

DIARY OF A GOD:
ORIGINS

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1

AS A CHILD

The fog shouldn't be like this, lingering about the shins, hiding the ground from a man's sight. I'd heard say that when the mist settles this low, it's the breath of Beirdin, slithering God from the Underworld; out roaming the night for souls to steal.

Just the thought of him made me nervous. That, and the damp smell of the fading night as it prepared for the approach of dawn. Either way, I had an ominous feeling; this was a morning that felt like no other.

Come on Brak. Where are you? I looked again for my best friend; my only friend. 'This was your idea.' I shouted. Then listened to my words echo through the rocks high above.

'Get here early, I've got a surprise?' His words. *Where in Beirdin's name are you?* 'Brak?'

Brushing the snow away from a rock brought bitter scorn to my fingers, and as I sat, a cold draught to my arse. From here I could see the valley as it stretched away below me, framed by distant hills now caught in a strange ruby light. Dawn was preparing to break above them. A wondrous sight, but not the reason I had agreed to meet Brak here at this ungodly hour.

It wouldn't be long now, in a few moments, when the sun peeked above the hills, its light would show Her to me. Another few minutes and the Lady would appear.

I stood and stepped back on the path. Above me the sky had appeared, the stars almost hidden from sight. Behind me the sun finally rose and moody shadows slipped and scurried between the rocks trying to escape the rising tide of light.

Just a few more seconds. Just a few more . . .

It happened the way it always did; as the sun half-breached with dawn's new horizon, above me the Grey Lady was freed from her rocky restraints.

She was my Grey Lady, and I watched in awe at her beauty. My imagination refusing to believe that Her wondrous vision was a trick of light and rocks. Far better to believe in her myth. To indulge in the dozen or more tales that hinted toward forbidden love, betrayal, and a magical curse. All nonsense of course. But there were times that I was sure she was something more, something that only I was able to sense. A moment later the shadows had slithered away to hide, and she was gone.

'Hey, you day-dreaming about your girlfriend again?'

Typical, he had a knack of being inopportune. 'She's a wonderful tragedy.' I said, and turned. He'd taken the shorter but steeper climb to where we were; he was out of breath and panting. Poor boy, his skinny frame not suited for the climb, nor the cold. He needed to eat more, put some fat on those narrow lips, get a little colour in his pallid cheeks. The breath he expelled clouded an eager face as he hurried up the path. There was never a time I was not happy to see my friend, Brak.

'You're late.' I scolded.

'Have you considered you might be early? No? Fair enough. Don't worry I'll make it worth your wait.'

'Why are we here, Brak?' *I should be tucked up and warm in bed.* 'Are you going to tell me?'

'No, yes, we're going to meet someone,' he said, 'and we have to hurry.'

'Meet who? Hey, wait, Brak, where are we going?'

He was off. Filled, no doubt, with some new scheme or plan he wasn't yet ready to share. "I see an opportunity," he would say. And in truth, I couldn't wait to find out what it was. I rarely saw him so eager.

'Slow down.'

'We have to hurry. She said she wouldn't wait?'

'She? Who's she? Where are we going?'

He was far quicker on his feet than I, but a blind man could track him in the snow. Especially in that old blue coat he wore. It was a hand me down

from an older brother, and several sizes bigger than his scrawny torso would ever fill.

‘I like the hat,’ I called out. ‘Who did you steal it from?’ It definitely wasn’t his. Knitted from black goat’s hair and too large for his head.

‘It keeps my ears warm, Mika wasn’t using it.’

His sister’s then, borrowed when she wasn’t looking.

A snowball thumped me on the shoulder powdering my cheek. I responded with a fist sized ball of my own which hit the tree a yard to his left.

‘Keep up, Drai; you can’t blame me if we’re late this time.’

Yes, I can. He was always the reason I was late. I trudged on after him flapping my arms in a winter dance to stay warm. Where he led, I always seemed to follow. Who else would? Besides, I envied my friend, he was always so self-assured and keen of mind. We were both fourteen in years, though he was one month older. But he had so much more in his life. Four brothers and three sisters, all older than he, but none were sharper, nor smarter, than Brak. That was for sure.

Brak’s detour hadn’t taken us too far out of our way as we sauntered down an old shepherd’s track, and then hurried down to the riverbank, covered by a crisp carpet of snow that framed a powerful movement of water that had begun to freeze close to the banks.

‘Can you smell that?’ I asked. ‘Is that meat?’ I took a long sniff of the cold air. Somewhere close a pot was cooking breakfast.

‘Am I not the best friend a man can have?’ he said. ‘Not only do I bring you to meet new a friend, I get you fed at the same time.’

‘A new friend?’ This was supposed to be a *short* detour before school. ‘New friend?’ I repeated, expecting more.

The top of the frozen knoll was welcome. My warm breath streaming cold air in a short rhythmic pattern. ‘What new friend? Brak, will you just . . .’

My curiosity laced itself with caution as I saw a small camp below us by the river. A single wagon, its silhouette highlighted by the sun now fully broken from the cover of distant hills. The sun was rising, fast.

‘We shouldn’t be here,’ I said. But I didn’t really mean it. ‘We’ll be late for school,’ I added, not caring care as much as my tone suggested. ‘If we’re not at the Learnit in time for bell, we’ll be sent home. Then we’ll both get a good hiding.’

Brak ignored me. I ignored myself and followed him down. Each footstep a slow crunch into the snow, much deeper down here.

‘Brak . . .’ *Who are they?* ‘Hey, Brak . . .’

A single cart was camped beside the river. A broad timber hood painted with colourful swirls and strange symbols I didn’t recognise. From the roof a small metal stack poured light coloured smoke into the air.

‘Brak, who are they?’

The smell of warmed meat was alluring and my attention focused toward the small pot that hung from a bending stake. The ground below scorched; the snow melted to leave a grim and darkened stain.

‘Come on, Draï. There’s nothing to worry about.’

‘Brak?’

Travellers were rare this far east of the City. Why would anyone *want* to come here? This was a quiet valley where the only thing that passed was the years. *Flame*. I found myself wishing the fire would spark and warm me. *Flame*. I don’t know why I wished it so hard. *Flame*. A small flicker of fire reared upward from the warm ash. *Did I do that?*

‘Draï . . .’

‘What, no, I didn’t do it.’

‘Didn’t do what? Come on, she wants to meet you.’

I had the strangest feeling that I didn’t want to meet her, whoever she was. There was something strange about the symbols painted on the wagon. And the two horses tethered by the water, they seemed to stare at me. Both tall, powerful, with manes dyed jet black. Hand stained patterns wound down their flanks and hind quarters. They began to whinny, the larger mare aggressively stomping its hoof.

‘Brak?’ I had to pull him from the pot. ‘That’s not ours. What if someone comes out?’

‘Don’t worry, it’s fine. She won’t mind.’

Who? Who won’t mind? I pulled on his coat to stop my idiot friend feeding his face. *Why won’t he listen?* Orin’s teeth, he was impossible at times. Brak’s idea of what people minded was rarely the same as theirs. ‘Brak,’ Any louder and my whisper would have carried downriver. ‘I want to go. These people could be dangerous.’

‘Not people,’ he shook his head. My friend already half-way to the wagon and urging me to follow. ‘It’s just her. I told you, we’re expected. She insisted on meeting you.’

I had a bad feeling about this. A strong urge in my stomach that something bad was inside that wagon. I could feel it. But just as strong, more-so, was a growing curious about who Brak had brought me to meet.

I pocketed my concerns and levelled one boot after the other following in his footsteps toward the wagon. Each crunch of the snow sounding louder than the last, but I couldn’t let him go alone.

The closer we got to the wagon the more colourful it seemed. It’s vibrant patterns were complex, bright symmetrical swirls, no two the same, broken by harsh strokes of the brush. I felt as though I should understand their meaning. The last thing I expected; the paintings began to glow.

‘Brak, can you see that?’

‘The big wagon, sure. I’ll knock, you’ll see,’ he brushed at his jacket, removed his hat and smoothed back his fine blonde hair, keen to present himself.

The smog from the stack twisted and swirled, but I felt no breeze. And that damn horse was stomping as if eager to charge. The symbols seemed to lift from the wood of the wagon.

‘Creol?’ Brak shouted.

‘Who’s Creol?’

‘She’s the woman that wants to meet you.’

He gave me that grin of his. The one that told me he knew more than he was prepared to share. 'Creol?' His hand knocked gingerly on the door for a second time.

'Brak, I want to go,' I pulled at his coat.

'No, I told her you'd come.'

'Told who?' Another tug. More insistent this time. 'Brak, who is, *she*?

'She, is a Mercian.'

A *what?* I let go of his coat and backed away. 'A Mercian . . . Brak, are you mad?'

Mercians were a high minded and rare breed. They were Nomads who didn't recognise borders, nor any authority beyond their own. They were Sorcerers and Magi. I'd heard tell that Mercian's were weavers of spells, and masters of the dark arts. And that they spoke to the dead. *To the dead!*

'I'm leaving.'

'Don't be stupid, Draï. Come on, she won't bite.'

'He's right, child. Only the Vampyræ bite.'

I froze to the voice of a woman. A gentle tone, that seemed to plunge through my body.

Female Mercians were more mystical and sinful than their menfolk. I'd heard it said that a Mercian woman could entrance a man with a single word. They could summon bad spirits with a casual breath. That they were half spirit. I wanted to leave, now.

'So you are Draï,' she said. 'I am pleased to meet you.'

'See, I told you. She invited us for breakfast just so she could talk to you.'

Oh Brak, what have you done?

'You're smaller than I imagined,' she said.

I didn't want to. I didn't mean to. But I turned anyway.

'Clear skin and bright eyes,' she said. 'Your mother keeps you healthy, that's good. You'll need strength of body, though I wonder, do you have strength of mind?'

I had no idea of what she spoke.

'Come, Draï. We can talk inside.'

In there? I stood as frigid as a lamb in cold water. *No way. Why would I?*

‘Brak, why have you brought me here?’ I whispered in earnest. ‘Why would you do this to me?’

‘She came to the farm several days ago. She wanted to trade potions for food for her horses. Pa went crazy. Started shouting about omens and bad luck and sent her packing. But Ma told me to find her, and give her food.’

‘And you did?’

‘Why wouldn’t I?’

‘Because your Pa’s right. They’re bad luck. You’ve heard the stories. The things they can make you do.’ I looked down. ‘They can poison you with a look. Cast spells that make you miserable, or crazy.’

That was it, she’d cast a spell on Brak. That would make sense of the idiot bringing me here. Why had he brought me here? Why did she want to meet me? I had a terrible urge to look up again, but I refused. I had never met a Mercian, male or female. Nor had I ever wished to. I closed my eyes and rubbed at my ear in the time honoured fashion to remove any bad luck she had already shared. I grabbed my nose and closed my eyes, tried to wish this all away.

Don’t look up. I wasn’t going to do it. *Don’t look in her in the eyes.* I felt my head lift. *Beirdin’s bones . . . Run, run for your life.*

Brak grabbed my shoulders and turned me fully around, then rubbed at the top of my head.

‘There, is that better?’ he asked.

Damn you. You and I are going to have strong words later, very strong. I couldn’t help it. I lifted my head and open my eyes.

‘I’m pleased to meet you,’ she said.

Such a kind and gentle voice, not at all what I would have expected. Or was it a trick? This was a voice that whispered, that could send a man insane. It was working too because I found her to be, pretty.

This Mercian woman could not have been more than a few years our senior. And she was slim. She clearly didn’t eat enough, unlike Brak who ate like a horse but refused to gain any weight. I doubted that anyone would want to be so thin by choice. Her torso was covered with a thick cardigan, and a bright purple shawl sat squarely across her shoulders. I liked her

shoes; soft canvas and died bright purple, hardly suitable to wear in snow. A long skirt trailed from her hips down past her ankles; the material old and frayed, the colours well faded.

She wiped her hands on a yellowing rag and then held her left hand out toward me in greeting.

Dear Gods, she's left handed? Can this get any worse?

I felt my arms cross my belly and hold my arms.

'So you're Draï,' she said, as if our meeting had been a long time coming.

'How do you know my name?' I asked. Why I whispered when she was stood right in front of me was unclear.

'I told her your name, you idiot.'

'Why?' *Why did you bring me here?*

'She has the Eye, Draï. She can see the future.'

'What future?' I asked.

'There is only one, stupid. She wants to see yours.'

Mine? No, not mine. 'I don't want to know. Why would I?'

'Yes, you do,' he insisted. 'It won't cost you anything. She was grateful for the food, that's all.'

Ah, I understood. She had been obliged to make payment, and had offered the vision as a gesture. Brak would never turn down anything that was freely offered, or at least, offered for free.

I stared at her hands and then down at her feet. *Don't look at her. Look at the ground, don't return her gaze. Look down, look down.*

A Mercian woman could turn a man to glass with just a thought, or a glare.

'Draï,' she said my name again, and I felt myself go as pale as Brak. I actually shivered, as if ice had rolled down my spine, but I summoned all my courage, and let my eyes settle squarely at hers. Dear Gods, what was I doing?

'Who are you?' I asked nervously. It was somewhat of a relief to find that I hadn't been turned to dust, and that the sky had refrained from opening to strike me down.

This Mercian woman who I now confronted, was hardly what I expected, just a young girl in her late teens, but somehow more mature, more experienced, than her years suggested. I supposed it was a necessity of life on the road.

She was pretty, but in an odd kind of way. Her lips shallow and her cheeks rounded. She had a pretty face, framed by the short straight hair that was drawn sharply up above her forehead into finger like bunches, and set in a prickly fashion. One thing the stories didn't exaggerate about the Mercian women, were the eyes. They were bold like a cat, and she used them well to scrutinise me.

But I watched her too. In those short moments, that seemed to stretch out time, I noticed a strange odd habit. Slight twitches, barely visible, but very unnerving. I was horrified at the sight of a scar that ran from her left eye across to her ear, and then trailed down her delicate neck. She noticed me staring at the mark and tried to hide it by adjusting her shawl. The first sign she'd shown of weakness, and I wondered what malice had been used to inflict such a wound?

Who are you? She looked away, and then back. This time her gaze shared a vulnerability, and I told myself she was harmless. What mischief could be endured by just listening to her words. After all, the vision she offered was given for free.

'Drai,' she spoke my name for a third time, which added to my apprehension. Her eyes closed as her face lifted toward the sky, as if in silent prayer.

'She's a bit weird,' Brak whispered, 'but I like her. She sees the most wonderful things.'

'Like what?' He was still an idiot to have brought me here.

'She told me I was going to marry Saski,' he announced. 'Drai, can you believe? Me and Saski. And we're going to have children. I know, I was just as shocked. But that's what she saw.'

A prediction that focussed my attention. The Mercian was obviously not averse to fulfilling the odd fantasy with her toll-free visions. Saski was the girl who sat in front of us in the Learnit. She was a year older; and in a year

she would ascend to womanhood and be encouraged to find a husband. Poor Brak, he had fawned over the girl for, well, what seemed like our entire childhood. But Saski and Brak? She didn't even like him.

'That's good,' I said. What else could I say?

'I didn't tell her anything, honest. She just came out with it. Me and Saski, can you believe?'

'Your friend would be well advised to remain silent,' the Mercian cautioned.

She was clearly irked. And I wished I could shut him up so easily. But now she was done conversing with the sky her attention had returned to me. Her hand outstretched to reach mine, and I let her.

This woman, this girl, her touch came with a wave of terrible excitement. A sense of giddiness as everything around me seemed to stretch far into the distance. I tried to focus but those bold blue irises drew me closer, then began to flood with a strange fluid to turn them white as the fallen snow. My courage shrank as she pulled me close.

'The Eye sits above you, child of the forest. It brightens the darkness, and yet it refuses to light your way. Interesting?'

I had no idea what that meant.

'You hear the voices, don't you. They come to you in your dreams, do they not? You hear the voices of the Spirits. They call to you from the shadows.'

I knew instantly what she meant. But how, how could she know? That was a secret I had only ever shared with Mama. What did she know about the Dreaming? How did she know about the voices in my head?

'Come,' she said, leading me toward the steps of her wagon. 'Not you,' she cautioned Brak. 'You will wait outside.'

Don't do this. This wasn't what I wanted. *Pull your hand from hers. Don't follow her, she's dangerous.* I felt as though I walked in a painting. *Drai, run . . . Run like the wind.*

But I couldn't. She'd cast a spell on me. Why else would I walk up the wagon's steps and enter into the unknown. How else could I have allowed her to close the door behind us.

2

I had never been inside a wagon such as this. A confined space, yet warm and cosy. The air within was fuelled by fresh embers, I could just make out in the tiny black stove. This was a person's home. All her worldly goods hitched to a team of horses.

The floor was laid with planking. A pretty handkerchief woven from lace hung across the only window, its shutters closed. Something sweet filled the air and made me quite giddy as I cast my eyes around; taking in the smallest details.

Six large paces would take me from one end to the other and I could have touched the roof on tiptoes. Yes, cosy was an apt description. To my right a bench half circled a table built for two. To my left lay a thin mattress in a cot covered by the neat fold of a knitted blanket, two drawers closed below. All about me were vivid colours that pleased my eye; there was wildness about them despite the fading effect of time. This was a place of comfort and refuge from the outside world. It had the feel of the generations that had lived inside this place.

There were flowers below the window and a small painting on the wall. She liked to read books, I counted eleven in all. I'd started counting; a habit I performed when I was nervous.

Six hollows in the rack for plates above a small wooden bowl. Twelve plates resting above four glasses. Fourteen handles on cupboards and drawers. Twenty-four individual planks on the floor, each one neatly mitred to fit the next, with two nails recessed into the wood at each join. Several were warped slightly out of line. Ninety-six nails in all that I could see. In a moment I had totalled one hundred and twenty-eight sheaves of wood layered within the walls and ceiling . . .

'Stop it Drai,' she said, and I felt her hand on my shoulder. 'Please, stop.'

Stop what?

I recognised her smile. The same one Brak exuded when he knew more than I did. I didn't like it when *she* did it.

'Sit, just here where I can see you. Let's talk for a while.'

I took a deep breathe. I didn't want to be here. I certainly didn't want to chat. What could a Mercian want to talk to me about anyway? I was no-one. Nothing special. I sat.

'It is difficult sometimes,' she said. 'To be different, I mean. But it's a gift, not a curse.'

'What do you know about being different?' *You idiot. What a stupid question.* I only had to look around me to answer it. 'Sorry.'

'How often do they come to you?' she asked. 'Do they speak, or do they whisper?'

'Who?' I was playing dumb, but I knew exactly of what she spoke. *How do you know? Only Mama and I ever talked . . . Not even Brak knows about the voices.* 'Who are you?'

There was that smile again. I had to learn it myself, before my body exposed my every secret I had without a word being uttered.

'I have come a long way to find you, Draï. Or at least, someone like you. Do you know anyone else like you?' she sat forward, hands formed in a triangle. 'Let me ask you again, child. Do they come to you? Do they call out in your dreams; do they whisper from the shadows?'

I shook my head. Twelve, she had twelve bunches in her hair. Eight tiny rings pierced through each ear; nine on her fingers in total. The invisible hairs on her neck caught the light as she moved; eight hundred and six that I could see. I didn't see it coming, her hand, as she grabbed mine and slammed it down onto the table.

'Don't fuck with me boy. I told you to stop that. My time is limited, as is my patience. So answer my question. Do they come to you?'

'Yes,' the word barely audible. My hand refusing my will to pull away. I was too frightened to scream. 'Please, I want to go.'

She turned slightly to her left, as if listening, but not taking her eyes from me. 'As I told your foolish friend, my blood-line is Mercian.'

‘I don’t even know what that means.’

She tilted her head again, and grunted a kind of approval.

‘Mercians are servants to the Gods,’ she said. ‘The Gods call on us to service them with our gifts.’

‘Are you, talking to one now?’

That seemed to amuse her.

‘Look at me, Draï. I want to see with your eyes.’

‘What?’ I didn’t want that, whatever it was.

Grall’s teeth, I would rather have stared into the mouth of that moody trickster God himself. Far better than the Mercian’s eyes. But she give me no choice as her finger lifted my chin to leave me gawking at those big blue, gorgeous eyes. Fresh as a dawn sky. For the second time I saw them roll upward and turn whiter than the snow outside. I was locked, fixed, and unable to break her stare. I felt her presence seep into my mind.

Memories flashed, of people and places. I heard forgotten conversations being spoken being out loud. My childhood flicked in and out of focus; flashed like lightning through a stormy sky. I tried to resist. I tried to block her out. But too late, she had it, everything that I attempted to hide. She had plundered it all as I sat and watched like a shocked bystander.

‘So it’s true,’ she said, barely believing her own words. ‘You are a Child of the Dreaming.’

She released my hand and I slumped back in my seat. My hands braced my head in comfort against the pain she had left behind. In one brief moment she had discovered what no-one else knew. That I had gifts and secrets that only my Mama knew. A few I had shared with Brak.

‘What did you do?’

‘Nothing more than was necessary. The pain will pass. I needed information, and I saved you the trouble of lying to me.’

‘I’m leaving,’ I said. No, I wanted to say more than that. ‘Fuck you.’ That felt so much better.

‘Go then. I have no intention of stopping you. But there is something you should know before you leave.’

No, I want nothing from you.

You need everything from me . . . If you want to survive.

‘What?’ That wasn’t possible. ‘How can you . . .?’ When neither person speaks but words are exchanged. A terrible word came to mind: witchcraft.

I’m leaving.

Then go.

‘That’s not possible? How can you hear what I don’t say? Can you read my mind?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Only your thoughts when they are directed toward me.’

‘That’s not possible.’

‘And yet it is so? You’ll find a great deal is possible before your journey has even begun.’

‘What journey? I’m not going anywhere.’ I didn’t like the attitude in her voice; I liked her smugness even less. She’d raped my mind of everything it held sacred. Yet even so, I was intrigued.

‘What journey?’ I asked again. No, I don’t want to know. ‘I have to go now. I’ll be late for Learnit. Teacher will be angry.’

‘I’m amused that you think you have a choice, child.’

‘There’s always a choice.’

‘No, not for you. Not for a Child of the Dreaming.’

She did it again. Her head listed as if hearing what was hidden from me. A slight nod, and then she leaned across the table toward me. I would have backed away if the chair had not prevented me doing so. Who was instructing her? I couldn’t see anyone. But I knew now that something was here in the wagon with us. I could feel it; some kind of presence.

‘We have searched a long time to find you, Halfling. To find a mind so free that it can ride the winds with the grace of an eagle.’

I’m going to disappoint you.

Then you are going to die.

‘Stop that. Words should be spoken aloud. What, you think this is funny?’ *This is witchcraft.* ‘I don’t want anything to do with you.’

‘And yet you are still here.’

‘What? What do you want from me? I have no coin, no standing. I have nothing for you. Let me go, or . . .’

‘Or what?’ she slammed her hand to the table for the second time, then raised a finger in threat. Reluctantly curled back as if challenged to do so. ‘You think he shows promise?’ she asked. ‘Yes, he does seem to be rich with gifts. But he neither understands nor cares for them.’

By the Gods, was she mad, or talking to the spirits? I saw nothing but the colour on the walls. But I sensed . . . I don’t know what I sensed. I glanced at the door and watched myself go through. All I had to do was get up, and leave.

‘It’s not locked,’ she said. ‘Take the handle and remove yourself.’

I desperately wanted to. What could be simpler? Just step toward the door and leave; but I couldn’t.

‘He wants to leave. Perhaps he is not the one we have searched for,’ she nodded. ‘Perhaps, but I say he’s too old, and has too much to learn. Let’s send him on his way. But before you leave Halfling, listen to me, and listen well. You were *wrong* when you said there is a choice. Our Gods forged us from the Ore of Darkness. They tempered us in a furnace of Solitude. Our souls were hammered upon a Holy Anvil and then thrown out into this world.’ Her eyes never left me and my fingers hurt from her constant grip. ‘Most men are sheep,’ her words coarse, yet sincere. ‘They belong to the flock, and will toil in the dirt and grass. They will hide all their lives from the darkness, too afraid to walk outside of the light. They are made of less, and will bow to those who want more. To the men who seek influence and power from the Darkness. Who dare to walk within the shadows. These are the wolves and the bears.

But there are others who live life as the fox. Men and women who allow the wind to whisper in their hearts; who grasp understanding from the nature of things about them. Seekers of knowledge and wisdom with which to help others.’

She gazed at me as though I were a curiosity.

‘Then come the Children of the Dreaming. So rare and precious a gift of Nature. Those who traverse the Light, and the Darkness. They are Eagles who can fly within a realm lost in-between,’ she sat back and listened for a moment. Then drew her hands back from the table. ‘It doesn’t really matter,’

she said with reluctance. 'I suppose all men are fundamental, and therefore forged the same. They will all fade to bones and rest amongst the clouds. It's a cycle that must never be broken. A cycle that must be guarded, and if necessary, it must be defended. It must be protected by the Keeper of the Gate.'

I watched the mood of her face sullen.

'The Keeper is dying,' she said.

'The Keeper?' I whispered. 'What is the Keeper?'

Don't you know?

No, I shook my head, and took another look towards the door.

Do you believe in the Gods, Draï?'

I hesitated. I didn't like words spoken without sound.

'Yes,' I said. 'No, I don't know.'

'Without a Keeper the Hordes will be set free. The Gods will be helpless to intervene. They will turn a blind-eye and let this world burn to save themselves. Do you want this world to burn?'

'No,' Well, it was true, I didn't.

'Then the Dark-Void and the Light-Verse *must* be kept apart. The Gate between the two must have a Keeper. So let me ask you again. Do you believe in your Gods, Draï?'

No, it was true, I didn't. Not really.

'Then how can we all be saved from sin?'

Sin? 'I don't understand.' What sin?'

My hand slammed the table this time, and near scared myself half to death. 'What sin? I haven't sinned.'

'A man without sin is a man covered in dust.'

'What?' *Stop talking in riddles.* 'Who are you? What do you want with me?'

She closed her eyes and placed both her hands on top of mine. The Mercian was strong for one so young and frail.

'Others will come,' she said. 'They will try to save you. They will risk all to absolve you of sin. The Healer and the Immortal will be released from their forest prison. The Painted Man will come, but never understand why.'

All will come for, you. For Draï, for he is the Keeper of the Gate. He is the Destroyer of Worlds.'

'You're mad.' *I need to go.* 'I have to leave. I'll get in trouble for being late. My teacher will be angry.'

The stories about the white-eyed Mercians were true then. They were harbingers of dread, who immersed themselves within the clouds of others.

'I'm leaving,' I got up, and there my courage ended. She began to jerk and fit. So awkward and desperate were her movements, I was sure her bones would break.

Before my eyes, my young pretty captor began to shrink, her skin drawn back to the bones. Her eyes swallowed beyond her cheeks as she aged an eternity.

Oh dear Gods, save me.

So now you believe. She said without moving her lips. *Now, when you have something to lose, and nothing to gain?*

I didn't want to lose anything. My mind and my life seemed foremost at risk. I wanted to hide but felt the hard back of the bench dig spitefully into my ribs. She had aged with terrible haste. The youthful pale skin she wore now wrinkled and old. I looked down to see her hands, so gnarled with age, grasped tight about mine. I almost relieved myself, right there and then.

'Are your sins so meaningless that you can ignore them?' she asked, her voice wracked by the sudden gain in years.

'I don't know what you're talking about. I don't sin. Please, I don't know who or what you think I am, but I'm not. I want to go.'

'Are you worth saving when the darkness comes?'

'I think I'm going to be sick.'

She smiled. A toothless grin that sent my nausea wild. I knew with certainty that no heart beat within her chest, and that the contents of my stomach would soon be hurled.

'The darkness is ending; the Dreaming will reveal all, leave the forest and go to the Mountain of Songs,' she said. 'Seek out the man with no home.'

I don't understand.

All that I tell you will come to pass.

Beirdin's breath, no . . . I turned my face away, but she drew me in so close I thought she might kiss me. *Don't . . .* Her breath smelled of piss. *Please.*

'Three times I will come to you, Halfling.'

Tears streamed freely down my cheeks. *Halfling?* That was the second time she had called me that. *What does that mean?* My mind filled with her toxic vapour, so bad I was ready to puke.

'Three times, Halfling, our spirits will pass. I promise you, your resolve will be tested by pain.'

I didn't like the sound of that, so I fainted. And I was glad to do so.

‘Drai, can you hear me? Hey, wake up.’

Something was shaking me. I could hear a voice.

‘Please don’t do this; I hate it when you do this.’

Do what? Get off me.

Why couldn’t I move? I struggled to free myself. I had to get away.

‘Drai, it’s me. Hey . . . your usual grumpy self when you return then.’

‘Brak, is that you?’ I took a moment to breathe. My hands, they were so cold. And why not, they were wrist deep in the snow. I lifted them; touched my chest. Checked that I was still me.

‘You were doing it again,’ Brak said, and had a cautious look about him. One of nervous concern, coupled to an obvious yearning to be somewhere else. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I held out my hand; grateful that he took it. My friend helped me to my feet.

‘You scare me shitless when you do that. You do know that.’

I wiped at my lips, I’d been drooling. I realised that I’d suffered one of my fits. I always felt the same after. My limbs ached as my mind cleared slowly of a moody haze. At least I hadn’t thrown up, not that I could see.

‘Why am I outside in the snow?’ I asked.

‘Where else would you be?’

I shook my head, and then realised. ‘Where’s the wagon?’ *The wagon, the horses?* ‘Where’s the girl?’

‘She’s gone. And don’t get moody with me just because you did your thing.’

My thing? No, that’s not possible. ‘What happened?’ *I was sat in the wagon.* ‘Where is she?’

‘Drai, you fainted. All she did was rub your hand, oh and whisper something in your ear. Hey, you went down and did your thing.’

‘No, that’s not what happened.’

‘Yes, it is. She hitched the horses to her wagon, and left. You really need to work on your social skills.’

‘You didn’t see?’ *I went inside. We spoke.* ‘Her face?’

‘She was pretty, wasn’t she. Drai, me and Saski . . .’

‘Brak, I went inside.’

‘Drai, the girl said hello. And then you passed out. You were, well, embarrassing.’

You should see it from my point of view.

People say that I have the Evil Eye above me, that when I fall and shake, and fit, that it is demons having their way with me. Most run at the sight. Others look on with morbid curiosity. The rest just gawk with disbelief, and fear.

‘I don’t believe it,’ I said.

‘You’re not the only one. Me and Saski?’ he spun around and did an awkward jig in the snow. ‘Saski and me. Oh life is going to be so perfect.’

‘That’s not the truth of things.’

‘Hey, I know you like her, but the words were said. Mercians have the gift. It was a vision.’

I ignored him. *This isn’t possible.* I could still hear her words. The ramblings of a mad woman. She didn’t even tell me her name.

‘Saski and me . . .’

‘Shut up. This is serious.’ I would have to make sense of it all. Try to unravel this nonsense and find some sort of reason for what just happened. ‘Sorry,’ I added. ‘Brak, are you sure that’s all that happened?’

‘You did your thing, okay. Dropped to the ground right next to me. I told you, it was embarrassing. I brought you to meet her and you, you, did *your thing*.’

I’m sorry. I’d hurt his feelings. ‘You and Saski? Hey, that’s great.’ It really wasn’t. All my young life I had wanted nothing more than a smile from that girl. *Saski and Brak?*

‘Hey, I bet I can get her to kiss me before the day is done. I bet you. How much you want to bet me?’

It was a bet worth taking. Not even if the Mercian *had* predicted it was going to happen.

‘One day,’ he said, ‘we’ll find a way of making some coin from that. From whatever it is that you do when you, do your thing.’

He was ever the merchant, and why not. If I was going to do, *my thing*. It may as well have some other use than just trying to send me crazy.

It was a fair walk from where we had met the Mercian, to the Learnit. The bell rang as we came into sight of the long, narrow building. Built with simple clay bricks, fired in some distant province or other, and hauled by cart to our pleasant backwater.

It had been built by parents of a time long past and then maintained by their descendants. Most of whom had sat beneath its thatched roof at one time or another.

Miss Scharill was our Learner. A nice woman at heart, but a strict disciplinarian; punctuality a learning she eagerly enforced. We called her Scryll, and she watched over her pupils with beady eyes raised above rounded spectacles. She wore a narrow, serious looking face; her hair short and straight, always being tucked behind the ears. A woman younger than the look she projected. She was a good teacher, and I liked her a lot.

‘Quiet please.’ She tapped her slender fingers against the table, its palm raised to insist we settle. She sat like a queen on her throne behind that desk, always looking down on us from the elevated position.

I sneaked a sly gaze over to Brak. Scryll had dictated, from lengthy experience, that we sit apart, and at opposite ends of the room. He sat with his chin in his hands, eyes gorged by the fair young girl who sat just ahead of him. Saski; the prettiest of the pretty, and clever too. Her olive skin stood her out from the pale reflections of the others, her hair wrapped as always in tight tails pinned at the back of her head. Most striking of all were her eyes, as grey as a coming storm, and I felt myself sigh inadvertently as I watched. And wondered if she knew what the future held for her, with Brak.

I should have taken the bet; whatever odds were offered, for Saski would never kiss Brak. Even with all his guile and clever wit, Brak would never get

his kiss, not from her. She was nature's brightest fruit. A reverie, who only the chosen might woo, and I doubted that Brak's name would ever occupy a space on that list.

'Let us start with history.' Scroll looked down at us over the top of her spectacles, and then turned to begin scratching her chalk on the board. 'Are you listening Draï, or just here to daydream?' The chalk paused in silence as if awaiting an answer. But I knew it wasn't required. She didn't need to look to know she had my attention, and the chalk continued to scribble. 'After reading your lacklustre homework I think you all need to be refreshed on your ancestral shortcomings.' She turned. 'Who can tell me the first three kings of Icena? And Brak, that is the kingdom in which we all live.'

The class gave a murmur of amusement, the answer came from Saski.

'Kaku The Great,' she said, and noticed that Brak was staring at her, chin still swooned in his hands. 'Ecenti and Ghortheum, of Icena,' she added, and stuck her tongue at him as Scroll wrote the names. 'It was his revered birth place from where the name of the Kingdom was assumed.' She added the extra information with a well aimed smirk at Brakkish.

She'd become aware of the puppy dog eyes that he trained on her. Poor Brak, he was becoming infatuated. But who could blame him. Certainly not I.

'Excellent,' said Scroll, 'Now, how many Kings of Icena have there been?'

A dozen hands went up.

'Yes, Brak?' Who's hand had failed to rise.

'Too many, Miss; I can't remember them all.'

The answer was followed by another murmur of amusement, and a frown from Saski, which Brak returned with a smile.

'Aldor, can you tell the class?'

Aldor, the fattest boy in the room. Shy, and perhaps a little retarded. He shrank from the attention and shook his head at the question for which he had no answer.

'Draï, can you tell us how many?'

'Twenty-seven,' I answered, and was promptly asked to stop as I began to recant all their names in sequence.

‘Very good,’ the chalk scraped in a long line down the board to separate the names from the empty space alongside. ‘Now, how many Emperors have sat on the throne? Brakkish . . .’

I watched as he turned his head slightly toward me, and rubbed at his nose as if to gesture some thought on the subject. In truth he looked to me for the answer. I placed four fingers to my lips and tapped them gently.

‘Four, Miss. I recall that there have been four Emperors.’

‘That is correct.’ Scрил chalked the number onto the board. ‘Unless you are blowing Brakkish a kiss Draі, would you put your hand down by your side.’

Laughter followed the request and even I had to smirk, she was sharp, our Learner, more than a match for Brak, though he failed to see the funny side.

‘Below the Emperor,’ Scрил continued, ‘sits the Senate. Who would like to explain its form and its function?’

To her complete surprise, as well as everyone else’s, Aldor raised his hand.

‘Yes, Aldor?’

‘May I be excused to relieve myself Miss?’

She shook her head. ‘No, you may not. Draі, please enlighten the class.’

It was my pleasure.

‘The Senate is made up from the nobility of the Kingdoms, Miss. And of other duly elected officials.’

‘Anyone, who elects these officials?’

‘The Emperor,’ was shouted by several voices

‘Incorrect,’ she said. ‘They are voted for by the Susti; the upper-classes if you will.’ She gave a look over her glasses around the room; I did enjoy it when she did that. ‘A class of governors, wardens, and prefects. Now *they* are all sanctioned by the Emperor. All new members affirmed by the Senate. Now, will someone give me one of the main parties of the Senate.’

It was Saski who answered. ‘The Assacions.’

‘The Francs,’ called out another.

‘Very good,’ the names went on the board with quick dashes of the chalk. ‘Those are the biggest two. Any more?’

‘The Khassari Druids, Miss,’ Brak added.

All heads turned. There’s was a name that sent a chill down everyone’s spine. I watched the looks on the other faces, even Scroll’s had hardened.

There were few unruly children who had not been threatened by their parents with a visit from the Khassari Druids if they did not behave. Myself included.

The chalk paused and then continued to scratch, tapping out its spellings as it struck the board. ‘We live in one of nineteen kingdoms.’ Scroll seemed happy to change the subject. ‘These make up the Empire; can anyone name me six of the others?’

My hand shot up. Saski’s hand rose.

‘Anyone except Draï, or Saski.’

Slowly she got her six names, and then three more from the class.

‘What about Aurista?’ asked Brak.

I hung my head. There were times when I wished Brak would think before he opened his mouth. Scroll’s chalk paused mid-flow again.

‘Stand up Brakkish.’

He did so, and with a smile having once again assured himself to be the centre of attention.

‘Aurista is not part of the Empire,’ she said. ‘As we all know.’

‘But it was once, my Pa told me.’

‘And he is not wrong.’ Through a frown she conceded. ‘Aurista made up four-tenths of the Empire’s land mass, and owned many of the Islands in the Ortican sea. That was until the Auristans broke away from the Empire three decades ago. Now, if you would like to stand for a while, the rest of us will continue with the history of the Empire as it stands.’

‘I heard Miss . . .’ And I shied at what was to come next. ‘I heard that the leaders of the Auristans,’ he gave a classically thoughtful pose. ‘I think they’re called the Vampyrai.’ He knew very well that they were. ‘I heard that they practise the Dark Arts. And, I also heard that the Vampyrai suck blood from the dead, and eat the souls of the living.’

He made short slurping noises through his teeth, and a huge grin spread across his face. Most of the class let their jaws drop.

‘I heard,’ said Scryll, ‘that someone suspected an ounce of intelligence resided somewhere in Brak’s head. But I doubt either claim to be true.’

A giggle rippled through the classroom. But I only had eyes for Saski, who winked at Brak, and then exaggerated the turn of her back toward him.

‘But since Brak has brought the subject to hand, who can tell me what started the Thirty-Year War with Aurista?’

I raised my hand instantly to advance a subject that fascinated me. My father had spent most of his adult life in military service; fighting the war against the Auristans. Each time he returned home he would regale me with tales of courage, and deeds of heroism. Despite having a great respect for the Auristan warrior he resented their creed, and through him I had inherited a bad taste in my mouth for the mention of their name.

‘Treachery,’ I shouted out.

‘Tyrants,’ shouted another, and a deluge of harsh words were dispensed.

‘Fine sentiments indeed,’ added Scryll, ‘now take up your chalks, and let us see if anyone can learn something today.’

At lunch I watched the sun emerge from hiding behind high clouds. It peeked out and spread a golden orange across the sky, causing faint white clouds to glow. And then it was gone again. The life giver had caused the lighter frost to melt, and in places the natural colour of the ground had returned.

I perched myself on a root that spread across the hardened soil below a small rag-tree; so called because the long leaves on its branches looked like washed rags hung from a line. At least with a bit of imagination. A hundred yards or so away from where I sat, across on the other side of the Learnit grounds, was a space cleared from the woods. And though many old stumps still remained, stubbornly refusing to wither and rot, it was where the other boys, Brakkish included, played the game of hit-ball.

As usual they were vocal and frantic, fervently throwing a small ball of leather stuffed with sand, as they tried to tag each other. One boy eagerly hurling the ball at anyone that strayed across his path. A game I avoided, knowing that should I join in I would inevitably become their main target. Not that I blamed them; how could I? I was different, tainted, something that none of them could ever hope to understand. How could they when I didn't understand myself.

Besides, I preferred to be away from the throng, somewhere outside where I could watch and learn, and be safe. Never joining in was a coping-mechanism. My way of ensuring a lack of attention from others by merely skirting around the edge of inclusion. The downside was that whilst the others were happy for it to be that way, it also reinforced their darker perceptions of my character. I was the boy who did, *his thing*. And I remembered too well the time the Dreaming had come upon me. When

every one of them had been present. Another pitiful episode in my life that I prayed never to repeat.

I had awoken to staring faces. A barrage of gaping eyes looking down upon me, as I lay helpless on the floor. Scryll was worst of all, as I recalled the look on her face, one of fear and concern, but not for me, but the others still brave enough to stand and stare. The irony was that had I not fallen from my chair, it was possible that none would have noticed.

‘It was your eyes,’ Brak had told me later, ‘you looked, well, possessed.’ Even he had kept his distance for an hour, and whispered with the others. But I knew well that he defended me.

‘What a man cannot understand, he will fear.’ My father had told me. More than once in my life I had seen that same fear grow bold in his own eyes, each time I’d found him staring down at me. He dealt with my affliction in his own way.

‘A warrior of the Varylion,’ he told me, ‘must be prepared to endure. To stand lonely as a tree in a desert of sand. Sometimes we must spare ourselves company, and compassion, if it is necessary to survive.’

My father was a man of few words when the ale was not present in his blood, and so I hung on every word that man ever said to me. And I would consider myself to be the warrior he was. I’d imagined myself often, as that lone tree, resisting the heat and isolation of the desert sun. But fantasy is never enough. Were it not for my dear friend Brakkish, I think I would have wilted and succumbed to the sun’s harshness a long time ago.

I took a large bite from my apple as I noticed the girls return, about eight of them in all, half the number of boys. They’d been on a short walk, and sat now in a ring facing each other on their favourite grassy knoll. Within moments they were chattering as only girls could. All bar one, who I noticed looked over towards me, her eyes filled with wonder about me. No, they viewed me with sympathy. It was Saski, dear Saski. She smiled to me, then turned away and giggled at something her closest friend Liasa whispered in her ear. Liasa, who then gawked at me and laughed with no attempt to hide her disdain.

It didn't matter, Saski had smiled. And I understood well the infatuation Brak felt for the girl. Indeed I shared his passion toward her, though I would never speak the words aloud. They would choke in my throat long before the air could ever give them carriage. But I did dare to consider them. To feel them as a gentle stroke down the back of my neck.

I wondered why she never wore her hair long, and let it flow about her shoulders like the other girls. Always hung in small tails bound tightly in ribbons down her neck. And then I dared to wonder further, whether her thin pallid lips had indeed ever been kissed? I felt the air glow about me, and the mere hint of her unexpected smile warmed me, and made me feel giddy at the thought. It raised a confident smile to my face which I directed with contempt, toward Liasa. And my mind drifted away to other things.

Above them a bitark chirruped in the branches of a tree, its loutish song calling to stir a mate. Its tune repeated undaunted above the churlish melee of boys. Its repetitive tones persistent and unaffected by a lack of response, and I admired its spirit despite the obvious rejection of its romantic overtones. Maybe it was the melody, or the rejection, or just an idiotic impulse, but insanity grabbed a hold of me. Held an inclination so wild that I was foolish to even consider it. And yet I did.

I was alone as usual, the boys a distance away and enthralled in their physical abuse. The girls, well, they barely noticed me at the best of times. So dare I try with so many present?

Ever since the onset of The Dreaming I had received the gift, but was always too fearful to use it. Here was something different, something about the bitark that enticed me, gripped me in its desperate song, and I resolved to pursue the risk. Should I be found out by the others they would surely assume that I was having one of my tiresome fits. So yes, I would try, and in plain sight whilst none of them could see.

6

I closed my eyes and focused on the bitark's song. I emptied my mind of all thought beyond its obsessive tone. As I pictured the tiny brown bird in my mind, as I tried to take hold of its regretful tune and use it to bring him closer. Bring him into my shadow. I would reach out across the opening on its song. Reel in the space above the girls, whose chatter had reduced to a murmur. I formed the bird's music into shape; its melody into something more transparent. A powerful cloud in which I could swim, no, on which it was possible to float. I wished for a bridge on which I could cross to reach the bird.

I had never before attempted to reach out so far, to stretch my mind across such a distance, yet I knew instinctively that I would succeed. And it was so much easier than I could ever have imagined.

It is difficult to describe that first time, even though so many years have passed. How I allowed myself to merge with the energy that flows between all things.

I know its name now, for I have swum within its tides often. I have felt the power of its grasp, and I have earned the right to call it by name. Dark Matter, the link between all things alive and dead; the mesh that binds all wheels together. And that day I floated between the branches and stole gently through their leaves, guided by the song of the bitark until our minds touched. My first merge, and it was wonderful.

I gasped at its presence, felt its tiny heart race with perfect rhythm, but so quickly it frightened me, and I thought we may fall from the tree together. There is euphoria when two lives touch, whether it is the actions of the body, or the mind, and on rare occasions by them both together. I think the latter is what men call love.

At first, all I could see was the branches and leaves, their colours stifled and disjointed, not at all as I would see them now. I felt the cold of the day pass and the frantic beating of my own heart, to the sober yearning of the bitark's song.

How I wanted to sing that song. Sing it aloud until I burst with pride. But a stiff breeze gusted through the tree and I felt the sudden flutter of wings, and the certainty that I would fall. And I did, but only for a moment. The motion moved me to will the bitark on; to insist that we spread our wings together and take to the air. To make the impossible real, and take flight to the sky, where we would ride the invisible waves and glide through the air unchallenged.

Just then the bell sounded aloud, and the moment was shattered and lost forever. I closed my eyes and took a sharp cold breath. I watched from below the rag-tree as the bitark flew in a low sweeping arc, beating its wings only twice and then gliding well beyond my sight. I took another deep breath and the bell resounded again, its clanger beating against the rim, shook vigorously in Scril's hand. The tone insistent that we all return to class.

We left the Learnit in the knowledge that tomorrow would bring more about the Senate; about its role as the supreme council; about those who ordered our lives and dictated how we lived. How, with the Emperor and its noble members safeguarded the Empire and all peoples within. Not that I had any real idea about how the government worked, they were so far away in the capital; the great city of Shai'valet. To all of us that lived in the outer provinces of the Empire, this was a place of dreams more fitting for fable than reality.

I'd heard stories of course, but had never actually met anyone who had visited the city. Who had walked below its spires. I had promised myself that one day, when I was older, and a mighty warrior like my father, I would take pilgrimage to Shai'valet. I would enter the city through the famed Nebuline Gate where so many famous generals, the men of myth and legend, had paraded in procession of victory. I had promised myself that I would stride along its streets, and gaze upon its many wonders. I would visit the temples, and stroll through its hallowed halls. Most important of all, I would kneel with honour and offer my sword in tribute to the Gods, before ascending the marble steps of the Palace of Dreams. To see the throne of the Emperor, where all the power in the Empire resided. It was considered to be a true wonder of the world. And I would enter chamber as a guest, and champion, of the Emperor himself. It wasn't just a dream, one day I would make it a reality.

'Hey, Draï. Stop daydreaming,' Brak shouted. 'We don't want to be late for our little wager with the fat boy do we.' There was a confidence in Brak's cheeky grin that inspired me. I had completely forgotten, become lost in my fantasy. I quickened my pace to catch him up.

'You didn't get your kiss,' I called out.

The mill was not too far a distance. We ambled and talked, chased each other and laughed, until we reached the edge of the forest whose trees reached down into the very water of the River Ood that flowed below. From here we picked between the trees and roots, swung from thick strong branches to show our bravado, always careful to stay clear of the river's bank that was often steep and unstable. Such an arduous trek full of fun pulling on the branches and trudging through the ferns always with the sounds of the swift flow of deep water below, a constant reminder of the peril should we fall. But as Brak so boldly put it, we were too young and far too handsome to fear a raging puddle of death. I wasn't so sure that I agreed and as exciting as the obstacles were, I was happier that he was the one treading the overhangs and not me.

We passed from the edge of the forest to get our first sight of the rickety wooden mill. The structure loomed up from the river bank to stand three levels tall, with a barn sized door in its attic. I always thought it an odd and ungainly building, aged and racked by time; far taller than any other building I had ever seen.

'Come on, I'll race you to the other side.'

'Careful,' I cautioned. What stood for a bridge was only the thick trunk of a tree felled years before to span the river. A river that was quick paced and deep enough to drown.

'Come on, I'll show you.' He was quick stepping across, and daring me to follow.

'Wait,' I called out. 'Just one moment. I'm coming.' Short steps, and one eye on the relentless surge below, but I crossed. Glad to jump down to the ground.

The building stood alone beside the river, in the shallows, a harbour of sorts where the swiftly flowing water of the Ood was stalled and separated from its powerful flow. I looked up in awe as I passed below the massive turning wheel. What a sight to see as the wheel's rotation arced around; constant streams of water tumbling from its paddles.

The river bank itself was scattered on both sides with a lavish deposit of imposing boulders, strewn as far as the eye, soaked by the constant lap of water's tide. Their top covered in a deep cushion of Elgan moss; a flowerless plant with a wild emerald colour that pleased the eye and flourished below the shade of the trees.

'Before we go in . . . hey, Draï, pay attention.' I felt a tug on my shoulder. 'Remember, you have to make it look difficult. Don't guess too quickly. You have been practising like we agreed?'

'Yes,' I lied, 'of course I have.'

'Good, cos if Pa finds out I've borrowed this.' He opened his hand to reveal a large silver coin sat squarely in the palm. The coin's centre regally stamped with the Emperor's bust. His image circled by an intricate weave of flora. My eyes opened wide as Brak lifted the coin; he kissed it. 'He'll do more than slap my ear if we get this wrong.' He laughed, and clutched it from view in his fist.

The stakes were indeed high, and for the first time I felt nervous. Getting things wrong would more than disappoint my friend. Poor Brak, he would certainly suffer if we lost a coin of such worth. Not that I had time to think on it before I was off in pursuit.

We entered to an abrasive hum that filled the building. The heart of the mill, its huge stones rotating mercilessly above us to grind down the luckless corn.

Ground level was a vast storehouse where large stacks of grain were piled high. The interior walls rose high in feathered planking, each one lapped above the next until the first floor broke them from view. A fine white powder veneered the whole of the lower floor.

This was a busy time for the miller. In winter people hungered for bread. The river would freeze soon. The winter winds would blow strong and cold.

The wheel would be lifted before the inlet froze to save the paddles from frost-bite. The only time of the year the great wheel would stop turning

Winter was a time of change for us all. The land could not be tilled, and the grass would slumber beneath a deep blanket of snow. Deer in the woods would shed their coats of brown and grow the thickest of winter fur. Fish would sleep in the rivers, hiding amongst the grass and reeds, waiting for the warmth of spring. It was a time of fasting for most, and of end for others.

‘Jorge?’ Brak shouted, and startled me. I had to stop daydreaming. ‘Jorge,’ even louder still. ‘Come on, idiot. Show yourself.’

‘Up there,’ I pointed to the upper-level where I had seen movement.

‘I told you Drai, he’s frightened to come down.’

The familiar rounded face of Jorge peeked over sacks to look down. He had a smug look about himself, which was not so unusual, his puffy eyes wrinkled above the self-assured grin. He rolled away to where we could not see him, and a moment later the massive stones began to slow.

Looking up I remembered the day that Jorge had left the Learnit. He was a tall powerful lad who stood a neck and head taller than us both. He was older too, and kept the longest hair of any male I’d ever met, down past his shoulders, and always unkempt.

We were never friends, no, more acquaintances. Two boys that sat a few seats from each other each day, yet rarely spoke. It was he and Brak that were friends, at least for a time.

I remembered how his father had come for him early one sunny morning, and how Jorge had cried as his father had lead him away. We found out later that his mother had died, suddenly from a bad heart, he never returned to the Learnit.

The mill fell eerily silent.

‘You’re early,’ he said in a deep intimidating manner. ‘I hope you’ve brought some coin this time.’ He moved with remarkable guile for his size as he slid down the ladder, feet and hands either side of its wooden rails, intent to impress us with the practised ease with which he ascended. ‘I

don't want any talk of you paying me later,' he scoffed, and then dropped the last few rungs.

He'd grown even taller, and put on more weight since the last time I'd seen him. His cheeks were rosier too. He wore a smock that covered his clothes. The once white linen now soiled by the constant wiping of his hands. Jorge moved in a lumbering fashion, a peculiarity that I didn't recall from the last time we'd met, but then it had been some time, and I wondered if he'd had some kind of accident since.

'Show me what you have,' more a demand than a request.

His delight was obvious as Brak held the coin in plain view. A shiny geldon piece made from pure silver. And a sight to behold for Jorge's lazy eyes, that widened with greed amidst his sullen features. Easy coin, no doubt. From a pair of foolish boys, at least that was what we wanted him to believe.

'Where did you get that from? Did you steal it?'

'Do you care?' Brak replied. 'I work hard and stash my savings.'

'Ha, ha, I doubt that. You're a lazy rascal who can't keep his hands in his pockets.'

'Show me yours,' Brak demanded.

Jorge ignored the demand, preferring to raise an eyebrow toward me. The same look I had received so often in my life; of caution and mistrust. He stared at me, but spoke to Brak.

'Is he going to be, all right? He's not going to do something, odd?'

I was grateful he couldn't conjure a more harmful word.

'Just show me your coin, miller-boy. I'll worry about him.'

It was nice that everyone was so concerned about me as I watched Jorge rummage under his smock. His hand returned with a motley collection of coins, which he counted into his left hand. His eyes met ours with distaste as he realised his funds were insufficient to meet the bet.

'Look the other way,' he demanded. 'Well, go on.'

We shrugged at each other and turned our backs. Brak waited a few moments and then turned his head to peek, and I kicked him in the leg for it.

‘What if he hasn’t got the wager?’ I whispered.

‘He gets paid every third Friday. Oh, that’s lucky, that happens to be today. Don’t worry, he’s got plenty.’

‘You can turn round now.’ Jorge’s hand was outstretched and open, and we both strained our necks to see the collection of coins. A tingle of anticipation followed as I realised he’d more than matched the bet. I was also aware that his other hand now held three small bags, each one stitched neatly from some kind of pelt; all of the same colour and the same size.

‘Your rules,’ he said, and knelt putting his money on the dusty floor.

The chink of the coins onto the floor aroused us both with excitement. Brak did likewise, and Jorge placed the bags in his hand down by his knees. He then drew a circle with his finger in the faint flour that covered the ground.

‘The contents will be laid flat on the floor; your rules,’ He added an indignant glare just for me. ‘He, can see them for a count of three, and then I cover them up again. I’ve counted the contents several times; there are no mistakes. If we disagree, we count together. Agreed?’

‘Agreed?’ Brak nodded, then rubbed his palms. He was eager to get the contest underway.

Jorge paused, he gave me a glare again.

‘Are you sure he’s . . .’

‘He’s with me, you just tip the bag.’

‘I like a man who’s eager to be parted from coin. It gives me a warm fuzzy feeling in here.’ Jorge rubbed his stomach slowly in a circular motion, his mouth opened and closed as if he were being fed.

The first bag had its lace removed; it was upended and the contents tipped. Jorge used his smock to hide what came out and smoothed the contents slowly below his hand. The arrogant smile he shared was beginning to irritate. That, and his assumption that I was going to do something odd. For the first time I actually looked forward to the challenge. After all, it wasn’t my money if I lost.

Why did I have to think about losing?

‘Last chance to back out boys? I would have to relieve you of your coin by default.’ He sized us both up and grinned with the surety of someone that knew something that we did not. ‘No? Don’t start blubbering when you lose.’ The smock was pulled away to reveal a flattened pile of corn grain emptied onto the stone floor. ‘One, two, three,’ he counted quicker than I had expected, then covered the grain with the bag. ‘How many, retard?’

Retard? That was uncalled for. I closed my eyes and remembered Brak’s insistence that I wasn’t to make it look too easy. ‘Can I have one more look?’

‘No, your rules, loser. One look, then you tell.’

I could almost feel Brak’s anticipation. But I shrugged and closed my eyes again. I could see every grain in my mind as if he’d left them uncovered. Returning the bag to cover them was pointless. The moment he had revealed them Their number was mine.

I opened my eyes again, swallowed hard and gave Brak my finest look of worry, which he promptly returned. This was good; I had them both where I wanted *them* for a change. ‘Seventy-one,’ I said, and followed the statement by leaning forward and scratching my head with worry.

Poor Brak, he should have a little more faith.

‘Is he right, is he right?’ he asked. ‘You can speak it won’t cost you extra.’

There were few occasions when I took satisfaction, even a hint of pride from the darker side of who I was. As soon as Jorge’s smile slipped into disbelief, I felt this to be one of them. Not because I gloated, or desired, but because I was capable of astonishing those that thought disparagingly toward me.

My mother had always told me that I was special. A child born with Godly gifts. Others would mark me down as afflicted. Some said with spite that I was evil, and dangerous. Young children were the worst having innocence as well as ignorance. To most I was a freak by hearsay; to be pointed at as an oddity worthy only of laughter and insult.

‘Is he right?’ Brak asked.

‘Yes,’ replied the miller’s son, who was truly flummoxed. The look of disbelief passed on to a meanness directed at me, that robbed me of my gratification, and left me feeling worried that he may thump me for my cleverness.

‘Come on, open the next bag,’ Brak shot me a smile and rubbed his palms, ‘I’m feeling lucky today.’

Jorge untied the second bag. It was tipped and emptied with far less eagerness than the first. Its contents were flattened and the bag pulled away. ‘One, two, three,’ he counted even quicker this time, and then dropped the bag in the middle of the grain.

‘Ninety-seven,’ I said the number before the bag had landed.

Jorge must have been holding his breath as he gasped out loud. Brak saw it as a sigh of defeat and clapped his hands together loudly.

‘He’s right, isn’t he? That’s two, we’ve got two. Come on Jorge, open the last bag.’

My eyes met Jorge's; their earlier insecurity toward me had turned to outright anger. He brushed the grain already on the ground away with the flat of his hand, flustering to remove them all, and then stared at me with open contempt. He drew another circle, and with it came a grin. A sly deceit that stared out from behind his eyes, and I was certain that Jorge concealed a surprise of his own.

There was history between Brak and Jorge, a need to put the other down, and it had started when a certain young girl named Saski had come to the Learnit. Two boys who had always been friends, but both had been eager to impress the new girl from the moment she'd arrived. They followed her around like greedy dogs; tongues hung out on her every word. Their need to impress had soon escalated into rivalry.

'Bag, bag, bag,' Brak insisted on a somewhat childish tune.

Jorge had recovered his composure, lifted his smock and pulled it over his head. He raised himself to stand, and gave both Brak and I cause for concern. If the wager was to end in a fight, there would be only one outcome, and that didn't bode well for Brak and I. Despite there being two of us, I had my first urge to run.

The smock descended slowly down Jorge's face, with only his eyes visible. Like some kind of bandit he glared at us both.

'One look,' he said. 'No touching, they're your rules.' He knelt and placed the final bag on the ground. At the centre of the spot he'd previously brushed so vigorously with his palm. Now his smock completely concealed its contents. He poked and prodded, lifting his eyes to check on us several times. His smugness had returned and he even seemed to enjoy spreading the corn. I thought he might start to hum.

'Ready?' he asked.

I nodded, and he lifted the smock.

'One, Two, Three,' he said with no hurry, and then dropped the garment to uncover the grain. He let them dangle and turn from his hand.

'Cheat,' Brak accused, and he quickly moved to retrieve his coin. Jorge startled me with his hand speed grabbing Brak's arm.

'The coins stay where they are,' Jorge insisted, pushing Brak away.

‘You’re a cheat,’ said Brak again. ‘Those aren’t corn grain; they’re grape-seed. We agreed to grain, and no more than one hundred to be in the bag.’

‘You don’t have to tell me about grain, I’m a miller’s son, remember?’

‘You’re a cheating dough-boy.’

‘Not so. We agreed to grain, and the head of the grape-seed holds a bushel of grain. It’s hardly my fault that each bushel is made up of many seeds. A bit like a blackberry really. Do you like blackberries? I like blackberries. Although I must admit I didn’t expect them to all fall off in the bag.’ A smirk rasped down his nose as he failed to contain his mirth. He roared with a wheezy laughter and pointed at Brak who fumed with clenched fists. I couldn’t believe that Brak might want to fight him.

‘May I see them again?’ I interrupted.

‘What, no . . .’ he managed to say as his delight continued. ‘One look, that was the deal.’

His eyes had begun to water. I thought he might roll on his back at any second, so cock-sure of himself was Jorge. In truth there was no need for me to see the contents of the bag a second time. My eyes saw what they needed to. Like simple patterns, the objects remained in my head; I could see, manoeuvre, and count them in the air before me. The seeds had glistened for me. Rippled with numerical value; like flickering candles to be counted in the dark. I perceived their numbers as easily as another would recognise the face of a friend.

‘Sixty-five,’ I said.

‘Wrong, freak. That’s the wrong number.’

‘I haven’t finished,’ I said calmly. ‘There are sixty-five bushels.’ His mistake had been lauding them from his hand. Each stem turned in jest by his fingers. So sure was he that I would be unable to take tally. ‘One hundred and eighty-two seeds, I include the ones that have fallen to the ground,’ I pointed. ‘Do you see.’

‘What? No, that’s not fucking possible.’

‘Is he’s right? Of course he’s right.’ Brak turned to me in hesitant hope. ‘You are right, aren’t you?’ he clapped his hands, then wished he hadn’t. ‘He’s bloody well right, isn’t he?’

Jorge looked so angry I thought he might burst. With more caution than the last time Brak's hand moved towards the coins. He scooped them into his hands, then pushed them deep into his coat pocket.

'We should go,' I said.

'Freak.' Jorge got to his feet. 'You cheating fucking freak,' he loomed tall above us.

I don't know what Jorge intended, or if he knew himself what he was about to do. But right at the moment of decision the rear door to the mill slammed shut, and we all turned.

'I was under the impression that this was a working mill, boy?' Jorge's father strode across the floor.

I felt it, and from Brak I swear I heard it; the sound of relief that we weren't going to get beaten.

Jorge whined like a small child as his father cuffed him about the back of his head.

'Get those stones turning, boy. And then fetch in the sacks on the cart outside.'

'Yes, Pa,' he winced keeping his head low for fear of another palm assaulting him. He smarted a damning look towards me, and then climbed the ladder back up to the first floor.

Jorge senior turned his attention to us. He was a rough looking man with a full untrimmed beard, matched by his hair. He held a calmness about his person that unnerved me, as he considered our presence. Or more likely, what to do about it.

I noticed a small glyph inked on his neck, just above the collar bone, and recognised it instantly as a battalion-sowl. A tattoo soldiers bear to remind them of battle. He had several more on his knuckles.

'I know you,' he said. 'You're Derlin's boy.'

I nodded at to his statement, and shared a glance with Brak. Both of us wondering what he would do next.

He was a bull of a man, his shoulders so wide that Brak and I could have sat on either side. In his right hand he clasped a bottle, and caught the scent of drink on his breath.

‘Have you come to cause trouble, boy?’

‘No, sir,’ I answered.

‘And you?’

Brak shook his head.

The miller was even taller than his son, and I felt the hammer of intimidation from this gaunt looking man. His skin well weathered and scarred by the years. He was perhaps ten years older than my own father, and would have set an even more powerful figure in his youth. He turned to me again and took a step closer; I felt my innards shy away but stood my ground.

‘I’ve heard talk of you, boy. People say the Evil Eye hovers above you,’ he stroked both of his cheeks and then lingered a kiss on the fingers that did so. It was the sign of the dead. At least one that would ward it away. ‘Is that true?’ he asked.

I shook my head and willed my legs to make me leave.

‘We’ll see . . .’ he took his eyes from me and lifted the bag on the ground with his foot to expose the grape-seed. ‘Eye or not, you certainly count better than that boy of mine.’ The menace slipped from his face and released a smile that helped amplify the kinder wrinkles in his face. ‘Come with me, boy. Your friend can wait, or he can leave,’ his hand waved dismissive towards Brak. ‘Come, I have something to show you.’

Show me? What can you have to show me?

I mouthed to Brak that he was to, ‘wait for me’.

Above us the stones began to grind again. The sounds of the mill were restored. Jorge was nowhere to be seen.

Apprehensive, that was definitely how I felt as I followed the miller through several doors. Like his son he lumbered somewhat, but I suspected through injury. On his breathe he carried the burden of sin, at least that's what Mama would say. The smell of ale permeated the air with each breath, and he rubbed incessantly at his thigh as he strode ahead.

I found it strange that there were no doors hanging on any of the rooms, and I strained to look into each of them, not wanting to be obvious about my curiosity. It was so different from the working mill. Back here was clean; fastidiously so. Each room filled with comfortable furniture, and homely objects. The touch of Jorge's mother, the miller's wife, it was still obvious despite her death these years past. Each room had polished surfaces, and I even saw a carpet spread out across a large floor.

I had never seen a carpet before, and wondered what it would feel like to cross its pile in bare feet, clenching my toes as I walked. It seemed to me that the miller was a man of means who took great pride and order within his home.

We left by a rear entrance into an open space recently cleared. The ground turned over, with several trenches freshly dug. The soil piled in large heaps by the riverside. My eyes immediately taken by the enormous wheel as it turned above the roof. Revolving slowly and in tune with the flow of the river.

'Sit,' he said, and offered me a pile of bricks. Then sat himself opposite; a hearty sigh as he did so. And then silence as he stopped, hands placed to his forehead. I don't know how many times that mighty wheel rotated before he spoke again.

'It seems odd,' he said at last, 'I've known your father for so many years, and yet you and I have never been formally introduced.'

I wasn't aware that he knew my father with any more familiarity than to offer up a friendly greeting. He coughed, rough and chesty, his breath reached my nostrils with the sweet sickly smell of ale and wine.

'Derlin has spoken of you often to me,' he said, 'I feel as if I know you.' With that he puffed his cheeks and then spat in his hand, rubbed his palm across the front of his shirt and then held it out for me to take. 'My name is Gharl,' he fixed me with a drunken stare. 'I am, as you are probably aware, a miller by trade.'

How odd that a grown up should introduce himself to me in such a way. I knew who he was; I had seen him many times in the past. I also knew that he owned the bakery, in Boundary. I caught a brief whiff of freshly baked loaves as the thought escaped me. On the rare occasions that my father was home he would take me with him to Boundary, our local town, where his first stop was always the bakery to purchase bread. Followed by the inn, where I would wait outside for him to return, sometimes for hours.

I pictured them together, Father and Gharl, plucking the memories into vision. I had a good memory, nothing was forgotten, just misplaced, until I had call to bring it to the fore. I could see them out of the corner of my eye as I looked longingly through the bakery window. As I salivated at the bread and cakes on the shelves. How I loved to look at those cakes. Even better to taste them. Father would always bring one out for me, and leave me to eat it outside whilst 'doing business' in the Tavern.

I could see them now, how the two of them always talked in earnest, yet in discreet whispers which turned to silence if another customer should enter the shop. In fact, they would separate, and Father would act as though they were strangers. I could see them both as I painted the memories. Come to think of it, why did it always take my father so long to buy bread?

I took his hand and shook it. Felt the dry calloused skin, his hand so much larger than my own. It was a hand that could crush my own with a simple squeeze.

'Do you know my father well?' I pried.

‘Derlin? Hmm, let’s just say that we have certain things in common that bring us together, from time to time.’ He gave me a curious look. ‘Tell me, what does he do, your father?’

Do? Don’t you know? Hadn’t he just told me that he had known him for years? ‘He’s a scout for the Varylian,’ I stated with pride. ‘My father is a warrior.’

‘A warrior scout?’ he nodded approvingly. ‘A dangerous occupation for sure. You must be very proud.’

I looked away. I didn’t intend to, I just did. I was so proud of my father, I was. I just wished I could be proud and have him home at the same time. It was so difficult to think of him as a father at times, rather than a Hero of the Empire. Always away in a distant land. Rarely at home with Mama and I. Living with the fear that he would never return.

Another thought struck me. Maybe it was the surprised tone, or just the turn of phrase, but I got the distinct impression that Gharl knew something about my father that I did not. And I noticed how he thumbed the pendant he wore around his neck. The motif at its centre, a staff with several strands coiled around its shaft. He dropped it inside his shirt when he realised. Then looked at me questioningly.

Gharl lifted a brick from the ground and held it aloft in his hand, as if inspecting the quality of its form. He handed it on to me.

‘What do you think of this?’ he asked. ‘Look closely now,’ as he offered me to take it.

The symmetry was pleasing, though hardly perfect, and I liked the way its reddish shades blended with one and other as I turned it in my hand. The rough texture abrasive against my fingers. I noticed also that the dimple patterns on either side were exactly alike in number.

‘You and your sidekick out there, you like to gamble?’

No. I shook my head. It was true, I didn’t. Brak did. I saw mischief in his mood.

‘I’ll make you a wager,’ he said. ‘I’ll wager that you see more in that lump of clay than most men ever could.’

One thing I did notice was how the old bear gained a twinkle in his eye, and a more sober tone to his voice. 'I have a question,' he continued, 'and if you answer it correctly I'll give you a shiny new penny. Do you accept?'

Yes. This time I nodded. He wanted to give away pennies, that seemed honest enough.

'I need sixty bricks to lay a cubic volume,' he said. 'The outside walls are all symmetrical and are six cubics in length, they are three in height. Each wall has a window at its centre, each frame exactly the same in size, one-third of a cubic in volume. My question is, how many bricks do I need to build the outer walls?'

'Three thousand one hundred and eighty,' I answered, still absorbed by the shape of the fired earth I held in my hand. I was captivated by its shape, engrossed by its many right angles and imperfect straight lines. I felt deprived as he removed the brick from my hand and gently replaced it with a penny.

The penny was as shiny as he'd promised. I'd never seen a coin so bright, and I wondered if he'd just made it himself. I gave Gharl a smile which he returned, the starkness of his face much more kindly toward me now.

'Another question, though this one must be for free, I can't afford to keep giving pennies away,' he grinned. 'Do you believe that you have the Evil Eye above you?'

What . . . ? What sort of a question is that? I shook my head in denial. But of course I did. I just wasn't about to admit it.

'I knew someone like you, once,' he said. 'He was older, but just as entranced by shapes and objects. Oh, and he could count too; tell you the number of ticks on a horse's arse, just like that,' he clicked his fingers. 'He was always careful to keep such observations to himself.'

Could it be that there were others like myself, who suffered the same curse as I? I listened intently, eager to learn more. Unaware that my hand had begun to tap rhythmically against the inside of my thigh. I only realised when Gharl placed his hand on my arm to calm my motion.

'Yes, he was just like you.' His gaze turned away for a second, and then came back. 'I know two looks in a man,' he said, 'faces that a man will carry for the rest of his life. The first is fear. Fear of what he has endured. Fear of what he might be called on to do. The other is regret; remorse at what he has inflicted upon others. Or what he has sacrificed to survive. I have seen both too many times in my life.'

'Father says that in war fear gets you killed, but anger keeps you alive.'

'Yes, for a soldier that can be true. But anger is an emotion that freezes a man's soul. A vest that can keep you alive, but can also stop a man from truly living. Fear, on the other hand. That can be the only fuel to make you realise you are still alive.' He held the bottle up in salute. 'I've seen too

much of both. I see too much of either in the mirror, perhaps?’ he began to laugh, as if telling himself a joke he wanted no-one else to hear.

‘Tell me, does you father ever take you fishing, or hunting?’

No. I wanted to admit it, but settled for shrugging my shoulders.

‘Does he help you with your homework after school? Has he ever read you stories at bedtime and stayed with you whilst you fall asleep?’

No. I shook my head and I felt a strange emptiness descend over me. Were these the things a father does for his son? *My father is a warrior.* ‘Father says that when I’m older he will take me for my first drink. He has already begun to teach me the ways of war.’

‘Is that so?’

Yes, *yes it is.* ‘I can throw a dagger,’ I said with pride. ‘And I have swung my father’s sword.’ Not that he knew that. The truth was, my time was spent with mama, mostly in the house and garden. I knew how to grow things; how to cook, and how to milk a goat.

‘Listen to me, boy. Derlin has been a friend and associate of mine for many years, but he can be a fool.’ He touched the bottle’s lip to his own, then lowered it away. ‘My father did none of those things for me, and to my shame I have not shared them with my son. A soldier’s life is for the man, and not for his family. It’s hard on his wife, and is impossible for his children.’ He fingered his pendant out again. ‘It’s difficult to see what we see; to do the things that we have done. And then return to our loved ones and carry on as we did before,’ his gaze became distant. ‘Slowly,’ he said, ‘the soldier begins to distance himself from the husband; from the man. We are unable to share the guilt that weighs us down inside. We struggle to breath in the place that we once called home.’

‘You were a soldier?’ This was a revelation.

‘I was,’ he said proudly. His smile returned, albeit briefly. ‘I too was a . . . Scout,’ he scratched at his head, ‘for the Varylian,’ he raised an eyebrow. ‘That’s what we’re calling it now?’ He released a deep and mischievous laugh. The tone in his voice led me to believe that truths were being masked, or even hidden.

‘What exactly does a scout really do?’

The question seemed to leave my lips before it had formed in my mind, and I knew from his expression that he had no intention of giving me an answer; at least not a truthful one.

‘Did you know that Jorge had two older brothers?’

No. I shook my head. *Two?* This was the first that I knew of siblings. I realised too how he had change the subject.

‘Jorge has lost two siblings. I lost two sons, both to the war. They went so as not to disappoint their father, and neither of them returned. That’s what happens in war. Boys leave and they never return. Only an empty space remains.’

‘My boy in there,’ he pointed back to the mill, ‘he wants to leave here, go off to war. He’s pleaded with me to let him go, but I’ve refused, and our relationship has suffered because of this. He doesn’t understand that the war with the Auristans has taken enough from our family, and I will not allow it to take more.’

I could feel the pain he bore, that he no longer tried to hide.

‘He sees only the glory of the fray. He feels nothing but vengeance in his heart. Vengeance?’ he scorned. ‘What has he lost but two brothers that he barely knew? All I am left with now is the hope that all of this,’ he motioned towards the building. ‘That the mill and the shop will compensate him when I’m gone.’

For the first time since I’d known him, I actually envied Jorge. I think that I understood better how a father should love his son.

‘See here, I’m adding to the mill for Jorge,’ Gharl stood and gestured towards the open space. ‘He’ll meet someone and start a family one day. Though I doubt I will be around to welcome any grandchildren. I doubt I’ll be blessed with watching them grow. This is all I have to give him. All an old soldier can share with his son.’

‘Can I ask a question?’

‘You can ask, yes.’

I wanted to know more about his involvement with my father but knew he would tell me nothing more than I already knew; at least, what he thought my father had told me. Besides, there was another burning issue

within me. Gharl had mentioned knowing another like myself; he had hinted that I was not unique, and I wanted to know more.

‘You said that you knew someone like me?’

‘Is that a question or a statement?’

‘Please, I’d like to know.’

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. ‘I will tell you about him, but not now. Right now I’m wondering what your father would think,’ he took a slow sip from his bottle. ‘Don’t think badly of him when you grow up,’ he said. ‘When you realise . . . When you . . .’ He laughed aloud and raised the bottle. ‘Here’s to the first time you spew in the gutter, boy. To sharing that moment with your father. You should go. Go on, away with you.’

I stood, nodded, and walked to the door. I turned to see Gharl walking away. Whatever was in that bottle, it was being emptied into his throat. A chesty cough interrupted its flow.

What was it he’d wanted to tell me? What had he wanted share about my father? I walked quickly back through the mill to find Brak lying atop a stack of sacks. His head leant hard back and staring upward, his fingers in his ears as he hummed aloud.

‘Come on,’ I shouted, ‘we have to go.’

‘Huh?’

‘Let’s go.’ He leapt from his perch and followed me in haste

‘Hey, slow down. Draï? What did the old soak want?’

I made haste, and ignored the questions that followed. I had to admit that it amused me not to answer, It was nice to be the centre of attention for reasons other than those that attracted an audience of onlookers. Besides, I had my own thoughts. All the old questions about my father had resurfaced.

At the Grey Lady I bid Brak farewell.

Darkness had fallen by the time I reached home. The light from the fireplace in the kitchen seemed sullen as I entered. No lamp nor candle burnt, and I noticed instantly that the table was set only for two. It meant that Father was not home; that Mama was not expecting him to return tonight.

‘Drai, is that you?’ she called out.

I forced a smile. ‘Is Father not home yet?’ I regretted the words instantly and wondered what possessed me to utter them aloud.

‘No, not tonight. Derlin has important business to attend to in Boundary.’

I could all too easily imagine what business that would be. An ale jug, and another woman on his lap.

Poor mama, I should have come home earlier. I didn’t like her being in the house, alone like this.

Our home was dimly lit by the fire, and what little light was now fading in through the kitchen window. I felt guilt at being glad my father was away, relief that I hadn’t stumbled into a hostile, or uncomfortable mood. I had heard them argue so many times since his recent return. The terms of the dispute usually the same, about his ungodly ways in Boundary. Wine women and cards were the accusation. It was no wonder he didn’t want to come home.

No, do not condone his actions.

Mama resented the fact that Father would spend so much of his time in town, rather than here with us. Years of, well, neglect, had left her living a life on edge. For such a gentle woman, he raised a fire within her. A fire that sprang from a vixen tongue, with which she would regularly brand him.

Their relationship was fractious, and for as long as I could remember, they had slept apart. The wooden stairs a constant barrier between man and

wife. She downstairs, here in the kitchen, sharing with shadows that reflect the flames between old wooden cupboards for company. That fire alone to keep the cold chills that crept through the window's frame, at bay.

'Drai, you're late? I was worried.'

'Sorry, I got, delayed.'

'With Brakkish, no doubt?'

I shrugged, so keen was I to share the heat from the fire. It was bitter cold outside.

'And how is Brakkish?' she asked.

'Oh, he's same as yesterday, and no doubt similar to tomorrow.' Mama put her arms about me and hugged tight.

This was all *I* needed, her loving touch and the glowing warmth from the embers in the grate. They fuelled a glow that reflected on her skin as she kissed my forehead. It cast a sadness across her face in a way that daylight could never do. Time, had not been kind to Mama. Her hair had thinned, and at times would look unwashed, dowdy even, as it fell limply about the lean features on her face. Only her eyes remained youthful, and filled with love, for me. She was aged beyond her years. The good looks of her youth still present, if you looked close, but the years of hardship, and of pain, did more than enough to try and conceal them.

It hurt me that she needed more; that I alone could not fulfil her life, though she tried to make me its sole focus. So I told her all that I had done, and when I was finished I opened my palm and let the coins slip to the table's surface. My share of what we had won from the mill, and it felt good that I could provide.

'You didn't do anything that would make you . . . ?'

'No, Mama. All I did was count.'

'Good, good. You have to be careful, Drai. People will not understand. Here, I made you this,' she took a small pot from below a piece of cloth. In it was a broth she'd prepared, and she hung it over the fire. 'Let it warm for a while. There's bread in the tin.'

What? What is it? I could always tell when there was bad news. 'Mama, is something wrong?' She took a deep breath.

‘Your father says he’s made new contacts in Boundary; that he will have work for the coming months. Perhaps even longer.’ She raised a smile. But I knew the thought of Father staying longer in Boundary was not ideal. ‘That’s a good thing,’ she said. ‘It’s good that he is home with us, don’t you think?’

I nodded my agreement; but he was hardly at home. As enthralled as I was he had safely returned, he had been almost a whole year away. I had seen so little of him whilst I was growing up, and now he was back, he would still be away. My brief encounter with Gharl came to mind. And for some reason I thought it wise not to mention.

I grabbed the pot and used my fingers to eat, I was hungry, And it had been a long day. Mama chastised me gently for my ill manners, but no more. Then she told me about her day. How she’d had a visitor, Joran. A woman who lived in the forest. A healer, who some say is a witch. She’d brought gifts from the forest, and stayed for a time. The healer was Mama’s only real friend. And though I knew this woman well, I barely knew her at all.

Mama told me of her new plans for the garden. How we could turn a large area behind the house into a plot for vegetables, and maybe even some livestock for the pasture beyond. Father had promised enough money to buy another goat, or even a cow for fresh milk. She wanted us to become a small farm and work what little land we had. And I agreed, wholeheartedly. But the guilt rose in my belly for I knew that when I was fifteen I intended to join the army. I wanted to serve the Empire. Be a hero like my father. I instantly regretted voicing my dream. Sometimes I wished that I would think a little more before I opened my mouth.

‘Is it so important for you to go to war? For you to kill?’ she asked. ‘Your father will put a stop to these ideas,’ she tried hard to give me a harsh stare. ‘But he won’t will he?’ I felt her hand cup my face. ‘Killing is a sin, Draï. A mortal sin that you can never be forgiven for. Once blood is on your hands, they are stained forever. Life is precious. I won’t have it, I won’t. If the Emperor wants to wage war, then let him do it himself. How many children must leave their mothers at home to satisfy his lust for war?’

It was my own stupid fault for bringing the subject up, yet I felt the urge to argue my cause. I wanted her to know that it was important for me to prove my worth, not just to the Emperor, but to my father. Of course I wanted to go to war, what man wouldn't? It was a duty and an adventure; a chance to see the world beyond this valley. I didn't have to say it; she could see it in my eyes, and I could see the loathing of such talk in hers, as she paced about the kitchen. She stopped.

'Do you know what is special about tomorrow?' she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. 'No.'

'It's the day that I wed your father,' she feigned a smile and felt for ring on her finger. 'It was a good day then, such a good day.' 'Drai . . .' I felt her take my hand in hers. 'Will you pray with me, please?'

'Yes,' of course I would.

She took the little black tome she always carried, from beneath her shawl. She placed my fingers upon its aged cover, and pressed them to feel the outline of the curious symbol embossed on its cover. A staff with something coiled about its shaft, very faint and worn. She placed her hand upon mine.

Prayers were always a silent affair for Mama. I did not know what she asked from her God, nor promised in return. But I knew that I would be first and foremost within them.

But her God was not mine. Her prayers went to the one mighty God she believed in, whilst mine were shared about the many.

I was happy to pretend, because it made her happy.

I awoke the next day to the scent of herbs rising from the kitchen to my bedroom. Mama was cooking breakfast, grape-seed by its smell. And I caught the scent of something else hiding in the aroma. I was sure I could smell the sweet syrupy scent of honey.

Slipping my left shoe on I quickly found its pair, then grabbed my only clean shirt from the linen box beside my bed. Its broken hinge creaked as it opened and almost slipped away as I dropped it closed. In a dreamy state I followed the scent outside to where it was stronger. I noticed my father's bedroom door was still closed. There were only two rooms upstairs, my own, and my father's, beyond their doors the gallery that overlooked the downstairs; I grabbed its railing with both hands and peered over, breathing in the aromas that wafted up from the kitchen below.

The smells were exquisite. Honey was an expensive treat, and rarely prepared in our home. The last time we'd had a jar, it was a present for my birthday from Joran. I knew my birthday wasn't the occasion, so something else was, and as I stared at the bedroom door I heard sounds from within. So Father had come home last night after all. I knew he would. I'd hoped he would. My heart burst with joy that he'd not forgotten Mama. Not forgotten his wife on the anniversary of their wedding. I was so pleased for her. So pleased for myself with the smell of honey. And from the kitchen came another joy; Mama was humming. Not a tune to which I was familiar, but it had a pleasant melody. And she moved as freely around the table as I had seen her do in years. It was enough for me just to watch, as I knelt with my hands grasped to the spindles

Below me rose warm air from the fire in the hearth. It always crackled, day and night, from the first chill of autumn until the warmth of spring. For some time now Mama had practically lived down there in the kitchen. She

slept in front of that fire every night, and was always ready for my sleepy steps down these stairs each morning. Always a smile for me, her son. And in these last few years I had seen the effort demand from her more. Yet it was always her joy to do so.

I watched as the morning sun sparkled through the window's glass, its bright light setting upon the plain wooden table around which we ate. It was so good to hear her hum. This would be a good day, I could feel it in my bones.

Grape-seed had nearly got me a thumping, but this morning its presence was divine. Soaked in barley water and mixed with honey, it was being slow-heated over the fire's flames. Its fragrance infused the house. I was happy and I was hungry. Better to get down there and prepare for the feast before she changed her mind and reached for a loaf of bread, or the tin with water and oats that rested on the shelves by the window.

'Are you ready for your breakfast?' she called up.

The question caught me by surprise. How did she do that? She always knew when I was present despite having made no sound as I left my room, her eyes gracing the kitchen at all times.

'Put your trousers on before you come down, Draí. It's the polite way to come to the table.'

Trousers? I looked down at myself and saw she was right. The open necked shirt I wore covered to my thighs and no further. I was naked from there down to a very awkward and frayed looking pair of sandals.

'Do it quickly, before you frighten someone with those legs.'

I turned to see Father standing in his doorway. He was a great trunk of a man. His arms were folded and he held a stern look that melted to a roguish smile.

I was surrounded and outnumbered, and with a grin, I surrendered and backed slowly away to my room.

My backside hurried itself to find a chair as I presented myself fit and ready. I felt a twinge of guilt as Mama pushed herself up, somewhat unsteadily from the fire. I wanted to help, but knew she'd decline. She never made a fuss, but her pain was clear as she carried the steaming metal pot toward the table.

I don't think I'd ever heard my mother so cheerful in the morning. And then she winced. Closed her eyes as the pot settled on the table's top.

'Drai . . .'

I knew what she needed before she asked. I left my chair and began rifled through a draw beside the window. Above it hung herbs and plants, many of which grew in the forest. Others that had been picked from the grassy valley that stretched for miles around our home. I looked for a brown stalk with fine yellowing hairs, and found it hidden below some grassy roots.

Grabbing a small knife from the sink I trimmed what was left of the hairs into a bowl. Then mashed them with a pestle, adding a few drops of water from a jug. The liquid effervesced from its touch, and as the bubbles faded the clear water muddied with a brownish tinge. It looked quite disgusting.

'That's the last of the pappas root, Mama.' I put the bowl in her hand. 'I'll go to the forest and get more from Joran. Shall I ask her to call on you?'

'You will not,' said Father, as he came down the stairs.

Had I realised he'd joined us I would not have mentioned Joran's name. There was no love lost between them, and I did not know why. He would not have her name spoken in his presence.

'I don't want that, *woman*, in this house.'

Before my mother could protest he'd raised his hands in passive poise.

‘Drai will go and acquire whatever potions you need. He will bring them back for you. Drai, do you understand?’

‘Yes, Father.’

A small coin was taken from his pocket and placed on the table by my bowl. He seated himself in the chair opposite. The one thing I never did was argue with my father. He was a kindly man, but stern, and his authority in our house was not to be questioned. I wondered why he’d neglected to dress his torso, and I couldn’t help but look at his fine physique. It bore no comparison to my own scrawny stature. I swear that if I had held my arms out and wrapped them around his chest, I could not have touched my hands together behind him. Men such as he, and Gharl, were surely hammered on the anvil of the Gods.

‘You will pay her, and we will owe her nothing,’ he said. ‘Now sit and eat your breakfast,’ he drew a deep breath. ‘It smells good, Estha. Can I smell honey? Don’t the bees sleep this time of year?’ He looked at me. ‘Drai, have I forgotten your birthday?’

You haven’t forgotten what day it is? Today is a tribute to your vows. I looked at Father, and then at Mama. The smile had left her face, though she tried to hide it. *You’ve forgotten? No, surely not?*

He took a bowl from the centre of the table and placed it down in easy reach. He looked up and caught me staring, so I looked away. Even in a good mood my father was an intimidating man, standing a head and shoulders above most. He had an assuredness about himself; a way of looking at people that left them in no doubt of their own inadequacy should they seek confrontation of any kind. It was the stare a wolf may give before it savaged the throat of a baby deer. Elusive in many ways, I didn’t know him as well as a child would like.

‘Isn’t every day cause for celebration?’ Mama said. ‘I have both my son, and my husband, eating breakfast at my table.’

I agreed. Both my parents were present, and neither, for once, sniped or tried to irritate the other. Silently I urged her to feed me; willed her to fill my stomach with something good. My anticipation rising as she moved

around the table looking more comfortable now, her medicine having quickly soothed her pains.

Mama had made a fine art of disguising pain, and her movement looked almost graceful as she came around, the tap of her cane barely registered, I was so used to its tone. She leant on it with her elbow and raised the pot in the same hand, then ladled the hot steamy liquid into the bowl onto which I immediately pounced with my spoon. I slurped quickly, and halfway through I belched.

‘Don’t misplace yourself on the way home again,’ said Mama. ‘We have things to do, you and I.’

The statement intrigued me. But for now I was happy with filling my belly. The speedy action of my spoon testament to my great pleasure. It was delicious.

‘I’ve cleared some of the ground by the old sty whilst you were out yesterday, Derlin.’ Mama ladled more breakfast into his bowl. ‘The soil is good, so I thought we’d plant another nursery. Some vegetables, and perhaps a little corn. We could sell what we don’t eat,’ she placed a hand on his shoulder as she passed. ‘And I had a good look at the sty too,’ she said. ‘The structure is sound. If you put a roof over the enclosure we could buy another goat. Maybe even a cow for fresh milk. Some chickens to keep it company.’

‘We’re not farmers, Estha.’

‘No, but now your tenure in the army is over, I thought I’d put you to good use. Draï can help you.’

My spoon slowed its eager passage up and down. *You’re not going back to the war?* This was news to me. *You’re staying home?* I felt a sudden rush of joy. It was numbed by the look on his face. His unwillingness to meet his wife’s gaze.

‘I’ve been having some thoughts about the house too,’ she said, putting the bowl down. She stood behind him, her hands on his shoulders. She kissed him on the head. ‘We should draw up a list of things that need repair. Oh, and Draï could help you paint the sheds,’ her arms slipped around his

neck. Her cheek rested on his. 'Drai's been so looking forward to spending time with his father.'

No, don't. Please don't spoil it for her.

'Stop it, Estha.' Father wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He took her hands in his, and gentle as he could, he parted himself from Mama's embrace. 'There will be no sty, and no goat. Sit down, please. I've got something to tell you,' he looked to me, and not at her. He pushed his bowl toward the centre of the table. 'I have something to tell you both.'

I felt my appetite wane as his tone matched his gaze; my eyes flitted from one parent to the other, not really wanting to look at either.

'Perhaps you should be on your way now, Drai,' Mama suggested. She smiled, but her eyes told it all. 'Remember, straight home.'

I looked down at my bowl, it wasn't empty. I stood anyway.

'Stay where you are, Drai. I have something to say. Sit, and you too Estha.'

'Let the boy go, Derlin. Whatever it is you have to say I can share with him later.'

He ignored her and spoke to me.

'Drai, would you like to come to town at the weekend? We could spend some time together. I can purchase that new tablet, and get the chalk you need for learning. If you want, we can stay the night, at the Broken Glass. I'll introduce you to some of my friends. Maybe buy you,' he glanced at Mama, 'a *small* cup of ale?'

Really, together . . . The Broken Glass?

'It's time for you to become a man,' he said.

A man! What does that mean? He winked at me, and a sly smile broke his lips. *Oh, you mean . . .*

There were women at the inn. Not the sort that stayed home baking, or darning socks. My euphoria erupted in secret, and then waned, knowing my mother would be loathed to allow such a thing.

'And what has your son done to deserve such *intimate* treatment?' she asked. 'Or what, more like, have you done? Say what it is that has to be said, Derlin. And speak not with deceit on your tongue.'

I shrank from the conversation, recognising only too well the tone she now adopted. And why her hand slipped inside the pocket of her apron. The small black book she was never without, now in her hand. Not only her tone, but her rhetoric would change. They both knew that a line had been drawn. It was Mama who crossed it first.

‘Give favour to me, and not your son,’ she said, ‘For I will bear the disappointment far better.’

I watched him take a take a deep breath, a scowl on his face that he didn’t want to wear. This battle-hardened soldier so prickled with defensive scars; I knew he would rather face a violent clash of swords than his wife’s anger. She waited for his reply.

‘I’ve been recalled, Estha,’ he said.

My blood ran cold. *No. You can’t go back. No.*

‘I’m going back to join my regiment.’

An instant and bitter disappointment crossed my mother’s face, and I felt it myself. My father had only been back for a month; I was slowly getting to know him again. Getting to like him. We were putting behind us the huge portion of my life that we’d spent apart. Besides, now was not the time for such news. We were eating grape-seed and honey. My Mama, his wife, she’d hummed whilst making us breakfast. She was happy. Why would he want to spoil that?

‘Recalled, why? You told us the war in the East goes well, that it will soon be over. Why are you called back?’

Mama’s mood filled with sadness, not anger. I saw the shadows shade where morning had ushered the light to return. The angular features of her face that had once turned men’s heads, now seemed more gaunt than usual.

I expected harsh words to be parted from her lips, but I felt the unexpected news had taken them from her.

‘They need me, Estha. My talents must be placed where they can best serve the Empire.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Your place is here with your son.’

‘Estha . . .’

‘No, I don’t want to hear it. Drai, your bowl needs filling, give it to me.’

‘Estha, I’ve been recalled. I have to go.’

‘I don’t want to talk about it. You will stay, with us. Your place is here, not out there. At the edge of the world fighting savages.’

‘Hardly savages?’ he toyed with his spoon. ‘This is good Estha, very good,’ then grinned half-heartedly, ‘I will miss your cooking. Eating off the land is hardly the same as food cooked in the home.’

‘So you say. Another reason for you to stay then.’

‘Estha, I can’t stay. I . . .’

‘I what, Derlin?’ her tone suddenly tinged with anger. ‘You must tell them you cannot go.’

‘I leave in a week,’ he said.

Mama filled my bowl. She touched Father on the shoulder as she passed.

‘Then you have time to think about it,’ she said.

They were sparring, neither wanted to launch an all out assault whilst I was present.

‘The decision is made.’

‘It’s too much to ask then, that we bring up our son together? Too much to expect that a husband will find time for his wife, when he has so much for others,’ her hand made forceful contact with the table’s top. In it was her black book. ‘So much of my husband to share with *others*; those who will bear his love without any more responsibility to share than the coins he leaves at their bedside.’

It could not have been put more bluntly. Father slammed his spoon onto the table. He wiped at his lips like a man taken deeply with insult. I received a long hard stare. ‘Go to your room; your mother and I have things we need to talk about.’

I stood to leave the table.

‘Sit down, Draï,’ Mama said with a soft hush. My fingers had barely had a chance to leave the scuffed edge of the table as I found myself sitting again. ‘Eat your breakfast. Derlin and I will talk later,’ she turned her attention to my father. ‘This conversation is over, Derlin. Go into town, find yourself a glass, do wherever it is that makes you happy. Please leave; we’re used to getting by on our own in this house.’

I watched him stand; the great warrior suddenly battle-drawn and weary.

‘You must understand, Estha. I have no choice in the matter, I have to return. The decision was made for me.’

She shook her head and looked away as if trying to make sense of something that confused her. Then Mama did something that I had never seen her do before. She slammed her cane against the table’s top. I felt my fists clench and my eyes instantly avert from hers. She made me tremble.

‘Liar. They did not come to you; you have gone to them, again.’

‘Calm yourself woman, not in front of the boy.’

‘Calm yourself, he says. They need me, he says. We need you Derlin. We need you for the winter months are already upon us. Your son needs you to guide him, to bring him up as a man,’ her voice softened. ‘We need you more than the Varylian, don’t you see that. Or don’t you want to see that?’ Her eyes filled and I thought she would cry.

‘What do you need from me, woman? You don’t want me. You made that decision a long time ago, when you came down here to be cold. And as for the boy? For him to become a man his mother must first cut the apron-strings with which she binds him. No, my decision is made. I’m going back.’

I knew then that the past month, where I had thought they were trying to get along, had only been a truce of sorts. He’d never intended to stay, and my mother had never truly believed that he would. She had only hoped, I suppose. Hoped that something lost may have been found, though I doubted whether she truly wanted to find it any more than my father did. For it had been too long lost.

I sat there amidst the raised voices and felt myself withdraw, and felt the darkness begin to swallow me. For the first time in my life I welcomed it. For I knew the Dreaming would be a good place to hide.

THE DREAMING

Movement was difficult as I trod on through a constant gloom. Each step a careful foot forward to avoid tripping on uneven ground, that suddenly steepened without warning.

I trudged upward on a surface that was loose like shale; that moved in all directions below my feet. Hard though it was, I was determined to reach its summit. My fingers aiding my effort as they grabbed the steepening incline to find leverage. My skin becoming stained with sweat from my endeavour. Somewhere above me was a peak, a place to survey the terrain that lay ahead of me.

When I reached it, all I could see was a vast empty space. Darkness as far as my eyes could see. Blackness that offered scant hope of ever finding my way out. Even the sky above was concealed from me.

Where am I? It all seemed so pointless; so wearisome. I didn't understand why the Dreaming brought me here. Why it always brought me to this same place? *Why?*

A sudden scurry of movement sent a chill charging through my body. My eyes searched what I couldn't see, and they saw nothing. A nothing that was black and empty. Whatever this nothing was, it trapped me.

There it was again. An urgent movement of limbs scraping at the loose rock. Whatever creature it was that shadowed me, it had returned. It was somewhere out there. Somewhere very close.

Shit, it's coming fast.

Fear fed my every muscle and fibre. A need to flee that surged and bristled my skin. I had to move, and move fast.

Thank the Gods I was descending, my movement quick and easy. Sliding down through dispersing ground; the surface slipping away from me to aide my passage. I was barely aware of the sharp edges that tore at my clothes, that bit and stabbed at my hands, as each moved with a mind of its own to aid my balance. My descent was filled with desperation, and then panic. The surface more horizontal as I lurched forward, off balance; I had to run, sprint, give all that I had to gain momentum. No time for careful footwork in the darkness.

I could have run into a wall and I wouldn't have seen it coming. Only one thought. A single intention, to keep my legs moving, and pray I could stay ahead of what scrabbled and snorted behind me. Tall talons in full flow as they chased to catch me. I heard every pad of the beast's claws. Whatever it was, it was big. Of that I had no doubt.

Panic gripped my heart in a clenched fist as I ran. I could feel the beast's ravenous eyes on my back. My only way was forward, and each time I dared a look behind, the ground I so quickly covered was erased. Parted by a curtain of jet through which I saw nothing. Always nothing. But the beast was out there. It was hunting me. Biding its time with relentless pursuit. Forcing my legs to give all that they had, and when they were done, I knew it would strike. I feared that time edged ever closer.

It happened without notice. I fell. My arms flailing to protect myself, as I stuck the ground at pace. I hit it hard, but felt little. When I'd stopped reeling, I froze, and I listened. My body battered and bruised, my senses sharper than the cuts I was yet to feel.

How I cursed at my lungs for their need to breathe. Each breath a signal to the beast. It was out there, but it too had stopped. Put an end to the chase, for now. It was waiting out there in the darkness, but for what? The silence that ensued shrank my world within the air that flowed about me.

Absolute silence.

Not a trace.

Until a terrible roar broke the space about me. Forced me to clutch at my ears, and screw my eyelid's closed. I felt the hairs rise on my body as I lay there, not daring to move. Except to constrict myself even smaller. To

become unseen and unworthy of attention. I begged myself to stay silent, but could hear my thoughts scream questions I didn't want to hear.

What does the Dreaming want from me? Why does it bring me here?

Wherever this place was, the Gods had forsaken it. Just as they had now forsaken me. I swear, I thought I would shrivel and die. But as tears welled in my eyes, they wept up a kind of courage, of sorts. A stirring that forced me to react; to cry out.

'Go away!' *Please, leave me alone.* My only reply was an echo of my words, and they faded a little more each time they were spoken. Until they went unheard, deep into the void.

'What do you want from me?'

'Leave me alone.'

Alone: such a horrible word. Despite my futile pleas, only silence remained. Just the black scorn of emptiness.

'I'm sorry.' *Whatever I've done. Please . . . I'm sorry.* Tears poured unchecked down my cheeks. 'Forgive me,' I whimpered.

Now, more than ever, I wanted my father to be with me. I needed his warrior hands to hold mine; to wrap me in his arms and protect me. I needed *his* strength and courage to fight. I craved to find the warrior that *he* was, within me. But all I found was fear as another blood-curdling roar carried on still air. Followed by the scrabble of something huge on the shale. The beast was on the move again, and its movement was rapid.

I didn't think, I reacted, by springing up from the damp cold ground. I fled with dread in my heart, with a terror that soaked my mind. I was consumed by the blind necessity of my panic. I more than ran; I flew, covering the ground with barely a stumble. The ground ahead easier to see. But still it was behind; snarling and growling with awful intent, and closing in fast.

Worse still, I could hear more than one of the wretched creatures. They were a pack now, and keen for a kill. Circling from my left, gaining to my right. Covering the ground far quicker than I could hope to myself. I felt my heart sink as the glow of the beast's eyes appeared in the gloom.

I ran, leapt, and slid. Pulled myself through gaps in the rocks. As I gasped for enough air to fill my lungs; more fuel to drive myself on. My only thought now was to stay ahead. And I feared my heart would explode from the effort. My legs would surely soon turn to stone, and if they did, I would falter.

Please, dear Gods, don't let my legs falter.

I dared not look back in case I might stumble, or worse, I may even fall.

No sooner had the thought passed, than I felt myself trip. My footing lost on the boulder onto which I'd leapt. My weight shifting sideways, and then forward. My motion confounded as I tumbled without time to reach out and break my descent. I felt a sudden and final end to my escape as the ground broke my fall. I crumpled from the callous impact feeling shards of stone pierce the skin of my hands, and then my face. In that awful frozen moment I heard the tear of my trousers above the scream of the beasts, and I wondered as my legs passed awkwardly above my head, what my mother would say at their ruin.

The notion passed as abruptly as my motion. My head struck first, closely followed by my body, and both were plunged deep within a silken sea. To be swamped by its warming embrace.

I fought the urge to sleep, but drifted back and forth like waves crashing on a sandy shore. For a moment I felt safe in these waters, and then felt them recede. Ebb slowly away to leave pain flushed with numbness as bruising swelled to smart across my body.

My last thought was of Mama. How I yearned for the love and touch of the woman who had raised me. It was a kindness to feel her embrace. To hear her voice. As I closed my eyes I saw her face. Settling into her arms I was taken by darkness.

I don't know how long I slept, but when I opened my eyes the landscape had changed. The beasts that tormented me had not preyed upon my body. They had not torn me apart, nor devoured me whilst I'd lain unconscious. Not a scratch had been visited upon me, that had not been delivered by my fall. Indeed, the chafe and bruising from my flight was not nearly as bad as it might have seemed.

I was alive and well, and as I laid my head back I whispered prayer to the Gods. I didn't care which one. It was to one and all. I was just thankful that the air was pure, and no longer sour. The sounds of the beast, no longer set in chase. They were gone. As was the damp and chill that had plagued me. The temperature more comfortable, it felt luxurious and warm.

'Who's there?' *I heard you.* Just a whisper; perhaps my imagination? 'I know you're there.' I heard it again.

More than one voice this time. A sudden rush of words; too many to understand. A trampling of whispers on the air about me. Gone as suddenly as they'd arrived .

I was confused, dazed even. Weary and feeling hot. The air verging on a stiffler. The heat had warmed through the leather on the soles of my shoes. It tingled my feet in a pleasant sensation.

Dear Gods, where am I?

'I don't want this,' I shouted.

If this a gift, take it back.

This place was unlike the last, and different to any I had seen before. Not even the caverns of Trouer, a place where my father had taken me when I was young. Where he had tried to infuse within me the ways of the warrior. How to live from the land, how to stalk with the stealth of a hunter. To track and hunt the creatures that lurked in the depths of the caves, small

though they were. My smile slipped as the memory concluded my failure. My father's disappointment, though he tried to not to let it show.

No, Trouer didn't looked like this.

Where I stood now was vast. A mountain hole that carried as far as my eyes could see. Though I did find the redness of its light pleasing. The cavernous structure awash with its crimson tone. I was in a firelight land that sprawled deep within a mountain, with cliffs so high they rose as towering facades, to a summit so high, only a bird would be foolhardy enough to try and reach. But as magnificent as it was, this new landscape only served to magnify my feeling of being alone.

I walked for some time. A passage that took me deeper into the rift. As I did I felt the temperature soar; my body glazed, as the heat drew perspiration. The cold and damp long gone, and replaced with lacerations in the mountain walls that drizzled with molten rock. Ancient claw-marks ripped deep into the rock-face and left to bleed into a fire-plagued river. Or perhaps I was feeling giddy from the heat.

One thing I was certain about. A milestone had been met, or possibly passed. I even harboured a sense of belonging, but to what and why, I had no idea. Wherever the Dreaming had brought me, I knew now that it was part of a journey, and that I was closer than ever to where it wanted me to be.

'Hello?' I called. 'Is anyone here?'

I repeated the question, much bolder this time, but without reply. In past visits to the Dreaming it was only darkness, but that had changed when the howling beasts had emerged. I felt they were sent to discourage me. To bar my path. They had failed. And now something, or someone, was closer than ever to me now. I could feel it. If it were the Gods that called me here, then I was sure my progress would only become more difficult, for that was how the Gods worked. Those who were chosen always set upon, tested, forced to endure. Asked to achieve the impossible. It wasn't as if I were being given a choice.

I followed the molten-stream and watched as it bulged and burst, and at times rose up to fold over upon itself. Its flow leisurely until it reached a

juncture where it joined with others. A gathering of secretions so unhappy to be joined that they spewed spectacular fountains of flame, as they merged in a fire-dance that eventually calmed.

I was awed by what it did next. The fiery drift flowed beyond a precipice and fell into a cavernous cauldron of flame. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. And a fine place to sit and rest, and watch. High enough to see, but far enough away to keep me from harm. For a while I forgot how lonely, dirty, and home-sick the Dreaming had made me. Perhaps it was the heat that dulled my senses, or the mesmeric effect of the falls. Either way, within minutes I was asleep.

In our dreams we explore the impossible. We overcome the barriers put in place by the physical world. It is only fear, and familiarity, that stop us from moving between the two. Those who are touched by the Dreaming can cross the line between what is, and what could be. They have the power to shape either, or both.

My life was bound by destiny from the moment I entered the Dreaming. I was ushered by forces I could never have hoped to resist. There are Gods who would take control of my gifts. Others who would stop at nothing to destroy them.

From sleep comes awareness. The Dreaming is a door between the two.

It was the chill that woke me to see my breath form above my eyes in a vapour. The warmth of my body was crystallised for a moment in the air.

The rock on which I'd slumbered was gone. Its warm embrace replaced by an early morning dew that gathered on the lush grass. I'd moved on again. My sense stunned to find myself high above a foreign landscape, its surface covered by tall hills, and flat lands beyond. Farther still was a vista of mountains capped in peaks of snow, with slopes bristling with forests.

I lay on a precipice I dared not look over. For the land was several leagues below me, and took my breath away.

Moving back I found the cover of trees, lean and tall, their limbs twisted and lush with foliage coloured silver and gold. Their canopies glittered with the light from the sky. A sky I did not recognise, nor even believe to be real.

As deep and vast as the land below, the sky was much larger. I couldn't tell if it were night nor day. But it was ethereal. A giant violet cloud that stretched throughout the entire sky above me. It stretched forever, and was laced with seams of gold. Each one frozen by the dark; illuminated by the

light. Dusted over by stars whose reflections gave the heavens such vastness and depth.

The more I stared, the more I saw. Or didn't want to see. This sky had two ghostly orbs filled with twilight. One perched on-high, whilst the other, much larger, was paused to never breach the horizon.

Khendrin? It had to be. *The home of the Gods.* Whom I had never truly believed in, but what other explanation could there be? *Only the Gods could dream such a place into existence.*

I knelt and put my head in my hands. I began to pray. Prayers that I'd so long ignored, but now each and every word passed in whispers from my lips, as though I had chanted them a hundred times before. I prayed to Mama's God also, just in case. For surely this proved that He was all powerful over the many deities that were worshipped by others. I especially prayed to my father's favourite God. His beloved Antrox; mighty God of war.

I prayed hard and hoped that all would listen, and also forgive. Staunch prayers that soon turned to questions. The first amongst them, was why? Why was I here? If this was Khendrin, then where were the fabled Halls of the Dead? The great palace where the brave fallen warriors of the Empire would feast each night?

Beirdin's breath, am I dead?

More prayer spilled forth, mostly to thank the Gods. And to ask for their blessing. For them to deliver me safely home. For the Gods to appear and explain themselves, not that were duty bound to explain anything to me. But if this was Khendrin? If this was where the Dreaming had finally led me. Then it was truly a sign from the Gods, and I could expect more. They had tested me with endeavour, and accepted me as worthy.

Mama was right. I was a Chosen One. But chosen for what?

Magical or not my body still suffered from bruises and fatigue. Despite these, I would stand, and I would be honoured.

Nothing happened. The magnificent, and somewhat frightening sky, gazed down. No apparition, no spirit, not even a ghost had come to speak. Above me the stars glittered in eternal glory above clouds made of gold. I stood alone in the land of perpetual twilight.

So prayer had failed me. The Gods had not seen fit to answer my call. There was nothing but the fresh clean air and the trailing mist of my own breath to suggest that what I saw was even real.

I dropped to my knees again, but this time to safely shuffle myself closer to the edge of the plateau, to look down on the land below that flowed with the changing shades of grass and trees, that lifted and dropped throughout a thousand hills. The mountains beyond struck a powerful frame. But what drew my eye was the winding river that weaved a path throughout. And in the distance a basin into which, as far as I could tell, several leagues of precipice induced the water to fall. At its base rose a thick mist as wide and as deep as any sprawling city.

There was a smell too. A sweet fragrance drifting on a slight breeze.

If not Khendrin, then where?

‘Where am I?’ I shouted. My words lost in the vastness of it all. ‘Great Maker, what do you want of me?’

Not a sound, so I left the edge and returned to the trees. Tried to make sense of what I didn’t understand. It wasn’t easy with all this ‘greatness’ about me.

Is this a puzzle I must solve alone? Another question to add to my growing list. *How? Give me a sign . . .* I wasn’t sure if my eyes played tricks on me. *What is that? No, it can’t be.*

I moved carefully back to the edge. A long way down and in the distance, I saw movement.

It's not possible.

A huge contingent of mounted knights; columns of men who marched behind. I saw a seething throng that moved in ranks, perhaps a hundred or more in breadth, many thousands in length. A growing shadow, their numbers so great. I witnessed an army of massive proportions. Men, soldiers, and horses. Or what looked like horses. Warriors riding high in the saddle. What I had thought to be trees now revealed themselves to be a mass gathering of standards, and flags.

This was the march of the Fallen. The feasting over, they had come to fight. But fight who?

I had prayed for a sign but could never have imagined so powerful a vision. There was only one place this could be, so I fell to my knees. This was TessaNine, the middle-land, where Antrox, God of War, led the Fallen Warriors who had honoured him in life, and then in death. The God my father prayed to every day for his blessing and protection. How could I doubt it; this was where the fabled Hall of the Fallen must be, and below me I saw his warrior hordes.

I chanted over and over for his blessing and even dared to open my eyes. Frightened as I was that I may actually see the Warrior God, as he charged down from the heavens in his golden chariot, flanked by flaming ravens. My heart pounded wildly with excitement, cautioned by fear. Something ill was about to befall my dream, I could sense it. A moment later, I could hear it too. What I saw chilled me deeper than a dragon's breath.

I saw demons. They rode down from the stars on a wail of fury. Bright lights that blazed a trail through the twilight and then dropped in free-fall. They came in the wake of wild primal screams and lit the vastness of the sky like fireworks.

I knew demons could fly, and here was proof. They fell with terrible speed before arcing their descent. The air ripe with demon's wail. A bloodthirsty call to arms that encouraged me to step away from the edge. To find cover. As they dropped from the sky like arrows, I hid.

From the canopy of a tree I watched. Not only my eyes bearing witness, but my mind also. I felt the accumulative terror of all those below as one might feel a sudden breeze. But despite the terror I watched an innumerable number of blades drawn in unison. A defiant raising of a shield-wall that captured the moonlight and momentarily blinded my eyes. And when I looked up again I saw the ground was erupting from the punitive touch of ethereal light. Flashed down from the many demons' eyes like a silver-hail intent to devour the knights in a hail-storm.

It was horrible the way the soil discharged upward from the ground in such violence. Mere moments before the strafing motion fell amongst the Knights and their steeds. I could never have imagined such destruction.

A heartbeat later I was unable to distinguish the warrior's from their horses, as bodies were violated and torn apart. Heaved effortlessly up into the air as if by magic. I couldn't turn my eyes from the morbid scene as helpless men and animals were cut down and thrown apart. So many thousands with each pass of the Demon Horde. And I heard their screams; felt torment in my head, as if a wall of death came crashing through my mind. I nearly fell from the branches clutching my ears. As swathe after swathe of demons turned brave warriors into the twisted and deformed. Unable to defend themselves, so vicious was the onslaught of light and hail.

I knew that the fires of the UnderLand could burnt fierce. Father had gripped me with tales of war. But not like this. The smell of flesh was appalling, even from such a range. This was not TessaNine, how could it be? What God would see their disciples torn apart in such a callous and hopeless fashion. There was no honour here, no noble cause. Just death on an unimaginable scale. This was slaughter.

For a time I couldn't watch. I fought hard to keep the screams from overwhelming my mind. I thought of Mama, of our new garden. Of Brak and his foolish ways. But it was Saski. Her pretty face, that welcome smile. It was she who gave me a way to shut it all out. I stared into a canopy of leaves with Saski in my thoughts, until I knew that barely a soul was left breathing down there. I knew without looking that the demons of the air had begun to land.

From the bellies of the beasts I saw creatures that looked like men. At least they walked like men who wore the blackest of armour. Within minutes they were many, littering the valley floor, and quickly assembled to advance en-mass. I think the defenders of the land below me saw a chance for revenge. Or was it a glorious death, as what was left began to rally. Barely a banner left upright in their lines.

It sounded like the clouds ground with thunder as the horses were set to gallop. The pitiful remnants of a proud army. One last stampede toward the demon's lines. Lightning flashed to counter the thunderous sound of hooves, and death was stirred again like leaves swept before a raging breeze.

I had never considered courage to be a foolish thing. But what I saw was futile. Suicidal. As men rode out through the dust and smoke. Brave beasts held to a trot, then a canter. Then the full on gallop of the charge, as lances lowered, and banners trailed in the wind.

They were cut down by a savage form of lightning. Terrible darts of light that tore through their ranks. So brutal, so efficient. This wasn't war, it was murder. I had not thought the battlefield to be such a terrifying place, as horses fell below twisted reigns, riders being hurled to the ground. Men and banners being trampled under-hoof. Those at the front were crushed where they lay by the ranks that spurred on from behind. But still they did not falter. Still they came on. I think the horses were bravest of all as they finally reached their quarry, as they crashed into the forward ranks of demons. Their riders sweeping through to smite them with blades of steel.

The smog of battle drifted over everything until I could no longer see, but I knew that men and demons died. I felt the mass delivery of souls unto

the afterlife, and I wondered if it was prepared to receive such a bounty shipment of death.

It was all over with such rapid insanity, and as the mist began to clear across the battlefield, I became aware that another form of butchering had begun. Slithering creatures were already moving, no, flowing amongst the dead. Creeping like spectres freshly risen from unholy graves as they foraged amongst the swords and crests of the fallen. I winced as I witnessed their atrocity. The mist-like souls of men being plucked screaming from their corpses. Being devoured in a demonic feast.

I turned, repelled by the sight. Hugging at my tree as I wept. What manner of being were these that they could defeat an army so large and powerful in such short a time? And why had I been brought to bear witness to such a crime?

I cried, then I slept, and then I cried again, before I dropped to the soft grass with tearstained cheeks. I was finally free of the screams, but not of the whispers. The same ones I had heard earlier. Too many to hear then. But only one now. And what sounded like the whispers of ghosts, was fast becoming a voice to be reckoned with.

‘Who are you?’ I shrank from the sound of my own voice. ‘I know you’re there. . . . I can feel you.’ I resolved to be strong. ‘Show yourself.’ I demanded. ‘Is it you who brought me here?’

‘Your journey through the dark energy has been long, but necessary. All it takes is a few final steps.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Can you not see me? Was I in error to bring you here?’

It was a man’s voice. Words he conjured in my head. I don’t know why, but I closed my eyes and tried to focus on his whispers.

‘Walk toward the light, Child of the Dreaming.’

A flicker in the distance, a mere spark. But I felt it touch me with a summoning hand.

‘The light is for you,’ he said. ‘Concentrate, and you will see. Follow my voice and it will bring you to me.’

‘Who are you?’ *I’m not going anywhere.* ‘What do you want from me?’ *Why did you bring me here . . .* The light flickered, grew with intensity. It dazzled from afar. ‘Demons,’ I gasped.

The more the spark gorged with light, the brighter his mind became to me.

‘They follow you, don’t they? I can feel them.’ *Please, no.* I didn’t want to see. The urge to reach out and grab the light was irresistible. But I knew, somehow, that was what *it* desired.

‘I have searched what is empty and vast to find you,’ he said. ‘Come, embrace the light. It won’t harm you. All you need to do is step inside.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t you want to know? Doesn’t it burn inside you to be revealed? I will show you the meaning. I will help you to understand.’

I knew what he meant. This was why the Dreaming had brought me here. I'd finally broken free of the darkness. Now I wanted to step fully into the light. Against every instinct that urged me not to, I reached out to the light.

I shielded my eyes with my hand, partly because it hurt to see, but more because I had become safe in my fear, in my silent hiding. Perhaps this voice was just another way to lure me into torment. But I had to know.

Each time I had entered the Dreaming I'd felt the call of something distant. Something powerful; a pull from where I was to where I should be, to where I was now. I could not deny the brilliance of the light, for as tight as my eyes were shut, its passage forced them wider open.

It was on me, around me, it became a part of me. A flash of brilliance that ignited my body, and swept me away toward the heavens.

I left this world behind and headed for the stars.

I understood now what it felt like to pass over to the other-side. Everything was gone, and only the light could be seen. And that passed quicker than it ever could have travelled. Neither colour nor detail registered, just a blank page totally devoid of form. I was in free-fall toward the other-side, yet fell without motion, totally succumbed to the presence that summoned. Even the silence was gone. With more than a little care I managed to kneel within the powerful illumination, my world small now and limited by the brilliant shade, with no-one but myself for company. Let loose upon myself with my own thoughts and fears.

I had never honestly believed; unlike Mama. She called my abilities, gifts. But all the *gifts* had ever done were mark me as an outcast; a point of derision and scepticism by others.

So many times she had called me 'Special'; I thought it a label more than a name. A term fostered by the pride and the love of a mother to protect her son. In my lonely moments of which there were many, I was nothing but an error thrown into the world to be bitten and scratched; set upon by others that didn't want to try and understand. Only the merest hope was ever offered. Breadcrumbs to follow in a bid to keep me sane. Mama had always told me that, "I was suited for a higher purpose. I was set on a path laid out by the Gods."

But even now I wavered. Hesitated to let myself fall and be caught by her faith. Anticipation shrouded me with fear, that I would fail whatever test the Gods now conspired to set me.

Slowly my eyes adjusted.

Am I here? I knew not where here was. *Where am I?*

A sigh of relief as my surroundings came slowly into focus. The thought that I'd been sent as an offering still strong in my mind. What other use could the Gods have for a scrawny lad like me?

The corridor ahead was brightly lit. It had walls made of metal, or what looked like metal. And despite my infinite reservations, I followed it.

To say I felt sorry for myself was an understatement of monumental proportion. This was a cold and lifeless place, with nothing natural about its form. A metallic world struck with impossibly straight lines and walls that my fingers could find no bump or mark. I wasn't even sure of which way up I stood.

Surely only the Gods could have brought me to such a place? I began to pray, hoping they would fail to notice I only did so in times of stress and fear. It was never too late to believe.

One of the walls parted from the others and startled me. It slid unaided to one-side, instead of opening inward or out. More disturbing was the light that escaped from the space beyond, it was different from out there, darker somehow. As if the night had come but my eyes could see perfectly well within its shade.

Barely had the realisation dawned when another came to be reckoned with. I was no longer standing alone. The opening had filled with a tall dark shadow. An image somewhat blurred, and foreboding. I dropped to my knees and shut my eyes tightly; I was not ready for this. To consort with Gods, or those who did their undertakings.

'Blessed be the mighty Antrox. I beg forgiveness; it's been too long since I last sent you blessings. Your humble, snivelling servant, prostrates himself and begs your pardon.' I said it out loud so the stranger would hear.

At that moment I believed. I believed in all the Gods, and I wanted to tell them as much.

Blessed be Craxic, Lord of the sky, and Astrun, winged Goddess of hunters. Sortis, the God of wonders. Every other name that came to mind, I beseeched each and every God that I knew, or had ever heard of. I swore my fealty, my undying love; my devotion to them all. I prayed hard for their

forgiveness towards my indecision and lack of faith. Perhaps it wasn't too late to redeem myself, and then it spoke.

'I am so very pleased to meet you at last. There were times I thought my search to be vain,' its voice was old, and filled with strength that comes with age, and yet on some level devoid of any sincerity. I heard the soft movement of its shoes as whatever it was stepped towards me.

Do Gods wear shoes? I supposed they must.

'One tiny spark of hope,' it said, 'in a universe so immeasurably vast.' I heard relief, and triumph too, in its tone. 'You were difficult to find, but not impossible; it is never impossible. Remember that. For us there are no limits, and no ends to which the means will not set us free.'

Us? I realised I had forgotten to breathe since I'd entered.

Was a God really talking to me? To Draï, an unimportant boy still shy of his manhood. I was an oddity. A thing of curiosity. The Evil Eye sat on my shoulder. Why would a God want to talk to me?

He'd taken the form of a man, but unlike any I had ever seen. I dared not look up for fear of displeasing him. So I peeked, as was my habit. Just a little out from one eye to see he wore a strange flowing garment that shimmered as he spoke. I had never seen a softer, finer weave. Nor a paler shade, as if it had moonlight sown within its thread.

Is this what Gods look like?

He wore a narrow face that showed harsh lines etched in a blanched skin, well scored by his years. Two small tendrils hung from each lobe of his ears, like a woman's earrings.

'At least you know your place,' he said, 'perhaps there is hope for your kind, though I doubt it.' He walked toward me like a man withered by age, fatigued by the obviousness of his ageing years.

I will never forget the way those hollow eyes stared out at me; black as jet, with no colour or life. No sparkle to prove he was alive. I knew then that this was not a man; not as I understood a man to be. You can tell much from a stranger's eyes the first time you meet. They will always project a truth later hidden by familiarity. His gaze was ruthless. It betrayed the welcome spoken

in his voice, and showed signs of a younger, much sharper spirit, that kept hidden its intent.

‘Have you any idea how long it has been?’ he stepped around me. ‘No, of course you cannot.’ I felt a stirring run up the length of my spine as his gaze questioned me. As his eyes sized me up with notions that I could not imagine. ‘Finally,’ he said, ‘we can end our search through the dark layers of night. You stand before us as a beacon. You will lead me to another who is like myself.’

I didn’t understand, and continued to hold my tongue. Despite a hundred, a thousand questions, that demanded to be released in search of answers.

‘Who are you?’ I asked, as he stepped fully around me. As I realised that I could not move. Not a muscle would twitch, not even to shy my face, as his face leant in to almost touch mine. ‘Why? I asked. Why has the Dreaming brought me here?’ The question seemed appropriate, if awkwardly stated.

‘The Dreaming? Ah, a primitive representation of the Universal Thread. Let’s just say that you have searched for me, as I have searched for you,’ his voice a whisper. ‘It was inevitable. It is long overdue.’

‘I don’t understand,’ my mind spun in confusion. ‘What do the . . . ? Why . . . ? Oh, dear Gods, am I . . . ?’

‘. . . Dead, are you alive? Are you here, or there? Questions, questions. You should be asking *who* you are, if you want to understand questions like that.’

He was too close. I felt sickness from his lips; nausea from the words as they passed through my mind. The urge to faint could barely be denied.

‘It was difficult to bond with you from such a distance, but here you are at last. I apologise if I was too impatient the first few times. I hope you weren’t unduly distressed?’

I shook my head, a bit too eagerly.

‘Well, let’s see shall we. I am known as Companion. I represent, well, we’ll get to that. I am ‘first contact’ for you and your race. The Faith is

coming. We will welcome all who are willing to believe, into our fold,' he moved around me, out of sight, but I felt him. A dark presence in the gloom behind me. 'There is always room for those who believe,' he said. 'With your help, and mine, your world can be saved. All those who are willing to embrace, *The Faith*.'

Two words that made my spine tingle. Whatever link we had, I wanted it broken.

'You struggle, why? You cannot hide what I want. Illumination sparkles inside your mind. You're a creature of the light who carries the gift of sight within him. And yet, you see so little? Your mind is frail and pathetic. It is a beacon. A doorway through which I cannot fail to . . .'

To what . . . ? I didn't want to be anyone's beacon. For what reason. Why? All I wanted was home. Or was that the point? If I was a beacon, then for what? For his Horde to come and set my world alight? My fingers jerked open from my palm where they had been clenched. I turned my head to confront him, and wished that I hadn't. His eyes were like staring into an abyss. 'Let me go,' I said. Not sure where my courage had sprung from. Happy that I could at least surprise him.

'You have strength; I'm impressed, and something else too. The Strings in this Universe can be plucked, they can be played,' he inhaled slowly, as if appraising the scent of my hair. Then he stood back, 'Oh, something else indeed.'

I didn't like that. Neither the words nor the way he said them.

'It's been an eternal search to find one such as you. Is it true?' he smelt me again. 'Many have been chosen, but none have offered more than tribute to The Faith.'

I felt sure a grotesque codicil was left from that statement. An assured hand reached out to touch my cheek. God or demon, I felt my innards tremble at his icy-touch. I feared I might puke, or even collapse, as my knees began to falter.

'Tell me. Is he still on your planet?'

'Who?' *What?*

‘The one you serve,’ his statement woven around malicious intrigue. ‘Tell me about him.’

‘I serve the Emperor,’ I said blindly. *Don’t we all?* And I began to conjure images in my mind. A great city, and a golden palace. Images built from the words of storytellers.

‘Not him. I talk of someone, else,’ he raised my chin so I would look at him. ‘You don’t know, do you?’

I was shaking my head.

‘Others have come to serve. But you are the one that I . . . that my Master seeks.’

I felt him rummage through my thoughts, and saw his disappointment that I knew nothing of whom he spoke.

‘Hmm, *he* was an error. A mistake? Are you a mistake?’ Words supported by anger now. ‘He was broken and should have been put down,’ said Companion. ‘Loving the Dark Star wasn’t enough for him. How could it not be enough?’

I didn’t like his bitter tone, nor the fact that it was being directed at me, his breath on my neck. Sickly warm and invasive, I wanted to shy away; sink through the floor and disappear. Companion’s anger only tempered by his patience as he rounded on me fully and squared his face to mine.

‘Did he really think I would stop looking for him? That the Universe was so large that he could hide himself forever?’

What could I say? I didn’t have any answers. So I told him so.

‘I don’t know.’ *I don’t know.* ‘Are the Gods angry with me?’ I gave a bold glare as if to prove my honesty. ‘I don’t understand any of this.’ Thank the Gods, he actually smiled.

‘There is no need for you to fear me; you have something that I need,’ he ran his finger down my nose. ‘So many galaxies between us, but still I can sense *what* you are. And you have no idea yourself, do you. No idea of what he has done to you?’

‘Please, why did you bring me here? I’m not worthy. I want to go home.’

‘The one I seek stole something that belonged to my Master, the Dark Star. He has used it, I see that now. And *that* was a mistake. It has brought

you, to me,' he took a deep breath filled with satisfaction. 'I've ordered a change of course. Your world is now subject to The Faith.'

'What does that . . . ?' The wall opened. I felt myself drawn out through the opening; I could see my image left stood behind. What sort of magic was this? What insanity had the Dreaming cast me into?

No doubt now; I was certain I was dead. Nothing inanimate blocked my way, despite raised hands I felt nothing. Not the walls nor ceilings that barred my path. I simply passed through them all. Carried with purpose to reach above and beyond, and continuing to rise. Until I realised I had risen above a city. A place far bigger than any I could have imagined. A vast metropolis of warrens, set within a maze, and littered with lairs filled with creatures that I only now recognised. Beings that I had seen before.

This was a City of Demons.

These creatures were responsible for the massacre I had witnessed. These were the demons, and they numbered in their millions. Some kind of chthonic horde, so vast I could barely take them all in. Cursed creatures, who thankfully showed no sense of my presence above them.

What frightened me more was the cold empty expanse beyond. It was endless. Something awoke inside me, a memory, but not one of mine. I realised I moved within the space that lay between the stars; the utter emptiness of the eternal night.

I felt my heart would stop. That my mind would shut down in darkness. It was all too much. Even in my ghostly form I could feel the damning chill of the perpetual void. And yet, it was welcome. A sight so long unseen. It was obvious that a madness had beset me.

I used the city's revolving spires as an anchor. I refused to move my eyes from what lay below. What could only be explained in fables. It was the City of the Dead. I kept my eyesight fixed on the city, and dared not stare out into the Abyss.

They were wondrous spires that held a faint recollection. Stretching so high, they seemed like mountains. Each one rotating slowly around a central mass. A length that exceeded the view of my gaze. Its end too far away to see.

As our spirits travelled through the darkness. I had no control, nor did I lust for any, as I flowed between the movement of the spires. Their motion lazy, like that of giants, to render me small and insignificant as we moved along, and then down. Back into its very bowels.

How could anything so smooth, so unnatural and dark, be so vibrant and full of light? A constant bustle of creatures that I dared not look upon. This

place was as full of movement as a forest floor. They swarmed in packs to gather food, whilst others lay dormant in their lairs.

I flinched as the walls passed again, too quickly for me to count. I felt the innards of this strange and barbarous city begin to hum. A powerful resonance growing louder the deeper we fell, into a space with fewer souls to be seen. Demons left above us, and behind, to find beings very different to those who dwelled above. More human; more like me. No, not me, like him, Companion. Each busily attending to walls that twinkled with dark lights. The darkness of a cave, seen before my eyes could adjust. So many shadows, all captured in frozen pools. One by one these 'companions' turned to see. For unlike the others, the demons, they were aware of our presence.

Our ascension complete, we walked. On ground that was solid, but empty, as it passed below my feet. The feeling a puddle would make between my toes if I could walk on water.

Questions still fired like arrows through my head. But fear cautioned me against words. It was better to remain silent than gibber like a fool, so I relented, and accepted that the Dreaming had carried me to where I was meant to be. In truth I was captivated. Totally in awe of this incredible, yet terrifying city.

I was numbed by its awe, and unready, as we passed beneath a looming arch, its strange symbols a ghoulish glow of amber.

As I stepped below, I also stepped within. Into the very sanctum of the Gods themselves.

Companion should have warned me. Allowed me to close my eyes; have them bound with strips of cloth. For no man should set their eyes upon the Gods.

I stood spellbound within a great sphere of water, bound by magic to flow about us? So much taller, and wider, than the miller's wheel. I was beneath a river, looking up through a sheet of ice. Or did I look down? Above us a sea of glowing embers that burned intense and white, and stirred with erotic passion. So erratic was their movement; so abundant their cause, that I could never have guessed their number. Such chaos, and yet so calming as they passed above our heads.

'I was once like you,' said Companion. 'I too was small, and afraid. Ignorant of all but the one moment in which I stepped.'

I heard his voice but the words were lost in their meaning. Too enthralled was I with the gift of sight. At the impossible that happened all about me.

'What is all this?' I asked, knowing I could never understand. But still that nagging recognition, just out of reach. The feeling that on some level this was not a mystery.

'This, is a means to an end,' he replied. 'The universe is compiled of Dark Matter. What you see above you are its remnants expelled.'

'Dark Matter?'

'We take what we need to move our City through an endless realm of space.' As if to prove the point he removed his cloak and held it out at arms length.

He dropped it, and I watched the cloth fall. The hem touching the floor first, as the rest compressed quickly into a pile.

‘A poor comparison, perhaps? We take the Dark Matter and expel it. The process leaves a wake in space, but in this way we can move immeasurably fast. So much quicker than light can travel to your eyes,’ he smiled. ‘Like you, I understood little. Until my eyes were opened by the Dark Star,’ he lowered his head as if with reverence to the name. ‘Through its grace we offer you deliverance from the light, and salvation into the dark.’ He lifted his hand in a manner that I should follow its lead. ‘Behold,’ he said. ‘I am instructed to offer what so few have ever seen.’

I understood then, that I walked in a dome, of sorts, that continued below as well as above. A vast housing in which I stood with him, Companion. An energetic view of transparency into the darkness of the Void beyond. I had that feeling again. That I was standing upside down and rotating. The nausea returned. Not helped by a floor of glass, that rippled when I moved.

Companion had moved to where the floor ended. To a precipice. ‘Behold,’ he said. ‘Look upon your God.’

No, I can't. I didn't want to, I just couldn't help myself.

I could feel the power of what he wanted me to see. Its will that forced itself over mine. My heart began to race.

I took a step towards him, and felt my image stretch toward the platform. Drawn inexorably towards him though my feet remained still. It was irresistible and overpowering. Then it called my name, and I gave myself heart and soul. No thought to any consequence.

‘It speaks to you?’ Companion knelt. ‘How wonderful,’ and though his head bowed, his dark eyes looked up at me, and glowed with a darkness I could not describe. I felt them curse my name.

I still refused to look. It was enough that I could hear. That I could see, as it shared a vision; an incredible image of the city. Then a moment of insight that revealed an eternal voyage. A crusade that was older than the stars.

‘The Dark Star only speaks to the Companion.’ It was Companion's voice that kept me tethered, that stopped me from falling into oblivion. ‘You are, honoured,’ he said, his tone sullen.

I felt he wanted to let go and allow me to fall. 'We have journeyed through eternity together . . . It is soon to be my time to sleep.'

He didn't look too happy about it. Not that I knew what he meant, but he recovered his composure.

'Tell the one that you serve. Tell all of your race to watch closely at the stars, for we are coming. The Faith brings salvation from the bondage of the light.'

I couldn't turn away from the darkness that lurked below me. I didn't want to look, but I wasn't being given a choice. Whatever it was that was down there, it was dark. It was evil. Companion's voice trailed away in my descent.

'Tell them all,' his voice devout and assured. 'Tell the heretics and believers alike. They must look to the stars, for we are coming. We will not be denied.'

‘Shhh, its all right, I’m here. I’ve caught you.’

I opened my eyes in a daze, following her soothing tone. And though I couldn’t see her at first, I felt Mama’s arms warm and soft about me.

It was difficult to focus, and I had a pain thumping in my head as striking as a hammer swipe that pounds the blacksmith’s anvil. Always when I returned, it was with the same throbbing pain deep behind my eyes, and a nausea I knew would quickly pass.

I was unable to move, and grateful for the cool dab of a cloth she touched against my face.

‘Shhhh,’ she repeated, and pulled a blanket to my chin. She kissed my cheek. ‘You’re back. You’re safe with me now.’ Mama rocked herself, and me in turn. ‘You’re safe. Shhh. You’re safe.’

I was not afraid, not this time, for something different had happened. Before when the Dreaming had taken me away, I had felt only the terror of the chase. An endless roaming in the dark in search of something that wouldn’t be found. I would return to a sweat filled bed with panic racing in my heart. But this time it was different. My overwhelming sense of solitude and mistrust had been replaced by a desperate need for Mama’s embrace, to reassure her.

‘Shhh, be calm. I’m here, I’ve got you.’

Mama’s voice was soothing, so too was her hand teasing through my hair, encouraging me to be calm, as slowly the light from the window prickled my senses and brought me home.

‘Mama . . .?’

Shapes began to unfurl, the space around me became more familiar. I was sat in our kitchen, unable to move. I was fixed and rigid, and felt a wild stare sown onto my face.

‘Shhh, I’m here, I’ve got you.’ I felt her arms wrapped around me, her dear embrace try to hug me back. Everything else seemed hollow, and I had that damn ringing in my ears. The same sound each and every time I returned.

I’d heard a story once, about a man who drowned in a lake. His name was Sabartis, and he was a jester for nobles and Kings.

The tale was a parable about a man who brought joy to many, but whose humour became more and more objectionable to the Gods. They became resentful of the man and cursed at his humour. So aggrieved were the Gods that they conspired to undermine his popularity. Whispering in the ear of the crowd, causing thunder and lightning to follow him around.

Soon Sabartis found his life adrift within a dirge of loneliness, with only the memories of a million smiling faces. Their voices roaring with spiteful laughter whenever he closed his eyes.

The day came when Sabartis could no longer endure the sound of laughter, and so he leapt from a high cliff into the waters of an icy lake. His dead body found by a fisherman who ferried him back to shore.

As he laid on the bank of that lake, the Goddess of the winds, Braia, took pity upon him. She sent a powerful gust of wind to fill his lungs, and purge the water from within them. She whispered on a breeze, her voice sent to guide him back to the light.

The tale tells that he lived a long life on the banks of that lake. Each day he would fly a kite, in homage, because Braia liked to be tickled on the breeze.

I forget all the details, I mention it only because it best describes how my world is lost, and then found. That’s how it is when I return from the Dreaming. Sometimes I am tickled with visions and words, and sometimes it’s just the light that returns to ward away the darkness.

I listened to Mama’s voice and followed it. I was slowly aware that my right hand was clenched upon the table top whilst my left palm tapped upon it incessantly. Through no conscious will of my own my left leg jiggled to a similar rhythm, until I felt Mama’s hand slip over my thigh to ease the motion. I felt myself breath for what felt like the first time.

‘Shhh, you’re back. You’re safe here with us now.’

No finer welcome home could anyone have than the caring eyes of a mother; the touch of her hand against my face. How I loved her face in the candlelight. Her hair falling awkwardly across her eyes as if freshly awoken from sleep. Her serious brow that quizzed my thoughts without any need for words. I felt her fingers squeeze mine and I gawked back at her expectant gaze. Only her eyes ever smiled, and only for those who knew her well enough to see. She wore the same serious and unhappy exterior that I had become so familiar with. Mama was a woman frozen in time. Something in her past had scarred her deeply. What it was, I did not know.

She kissed my forehead and hugged me, and the world became real again. I could smell the lavender scent on her clothes as the room became mine again. I could see my father standing by the door, his hand on the latch as if he was about to leave.

Where are you going? Please don’t go.

I recognised a familiar look in his eyes. A man unsure, and on edge. A man panicked and indecisive of which way to run. Towards me, or away? Not a feeling a warrior was used to.

Father . . . I still couldn’t speak. Please, don’t leave.

I saw the guilt in his eyes. The sadness in his breath, as he looked away. As the latch was lifted and the door opened. A cold breeze forced its way in to quell the flames in the grate. My heart sank as my father left us.

‘Drai, look at me. Shhh, tell me you’re all right?’

I wasn’t, but I didn’t think she’d noticed him leave. My lips being tugged by a soft cloth as she wiped spittle from my face.

‘What should I do with you?’ she asked.

Stop cleaning me . . . I wanted to cry out; run to the door. But that was how it was when I returned. *Father . . .*

I let my head rest against her breast gaze staring at the door. I felt drool slip slowly down my chin.

‘You look different,’ she said, and discarded the cloth. Then cupped my forehead to check I wasn’t too hot. ‘What happened?’ she asked.

‘Monsters,’ I answered

Her eyes narrowed. ‘Were you frightened,’ she kissed me. ‘It’s all right, I don’t mind if you don’t want to say.’

Oh, I wanted to shout about it. Tell her all.

‘It spoke to me, Mama.’ I snuggled deeper into her arms. ‘The Dreaming, it spoke to me.’

‘Drai, blessings are upon you,’ she rocked back and forth with me in her arms. I knew she was silently praying. Thanking her God for keeping me safe. But more than that, she was happy.

‘I heard them as clearly as I hear you now,’ I added. Then I eased away. ‘They spoke to me, Mama.’

‘Who spoke to you?’

I knew what she wanted me to say. Every shadow on her face wanted hear me say it. But I wasn’t sure.

‘The Gods,’ I whispered. I had to. For what else could they have been? ‘And dem . . .’

‘. . . Shhhh, don’t say anything else.’ She reached under my pillow and took the book she’d placed there. Her book, under my pillow? She kissed its cover and held it to her chest, looking up to the ceiling, her eyes filled with the dew of joy.

‘Pray with me, Drai,’ she placed the book in my palm and closed my hand around it. Her own around mine. ‘Thank you, dear Lord, for all your blessings. . .’

Demons. I closed my eyes tight. *I saw demons.*

‘Tell me the words,’ she said.

Words?

‘What did God say?’

I remembered looking over the edge. Staring down into darkness. I felt it pull at me as if I fell from a cliff.

Dark Star. That’s what he’d called his Master. *The Dark Star.*

‘They said . . .’ I caught myself unable to deliver the words, still unsure of their meaning. ‘We are coming,’ I blurted it out.

‘It is written,’ she clutched my hand tighter about the book. ‘And through holy words will the Prophet come. We must give sacrifice and watch for His coming.’

We must? How?

The book’s cover was well faded from time and touch. It’s words had become Mama’s meaning in life. I don’t know if she’d begun to believe out of necessity. A need to believe in something, in anything. Or whether life had forced her to find meaning. Either way, the book fulfilled her needs. There was a clear path between its words, and the Dreaming that came to me. At least that’s how she saw it.

‘Seraphs will sing,’ she said. ‘The clouds will empty onto the land the rain of retribution, and the world will be purified; washed clean of sin. Onto cleansed and holy ground will fall new seed, and swell in abundance. To bring forth new life that will force the old to wither and fade. Only the faithful and devout will continue.’

I didn’t like the sound of that too much. I never really did. Her God was filled with harsh words and sounded vengeful. After what I’d seen, maybe she was right? My face must have said as much as she took it in both her hands.

‘It is not necessary to understand, that is the purpose of faith,’ she said. ‘You do have faith, don’t you?’

‘Yes Mama,’ I said without enough conviction, but I don’t think she noticed.

Faith, I don’t think I had too much of that. *The Faith?* Companion had said it several times. And each time it had chilled me. I wanted to believe,

though I doubted in truth I had much belief within me. I had realised though, that this was the first time I'd ever been allowed to touch her book.

It was her book; her's alone, and she guarded it jealously. Father, to my knowledge, had never opened the cover. Why would he? Father believed in his own Gods. The old Gods, who moulded and shaped all things. He admired, and prayed to the Gods who favoured combat and war, but respected those who could cause anger in the winds. Who encouraged the rain to fall, and also to hail. And though he didn't approve, he did understand the personal need involved to hold the Gods dear. Even if it was just the one God.

Mama believed in her 'one-true-God'. The God with no name, who lorded over all things. All on His own, without the aid of others. He sounded like a greedy God to me.

His words were written in her little black book. A book that was her bed-rock, her guidance, her comfort and inner peace; what little she ever really found.

"Faith and understanding," she'd say, "are seldom found in the same heart. We live in a world of wonder, and danger. Only faith can guide you, and that is all the understanding we need." It was pretty black and white.

She'd closed her eyes again, book clutched to her breast; a broad smile on her lips. To see Mama smile was a rare gift, and I indulged myself in the moment, with hope it would last.

I don't know what it is like to dream like others, but I'm told that dreams are seldom remembered. That the feelings they invoke can be as strong as the wind through your hair.

That our Dreams are the will of the Goddess, Shari. The She-God who fills our sleeping minds with desire, and fear. It is she who teases and torments the sleeping. And there are those, it is said, who can capture the dreams of others, and decipher their meanings; put into words what none can understand. They are Shamans and Seers. The Mercian women among the few who could do this. My thoughts drifted back to the Mercian girl, woman, whatever she was. She'd spoken about a Void, about a Keeper. Could she have meant Companion?

No, that's not possible; how could she have known? Could she have seen it in a vision? *No, I don't care. Not now. I'm hungry.* My emotions were drained; reality was settling back within me. I didn't want to tell Mama everything. *She might think me mad.* 'There was something else,' I hesitated. But if she didn't understand, then who would?

'What is it, Drai?'

'They, they told me . . .' I looked up. 'We must watch the stars,' I said. 'Mama, they are coming.'

She gasped. 'And so shall it be. The end of all, will behold the new beginning.'

'But Mama, I saw . . .'

'Shhh, Drai. What is given should not be shared. It is enough to know He is coming.'

'But . . .'

'No, it is enough for me to have faith. That I have a son who is true. His words were spoken to you, Drai. Cherish them.'

No Mama. I fear them.

Her lips moved without words; she was praying again. She had the two things she loved most in her hands. Her son, and her precious book. I wanted to tell her everything, but she'd already heard all she needed to hear. The rest was fanciful anyway.

I reached out for the bowl closest to me. It was half-full, the spoon rested on the rim. If I had been away for so long, then how come my breakfast was still warm?

But if it was a dream, then how come I remembered it all so vividly? And more to the point, why did I feel so at ease, so familiar, with all that I had seen? It should have left me a gibbering wreck.

But somehow, in some way, it was as if I had been a part of it all, but couldn't remember.

That morning was brisk outside, and the night had left a fresh veil of snow. My feet crunched with each step taken down the path to the valley floor, following tracks left by paws and claws that had hopped and leapt before mine; animals searching for food, or just playing in the snow. Dawn was about to break as I reached the riverbank.

The water moved slowly for the time of year. A gentle meander, until a bend in its path where huge rocks had gathered, and the flow became a swirl and a surge. A good place to cross. Jumping from one boulder to the next, to reach the forest on the other side. And as I entered its tree-line I turned my back on the rising sun, to take a path into the forest that few people knew was there. And even fewer would follow. For this was a forest filled with Spirits, Sprites, and Shadows. Thankfully, none of whom had ever done me any harm.

But it was an eerie place. The deeper I went into the trees the more the light began to dapple and recede. It danced nimbly amongst the canopies but took flight in the undergrowth. This was a spiritual place filled with many shades of light, each in conflict with shadows for dominion between the trunks of the tall and powerful trees. An ancient kingdom of magic and mystery. A place to escape to and hide, and find oneself.

I felt in my pocket for the coin that Father had given. Then caught sight of what had happened? I saw him again in the doorway. *Why?* What was it he feared? My stomach turned to lead. *It's not your fault, Father. It's mine.* I was the charm that bound them together. I was the aberration that had forced them apart. Did Father believe as so many others, that I walked with the Eye above me?

'Father!' I screamed.

My mother's love had become pious in its nature. My father's love had interwoven itself with fear.

'Father?' I shouted again.

A foolish thing to do. My voice unanswered between the watchful gaze of old leviathans. Silent giants that lorded above the bracken and fern. They held court in a world filled with strength; inhabited by creatures who understood what it meant to be alone.

Here, where the winter fall had begun to litter the floor with browning leaves, the great trees preparing to shed themselves for another cold winter. A fasting before they slipped into their long sleep through the coming months. It truly did seem ancient.

The deeper into the forest I walked the harder the path became to follow. Easy to get lost if I hadn't walked it so many times. I felt a hundred eyes watch in a silence that hung heavy within the still air. Broken by the occasional cry of a bird, or the rustle of something small in the undergrowth. Even the trees grew closer together, their gnarled roots breaching the soil like warped and twisted limbs. This truly was a mythical location. Where the limits of your sight would catch movement. Where only stillness prevailed when you turned to see. Good reason, I supposed, for the popular myth that this forest was roamed by ghostly apparitions, and that Joran, the 'Forest Witch,' was the keeper of its spirits and souls. A title in which she furtively revelled. It kept the 'Outsiders' away from her beloved forest, and protected her seclusion.

It didn't take too long to reach Joran's cottage; I made good time and ambled up its path to the sudden cawing of crows in the tree tops. A warning perhaps that I had arrived? Or just birds who stretched their wings into the sunlight that streamed down through a gap in the trees. A coincidence that the forest canopy parted to light the ground around Joran's home. A dwelling surely built by Spirits who lived in the forest.

Its craftsmanship was intricate. The outer log-walls stacked upward from the soil. They rose in unison with the uneven level of the ground. Their sawn ends melding seamlessly into the trunks of muscular oaks stood on either side. Mighty trees that interwove their branches above a pitched roof

on two levels and weaved from layers of dried grass. It dressed perfectly about the oak bark.

I ascended steps cut from the soil and set with logs. The glass in the window beside the door sparkled with brilliance as I raised my hand to knock, but received no answer. I'd seen no smoke rising from the stack as I'd approached, even so, I rapped twice more, but still no answer. I eased the door slowly open.

'Hello?' I called out. 'Joran, are you home?'

Inside was as natural as the cottage itself. Old worn planking on the floors, that stepped up to a higher level. A faded rug on the raised floor; a simple wooden table with thick spindled legs, three chairs about it.

What always pleased my eye was the grand sideboard against the far wall. It was old, and finely carved with ancient runic symbols. They looked religious, but I didn't understand. I liked the animals skilfully tooled into the drawers, and onto the stretcher below. It was a grand piece, and out of place; stolen perhaps from some other world. More in place at a castle, or a noble's house, but not here in the forest. I'd often pondered on its history, but was too polite to ask. Or too weary to pry.

I wiped my feet on the mat outside before stepping in, knowing how fastidious she was about the cleanliness of her home. I closed the door and entered.

A heavy wooden mantle adorned a small fireplace, no fire in the grate. There was nothing to indicate a past or a present in her home. No indication of who she was, or had been. No sign of Joran's history; of her love or passion. These rooms held an air of abandonment as I walked through, and stepped down into the kitchen. The space where Joran spent all of her time. By far the largest room in the cottage, and it made a statement to me each time I stepped down into the room. This was the focus of where, and how Joran lived. Her life now was all about me and on show to be seen.

I marvelled at the laddering of shelves that lined the rough plaster of the kitchen's walls. They told everything, if you took the time to see. Each shelf was topped with a horde of assorted jars. Brown glass and green, blue and

red. On the walls hung hooks, each with a purpose, to hang posies of wild herbs and spices. There were dozens, and their smell was sweet and welcoming.

Flowers dangled too, given a wall all to themselves. Left to parch above a work-surface stacked with numerous small bowls. The petals were rich in colour; left to dry, waiting for a pastel to grind them down. So pretty as they dangled; a pink and white, yellow and red colourful display. And in the cabinet below the surface was the substance of her endeavours. Behind glass doors stood rows of small bottles I knew were filled with her potions and brews. Medicines mixed from the gallery of nature outside her doors.

I opened one of several small drawers. Its space filled with the dried remnants of rare forest fungi. Picked and dried in the summer months, then stored for use in her precious remedies. How I envied Joran and her secret world of the forest. She had found solitude in a place where she would never be alone.

I ambled over to the back door, that was open. I had never seen it shut, and through it I could see the forest outside. The light from above sharing warmth to the open space. She'd told me once that her door was always open to the spirits of the forest. I'm not sure I would have been so welcoming to them.

One of Joran's precious books was on the work-surface. I gingerly opened its cover. On both the pages exposed were skilfully drawn pictures; paintings of flora well faded by their age, and framed by very old text that I couldn't read.

Spells? I let the book close. *So what if she is a witch?* She'd always been kind to me.

I left the silver coin on its cover. She'd understand. Joran would come. She'd bring a fresh supply of pappis to ease Mama's pain.

I left through the open back door.

I didn't see my father over the next few days; he would leave before the sun rose, and return late at night when I slept. I wasn't sure if it were his wife, or his son, that he was trying to avoid, but he spent near all of his time in Boundary. Where or with whom was a mystery to me. Occasionally I would hear the panting of his horse as he approached the house, and the muffled whisper of harsh voices that tried not to wake me. Always he was gone when I awoke.

My mother said nothing about this and so I greeted each morning in the same fashion as before. I went to the Learnit, and returned to find my chores waiting. It was as though Father had never returned from the wars.

We kept ourselves busy and neither of us spoke on the subject. Besides, Mama had grand new ideas for our home, and was not dissuaded by my father's objection. In only a few evenings we had cleared the brush and weeds that littered our new nursery. Just Mama and I. No distractions. No harsh words to hear, and though I loathed to admit it to myself, we had become self-sufficient, just the two of us. And though I missed him, his presence would not have served us well. Whilst the snow held at bay, we worked. The white on the land had faded, the ice melted; retired to the farthest corners of shade. We knew it would return, and during its absence we worked hard to prepare the ground for the following spring. So many roots and rampant weeds were pulled before the soil became possible to turn. And as we toiled to the fading light I would see Mama stretch, often, with hands on hips, her back arched, she would look with anticipation to an ever greying sky. But she would show no more sign of discomfort.

I too would look upward, but only for a moment, before my eyes levelled back down the long stretch of valley below which we lived. They didn't lift

in hope to see good weather, but in vain, and with desire, that I would see a silhouette in the distance. That I would see my father.

ORIGINS

‘Where are we going?’ It was early, no sunlight yet through the kitchen window. ‘Mama, please, I’m not dressed.’

I felt a chill prickle the soles of my feet. The rough surface of the floorboards clicked at the touch of her cane. I knew how much it hurt her to walk and was surprised at how quickly she moved us both toward the stairs. I was looking for my shoes, having discarded them with a flick of each foot the evening before. I grabbed for the one that was visible as she opened the door.

‘Shhh, we must not wake Derlin,’ she insisted with a hush.

It seemed unlikely to me that my father would *not* hear us; the tap of her cane, the squeak of the door. The creak of the stairs we were about to descend would hardly go unnoticed to a Varylian Scout.

Father had served more than five tours with the front-line soldiers. Elite warriors who were the eyes and ears of the Emperor’s army. His ears must have burnt from the noise, we made, no matter how quiet we thought we’d been.

I barely had time to consider my thoughts as I reached for my shoe and plucked it from the floor, as I was dragged through the doorway. I hopped across the gallery and tried to push my foot inside, succeeding as we reached the top of the stairs.

‘Mama, where are we going?’

‘Shh . . .’

I glimpsed the frown on her face as she urged me to go down, with only one shoe to wear. I swear I saw a glint of mischief in her eyes as we descended into the dim firelight from the kitchen below.

I didn't understand the rush to get outside to find, thankfully, it was a mild evening. The moon was full and the sky was dark. It prompted my memory of the Dreaming. All those stars, and the infinite void that lay between them. Everything I'd seen, that I didn't want to consider any further. I'd kept telling myself it had just been a strange and terrifying dream. How could it be true?

How could it?

Mama encouraged me to the bench my father had built, when I was barely old enough to remember him doing so. It was late spring, and the sun was high in the sky pretending to be summer. It was the last time I remembered him being home for an entire season. My last memories of Mama walking without her cane.

She tugged me, and encouraged to sit. Then sat beside me and kissed me on the cheek. I felt her arm link through mine and she rested against me.

'Look,' she pointed at the dark sky. 'What do you see?' she asked me.

'The stars,' I said, 'and the moon?'

'I've always loved the stars, Drai.'

I knew that. I knew also that when she lay in front of the fire at night where she could see them clearly through the kitchen window. They brought her comfort.

'Ever since I was a girl,' she said, 'much younger than you are now. I've felt drawn to watch the stars. Your grandmother used to say they were naughty pieces of moon that refused to go home. What do you think?'

I shrugged my shoulders, it seemed very plausible. Or would have a few days ago.

'I think that they could be more than that, Drai,' she shuffled closer. 'What if . . . ? What if there were others just like us that watched the stars just as we do now? Stare back at us from one of those stars,' she pointed again, 'Maybe that one? Or that one over there?'

I didn't know what to say to a question like that, and hoped she'd not spoken such words to anyone else. Some might think it the talk of fools, where others would shout out words like madness, or even witchcraft.

‘What else?’ she turned my head gently. ‘Look closely, what else do you see?’

I looked hard toward the heavens hoping to see something other than the glitter of an unusually clear night. So many stars, they filled the sky. But I saw nothing else. I shook my head without realising and felt her arm squeeze mine. She pushed herself up with her cane.

‘Mama, I’ll go get you a coat.’ She held me fast. ‘It’s cold out here.’ She looked frail in her nightdress, but unconcerned. ‘Please, let’s go back inside.’

‘We’ll come out tomorrow night. And then every night until there is a new star to see,’ she stooped and kissed my cheek. ‘They’re coming, Draí. You said so.’ There was excitement carried in her words. ‘Of all the stars in the sky, they chose us,’ she kissed me, and then again, ‘they chose you. They chose you, my boy, to hear their words,’ she sat up and a chill breeze ruffled her nightdress.

Oh, Mama . . . She looked fragile. Her legs too slim, her bare feet showing too much bone. A stranger would think her malnourished, but it was the illness that was wasting her away.

‘When they come,’ she said. ‘You will be one of those to be accepted. You have been chosen because you are special.’

Special? That was a word I’d heard to describe me my entire life. A word that I cursed every time I heard its use, except when Mama spoke it. I understood the meaning when it carried the air from her lips.

I grinned like an idiot because I didn’t know what else to do. I had seen what was coming. No fantasy, no dream. And there was nothing I could do to stop them.

‘This has to be our secret,’ she put a finger to her lip, kissed it, and then touched it to mine. ‘Our secret; tell no-one. Look to the stars each night, and tell me if you see . . . Him.’

Him? Oh, you mean, Him.

Mama’s One-God. Perhaps one should be enough for us all. But not this one. Surely not this ‘Dark Star? That couldn’t be the one she waited for, could it?

But if anyone else had seen the way her spirit swelled, in that moment I knew I had added purpose to her life. I felt I'd given her something back for all her love. And a sudden thought too. She wanted me to be watchful. Why? She would often sit out here. She liked to pray out here. Was her eyesight failing?

'What about Father?' I asked.

'No,' her face tightened and her tone changed. 'Not even he must know. Promise me, Draï. Promise me on the book,' she pulled my hand tight to her pocket. Placed my palm open onto the book inside. 'Promise me.'

I nodded, and she cupped my face in her hands. Her smile seemed nervous, and then lifted with a breath. She stood and encouraged me to do likewise. We returned to the house accompanied by the familiar tap-tap of her cane. And as we did so a movement caught my eye at the window upstairs. From my father's room. Had he been watching; listening? A part of me hoped it was so, because despite Mama's plea, I knew it was wrong to keep secrets from him.

I took one last lingered look upwards, and then I walked back into the house. I wondered if Companion, and his Hordes were real, or just the amusement of the God Shari playing tricks with my mind.

Deep down I knew the truth, and it was coming from the stars.

Life continued as normal for me over the next few weeks. There were no visions from strangers, and I was free of the Dreaming. The snow continued to fall outside, and the winter cold crept into streams and lakes and set them hard enough to walk upon. At night we heard the bitter winds howl, and then fade to a whisper as the morning sun rose. We entered the month of mists, where heavy dew would frequent the low ground, and in places float as high as a man's waist.

It was also the Season of Sleep. In which many animals returned to their burrows to avoid winter's cold. The birds kept to their trees in silence. And in the forest the male stags vociferate that their winter nature was upon them; warnings about territories marked. They had entered the season of love, and would fight, even kill, to proclaim it.

Each morning I went to the Learnit. Brak and I together. There was no kiss for him from Saski, for which I was quietly pleased and in the afternoons we would enjoy each other's company. Which meant we got into trouble.

My father stayed mostly away, and I knew the hurt it caused Mama, but she showed little sign. She was prepared for the coming time when she would be, once again, alone with her son. Her husband away fighting.

Until that day arrived she busied herself clearing fresh snow. Preparing the ground for a spring thaw. I did what I could to help.

My heart pounded in my chest I ran so hard, the last of it uphill to home. I raced the light which faded fast, my belly eager to be fed, my lungs keen to draw air.

I stopped a few feet from the door, bent double, head shaking and drawing deep breaths, each one deep and slow; a constant vapour in the air. It was a good run, I felt pride at my exertion, having not relented since bidding Brakkish goodbye. For I had seen tracks in the snow. A horse, fully laden with a rider and pack. It could only mean Father was back.

Orin's teeth, I was burnt out, but slowly my panting waned. From the bench in the garden I could see Totti, my father's horse. A beautiful grey mare chewing on hay in our shed.

I could hear voices in the house, one of them my fathers. He was back. He'd come back for me, as I knew he would. He'd promised to take me to Boundary and celebrate my coming of age. I felt my strength return at the prospect of being taken to the Broken Glass.

A massive grin bloomed on my face. Father's warrior friends would toast me. Ply me with drink. I would smoke a small pipe by a fire. I'd enter as a boy, and in the early hours I would leave as a fine young man. Drunk and filled with bullish banter, no doubt.

I had another, more enticing thought. There were women at the inn.

Brak had described the women who frequented the Broken Glass. They wore skirts raised well above the ankles, and blouses that were low cut across their breasts. How he knew that I don't know, but he'd said that coin could entice them to sit on your lap and whisper sweet words in your ear.

I felt a sensation that had not been aroused by my fatigue. Indeed, the effort of my run was forgotten. I was rejuvenated and took the last few steps toward the front door. But as my hand gripped at the handle, it

refused to push the door open. I heard voices suddenly raised within. A flash of verbal dissent. They were quarrelling. Both voices fuelled with accusation, but not yet unleashed in anger. I moved my head closer to the door to listen.

A glass was smashed inside, and I let go of the knob. I stepped away, the voices now raised in full and angry dispute.

No, don't. Why had they waited until now? Stop it . . . stop!

This spoiled everything. The truce between them was broken. It was time to behave like proper parents, and think of me. I urged myself to throw open the door and feign surprise in an attempt to stop the fight, but failed to muster the courage. I flinched as I heard Mama scream, and then hurl vile abuse at Father. She was ranting in a fashion I'd never heard before. Insult and profanity mixed with accusation and regret.

I placed both my palms against the door. *This time. Do it. Summon the strength to enter.* One sharp push was all it would take; they would see me, and surely they would stop. I cursed myself as the tension in my arms waned and my head rested on the door. I was too weak to force myself between them.

'Mama,' I whispered, and then fired myself with anger. Not at them, not at first, but at myself for being such a coward.

Why? Why now? Tonight of all nights? Surely this night was about me, and not them. The voices lulled, Mama's assault abruptly ending. I could no longer hear her voice, or his.

I moved slowly to the side of the house and leapt on the wood pile heaped against the stonework. I jumped up to grab the window ledge of my bedroom. I'd barely noticed before, but now the cold bit harsh at my fingers as I hauled myself up. Pushing the window open with my forehead, I clambered through and dropped silently to the floor inside. I felt like a thief in my own house as I stole across the floor being careful to avoid planks I knew would creak. To a door already ajar, which I encouraged to open further.

Through the gap I could see most of the kitchen below. But not the fire, nor my father. Mama was looking out of the window, her lean frame leant heavy upon her cane. I slid on my belly towards the gallery to see better.

She'd been crying, her face wet from tears. Her demeanour was stern, she wore the face of a woman scorned.

'Why did you come?' she asked. Her voice calm now, and laced with regret. She stubbornly wipe at her tears. 'Have you come to torment me?'

'No,' he replied. His strong tone sounding tired. I still couldn't see Father, he was close to the fire. 'This is still my home,' he said.

I'd heard this before. They would parley now, each with hope that the other would relent and yield first. But neither would, not really. They'd built an emotional wall between them. When and how it had first been laid was a mystery. To me, and presumably to them also.

'Home?' Mama seemed confused at his use of the word. She turned to face him. 'You have no home, Derlin. You live in the wilds out there; it's in your blood. The truth is, you want to be anywhere but here. And you justify this desertion of your family in the name of *duty*,' she pointed back towards the window. 'Home for you is out there. A hundred, a thousand, leagues away. I don't even know in which direction.'

Silence, as she looked away. The only sound I could hear was the sharp crackle of the fire, and the sound of my own heartbeat. It was Mama who spoke first.

'It would be better', she said, 'if you went away and never returned.'

What? No. Why would you say that?

'This house is not your home, Derlin. It's your cage. Draï and I, we are your jailers. You only return to release your guilt. It would be better for us all if you stayed away.'

'That's not fair, Estha. I've tried. God, I have tried.'

'Do not blaspheme in this house, Derlin. It is one thing to mock me with your return, but hold your tongue to the one who holds my hand. He is coming . . . ' She didn't get a chance to finish as my father began to laugh. It was a cruel and mocking laughter.

‘Each time I return you’ve slipped a little deeper into this madness of yours. Only it’s not just you any more, is it? I’ve heard you, filling the boys head with this rubbish.’ His anger was building. ‘What’s wrong with the old Gods, Estha? Aren’t they enough for you? We’ve prayed to them for centuries and they’ve seen us prosperous and safe. There are so many good and proper Deities to worship in the Empire and yet you cannot find fulfilment in any of them?’

‘I no longer put my trust in false idols and pagan rituals.’

‘Our Gods give us strength, and reason, Estha. They guide us through our lives. They honour and protect us. They favour us in trade of sacrifice and prayer. Without the Gods this world had no meaning.’

‘My God gives me all the meaning I require. He is the truth, He is the light. In Him, I have faith.’

‘Faith, What the fuck is faith. We give prayer, and the Gods give in return. That’s how it is, Estha. That’s how it was, and how it will always be. Faith? I don’t understand. I never did and I never will. What good is a God who requires absolute devotion on your knees, and gives nothing back in return? Take a look at yourself, Estha. Pain and suffering is all He gives you. What sort of a God takes what you have to give, and gives nothing back?’

I could hear the frustration building in his voice. The anger brewing, but not yet released.

‘Where would our crops be without Sirtis, the God who pleases the ground. Ground that bears the fruit of our labour when the wheat and barley grows? How would the rains fall without Serrelis. How would the sun rise each day without Histil, and Konar? I see my Gods every day, Estha. Where is yours? He’s nowhere! Your God resides up here, and nowhere else. His world is a world filled with chaos and disorder.’

I strained to look, being careful not to expose myself, and was startled by the thump of something on the table. I could just make out my father’s rucksack, packed and full, and I knew then that he hadn’t come back for me. He’d returned to leave us without saying goodbye. I watched his hands delve into the clothing hidden inside; a shirt pulled half out as his hands grabbed for something within.

‘There,’ he placed a tiny statue, no more than a few inches in height, on the table. ‘That’s who I pray to. You know him as well as all the others that you deny. Antrox, God of war; the guardian of all who fight under his protection,’ he held it up so she could see clearly. ‘I need to know that if I die out there. If an arrow pierces my heart, or a sword cuts me down. I know that Antrox will take me, and protect me from Wedan the soul-taker. If I die with a sword in my hand I know that Antrox will raise me up, and guide me to the Halls of the Fallen. It comforts me, Estha. To know that I will drink, laugh, and fight again with my fallen comrades,’ his hand relented and rested on top of the rucksack. ‘It’s what I am, Estha. I do not know who you are anymore. You are a stranger to me.’

Mama walked to the fire, I could see it now. She knelt beside the flames and poked with her cane at the small logs aflame in the grate.

‘I require faith without understanding, Derlin.’

‘What? I don’t even know what that means.’

‘Faith, Derlin. It doesn’t need reason. It doesn’t need idols. It’s a measure of how well we weather the storms of life. It’s the giving of yourself in the knowledge that He will only show himself at the end.’

‘You give yourself to a God that gives nothing in return. You’re a fool, Estha!’

‘And you’re a bastard who would rather desert his family than take a leap of faith; that his wife still cares, that his son is not a freak of nature. He’s seen the way you look at him, how the great warrior reacts. He’s not ill, Derlin. He’s been chosen. Your son has the gift.’

‘My son? Well, we know that’s not . . .’

‘Silence your lips. Do not say another word. Get out, it’s what you want. Go!’ she took her book from the pocket of her apron and clutched it to her chest. She began to pray.

‘There’s no-one up there listening, Estha. You’re talking to yourself.’ My father stepped out into full view. ‘Damn you woman. I should have stopped this madness a long time ago,’ he grabbed Mama’s arm and pulled her to her feet. She tried to resist.

I put a hand to my mouth in case I might cry out.

‘The madness is yours, Derlin. Can’t you see? Demons rise and fall about you. They sit on your shoulders and laugh.’ She pulled away. ‘You have the Evil Eye above you Derlin, your sins are well known. Get out, there is nothing for you here. Go back to your wars, and your whores.’ She outstretched her hand and pointed with dire incrimination. ‘You have the blood of innocence on your hands. Do you think I don’t know?’

‘Estha, stop it.’

‘Stop? No, let’s continue, or do you fear the truth to be sharper than the blade you wield?’

I hated it when she spoke to him like this, with the tone of a priest, spouting words of damnation.

‘Tell me, Derlin. How many lives have you taken in the Emperor’s name? Not on the battlefield, that’s not how it works is it? You thrive in the darkness and hide from the light; it’s much more personal for you. Yes, I see it in your eyes. Each time you return I see the darkness cloud darker above you.’ She took a step away, as if afraid he may contaminate her. ‘You are no longer welcome in this house, Derlin; get out before I call you by your real name.’

‘Estha,’ he held out his hand, and she stepped away. Grasping the book to her chest as if it were a protective charm. ‘Get out Derlin. Leave by the window, or through a crack in the door, for there is nothing here for you. Only the living can reside here. Go back to the beasts you serve, murderer . . . Assassin.’

Something inside my father snapped. I had never seen him raise a hand to another, and seldom had I heard him raise his voice without good reason. But with a single step toward Mama he lashed out and struck her with the back of his hand. A blow landed with such force that I flinched at the sound made against her face. I felt the temperature plummet as she fell back, her delicate frame collapse. She dropped like a taught length of rope suddenly released.

Father dropped to his knees, overcome with grief. He reached out to her, his features locked in a frozen stare of disbelief. Not believing what he'd done.

‘Estha?’

Her hand raised to ward his favour away. ‘Don’t touch me,’ hatred in her voice. ‘Don’t come near me,’ she was feeling through her pockets. Patting down her blouse. ‘My book? Where’s my book?’

‘Estha, please, I didn’t mean . . .’

‘Vile creature, your hands are bathed in blood. Do not put them upon me.’

‘Estha, I’m sorry. I don’t know what I . . .’

‘My hands will not touch, and my heart will not covet. No false prophet or idol shall share my name. Curse you, Derlin, for you are damned. Damned to burn in the fire when He comes. And He is coming. I’ve seen through our son’s eyes, Derlin. The one true God is coming.’

I was rigid, stunned, and could do no more than stare. My father’s guilt turned sour like milk to be replaced with bitter resentment at her words.

‘My book,’ she tried to stand. Slapping away Father’s hand outstretched to help her. ‘My book is my faith, my guide, my path, and my word. Where is my book?’

Her hands more frantic; searching close by her frame. It was Father who picked the book up, not her.

‘Give it to me,’ Mama demanded. ‘Offer not what is mine, for it will burn you. Murderer,’ she shouted. Her hands reaching, beckoning, pleading. Then pointed in recrimination. ‘Murderer!’

Father raised himself. All pity gone and replaced with scorn. He stepped back, lifted the book so she could see, and then threw it onto the fire.

Mama cried out as though she herself had been put to the flames. She pulled herself across the floor, sobbing, spitting profanity, her tongue rabid with pious accusation. Damnation from her lips the like I had never heard. She pushed her hands into the embers in blind panic and scraped away at the burning sticks and embers. I watched on in disbelief, as did my father.

Charred and singed the little black book was pulled from the heat and wrapped in her apron, as she shuffled herself back against the wall.

‘Burn, you bastard of sin. Burn.’ The book clutched to her breast. ‘Your sword will not protect you. He, is the light and the dark. He, is coming, He that will save us all,’ she raised her hand, ‘but not you. Not you, nor any like you. You will burn . . . Burn . . . Burn . . .’ She kept repeating it until her voice trailed away, and only her lips moved. Her eyes lost in a wild glare.

For a moment the house fell into silence. My father as shocked at what had happened, at what he’d done, as I. But the spell was broken by the soft chink of something metal against the flagstones on the floor.

I caught a glimpse of something shiny roll, and then spiral a hand’s width from my father’s boot, and I knew with instant despair what that glittering bauble was. A slim band of gold that my father had lovingly placed upon her finger as an oath of his love. A token in which she had believed, and had never once removed, until now. Mama’s wedding ring.

‘Estha?’ His voice lower, its tone fearful. ‘What are you doing? You’re not thinking clearly,’ he lowered himself to one knee and took the ring in his fingers, then held it out to his wife. She shied away, turning her head but keeping that wild-eyed stare fixed toward him.

‘Get out you spawn of evil. Get out and never return. Leave us, leave us, leave us.’

‘Think about what you’re saying, Estha. Please, I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me. Let me help you up.’ He reached for her cane; holding it out to her with care, as if she might bite him. Mama drew her knees tighter to her body as if expecting the cane to be wielded viciously upon her.

‘No,’ he placed the stick down and lowered his hands in an overly passive gesture, ‘I wouldn’t. For God’s sake woman.’

‘You call upon His name, but only to ask him for His favour.’

‘What? No, that’s not what I meant. Give me your hand wife, let me help you up. This shouldn’t have happened. I’m so sorry, forgive me.’

Forgive him, Mama. I’d never seen nor heard her be like this. Take his hand, please.

‘Beware the forked tongue of the snake for it shall please you with its lies.’

‘Stop it Estha, please. I’m so sorry, I don’t know what came over me. Here, take your ring. Take my hand. I beg you.’

‘It will offer you hope and seed your world with despair. Promise you nectar and fill your mouth with sand.’

‘What are you talking about? I . . . Please, take your ring.’

She did, and then flipped it into the fire. She raised the book to her face. Somehow it wasn’t my mother that looked over its pages. Her features no longer pitiful, but hardened against Father.

‘My husband? No, he left me a long time ago, leaving you in his place. Go, leave, charlatan. It should be easy for you to leave us both, so well practised is the man,’ she raised the book as if to ward him away, and then clutched it back in fear he might take it. ‘Whatever I had with my husband, it has long since passed. Long since laid to waste. I do not know you, you have been removed; there is nothing for you here anymore,’ she began to rock slowly, back and forth. ‘Leave us, let us be. Let the silence of your passing ring loud with rejoice, and let no-one say you came.’

No matter how hard I looked at my father, how desperately I wanted him to refute her accusations; I could see that her words were what he truly wanted to hear. He shook his head, not in denial, but in contempt, and I began to tremble again.

‘What about the boy?’ he asked.

‘The boy? You mean your son?’ she raised a smile, of sorts. ‘But then he never was your son, was he? I was never able to give you what your heart truly desired. No child for Estha. No son for the great warrior to groom.’

What? I needed to hear that again. I felt the blood drain from my ears. She was upset, not thinking straight. *Of course you have a son, me.* I eased the door further ajar and with my belly hugging the floor, my head kept low, I strained hard to listen to words. My father’s expression, not one of a man learning a terrible truth, more in shock that a damning secret was exposed.

‘Did you truly think I didn’t know?’ she said, more lucid now. ‘You weren’t the only person present at the birth, Derlin. Joran told me everything. I even began to remember for myself, as the months passed by,’ she slumped back against the wall. Her book cradled in her hands.

I saw it in her eyes, she wanted to hurt him. But the knife she wielded was a truth that cut far more deeply than any blade could have sliced.

‘Drai was stillborn,’ she said. ‘Our son taken by *your* Gods. A lifeless babe expelled for the amusement of blasphemous idols. Where were your Gods when our child was born?’ she was shaking.

Father . . . ? Answer her. Refute her. She had obviously misplaced her mind. The strain of the last few minutes were too much. *Father? Tell her she’s wrong.*

‘Another child taken away, one more life that I couldn’t carry to term,’ she began to cry. ‘What did we do that was so wrong? How many of your Gods did we offend? Did you offend?’

He was shaking his head, but not in denial.

‘Don’t do this, Estha. Let the past lie buried. Don’t resurrect the dead.’

She snapped him a furious and spiteful gaze.

‘That was the first time I prayed to Him, did you know that? No, of course not. You barely noticed me after that. I found a new God. The one true God they called him,’ tears streaming down her cheeks. ‘Your Gods had forsaken us, Derlin. So I prayed to Him. I prayed so hard that I lost my mind for a while,’ she looked thoughtful. ‘Maybe it never returned.’

I had never seen such a pitiful sight as Mama right then. She refused to look at Father, only at the ceiling, or perhaps toward the heavens. I didn't care. She looked broken and hammered in her corner. Curled up like a child lost out in the wilderness. But why did she want to hurt me? I was Drai, alive and well.

Father, tell her she's wrong.

'Joran,' she said, 'told me how the madness came upon me. How she tended me for days; how I refused to let my baby go.' I watched the sobbing recede and the anger return. 'Your Gods Derlin, are murderers of infants. Destroyers of dreams. I prayed to Him until I thought my heart might burst, and my God answered my prayers. He returned my son to me and gave us both new life.'

It was true then, my mother was mad. How could she be anything else if she believed such a story to be true. It couldn't possibly be true . . .

'No Estha. That's not how it was,' he knelt passively in front of the fire. Afraid to look her in the eye.

'That's exactly how it was,' she hit her head against the wall. 'I remember because it's here, up here, where memories can't lie.'

'It wasn't you who had the madness. It was me. Because I didn't know what else to do. Oh Estha, I'm sorry. I thought . . . I was sure. What I did, I did for us both. When I brought you a child . . .'

'You were simply the tool for *His* love.'

'I became more than that, woman. I became a murderer of people, and a thief of the flesh. And no matter how hard I have tried to wash those sins from my soul. No matter what righteous cause I fought for the Empire. I found myself wading deeper and deeper into the blood of others.'

'You took part in the slaughter of innocents to feed the anger in your heart. What came after; that was a love for what you do? You offer the souls of others to please *them*. And to please yourself.'

'It was the bargain, for you.'

'Save your guilt, there is another who will judge you far better than I,' she fumbled for the cane at her feet. Then brushed away his efforts to help. Mama forced herself to stand. 'I want you to leave, Derlin. Take whatever

demons that fester within you, and go. Leave us be; my son and I no longer need, nor want you. Get out.'

'Estha?'

'Get out, get out, get out.' She struck her cane against the grate of the fire and turned her back on him.

I shrank at the outburst. My stomach wrenched so tight. I wanted to hear more of what they spoke.

'If only I'd known back then, how my actions would change us. What I did that night was for you, for us, and it has damned us both ever since. You're right, Estha,' he nodded his head with stunned acceptance, 'there is nothing for me here.'

Wait. That's not true. My lips were frozen and unable to speak. *Father, you have me.*

Whatever was on the table was forced ungraciously into his pack and slung again over his shoulder. I saw the regret in his eyes as he stared at Mama, and for a moment I saw the great warrior broken. Resigned to his defeat. He strode toward the stairs and I instinctively slid back and pushed the door almost closed. Only the slightest of gaps, enough to see his shadow pass, nothing more. His footsteps closed as he ascended the stairs and the floorboards creaked under his weight, and for a moment I felt only the darkness of his shadow until he had passed.

I wanted to cry out to them both, to stop this foolishness, and become my loving parents once again. But a numbing anxiety had spread throughout my body as the coward in me refused to intercede. As desperate as I was to come forward, there was a force more powerful, one that made me turn in upon myself and cower behind the door.

Father said nothing more. Only footsteps heard, until the dull clunk of the door closing.

My father was gone.

My world shrank beyond all proportion as a futile numbness set in. I did not wish to accept the harshness of what had happened, so I closed my eyes and pretended that nothing had changed. I wanted to sleep. To awaken and find that everything I'd heard was the just foolish rhetoric of a dream. When I opened my eyes again, it would be a mere memory. A tasteless and bad dream inspired by the mischievous Goddess, Shari.

But reality is a harsh burden, and once my weeping had passed, and my eyes had opened again, I dared a look from my window. My eyes straining for any sight of my father in the dwindled light outside. I saw nothing but the fresh tracks of his horse leading down into the valley trodden deep beside my own. Above them a full moon, and what light it shone gave all outside an air of shadow and emptiness.

He was gone, and somehow I knew, I knew well, that I would never see my father again.

I'd acted like a coward. Not finding the courage to intervene.

This is all my fault. I could have stopped him leaving by opening my mouth. By telling them both that I loved them; no matter what had happened in the past. My inactions, mine alone had allowed them to part. This was my fault. The responsibility was mine.

I felt trapped. Fearful of what I saw outside. Wary to leave my room. A cloud had fallen where love would normally reside. And there were questions that I could not ignore. What *had* happened in the past? In *my* past? What did it all mean. How could I have been stillborn, and yet still be alive. What was it that my father had done to anger Mama? *Mama . . . ?* Dear Gods, where was she? I ran to the door and flung it open, taking two steps at a time as I descended the stairs.

It was dark and cold in the kitchen. Only a remnant of moonlight through the window to see. No flames of the fire? I searched the room with my eyes despite knowing that Mama was not here. In that moment I saw what my mother must have seen and felt a thousand times before. How lonely the kitchen becomes with the onset of night; without the warmth and comfort of the fire that had burnt itself out. I wondered how often she'd lain on this floor with only a blanket to reassure her.

The fire has died? I must have fallen asleep. How long? 'Mama?' I called out, but received no reply. 'Mama?'

I felt a chill grip me as I ran to the front door and rushed outside. 'Mama!' I ran around the house, stopping when I saw her sat on the bench.

'Mama,' I whispered, and walked toward her. 'What are you doing out here . . . Mama?'

She half-turned. 'Watching,' she said, and then patted the seat beside her.

My relief to find her well and safe curbed my haste to find her. Instead I felt the shackles of shyness take hold, and I wondered what kind of unease stops a son reaching out to his mother. I realised, to my horror, it was fear of the truth. My father's words still rang intrusive and unwanted.

"I brought you a child," he'd said.

"Drai was stillborn." Mama's own words, but what did they mean? Had they spoken about another child. Did I have a brother, or perhaps a twin? Were they both so incensed by each other that they spoke lies? No, they'd spoken words that were true. Secrets long hidden and uttered aloud in anger, secrets about me.

She tapped the flat surface of the bench again. 'We are all dreamers,' she said. 'But none can dream like Drai, my son,' she looked around at me. Her face recovered and glad that I was near. She had no idea of what I'd overheard. 'You should have been home some time ago,' she added, but didn't seem to mind. She tapped the bench for a third time. 'Drai, is something wrong?'

'No, nothing,' I lied, and shook my head.

'Come, sit with me. The stars are vivid tonight.'

She was right. So many of them up above us, arranged in their familiar patterns. And there was a whiteness about the moon tonight. A glow of ethereal brilliance upon the slumbering snow-covered-landscape that descended into the valley below.

I sat, and put my arms around Mama. I snuggled my head against her shoulder, and felt the tender touch of her hand on the back of my neck. What more could she give me than the love and kindness she had always shared? I didn't care about what I'd overheard. Two old fools trying to hurt each other. I knew what I knew, and that was enough. It had to be.

'I love you, Mama.' Nothing was more important than how I felt. She'd been gravely wounded by the only man she'd ever loved. Her world teetered on the edge without him, and it was up to me to help her find a new way. To step up and become a man.

'I'm sorry,' she said, and kissed my cheek.

Sorry? You have nothing to be sorry for.

'There's something I have to say, and I'm not sure how.'

No, I don't want to know.

'Drai, darling,' she hugged me tight, as if it would be for the last time. 'We are sinners,' she said, 'your father, and I. And though our reasons were pure . . . It was still a sin. Oh Drai, our sins have consequences on the ones we love.'

No, I don't want to hear. Leave your secrets buried in the past. 'Father has gone, hasn't he?' It was all I could think of to say. 'It's alright, I don't mind,' I unwrapped her arms and looked her in the eyes. 'Mama, promise me you'll never leave me.'

'What? No, why would you even think . . . ? Dear God, never, I will never leave you.'

'Swear it, Mama. On your book; swear it on your book.'

The face she wore was one of disbelief. And then reassurance as she cupped my cheeks in her hands. 'Never,' she whispered, and un-pocketed her book to placed it on her chest. 'I swear,' she said. 'As God is my witness, I will never leave you.'

Good, now stop talking. Crisis averted. I don't want to hear about sins, old or new. 'Look,' I said, 'it's such a clear night. I can see deep into the Heavens.'

The Heavens, it was her word to describe the indescribable. What Mama called the Heavens, my father called Tol'land; the Land of the Gods. Up there, where his Gods resided. The stars were their homes, starlight the source of all the Gods' power.

'Drai . . .'

No, I don't want to hear any more. She had that same look.

'Can we pray, Mama? You and I, as we watch the Heavens. I want to pray.' It was the first time, I think, that I'd asked her and not the other way round. She looked delighted.

'Yes, of course,' as I felt my hands wrapped around her book. Her fingers clasped about mine.

I wanted to pray, but not because I believed. Not because I shared in her faith. I just wanted her lips to stay busy.

'Blessed be the Prophet and all of His Seraphs,' she whispered. 'For His love will lay waste the path of darkness and lead us to the true faith. Blessed be all those who open their hearts to His words.'

I heard everything that she said, but didn't really listen. The words weren't important, not to me, until one phrase made me aware.

'Have pity on the weak, whose hearts carry the burden of sin. We pray for forgiveness for those who have strayed from your path and become lost in the bloody mist of their own good intent.'

I wondered if she was speaking about Father. Or perhaps about herself.

The winter sunshine passed and the warmth of spring came early to melt the snow. The annual thaw moistened the ground and encouraged new life to break free of the soil, returning grass to the fields. The only time of year that the deer were lured out from the forest, and the birds sang happy songs as they hid and played amongst the fresh leaves of spring.

In the few months that passed after my father left I watched my mother become increasingly frail. Her illness attacking her inner-strength, and I think my father leaving only hastened its effect. She was ageing more quickly than nature had ever intended; all of her strength being sucked away as the illness progressed. I realised she was dying.

Now Father had gone Joran came more frequently to visit, bringing stronger medicines to relieve Mama's pains. I had watched her illness unfurl over the years, but had somehow denied its progress. The last few years now caught up with haste, and I hated myself for having lived in denial. The truth of her illness now slapped me in the face, and thank the Gods for Joran's presence. For her attentiveness, and her skills in managing the pain. And I began to notice more, as the visits became more frequent. How bound together these two women were. The months passed, the visits came daily.

I would watch them talk, for hours at times, and come to understand their relationship was more than just by acquaintance. There was history between them. More secrets being bandied in whispers. And though they thought me blind to any past collusion, through their looks and gestures I came to see, and ignore, for Joran made Mama happy, and I liked her for that.

Joran and I shared little conversation at first, but that all changed as the months passed, and we became familiar in each others presence. The witch began to teach me, and I was eager to learn. How to find, pick, and prepare

the medicines Mama so badly needed. She even showed me how to cook simple dishes for our supper.

Her friendship with Mama, became a friendship to me. This so called 'Forest Witch' brought warmth, learning, and new mystery into my life. Which despite my attempts to ignore, began to incite me with a need to understand. Mama and Joran had a past shared, and it included my father, and myself. But despite our new familiarity, I knew nothing about who she was. This woman who had come and fitted so well into our lives. Just her name, Joran. If that even was her name.

She was a calm and thoughtful woman who spoke with purpose, and with eloquence; hers was a voice that was charmed, that I could imagine casting spells. I often found myself staring at her, and I'm sure she knew, for there was a youthful essence about our witch, until she frowned, which was hardly ever, and then her skin would crinkle, just slightly, about her eyes. Eyes so wonderfully clear and blue, and watchful. I think she noticed the world as I did. Filled with numbers and order, sequence and and repetition. I was sure she was as curious about me in that way, as I was her. I could tell, just from her gaze; always gentle, but never direct. A stranger might think her shy, but that wasn't so.

Our witch had a womanly demeanour, and a striking figure too. Her hair always tight behind her ears and woven with clasps to fall over her left shoulder. Never her right. The way she walked, talked, and even sat on a chair; each movement so assured, and yet served to the eye with a humble allure. I'd never met anyone like her before. And I knew that men liked to look, but were also fearful of having their gaze caught. She was both submissive and strong. Powerful, and at times, I felt she could be dangerous too. I felt the secrets that lay hidden behind our witch's eyes. And she knew that I knew, which intrigued me more. As did her age, at which I could only guess.

I 'd heard tell that she had lived in that forest for, well, a range of ridiculous notions. But if Mama and Joran had history, then she was at least Mama's age, or older.

Poor Mama, her hair had greyed quickly, and before her time, The striking auburn it had once been, had faded, and that was unfair. But I could hardly blame Joran for the vagaries of life.

On occasion, when Mama was feeling strong, we would all go to the forest to search for appetising herbs, and fungi. Weedles could always be found now the ground had warmed. Small grubs with a sweet taste and a firm texture. If you scratched at the surface of the soil they could be found just below. But mostly Mama and I would spend our time in the garden, preparing for the onset of the growing season. She was so impassioned to see the new growth.

It was “honest toil” and “good for the soul”. Mama would persist in the work despite her body’s obvious objection. Prayer would be frequent, and she would read silently from her book whilst I laboured on. She became increasingly dependant on us both; on Joran and I.

As the summer season came upon us I had become the man-of-the-house, and the doting son who cared for his mother, and was happy to do so. It wasn’t just a necessity, but my pleasure to be with her. To be by her side. And as the evenings warmed and the sunlight remained, our evenings together became special. Most nights sat on the bench that my father had made. Always vigilant, with one eye watchful towards the sky, and for a while the Dreaming left me. I began to feel normal, like other young men, I hardly felt like a child anymore.

Growing up can be an instant experience and not a gradual thing and I left my childhood behind in search of my meaning as a man.

Joran added to my learning, and I considered leaving the Learnit, as she opened up her books to me, and I felt a strange transformation take place. I went regularly to the cottage, sometimes skipping my learning with Scroll, and I began to learn the secrets of the forest. I was in awe of Joran’s wisdom, and began to feel a part of her world, one that she seemed happy to share. I began to feel less of a ‘desert tree’ and more an oak that flourished within the forest.

Even Gharl came to the house from time to time. It was not unusual for old soldiers to help the widows of those with whom they’d served with. At

least that's what he told me. The truth was, I didn't really care, as his presence was a great help and always appreciated. He helped repair the old shed, and even brought us a goat to live inside. I was grateful to have a man with whom to chat, though I never asked him, and he never shared, what he knew about my father.

To my regret I saw much less of Brak than I would have liked, and that hurt me deeply. Our worlds seemed set to drift apart, and on some level, I knew that it was probably for the best.

AND SO IT BEGINS

‘Come along now everyone, you all have homes to go to. As do I.’

Although there were only twelve of us in the Learnit, it would always take an eternity to empty the class. Even Brak, sat chatting to Lorne and Aldor, seemed in no hurry to leave.

‘There is one last thing,’ Scril raised her hand for attention. ‘I have a homework assignment for those that have idle minds.’

That worked, the chattering and dawdling stopped, and the movement of feet increased in earnest around the room. ‘I’ll give it to you tomorrow,’ she said, a quiet grin on her face.

‘Oh, Drai, will you wait behind please. Come along everyone,’ she clapped her hands and the last of them left.

I mused that she must crave this sudden silence in the room. Then a more sinister thoughts struck me. For what reason had she wanted me to stay behind? What had I done wrong? I heard the door click shut and the clunk of a key as it was turned in the tumbler.

‘Now then Drai,’ she leant back against the door. ‘How are you? How is your mother?’

‘She’s fine,’ I said, and noticed her usual crisp expression, and stern character were gone. Her demeanour had softened and she smiled at me. A strange wistful smile I’d never seen her share before. The normal angles of her body and stiffness of her stance had rounded; melted almost as she leant against the door, arms folded behind her back. I was surprised at her, well, frankly, very womanly behaviour.

Raising her hand in the most carefree of manner she pulled at the metal clip that held her hair bound, and not taking her eyes from me.

Unrestrained, the locks unravelled to fall free. Her hair bursting with shine and bounce to hide her slender neck. She even shook it as if a sudden breeze had caught her by surprise. I could hardly ignore the way she leant against that door, one leg delicately poised against its frame, the other impossibly straight.

I was more than surprised, I was captivated. Rooted to the spot and transfixed; held in her gaze I was unable, no, unwilling, to move in case I might break her all consuming spell. I could hear my own breath gather pace, and a strange sensation began to prickle at my skin; to tease at my senses. I felt myself becoming aroused in other, more sensitive places.

I was sixteen and a man. She had noticed, and I was glad of it. Excited by the way she sized me up and down. I had to wipe the stupid gawky look of my face.

I startled to the sound of a door slamming somewhere in the distance. A voice carried through the stillness though I barely heard its tone. It wasn't important; I wanted to be alone now with Miss Scril.

'Drai?' The voice called for me.

Go away, I whispered. Now's not a good time.

Drai, are you up there?'

What? Oh shit.

Mama was back from the forest with Joran. I opened my eyes and stared at the door, willing it not to open. Then I leapt from my bed and ran to it, pulled it ajar.

'I'm up here,' I shouted, 'just a moment.' I closed the door and waited for my *blushing* to subside. 'I'm coming,' I said. *Just a few more moments.*

With a deep breath and a practised smile I opened my door, and taking my time to descend the stairs, I called out to greet them.

‘Mama, where have you been? You look exhausted,’ I pulled out a chair and ushered her to sit, and then scolded Joran gently with a shake of my head. ‘Mama, you’re pushing yourself too hard,’ I said.

There was an awful paleness about her skin, even more so than usual, and a lack of colour in her lips. I chided myself for staying home and not being present, but it was hard to watch the health of someone I loved so much ebb away. Like water seeping through my fingers, there was nothing I could do. I had hoped that now the colder months had passed; with summer almost upon us, that she would start to gain weight and grow stronger again. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

‘Come, look at what we’ve found,’ Mama insisted. Pointing with her cane at the satchel Joran had placed on the table. Her fingers nimble as they undid the buckles.

‘We’ve had an adventure,’ said Mama. ‘Look at what we found.’

An assortment of fruit was plucked from the bag. Some white mushrooms followed. And then sprigs of what I could only describe as sticks? And still more, as leaves were placed on the table.

‘What do you think?’ asked Mama.

‘That you’ve been overdoing it,’ I said. ‘I’ll put this all away,’ I picked up the sprigs. ‘Do we eat this?’ I asked.

‘You crush and sprinkle,’ said Joran.

What? She was looking at me, her expression laced with mischief. Then mine must have shown horror as she grinned like a fox. *I was upstairs sleeping. I was . . .* ‘I’ll hang these on a hook,’ I said. And as Joran turned away her actions seemed to slow. Her voice drawled, and I couldn’t make out the words.

I don't know why but I felt myself drawn to reach out to her. Enticed to see what it was she saw. Like the bitark before, I dared to try. But unlike the bird it was the first time I had ever attempted to touch with another person. The first time it had even crossed my mind to attempt such a thing. It was upon me in a flash, the idea, and then the will to try.

I concentrated and clenched my fists, tried not to stare directly at Joran, but could not help myself, so I lowered my head and forced myself to look down. Listening to her voice as she spoke with Mama. Her voice, the sound, I saw a bridge.

It happened quicker than I expected. I jolted from one place to another across the empty space between us, the room spiralling it became a blur. I didn't like it. Reaching out to a bird was one thing. To try and join with another person, that was something else. It was madness. But I knew right then as I touched her with my mind, that it was possible as I felt, no, probed at the edges of her conscious state. More effort helped bring her voice to me. Its sound was haunting, the air between allowed my mind to flow. I had to be careful, gentle; don't force it, just let it happen.

A moment later my head erupted with flashing images, one on top of the other in a multitude of layers, too many to see clearly. I had to slow them down. Make sense of what I was seeing. I felt her memories turn like pages in a scrapbook.

She was young, happy, filled with the effervescence of life. I could feel her naivety as if it were my own. I saw a memory of an older man, and felt a love as powerful as the first days of spring. A man, but not a man; he was a King of men. And on his hands I saw blood, treachery, and deceit. And yet I was overcome with hope and joy. An innocence, and a blindness to what life would bring. The empty space it left behind. I felt her pain as if it were my own.

This is wrong. I was intruding where I had no right to be. *I have to stop.*

Joran smiled at me, unaware as the feelings faded. But as they passed, I saw one final image. The image of time; one single moment that encircled a lifetime. Right there in her smile I saw the age of a woman I found impossible to believe. Then like a dream, it was gone. The images

dissipating, but the empathy remained. And an awareness, that it had not been me who'd joined with Joran, but she who had joined with me. I'd been tricked into showing my gifts. Unaware that a door opened, can be entered from both sides. She had deliberately shared with me, so that I may share with her.

'He has a gift,' she said. 'A very powerful gift.'

'I know,' Mama replied. 'Drai, I'm sorry, it was the quickest and safest way. Forgive me.'

Forgive you . . . For what? What just happened?

'Potential is wasted without application,' Joran lifted the satchel to the table. She unbuckled its flap and tipped out the contents. She separated them on the table so I could see.

'Tell me, what do you see?' she asked me.

Mama winked; a playful look that encouraged me to engage. 'We've had an adventure,' she said. 'Look at what we found.'

An assortment of fruit lay before me, and some white mushrooms. Some sprigs of what I could only describe as . . . sticks? Joran placed some leaves on the table.

But this has already happened?

'I don't understand?'

Joran had that same serious gaze that I had received from Scroll so many times in my past. Was this a test?

'What do you see?' she repeated, her tone expectant.

'The future,' I said. *No, not true.* That couldn't be true. I'd seen what she, Joran, had seen. Or had I?

'They spoke to him,' said Mama. 'There is no choice,' she put her hand on Joran's arm. 'Our past? We knew there could be consequences.'

What past? What are you talking about ? I didn't like the serious nature of the conversation they were having without me. *What past?* One day I would learn to ask these questions out loud.

'Talk to him, Estha.'

About what? Why are you looking at me like that?

As if I were more to her than my mother's son.

'I will take him when the time is right. I will do what I can.'

Mama pushed herself up. A simple movement for most, but now the cane was her crutch. She followed Joran to the door.

'Thank you,' she said. 'For what you've done, and for what you do next.'

Neither tried to hide their concern, and from it I concluded that they had made plans for me. An agenda to which I was not yet privy. Joran lingered in the doorway, the door half open.

'We have much to do, you and I. When the time is right.'

'Mama?' her lips smiled, but her eyes suggested otherwise. 'What am I?' I asked.

What am I? I asked again without sound to carry my voice.

The future, answered the witch. *When the time is right*, she said. And in that moment I saw the witch with her defences down. A woman torn, or even tormented, between what was past, and what must come next.

The door closed and Joran was gone.

What did I know of my world back then? Settled as I was in a backwater district. Pillio, it was as far from the Imperial capital, Shai'valet, as a citizen could be. My small part of a failing Empire was a lush fertile valley once cursed, and then fought over, by forgotten Kings.

Pillio was where it first began, the Imperial War. Where Aurista and the Empire had first collided; a harsh conflict that continued through subsequent generations until the lands on which I was raised were just a historical footnote.

The Empire of my youth was nothing more than a magnificent parable to me. A hundred thousand square leagues of the whispered about, and unknown. All I knew of it was that which Scryll had taught me, and I drank feverishly from her cup of knowledge. But all of this was about to change. Two mighty cultures that clashed in far away lands were coming. Their inevitable tide of conflict would flow in my direction. Their war inexorably linked to my life. No-one, least alone I, could ever have seen what was to come.

Deep down all I ever wanted was to wear the uniform of the Emperor, and be a warrior of worth. To stand by my father's side against the enemy. To hold my shield in defiance next to his, our swords unsheathed; songs of battle in our hearts as our ranks advanced.

I knew nothing of those who would turn my dreams to favour their own. Who use me to try and change their world.

Or those others who would use me to end it.

SHAI'VALET
(THE ENEMY WITHIN)

Narcista stood behind the royal-gallery, Druids precluded from entering the Imperium. The golden lustre of the balustrade clasped in his hands as he watched the procession below.

Another gathering of the Senate, like many he'd seen before. But this time it was different; this time he paid close attention. To the one hundred and twelve Senators, as they jostled through the grand entrance; milling between its two great columns. Sixty feet of mythical warrior hero, one on either side. They shouldered a snake carved lintel above them.

One hundred and twelve men, well dressed by the capital's finest tailors, all sounding in good voice as they filed past the gargantuan statues to disperse about the Imperium's floor. The result of an emergency ballot now ready to be heard. Narcista squeezed at the rail again, as he watched the politics play out. The result by no means certain.

'Look at them,' he scowled. 'Like well kept sheep, herded in from the nineteen Kingdoms. Every one of them eager to sup from our Emperor's overly generous bowl.'

'Careful what you say, Brother,' Amastic tugged the hood of his robe to cover his head. 'These walls are well known to have very large ears,

'Fuck them,' said Narcista. 'Their time will soon be at hand.'

'But not yet. Tell me, will the senate vote for the bill?'

'They must,' said Narcista. 'We've worked too hard, and for too long to fail now.' The ageing Druid's dark eyes looked for signs from the Imperium Members below.

Senators Hoth, Heron, and Battle loitered by one of the many arches that led away into the Palace. Heron's lips moved but the fat oppressor said nothing beyond his gluttony for the previous nights food. Hoth, the Slim, was a man who held a permanent snarl on his lips. He talked only with his ringed hand raised to shield his mouth. All three were unknowns, their votes questionable, but doubtless thrown in together.

In the centre, and holding court, the Prime Minister and his cronies, all twenty-seven of them. A well connected caucus who wore red bows; they had powerful ties to the Outer-States; where the real money was. Traders in ore, metals, and weapons which were always in demand for the war effort. All the bows would vote in whichever direction the Emperor required. Not that his sympathies were yet known

He and his fellow Druids had lobbied hard to bring enough Senators on-board. The last part of the puzzle in the Order's grand scheme. It would force change upon the Empire, by bringing down its elite.

How he despised the affluence of the Senate below. How he loathed their opulence and arrogance, as they performed their cordial rights within the Imperium. Their decadence matched only by their greed. Whores, all of them. Political courtesans of power. Each one of them could be bought by any of the others. By whomever offered the most. He looked forward to the day they would all be culled.

'Are you getting any sense of the vote?' asked Narcista.

'From the lips I can read, I think it is favoured.'

'I agree. The Gods look kindly on our endeavours, Amastic.'

Narcista had spent most of the week with Amastic, his Druid sibling. Between them they had asserted their Order's will; to assure that the vote would be cast against the Emperor. An Emperor the Order had encouraged to put before the Senate.

They had been assiduous in the days prior, conversing in secret with certain Senator's below. To persuade, bribe, and where necessary, threaten to assure the vote passed. That they began their own downfall.

Openly, the Khassari Druids were in favour of ending the war. But in the many dark places within the Palace they had worked against the Emperor, to continue the war. To raise more funding and arms to crush the Auristans. Now was the time. With the Senate aware that the tides of war were shifting.

‘Look at them,’ he sniped, ‘dogs who shit on their master for a coin. The old Emperor knew how to keep order amongst his bitches. He understood the Empire’s need for order, for our Order. The son allows this *scum* to undermine all we have achieved.’

Narcista yearned for the return of the old days, when the Emperor ruled with an iron fist, and the Empire expanded at his will. The Imperial armies conquered, and with them came the Order. All those who refused the new Gods were put to the fire and purged, as it should be.

He remembered the Senate as it was, an Imperial Council. Twenty strong, with five seats held by the Khassari; his beloved Druid Order. In a time when they had more than just the ear of the Emperor; they were his trusted and faithful, his enforcers. Through them the Emperor spoke to his people. The Order was the Empire’s conduit towards salvation. Now look at them, the Senate; pampered pigs who argue and bitch amongst themselves. Their foremost purpose to seek favour from the Throne, and bleed the Imperial coffer of its wealth. It had taken only five years for the son to yield to his subjects.

Without the Emperor’s staunch patronage, the Order too had been sidelined, and the Senate had grown. With it came the many offices of power, and a deluge of officialdom. An Emperor without vision, had allowed the Senate to ween away Imperial power. The excess’ of the Imperium, and its ability to pamper their Lord and Master. An Emperor who’d turned delegation into an art form. Who loved high praise and adulation, ruled over a Senate who understood how to undermine an Emperor’s gregarious nature, to pamper his need for social dominance; the young man’s enthusiasm toward his own reward-seeking behaviour. They used a lack of appetite for official duty, as a weapon. And now there were too many mouths to feed, and an office to attend to its ravenous desires.

Narcista sneered at the Imperium below, the massive complex was the finest amphitheatre ever erected. An impressive forum carved from Lunasite marble, to seat the cream of the Empire's nobility, all one hundred and twelve. Bloated pigs who sat at the Empire's biggest trough, the Imperium. Snorting complaint and dissent below the classical columns that rose around them; on which the great glass dome above had been rested.

The previous Emperor's design. Built at the zenith of his Imperial power. Pure brilliant sunlight allowed to stream down from the massive glazed dome. A true Emperor who's power and vision had created light within the Imperium. No need for torches or fire. And at great cost the son had indulged the father, and finished his vision; adorning the smooth lines of the circular walls with the crimson badge of his own Imperial office. Flags and drapes that hung in plenty; where gold and silver was plated en-masse. Everything in tune with the young Emperor's personality. A fashionable and eccentric patron who indulged himself in the finer things that his exalted status could afford. Of which there were many.

Narcista had walked the entire length of the circumum. The Imperial gallery that wound its way around the walls above the gathering. They knew he was up here, watching. Despite their recent fall from grace, the Order was still feared. The moment was close at hand.

Movement below ceased and the bustle of voices faded as Senators shuffled for their seats. Their business done as they waited for the votes to be counted.

'At least they can find their seats without any help.'

Amastic placed a hand on his brother's shoulder. 'We have done all we can, it is in the hands of the Gods now.'

'It should not be,' he glared at his sibling, 'it should be in our hands, and will be again.'

'Patience, Brother. The time is coming when the Eight will rise unto the light, and no longer need to work in shadows; through them the Empire will be strong again. The might of Imperial power will return itself to the field of battle.'

‘When that time comes, I will see that bastard son of a true Emperor writhe on his gilded throne. He will die screaming the reverence of our Order, so I swear.’

The torches burnt low in the Emperor's private chamber and the swelling shadows that encroached reflected his sombre mood. He was more than troubled; he was becoming dejected, which was hardly uncommon. He was young, perhaps twenty, no one really knew, the bastard son of the Old Emperor who in his dotage had lain with the pretty wife of a low born noble. The birth outside of his royal marriage had been discreet but had hardly gone unnoticed and when the legitimate sons had died one by one, before the Emperor's own demise, it was seen fitting that he, Jolon, was the true, rightful, and *only* heir.

A concealed door opened in the panels beside the fireplace, its fuel spent as the embers cooled. It closed again to a dull click.

'You frightened me,' the Emperor said. A stranger standing in the gloom.

'Apologies,' he spoke with gravel in his voice. 'That was not my intention.'

'No, of course not,' Jolon moved to the panel. 'Are you certain that no-one saw you enter?'

'Discretion is paramount in these matters. No-one is aware of my presence here.'

'Good, good. Come closer, I can't see you well. We need more torches in this Palace. I'll see to it tomorrow.' Jolon paced the room, he seemed more anxious than usual. 'I need your council,' he said, 'more so now than ever.'

The Emperor was young, handsome, perfectly dressed in silver cloth. His tunic unbuttoned, his thumb turned up and then down for better purchase as he bit at the nail. 'They voted against me. Can you believe that? Those fuckers voted against their Emperor?'

'Traitors and thieves, my Liege.' The stranger came into the light. A hood concealed his identity. He bowed, lingered, and then lifted himself. 'I am

looking into the matter, and *will* find the instigators of this ever increasing dissent against you.'

'I want names,' Jolon insisted, as he poured a ruby red wine into a crystal glass. It paused at his lips. 'Why do they want to continue this war? Don't they understand we could lose? Are they mad, or just ill-informed?' The Emperor moved to his bed, with one hand on the foot post, the other holding the glass. He sat on the edge of the huge mattress, a dozen pillows neatly arranged against an ornate headboard.

'Why did they vote against me; my counsel told me the bill would pass?'

'Then perhaps we should reconsider the value of those who give you counsel.'

'Hmm, yes, you're right, the idea as welcome as the wine he supped. 'I'll have them removed. Will you arrange their replacements?'

'Of course my Liege, but the names come from you. I must remain, your discretion.'

'Ha, ha, I like that, my discretion.'

'I will supply a list of names that support you. It is wise to surround yourself with those whom you can trust.'

'Trust? I can't trust anyone, you know that,' he was pacing again, but stopped to raise a hand. 'Except you. I trust you. Yes, I will leave it to you. But you still haven't answer my original question. Why? Why did they vote against their Emperor?'

'Who can tell with the fickle trappings of nobility? Perhaps they are flexing their political muscle. Though I suspect they are trying to send a message.'

Jolon lifted his head. The contempt on his features replaced by concern.

'A message? What message? You mean to me?'

The stranger pulled the hood back from his head. He was fifty, perhaps a little older; bald with a more than serious look etched across his profile. And his eyes were close together, and set deep below his brow. A face that one might wonder, had ever had reason to smile.

He removed his long, heavy cloak to reveal the snug fit of a Druid robe; its cut was sharp and tailored, the fine weave of material reflective even in

the dying light of the fire. The heavy soled black boots, though intensely shined, were soiled with mud from the gardens he'd entered by.

He draped his cloak over the back of a small ornately sculpted chair, and then opened his hand toward its leather-bound seat.

'Yes, yes, sit. Talk to me, Narcista. Why, why have they blocked their Emperor's bill?'

'I fear pride and greed interfere with reason. War is profit, and profit is power. And their power grows. They have much to lose, and so now they openly defy you.'

'They openly defy me?' worry spread rapid across the young Emperor's face. He pulled the heavy quilt from the bed to cover his legs. 'What do I do?' he sat forward. 'Perhaps you, you could intervene. . .'

'No, my Liege. It would be unwise for the Order to openly support your rule. It would compromise our ability to serve you. To be your eyes and ears within the Senate, and those who support them. I am in contact with my Brothers across the Empire. Be assured intelligence is being gathered.'

'Good, good. I want them all, Druid. You understand? I want every name, and soon.' Jolon slumped back onto the mattress. 'You have no idea, he said, 'how troublesome Imperial government can be. I'm denied at every turn. So much bureaucracy; an Emperor should wield absolute power,' he rolled over, grabbed one of his pillows. 'I want my father's respect,' it was cast across the room. 'Do you hear me, Druid? I want Imperial power restored. . . ' the remaining cushions were slung in a tantrum in all directions. 'Power, Druid. I want them to fear me,' he reached for his glass. It was emptied without taking breath. 'I won't be mocked, Druid, wine dripping from his chin. 'We must have your support, soon, you hear me? Soon. I want heads. I won't be satisfied until I have heads. It's my mother's fault that I have to go cap in hand to them. She gave too many concessions.'

'To assure your ascension to the throne.'

'I'm the son of an Emperor. She gave them too much.'

'And they took advantage, yes. The power of the throne siphoned into a tenfold of seats in the Senate.'

His father had always kept the nobles divided; fighting amongst themselves. But always they would come when he called. None would dare to defy. Narcista could hear the old bastard's voice in his head, as if he were there in the room with them. "Loyalty is a commodity to be bought or sold like any other." He'd say. "Whilst they squabble amongst each other they cannot rise against the throne." He'd always known how to treat them. When to praise, and when to slap down hard. They'd revered him, and they had feared him. How could he have sired such an impotent son?

'When the time is right we *will* act. Those that work against you will be arrested, and purged.'

'Purged? Yes, I like that. I want them, *purged*.' Bottle and glass clinked as wine was poured; its descent too fast, the ruby flow splashing above the rim. 'I want them stripped bare, you understand? Take everything they own, the Royal coffers need filling,' he was up and pacing again. 'I have a mind to build more statues. I think the provinces need to see more of me, don't you think?'

'Without a doubt, your Highness.'

'Well, say it with more enthusiasm then. I'm their fucking Emperor; how will they recognise me? How will they . . .? What? What is it? Your's is a face that a mother would shun, but I've come to recognise the signs. What aren't you telling me?'

'There is, something else. I've not yet substantiated . . .'

'Spit it out, Druid.'

'Rumours, my Liege.'

'Oh, is that all. I live in a palace filled with rumours. There are times I think they're all that hold up the walls. Who's fucking who this time?'

'It appears that some of the Senators are dissatisfied with the way things are.'

'Really? They just voted down my personal proposal that they contribute more to the war effort. An idea that came from you, I might add.'

'That if passed would have released the royal budget for more personal projects to go ahead. But now it's been rejected, we have confirmation of disloyalty,' he lingered, 'and treason.'

‘Treason? Are they planning to kill me?’ Jolon’s backside slumped back to the bed. ‘Don’t let them. You have to stop them.’

‘Nothing so nefarious, my Lord,’ his relief was obvious, ‘not yet, at least.’

‘Not yet? We have to stop them. You have to stop them,’ he seemed to reconsider. ‘I’ll have the Palace Guard arrest them all. Yes, I’ll do it tonight.’

‘A wise idea, sire. One your father would have been proud of. But not tonight. The Order is almost ready to present you with lists of those who need to be, *purged*.’

‘Purged, yes, purge them. What are the rumours?’

‘That perhaps another would be better suited to sit upon the throne.’

‘Then they are going to kill me?’

‘Depose you. As I say, it’s rumours.’

‘I don’t understand. They all grow richer from my patronage, don’t I give them what they want? I’m the Emperor, they can’t ask me to step down. I won’t let them.’

‘Calm yourself, sire.’ Narcista rose from the chair. ‘Now is not the time for rash action. My informants tell me their plans are in infancy; now is the time for stealth. We must watch, gather information; act with care before we are bold. Let me gather information from our agents. They are all across the Empire, and they work for you. Our entire Order is working for you.’

Jolon’s mood lifted, then soured. ‘What? There’s always something else with you. Do I want to hear it?’

‘There is a quicker way to gather the information.’

‘Then do it.’

Narcista’s face feigned apprehension. ‘It will need an order, written in your own hand.’

‘I have some, somewhere?’

‘May I?’ Jolon nodded. Narcista strode to a desk, pulled open its front; he took ink and paper from within. ‘We must do everything necessary to assure your safety, he said.

‘Yes, everything. What do you have in mind?’

‘The office of Inquisitor General is about to become vacant.’

‘Vacant? Senator G’tor hasn’t mentioned anything to me.’

‘Senator G’tor is not aware of it himself; not yet at least. We believe him to be leader of the Senate’s opposition to your policies. An agitator, and we believe, also a leader in the conspirators to dethrone you.’

‘He’s one of your names? But I thought . . . ’

‘The Senator is colluding with the rebels.’

‘Rebels? How many of them are there?’

‘That’s what we are about to find out,’ Narcista offered the quill to Jolon.

‘But the Senate won’t let me remove him.’

‘Alas, G’tor is old and in ill health. We believe he will expire of natural causes.’

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow, if it’s the Emperor’s will? Sire, we must act, and act quickly if your throne is to be saved. Consider G’tor the first in a long line to be *purged*.’

‘Yes, of course. We must act,’ the quill began to scratch on the Emperor’s official paper. ‘Can I assume you have someone in mind to replace him?’

‘I believe one of my Brothers would make a perfect choice.’

‘G’tor, I had no idea? But it would explain his lack of presence at the palace. I thought it was his health.’ Anger began to well in his voice. ‘Have the bastard removed. But be careful, I’ll not have them accuse me of being involved.’

Narcista lifted his cloak and circled it around to cover his shoulders. ‘The Emperor’s safety is in the hands of the Order. You will receive all the protection your highness deserves.’ He bowed and turned to leave.

‘Narcista, thank the Brotherhood. The Order will be rewarded for its service.’

‘Our reward is your continued patronage to serve the Empire, nothing more,’ he raised his hood and covered his head, then turned to leave through the concealed door in the wall. ‘We live to serve,’ he said.

‘Narcista?’

‘Yes Liege?’

‘Will it help if I pray?’

'Pray hard, sire. That the Gods will watch over your soul whilst the Khassari watch your back in the Senate.'

Narcista sighed thoughtfully and then stepped back toward the closed door he had left by, its surface rough and unfinished unlike the opulent decor on the opposing side.

There was no hurry, the visit had gone far better than he'd expected. He even managed to raise a smile, of sorts. He stepped closer and stooped his ear to the door. Sounds of ranting from the Emperor as he challenged his father; shouting as though he were in the room with the old man and arguing his cause. A glass smashed, furniture was overturned. Yes, the visit had gone well.

Several narrow passages were traversed, and Narcista exited into rooms once occupied by the Empress. Chambers filled with rich tapestries and an ornate decor. Above him hung a chandelier, its intricate weave of crystal and glass, not unlike a spider's web. Several dozen candles long since spent and never replaced since her sudden demise, some fifteen years previous. He knocked twice at the exit and it was opened by a palace guard, wearing the blue uniform of a House Guard Captain.

'Re-seal the door,' Narcista ordered. 'We wouldn't want strangers walking in uninvited.'

'Of course sir,' the captain took a large key and inserted it into the lock. 'Can I be of further service tonight?' he asked. A well honed authority from years of service in his voice, though he never looked the Druid in the eye.

'Be watchful,' was the reply.

'Yes sir. And sir, when the time comes; my men and I will be ready.'

The statement surprised Narcista and aroused his curiosity. He studied the man observing closely the pampered uniform he wore. Eying the silver hilt of his sword more suited for a ceremonial occasion than a bloody battle.

And the headdress; a floral plume of feathers sprouting from a copper coloured helm. He looked like a toy soldier.

‘And what is it you stand ready for, captain?’ Narcista asked.

‘To fight for the cause, if that’s what you ask, sir.’

‘Look at me, captain.’

‘Sir?’

‘*Look* at me.’

Narcista cast a deep gaze into the captain’s hazel eyes, and searched for truth. The man was indeed sincere. The time would come when the House Guard may have to stand against the Kartach; the Emperor’s personal guard. A full legion of disciplined and well armed men whose only loyalty lay with their blood oath to protect, and if necessary die for their Emperor. Soldiers dedicated to their job, almost beyond reason. He saw that the statement was honest and accepted that the captain believed what he said, at least for now.

‘I need privacy, captain.’

‘This part of the palace has been deserted since the old Emperor passed on. No-one comes here any more. Except the spirits of his concubines; they lived here after the Empress died. They all disappeared when the old Emperor passed on. Murdered, that’s the rumour. To keep him company in the afterlife. They say this part of the palace is haunted by their ghosts.’

‘And what do you think, Captain?’

‘I say superstition helps to keep prying eyes away,’ he offered Narcista to follow. ‘Most of the rooms are still locked,’ he held up his ring of keys. ‘These are the only way in, or out.’

‘Privacy captain,’ Narcista said again.

‘Of course, sir. Please, follow me.’

‘You’ll need to light a torch.’ There were two, one hanging on each wall, either side of the door. The captain used his own to light them both. ‘If there’s anything you need?’

‘You may retire, captain; I’ll find my own way out.’

‘Of course. But be vigilant, sir. This part of the palace is under my jurisdiction, but it’s still policed by Kartach, random patrols,’ he opened the door, bowed, and withdrew.

Inside was a forgotten antechamber used by handmaidens to the Empress. Silken drapes dangled from the walls, that were once hung with great care. Small tapestries set to soften the stonework lay on the floor. Simple furnishings claimed beneath a veil of dust. All signs that the apartments had been unused for years.

Narcista closed the door, then moved towards the stone mantle above the room’s fireplace. He lifted a pretty lantern with four glass facets, and placed it on the long table in the middle of the room. Its thick wooden surface still set for a meal that had never been served. A decorative silver candelabra at its centre; now decorated by a bunting of cobwebs. He placed the lantern on the table, took the wick inside between his fingers. A whispered spell conjured up a small flame. Its light magnified by the glass.

‘The Order is life,’ he said, a small slim box in his hand, taken from a pocket sewn in his cloak’s lining. Fingers unlocked the small catch as the light glistened across the metal motif set into its lid; a fist clasped about a thistle: The sign of his Order.

Pressed perfectly into a silken lining were two delicate candles, no fatter than his thumb, no longer than a man’s finger. Their wax as blue as the sky and speckled with dust that gleamed in the flame’s light. Set between them a small round mirror barely the size of a medallion.

Hot wax was dripped onto the table's surface as each candle was set upright in a familiar ritual. A Druid secret. He placed the mirror upright between them, its surface impossibly clear, it seemed to siphon what little light the flames shared. Its edging inscribed with intricate symbols so tiny they could barely be read.

The box was a gift from the Brother's, a reminder of the temple at Salactin; the Druid's most holy place. Where the novice recruits were schooled in the ancient ways. The candles were a small piece of home, and all they were allowed to take with them into the outside world.

It's been too long. The scent released was Churlic; an aromatic fragrance to remind the recipient of Salactin's piety and purity. It was the Druid's religious home. *When my work is done, I'll see you again. A long journey I will happily endure.*

The scent of the candles conjured up images. He smiled.

The orchard's will be awash with colour; with summer bloom. Birds in the meadows. Sunshine on the many terraces. He remembered one in particular. Its grand windows set into the northern tower, below the temple's spire. The odour coursed deep into his memory. His years spent in learning and meditation. The power of the ancient tongue. His home for so long. The scent aroused his absolute desire to succeed his mission, and then be granted permission to return.

Such memories were irrelevant, for now. There was too much to be done. He placed the mirror upright against the side of the lantern and began to chant in a hush. A hum of words spoken in the ancient tongue, as he pinched both wicks to douse their flames. His chant intensified; the syllables spoken with a sharp tone from his tongue, as his hand weaved back and forth before the mirror, which began to warp, its surface no longer flat. It became fluid, like water in a pool.

The response was weak at first, but strengthened. The lucidity of the glass obscuring the image. Narcista's own reflection fading, as another face took its place.

'Is it done?' the image asked.

‘Yes Brother. And far better than we could have predicted. I have made the appropriate suggestions; his paranoia and weakness of mind will do more.’

‘So the vote was favourable?’

‘Yes, our proposal was defeated. Whilst the Senate and Emperor squabble amongst themselves, they will not notice the Order’s hand in what they do.’

‘The Eight will be pleased with your endeavours, Narcista.’

‘I serve the Eight,’ he said, and bowed his head.

It was still a little difficult to make out the face in the mirror of his Brother Druid, Sermile, who they called ‘the Blind One’.

‘Will he act against the Senate when the time is right?’

‘Yes, with each action he distances himself from them.’

‘And the office of the Inquisitor General?’

‘Senator G’tor will succumb to a natural end.’

‘Good, then everything proceeds as planned?’

‘Yes, I think that the next few days will more than stir the Senatorial-pot.’

Sermile nodded his approval. ‘Our time is coming, Brother. When the Emperor dissolves the Senate, the Inquisitor General will impose Marshall Law. The Palace Guard will purge the Imperium, and we’ll replace the War Council with Generals who are loyal to us. It is the will of the Gods that the war with Aurista continues. Imperial resources will flow.’

Narcista nodded his accord. ‘Life is order,’ he said, ‘and in order we find guidance.’

‘And with guidance, all will follow the Order.’ Sermile replied.

There is order to life. Within that order flows an energy that links cradle to grave. That energy has many strings, Narcista. When one understand the flow, he can pull the strings. The Order is pleased with you.’

‘I serve the Eight. All will cherish the Gods, as is proper and right. The Order will show them the way.’

‘With an iron resolve. For we are the vassals that parley between the living and the dead. The Senate will pay for standing between us, and the people of our great Empire.’ The glass shimmered as if to sympathise with

his words. ‘Your work there is done, Narcista. The Eight have another task for you.’

‘Another task? There is still much to do.’

‘Amastic will watch over the Senate, with the help of a sibling. You will make yourself ready for a long journey.’

‘A journey, where?’ *What can be so important to take me away from the capital at such a time?* ‘Surely my place is here. Can’t one of the others go instead?’

‘It is the will of the Eight.’

‘Of course; I meant no disrespect. May I ask where am I being sent?’

‘You will travel to the province of Pillio, in the Eastern Kingdom of Icena.’

‘I’ve heard of it. What requires my presence?’ He was intrigued, doubly so by the slight hesitation in his Brother’s response.

‘The Seers have requested that *you* investigate a disturbance. They’ve brought their concerns to the attention of the Eight. It is their will that you make the journey. I’ve arranged for a Lurqer to meet you under the city gates at sunrise; he will be your guide.’

The Seers?

He had mixed feelings about the Seers. They were a rare breed who rarely spoke, so content were they to sit and watch the world through closed eyes. It was said that their senses were so finely tuned to the energies that all life possessed, that through deep meditation and incantation they could float free of their bodies to watch over the past, and the present. Follow the signs to predict the future. He personally doubted the claim. Their kind had been hunted to near extinction in the past. The last of the Seers had been hidden by the Eight at the request of the old Emperor. He’d considered them to be a valuable asset in private, whilst openly condemning them in public. There were certain parallels to the fate suffered by his own Order.

‘They asked for me,’ he said, ‘*personally?*’

‘Yes. Interesting, don’t you think?’

‘It’s important to the Circle of Eight, that’s all I need to know.’ *The Seers asked the Druid elders for me?*

‘There’s something else, Narcista. You are to seek lodgings in a town called, Boundary.’

‘Boundary . . .?’

‘Yes, as I said. Interesting, don’t you think?’

Boundary, that’s where the war began. Why send me there? And why a Lurqer? ‘What need do I have of a Mercenary?’

‘He’s a tracker, and guide.’

An assassin too, no doubt. ‘Is there anything else I need to know?’ he asked.

‘No, you will wait until you are contacted.’

‘By whom?’

‘You will leave at first light. Speak to no-one, not even Brother Amastic, before you leave.’

‘Am I to understand the nature of the disturbance?’

You will make all haste, Narcista. You have been chosen to act as the Watchman.’ For the second time he paused as if unwilling to continue. ‘The Seers have predicted the beginning of the Kari’pacha.’

What? ‘That’s not possible.’ Is this some kind of joke? It was unthinkable.

‘The Seers have seen, The Coming. Narcista, the prophecy of the Grave-Stalkers is upon us!’

THE END OF ALL THINGS OLD

The sun was setting into twilight; that narrow band where Time refuses to recognise neither the day, nor the night. Where neither can be seen, but Origin can be glimpsed, if only you have the eyes to see.

Above us a small flock of Looms flew; soaring with massive wings outstretched on a warming breeze. Like silent arrows, their long slender necks outstretched as they headed west. To see them in the sky was a sure sign that summer was fast closing in. As was the night. In the distance the forest had darkened, expectant that the light would wilt. Its canopy more the colour of a mirky pond, but still I felt this was the best of times; when the summer sun sheds a warm breath across the land, and the spell of winter is broken. A new season of the land to turn pastures in the valley rich and fertile. The smell of the soil changing to lure the deer from their forest undergrowth. Keen to graze on the looping milkbain that had already begun to grow. My sixteenth summer, and I welcomed it.

Or is it just a dream?

As I sat in the kitchen, I saw Mama linger alone in the doorway, her thinned figure exposed before an irresistible orange haze, being dragged behind a descending sun. Its light receding, and for a moment, I felt it was taking her too.

I don't know why I saw it like that. Just the truth of what I still refused to believe. I saw clearly that her strength had been sapped so very quickly by her unforgiving God. And for the first time I conceded, that her time was being drawn. I finally admitted to myself, what was inevitable, unthinkable even, before my father had left. That her time was soon, and after she were gone, I would be all alone.

‘Come and sit with me,’ she held out her hand, and I leapt from my chair to take it. Squeezing gently as I followed her out to our bench. The night finally winning out over the day.

‘It’s so hard to see these days without the clearest of nights,’ she sounded troubled. ‘Can you see them, the stars? Draï?’

‘No, not yet.’ I squeezed her hand again, and said a silent goodbye to the Looms as they disappeared into a red stained horizon.

I knew that when night finally prevailed the heavens would release its stars in abundance. But not yet the one she hoped for, and I wondered if it would ever come. In the months that had passed since my last Dreaming, when they had spoken to me; my mind had been silent. I didn’t know why they came to me. I didn’t know how she knew that they would. But each night we sat outside on that bench and we watched, waited, for a new star to arrive in the night sky. To find that nothing had changed, and I began to feel that my visions were a lie, and that I had dreamed my dream just to give Mama hope.

‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘The important thing is we know they’ll come,’ she touched my face and smiled. The smile you know precedes words that you might not want to hear. Then, as if a change of heart, that look replaced with another. More hopeful, if a little distant.

‘Draï, have I ever told you how I met your father,’ she asked.

I shook my head. No, she hadn’t. I must have wondered, but I’d never asked. I instantly conjured an image of my father, much younger, wearing the uniform a soldier at war.

‘He came to our farm,’ she said. ‘I was, perhaps a year or so older than you are now. I saw *them* in the distance, as I sat on the hill above our house. I ran down to my father, I was so excited. “Soldiers,” I kept shouting, and didn’t stop pointing towards the sun. Well, Father told me to calm myself. He teased my hair away from eyes, and then told me to go clean out the barn.’

‘What did you do?’

‘What I was told, of course. Well, I intended to at least. Once inside, I climbed that ladder up to the loft as if chased by fire. I threw myself onto a

pile of soft straw, and I watched. The riders still distant, I could only see their dust. I saw my father go into the house, and return with his sword. I watched him hitch it to his belt. And I tell you now, I shed my excitement, and was gripped by fear. I didn't know what to think.'

'But it was my father?'

'Not then he wasn't. And the memory of the war was still fresh with the Ikena people. I was a little girl when the war started. Soldiers still made people nervous, even then.'

I scrutinised every muscle on her face as she remembered. As her tone reduced to a whisper.

I watched from the bale-hole as the soldiers arrived at a cantor; about twenty of them. They rode into our farm with banners locked into their stirrups, their flags covered in dust. I'd never seen such powerful horses, so tall, and draped with bright saddle-clothes and over-coats. The sound of their hooves made a noise like thunder as they arrived.

Only one man dismounted, and he walked to meet my father. My blood ran many laps around my body before I remembered to breath; when they took each others hands to greet.'

'Was it Father?'

'No, Derlin took some of the horses into the barn later. He was rubbing them down when he caught me spying from the loft.'

'What did he say?'

'He grunted. Told me to go away. But I refused. And I teased him for doing a woman's work. He scolded me in return. Quite curtly if I remember. For my lack of understanding, of a warrior's relationship with his horse. Your father was very serious back then. He would always look stern, like this.'

Yes, I'd seen that look before.

'Anyway, I knew he liked me, even though he pretended otherwise. So I stayed up there. Of course he tried to impress me, and I feigned disinterest. But I knew then that he was the only man for me. A few hours later they moved on, to Boundary.'

'But he came back? He must have come back.'

‘It was a day or two later. He came with coin from the officer to pay for our food and hospitality. He asked my father if he could rest his horse for a while, before he returned. He got himself invited to dinner,’ she winked. ‘We talked on my father’s porch afterwards. It was on a night like this, Draí. Between the passing of spring, and the coming of summer. I remember that day drifted into night without either of us paying heed. My mother told me later, that it was obvious he had eyes for me. And as I said, I’d already decided for him that he was the man for me.’

‘You fell in love?’

She was grinning. What price her face at that moment, as she remembered.

‘We were married within the year; a foolish and naive young girl, and a very serious warrior hero.’

What? What is it? Other thoughts had dulled the edge of her smile, but she recovered.

‘He admitted to me later,’ whispering again, ‘that he had left Boundary without permission. That the money he gave my father was his, that which he’d managed to save. All the pay he had put away for a week of merry-making whilst on leave from the front. He’d given it to Father so he could return to see me.’

‘Mama?’ I had to know. *Father said. . .* That afternoon, whilst I was listening to them argue. *What did he mean . . .* I couldn’t say the words out loud.

‘What is it, Draí? What did Derlin say?’

I just couldn’t say it.

‘He told me,’ I said. ‘He told me once, how much he loved you.’ Those words seemed just as bad as she looked away, eyes full and ready to burst with regret and water. ‘Mama?’

‘Oh Draí, we still love each other. We do. But there’s been . . . There’s so much I . . .’ she grabbed my face. ‘Your father loves you. I love you.’

Whatever I’d said, it forged a new steel in her heart.

‘There are things that we must speak of, Draí. Words we’d prefer to leave hidden below a blanket of silence,’ she lifted my chin. ‘Oh Draí, I must leave

you soon,' she said it as if she were going to market. 'I have much to tell you.'

No. I shook my head. 'No.' *Why would I want to talk about that?* I must have painted the objection on my face. 'You'll recover. Joran's medicine . . .'

'Helps,' she said. 'Oh Draï, shhhh, it's all right. The Gods come for us all in the end.'

Gods? I thought there was only one true God? And where is he? Why doesn't he help?

I felt her finger draw down my cheek, and then dab me on the nose. 'It's my time, Draï. Just as the sun yields the sky to the moon, I must leave this body and move on. But I promise you; I swear. I'll always be close-by,' she placed her hand on my chest. 'In here. Always, in here.'

I looked at the sky to see night coming fast. It allied a darkness that descended within me.

'I've no more strength left to fight. You must have faith, Draï. Faith that when we pass, only our bodies fade. Neither our spirit, nor our memories will ever leave. Keep me alive, in here,' she touched my forehead, 'and in here.' A single tear slid slowly down her cheek to hang stubbornly from her chin. I watched its descent to her dress as she turned her gaze back up toward the night sky. 'They are coming, Draï. I feel them, and you see them; and that is enough for me. All will be well when they arrive.'

No, it won't. I'd seen them. I knew what was coming. I knew they were coming for me. That I was the beacon that drew them, and not the only reason they came. 'They'll come.' I said, nodding my head. *Please Gods, don't let her be here when it happens.*

Despite the warmth of the evening I began to tremble. That feeling when you are so filled with cold it no longer gives you a choice; your bones begin to dance and they cannot be calmed. Dear Gods, I was wishing my Mama dead.

'I want so much to stay here with you. But it's not my time. And you'll go on without me. It's you that they come for, not I. When the Coming is upon this world you must be strong, Draï.'

I could see the strength of her faith like chainmail in her eyes as she spoke. As she cupped my face with her palms.

‘I’ll wait for you, Drai. I’ll wait for you, and for Derlin, for as long as time will allow. We’ll be together again, as a family should be. And we’ll be happy in God’s kingdom.’

I jumped to my feet like a spoilt child being told he couldn’t have his own way.

‘I don’t want to be chosen,’ I said, ‘and I don’t want you to die.’ There, it had been said. I’d used the words my mind was desperate to avoid lacing together. *Dying, death, Mama.* Terrible words when they hang above a loved one.

She held out her hand to me, and I backed away. I didn’t mean to. I just did.

‘I don’t want you, to leave.’ *If I’m so gifted, why can’t I make you well?* ‘I want you to stay.’ *I want you to be well.*

‘I know. But Drai, there are things that you must know. But to tell you, it would break my heart.’

No, she wasn’t listening? I don’t care.

And I didn’t. I didn’t care about truths, half truths, or even lies. I just wanted to comfort her, and her to comfort me. I just wanted to slip my arms about her and snuggle into her embrace. I didn’t want to hear these things. *Not now, not ever!* At that moment I was filled with hate for myself, its dark malevolence charging my glass.

I’m a selfish fool. Now was not the time to become so self-absorbed. Nothing mattered now except Mama, and the time we had left together. And I was spoiling it for both of us. I took her hands, still held out, and I kissed them. I pulled them around myself and lay my head upon her breast. I felt warmth as I listened to the quickening beat of her heart. *Yes, we have to talk.* I hated the thought of it. But I didn’t want there to be things left unsaid. There were things I had to know, that I didn’t want to hear. What my father had said that night? His words burnt within me, as her lips touched mine with a gentle kiss. Her thumb wiping away a tear that I hadn’t realised had escaped.

She reached into the pocket of her skirt and pulled the black book from within, then slid it under my hand and placed her own on top. ‘When the time is right,’ she said, rocking to and fro. She began to pray.

I prayed too. But in the back of my head I was mulling over doubts. Unable to ignore the questions rising, that were far too raw to hurl at Mama. And with the absence of my father, these uncertainties began to refocus on someone else. The Forest Witch, Joran.

But the questions that forced their way into my mind were not the question that I whispered aloud.

‘Mama, will Father come back and say goodbye to me?’

Warmth drew the moisture from the dew, and if I concentrated I could see the plumes of vapour into which it streamed. In no great hurry rising high from the forest floor. And if I focused my mind, the undergrowth came alive with the sounds of woodland creatures. This new world had opened up to me, and with Joran's help I'd begun to realise its endless probabilities.

This place was idyllic, yet industrious. A land of humble beginnings and yet the noblest of possibilities. My learning in the art of medicines alone could lend a lifetime to being discovered.

Not long ago I had wondered why anyone would want to live in so isolated a place. Now I realised that it was us, the people who lived in towns and cities, who were really the ones who lived in seclusion.

Had it not been for the damp that leaked through my boots to soak the socks that Brak had given me, it would have been paradise. But I considered the dew a small price to pay as I sauntered the hidden paths of the forest, keen to deliver everything that Joran had asked me to find. My knowledge of the forest flora was growing and my eye ever keen to see the hidden and sheltered places that would once have gone unnoticed to my sight. She had opened my mind, and my heart, to a new way of living. To the brand new world in which I walked, and for that I was grateful.

I reached down between the stalks of a tight little group of firebells, so called because of their striking colour, and the shape of the tubular flowers. It was a delicate thing to tease the pods away, but below lay the weaver's lace; always growing, just below the surface of the ground. Where there were firebells, the weaver would hide. My fingers teased the delicate pods into my hand before they had a chance to fall, and spoil at the touch of the soil. Such a rare delicacy at this time of year. It was a winter herb that grew

only for a few months and would soon seek to return to the ground and sleep for another year.

I centred each pod in its own square of paper, no larger than the nail on my thumb, just as Joran had shown me. A few minutes later they were tucked safely into my satchel. Weavers were a rare discovery, and as I closed the flap on my bag I warmed with a flush of self-satisfaction. A confidence in myself to which I had rarely subscribed. It felt good. As I sat on an old root covered in moss, in the distance I heard the familiar chirrup of a bitark; a female, her song happy and sweet, and soon accompanied by the hollow hoot of a lonely wood owl. I closed my eyes, emptied my mind, and encouraged their voices to speak.

This secret world of the forest had opened up my mind. What was once guarded by fear, was now aroused and embraced. Attuned to this flood of new sensations that encouraged and emboldened me. This was a wondrous place, and I had no doubt that my new found confidence was a reflection of the forests welcome. Of our new found and blooming intimacy.

In the distance I picked out the call of at least a dozen birds who sang and welcomed the dawn. I heard numerous inhabitants of the forest floor awaken; so many tiny lives begin in earnest.

I knew it wasn't possible to be a part of them all, but I tried regardless. I shared in the wealth of the forest as it awakened from its slumber, not that it ever truly slept. The inhabitants emerging to forage, and play. I could hear the endeavour of tiny paws, on, and beneath the brush. I could even smell their pelts, and from the corner of my eyes, and with no great effort to see, I could sense the hidden shapes that tried to hide from me. I was beginning to learn how many shades of shadow existed in our world. And how many layers its form could take.

I took a final deep breath of it all.

'Drai?'

Joran's voice startled me, and the forest slumped into silence. I wondered why, how, when my senses were so keen that I had not been aware of her approach? I felt embarrassed; a touch angered, but resolved to show no more than a little surprise.

‘Look,’ I said with triumph, intent to change the subject that had yet to be broached. I reached into the bag and pulled out my folded paper squares. ‘Weaver lace,’ I said.

‘They will have to be squeezed and dried within the hour.’ She took them from me and held them up to the light. ‘You have a sharp eye to spot such a treasure, but I also have a talent to see what others miss. For example,’ she tucked the papers into her bag and drew the string tight at its neck. ‘I notice that your forehead glistens with sweat. I had no idea that looking for plants was so arduous a task. And your pupils are dilated, and yet the light here is relatively strong. Tell me, what were you doing before I announced myself?’

I shrugged. ‘Nothing,’ I lied, and then noticed, as I was sure that she did, that the pitch of my voice had risen. I coughed, and offered another shrug. Her sternness melted in a wry smile.

‘The forest can be a provocative place,’ she said. ‘Sometimes the strangest of things can happen,’ her eyes locked with mine, as if she were attempting to pry my secrets from me. Like a fool, I resisted. ‘Drai, sometimes you have to speak, or no-one will ever listen.’

How sweet her voice felt as it touched my ears. A gentle plea, and an invitation to bare all.

No. ‘Yes, no, I mean no, there is nothing to tell.’ The truth was I did not know what I meant. For a second or two I was confused and unable to break her gaze until she finally looked away. Her voice was so damn invasive at times. It enticed me to speak about things that I wouldn’t even tell to Brak. It was as if . . . As if she were casting a spell on me.

‘Do you know what I love so much about the forest, Drai?’

I shrugged, which was fast becoming a habit, and shook my head.

‘No? It’s listening to the trees at night when they think that no-one can hear. If I listen to their sounds, I can hear them speak. Oh, not in words, but with gestures. The rustle of leaves and the creaking of limbs. Sometimes the wood owl will try to interrupt, or the insects will tickle their bark and try to distract them. But if I listen, I can hear.’

Yes, I know. I can too . . . No, that's what you want me to say. She's used a few suggestive words and a thoughtful pause as a weapon. *Clever.* But I had nothing to say. *Or maybe I should.*

'See what I have,' her hand lifted from her pocket and opened. In her palm were what looked like tiny beads of glass. 'They have another name,' she said. 'But I just call them, snow.' She pressed one between her fingers and the brittle ball was crushed into a milky powder. She held it out to me. 'Tell me what you think.'

It looks like powdered snow. I took a long slow breath through my nose and savoured a strikingly sweet odour.

'It smells like girls.' I said.

'Of course it does. Snow is a powder for making perfume. When mixed with other herbs and spices it's very popular at the market,' she smeared her finger down my nose, then giggled at my indignation as I tried to wipe the girly scent away. 'It's very popular with men too, when mixed with deer urine.'

'Really?'

'Now tell me, what do I have in my hand?'

She wiped the residue on her blouse, and with the skill of a fairground magician returned her other hand with a tiny posy of leaves in its centre. I knew instantly what they were.

'Foxberry,' I said.

'And its application?'

'Ground and mixed with honey it makes a poultice for an open wound.'

'And?'

'And if soaked in fresh oil and baked in dough, they make a lovely centre for biscuits?'

'Very good. You can help me bake some for Estha when we return,' she winked at me. 'I happen to know she has a sweet tooth.'

Not just Mama. Just the thought of watching them rise in the oven made the hunger stir in my gut.

'I'm going back to the cottage,' she said, 'my bag's full.' It was held it up like a winner's prize. I clutched mine close to my stomach realising my poor

efforts, mine still half-empty. It didn't go unnoticed. 'Application is the root of all potential, Drai. If we don't try, we don't succeed. Will you come back with me?'

I shook my head and lifted my bag.

'I have more filling to do. I'll be along. Don't hurry back.'

She laughed. 'For you, I'll take just one step at a time.'

I watched as she moved away, her dress touching the ground, I couldn't see her feet. There was a humble nature about everything she did, even walking. When she was gone I sat back on my root. It was nice here, sat on the bank. A pool of crystal clear water below, fed by an ancient underground spring. One of many little grottos that were a feature of the forest.

I considered stripping off and bathing in the cold water. *I should fill my bag?* I raised my feet, laid back, and closed my eyes. I could still smell Joran's scent. It lingered in the air despite her absence. I had so many unanswered questions about that woman: About the 'Forest Witch'.

Perhaps she was right; maybe it was time to talk and share what I kept hidden and secret. There was something about her when we spoke that enticed me, almost dared me to open up. Perhaps that was why Mama had chosen her to take me in? I knew it was so; it had to be. What other reason would Mama encourage us to spend so much time together? It was how she wanted it to be, of that I was sure. She was doing what any mother would do and making provision for me for when she was gone.

Gone?

I began to think about the inevitable again. Thoughts that I'd forbade myself to consider because they always came with a pain in my gut. How would it be when she was gone? How would I cope? I'd never known a life without her.

My father's absence; no anticipation of his return. I cursed myself for wanting to dwell on thoughts that hurt. I was a tree, strong and powerful, and I would not wilt beneath the desert sun. I would be strong for her, and for myself in turn. Such passion of thoughts fuelled my senses to rise, to forge my innards with iron. I felt the forest come alive again, with the passage of tiny creatures, living lives invisible in the grass and ferns. I heard the sounds of the trees, and felt the warmth of the morning sun break a thin layer of leaves above me where I sat. Swept suddenly by a gusting breeze. Releasing Lapwings from their perch. Tiny birds with a yellow plume that darted with synchronicity through the space between the trees.

I surged my thoughts upward to try and catch one. I'd been practising, and felt my thoughts flow; twisting and turning through the branches unable to catch up. They were too fast, too nimble, their tiny wings too quick to change direction. It was like rolling downhill and trying to focus on the sky. I felt quite giddy with their motion and gave up the chase.

Here in the forest I felt free to practise my gifts. Amongst its vibrant atmosphere I tempted myself with limitless sensations. I knew what they were doing, Mama and Joran. They were preparing me. Helping me transition from one life to another. The more time I spent in the Forest, the more acceptant I became to the inevitability of change. But for one door to open, another had to close. And I refused to welcome any life without Mama.

As usual my thoughts became confused. The forest became a silent place, bar the distant hoot of an owl. The infinite presence of life obscured. I felt ordinary, and that was a feeling I was beginning to dislike. Even here, in obscurity, hidden within the forest, I felt as powerless as I did out there where I hid the truth of me. I was bound by fear. Of treading into a world where each step left my own behind. That others would find me out. That my father would never return. The biggest fear of all, that my Mama was dying with each passing day and may soon be gone. I had to stare these things in the face, and yet I hid them behind clouds. Somewhere in the middle they would always find a way to consume me.

Brak?

I would seek him out. I'd drifted from his side; not by choice, but by circumstance. When the mind stirs too rampant with thought, it needs to walk a path and unravel, safely. I needed my friend. I needed my idiot companion to lead me into temptation. To worry about getting ourselves into trouble would be a god-send right now.

Something stirred in the distant undergrowth. I grabbed my bag and sat forward, was I being watched?

To my surprise I saw the outline of a rare beauty, but in a place I could not possibly see. Not with my eyes. A powerful beast lifted its head and took my gaze. Then pawed at the earth with its hoofs, snorting with long deep groans of satisfaction and pride. I felt the weight of heavy antlers as we merged, my first sight a rippling reflection. He was sipping from a forest pool.

I felt empowered by this mighty beast. A powerful elegance engrained in a muscular tone. And then I felt my heart swell and thump. A vigorous

rhythm injected as a sudden gust of breeze passed across us and caught itself amongst the trees. The air funnelled back against itself almost before it had passed us by. On it we caught an odour that was unfamiliar. I knew of no animal that would pass on such a scent. Its strength unnerving, and the Stag backed away. The air stank of danger, and it was closing fast.

The stag leapt from the water's edge and took me in its stride. There were several different scents, each as alarming as the last; unnatural, and foreboding. We ran through the ferns, leapt across the great oak limbs that crisscrossed the ground. The sunlight dappled and confused, but despite the blur of my surroundings I caught a glimpse of the danger, and it came on two feet, not four. I recognised the scent; the rank body odour of unwashed men that had caught the breeze.

From a distance, and faster than the stag's hooves could run, came a hurtling sound that ran us down. A deathly squeal that tore through the air getting louder. It bit deep into the bark of the tree ahead, its flight ended. The ominous sound quickly followed by another, that squealed its oncoming intent, and then passed us by. The great stag's hooves scuffed and stumbled, then scrambled down a hidden path. We slowed; used the thickness of the ferns as cover, head low to conceal our presence. The stag's heart pumping hard, rampant with the fuel of life.

Another projectile pierced its way through undergrowth that yielded, and struck the trunk of a tree not a few feet from where we stood. I saw an arrow stuck fast in the bark. We were being hunted.

Run . . . Run!

I felt powerful legs launch the beast forward. Sticks and leaves smash as he charged on through. In little doubt now that both our lives hung in the balance.

Leaving the path we raced for cover, snapping the ferns and bullied our way through ever denser foliage. I could hear them coming, chasing at pace, getting closer by the step as another arrow wailed its presence through the air and was lost into the forest. We ran surefooted across the uneven ground, the bracken and branches breaking as we passed. Running deeper into the forest where the light became more scant. The ground more

difficult to see, and to tread. Powerful lungs dragged the beasts chest in and out, his senses keen for any sound. Our pace reduced to single steps. Both us left left hoping we had done enough. And then our luck ran dry as we stumbled on the slippery contours and fell heavily downward from a grassy knoll. Four legs scrabbling for purchase but finding none.

Bruised from the fall I felt as breathless, and vulnerable as the stag. As we lay frightened in undergrowth, our hearts racing together, thumping in tune. I heard the great beast snort with heavy breaths, short and quick.

No. Hide.

I begged him to stay, my senses honed for signs that the hunters were near.

Wait . . . Calm . . . Silence.

I tried to warn him. They moved slowly now, in virtual silence. But I could hear them. I could pick out each cautious sound they made. They couldn't hide from me.

Patience.

I could smell their approach; hear every guided footstep that tramped the ground. They were circling around us. Unsure of where we were. They were waiting, poised, ready with their weapons to take us down. Three men who approached with practised stealth.

No . . .

He'd snorted, though he hadn't meant to. I cold feel the animal ready to run. His hoof scraped at the dirt.

Don't . . . Please.

I held onto the stag though it drained my resolve. I couldn't let him go.

Wait . . .

I saw the past, but they weren't memories of mine. I felt small, new to the forest, uncertain of many things. I was lost and calling for my mother. The sound sent a chill through my bone despite it not being real. I'd wandered from her side and could not find her scent. I remembered the long calls, my demand for her presence. I remembered the fear of the forest without her strength to protect me. And then the herd was there. All the

mothers had come to find me. I was the future for them all. Without me their herd could not survive.

He snorted again. *No . . .* Another hoof well planted. *Please . . .* I couldn't hold him. *Don't . . . !* Every instinct he had was to run.

I felt a tear run down his nose. The nature of the beast was never to hide. I felt his head lower; his mind break free from mine. *No.* I'd lost control. *Stop.* We broke free of the undergrowth and fled for the safety of the deep forest.

Grass, bracken, and fresh shoots were trampled by the beasts hooves, as the animal lunged forward; lungs drawn with huge gulps of air to fuel a desperate bid for safety.

I felt the first arrow hit hard in his side, but still he charged undaunted. The second hit his hindquarters and the great beast stumbled, but still he managed to drive on. The third struck deep in the neck, and was a numbing sensation. The steel point of the arrow severed through the windpipe, and the stag went down, taking me with him. The magnificent light that had shined so brightly to attract me, went dark. The beautiful beast tumbled through the flora.

I cried out as though it were me who'd been shot, and then the forest rushed by my mind in a blur. I sat bolt upright in the clearing, still sat on the root. *Why?* Such a wonderful creature. *Bastards!*

It took a few moments to settle. My breath, stomach, my mind, all out of synch. One thing I was sure of. Despite the pain of the kill, I had never felt so alive.

'You felt it didn't you,' a voice

Joran? Damn her, I couldn't feel her presence. 'Joran?' I couldn't see her. 'Hello?'

'Impressive. You felt the stag from so far away.'

'Who's there' It wasn't Joran's voice. 'Hello?' I got slowly to my feet, wary of the voice, unsure of where it had come from. 'Show yourself, whoever you are.' The memory of the arrows flying wildly in the forest returned; I crouched down. 'I have nothing of value. Nothing for you to steal, I called out.'

'She was wise to keep you a secret from us.'

“What?’ *What does that mean?* ‘Show yourself.’

A breeze roused high in the branches of the trees, their long limbs parting, the rustle of leaves unnerving. It circled, gathering pace, and with frightening haste it gust downward towards me as if it were alive. The ground around my feet erupted with excitement to throw leaves and grass about me into the air. I had to shelter my eyes; hide my gaze. I felt its heavy draft engulf me, and threaten to lift me away.

Joran? I tried to reach out. I didn’t care if she knew, not now. *Joran . . .* I dared to squint; tried to see. I watched as a thousand leaves were sucked unwillingly from the canopy by a vicious swirl and frenzy. All drawn toward a central mass. A collage of distorted colour and form. I gasped as I realised a presence, unlike any I had ever felt before, as it circled around above me. The mad flurry of leaves taking deliberate form.

Oh, my. I marvelled as broad leaves and fresh buds gathered to a central mass, and a familiar shape. *Incredible,* I was caught between flight and wonder at what I saw. The slender outline of a woman. *How can it be?* It wasn’t possible. What magic had I unleashed now? *No, I’m dreaming. Fallen asleep on my root in the sunshine.*

I watched captivated as the entity assembled, then tweaked at its form, and when finally satisfied descended slowly before me. A handful of discarded leaves fluttering gently to the ground.

‘Don’t be frightened.’

It speaks? She came close and held out her hand. *No, you’re not real.* I wasn’t about to touch it, her, whatever this was. *Leave. Turn around and walk away.*

‘Where will you go?’ she asked.

‘What?’ It was difficult to breath. ‘Who, what, are you?’

‘It’s been a long time since I’ve taken solid form,’ her hand retracted. ‘Your heart is racing, why? Don’t be frightened. I mean you no harm. We need you,’ she said, as if I might help her carry a basket. She floated upward. ‘Do you like it?’ she asked. ‘Do you like my body?’

No. ‘Is this magic?’ Yes.

‘You’re confused? Of course you are,’ her body rose with no visible effort, and she stretched as if freshly awakened from a restful night’s sleep. ‘Magic,’ she said. ‘Yes, I suppose I am.’

She seemed amused by the notion, though it seemed secondary to her bathing in the warm sunlight, that now streamed directly through the bare branches above.

This is incredible. ‘What are you?’ I’m dreaming. ‘I’ve never spoken to, leaves.’ I’m still asleep, and dreaming.

I backed away as she coiled around, and then down, to hover right in front of me. Her levitation far closer than I would have liked.

‘Shall I tell you a secret?’ she asked. ‘Shhh, you mustn’t tell anyone. This is the first time I’ve ever been made of leaves.’ She was up, rising, twisting her form, and then resting with arms outstretched. It was the sunlight. As if she’d never felt it before.

She began to laugh. *Did I say something to amuse you? This is anything but funny.*

‘Who’d have thought it? A corporeal being?’ I heard the leaves rustle, as if flustered. Like a bird shedding water after dipping in a pool. ‘I wouldn’t have thought it. Nor any of my Sisters,’ her head lowered on a long neck of leaves. ‘I think someone has gone too far. Too far!’ Spoken so loud she wanted someone else to hear.

‘What do you want?’ I asked, my body damp from a fine sheen shed with fear. My heart too was over-beating. ‘What, what do you want?’

‘Want? I want to survive. We, want to survive, my Sisters and I. We break the rules set down by him, because we know. We felt it. We know what you’ve done.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

She rose high into the canopy through the outstretched branches. Her form unhindered by the rough limbs she’d recently stripped bare.

‘My Sisters and I are forced to break our oath. Someone has to intervene. Before you, Child of the Dreaming, become the destroyer of worlds.’

My heart nearly stopped as a thousand or more leaves burst into the air like a firework. I watched them fall like gentle snow.

'Under the circumstances, we have decided to help.'

I turned, stumbled; could not believe what I saw.

'We're going to save you from the one you call the Forest Witch.'

Water had risen from the pool; it was speaking to me. Like the leaves before it had taken on female form.

‘There are forces at work here that you cannot possibly understand. You must have faith,’ she said. ‘Trust that we can guide you better than, her.’

This is incredible. ‘You said, him? Companion?’ No, that’s not who you mean. *Who then?* She was so clear and vibrant. Like sunlight on glass. ‘Who are you? What do we want from me?’

‘To stop the inevitable. To turn back the tide. And if killing you would do so, *we would.* But it’s too late for that now.’

Her face. So translucent. She knelt on the ground where I’d stumbled. *What are you?* She obviously didn’t mean me any harm. Other than the threat to kill me. *I think I’m going to be sick.* Her face was so close. I would have felt her breath, had she been able to breathe. *Joran?*

‘I told you, you won’t find her. Not whilst we’re here.’

Her form shimmered, as if angered.

I must be dreaming.

‘You think you are dreaming. Why?’

‘I didn’t say that. How did you . . .?’ *The Mercian? But she was a dream.*

‘So many dreams for one so small. Tell me, why do you find my presence so hard to accept? Do you not bond with the animals. Feel their excitement, their playfulness. The pounding of their hearts? Isn’t that, magic?’

I pictured the bricks at the mill and started to count. I hummed Brak’s favourite tune, the one I’d heard him whistle so often. I recited a poem, but couldn’t remember all of the lines.

‘This would go a lot quicker if you’d accept. Look at me!’ *Have I not manifested myself in a form you can understand? Do we not speak with one mind.*

The bricks at the mill. They were rough and uneven. I could feel the texture of the one I'd held in my hand. She pulled away, and the nausea went with her. The water-woman was flirting with the sunlight again. And she was talking, but not to me.

'Yes, yes, I suppose I could. But it would hurt him,' she looked thoughtful. How could water appear thoughtful?

Who is she talking to? Like the Mercian, she had company who I could not see. *Mercian, is it you?* Her conversation over, her attention returned to me.

'You really don't have any idea who you are, do you?'

'My father is . . .'

'Gone. Your mother soon to follow. Very sad, of course. But what's done is done and cannot be undone. And is of no importance compared to what is to come.'

'It's important to me,' I took a step closer. 'Who are you? Are you the Mercian? You talk of Sisters,' I was looking around. 'Where? What plain of existence do you occupy?'

'An interesting question from a child. But we are not the issue.'

I wasn't listening. I was recalling my parent's argument, and what had been said. I wanted to know what this spirit knew. What my parents obviously had a hard time in sharing. She obviously wanted my help. For that, I wanted answers. The only other possible option, was I'd lost my mind.

'Think clearly,' she said. 'Interesting, isn't it? The difficulty to focus when she's around. How your curiosity sinks and rises but never comes to the surface. You have questions that demand to be answered. But as soon as they form, they fade, like memories that refuse to be tempted from their hiding place. Thoughts become sleepy and inconsequential.'

Yes, that's true.

'It's *her*.'

I could feel her now, as she warmed herself in the sunlight. The magic that attracted the water touched my skin with a glow.

‘She lies to you, and to the one you call, mother,’ she closed in on me. ‘She will leave you with nothing. Such a shame your father is always so far away; the call of duty more important to him than the love of a child.’

He’s my father.

‘And then there’s the girl,’ she floated down and set herself before me. Part of her trickling out amongst the grass. ‘You like her, don’t you, that girl? Every time she casts you a gaze, she fills you with hope. That one day she’ll look at you with favour. Yearn for you in that *special way*.’

Don’t shake your head. Don’t you . . . I didn’t like the way she spoke to me, she was too direct with her words; almost hurtful in their intent. I didn’t much like the truth, not the way she spoke it.

‘Tell him, sister.’

‘Yes, tell him how she keeps us in bondage. Tell him how we suffer.’

‘Tell him . . .’

‘Yes, tell him . . .’

They came from everywhere, whispering voices that stabbed at my ears like knives. So many that I stepped away. Only to back I trip and fall against the trunk of the tree. I swear I heard the great oak sigh.

‘Help us, corporeal. Help us escape this world on which we are exiled.’

‘This accursed world on which she keeps us bound.’

‘Enough,’ I shouted. ‘Show yourself, or leave.’ I’d placed both my hands on the coarse bark behind me. I drew from the great tree’s potency. The life force that surged from trunk to limb. I felt for its deep roots and felt them anchor me the ground. ‘State your business, or leave.’ What else could I say.

‘Too much Sisters, you confuse him.’

The water rippled as if this water-logged-effigy admonished her Sisters. I heard them hiss like escaping air as they slipped away.

‘I can give you the answers you crave,’ she said. ‘And I ask for so little in return. Just keep us a secret, from her. From all of them.’

She was so close now; peering at me. Eyes like glass baubles, that showed no reflection from the light.

‘Companion, you said? Yes, yes, you know. You accept, despite a lack of understanding. Good, good, that is how it must be. There is no other way.’

You must undertake a journey, Child of the Dreaming. It is the only way you will find the answers you seek. The only way you can ever hope to understand. Or it will be the end for all of us. When the Horde descends, Armageddon will follow. I will not let that happen. You must help us, corporeal. And in return we will be your guide. Your tutors. Your friends. You can even come with us when we leave. Oh to see the wonders that we can show you, out there in the True-Verse.'

'Curb your tongue, sister. He will learn soon enough. But not now.'

'Help us, Draï,' its voice more soothing and gentle. 'Help us, and in turn we will help you uncover the truth they keep hidden. That they all try to hide from themselves. Your *father* runs from the truth. Your mother, she will take her secrets to her grave.'

The water rippled as if I'd cast a stone, I felt a presence who was willing to engage. Willing to share, rather than probe.

'Come,' she said. 'As a gift of good-will, let me show you.'

On came a rush of sickness. The type of nausea that makes you drop and prepare for the worst. I thought I would empty my guts onto the grass.

Where's the forest? It was gone. *Who's there?* I could hear voices. Strangers, and not too far distant. 'Where are we?' I demanded.

'Where it all began,' she said. 'The day that *she* deceived us, and put us all in grave danger.'

Slowly the light began to make sense of the shapes around me. I hadn't realised how close she was, peering at me like that. As though I was something to be studied.

'You feel it, don't you?' she twisted with harmonious grace and rose like a wisp of smoke above me, her gaze never leaving my own.

What force of nature did these entities bring. What ends did their motives serve, and did I care? All I knew for sure was their words made perfect sense. My parents were keeping secrets from me. Why? What didn't they want me to know?

And Joran? This woman who was now so entangled in my life, and yet I felt I'd know her for years. There was so much about the witch that I didn't know, or understand. Nor did I care to. Which I knew I should. For I had

questions, questions, and more questions, and yet I asked her nothing. I couldn't. The way she was; the charm and presence of her personality, so overbearing in its quiet and complex way. She exuded a calm that had somehow infected me. Encouraged me to undermine myself. To hold back and stay silent. And yet I demanded to know what these secrets were. Because they were my secrets too.

I felt as if a spell had just been lifted.

'Watch,' she said. 'See where it all started. Let me show you how the lies began.'

What was happening to me? A few months ago the worst thing I had to endure was listening to Brak fawn over Saski. My father had come home for good. His time in the army was done, and Mama seemed happy. For the first time in my life our family was complete. Even my dreams were content. And now, before I had even realised, our lives were collapsed into darkness. Changed beyond all recognition. It had all spun out of control.

Or is it just in my mind?

No, this is real . . .

Something inside of me was awakening, I could feel it. All that I had witnessed; as incredible as it was, so unbelievable, and yet, unfolding with such familiarity. As if it all waited to be dredged up from my memory. Memories I couldn't have. From a life I couldn't possibly have lived.

What's happening to me? Whatever it was, it was real. *This spirit, this entity, she's willing to share.* I wanted to know. *Mama, I'm sorry.* She was keeping secrets, and though I knew her reasons would be good. I wanted to know. *I have to know.*

I felt a change in me. Perhaps it was the moment a boy became a man. Maybe I thought I would go mad if I didn't take the opportunity. I knew that I wanted to stop being frightened by who I was?

I want to see. I lifted my head and opened my eyes. *Show me!*

The sky was blood red, without a cloud to break the glow. And though I couldn't feel its force, I knew a fierce wind blew in frustration at two figures I could make out on the rocks above. One a man, his back to me, his long hair swept about his face to hide his identity. I watched as he appeared to struggle. His intention, to free a woman from a circle of light. On either side of them a pillar from where the light seemed to shine.

No! A sudden shunt of fear through my chest as both pillar's reacted to his advance; unleashing numerous talons of lightning directly into the orb, and at the woman's body. She arched with each impact, at the pain inflicted. The male was thrown from her side.

Stop, I demanded. And though the sky above rumbled with empathy, the woman's pain was increased.

Save her . . . He had to save her. Tall, athletic, nimble, as he climbed back to the orb. I heard the shouting of words between them. I knew she urged him to leave, but he refused to go. He would rather die than desert her. How I knew that, I don't know. But I felt their pain as if it were my own.

'Do you see?' my water spirit said. 'Do you see the wickedness of the corporeal as it lures its prey?'

I saw the man, dressed in fine clothes, stumble. Beaten back by the invisible storm. I watched him flung back from his feet to the rocks by a spiteful gust, where he lay for a moment. As I willed him to his feet. And as he pushed himself to stand, I saw his face. A face that wasn't possible.

I took a sharp and fearful breath as I saw him. The colour of his skin, so pallid and fair, with eyes as red as fireweed. I recognised him at once, or at least his race. And though I had never seen one before, I had absolutely no doubt that the man on those rocks, was Vampyrai.

I went from my knees to my belly so desperate was I not to be seen. Frightened by what he would do if he saw me. By the Gods, I never believed that the Vampyrai were real. I thought them a myth spread by the Empire to aid in their fight. They were terrifying folklore; tales to frighten children in the night. Even my father, who'd spent his adult life locked in arms against them, shared with me once his doubts that they even existed.

'Look how it revels in sorcery, and depravity. How a, a spirit of the forest, is taken and trapped.'

I knew nothing of his intentions, but I watched engrossed as the Vampyrai refused to be beaten down. How valiant he was in his defiance, each grasp for purchase on the stone littered ground as the wind tried to drive him back.

Spirit? She said, Spirit of the forest? That was how I had first seen her. They were one and the same?

It was difficult to make out from this distance. But each time the lightning struck, the woman changed. Her true form revealed. The Water Spirit too had changed. No longer stood beside me, but stepping out in front. She walked on the ground, her eyes filled with sorrow. She, they, both beautiful creatures of the light. No, far more than that, they were forms of energy. I had seen them before, somewhere, at sometime in my memory's past. And they were connected in more than just shape and form. With each talon of light I saw the pain in the Forest Spirit's eyes.

'Who is she? I asked, as another bolt lit out. The figure in the orb arched in pain; lifted high in the orb. She was being tortured.

'I don't want to see any more,' I said.

'Watch, corporeal. For this is where it all began. Open your mind, and you will see.'

I relented and complied. At least the sky was clearing overhead, the intenseness of its colour beginning to fade. Its fury spent, the wind beginning to calm. The man; the creature, finally reached the orb, and with a final desperate lunge the two joined hands, and he pulled the spirit free.

Thank the Gods, for I couldn't have taken much more. I saw, I felt, and I remembered. But as quickly as dreams come upon us, their memories fade. Though it all made sense, I had no idea why.

The Vampyrai knelt, his strength spent. The woman cradled in his arms. Her form no longer translucent, she was solid as I'd thought all beings to be. And I thought her dead as he rocked to and fro, his features hidden beneath the wild matt of his hair. His silken shirt blackened by the sting and venom of the striking light; the words he chanted carried through the air like a solemn prayer. I thought her gone, until her lips opened to find air. Like a drowning woman she gasped for life. Her hands instinctively pushing the Vampyrai away. He refused to let her go. And then an embrace as she realised he had saved her.

'Who are they?' my heart was racing.

'*He* is of no matter. But do you not recognise her?'

‘No,’ I didn’t. ‘Should I?’

‘Look closely.’

Long fingers adorned with silver bands of metal, gently lifted the strands of chestnut hair from her face. She was peaceful now, no longer in pain. I shook my head.

‘I don’t know her?’

‘Look closer,’ she demanded.

I did, but not at the woman. I stared at the man who held her. *Is he really Vampyrai?* Was I really in the presence of an infamous Warrior Warlord? It was a rush the like of which I had never experienced before. I’d heard stories since the cradle about the Vampyrai. Their flowing locks of silver hair; the soft pallid skin. The ferocity with which they could fight. Their blood lust . . . He turned to look directly at me, and there was no doubt left in my mind. It was the red centres of his eyes. They were like nothing I had ever seen before.

‘Look at it scowl. Even from so far a distance in time, it still shows hostile intent.’

No, that’s not what I feel.

My new friend rose in the air above me and shrieked a wail so terrible that I cowered like a dog to its tone.

‘That thing took our beloved,’ she wailed. ‘It abused her innocence, and raped her trust.’ She seemed unconsolable as another shriek tethered all my fears into one single moment. Enhanced as she came closer, whispering, muttering in a language I didn’t recognise, and for which I didn’t care. She was angry, distressed, a look of spite on her face. ‘The corporeal set a trap,’ she said. ‘It lusted, lied, and deceived. It should be skinned and hung for all to see. A lesson to those that would attempt a crossing of the great-divide. Look, Dreamer; it took our Sister.’

Fear or not, I couldn’t take my eyes from them as she drifted closer. So close I felt that tingle across my skin again. ‘Look. Look closely at what it did.’

‘Back away from me,’ I shouted. I’d not come here to be frightened. But to learn. ‘Temper your manner towards me, or leave,’ I said.

I marvelled at the Vampyrai. At his courage and fortitude. His skin almost white; framed by the dark flow of a silken shirt. Its cut crisp, if somewhat fanciful in design. He was adorned with rings of silver on each finger, with more pierced through his ears. He wore the trappings of power; of culture and coin. The woman still cradled with care in his arms.

I was surprised how fast my heart was beating as I got to my feet. It almost stopped at the shock of what he did next. A threatening roar; a warning to us to stay away. A deep cursing noise that caused me to shrink without actually moving. He warned us again and this time his lips receded to bare his teeth, as a cat would hiss out violent intent. It was a warning to be ignored at our peril. I was in no doubt that the man was indeed, a Vampyrai.

Gods, look at his teeth. They elongated three times their normal length from his mouth, two from the top mirrored by the lower jaw, and as if that were not threat enough I reeled as the striking crimson colour of his pupils fractured and seeped outward to completely fill his eyes. It was a madness of sorts for sure, or were they helping him to seek out sights that were beyond the limits of what others could see.

He could see, us; see her, my new found ally. I was sure he was glaring at us both through the barrier of time.

I was being foolish, it wasn't possible. What I was doing wasn't possible. It seemed I was getting good at doing the impossible, and accepting it as the norm, which was possibly more unnerving.

'They're lovers?' I said. He showed no sign of malice toward her, just a desire to protect and defend. *I don't think this is quite what you would have me believe.*

For as long as I could remember my father had told me stories of the Vampyrai. They were tales his father had told him, passed down by generations that had lived in the same times as these infamous leaders. “Divine rulers,” they said. Over the many peoples that inhabited the Unified States of Aurista. “A race of few who had mastered so many, and with the help of Devils and Demons.”

Though he despised their name, my father always had a healthy respect for his enemy. The Auristan warrior was a fierce foe, and an honourable enemy. But in all the years he’d been in the service of the Emperor. All the skirmishes and battles my father had endured. He said he’d never seen a Vampyrai. But from the way I’d heard him describe them, I wondered now if that were true.

The woman began to move again. I thought for a moment the effort had been too much, her strength clearly returning. And though I strained my senses, I could only wish to hear their words. Words that were not necessary as I marked her gestures; the way her hand reached out to feel his face. The way she moved her hands. The way her lips raised a smile, like a crescent moon. *It can’t be?* I lifted my hand to my mouth. *It’s not possible.* I recognised her. The woman who lay coveted in the arms of the Vampyrai, I knew her, though she was young.

‘Ahhh, now you see,’ the Forest Spirit came close. ‘You see now how it all came to pass. You see now why she can’t be trusted. It has seduced her with deception and lies.’

It’s her, the witch. Joran? ‘No, it can’t be.’

I didn’t believe my eyes as my mind flashed back to the images I’d seen that day in the kitchen, when she’d allowed me join. Her intense feelings of

love, and betrayal, by a man who was King . . . But who wasn't a man. I didn't understand the images then. I did now. *He's Vampyrarai?*

'Yes, and she's our sister. We need your help. She needs your help. By helping us, you will help yourself,' the spirit's tone softened, her words delivered in earnest. 'Help us, Draï. Help bring her back to those who love her. Help us close the gap so we can all begin the long journey together.'

You used my name? I took her gaze, and closed my mind. I wanted to empathise; feel what she felt, but her mind was closed and shared nothing. That alone was cause for mistrust. I knew she was manipulating me. I was also sure that what she showed me *was* the truth. At least her version. I knew from my good friend, Brak, that the truth wasn't always what was true.

'She's a spirit, like you?' I asked, feigning surprise and naivety, which wasn't difficult. 'How can that be?' In helping me recognise how Joran had pacified my mind. She had unwittingly exposed herself. *I see lies mixed in with your truth.*

'She's our sister,' she said. 'We miss her. We cannot complete our journey until she returns. Help us, Draï.'

So this is for her good? Or is it for yours?

They wanted Joran to return. Why? Why did she leave them, for him? The Vampyrarai creature? What I saw was love captured in time. 'What journey?' I asked. Not sure I really wanted to know. 'What happened here to make you hate him so much?' I stared at the figures now frozen. 'What's happened? I want to see more.'

'Time is running out, we need your help to bring her back. To bring her home where she can be forgiven, and cared for. You do want to help us. You will help her, won't you? She's your friend. Help your friend, child.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I'll help.' I turned to look her in the eyes, if that's what they were; bulbous and transparent, giving no signs of the thoughts being laid down behind. 'I'll help you,' I said, 'if you tell me everything.'

There, I was making a bargain with a woman made of something that resembled, water.

‘Be sure, young Draï. We need you to bring her back before the Dark Star . . .’

‘Shhh sister, you have said too much.’

I knew it. I knew they were still here; hiding from me. The whispers, which began again in earnest, all around me.

‘You say too much . . .’

‘Have a care . . .’

‘He’s not ready . . .’

My senses darted from one hushed tone to the next. These spirits, they wafted about like a leaf on the breeze. In and out of sight so fast I was unable to capture their likeness. But their attention signalled one important fact. They knew. Somehow these *creatures* were aware that Companion had found me. That he was on his way. How else could they know about the Dark Star?

‘Come, before the Forest Witch returns,’ she stirred with a graceful twist that swirled upward towards the light. Her form passive as it bathed in the sun’s golden rays. I could see through her as I could see through glass. She reeled back down with intent to intimidate. ‘Be wary of our sister. She is not of her own mind; she cannot be trusted. Be warned, keep our words most secret. She cannot know until she returns.’

More secrets? Well, at least I’m a part of them now.

‘What’s a Dark Star?’ I asked. The very name struck a chill within me. In the spirit too by her rippling reaction, as she ran from a memory pulled to the fore. An image of darkness now released.

I felt it, and tried to remember what it was that I’d forgotten. I saw a dark wall and an empty memory in my mind. But we shared the same foreboding about what rested at the centre of the City. A power so dark it had left a hole where its memory should be.

‘We will come to you again, Draï.’

‘No, wait.’

‘Be warned, the witch must never know. It is danger for you if she finds out. Remember our bargain. No-one to know, and everything to learn. Be patient, be vigilant, and be wary of the woman called, Joran.’

She frightens you?

A sudden gust of wind ruffled through my hair, and her voice was gone. It was all gone; the light, the Vampyr'ai . . . Joran, as all about me the forest returned. I lay on my root staring up into the trees, still afraid to move for fear it was all a dream.

But I knew better now. The Dreaming was as real as the ground beneath my feet. My safe little world had begun to creak and groan, and split down the middle, so much had been revealed. How wide and deep the secret's ran. In that one moment my life had changed. I saw the difference between knowing a thing to be so, and the clarity of realisation that it was an unalterable truth. It hit me with the impact of a blacksmith's hammer.

The Dreaming was real. I had a destiny that encroached me from all sides. It grew from my past, and shaped my future. And though I couldn't see my way forward, at least not yet. I felt it would surely be revealed by unravelling my past. But not the past of a mere child, no, what I sought would wind itself far deeper than my time. And though it's not the past that defines us, nor is it the future. It would be the here and now that would define them both.

It was plain now that the Forest Witch played a part. And I doubted I could truly trust her. My father was gone, and I may never see him again. Death was stalking Mama; taking her slowly before my eyes. My life was folding in upon itself and I knew that soon I would be left alone. I leapt to my feet and moved swiftly into the forest. Like the stag I ran hard, as if for my life, as I trampled through ferns. My adrenaline flowing, as were my tears. I cried like a baby who wanted his mother. I cried because it was the only thing I could do. It's a sickness, something you can't control. You just keep on crying until you run as dry as the sand.

When I left the forest, I was angry; angry at the Gods for nurturing me. For allowing me to watch myself grow to be an orphan. What was their plan after my parents were gone? Would they strike me down, or would I wander the Empire to find myself lost and lonely, like Sabartis? Was I an object for their mirth? A toy to be laughed at and poked. A thing of amusement, to tease and tempt, and ridicule.

No, I began to plot and plan for myself. I would find out what the witch knew about my parents. I would do it with stealth and cunning. I would not tell Joran about the forest spirit. That was my secret from her, from them, and when she came again I would trade my help for information, which it clearly intended to bargain, one piece at a time. The spirit knew about Joran; it knew of the City of the Dead. But did it know what part I had played in their coming? I doubted that, and resolved to keep that secret to myself.

In the blink of an eye I had woven myself well within a web of lies and deceit. I wondered how many more lies there would be to follow.

I collapsed on the slope of the hill as I got my first sight of the farm. I'd run so fast my lungs were fit to burst, and as I knelt gasping for breath I saw the one place I knew I had a friend. For Brakkish was the best friend a boy could ever have; he would understand, though I doubted he'd believe. Not all, at least, but this was all too big for me now and I needed to talk. To share my secrets with someone I knew I could trust.

Such a beautiful setting amidst the fertile land that for generations Brakkish's family had farmed. They'd grown Long-Wheat that grew into a playground for children when fully grown. The wheat grew taller than most men, and had grown now to almost knee height. Its milk coloured stalks turning the landscape white, as if the snow had returned. As I stared down I remembered the last time we'd played war. A few summers gone now. So many seasons spent playing hide and seek in those fields. When was it, I wondered, that we passed from children into men? I hadn't noticed until today. Schoolwork, chores, and a hankering to fight in the war had taken precedence above my need to play in wheat. Recently superseded by a deadly horde, other worlds, and strange Spirits who seemed eager to be my friend. I had to talk to someone about my recently discovered secrets and lies.

I caught my breath and watched. Brak's home much larger than mine; his family too. I wondered where he'd be. Not in the house, not now. Not if his brothers weren't out tending the fields. He'd be trying to avoid them, in one of the several barns, I presumed. Maudlin at his chores, or more likely hiding to avoid them.

Someone was home, I could see smoke drifting from the farmhouse chimney. A brick built shaft in the midst of a shingled roof. The house lined with timber shiplap, and a new veranda recently extended by Brak's father.

I remembered the sound of hammering and saws. How his mother had brought lemonade for his brothers in the sunshine. Brak and I had helped carry the timber from the wagon.

It was black smoke; someone burning damp wood. That was Brak for sure. So he was home, and I was grateful. My breath fully returned, I set off down the hill. Within minutes I breathed the familiar smell of goats. Their odour calming. From the distance I heard mooing cows, they had six of them out grazing on a small pasture. It had always seemed so big, so sprawling. Fields and barns that children could get lost in. But not today. It seemed a very small place in the grand scheme of what I'd seen.

I mooched about the inside of the closest barn, patting each goat as I passed. All too busy feeding on straw. Mildew was my favourite. Black and white, she was as old as I. But no sign of Brak. No sound of him in the loft above.

'Brak?' I called. 'Hey, you up there?'

He wasn't in the other outhouse, and I doubted he was in the fields knowing how much he hated manual work. Just the thought of breaking sweat with his hands was enough to feign illness, or injury. No wonder his parents had thought him a sickly child. Small wonder that his six elder brothers called him lazy, at least where working the farm was concerned.

A short walk across hard ground to the house sent several chickens clucking. I tried to quell their excitement with soothing noises as I cleared them from my path. I was skulking about and didn't know why.

'Brak?' I half-shouted and half-whispered towards the top window at the rear of the house. The room he shared with his brother Tak.

'Brak?' a little louder this time. Several small stones were tossed before I conceded he wasn't asleep up there.

Knock on the door. Why I tried to conceal my presence was unclear. I'd done nothing wrong, and his family like me. I was always welcome at the farm. The problem was, I supposed, that I didn't feel like me as I walked back around the front of the house.

Brak, where are you? The front door seemed exposed. They'd all be in there watching, listening. Inviting me to eat, probably, and not what I

wanted right now. I was feeling abandoned, agitated, and about to lose hope when the front door creaked open. Enough for Brak to poke his head through.

'You'll break a window,' he said.

'You heard?'

'The cows in the field heard.'

'Oh, sorry. Is, anyone else, at home,' I craned my neck but the door was pulled tighter to his neck.

'Where have you been?' he asked. 'It's been weeks.'

'I'm sorry. Mama's been, you know.'

'Oh, right. How is she?'

I shook my head and shrugged. *Why are you poking your head through like that?* 'I have to talk to you,' I said.

'Now? Can't it wait?'

Wait? No, it can't wait. I ran all the way to get here. 'It's important. Please, can we go somewhere. Take a walk or something?'

'Not really, Drai,' he pulled the door as tight to himself as he could. 'It's a bit awkward at the moment.'

'Brak, it's important. Just a stroll in the field. Go see the cows,' I shrugged. 'I need to talk.'

'Sorry, can't. Hey, I'll call round tomorrow, I promise. Or I'll come get you on the way to the Learnit, if you want? We can chat on the way.'

I was shaking my head. *Can't you see? Can't you sense how important this is?* 'I have things to tell you,' I said.

I watched as a shadow passed behind him. So someone was in there. Why was he hiding them? Who was more important than his friend? He motioned me closer.

'Later,' he whispered, and opened the door very slightly so I could see inside. 'I've got a guest.'

I leaned to see, and my heart sank.

'I promise, we'll talk all day tomorrow. Anything you want, just not now.'

I saw his guest, sat on a cushion. One of two huge pillows we'd sat on together since we were small, in front of the blazing fire. Saski was

warming herself, with one of the new puppies in her arms, playfully rubbing its belly.

‘Jess had puppies,’ he said. ‘She wanted to see. She’s going to ask her mother if she can have the black one.’

‘Oh, good,’ I said. *She’s had them already?* He’d promised me I could have first pick of her litter.

‘I told you she liked me,’ he whispered. ‘Remember that Mercian woman, she said it as well.’

Yes, she did. ‘I remember,’ I said. ‘I’m happy for you.’

‘Hey, when you coming back to the Learnit, some of the others have asked after you?’

I knew that to be a lie, but appreciated the sentiment.

‘Drai, I have to go. We’ll talk later, okay? I promise.’

I strained to look inside as he stepped back. If I could have had just one wish it would be for this. For me to be a man, and this to be my home; the puppies to be mine. And for Saski to be sat beside me as they played. Strange how quickly I lost my eagerness to talk.

‘I’ll come and find you tomorrow, I promise.’

I barely heard his voice as the gap closed. Saski turned toward the door, puppy in arms. Her face a dazzling picture of pleasure.

It was another torment from the Gods as the door closed and left me stranded on the wrong side.

A CROSSING OF LIVES

Eight weeks of hard riding, across four Kingdoms; Narcista had finally reached Pillio. A further two days to finally arrive outside of the city of Boundary. A thousand leagues travelled and Narcista still had no idea why he was here in this backwater of the Empire. An isolated place with no strategic relevance, nor importance.

Why such an arduous journey? Why? It had troubled him greatly. Regular reports on his progress to fellow Druids had yielded no answers, no updates. *What's so important that they send me from the capital? That's where I belong, where I'm most effective. Why here?* He tugged at his robe against the chilled morning air. Narcista kicked gently at his horse's hind-quarters. 'Move on.'

He'd seen enough of the walled settlement, no more than a few leagues distant. Hardly large enough to call itself a city. A dire sight filled with frontier architecture. Its buildings constructed mostly of timber; some stone, doubtless hewn from a local quarry. Its yellowed surface stained by the ground it had once shared.

He looked along the shingled rooftops, pitched and uneven; a single spire protruding. A less than impressive sight. He preferred to stare at the ground as his horse walked on. It too seemed fed up with the journey to what was once the outer edge of the Empire. Narcista pulled his hood low to cover his face as the wind kicked up yet another flurry of dust.

Those behind encouraged their horses to follow. Six men who escorted the Druid. Four wore the grey uniforms of the Vildegard, the elite personal guard of the Khassari Druids. Bows strung across their shoulders, swords hung from their belts. Men who'd sworn, "Loyalty and obedience above

death.” All were hungry, none complained, as they slumped on their dirty horses. Though their mouths were dry and clothing riddled with dust, they endured without complaint.

First behind Narcista was the Cleric. A young man of barely twenty years, and a novice in training. Raised from childhood in the Druid ways. He too wore the grey of the Vildegar, but was marked out as different by the hood that covered his head, and the skirt belted over his trousers, that fell to his knees. His unshaven appearance belied his youthful looks, but not the eyes. A gaze that portrayed the hardness of a man already used to being obeyed.

The sixth rider was a Lurqer; a horseman from the Nomadic tribes of the West. A man who sat high in his saddle and showed barely a sign of fatigue. The long and gruelling trek shown only by the heavy dust settled into his quilted coat, and gathered deep within the full dark beard that covered his face. Tall and slender, his hair long and matted, he rode at the rear without a saddle.

Narcista was impatient to arrive, and once again reflected on his mission. *What mission? Why am I here?* The same questions over and over again. To do otherwise was unthinkable; but at the behest of the Seers? To send a Druid here, to Boundary, and with barely an explanation as to why?

“The Seers have predicted the beginning of the Kari’pacha.” Sermile had said. “The prophecy of the Grave Stalkers.”

Superstitious myths. A modern Druid believed in what he could see, touch, feel, and influence through his own volition. *Fuck the Seers.* But still, Sermile was a wise Druid; nobody’s fool. And the old emperor had believed, fervently. He’d given the Seers unprecedented status. Even the Eight had consulted them. That alone should be enough. *But these were prophecies written down centuries ago?* He’d been too long in the saddle. Perhaps too quick to dismiss. Too long in the comfort of the capital. There was always room for the unexplained, even in Narcista’s modern way of thinking.

‘Cleric,’ he called out. ‘Find quarters for us in Boundary,’ he turned in his saddle. ‘Try to be discreet.’ He looked down the line of men. *Little chance of that.* Within the hour the city’s population would be talking about their

arrival. 'When you're done, come find me. I'll be with the City Warden,' he settled back in his saddle. He was going to make enquiries. *I want to know why I've been sent here.*

'Of course, patron,' Cleric nodded, and wheeled his horse toward the gate. The Vildegard followed at a canter.

Narcista beckoned the Lurqer.

'Do you sense anything?' the Lurqer asked. His accent strong, his tone deep; his gaze moving along the walls of Boundary.

'No,' Narcista replied. 'If there is a reason to be where peasants still piss in the streets, I'm not aware of it,' he kicked his horse on. 'Stay alert. I don't like mysteries.'

I awoke as if nothing had happened. I'd closed my eyes to the darkness of the night, and opened them to the light of day, that now splintered in through the aged shutters on my window.

That was how it was for me, I didn't dream like others. No random thoughts, or crazy tales that made absolute sense until the moment you opened your eyes, and then left you with an irritating riddle as to what had passed. Sleeping for me was a twitch in time. An instant where my mind went blank. Nothing more than the closing and opening of my eyes where the night time passed unhindered in-between. Only when the Dreaming was upon me did I see visions. Only then did I welcome the colours and light that others took for granted. My Dreaming was as real as the waking world.

I rose from my bed and dressed. It had been three days since my encounter with the Forest Spirit and barely a word had passed my lips since, preferring to be alone with thoughts that I had to constantly chase and scrutinise. I lacked my usual razor sharpness; my keen sense that helped me see better than those around me. But now I knew it was the magic of the forest that encouraged my mental indolence. Over which I had slowly begun to prevail.

In those few days I found lying would pass my lips without preying on my conscience. "I was fine," I would say. Even though I was not. "Just a quiet day. Nothing much happened." Lying through omission was even easier, but hard. I'd always told Mama everything. But she kept secrets, and so did Joran. In telling none about the others, I hoped that truth would be found somewhere in the middle.

Now I knew the forest's secret, it was akin to a life lived within a cocoon. Like a fool who drank too much and had addled his brain. But now I

understood, I just didn't know why. Why Mama encouraged my friendship with Joran? Why they tried to hide what refused to be hidden? These Sisters, whoever they were. The witch's history, and how it interacted with mine. The Dreaming, and the Hordes that I'd seen. And Companion . . . Companion to whom? It was a jumble to keep.

And why? Why did Mama allow this to happen? What was it my father refused to stay and be a part of?

One simple question I kept at the forefront of my mind. "Who am I?" Repetitive and invasive it began to consume my every thought. My life had changed since Joran had become a permanent fixture within it. And though I enjoyed her company, and was grateful for her steadfast help with Mama, since the Forest Witch had arrived her influence upon me had become almost overwhelming.

I didn't remember being such a slob. My bedcovers on the floor, my clothing fared little better. Even the lid to my private chest was up and inviting all for inspection. I took a deep breath and left my room. Balustrade in hand I descended to the kitchen.

No fire? That was unusual. *No breakfast set on the table?* Where was she? 'Mama?' I called. Then called again, but louder this time, still staring at the empty grate.

The fire was like an old friend, now absent. The summer months had not yet fully arrived, and though I descended bare foot and without a shirt, I could feel the early morning chill raise the hairs on my arms. I'd thought it a bit soon to not light a fire. She'd told me often how the crackle of the wood burning was a tonic to help her sleep.

'Mama?' *Where are you?*

I stopped before reaching the final step, and looked up towards my father's bedroom. The door was closed

If Mama is in the garden? Opportunity struck me as I realised I'd not been inside that room since I was a child. I was already ascending. *Besides, I'd get a better view of the garden.*

I pushed open the door and stole a look inside. Then a quick check of the kitchen below. I took a very deep breath. If I were going to find clues, or

answers, then surely they'd lie within. I stole across my father's room to the window opposite and looked outside. There she was, sat on my father's seat; gone out to watch the sun-rise. I felt an overwhelming compulsion to join her, but if I left now I might not have the chance to do this again. Knowing what I was doing was wrong. I watched for a moment, and felt the warmth of the dawn sun, not yet risen to fully clear the hills. All the time my gut feeling the pinch of guilt.

These last few nights had been the first I'd not sat out with her. Whatever my feelings, it was wrong to ignore her. I wanted to say sorry, and I would. But not right now. I stole away from the window.

A week ago I would not have approved of what I was about to do. It was wrong. To enter my father's privacy like this, in such a dishonest way. It was inconceivable a week ago. But I was convinced now that it was a necessity. Where to start?

The room was larger than my own. A bed sized for two, but only ever occupied by one. Two doors set in separate walls; one that I had just entered. Beside the entry hung a mirror half the width of the door. Hard to miss as my reflection stared back at me, with disapproval.

The other door was smaller; a cupboard, and the one I fingered open. Inside were all my father's possessions. His clothes piled neatly onto shelves. Others hanging from a metal rail. They were familiar garments that I'd seen him wear on numerous occasions. Some, he'd told me, had belonged to his father. My grandfather. A man who I'd never met. Only heard stories of.

My hand was drawn to Father's long-coat, hung from a hook above the headrail. Its hem, a hand above touching the wooden planks on the floor. How I loved that coat. Its well-worn leather dulled from the passage of years, and ten thousand leagues, or so my father said. It was always the first thing I'd see, when I entered the house to find him returned. Hung on the wall just inside the door, it always brought joy to my heart. Now it brought sadness. The memories this coat invoked seemed distant without the hope it would make more.

Why? Why did you leave this behind?

I ran my fingers down the long lapel, teasing at the supple leather. He knew I loved this coat, his only protection from the elements when riding. This coat made a statement about the man who wore it.

Is that why it still hangs in here? Did you leave it for me? You're not coming back, are you?

No, I was being silly. Of course he'd come back. He always came back. This was his home. He'd be back for me and for his coat.

I moved my attention away. Several pairs of trousers hung beside it, one made of linen, the other leather. Besides them were two fabric shirts that took my eye. Both too small for my father, and as I teased them aside I saw another garment. A smart leather jerkin that I'd never seen my father wear. Its collar short, the sleeves buttoned, a single pocket on the waist. It had buckles to adjust the size. This also was too small for my father to wear, and hidden away. I took one of the shirts down and held it in front of me. Made for someone much smaller, and far less broad than he. I put my arm in the sleeve and pulled it on. A good fit with a little room to spare.

To grow into? He'd obviously had them made for me. I grabbed the jerkin and pulled it on. *He'd had them made for me.*

I peeked out through the door and then closed it. I took a step back to admire myself in the mirror. The buckles on the waist and sleeves were fashion meant for a man, and not a boy.

They're a surprise. He'd had them made for me as a surprise. What other reason would they be here. *Of course; when he takes me to Boundary . . .* I felt my eyes well; my breath stutter. *Oh Father. You didn't even say goodbye?*

I took the jerkin off and returned it to its hanger, my gaze suddenly weary and floor-bound. It fell on shirts neatly folded and left on the floor, and something else. A floorboard not quite square with the others around it. I don't know why I stared at it. But instinct encouraged me to kneel. As I moved the shirt I noticed the tiny nail-holes were empty. Peculiarities that others would not have noticed, now stirred my curiosity.

Strange, how a few days ago I would not have pandered to such intrusive behaviour. But now I did. And was glad to do so, as I teased at the edge of

the board with my fingernails. To my surprise it came free. There was something hidden in the hole below.

A small bail, about the length of my sock. The leather that wrapped it old, but well oiled. A thick lace tied about its girth. Looking through Father's clothes, that was bad enough. But this had been hidden. Whatever *this* was, it was private, and very personal.

I grabbed the bundle and unpicked the knot set in the lace. I placed it on the floor outside of the cupboard and pushed to unroll the leather. I was taken aback by what I'd revealed.

Six wooden hilts in the bale, carved from oak with a circular pommel. Each bound tightly with leather ribbon to better fit, I assumed, my father's hand. The brown dye of the leather well faded, and an obvious sign that they had been well used.

Knives? I hesitated to touch them. *Not knives, daggers . . .*

The guards on the weapons had been forged from a metal I'd never seen before. Dull and non-reflective. Shaped in a semi-moon to stop the hand slipping forward when thrust into the target. The blades themselves veiled by the sleeves that held them.

Why so many? I teased the middle one out with my fingers; drawing it cautiously from its sleeve. *What is this?* Not a blade of steel as I had expected. *Incredible, I've never seen a blade like this?*

Thin, sharp, and made from what looked like glass. It could even have been ice. I tapped it with my nail to be sure, and then ran my finger down the flat side of the blade.

What is this? Why do you have weapons like these?

I felt the outline of an inscription that I couldn't make out with my eyes, so held it up higher, Trying to find the light from the window. I saw, something? Symbols the light refused to reflect. What held my gaze was the

wonderful hue of the material, and what looked a lethally sharp edge. The length of which gave no reflection, and yet still its lustre remained.

I was smitten with a notion of stealth in the darkness. And was aware of a growing sensation of power incited in my hand . . . In my heart. I was a shadow in the night. A furtive breeze that no barrier could deny. I was the last thing an enemy would ever see before I slipped this blade into flesh.

I thrust the knife forward, and with slow and deliberate force, I twisted it deep into my imaginary foe. The skin well pierced apart; the flesh unable to resist. It was a morbid sensation, which led to the perception of blood drooling through my fingers.

No! I dropped the knife. *My hands?* I wanted it off my hands. *Get off me, get off.* I rubbed my fingers hard against my pants. Dragged my palms to make them clean. *What is this?* I watched the crystal clear blade glow a misty blue. The symbols my eyes could not make out seemed to lift from the blade, and then fade. I checked at my hands, no blood on my palms. Just an overactive imagination, at least that's what I told myself.

I slid the leather roll towards the knife with my toes. With two fingers I picked it up and fingered the weapon back into its slot. I rolled the bail up and retied the knot. My foot easing it back towards the hole it had come from. A moment later the floorboard was back in place; folded shirts dropped in a pile to conceal it.

I was wrong to have invaded my father's privacy. Far from finding answers, I had uncovered more questions to ask. Questions, I feared, I would never be able to present.

I closed the bedroom door as quietly as I could and made my way to the stairs.

I leapt down them in twos, and grabbed Mama's shawl from the chair as I passed.

The jumble of my life could wait. I had one need to attend to; I needed to free my mind. Mama could catch a chill at this hour. Silly woman, the summer hadn't arrived, but it was most surely on its way.

'Mama,' I called. 'What are you doing out here so early? Why didn't you light a fire last night?' Questions, questions, my life was filled to the brim with the horrid things. 'I'll do it from now on, until the nights warm themselves. Mama? You should come inside, I'll make tea.' I opened the shawl and dressed it around her shoulders. As I did so she fell forward into my arms. Every alarm in my body began to toll

'Mama?' *Are you ill?* 'here, let me take you inside.' I instinctively looked for Joran. 'Mama?' My arms went around her and I took her hand. Then let go as if it were plagued.

No. Her skin was colder than night. 'Mama?' I lifted her chin; her eyes open, but no reflection as they gazed beyond me. A tight and terrible numbness caught me as I pulled her close. 'No, Mama. No, no . . . Oh dear Gods, no.'

I checked for a heart beat in her veins. I reached out to her with my mind. I tried to join with her like the bitark. All I found was empty space where her beautiful mind had once been.

'Mama, please, wake up.'

Mama . . . ?

How light she felt as I carried her from the garden, wrapped up in the blanket that had kept her warm for so many years, as she'd slept besides the kitchen fire. It was only now that I realised how frail she had become, and wondered how she'd carried on for so long. I stood with Mama in my arms, staring down. Unwilling to relent; to accept. It seemed the world in which I lived had dwindled to a space no wider, no deeper, than the one I stared at. That was freshly dug.

I placed her into that cold and dark place, because that is how we leave our loved ones. At least what is left of them. And I hoped with all my heart that her God was out there, somewhere, to embrace her with open arms. I shovelled the soil into the hole. For the first time in a long time, Mama was truly at peace.

But not I. The air about me held a bitter taste as I brushed at the mound of soil now piled before me. My palms stained, my nails plugged with dirt, as I smoothed at the burial mound. She was beneath it now, and at rest. It took a while, but the stones I placed on the soft soil would deter wild animals that would desire what lay beneath them.

When it was done I found myself staring at a cold fireplace, in a kitchen that had become her world. I uttered a prayer to her God as I sat there, her little black book in my hands. I wanted the power of its pages, of its words to be heard.

As a child I'd often sought to peek; to discover what secrets and spells were written down on its pages. I should have left the book in her pocket, I know. But a part of me wanted to keep a part of her. The one thing in her life that had brought her hope, I hoped it may somehow bring comfort to me too. It seemed my last act in her life was to steal from her when she was dead. I found it difficult to reconcile. Just like everything else that had recently happened.

I felt more than a flutter in my chest as I fingered the well-worn cover. I knew Mama would want this. I did. For me to be as one with her God would make her happy. The One true God was in this book, and I was ready. Let His secrets be revealed. Let His words be *my* guide; help *me* to believe. I could feel them taunt me. Dare me to unveil their mysteries, as I thumbed at the edge of its cover. I wanted so much to believe as she had. So I flipped open the cover.

Strange, the first leaf was blank. No writing, no print. No words to inspire. I drew my finger down the blanched, textureless page, and turned. Then the next two, both blank and empty of teachings. Two more turned, and then two more after. I turned them all, but found them empty of words.

I don't understand?

It was a catalogue of blank pages. No script, no symbol, just empty pages with nothing to declare.

Mama? I moved to the window and lifted the book to the light. Turned each page again, being careful to examine for signs. *Where are the words?* I flipped through them again, with less care, putting page to glass fraught to reveal something, anything. *What is this?* I closed the book staring at its dark cover. *Why is it empty?* Confused at the absence of anything to see. Shocked in no small way at what it refused to reveal. *Why had an empty book been of such importance to Mama? It makes no sense, unless . . . Dear Gods, no?*

Was the book a mirror of her life? Had she kept her emptiness at bay by hiding it well within these pages? Was God just Mama's way of dealing with the physical and mental pain? Was that all the Gods were? A manifestation of our fears. Somewhere to hide our inadequacy.

I closed the book, and in that moment I saw everything in my life so very differently, and with a bitter-heart. I wondered how different, how much happier her life could have been without having me to watch over, and care for me. I'd been a childish child, and all I could see was the worst of me. To look after me, and my Dreamings, when she could have looked after herself. Then another thought when I'd considered myself at my lowest.

"When I brought you a child," that was what my father had said. *Brought? Children are born, not brought. You don't bring them home from a market?* It seemed my past was as blank to me, and yet as full as her little black book.

Father? I wondered; was that even a fair description of the man? *What does that word mean anyway?* Just a man who spends his life absent from his home. *Why? Why did you say that? "When I brought you a child." Where did you bring me from?* Worse still; why didn't Mama tell him it wasn't so?

Oh Mama, why didn't you tell me? You wanted to, I know you did. I saw the pain in your eyes each time you tried. Mama . . . I couldn't believe it even crossed my mind. *Are you really my mother?*

Yes, yes she was. I would never doubt that, no matter what secrets I might uncover. And I was resolved to discover them all, from the witch, Joran, and the so-called Sisters. And from him, the one who called himself Companion.

I'll play your games. I'll follow the path. I'll do whatever is necessary to find out . . . who, I, am?

I felt misery swallow me whole, and tie my stomach in a knot so tight I found it difficult to breathe. This was no time for false thoughts. No time to worry about what I didn't even know for sure. It meant nothing. Mama meant all. I couldn't believe she was gone. I should have been here for her, to hold her hand. I should have held her in my arms and let her know how much I loved her. Been her comfort as she passed from this world to the next. It was wrong; to be alone like that. I should have been there.

And where was Father? Where was Derlin? Gone again, at the time when she needed him most.

Damn you!

Damn him for always thinking of himself

I spewed tears in a torrent down my face. I'd wanted to read the words she'd held so dear. I wanted to send her to her God with words spoken aloud from *her* book. But could only speak two words from my heart, that were barely worthy enough to utter.

'I'm sorry,' I said aloud, staring out through the glass at her grave.

They were the most inadequate words a person could ever have spoken.

Mama's book clasped in my hands, I sank back into my chair, and the strangest feeling swept across me. As my fingers clutched the leather bound tomb to my chest, I remembered Mama, smiling. I felt her faith course through me and give me strength.

In that moment I knew in what direction my future would take me. I intended to reel in the mysteries of my past. Unlock all of its secrets and hold them to account. For only then would it ever set me free.

THE FIRST STEP

I wasn't sure how much time had passed whilst I'd slept, but when I awoke the kitchen was still a small and desolate space. The grate in the fire still bare and cold.

I ventured outside to see the sun had blighted the sky with an orange hue. As far as my eyes could see, the valley was still green; enriched with colourful blossom. Life outside, so it seemed, just continued on. No pause, and no kind words. It was mean and uncaring, and without sympathy for the ache I felt in my heart. A life had been lived, and had now passed on, and there was no-one but me to mourn. The world in which I lived had ignored Mama's passing, as it had largely done her life. Nothing had changed. It twisted my sorrow into anger.

'Why?!' I shouted from the doorway. 'She was a good person.'

It all looked the same today as it had done yesterday; as it would tomorrow. I realised that only the Heavens ever change, into light and dark. The land below responding in reverence. All those who live in-between, we do so at their pleasure. We do so unnoticed.

Am I the only one who cares?

I resolved to leave. Why stay? There was nothing here for me now. In a short while I would turn sixteen and be recognised as a man. And I would be my own man. I reasoned now with more clarity than ever before what I would do with my life. I would join the army and fight. Do my part in the Empire's war against Aurista, because in war a man can find purpose, he can find courage and pride, and he can forget. Leave behind the nonsense of childhood, with all its secrets and lies. Because who truly knows what came before? They were just fantastical Dreams. All of which were now forfeit.

I'd awoken to find myself a different person. I was a man alone, who would go forward, and not back. I would fight and kill, and perhaps one day, I would find my father. And I promised myself. On that day there will be a reckoning.

It was another dream. I was no more ready to fight in a war than I was to confront others about my past. I'd fallen asleep with a heavy heart, and awoken with a hole in my life that I could never hope to fill.

The Forest Witch found me asleep in the kitchen. Curled in front of a dwindled fire; tearfully lit in the hope I might feel closer to Mama. But all I heard was the ghostly crackle of firewood from the crib.

I barely slept; more slipped in and out of consciousness as tiredness claimed, and then released me. As the fire had dulled, its heat faded to charcoal and dust. She'd come to find me, lost in my solitude.

'I'm so sorry,' she said, her hand on my shoulder. 'I came as soon as I felt her pass.' I felt her fingers tighten with compassion as she knelt on the floor beside me. 'She's free now. Free of her pain.'

'Free of me,' I said, and wished I hadn't.

'No, you were her reason for living. You were her joy.'

I was her secret. It was burning a hole inside me. 'I hurt,' I said.

'I know. When a loved one passes, they leave a space. It's how we choose to fill that space that defines their passing. Don't fill yours with anger, Draí. Your mother loved you. She stayed longer than I thought was possible. Now, get up. It's time.'

'Time?' *Time for what?* I hid my head with my hand. *Go away.*

'Estha asked me to watch over you when she passed. Come, there are things we must do.'

'Then go and do them, I don't care,' I refused to look at her. *Leave me alone. I want to be alone.*

'It was her time, Draí. She had to leave, and now so must you.'

I raised my eyes to gaze on her. *Where were you when she died?* 'She was alone.' *I wasn't there.*

‘Drai, Nature is a cruel mistress. She gives us a beginning, but demands we must also have an end. It was Estha’s time.’

‘I wasn’t there,’ I said. *Gods forgive me.* I wanted to bawl like a baby. ‘She was alone. I left her on her own.’ I threw back my blanket. ‘Where were you?’ *Why should I take all the blame?* ‘Why weren’t you here? You’re supposed to know these things. You should have been here.’ *Damn you.*

Her eyes looked down, but not a flicker of grief beyond. But I felt it. I felt her pain as clearly as my own.

‘Mama’s gone,’ I said, still not truly believing. ‘I don’t know what to do.’

She placed her hand upon mine. ‘The dead never really leave,’ her voice comforting, ‘they are released to occupy a different space to the living, that’s all,’ she smiled. ‘Who’s to say we won’t find a window through which to talk to them again?’

Really? ‘Is that possible?’ That one sentence lifted me with hope.

‘Drai, get your things together. It’s time to go.’

‘Go? No, I’m not leaving. This is my home.’ Every room in the house flashed before me. The good times, and the bad. I even saw Mama walk across the kitchen, keen to make breakfast for her men. ‘My room?’ I said. *My father’s room . . . His belongings.* I realised they were mine now. ‘Mama is here,’ I said, and pointed outside. ‘I won’t leave her.’

‘And yet we cannot take her with us. So what are we to do?’

Don’t look at me like that. I don’t know. I was feeling tired again. Weary of mind; slowly slipping into confusion. ‘No.’ I pulled my hand from hers. *I know what you’re doing.*

I watched her expression harden. All her features buoyed and ready, waiting, behind a smile still tinged with mourning. I understood why men desired her. She was a beautiful woman in her youth; I’d seen it. A beauty though aged and changed, still fired by her elegance and allure. And I realised this was the first time I had seen her with her hair let free, and not bound in a tail. It fell about both her shoulders with a crisp auburn shine. She was different, and I didn’t know why.

I wanted to look away. But once she’d grasped my gaze it was difficult to let go.

‘It was Estha’s wish that I take you,’ she said. ‘I promised your mother I would make a new home for you, with me, in the forest. Would you have me break my oath to the dead?’

‘Yes, no, I don’t know.’

Joran got to her feet, her hand held out to me. Her image a mist of colours too real, her gesture enticing; somehow demanding.

‘Look at me, Draï,’ her voice soothing. ‘Take my hand, it is time for us to leave.’

Charmed, that’s how I reasoned her gentle face. Always reserved, and yet humble. Set with eyes that could wield steel in their gaze. Like comets in a night sky they would draw you in with their blaze. Insist I do as she bid. And when allied with her voice, she was beguiling.

No, I don’t want to.

Get up Draï, it’s time to go.

What?

I promised Estha I would keep you safe. I cannot do that here.

Safe, from what? I got to my feet.

‘Since when does a healer have the gift of speech without words?’ I refused her hand. ‘I don’t want to be safe. I want to know what’s going on. I want to know why Mama had to go. Why my father can’t look me in the eyes if I’m so, *so special?*’

‘I understand.’

‘No, you don’t. I want to know why the Dreaming comes to me, and me alone. Why I flounder like a fish out of water as dribble falls down my chin. Do you know how that feels?’

I felt her sigh.

‘The fits are your body’s way of protecting you, Draï. To help you cope with the stress of the Dreaming,’ she paused, being careful to pick her words. ‘They, interrupt your abilities.’

‘It scares me.’

‘And yet you managed to overcome your fear. And for that, we must now deal with the consequences.’

‘What consequences?’ I knew the answer before I’d finished the question. ‘You know, don’t you. About Companion?’

‘You *are* special, Draí. And I promise, in the fullness of time, you will understand all. But that time isn’t now. It would likely get us both killed.’

Killed? I didn’t like the sound of that. *Why?*

There are many who would use your gifts to achieve their own goals. She took my hand in her own. ‘Don’t try to fight me, I beg you. Others have already felt your presence.’

‘Companion?’

‘There are others.’

‘Who?’ *I won’t go unless you tell me.*

She looked torn between the truth and deception, I could tell.

‘The Druids,’ she said.

Druids? Not what I expected her to say. *What do Druids want with me?* I’d never even seen one.

‘Draí, you *will* embrace your gifts. I will help you to do so, I promise. But not now. It’s important that we hide them, for now. I’m so sorry,’ she whispered, ‘but you *must* come with me.’

Yes, I know. I will.

I felt Joran’s hand take mine, and I stood without persuasion. The pain and anger that burnt so virulently within me began to fade, which wasn’t fair. I wanted it to stay. I required it to burn inside and help forge me into a new man. I didn’t want to feel calm. I wanted to rage against the world. But the Forest Witch beguiled me with her words, and I was helpless to resist.

All the questions I demanded to be answered, now began to drift; to recede in my mind. Floating further and further away, until they were out of reach.

I was powerless to stop her. I followed as she led me away.

A NEW START

The forest was a tranquil place. I barely spoke a word, and I think that Joran was happy for it to be that way. As the days and nights drew into weeks, and eventually a month had passed, before I had finally come out of my shell and given myself over to this new way of life; my new existence. And perhaps this was the way it was meant to be. After all, the Mercian woman had referred to me as a “child of the forest” and now it seemed, that I was.

No thoughts to leave, none to join the army. I felt no hunger for adventure. In the forest I learnt to live again, in a passive and less inquisitive manner. Joran always there to watch over me. Encourage me with her infinite patience. She helped me to let go of the pain, and slowly, very slowly, I allowed myself to leave the old world behind in this wonderful forest of hers.

‘Minstrel, here boy.’ Just when I thought he’d stopped his unruly behaviour, there he was, off again. ‘Minstrel,’ I demanded.

My new four-legged friend came tearing through the undergrowth.

‘Minstrel, come here, now!’ He skidded to a halt, backside hard on the ground, without a mind for the bum tingling ferns. His head angled in search of praise. The mongrel’s tongue hanging from the side of his mouth and panting.

‘Do as you’re told,’ I scolded, somewhat half-heartedly. ‘If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times.’

From my pocket I slipped a small button of dried meat hoping it wouldn’t be seen, but felt Minstrel’s paws against my leg as he nuzzled my hand and tried to lick it greedily out from my fingers.

‘All right, all right. Take it,’ his frantic nibbling wetting my palm. ‘You mangy animal. Eurgh, no, enough . . . stop,’ I pulled another button into view and teased him away from my face. ‘I had the pick of the litter you know. I could have had any of them. That black and tan sister of yours would have come when I called. Hey, hey, where are you going? Minstrel, come back.’ I spent half my time chasing him, and the rest calling him to no avail. ‘You’ll be back,’ I shouted. ‘I have food . . .’ *Damn that animal.*

I couldn’t help but smile as I recalled sitting beside the basket of sleeping puppies, seven of them.

Four dogs and three bitches; how small and cute they’d been. Each flopped over the other in their basket, jostling for warmth. It was Joran’s idea. She’d heard that Jess had had a litter. Brak, though I’d seen little of him, had promised I could have my pick. I think they both knew I needed company. The kind that neither could provide. With so many holes in my life, it seemed that Minstrel was the perfect choice to bind them.

'Go on, choose one; but not the white one. I think it's a bit odd,' Brak had remarked. 'A bit like you,' he'd jested. 'Or see, look her, the black and tan. She has the most gorgeous black eyes, don't you think?' he'd seemed more excited than I as he'd held her up for me to see.

'Brak. Drai has to choose his own companion,' his mother intervened. 'Take your time, Drai.' she was a rounded, blonde woman, and it struck me that I'd never seen her without an apron tied about her waist. She's filled with good home cooking, Brak would say. With so many mouths to fill, it was a wonder she got her share. I'd seen Brak's siblings in action around the dinner table.

I'd wanted to curl up tight with all seven of those furry delights. But I decided I didn't want a bitch, I wanted a dog.

'I like that one,' I'd finally announced, pointing to the black fluffy animal that was squashed by all the others into the side of the basket, in an almost upside down position. 'I want him.'

'The ugly one?' Laughed Brak. 'Ha, I should have guessed.'

Joran picked the jet black puppy up with a hand below his belly, and stroked his head. Though his eyes had refused to open he did cock his head to acknowledge her attention.

'He does look a little lonely on the edge, doesn't he? Are you sure this is the one you want?'

'Yes.'

'I wouldn't have chosen that one, it looks a bit simple.'

'Shut up Brak,' said his mother. 'He's a lovely little fellow, and I think the two of you will make each other happy.'

I remembered the fond smile and the rising warmth that I had felt as his languid body was passed into my arms with barely a movement. Yes, he was the one for me, and I snuggled my face close to his as I held him for the first time. Familiarising myself with his warm puppy scent. He liked me too of that I was sure as I felt another kind of warmth mingle with my clothing as my puppy, Minstrel, marked me out for himself.

'Minstrel,' I called again. 'Come on you mangy-fur, where are you?' I watched him charge down the path tail wagging his delight. 'Come on boy,

I have chores to do.' I marched off patting my thigh to encourage him to follow. Knowing that he would not allow himself to be left too far behind.

Time seemed irrelevant. That was how it was in the forest; so calm and tranquil. I could neither hold an uneasy thought nor harbour any angry desire. Life for me was like a dream conjured by others. A tide of fleeting memories, already distant when I awake. Forgotten before my bed is abandoned. I had all but forgotten my encounters with the Dreaming.

Each morning I would take a long walk with Minstrel in the forest and then return to sit for lessons and how quickly I had learnt. It had always been that way for me but with Joran I discovered so much more about the world in which we lived, and not just the natural world, she gave me a glimpse of the Empire. The history of its races, and the possibilities for their future.

At the Learnit we were spoon fed on a diet of what others thought we needed to know. With Joran there was so much more and I soaked up the knowledge like a freshly caught river sponge.

I was alone in the cottage as I dusted and cleaned; chores I didn't care for, but never shirked. It was difficult not to disturb the strewn contents of the kitchen knowing the importance of each and every thing having its own place. Books open, bowls half filled, with contents set to dry or bond. To the untrained eye it was a muddle of confusion, and a pain to clean.

"Everything has its place, a designation and a space." She'd told me often, and it was true. I'd begun to see the world in a very different way. No longer as a collection of individual parts, but as a cycle of ingredients that can be mixed blended and mingled in so many different ways. "The more we understand, the more powerful and influential we become," she'd told me. "Through enriching ourselves we rise higher within the cycle of life. But with that knowledge comes the responsibility to help others." It was a philosophy I had come to share.

The kitchen was done. Joran was on a day trip to Boundary. Minstrel lay outside, sleeping. I was hungry.

I took half a loaf from the cupboard and then fingered my way through a few herbs that hung from the wall. Selecting what I considered to be a sweet cocktail, and all I needed to prepare a dish for supper, in a pan I'd plucked from its hook. Half filled with water from an old casket, which I filled every three days from the river.

I placed the pan on the table, submerging the loaf fully to allow it to soak. Then mashed the mixture with a spoon. It was an art to ball dough and keep it from escaping through my fingers. When done, I lit a fire below the oven. Sprinkling small coals over the kindling as it caught with flames. And as the fire warmed behind me I mixed my herbs into a paste. I sliced my dough and smeared it well into the cuts, before placing it on a tray.

It was satisfying to me to realise how self sufficient I had become. And though I missed Mama's attention. I knew she would be proud of the path I was on. I placed the tray in the oven.

It wasn't long before I could smell the bread warming itself. The warming paste enthused the kitchen with an aromatic vapour that made my lips moist, and my stomach feel more hollow than before. I opened the pages of a thickly bound book and took to the bench outside.

Minstrel was stretched out on the ground and basking himself in the sunbeams that broke the cover of the trees. Breakfast and dinner, they were the only times I was certain I wouldn't have to go and find that damn dog.

I read for an hour about the application of fungi in medicine; healing being foremost in my learning. Minstrel leaving his sunlight and preferring to lay with me, his head on my lap. The book on his head. A combination of wild forest flora and half cooked bread to keep us company. And as we both did what we did best I wondered why Joran had not taken us with her.

Once every week she would travel to Boundary, and stay overnight to sell her herbs and potions at the market. It seemed only fair that as I had assisted in the preparation of her wares, that I should accompany her. Until now she had insisted that it was best I stayed in the forest, and had a dozen good reasons why. Shutting the book I resolved to invite myself next week. Yes, the decision was made. *I want to help.* When Joran returned I would press my desire to accompany her. *Her next trip to Boundary will be with Minstrel and I.*

'Hey boy,' his ears had pricked. 'You and I, we're going to the city. And we're not taking no for an answer.'

‘Did you enjoy the sweet-loaf?’ I asked.

‘Hmm, very much, but possibly not as much as Minstrel.’

I scowled at him for being so daring, the pot still lying where it had fallen. From where it had been tugged from the table. I couldn’t help but smile as I watched him arch his head; his tongue desperate to find the last crumbs still caught in his whiskers. His legs wisely backing him toward the door.

Casual, that’s what I need to be. Give pretence that it’s of no great concern. I took a deep breath as my eyes wandered away from Minstrel. It had all become so familiar to me over the months. The hanging herbs on the wall, that I had helped to procure from the forest, smelt wonderful as they dried. I loved the picture window with its four frames that let the light stream so casually throughout the room.

‘There was something I wanted to ask you,’ I said. *No, be more assertive.* ‘Can I . . . ?’ *Don’t ask, idiot. It implies you’re giving her a choice.* I cleared my throat.

The plates chinked together in the sink as she added steaming water from the bucket warmed over a cooling oven.

‘It’s been a lovely day,’ she said, and I knew I had missed my opportunity. ‘I was thinking.’ There was that glossy smile I had become accustomed to. It meant she knew something that I did not.

‘As you know I’m going to Boundary in a few days.’ She took a thoughtful pose, the light shining on her hair. ‘Do you think that Minstrel would like to come with me?’ She poured the rest of the water slowly into the sink. ‘He doesn’t get out as much as he should.’

What, I walk him twice a day?

‘I think I may take him into the city next time. It would be good for him.’

‘Minstrel?’ I didn’t mean to say it out loud. ‘Why Minstrel?’

‘I think it would be good for his development,’ she turned and looked at me. ‘And I’d welcome the company, she paused to let my disappointment soak in.

‘Err, yes. I wouldn’t mind.’ *I really would.* ‘Why? I mean, when, are you going again?’

‘I visited the outer farms last time, and didn’t get into the city. So I thought, with the new-moon market coming up. What do you think?’

I shrugged, nodded, then sighed.

‘Good,’ she said. ‘And could I convince you to come and keep Minstrel company?’

What? Yes . . . A smile blossomed on my face. *Consider me convinced.* I nodded eagerly with a big stupid grin on my face. ‘I’d like that,’ I said. *Very much.*

‘Good, then it’s settled. We’ll leave on the next full moon and travel overnight.’

Overnight? That sounded exciting. I’d not been to Boundary since I was a child. I remembered the feeling of inadequacy the first time I went through its gates. Under that arch that I cricked my neck watching as it loomed overhead.

‘Scrill says the original pioneers of Pillio built Boundary over a hundred years ago. And that the Prayer House at the centre was built on the bones of the first settlers. She said that’s what makes it a holy shrine.’

‘Huh, is that so. What else does she say?’

‘That the settlers were the first to venture this far east. When they found the valley, they organised into settlements; they began to farm the land.

‘Drai, a hundred years ago these lands were known by different names, and farmed by a people quite different to us.’

Really? That was news to me.

‘No,’ I corrected, ‘the first pioneers found this land uninhabited. They claimed everything for the Empire. And tamed the land with their bare hands.’ I even clenched my fists to somehow prove it.

‘And then the Auristans came to take it from them?’

I nodded. 'That's what started the war.'

'Hmm, I've heard that story.'

'But it's true.' *Isn't it?*

'On a very clear day you can see the mountains to the west?'

'Yes.' They were hardly mountains, just an outline protruding from the horizon a very long way from here. Only visible on the clearest of days, and from the top of our highest hill.

'The Great Veil,' she said, 'Where the Empire ends and the land of Aurista begins. Or at least it used to. The mineral wealth in those mountains has been disputed since the war began. Their previous inhabitants called them, the Oriannas.'

I liked it when she did this. Spoke like the story-tellers that come once a year to the Learnit. Even Minstrel was sat, tongue hanging, listening to her voice.

'Those mountains were mined by the Auristans for their metal ore, for well over a thousand years before the Empire came. The valley you live in was a sacred land. When a person died their spirit would seek out and roam these valleys for eternity. Their blood would fuse with the soil and a weaver would grow to mark their passing. You call them *Fireweed* because of their crimson colour.'

I knew the plant well. It had ruby petals and was despised by the farmers. Once rooted in a field it would spread and bind with their crops. It would suffocate the farmer's plants with their ever increasing numbers.

'These were the Firelands, Drai. The weaver grew wild and covered the land like grass.'

'But I thought the pioneers were the first to cross the mountains, and found our lands empty? Scroll, she told us . . .'

'What your Emperor wants you to learn, no doubt. To the victor goes the right to choose his own version of history.' She sounded disappointed. 'The previous inhabitants of this segment of the Imperial map were encouraged to move further east some time ago.'

I don't know where the question came from but I asked it anyway.

'Did the Vampyræ live here?'

She looked away. ‘Perhaps, who can know for sure? When the army of the Empire came they would have hunted any of that breed with extreme prejudice.’

I smiled at the statement and she turned toward me with a more than dour expression. ‘You find the extermination of one race by another amusing?’

‘No,’ Of course I didn’t. ‘But the Empire has to protect its citizens,’ I added.

‘Then Scril is a better learner than I give her credit.’ She seemed to lighten her mood. ‘It was all a long time ago. Leave the table, Drai. I’ll clear up.’

I think the topic of the conversation upset her, though she tried to hide it. Taking a book she began to read.

I didn’t know whether I believed her or not. It was a good story, that was all and I set a good and excited pace up the stairs and into my room to be greeted by the usual mess of clothes and things littered on the floor.

“It was acceptable,” Joran had said, when I first came to live with her. “So long as it stays in your room and never spreads into the cottage.” I had a system; the clean clothes were piled at one end of the room and the worn cast to the other awaiting their weekly visit to the river with a scrubbing board. A chore I never looked forward to, and was unnecessary now. I was going to Boundary, and I would need clothes to wear. Not that there was too much variation in what I wore. A bland selection of colourless shirts and loose trousers, most of which had previously belonged to strangers, and had been donated in one way or another.

I scrambled on all fours to pull a slim wooden box from below my bed. It had a catch that moved easily up and down, and I teased the lid open to reveal its contents. Inside was clothing I’d never worn before. Taken from my father’s closet. Clothes sized for me, that he’d wanted his son to wear; that I would wear to Boundary. I lifted the jacket like a prize and silently cheered myself as I turned toward my father’s mirror I had brought with me and hung on the wall.

Soon. I hadn't given these clothes a thought since coming. *I'll ride under that arch in triumph.* I couldn't wait.

Something else was in the box, that Joran knew nothing of. For I had hidden it in the garden and collected them later. Jacket over my arm I slipped my hand under clothing that remained.

I'd forgotten. The leather bail was in my grasp. *I shouldn't have brought these.* But there was something intensely attractive to me about his weapons. Their maker having taken so much care in his craft. Each intricate stitch perfectly woven to fetter the leather, with not one out of place. I'd not held them since I'd carried them back, though I'd cautioned myself against doing so. As usual I hadn't listened.

I let the leather from my hand, and fluffed the shirt on top to be sure they were hidden. Now was not the time. Nor could I imagine a time, and was glad I hadn't as my heart skipped a beat to the mad scrabbling of claws on the other side of my door. Minstrel insisting in his normal canine fashion that I let him in.

I placed the jacket back inside before allowing him in. He'd doubtless see the leather as something to chew. The door opened, he rushed in and leapt onto the bed. Spread eaged and tail wagging he panted with enthusiasm, that I didn't share. The worst thing about keeping secrets is the fear of being found out. But I knew that Minstrel would never tell. I opened the box again.

'What do you think?' I asked my breathless friend. 'I can narrow the sides with these.' I pulled the thin straps. 'I'm going to wear it to Boundary.' He tilted his head and licked at his lips, which I took as an agreeable sign. 'And these?' I asked. The trousers a little long, but I was dab hand with a needle and thread. 'A cut along the bottom here; a few stitches?' His tail stopped moving and he released a subtle bark. 'Then it's agreed. I'll wear them when we go.' I stepped over and rubbed his belly. 'We're going to Boundary, boy.' I laughed aloud and rolled onto the bed taking the panting Minstrel in my arms. 'Were going to the city.'

It had been years since my last visit, and I rejoiced in the adventure we would find.

I thought of little else over the next few days and busied myself in preparation, unpicking every stitch of my new clothes at least twice to tailor them to fit. I intended to walk the streets of Boundary with a swagger. My manhood was imminent, unstoppable, and somehow entwined with my visit to the city of Boundary.

I'd assumed that we would walk, and at breakfast I asked how long our journey would last.

'Nine, maybe ten days,' Joran replied.

Let it take as long as was necessary. I was ready.

'Or maybe less,' she added with an almost sly grin, 'Have you ever travelled in a cart?'

I sat forward at the table. 'A cart?' Her feature's were filled with mischief. 'We don't have a cart,' I said, which was stating the obvious.

I knew one of the farmers was happy to lend her a horse. It was a bargain between them. Joran supplied medicine for his mother, and he lent her one of his horses each week to go to market. Did he have a cart too?

Joran was a healer; a doer of good works. She was generous to the poor, and there were ample poor. The Forest Witch never turned anyone away; not if her potions could help them. She would always give them gladly.

"Time," she once said, "is symbiotic with life. It's precious, and should be shared with others."

The only caveat to this was her privacy. She would always go to others; never let them come to her. She had set days where she would walk the short distance to the Grey Lady, below which was a spring where a small falls of water fell upon lush vegetation. An oasis of sorts, shaded by a ring of trees. And there would always be a dozen or more waiting, having travelled and and camped overnight.

She told me on one such occasion that, “The forest gives up its bounty at no cost, and for the benefit of all who live there. So why should I behave any differently?” I could clearly remember a time, not so long ago, that I would have argued that statement. Maybe it was the diminishing influence of Brak, who always saw profit, and the opportunity for coin?

I met Sage for the first time and was unprepared for the fiery old woman who I'd heard my mother mention in the past. I remembered Brak had referred to her in passing. 'She's a miserable old crone,' he'd said, 'that lives alone and shoots arrows at anyone who trespasses on her property.' He'd spoke it as if he'd experienced her wrath first hand, but hadn't elaborated further.

She lived a few leagues from the far-side of the forest. Somewhere too far from the valley for me to be familiar, but a welcome walk. Begun before the sun had reason to rise. It took its first peek above the horizon as we sighted Sage's home. A curiously yellow tint throughout the sky that I considered to be a good omen.

Sage was a silver haired, barrel of a woman, who didn't seem to like me when we first met. It was she who offered us the cart and horse. An old nag really. Not much to look at, but strong and healthy. A description that would fit both woman and horse.

She wore a pale and simple dress that fitted like a tent and was raised slightly above the knees. On her feet were heavy boots, half-laced. I think one word described her to me, that word was agricultural. And though I tried to make a good first impression by smiling eagerly. My keenness was returned with a dire squint, a cold shoulder, and apparent disappointment.

'How long do you want her for?' she asked, patting the grey mare on the nose.

'Nine days should suffice. I'll send Draï here to collect her.'

'Him? Can he drive a cart?'

'I don't know,' Joran looked at me expectantly. 'It would appear not,' she added.

Sage's lips were tightly shut, her mouth chewing with nothing between her teeth. 'Come with me,' her finger beckoned.

Why? I glanced at Joran who offered no explanation other than to walk away. Shouting out to Minstrel who, damn that dog, came racing across the field to followed her.

'Don't be late for supper,' she called.

'Come along, boy.' Like Minstrel I followed, none too happy about them deserting me. Leaving me alone with an old crone.

How she moved so quickly for a woman of her age, and shape, I had no idea. Her frame lurched from side to side and I quick stepped to keep up. I followed her across the yard and through two broken fences to our destination, a barn. A large wooden door barring our way. She stopped and waited, as did I.

'Well, it's not going to open itself?'

'Sorry . . .' I grabbed a firm hold of the metal handle and pulled. It refused to open. She was right; not by itself. I dug my heels into the dirt and heaved the door slowly open.

Eurgh, what do you keep in here? The smell was foul. As if the inside hadn't seen the light of day for years.

'Well, go on, in you go.'

You want me to go inside? I thought it prudent to allow the fresh air to mingle with the foul. A pause to let the sunlight wipe the damp away. *Fine, I'm going.* At least I could see inside now my eyes had adjusted.

In the middle of the barn was a reasonably sturdy looking cart. A seat made for three up front. Wooden railings surrounding the flat-bed behind. Enough space for half-a-dozen bails of straw. My gaze quickly drawn away to the barn walls, where a treasure trove of objects were piled. Each corner of the lower level stacked, and the landing above too. No wonder it smelt; how long had these things been left in here.

I could see lamps, utensils, and a veritable horde of wooden boxes; one-hundred and forty-seven, probably more behind. Metal tools were hung from the walls. Chains from the rafters. I counted three anvils piled in the far corner. But it was the piles of books that caught my eye. Who owned so

many books? Where did they come from? Like everything else in the barn they seemed to be abandoned. Left to be covered in dust, hay, and cobwebs.

‘Don’t steal anything,’ she cussed.

No . . . *what?* I’d never seen a horde like this. *Brak, my friend, you’d love this.* He’d see opportunity in this treasure trove, that would doubtless lead to coin.

‘It’s seen better days . . .’

Hmm? She was running her hand across the cart.

‘It’s old but won’t let you down.’

‘It looks fine.’

‘Does it? Well, she’s used it before.’ Sage unhooked a harness and reigns from a timber and tossed them onto the driver’s bench, Then she motioned to the two shafts that protruded from the front of the cart. ‘Well, pull it out.’

It looked very heavy, and was. In those few feet I struggled to drag it from the barn and the burden of the horse was graphically defined. I blew hard and eyed Sage, who was keen to watch me; standing well away without intention to help. My dislike of the woman was steadily growing.

‘Can you dig holes, boy?’ she asked.

‘Holes?’

‘Space in the ground. I need someone to dig me a hole,’ she looked back into the barn. ‘I want to bury most of this.’

‘What, no!’ The hole would need to be half as deep as the barn was tall. *Why would you bury treasure?*

‘Pity. Well, close the door.’ I didn’t like the way she muttered between sentences. ‘Let’s find a horse to go with the cart.’ She walked past me her lips pursed and chewing again; then she spat in my general direction. ‘Come along, don’t let the grass grow in your shoes,’ she walked with an urgency I didn’t understand. Shoulders bobbing from side to side. She reminded me of a summer bee, its body’s so round and plump it shouldn’t fly. I followed her to the rear of the barn to see a brown horse standing in a paddock.

‘She’s fat, but she’s strong.’

I shied from her eye contact, my mouth keen to stay closed, and not state the obvious.

‘There are a dozen more out there,’ she said. ‘I’ll bring them in one day; put them back in here, though I expect they’ve gone a bit wild by now. She threw open the rickety gate. ‘Not you though, eh? Little Tilly here stayed didn’t you girl.’ She puckered her lips and blew a kiss. The mare replied with a long whinny. ‘Do you know horses, boy?’

‘Yes,’ I lied. I had sat on one a few times as my father had tried to teach me to ride. But I wasn’t a good study. More a disappointment, that I silently thanked her for reminding me.

‘I prefer the comfort of a cart myself.’

Tilly snorted, and I’m sure Sage would have too if she’d known how.

‘She’ll pull you wherever you want to go, and won’t gripe whilst doing it. Well, not much. Isn’t that right girl?’

I was astonished to see Sage pull on Tilly’s mane and with little apparent effort for such a rounded frame she was up on her back.

‘I’m presuming,’ she said, ‘that Joran has left you here for a reason?’

‘Oh, I . . .’ *Don’t really know.* Why had she left me?

I took a look over my shoulder in the direction of the forest. Turning back, I shrugged.

‘Likes to leave things to their own conclusion that one.’

Why did she look so wary of me? Like I couldn’t be trusted. I’d never met this woman before today, but was left feeling as if I was the bearer of bad things. And then her tune toward me changed, just like that.

‘How would you like to drive the cart for a while. Give Tilly here a workout?’

‘What?’ *Me and the horse?* ‘I don’t know how,’ I said, and assumed that would end the conversation.

‘I’ll teach you. That is why she left you here, to learn?’

‘You want to teach me to drive a cart?’ My face must have lit brighter than the rising moon at sundown. ‘Yes, please.’

‘Good,’ she was chewing again. ‘Let’s get Tilly into her straps, and then we’ll hit the dirt.’

From the moment the reins passed through my fingers I was inspired. I would be the a master carts-man. My sturdy steed well versed in her art, she coached me wisely. Broke me in gently, and made it easy to learn. There was hardly a reluctant pull, nor a missed step, as we trotted around the field with Sage calling out instruction. The ground passed easily below, the cart finding each bump along the way. But I hardly noticed. I could have stayed out all day and most of the night, but eventually I yielded the reins. Returning to the barn, my new mentor taught me how to harness, and then to rub down dear Tilly. I did it just the way she liked it with handfuls of damp grass.

I stank of horse as I sat on Sage's porch watching Tilly run around her field. Her head dipped and flipped, with the occasional kicking of her hind legs. So much energy for one so old, and I wondered if there was something in the air.

'How long have you known her?' asked Sage, a cool drink in each hand. The scent of apples wafting from the cups.

I shrugged. She'd always been in Mama's life. But I'd only got to know her in these last few weeks.

'I like her,' I said.

'Most people do,' she replied. 'She has a way about her.'

I took the drink and found it thirst quenching.

'Have you known her long?'

'Joran was a friend to my mother, and to her mother before. It's like she's been in that forest for a hundred years. But that's not possible, is it.'

If she'd asked me that a month ago, I'd have agreed. My eyes now placed on an assortment of corn biscuits she placed on the table. I reached out, only to have my hand slapped away.

‘Wait until you’re offered,’ she scowled, and sat herself on the bench next to me. ‘Now then, would you like a biscuit?’

‘Yes,’ *I think*. I watched her hand.

‘Go on then, help yourself.’

I reached out, and took two. ‘She’s teaching me,’ I said. ‘I want to be a healer.’

‘Yes, you have that look about you.’

I do? What look?

‘You see those fields, boy?’

‘Drai,’ I said. *My names Drai*. From the veranda of her house I saw flat-land that stretched for several leagues before ending in the trunks of the forest. To the West were the hills, on the far side my valley. A good day’s ride, if I’d owned a horse. *Why do you do that?* Her lips pursing, jaw moving, as if vigorously chewing on air.

‘We’ve tilled this land for forty years, me and my husband. Gods rest his soul. And now there’s no-one to look after them when I’m gone. We’ve grown wheat, corn, and firestalk. God’s teeth, is it a wonder I’ve got such a bad back?’ she put her hand on my knee. ‘I was sorry to hear about your mother, lad. Estha and I were hardly close, I’d not seen her for a few years. But that woman had a good soul.’

‘You knew, Mama?’ I was surprised. I’d never heard her mention Sage.

‘Oh yes, Horgen, my husband, a fine man.’ She raised her head as she spoke his name. ‘He knew Derlin from way back.’

‘Was he a soldier too?’

‘Gods no, Horgen was a pacifist. He hated war and all its trappings,’ she seemed to have her own objections. ‘That’s why Joran has you, isn’t it? Derlin’s gone off to fight the good fight and left you, am I right? Men are foolish,’ she looked at me and then spat, ‘their only answer to dispute is a violent brawl or a swing of a sword. Or both.’ She shuffled on the bench to face me. ‘What about you?’

What about me?

‘Do you follow your father, or your mother?’

I’m, not sure.

‘The Empire is a war machine boy, a hungry juggernaut with an appetite for young men too eager to die in its service.’ She slurped loudly from her cup. ‘My mother had three children; two are dead now, Gods rest them. I had a son, gone now. Lost out there somewhere; another young life extinguished in the service of his Emperor. He wasn’t much older than you are now. But I remember him. All of them. As if it were yesterday.’

‘Were they warriors?’ I thought of my father and felt a surge of pride in my chest.

‘My brothers, and my son, warriors all. If that’s what you call selfish young men who leave their family; their recently widowed mother to work a farm alone. To heed a call to war . . . Would you like some more apple juice?’

‘No, thank you.’ This was the second time I’d met someone who had lost loved ones to the war. And yet, I still felt there was honour and adventure in war, despite the sacrifice.’

‘I see it in your eyes, boy. You take after your father. You think war is exciting. The thought of battle puts strength in your arms,’ she grunted more disapproval. ‘Wait until you’ve seen a blood-soaked floor, the life-blood of a soldier spurting from a vein. His artery severed by a blade. It’s a difficult thing, listening to the cries of young men who wait to die.’

‘You’ve been to war? How, when? What was it like?’

‘Worse than you can ever imagine,’ she said.

I’d seen my father with that stare, once or twice, just before telling tales of the war. It preceded a smile, and then stories of the fray. Men who clashed with swords in skirmish and battle. From a tongue emboldened by ale, and away from Mama’s prying ears. I didn’t see the smile on Sage’s lips.

‘I see a familiar look in your eyes, boy. That’s the look that gets young boys, killed. Why don’t you have another biscuit?’

Sage took a deep breath, and chewed even harder. She spat what could only be described as the longest throw of spittle I’d ever seen.

‘The Druid’s came first, to take the young men. Boys for their war-machine. Then the girls were encouraged to go to. They needed nurses for the hospitals; if you could call them that.’

‘You’ve seen a Druid?’ I felt a rush of blood surge through my veins. ‘What are they like?’

‘Just men, but not like any I’d ever seen. Back then they wore chainmail and swords, and spoke with the voice of the Emperor. They were holy men from his Great War Council.’

I could feel her memories rise, and the sadness on which they arrived.

‘You want to know more, don’t you?’

I nodded enthusiastically. She finally looked her age, sat there with that cup on her lap, hands cupped about either side.

‘Men are fools,’ she said. ‘Druids . . .’ phlegm was hurled as she spat on the ground by her feet. ‘They are pestilence. How they busied themselves back then, prying out the young as fodder for their war. They arrived with a troop of soldiers, their banners flapping in the breeze. How exciting to hear the ground tremble below the hooves of their horse,’ she sighed as more memories stirred. ‘My mother was a very old woman when she died. Hard work and clean living was how she explained her old age. She never touched a drop, and prayed to the Gods twice every day. Once before she got out of bed and then again before she got back in at the end of the day. She told me more than once about the men dressed in black, and their Dog Soldiers.’ Sage shook her head despondently. ‘I loved my mother, boy. But she had some strange ways about her. Ideals that lingered from the old days. Her generation admired them,’ she leant closer, ‘the Druids. My mother was a foolish old woman.’

I felt hatred stir, and deepen, each time she mentioned their name.

‘Where do they come from?’ I asked.

‘Who knows? But they were more prevalent back then,’ she spat again. ‘My mother told me stories too. How they’d come from the darkness before the Empire was born. Stories her mother told her, and her’s before. When the world was smaller, just a collection of Kingdoms and Chiefdoms, each one willing to take what they could from the others. Laws were the whims of Kings and Warlords, and imposed by the lance and the sword. Loyalty and allegiance were a mark of birth back then, not a matter of choice. I’m

not old enough to remember it myself, but my mother did. She grew up in a world that had already begun to change.

Did I mention my mother had nine siblings? A large family who lived in house even smaller than this. That must have been a sight,' the thought surfaced with a grin. 'She lived with her Grandparents; people who still sacrificed animals and painted their faces to welcome a new moon. My mother lived in a time that was dying. When people still believed in enchantments and superstition; sorcerers and witches. Magic was a daily part of their lives,' she shot me a sharp look. 'Are you still listening?' She knew I was. Sage leant back on the bench with a head filled with memories. And something else, as she slipped a flask from her dress. I realised it wasn't apple juice her glass had been filled with.

Sage? Don't stop, I want to know more.

I was willing to poke and prod. I wanted to learn what Scril was obviously unwilling to teach. 'Sage?' I whispered

'Think yourself lucky,' she said. 'The Druids have gone to ground. Haven't seen one for a long while.' Her flask was raised. 'Good riddance.'

'What was it like, back then?' I asked.

'The aristocracy, if you could call them that. They ruled over the day to day cycle of all commoner's lives. Ten thousand Gods watched over their souls. I think the Druids found a way to insert themselves into the gaps left in-between. They rose from obscurity with no respect for borders, and were so feared that no-one tried to impose restrictions upon them. They had magic you see. Dark powers that could curse a man just for looking at them out of turn. They came from nowhere, and interfered with all our lives. Blessings for the dead; curses for the living. They married lovers, mixed potions, and spread their influence throughout the kingdoms. The way I see it, they had a good thing going back then, until one of their kind changed it all forever.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just stories, boy, myths and legends, even Druids have them,' she gave me a little wink, and I wondered if she teased me. 'Where there is influence there is power, that's what they say. I believe that statement to be true. My

mother was weaned on tales of the Druids, handed down from her mother and those who came before. There is a tale of a Druid who rose above them all. A Druid who set down their words in books so that others may follow and preach. That was unusual because the Druid way had always passed from one to the next, and only with the spoken words. They have Clerics who are indoctrinated in the Druid ways. It was said that one single Druid brought all the others together. He took on their leadership, and won. They were nomadic no more. The Druids began to build temples. Their ranks swelled with Clerics. Young children offered to the cause. The stories tell, that this Druid taught the others the darker arts. He taught them how to enter men's souls. How to reach into their dreams and strike them down. The Druids evolved from individuals, that fought like cats amongst themselves, and built them into an Order with more power than Kings.' She stifled a laugh. 'Like all good things it came to a bloody and violent end. You see Kings don't like to be in fear of anyone but themselves, and after generations of Druid oppression they were keen for change. That's when the first Emperor came to power,' she pursed her lips enforcing the footnote. Then filled her glass from the flask again. 'He allied with some, conquered the rest. The jewelled thrones of the many kingdoms were discarded, and united. There are those who say the rise of the first Emperor was the work of the Druids. Their influence reigned unchallenged thereafter,' she gave me a scolding glare. 'Mark my words, boy. If a black-herald from the Imperium rides up and tells you how noble it is to fight for the Empire; walk the other way.'

'No,' I said. *Why would I do that?* 'It's our duty,' I added. 'My father . . .'

'Is a fool. Oh, he's a very brave fool. Of course he is. But Draii, war is . . . well, it's death. And lots of it.'

You used my name. Are you warming to me?

Her glass was raised. 'To brave fools,' she said, and meant it. 'To a family of brave fools.'

I think I understood. She'd lost blood in a war that had dragged on from long before I was born.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘I can be abrasive; some say I’m rude. And I suppose my cynicism knows no bounds. I think that’s why I like Joran so much. Yes, maybe. That woman believes there is good in all people. And she’ll look hard to find it.’

Really?’ I hadn’t meant to say that out loud. Fine words about someone who won’t allow me discover my truth.

‘She’s a woman who’s been hurt by love. The worst kind of wound for a woman. And no, don’t ask. I really don’t know. It’s just a feeling.’

I remembered my vision in the forest. But, that was a Vampyrai. ‘Sage . . .’ She was reopening old wounds herself. Memories of how she came to be alone, and that was my fault. ‘Sage, why do they call her the Forest Witch?’ A change of subject to hopefully remove the burden.

‘Oh, it’s just. People who fear what they don’t understand like to label it,’ she smiled. ‘I think she likes it, being called a witch. It keeps folk away. And when you prefer to live in a forest, in the company of trees and the spirits. I suppose that’s a good thing.’ she gave me a sharp look. ‘What do they call me?’

I shrugged my shoulders.

‘Hmmm, not telling. It’s that bad,’ she took another sip from her glass. ‘Joran’s a good woman, and I won’t be told otherwise. My family have known her a long time. She’s my friend.’

‘Mama was her friend too,’ I said.

‘I didn’t know your mother well, Draï. But others spoke kindly of her. Joran only mentioned her once, in Boundary. I remember now; you were just a baby. Held in your mother’s arms. Joran threatened your father.

She did what?

‘Oh, I wasn’t privy to their words. But I saw your father bow backwards, in spirit if not in body. A great hunk of a man but he looked fearful. Your mother sheepish. I remember thinking . . . Oh, I don’t know what I thought.’

Think harder. Tell me.

‘It was the only time I’ve ever seen Joran angered like that. So out of character. We were meant to stay two nights in the city together, but we left that day. Not a word of it passed her lips as we journeyed home.’

‘Why would she argue with my father?’

Sage was shaking her head.

My father never spoke fondly of Joran, perhaps that was why. What could have made my father fearful of a woman? Sage’s word. Not apologetic, or humbled. She said he was fearful.

‘She’s a remarkable woman, Joran. A kind soul who gives far more than she takes,’ her attention came upon me full-fold. ‘Take you for example. Why would anyone want to be saddled with another woman’s offspring. Especially an odd little owl like you?’ she shook her head a little too disparagingly for my liking. ‘Joran is a woman that cherishes her privacy, above all other things, and yet she took you in. Why is that?’

I don’t know. I wish I did.

‘I’ll tell you why. Because she sees something special in you,’ she was shaking her head again. ‘Now I wonder, what would that be?’

Special? That word again. I shrugged, and popped another biscuit into my mouth. ‘These are good,’ I said. ‘Hmm, really nice.’

‘Oh, you don’t have to tell me anything. I’m old and crusty, and probably wouldn’t understand anyway. Her accepting you, that’s more than enough for me.’

She lifted her feet to the table. She was talking freely for the first time since we’d met. I supposed that’s what bottled spirits did to you. Made your head dance to a different tune. I wondered what she’d say, if I told her what she wanted to hear. I didn’t really want to, but I saw opportunity. And I’d promised myself I would grab hold whenever it arose.

‘I have a gift,’ I said. ‘Mama called it, the Dreaming.’

Sage raised a hand to her mouth and picked at her front teeth. ‘Yes, I’ve heard of such a thing.’

‘I see things,’ I added. ‘Up here,’ tapping on my head.

Her finger ceased its dental probe. ‘What sort of things?’

‘Things that haven’t happened. Things, that frighten me.’

‘They do? Like what?’

‘I see a dark cloud rising above the world, and . . .’

‘And . . .?’

‘An end to all days,’ I said, with a good helping of regret.

There, it was done. I’d finally told the truth of what I saw, but wished I hadn’t. For the first time since I’d met Sage she was silent. Her silence expressing more than words could ever say. She cleared her throat gently.

‘Joran believes you, doesn’t she.’

I shrugged my shoulders.

‘How? How does it all end?’

I looked up to the sky. ‘They’re coming . . .’ It was a stage-worthy performance.

What, no, are you all right?

‘I don’t want to know,’ she took her glass, stood, and walked from the porch. ‘Some things are better left unsaid, and unknown. God’s teeth, you shouldn’t have told me,’ she downed what was left in her glass. ‘I can see why she took you to the forest. Draï, there are many out there who would come with eager ears to hear such things. And others who would want to silence your words.’

They would?

‘Is there something wrong here?’ We both turned, startled by the voice behind. Neither of us willing to speak. I wondered how long Joran had been listening?

‘Wrong? When does it ever get right?’ Sage replied, ‘God’s bladder, I need a piss.’

‘Sage, have you been drinking?’ Joran asked.

‘Me? No,’ she lied, then spat on the ground. ‘I thought you’d be here earlier. I’m not a babysitter.’

‘I apologise. I hope he’s not been too much trouble.’

‘Let’s just say, I’m glad he’s yours,’ she winked at me.

‘Draï, be a dear and fetch Minstrel. He’s in the upper field.’

I could see him. *What are you chasing out there?* My dog was charging around in the dirt like an idiot, and some distance away. *Why should I fetch him? He comes when you call.*

‘Draï, please. It’s time we got back to the cottage.’

‘Can’t we stay a while longer?’ I asked.

She obviously wanted me out of earshot, so I reluctantly went to fetch Minstrel. I tried to watch as I walked. The two women in conversation. Sage seemed unhappy as the two women talked. As usual I was the only one not included in the conversation.

‘Come on Minstrel,’ I called. ‘Come on, boy.’ Damn you dog. Come when I call. ‘Hey, hey, its time to go home.’

What a treat, as I slipped on my new clothing. The leather in the trousers was supple and dyed dark. The shirt, a cream colour, had not been worn before. Gifts from my father, of course. Why else would he have bought them, and brought them home?

I felt older as I pulled on the jerkin. My eyes met my own as I snapped up the short collar. I felt like someone else as I slowly buttoned the sleeves.

I felt closer to my father, wherever he was. Whenever I thought of that man, my life paused for a moment, and I realised how much I missed him. And how angry I was that he had left us. He didn't know Mama was gone, how could he? Always I felt the trade in emotions. Part of me hated him for leaving. An even larger part wanted him to come home.

'Drai, are you ready?'

Trust Joran to know when to break a spell.

'Sage will be waiting,' she called up the stairs. My mangy friend leapt from the bed and hurled himself through the open bedroom door.

'Yes, go. Whenever she calls,' I called out after him. *I'm sure you do that to annoy me.* 'I'm coming,' I shouted. 'Just a moment.'

We left the cottage in near darkness, with Minstrel playfully jumping at my leg. My hands ruffling at his ears. Our playfulness allowing Joran to get a short distance ahead. A well worn rucksack on her back. A newer, smaller one on mine.

She'd been up most of the night preparing for our journey. Folding fresh powders into crisp squares of paper, and making sure her potions were mixed fresh for our trip.

'That's enough now. Hey . . . Stop . . .' I couldn't help but laugh at his persistence; slobber and love. Me sending mixed messages. I think it was the new smells, he seemed determined to peek inside my pockets.

‘Minstrel, get down. Come here, boy.’

He was off, trotting beside her with his head held high and keen to obey.

Unbelievable. ‘Why won’t you do that for me?’ *Yes, I’m looking at you.* I think the selective rebellious nature of my dog amused Joran.

As promised, Sage was waiting when we left the forest. Tilly harnessed to the cart, her reigns looked recently oiled. It was easily noticed how well the old nag had scrubbed up. Tilly’s mane sown with small beads, her tail woven into a long plait. My new, and more obedient friend, seemed pleased to see us as I threw a mischievous scowl at Minstrel, whose ears dropped as Tilly raised her head and called out with a rasping whinny.

‘Good morning Sage,’ I called out, and ran out ahead to greet them. Minstrel scampering to be first onto the cart. He leapt up onto the seat and sat panting with anticipation.

‘You’re not coming,’ I said, and took Tilly’s nose in my hands. ‘You look lovely,’ I whispered whilst rubbing her cheeks. ‘Sage, I’m sorry about the other day; I didn’t mean to get you in trouble.’

‘Trouble?’ she asked. ‘There’s no trouble.’

‘But I thought? I saw you argue with Joran when I went to fetch Minstrel. Didn’t you . . .’

‘There were no harsh words between Joran and I,’ she took the pack from my shoulders and lowered it over the cart’s railings to its bed. ‘You’re not taking that mangy fur-ball with you?’ A glob of phlegm hit Minstrel in the ear. He jumped down and scampered below the cart out of sight.

‘But I told you about the Dreaming, remember?’

She looked puzzled. ‘What dreams? The last thing I want to hear about are the dreams of adolescents. Joran, are you driving, or is he?’

Joran placed her sack carefully into the cart. ‘Drai can drive. If he wants too?’

‘Me? Yes,’ I couldn’t get there quick enough. A glance towards Sage as my bum hit the raised wooden seat. Half expecting a wink, or a maybe smile. I received neither.

She had Minstrel by the scruff, and a moment later a collar had been dropped over his head, a lead attached. He didn't seem happy, and tugged against his restraint. He wanted to come with us but Sage held firm, despite some novel twists and turns.

'Good boy,' I shouted down. *You be a pain in the arse for someone other than me.*

'Drai, are you ready?'

'What? Yes,' I couldn't wait. I flapped the reins and the cart was pulled forward. I turned again towards Sage, who was already walking away. Her hand half-raised, the other arm more than a match for Minstrel.

'Don't worry,' she shouted. 'I'll be fine. It's not such a long walk for an old woman with a bad back.'

THE INN

Four soldiers sat around the table in their dark uniforms, increasingly unkempt, always unbuttoned. Their armour laid restless in their rooms. By order of the Druid who had brought them to Boundary, but had not seen fit to tell them why.

‘At least the wine’s palatable,’ said Able. Tall, wrinkled, and the oldest of them. ‘Not so with the women, are there any worthy of passion in this place?’

After so many weeks of indolence their time had funnelled itself between the narrow walls of the inn. They’d become familiar with the crackle of damp logs and the fire’s oppressive heat. It was a test of their manhood. A penny paid to the others by the man who gave ground first. A halfpenny received by any man bitten by the ferocious sparks that spat from the grate.

‘Fuck, I give in.’ Castlin threw coin onto the table. ‘I’m too fucking hot. And I’m tired of this place,’ he raised the jug in his hand and let the last of its wine pour into his cup. Each man reached for a penny, and then raised themselves keen to retire to one of the booths against the wall. ‘When are we going back to the capital?’

Horbin scratched at his cheek. His face not seen a razor in days. ‘We stay until we’re told otherwise,’ he said, and meant it. Then threw his coat across the table. ‘We’re supposed to be blending in.’

‘Fine, but I’m just saying. It makes no sense to be here. What are we waiting for?’

‘The boss to give his orders.’ Horbin’s job was to obey, not to question. ‘When he tells me, I’ll tell you.’

‘What’s the matter, Castlin? You in a hurry to get back to your wife?’ Able’s comment encouraged an ale-fuelled and raucous laugh as they all slumped into cooler confines. He raised his mug. ‘To women,’ he said. ‘But not the ones we marry,’ he could barely find his mouth with the cup.

‘Innkeeper, another jug,’ shouted Castlin. ‘And be quick about it. Look at that fat bastard. Every time we come here he wants to piss his pants. Ha, ha, I’m going to . . .’

‘Sit down.’ Horbin’s words an order, not a request. ‘We’re off duty, but under orders not to disturb the peace.’

‘I was only going to . . .’

‘Behave yourself?’

‘Yeah, sure, that’s what I was doing,’ Castlin slid back onto the bench. ‘Fuck, this place is boring.’

Horbin beckoned the girl carrying the wine. A young redhead, she seemed nervous. Their presence a concern to her as well as the innkeeper, as another bout of laughter roared from his men. The owner’s takings were obviously down. He’d have to compensate him before they left.

‘Come on, Hera. Spit it out, you’ve had a face like a sagging tit since we got here.’ Castlin slid the smaller man his cup and encouraged him to drink. ‘What’s wrong? And don’t tell me you’ve got another bad feeling about this shit-hole, because I’ve got enough of those myself,’ he lifted his mug, tilting it toward his bearded friend, and belched. ‘Come on, what’s wrong?’

Horbin groaned. His shrewd face crumpled in his palms.

‘You had to ask, dear Gods you had to ask,’ a belch followed ‘Fine, get it out. Out with it,’ he demanded.

Hera puffed his cheeks and shook his head, eyes heavy with drink. His features more serious than usual. ‘I’ve just got a bad feeling, that’s all,’ he said, unwilling to offer more.

‘Out with it,’ said Horbin. All eyes now on the smallest member of his band. ‘They won’t let up until you do.’ He was interested himself. Hera was not a man to brood. ‘Hera, what’s wrong?’

‘You’ve heard,’ he said, and glanced back to the stairs. Above him was someone’s attention he obviously feared. ‘You’ve heard that we’re not winning this war?’

Castlin waved a dismissive hand.

Horbin rubbed harder at his cheeks.

‘Look, I’m just saying what we’ve all been thinking. We’re a week’s ride from the Veil, why else has he brought us here? Fuck, this is halfway across the Empire?’ he rubbed at the tiredness in his eyes. ‘I’m just saying, it has to have something to do with the tribes. Bloody Naribs. I’ll bet Patron’s been sent to whip them into line. And you know what that means?’

‘Fucking savages. Shit, you think we’ll have to fight them?’

‘Able, don’t be stupid. There’s only four of us.’

‘I’ll fucking fight them, all of them.’

Hera raised a smile. ‘You, against the entire Narib nation? Go take a nap, you idiot.’

‘Hey, I like to know what’s going on, that’s all.’

‘I’ll tell you what’s going on,’ Horbin interceded. ‘The Patron brought us here for a reason, that we don’t need to know. So here is where we’ll stay until he tells us different.’ He was pleased to see them nod, reluctantly, in agreement.

‘I was just asking.’

‘Fuck, you have to have the last word, don’t you.’

‘No.’

‘Yes, listen to yourself.’

‘I was just saying. I’m allowed to say aren’t I?’

‘Remind me again why we brought you along?’

Able offered him a wry grin. ‘Cos I’m the only one who can cook without poisoning everyone, that’s why.’

‘He’s got a point,’ said Castlin.

‘His cooking stinks,’ said Hera.

Smiles lifted around the table at the verbal fencing.

‘Then you’re going hungry. Hey, Horb, go ask the boss why we’re here,’ Able pointed up. ‘Just, get a reason. Can you do that? There has to be a reason why we’re here in this piss-water town.’

‘It’s a city,’ said Hera.

‘What?’

‘It’s a city, not a town.’

Castlin sighed. ‘Everyone knows, if the brothels are small that means it’s a town. Am I right?’ he looked for support. ‘I’m right, aren’t I? I know I’m right.’

‘Look, it’s not my place to say, I know. But all I’m saying is, we’re right next to the Veil,’ Hera opened his arms to invite consensus. ‘Come on, it’s staring us in the face. Even the locals know about the two legions that are up there. Two legions of Kartech. Serious fuckers. It’s a second front, has to be. The boss is here to make sure the Nabs do as they’re agreed. Make sure they hold the fort, so to speak.’

‘The Kartech will fight like dogs,’ Castlin raised his cup. The curls in his hair seemed to straighten in salute. ‘They’ll kill every fucking ’Ristan that crosses the border, and more besides.’

‘So you think they’ll come? Horb, is he right?’

‘Wouldn’t you, Able? We invaded them, remember?’

‘Wasn’t me.’

‘Your granddaddy then. He took their lands, their women, and their honour. They want them back.’

‘And we’re going up there?’

‘It wasn’t a good thing that we did,’ said Hera.

‘Different time, different Emperor,’ Horbin reminded them.

‘The sins of the father,’ he replied. ‘If the old Emperor was still with us we wouldn’t be in this situation.’

The nodding was unanimous, as each man raised their cup.

‘When the time comes I’ll fight for the Patron, not some whelp on a throne.’ Castlin took a breath. ‘I don’t say what was done was right. But those Auristan dogs have slipped their leash, and they’ll spread like a cancer

throughout the Empire if we don't stop them. And that's why I'll fight. Why I'll kill and hammer those fuckers until they beg for mercy.'

Their cups rattled upon the table's top. Hera standing to draw their attention.

'I've fought them, hand to hand. Let me tell you, they stink when up close. They shave their heads and cover themselves in animal fat before screaming en-mass into battle,' he circled his heart with his hand for good luck. 'I'm still alive to tell you because I'm a tough son of a bitch as well.'

The cups rattled again.

'They don't believe in the Gods either, which proves they're heathens. I heard they worship the elements. The wind, rain, and fire. Fucking Auri's,' he turned his head and spat on the sawdust that covered the floor, 'they believe that their lives are only borrowed from the spirits, and that death is the loan repaid in full,' he shook his head. 'They don't fear death. To them it's the natural flow of one river into the next.' Hera paused, the wine dredging up memories. 'We captured a few of them near Tridium. Not a place I'd never heard of, but I'll never forget. We tortured them all night and barely got a sound from any of them.'

'Maybe they don't feel pain?' said Castlin.

'Oh they felt it; every stick and twist of the hot iron. But barely a sound from any of them,' he shook his head. 'It wasn't natural, I tell you.'

'The problem is,' Horbin interjected. 'We are two diametrically opposed ideologies.'

A moments silence.

'Shit, I don't even know what that means,' Castlin broke into laughter, infectious to all at the table.

'I don't know whether to kiss him or slap him,' said Able. He grabbed Hera's face and kissed his cheek. 'We'll kill any fucking Auri that comes within sword length, shaven bollocks or not.'

Wild eyes and open mouths unleashed a riot of laughter and belching.

Horbin sat back and watched, happy that his men were drunk. He'd take them out early in the morning. Drill some discipline into sore heads.

But maybe they were right. Perhaps the time *had* come to ask the boss, why they were here?

The flames in the fire had diminished and no longer leapt high below the mantle, but no-one had noticed, and Gerban had no intention of burning more wood. He hoped the dying embers would encourage the soldiers to an early bed, and allow him to close his doors earlier than usual. Gerban wiped at his bar, silently cursing his luck.

He breached a smile as he stupidly looked towards them, the soldiers. Each sunset they'd return; unwelcome guests. They'd eroded his business. Slowly turned his customers away. They came for "medicine" that's what they said. Liquid that flowed from a keg to addle a soldiers mind when their swords weren't required. It helped them through the hours of inactivity and idleness, that predictably led them to boredom. Boredom and drink, the worst combination to be found in soldiers. And even worse still, they were Vildegar.

Gerban glanced towards the stairs, and then quickly away. It was considered unlucky just to think about Druids. *Don't look for them.* Yet somehow a Druid has found his way to the Broken Glass, and was staying upstairs. *Of all the inns in Boundary, they came into mine?*

That was unlucky. He'd not heard tell of Druids in these parts for more than a generation. *He's doing it again, in front of the customers?* Gerban turned away and began moving ale mugs again. From the upper shelves downward this time. Muttering a silent prayer to the Gods as he did so.

What? What did I do to upset you?

'I quite like it here, it's a quiet enough place.' Able dribbled the last of his urine into the fire's embers, and then shook his manhood vigorously. Deep breaths helped to alleviate the froth of ale that constantly reached for the back of his mouth before swallowing it down again. He buttoned the flap on

his trousers. 'I've thought of another plus for this place,' he said. 'There's no need to watch the shadows here; for some maniac to come running at the Patron with a knife. And we don't have to listen to political yack as we follow him around the Senate.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Hera. 'Protecting the Boss keeps me on my toes. There's not one fucker in that place that likes him, and that's fine by me,' he sat forward. 'Maybe that's why were here? Enemies of the State to put down?'

They all looked at Horbin, who had no more an idea than they.

'He'll let us know when he's ready.'

'I'll wager he knows more than he says,' Castlin raised a finger towards the window. At the Lurqer who sat with his drink, in what looked like quiet contemplation. 'What about it, Lurqer?' he called out. 'What have you got in that head of yours that you'd like to share?'

'Maybe we should cut it off and peek inside,' Able muttered, laughter following the insult.

Horbin wondered the same question. The dark skinned nomad from the Veil had barely said a word since leaving the capital. *What do you know?* He wondered. *And if you do, then why? Why you and not me? Why hasn't the boss told me?* He looked towards the stairs. *What are you up to?* His attention returned to the Lurqer. Horbin had worked with him before. A good scout, and a bloody good soldier. It was said they could sense danger before it became apparent. Hell, he was all in for that. Any edge in conflict was a chance to stay alive.

Just then the Lurqer turned his head, and raised his glass to Horbin. Leather clad, dark skinned, and with long hair that he'd seen him wash in dirt. Then pin behind his head with short blades that could kill a man. Horbin returned the polite gesture.

It was unusual for him to be present in the inn. Horbin was unaware of his nightly pursuits. Preferring to stare out of the window than join them.

'More drinks, woman,' Castlin beckoned. He wore a glare that his deep set eyes turned wild. 'What's taking so long?'

It's time you all went to your beds. Horbin could sense things of his own. Like when Castlin was angling for a fight, or something worse. The serving girl was a fresh-faced and buxom female, pretty too. She leaned against the bar, and probably wished for the inn to shut. Her eyes were closed, not enamoured by Castlin's request. Nor the manner which served it.

'Don't keep the Vildegard waiting, it's bad for your health,' Castlin rapped his palm on the table with impatience. One eye levelled at the Lurker, the other at the innkeeper's wench.

Horbin took a breath, and readied to intervene. His orders were plain. "No trouble whilst were here."

Sillv looked at Gerban for reassurance. Pretty blue eyes with long lashes downturned with obvious reluctance. Then she smiled and slid a tray onto the bar.

'Give them what they want,' said Gerban, as he filled another jug. 'Let's hope they pay for it this time.'

Sillv took a deep breath. Only one girl was required to give service; the last few weeks had been increasingly quiet. Tonight was Sillv's night. Tomorrow too. She liked it when men looked at her, and what was not to like. She was a beauty, young and slim, with large breasts that men liked to dream of as they supped at their ale. She was the best service that Gerban had, and now wished she wasn't. As much as she wished now, she hadn't painted her lips so red, nor made her cheeks so pale. No, she didn't want to look desirable, not tonight. Being pretty brought tips, but tonight it made her feel vulnerable.

Gerban knew men well, and that was why his wine was strong, and his girls well endowed. 'Don't keep them waiting,' he said, and a scowl was returned, with a smile attached.

She wiped at her apron, then lifted her tray, with two large jugs aboard. She hoped that taking two would save her going back, as she walked towards their table.

The girl placed the first jug on the table. Close enough for Castlin to touch her arm.

‘Why are we here, pretty one? Any ideas?’

Had she been inclined to answer, the words were not forthcoming, as Castlin grabbed her backside with his fingers. The squeeze of her cheeks released a raucous laugh from the man.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘But I’d prefer you stuck your hand up your own arse, and not mine,’ Silly slapped his hand away.

‘Hah, a feisty bitch. A pretty one too. What do we do with pretty women boys?’

Silly knew better than to make eye contact as she slid the second jug onto the table.

‘We put them on their backs,’ said Able, barely able to lift his chin. But his hand still grabbed her arm. ‘How about a quick fumble, down here?’

‘You’d have a more tender time if I put a hungry cat down your pants,’ she said, and pulled her arm from his fingers.

Castlin’s hand slid forcefully up her skirt and pulled at her undergarments. She stumbled towards him.

‘She wants me boys.’

‘Get your hands off me you bastard,’ Silly pulled away.

Castlin tugged her back. He tried to get his lips planted on hers, but the girl squirmed and struggled, and then pulled away. She slapped his face with the edge of the tray. Castlin reeled, and the inn went silent. Silly stood staring as if the world were about to crumble below her feet.

‘Fuck, that hurt.’ Castlin’s gaze fell on fingers stained by blood from his forehead. You would have heard a pin drop.

Horbin put his head in his hands. Blood had been drawn, this was about to get awkward, even for him to deal with.

‘Gentlemen, please,’ Gerban flustered, his barrel shaped body finally moved from behind the bar. ‘I know of some beauties who’s sole purpose in life is to please men, especially those as virile, and compassionate, as you.’

Horbin silently applauded the innkeeper’s advance. He’d never seen a man so fat, and so submissive. So desperate to keep the peace. He slipped

into puppy-mode with a slight stoop for fear of being seen as hostile. Hands open and low. 'I believe the girls in question come in pairs. And it would be my great pleasure to shoulder the burden of cost. Please, gentlemen, it was an accident.'

Castlin ignored him. His attention distracted just long enough for Sillv to retreat. 'Fucking bitch,' his voice hushed but somehow weaponised.

Horbin assessed the room. Castlin was drunk, offended; ready to reap retribution. The innkeeper about to piss in his trousers. Able and Hera looked to him for guidance.

Two customers to his left, they wanted no part in what might be to come. Several customers sat by the door were different. They'd been watching them all night. Men now on edge, and armed. The Lurqer was aware of them too. Two newcomers, lean and tall, had appeared on the stairs. Out from their rooms. The way they held themselves; they'd been in service, in someone else's military.

"No trouble" Narcista had emphasised the order.

'Sit down,' Horbin said.

'What?' Castlin out held his fingers for Horbin to see. Blood drawn, demanded retribution.

Horbin stood. 'Sit, down,' said louder this time, and made an order. 'Able, the stairs,' he whispered. He moved his eyes to the left and Hera's gaze followed with understanding.

Able's hand slipped drunkenly from the table, and reached discreetly for his dagger.

'Tray, face?' Castlin emphasised his hand again.

'Did I mention that the drinks are on me?' Gerban offered. 'Yesterdays as well. No charge for heroes of the Empire, it's the least I can do. And the women I mentioned, they come in two's. Two each for our gallant Imperial warriors,' he was pleading. 'Can I get you a cloth for the blo . . . ?' He thought better of uttering the word.

Horbin left the table and stepped toward Sillv. 'Go home,' he said, then took the innkeeper's gaze. 'Your job's safe,' he added.

He put his thumb on her lips and smudged the red to her cheek. 'You can do better,' he said. Then slapped her so hard she fell back and sprawled onto the floor. Horbin turned to the doorway, his index-finger drawn and pointed. 'Leave your table, and breathe your last.'

Hera pushed his chair away, hand ready on the hilt of his sword. The Lurqer drew both pins from his hair.

Half raised from their seats the six men by the door thought better of intervening.

Able got to his feet, dagger in hand, not sure where the stairs were. The two men who'd left their room already ascending. Able slumped back into his chair.

'Sit down,' Horbin said to Castlin. 'Your blood has been honoured.'

Castlin's disposition and presence were angered and fully displayed as he loomed over the terrified girl. Both seemed to deflate, his need to retaliate somewhat appeased. The girl lay with a dash of red across her cheek.

'Bitch,' he said, and then stared up the stairs. Turned towards the door. 'Did I miss something?'

'No, no. Can I get some more wi . . . Some food? Bread and meat for our war heroes?' With firm stabs of his foot Gerban urged Sillv to leave with more haste.

She was moving away, slowly. Pushing herself with her hands and staring at the stairs.

I'm sorry. Sillv thought it as though the Druid could hear her thoughts. *I'm so very sorry.*

He came down with his Cleric in tow. She felt the fiery rhetoric she'd shown leave through the sole of her feet. It was the first time she'd ever seen a Druid.

'Is there any trouble here?' It took five slow deliberate steps for Narcista to stand at their centre. 'Horbin?' he asked again.

'No sir, just a misunderstanding; it's been dealt with.'

Narcista beckoned with his hand for Sillv to stand, and then again to step closer. She did as she was bid, her skin tingling with nervous anticipation.

Not the kind of customer she was used to. Nor wanted to serve. The man was tall, clad in black. Though he wore no habit, she knew well who he was. She wished he wore his hood, because those eyes, so deep set in below the brow, they looked inside her. She was sure of it.

‘Take your men outside. Horbin,’ the Druid said. ‘Walk the streets for an hour, and talk to no-one. Not even each other. Am I clear?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Do not come back until your men are fit to wear their uniform.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Horbin lowered his head, but offered an angry glare towards Castlin. ‘I’ll make sure they understand.’

Each man bowed as he stepped away, jackets in hand, all medicine left on the table. They left the Broken Glass for the cool chill of the night outside. The men sat beside the door, turned so as not to attract the Druid’s attention.

The Cleric pulled the spindled back of a vacated chair. He offered it to Narcista, who refused.

‘Walk the street for an hour?’ he asked.

‘They are soldiers, Elspar. Hard men who need a purpose,’ he stole a look to the Lurqer who shook his head, and sat. ‘As of yet, I cannot give them one.’

‘But they act like . . .’

‘Drink is a useful release for men sat idle.’

‘I understand.’

Sillyv felt Gerban’s finger in her back. She responded, reluctantly, and reached out.

‘Can I clear the table, sirs?’ her hand shaking.

‘I can bring fresh glasses, and whatever drinks you require,’ Gerban added. His back half-bent in submissive offering as he spoke.

‘My name is Narcista,’ he said. ‘This is Velspar, my aide.’

‘The last thing Sillyv wanted was to know his name. She’d heard it was a curse to hear a Druid’s true name. What she heard next made her tremble.’

‘You drew blood from the Vildegard?’ Narcista asked.

‘She should be whipped for her insolence,’ said Elspar. ‘Look at her. Look at the lust in her eyes. The seduction present in those painted lips.’

She felt his fingers touch her hair. Lift it and let it fall.

‘She has golden hair that hangs like a precious chain. And soft pale skin that might melt in sunshine.’

‘I, I’ll, fetch food,’ she said, and felt she might faint.

Cleric grabbed her by the wrist. Gerban stepped away. Silvv pleaded with her eyes for him to intervene.

‘Sir, she deserves a beating at least?’

‘No, I mean, please don’t.’ *Gerban, say something?* He bowed a little lower. *Please, tell them it wasn’t me.*

Narcista gestured for Elspar to release her.

‘Look at me,’ he said.

How she wished she hadn’t jested with the other girls, “That the Druid could be the centre of any persons nightmare.” That his eyes, “Could melt cheese.”

‘You tempted him?’ Narcista asked.

‘No, I swear. I just served. Please sir, he grabbed . . . I mean, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean offence.’

‘If it were my decision, I’d have you branded and flogged until you see the error of your ways,’ said Elspar,

‘She means no harm, sirs.’ Gerban had found his spine. ‘Please sirs. We don’t meet gentlefolk like you in these parts. She meant no harm. We only wish to serve.’

Silvv didn’t need encouraging as the Druid nodded for her to leave. Gerban backed away to the bar, his head low, unendingly appeasing.

‘Are you trying to get me closed down?’ Gerban said, ‘or worse. You do know who that is?’

‘A Druid, I know.’

‘Beirdin’s brow, you struck one of his aides. He could have us arrested. Or worse. Praise the God’s because he could have killed you.’

‘I’m sorry. I, I, I didn’t mean . . .’

‘Go, go home. Sall’s sake, I’ll close up when they go back upstairs. Silly, go!’

‘Why do we wait, Mentor,’ the question more rhetorical than enquiry. ‘It pains the men, and it pains me.’

‘We wait because the Eight tell us to wait.’

‘Of course. Then tell me why *he* is here? Why do we need to associate with a Lurqer?’

‘Don’t be so narrow-minded, Elspar. A Lurqer has many uses.’

‘Yes, of course. May I ask, have you used him before? I get the feeling there’s familiarity between you. It’s none of my concern, apologies. Look at him; he knows we’re talking about him.’

‘Would you like me to ask him to join us?’ Narcista turned toward the window and raised his hand.

‘No, apologies, that won’t be necessary. We can converse from here should the need arise.’

The Broken Glass was a poor and empty sight and for the first evening since Gerban could remember he saw his livelihood melting away, the longer that damned Druid and his followers remained. For a man so-sized, he walked like a shadow around the empty booths. Dousing their lamps, and filling the bowls beneath with oil. Cursing at his luck to receive such unwelcome visitors. It had been several weeks since he’d seen the tables full; his bar packed with eager customers. Happy customers . . . the tables, the lack of glasses or mugs to clear. He walked back to the bar and ran his cloth down its long shiny surface. It seemed the only thing left for his hands to do.

Gerban raised the gate on the bar, its hinges well oiled and slick, and then lowered it as he passed through, his gaze left to run the entire length of the well-oiled surface. The lack of movement and noise along his

livelihood gave great cause for shiver. The bustle and commotion; the raised voices that called for service. The sound of money, all had fled. For the first time since the incident he raised his eyes towards the only figures who remained in the inn.

It was a crime against good honest commerce. Who wanted to frequent an establishment filled with Vildegard? And worse, a Druid. He looked away before they caught him staring.

The wine racks were full, the ale-kegs stood ready. Mugs, cups, and glasses all polished and ready for use. He missed the girls, and their smiles. Their bickering, and the playful way they teased him. Like most men he was a fool for a pretty smile. On the wall above he eyed three barrels set in a triangular fashion, there was a plaque with the faint outline of a carving, a figure well worn from the rub of hands. It was Hergunia. A God who watched over workers in the fields. Protector of those who toiled with their hands. He'd adopted the image as a good luck charm in the hope it would keep his customers loyal, and frequent. Gerban spat on his cloth and rubbed at the plaque.

'I can tell you this.' Narcista interlocked his fingers and rubbed his mouth against his hand, a thoughtful pose he often adopted. 'The Eight would not have sent us here if it were not important.'

Elspar touched his forehead in reverence to the Eight. He had dedicated his life to their words, though he'd never personally heard their counsel. The Council of Elders were mythical, even to the Clerics who revered them.

'Na de'kai wei-mar,' Cleric said, and bowed his head.

'Is this place appropriate for use of the tongue, Elspar? In earshot of outsiders?'

'Apologies, Mentor. I meant no disrespect.'

'If none is meant, then none shall be taken,' said Narcista, as he looked around the inn. 'Strange, that a place like this should be so silent. Why do you think that is?'

'Fear, Mentor. They fear us, and so they avoid us.'

'And that is appropriate?'

‘Of course.’

‘But we want to teach them, Elspar. Why should they listen to what they fear?’

‘Perhaps it is the only way they know?’

‘And what is it that you know, Elspar? This is your first journey into the world. What has your time at Shai’valet taught you?’

‘That our world stands on the brink of falling into a great abyss. That too many heads turn in too many directions, towards false idols and prophets. That the search for faith cannot be found if the head is dizzy. There is too much disorder in the Empire, Mentor. Its citizens need guidance. They need delivery from their confusion. My short time in this, house of sin, confirms the worst. That all words spoken do not need to be heard. Only by breaking the common distraction can true order be restored.’

‘And who is it that speaks the truth? Whose voice would you have the people hear?’

‘The Eight, Mentor. The teachings of the Council of Elders. Their words will guide all those who are worthy to hear.’

‘And what is it that the Eight will teach them?’

‘That life is order. And through order we find life,’ Elspar lowered his head, his finger rubbing at his glass. ‘I have learnt, Mentor, that many citizens of the Empire have lost their way. They have drifted from the moral path and lost sight of the true faith. Spiritual purity has been abandoned. Too many Gods can only bring disorder.’

‘Life is order,’ said the Druid.

‘And through order we find life.’ Cleric pulled his chair closer. His features grave. ‘There is only one, true, religion. The Order has been chosen to shepherd the people; to teach them. To bring order to the Empire. The Eight have taught us; they have shown us the way. We will return the Empire to a single flock.’

‘And what would you teach your new flock, Elspar?’

Cleric’s crystal blue eyes; his youthful face. Both revealed by a sudden zealous disposition. Were he sat in school, none would have been the wiser. But here, discussing matters of faith, he stood ready to enlighten with the

whip and the sword. Cleric raised his hood and cowed down, as if ready to pray.

‘The path to true salvation will be ringed with fire, Brother. Those who stand within will be saved. They will be cleansed.’

‘And those stood outside your ring of fire?’

‘Are beyond saving, even for us. So say the Eight.’

‘And *you*, you see no other way?’

‘No, the Eight are all. The Order must be obeyed.’

Cleric closed his eyes and quoted from scripture. ‘Give the whip wholeheartedly and the lies will be struck away. The truth revealed to those with eyes to see. The Khassari are the Chosen, and we have been called. It is a righteous burden we bare, but will fulfil. Purge all heretics,’ he lifted his head. ‘For they must be branded with fire. The Druid faith, is the only true faith, and we will deliver its word.’

‘You speak boldly, and justly. But have you considered there may be other ways to convert your flock? Not all non-believers are heretics. Some are simply ignorant, perhaps even fools. Can we reach them with reason, and kindness; negotiation and tact? There are carrots as well as sticks to be used. Ways in which we don’t set fire to all of our *flock*.’

Cleric seemed surprised. ‘Forgive me, I am new to the ways of the world. But the will of the Eight, will be judgement for all.’

As a small child his mother had abandoned him. Left him outside a Druid mission, to be accepted or left to starve. A harsh introduction to the world that had spawned him.

He’d been called, and he had been chosen. Welcomed as a sign from the Gods, into a faith that had grown within him. With each harsh word and every stroke of the cane he’d grown stronger. He’d studied harder than any of his peers, though that alone had not been enough, not for the Druid calling. Their rejection had been worse than his abandonment as a child. But through perseverance and dedication he’d been indoctrinated into the Clerics. A sibling movement that was growing. A somewhat uneasy sub-order within the Khassari ranks. Encouraged to flower by the Eight themselves.

Despite his honour to be mentored by such a noble Druid, Elspar was a Cleric, a distinction of which he was now proud.

‘You understand the importance of stealth and caution?’ Narcista asked.

‘I do. Only through these virtues can we hope to affect change.’

‘Yes, there are many in the Senate who would see us fall, who work tirelessly against us. Their will, is to break ours.’

‘Heretics. Worshippers of false Gods that must be whipped until they whimper and die.’

‘If only it were that simple,’ Narcista raised a hand to the innkeeper to bring food. ‘Before we left I received word that the Princes of Thesiar will meet secretly with other members of the war council and Senate. It is their intention to send a peace envoy to the Auristans in a perfidious attempt to end the war. What do you think of that?’

‘They are traitors, Lord. They must not be allowed to succeed.’

‘Ah, but you allow for the possibility of their success?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Good. This is not a classroom, Elspar. In the real world we must allow for failure. Or how else can we best prepare to succeed? Be assured, steps have been taken. They will try to circumvent the Emperor with deceit and lies. But they trap themselves in their own web of treachery. Their road to success will be their undoing.’

‘I understand. No, I do not. Would it not be wiser to keep us in the capital, to help?’

Narcista picked up the glass and held it up to the light.

‘Hmm, apparently the Eight would not agree. Tell me, are you familiar with the Kari’pacha?’

Cleric shook his head.

‘It’s more commonly referred to as the prophecy of the Grave Stalkers. An ancient text penned in the first pages of the Book of Dreaming.’

‘The most holy of texts. It has not been my privilege to read the words of the Primaries. Perhaps when I am more worthy?’

‘You don’t have to be worthy to read a good story, Elspar. And that’s all it is. All it can ever be. The Book of Dreaming is filled with words that don’t make sense unless you want them to.’

‘But surely we have to accept a text written by the Primaries.’ Cleric touched his head and kissed the back of his fingers. ‘They were the first of us, the best of us.’

Narcista opened his arms as if to welcome debate as he relaxed into his chair.

‘Let’s just say, I find it difficult to accept the words in this particular book, despite its author. To calculate a response from information gathered, that’s something I accept. It’s what we Druids do, but a prophecy about the future, and from so far in the past.’

‘Are we not taught to have faith?’

‘Yes, but we are also taught to question what we do not understand.’

‘Mentor, what does the Kari’pacha predict?’

‘The same as most fortune-tellers, prophets, and mystics, something very dire, it’s often the easiest way to get people to listen.’

‘And yet, we are here, in Boundary?’

Narcista placed his hands behind his head.

‘Yes, young Cleric, we are here. Which suggests that someone is taking the prophecy very seriously.’

‘But we are here at the behest of the Eight?’

‘Yes, yes we are. And that’s interesting, don’t you think?’

WORLDS COLLIDE

From a distance I watched the city swell in size; tall spires against a brightening horizon, and my first sight of Boundary in years. As the path through the hills wound its way downward, the ground flattened in all directions, as we picked up the old silk road. A straight line towards the city, that a few hours later became an endless wall and a mass of rooftops beyond.

What a sight, as Tilly pulled the cart toward the gates. Every detail of the wall now well in view. Two days in the company of Joran, and Tilly, and now just yards from the huge walls that loomed above us. A huge towering barrier of stone, its crenelations like thick teeth between numerous towers. Their rooftops like arrowheads. The closer we got, the clearer the sounds beyond. I could actually smell the city.

Tilly pulled us towards the entrance, one of eight. It had been several years since my last visit, but still the memories were vivid. As was the sudden gut wrenching disappointment. The wall, the gate; the clothes I wore, now covered in dust from our journey. I should have met this gate with my father. It should have been the proudest day of Mama's life, my passing into manhood.

We joined with traffic, the gate a hive of movement. Men, women, and children; carts and ponies. Wagons so well laden with goods I thought they might topple. I heard donkeys bey and dogs bark, the sounds of folk shouting. Everything I could possibly imagine moved before me; the air about me charged with activity and energy, as one by one the traffic filtered beyond the gates. Gates taller than a house, and as thick as a man. I was astonished at their size and stature. I felt my stomach tremble as we

entered. My gaze drawn, my senses effervesced. I was captivated by the scale, and as I leant back I watched the arch loom tall above my head. What a sight to see? The first time I had entered through one of the three main gates.

Beyond were colours such as I had never seen. A procession of goods that slowly disbanded as each took their own way. Different routes to unknown destinations within the city. All I assumed to regroup at the grand market the city held on the third week of each month. I took a deep lingering breath of this wild and fragrant scene.

Why, I wondered, had my father not brought me to the market. My only previous visits had been through the smaller gates, and to the bakery and shops alongside. I closed my eyes to remember, then realised the noise of the throng had dulled. The melee of the crowd ahead reduced to a curious murmur.

I stood on the seat to see what had lulled the procession and the progress of our cart. I searched for the reason above the heads of the crowd.

‘Sit down,’ said Joran.

‘I want to see.’ I said.

‘Drai, do as I say. Sit down.’

‘What’s wrong. What’s going on?’ Tilly was being encouraged towards one of the narrower side-routes. Joran used the whip on her flank. She’d found a sudden urgency for the horse to move.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Get in the back of the cart,’ she ordered.

‘What? Why?’

‘Drai, please do as I say. Do it now.’

‘Fine, okay.’ I stepped back into the bed of the cart. *You don’t have to shout at me.* Was there an accident ahead, was that it? I still wanted to see.

As I climbed over I saw the crowd part. Drivers were hitting at their horses with sticks, yanking at their reigns. Trying to find find space where there was none. Tilly being urged to make her way between two tall creatures I think were called camels. Beautiful animals but not what caught

my eye. My gaze was captured by the group of figures moving slowly against the flow; men on horseback coming in our direction.

Soldiers, a dozen or so, all on horseback. Men in mail and grey uniforms; the crowd keen to clear themselves from their path. Hardened faces who eyed the crowd with suspicion as they passed through. How wonderful they were, with their rounded helmets and breasts of steel. But why should we be bothered by soldiers?

Tilly finally broke through the ring of wagons, the last of them conceding the ground to her.

‘Come on, Tilly. Move yourself,’ Joran instructed. ‘Walk on, walk on.’

The owners of the carts we’d moved looked annoyed with Joran, but their focus remained on the soldiers.

I slid to the rear of the cart. ‘Who are they?’ I asked the closest of them.

‘Vildegard,’ the closest replied. His reins pulled tight as Tilly forced his horse to retire. ‘Get your mother to move through, quickly,’ he shouted.

Vildegard? I felt the fear. I saw men lower their heads. Women look away. Some clutched their children tightly to their frocks.

Vildegard. What did that mean?

On my knees I leant through the cart-rails to see. In the soldier’s midst were two others; men in grey. One very different to the other. He wore a long leather coat, not unlike my father’s. Though its shine far more lustful as it caught the sunlight. A crumpled hood hid his neck, and he wore black gloves. The horse he rode was the shade of night. And the grey men who flanked him, their eyes busy searching the crowd, but not in fear. No, these men knew no fear. Their senses skilled to observe, probe, and appraise. They were highly trained to protect. To protect him. I could feel it.

I could see him fully as Tilly tried to pass through the gap she’d made. He wore a face one would never forget. A bald man, his eyes sunk too deep into his face, his brow prominent. The man in the long black coat pulled his horse to stop, as if been alerted to trouble. Those around him did likewise, and I saw hands reach for weapons. He raised his own to calm them. And what I saw next frightened me in a way I hadn’t thought possible. A darkness spread out from his hand. A cloud that moved amongst the crowd

who seemed oblivious to its touch. I felt his presence, and it was creeping closer. I wasn't sure, but I think that he felt mine.

The cart lurched forward and we moved away from the main road. Through the closing tide of folk between us and him, I felt his large restless eyes search. As Tilly trotted us away I felt the cloud of the forest descend to shroud me, as if it tried to hide my presence. I slumped in the back of the cart relieved to be moving away.

Who was that man? Who could force a crowd to hold its breath just by his passing? The discontented burble lifted back into the meaningless banter of the crowd. The city seemed to wake up again.

I don't think Joran intended me to hear her, but I did. Strange words spoken in a foreign tongue. I don't know how I understood them, but I did.

"Druid scum, burn with the touch of sunlight."

Druid? He was a Druid? All my life I'd been aware of them. Heard whispers about their Order, the dreaded Khassari. My own father had cautioned me against them. "Naughty children," he would say, "they are visited by Druids in the dead of night. The Khassari come to steal them away."

There, right in front of us, I'd seen one. I craned my neck as we moved on but neither he nor the soldiers were in sight. Just the wagons we had parted and now left behind.

The street became narrow. Barely room for the cart to pass by anyone on foot. This vast city, that seemed to sprawl endlessly from the outside, was far more cramped within than I'd ever imagined. And the odour had changed. The steaming dung that stained the cobbles through the gate area had been sweet. Now it became foul, and rank. The street hung heavy with the smell of people, infused with the scent of squalor.

'Where are we going?' I didn't like this part of the city. I wondered why people would want to live like this?

'I thought it best to take a short cut,' Joran replied.

So we're not hiding from the soldiers then? I climbed out of the cart and onto the seat beside her. 'Who was that man on the horse?' I asked.

'Which man? There is no end to men on horses during market week.'

The one you were desperate to avoid.

‘The man in black, back at the gate,’ I persisted. ‘He was with the soldiers. You must have seen him, he had funny eyes.’

‘I didn’t notice,’ she said.

‘You told me to get in the back. You shouted at me.’

‘I did? Oh, of course I did. Drai, I’m so sorry,’ she put her hand on mine. ‘Living in the forest on my own. It makes it difficult for me, you know, with all the people. Sometimes my heart beats so fast with the fuss and noise. I feel a kind of panic come over me. Forgive me?’

‘Yes,’ I nodded. *So it was nothing to do with avoiding a Druid?* If they came for unruly children, then what had we done to have need of avoiding his path? I’d bring it up again later. ‘I’m hungry,’ I added, and leant my head against her shoulder. ‘I’m tired too.’

Tilly pulled us slowly down the street. The brick walls of tall buildings passing us close by.

Noises, that had previously mixed like tolling bells, so rich and diverse, had become more decipherable. Far less appealing. People shouted at each other. A call from a window above put me on edge. I heard a barking dog, its teeth bared. Sounds that travelled unseen and in a ghostly manner; well amplified and provoked by the thinning air and tall walls. The sunlight faded and the onset of night stalked the narrow streets around us.

Are carts even allowed down here?

It was dark when we finally arrived. A clean bed and a hot meal awaiting inside, or so Joran promised. By the time we'd unhitched Tilly; fed her and pushed the cart under cover, I was ready for sleep.

Thick flagstones lead from the stable to the building. Four steps up the door, above which hung a sign from a pole. The 'Happy Hen' painted on its surface. No-one was more happy than I to be here. We'd passed through the old quarter of Boundary, the very centre of the city, and come back out into fresher, cleaner air beyond. At least that's what my nose told me. This had truly been a day to remember. The journey had not been difficult, its end well marked with the magic of the crowds. The city was a place to excite, and to frighten. But one sight stood out above the rest. The Druid.

'Drai, come inside.'

'Hmm, I'm coming.'

I left the shadows behind and entered into a long hallway, its walls covered with plaster and paint, both in need of repair. Above them thick timbers that shouldered the floor above. Small lamps alight on either side added an eerie atmosphere to our new lodgings, and I followed close to Joran as she lead me into a much larger room.

Several wooden steps lead down to a vast floor space, set on several levels. I was taken aback by the throng of people, who mostly sat in small groups around tables. Many were eating, most were supping ale and wine. The noise from so many people all talking at once was a vibrant. Quite daunting to take in. I'd never seen so many folk in one room. Its centre well lit by large wooden chandeliers that resembled wagon-wheels hung from the high ceiling. Around the edges of the room the light melded into the gloom, the tables furthest from it held in a secretive gloom. What drew my gaze longest was a huge fire that sent smoke upward inside the wall. It's

bricks blackened from the years; a long spit anchored at each side, with what appeared to be a whole pig already cooked and half eaten. My senses bristled at the spectacle.

‘Drai?’ My hand was taken. ‘What do you think?’ she asked, ‘exciting isn’t it?’

‘It’s, strange,’ I replied, and returned her smile. No wonder my father liked inns so much. A moment later I saw another reason, as a buxom girl approached us. She offered us to follow, and showed us to a small booth. Two benches covered with faded leather, a short table in-between. She invited me to sit opposite Joran.

I liked it here. It was, cosy. Sweet smells filled the air, from cooked food to smoking pipes. The girl too smelled sweet. A floral perfume on her white blouse, that had small ruffles on the sleeves. She was fair skinned, with brown hair that crisscrossed down her back well tied with a red bow. She wore a welcoming smile. The smile of a Goddess, and a body well shaped to show off her assets. As she reached across to remove an empty jug I felt her sleeve glide tenderly across my arm which made my skin dance and the hairs stand on end. I felt Joran’s foot kick me gently below the table.

What?

Oh, I was staring like a dog starved of its evening meal.

‘My name is Lexa,’ the girl said. ‘Can I get you some food? Some cold meat, maybe something hot?’

‘It’s very noisy,’ I remarked, desperate to say something of interest that may impress her. My statement limp but true. I remembered how boisterous the crowds had been at the gate. But this was more intense, aggravated almost by the confines of walls and ceiling. I decided I liked it. The bustle of sounds through the air well energised by conversation and laughter. Filled with the dusty smell of ash, and the musk of wine and ale. I sat back and watched them, all forty-six who were sat living lives that were separated by all the others sat about them.

‘First time is it?’ Lexa asked.

‘Hmmm?’ *What? No, is it that obvious?*

‘Bring some bread and cheese,’ said Joran.

‘Of course. And some buttermilk for your boy?’

Buttermilk. Boy? Do boys dress like this?

‘I saw a Druid,’ I said out loud, keen to impress. But by the look on both their faces, I quickly wished I hadn’t.

‘They’ve been here a few weeks,’ she said. ‘They’re staying at the Broken Glass.’

She smiled sweetly, as her hand moved in small circular movements around her heart, to ward away any bad luck. I caught myself admiring her dress again. Low cut across her torso with bountiful flesh exposed, that quivered enthusiastically with each motion.

‘I think . . .’ Joran’s emphasis directed more to me than her, ‘that Drai might like to hear more about, the Druid?’ His name spoken in a hush.

Yes, yes, I would. ‘Have you seen him up close?’ I asked. I’d listen to anything she wanted to tell. *Did you say the Broken Glass? But, that’s where . . .*

‘I’ve never seen a Druid before,’ she leaned in, fearful of eavesdroppers. We were all whispering now. ‘He came with the soldiers.’

‘That must have been very exciting,’ Joran said, almost too politely. ‘What would someone like that be doing here in Boundary?’ she asked.

Lexa shook her head. ‘Who knows? They’ve kept to themselves for the most part. I’ve only seen him twice.’

‘Still, a Druid; and this far from the capital? The rumours must be rife. Are they here on business? Are they looking for something,’ she stole a look towards me, ‘or someone, perhaps?’

Lexa stopped wiping the table. ‘They’re a bad omen,’ she was doing that thing around her heart again. ‘We shouldn’t talk about them.’

Joran pushed a coin into the table’s centre.

‘For the drinks and food,’ she said. ‘And a tale to interest the boy. He loves gossip.’

Lexa’s eyes were bound to the silver coin. Far too much for bread and buttermilk.

‘I know one of the girls at the Broken Glass,’ she said, and then took the coin. ‘She told me that the Druid and his Cleric were invited to stay with

the City Warden, but declined. One of the girls,' she looked at me, 'is, well, friendly with one of the soldiers. They, well, talk a lot. He says they don't know why they're here,' she was wiping at the table again. 'They don't like sitting around doing nothing. Apparently, the Cleric takes them outside of the city every day. They're scouting the area, but he doesn't know why. The Druid spends most of his time in his room. I do know that we haven't been this busy for months. And that the Gods are being very generous with their tips of late.' She slipped the damp cloth into a bold pocket sewn across her apron. 'I'll bring the food as soon as I can,' she dipped her head and left.

I wondered whether Joran's interest in the Druid was for my benefit, or for hers?

'Why doesn't anyone like the Druids?' I asked. She had obviously desired information from Lexa so perhaps she would share some with me, if I pushed.

'Spoken with true innocence,' she replied.

'Do you think I could be a Druid?' I asked.

I wish she could have seen the look on her own face. A cross between astonishment, and a desire to beat me.

'They prefer to groom their pupils from a much younger, and more receptive age.'

'But who are they? Where do they come from?'

'They're just men, Draï. Men who have anaesthetised themselves to all views and opinions that differ from their own. They are purveyors of deceit, and monger's of war. No more,' her tone changed. 'Are you looking forward to the market tomorrow?'

The market? I'd forgotten. I'd never seen a market before. Dear Gods, what a sheltered life I've led.

Joran lingered at the door of my room, her head half-bowed as usual. She looked troubled. I felt a strong feeling she had something to say before she bid me goodnight. A struggle to tell me the truth, perhaps.

I can handle it, whatever it is.

‘Drai . . . ‘

I know you want to. Tell me.

‘ . . . Sleep well. We have a busy day tomorrow.’

The door closed.

So close. She almost opened her heart. *I know you want to.* She doubted me, and I didn’t know why. I’d taken a journey through the Dreaming, and I was ready. But Joran was so guarded; secretive by nature, just her way. And besides, I hadn’t told her about all my gifts. Nor the truth about, him; about the one called, Companion.

I should tell her. Tell her everything. Maybe then she would share more.

There was something about her, my new guardian, that allured my senses in so many ways. She enticed me with a beauty that transcended her looks. Always ready to engage; to listen. Never a harsh word no matter how foolish I’d been. Her nature was warm and inviting. There was youth and voracity in those eyes that left one feeling helplessly seduced. It *was* her way, and no-one had the right to change it. I felt safe with her. I trusted that whatever she kept hidden from me, about me, was for good reason.

Besides, I had more on my mind. *Him.* The man in black. I could see him as clear in my mind as if he stood before me. What a strange looking man; I understood why he frightened people. The way those hollowed out eyes stared across the crowd this morning. He’d stopped because he’d felt my presence, I was sure of it. And so was Joran. She didn’t want him anywhere near us. But that would mean Druids had special gifts too. I’d heard they

could perform dark magic. It seemed I wasn't as unique today as I had been yesterday.

At least my room was nice. Much bigger than I was used to, but not as quiet. I could hear far away voices. The residue of the melee downstairs as it passed through the floor and walls. The people of Boundary, and folk who were here for the big market.

A few months ago this would have been terrifying to me. But not now. I felt changed, and not just me, but life. I was beginning to feel a part of an adventure. So much had happened in so short a time. I was me, but not the same. I had a purpose, but no idea what it might be. What I did know for sure was change was coming, and that it would fall upon the Empire, and more. I wasn't just a part of that. I had the increasingly foreboding feeling I was at the centre of it all.

I needed some sleep, and wouldn't get it staring up at the ceiling. My room's walls flat and bare, save the odd stain, and I could smell the odour of beer, which was comforting in this strange room, with its dark corners. The lamp at my bedside wholly inadequate to light all of the room.

I doused its flame and shuffled into my blanket. As I drifted away to sleep I heard a brief cackle of laughter from the street outside. My last thought; how different the world was this far away from the forest.

SISTERS

The air was thick with the stale odour of pipe smoke. A once sweet blend now turned heavy and stale. The stranger had never been here before. That fact was as important as it was irrelevant. Clad in a thick cloak that covered from shoulders to boots, he was just another traveller. In another place where no-one knew his face, nor cared. Prepared for business that could never be employed in the same place twice.

He slid into an under-lit booth with a view of the door. To his left sat an old man with a frail face and thinning hair, whose head rested on his chest as he slept; a light wheeze on his breathe, his mind lost in a dream well anchored by wine. He would remember nothing. Two others were on the opposite side of the inn, much younger, occupying a closet identical to his own, its curtain half drawn, their voices hushed so as not to be overheard.

Traders. He presumed. Or more likely black-marketers.

Men who involved themselves in nobody's business but their own. There were others, all minding their business. This close to the fighting it was wise to keep dishonest business away from the eyes of soldiers, or the law. He doused the light in his booth and signalled to the bar for service.

Just one other was present in the moody half-light. An attractive woman, she'd arrived late. She was sat by the bar alone, and had watched the slow trade come and go. Since he'd entered her gaze was only for him. A woman of the night, he could spot them half a league away. A whore looking for business that came with a bed for the night.

Head down he gazed about the room again. *She's not perfect, not for what I want.* Not as pure as he'd like.

The stranger raised his hand, then motioned an invite for her to join him. She took a tray from the man at the bar before he could protest, and added her own glass to the small jug and cup. He doubted she usually walked in that fashion; one slow foot well in front of the other, a subtle slink through her frame. A nice figure, in a tight dress.

‘I’ve been watching you,’ she said, as she lowered into the chair opposite. Her voice calm and inviting. Painted lips that filled with promise. ‘You look lonely,’ she said. ‘I always think it’s sad to drink alone. A single man should have the company of a woman.’

‘And you’re that woman?’ he asked.

She smiled with her eyes. Touched her tongue to her lips. Such a sweet young face for one so obviously experienced in her trade.

You’ll do. He sipped wine from a cup fired in clay, its rim chipped and cracked. He held it forward as if to toast her words.

‘I’ve not seen you here before,’ she said. ‘Are you a soldier? No, don’t tell me. You’re far too handsome to be a grunt. I’ll bet, you’re a trader. And that accent suggests you’re a long way west of where you should be,’ she crossed her arms and hugged herself. ‘I know people,’ she said.

He tipped his cup to acknowledge her presumption.

‘I knew it,’ she leaned back into her seat and raised her head, closing her eyes as her fingers gently traced the pale skin of her neck. ‘It’s always been my dream to go west. To see the big cities. Huh, I’ve always wanted to see the capital. Have you been there? I’ve heard there are so many people there that they can’t be counted.’

‘Well, they do a census every ten years, so someone knows,’ he smiled. There was an attraction to this one. Blonde with a mousy face, her cheeks drawn. She was pleasing to the eye, and clean, unlike some. This one took pride in her appearance, and was complimented by the sweet smell of her perfume.

‘Are you going to buy a girl a drink?’

‘Is it necessary?’

Her soft brown eyes lit up. ‘No, it’s just a custom in these parts. We can skip the formalities, if you’d prefer?’

‘Do you have a room?’ He asked.

‘Yes, and the door is always open to a handsome man with a purse. You do have a purse?’

Direct and to the point, I like that. He placed a hand inside his dusty cloak and pulled a small purse from a concealed pocket, which he placed on the table. He checked the bar area and the booths. No change, except the two in booth had drawn their curtain. ‘Shall we?’

Eyeing the bag with an impish smile the woman nodded and stood. Her hand drawn to her cleavage.

‘Talya,’ she said, ‘that’s my name. What shall I call you? Huh, or shall we keep you a man of mystery?’

This one had a sparkle in her eyes. They’d be pleased, he was sure. She had a zest for her life that hadn’t been crushed by the weight of her years. ‘Call me, Daigar,’ he answered. *It’s as good a name as any.* ‘Yes, call me Daigar.’

Her hand slipped into his and she tugged him gently to follow.

It wasn't much of a room that she led him to. No trinkets or baubles, no colour obvious on the walls. The only light passed through the glass of a small window set high in the opposing wall. It caught the light of the moon sufficiently enough to see a bed, and a small cabinet beside it. A single candle for the occupier's use. At least it was clean, the covers that draped the bed seemed well laundered.

As she closed the door a small framed mirror hung on its inside showed his reflection, and a sudden moment of recollection of another time; what seemed a different life. The door closed, his image out of sight, Daigar unbuttoned his cloak and let it fall to the floor.

Talya lit the candle; combined with the moon it was enough light for what both parties had in mind. She stepped towards him, pressed herself against him, her hands gently pressed against his shoulders.

'I promise you pleasure,' she said. 'Paradise that even the Gods are denied.' With practised ease she began to remove his shirt, one button at a time.

Daigar grabbed her arms and pushed her back onto the bed. She scowled, and then smiled. 'That sort of thing is extra,' she said. Then batted her eyelids as she stretched herself across the covers, her wrists crossed as though inviting their restraint.

He watched as the girl on the bed seemed to writhe. Her breath quickened as she moved. She was good. She was also aware that he hadn't joined her. With a swing of her legs she raised herself to kneel on all fours, full provocation with her body and tongue, tight to her top lip. Eyes open and excited, and locked on his.

'Join me,' she said. 'I'll be in your dreams forever.'

Daigar felt his desire rise for her charms. She was here for his masters. But they could wait, at least long enough for him to enjoy what she had to offer. She could consider it his gift to her, and one last chance to excel at what little she did best.

He unclipped the last buttons on his shirt. Her gaze on his muscular body; she seemed pleased at what he offered as his trouser were flicked away.

Daigar's own gaze was set upon warm curves, hidden by a silky blouse that hung low at the neckline. No man could resist the sight of her breasts, half hidden, keenly suggestive; he felt his heartbeat begin to quicken with the temptation she offered with her eyes. Her lips parted, her tongue teasing. She breathed in deeply, then let out a gentle sigh as she rolled invitingly onto her back, her hands gently parting her thighs.

Daigar knelt naked on the bed's edge. He took her wrists and with tender force put her hands up beside her head. He drew his fingers down the inside of her arms feeling the softness of her skin. With a firm grip he pushed her thighs further apart and lowered himself between them.

Her body was covered with perspiration as she rolled over, her fingers fumbling down at the side of the bed for her clothes. She retrieved the discarded blouse and pulled it to cover her breasts. It seemed a little late to be coy after what they had just shared. She'd been a vixen, no, a tigress unleashed between the sheets. Hardly surprising considering her trade, but he was unused to a woman taking charge of his body in such a way. Though he had to admit it had been a pleasurable, if strenuous experience.

'It's been fun,' she said, 'but I should go now.' She shared a look of expectation with him. Gone was the playful smile, more a businesslike frown. Daigar's hesitance led to her hand being outstretched.

He'd always been biased toward women for donors. Not only for his own sexual gratification, but because he found them needier after the chase. Even the sluts that sold themselves usually wanted something more. To be held, or even loved, which made the experience more gratifying. This one seemed to be in a hurry to leave. It spoilt the moment.

Daigar rose from the bed. He smiled as he reached for his trousers. His purse retrieved, he offered her to sit on the bed and receive payment.

'Fine,' she said, and stepped towards him.

As her hand reached out Daigar grabbed it. He pulled her with force and she stumbled back to the bed.

'Hey, what's with you? You got what you wanted. Just pay up and I'll be on my way,' she looked scared.

Daigar pushed her hand behind her back and grabbed her throat.

'What? What do you want?' The question falling on deaf ears. 'I'm warning you.'

‘We have unfinished business, you and I,’ he forced her against the wall, pressed his face up against hers. ‘This was not what I came here for.’ The full weight of his naked body pressed against her.

‘Please, don’t hurt me.’

He teased her shoes from her hand and dropped them to the floor. His cheek more firmly against hers. She tried to struggle, but he was far too strong. The smell of ear from the donor, it was addictive. Daigar filled his lungs with its scent, and exhaled it slowly back onto Talya’s lips.

Crying won’t help.

‘You’re a bargain made,’ he whispered. ‘How it must be.’

‘What? I don’t understand. Please. Hel . . .’

He covered her mouth with his hand to stop her call for help.

This part was always hard for Daigar. Because he liked it, and wished that he didn’t. He turned her around with ease. There were two separate highs from each donor, and he’d already enjoyed the first. Her body given freely. Now he indulged himself in the second. The more powerful thrill. The true addiction that lay claim to his soul. Daigar slipped his arm up under her throat and pulled on her wind pipe. It had to be done slowly.

She struggled to free herself. Tried to scratch at anything her nails could reach. But it was too little, and too late. Daigar too powerful to fight. He felt her body convulse as she fought for air. Talya began to gargle her sobs beneath the pressure of his arm. He knew it hurt, as he pushed her face harder against the wall; the plaster against her face. He raised his free hand and showed her the ruby ring on his finger.

‘Please, don’t, hurt me,’ There was barely room for the words to rasp out. Hardly enough space for air to be drawn in. ‘I, I. Don’t . . .’

‘Shhhh,’ his lips touched her ear. ‘Don’t fight. Just let it happen.’

He doubted her eyes had ever opened so wide, but seen so little. Her pleas reduced to a desperate whimper as a short spine of metal clicked out from the centre of the ring.

Daigar closed the spine to a hairsbreadth from her right eye.

‘Pleeease . . . Don’t!’

Daigar could taste her salty tears on his lips; feel every quiver, every tiny tremble, as she pleaded for her life. He slid the needle through her final defence. The closed and helpless eyelid that tried to bar its path. It pricked as it slid through, then moved unobstructed into the softer flesh below. Her long nails clawed deep into the plaster; dragged downward to score at its surface.

‘Shhh, it will be over soon,’ he felt an icy chill run the length of his spine. The euphoria of the kill. The guilt that it must happen. Combined they were an ecstasy unsurpassed.

Daigar felt he took a part of them, he always did.

‘You were so right,’ he whispered. ‘I will remember you in my dreams.’

Daigar was surprised, how heavy the woman was. Far heavier than he remembered as he carried her to the bed. During the lust filled passion of the previous hours he hadn't noticed, but did so now as he dropped her flaccid form onto the ruffled sheets. She wasn't dead, not yet. Her use as a donor would be ended if he'd killed her.

You're beautiful. The Gods created a masterpiece in you.

Slowly, and very deliberately, his finger stroked up the length of her thigh, then across her flat stomach. He took a moment to admire how her smooth skin flowed about her curves. How sad that it was filled with so much lust and trash. He could only imagine what had led her to this moment.

He resisted further maudlin thoughts, remembering that she was no longer his, but theirs. It was time to summon his masters and make the offering. This was his gift to them, and there would be nothing left when their appetite was satisfied.

Daigar opened Talya's eyes with his thumbs. A slight trickle of blood in the corner of the eye where the spine had pierced.

'What's it like?' he asked. He knew she was conscious; trapped and unable to move. No longer capable of speech, but it was important that she saw what was to come. Necessary that she took with her the truth, so the Gods would judge him.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

The donor was helpless, and waiting; how he hated the waiting. The lull stripped him of euphoria, and allowed his emotions to settle. He couldn't shake the damning feeling of disgust for what was yet to come. He wanted to leave, to remember them as they were, but *they* wouldn't allow that. He was instructed to remain. He must wait, and in the lull he suffered.

At first he'd done as they commanded because that was their bargain; what had been agreed. They'd delivered on their side, and so he did likewise. At first it had seemed easy. He was already a killer for a cause, what difference if he killed for personal gain. For the ones he loved.

It was for her, Estha, that the bargain had been struck. For his dear wife that he continued long after the nightmares had begun. It was thoughts of her whilst he waited that stripped away his hardened shield.

'Derlin,' he said, 'that's my real name.' Her eyes asked him, why? 'Take it with you,' he took her hand. 'Hold me accountable when my time is done.'

He could almost hear the sounds being forced out through her eyes. The sound of screams for him to let her go as Talya lay frozen in a final moment of disbelief. Derlin imagined her thrashing against the walls of her mind, unable to break free. He'd felt them all do the same. Derlin closed her eyes. A merciful gesture.

'What was yours, is now theirs,' he whispered, and stepped away to stand against the wall. They were coming.

They came through the mirror. To them it was an open door. A gateway to their prize. They swept through its glass and into the room with a frenzy. Spirits of the light with darkness in their souls. That's if they had any souls, which Derlin doubted. They were wraith-like spirits who devoured their prey. Swirling viciously in and out through the body like savage thieves, intent to strip it of life.

When they were done, there was nothing left but the cold bark of what had once been.

As it happened, Derlin faced the mirror. There were times when he thought that this copy of himself, this *reflection* might take on a life of its own. That it might step out from the mirror and greet him, before it walked away in disgust.

He sneered at the doppelgänger. The doppelgänger sneered back. It seemed more likely that it would kill him, than pass him by.

Derlin pulled his shirt over his head and pushed his arms through the sleeves, adjusting the leather thong that tightened the neck before turning to see, what was always the same scene. he'd become accustomed to it a long time ago.

The whore Talya was gone. The soft warm body that he'd laid with barely an hour since, was no more. Only a damned and ugly shell was left. Much like the bodies of soldiers he'd seen slain in the desert, their corpses left to desiccate in the scorching heat.

He always made a point of closing their eyes before they came. A sympathetic gesture on his part. But after, the donor's eyes were always open, staring. In their final state he knew that they had watched, unable to struggle, and he knew that they had been terrified beyond all comprehension at the savage rite performed.

Derlin pulled the bedcover over Talya's face. He'd made a bargain with demons a long time since. The women, for the boy. For his son, Drai. For his wife, Estha. So many times he'd wanted to tell her. But how? And yet somehow she'd guessed. Somehow she knew. Not the details, how could she. But the deed.

Perhaps it was written across his face each time he'd come home.

I awoke with more than a start; my heart pounding like a blacksmith's hammer, whilst sweat seeped from every pore in my body. A scream was caught in the back of my throat, unable to escape my mouth as my head fell forward to be cradled by my hands.

What had I just seen? What obscene ritual had played out in front of my eyes?

It was like returning from the Dreaming, but worse. So much worse. The moment my eyes had opened I'd understood where I'd been, even if I now tried to deny it. Just like the bitark and the forest stag, I had seen through the eyes of another, and never so clearly as now.

I was shocked and horrified at what I'd seen and couldn't believe it to be true. This had to be a bad dream or a nightmare. But how, I didn't dream. I never had. And I knew all too well whose eyes I had traded unwillingly for my own. I flinched as the memory of what I'd seen returned in graphic detail. I saw *his* face in that mirror as clearly as if he stood across the room from me now.

You can't wipe a picture like that from your mind. He had stood there in front of the mirror and I knew him so well, that fine muscular figure and eyes so brown. He'd lied about his name, Daigar? For I knew his real name, Derlin, and I spoke it aloud. I spoke it with shame.

'Derlin . . .' Husband of Estha. Father to the child named Draï. I felt sick at what I'd just seen.

I threw my legs over the side of the bed and got to my feet. I barely noticed the burnt stem of incense that had fallen to its side in a small glass bowl on the floor, but the strong smell of its odour was all about me, stifling me. Its smell so foul it smothered my airways. I needed air, I needed to breathe deeply of the fresh air outside. I opened the door and moved as

quickly as I could across the passage and down the stairs towards the exit. Where I fumbled at the bolt that secured the door, and flung it open. I stumbled outside and sucked in the air. As my mind calmed I realised how quiet it all was now, compared to our arrival. A deathly hush had set in amongst the streets of Boundary, as had the cold. But I didn't care, I just wanted to forget.

‘Are you ill?’ asked a voice from the shadows.

I turned towards the question and backed away in the same movement.

‘Hello?’

The moonlight was strong, but the street had many shadows. Being tearful hardly helped me see.

‘Who’s there?’

‘Are you ill?’ a girl’s voice, and more insistent I answer this time.

‘No,’ I shook my head. ‘Where are you?’

‘If the Provost finds you like this in the street, outside of an inn. They’ll think you drunk, or worse, a thief. They may arrest you.’

Slow footsteps clicked on the cobbles and I saw her. A girl barely older than I, her face bemused. Her demeanour one of concern. ‘Do you have friends inside? Are you lost? The Provost check everyone this late on these streets.’

What are you doing out so late? Or was it early. Not that I really cared.

Saski, she reminded me of Saski. The way her hair fell to frame her face. It was shoulder length, and red. Or so it seemed. The moonlight glinted out hints of auburn. But not her natural colour as I could just make out some darker roots. *Who are you, out this late?* The girl had olive skin and dark coloured eyes, that were narrowed more than most. A petite little nose that didn’t really go with her face, or was it just the light. I felt a grin cross my lips. That a pretty girl would find me here at this time . . . She came closer, and I couldn’t help but notice the clothes she wore were ill fitted. A man’s shirt and a shin length skirt that was ragged at the hem. Hand-me-downs perhaps.

‘Stop staring at me,’ she said, her voice laced with a hint of frustration.

‘Why are you staring at me? I’m trying to help you.’

‘I don’t need your concern,’ I said, not meaning to sound quite so ungrateful.

‘Oh really? Well, we’ll see how concerned you are when the Provost sell you to the Khassari. They’re here you know. Come to raise support for their army.’

‘You’ve seen the Druid?’

‘Dozens of times,’ she said. ‘They need fodder for the war. You do know we’re at war?’ she tapped the side of her head. ‘I only ask, because you seem a bit simple?’

‘I, what?’ *Simple?* ‘Hair,’ I said, pointing at my own. ‘It’s flatter on this side, you’ve been sleeping in that doorway. Your left shoe is smaller than your right, which means you couldn’t steal a matching pair. You’re the thief the Provost will arrest. And when was the last time you ate?’

‘Shush,’ her voice raised for the first time. ‘I meant what I said. The Provost began to recruit when the Druid turned up. They’re paid for each one they find, and are not known to be picky about who they take,’ her small narrow lips tightened and she bit gently. ‘Two days ago.’

‘Two?’ *What does that mean?* ‘Two, what?’

‘Days since I ate. You asked. You should go back inside.’

‘Why?’

‘I’ve just been telling you, or are you deaf? Should, I, speak, more, slowly?’

‘You’re very rude,’ I said.

‘And the Empire is at war. Do you want to go to war?’

‘My father is a warrior.’

She tilted her head to one side. ‘That’s even worse; you’ll probably want to go with them,’ she reached out and took my hand. Began walking me back to the inn. ‘You’re obviously too stupid to be let out alone. Come on, let’s go inside.’

Before I knew it I was being hauled back through the door. By the way she reconnoitred the inside, I guessed she really was a thief.

‘Which way is the kitchen?’ she whispered.

I hadn't realised how dark and empty the inn was past closing. I didn't really care. It was nice to have my hand held, even by a stranger. She pulled me inside, and tugged me across the floor of the main hall.

'Through the door behind the bar,' I said. *Are you smiling?* I was looking around and feeling guilty. 'We've paid to be here,' I whispered, and wondered why.

'Quickly . . .' She ushered me to jump the innkeeper's bar. Then we were through the kitchen door.

'Hungry?' she asked. Then sat me down in an old chair. A moment later an oil lamp was lit and my new friend was being followed around by her shadow. Her hands checking through the jars on numerous shelves.

How lightly she moved her slight frame across the floor. I'd never seen anyone move in such a lissom manner; so controlled and nimble. She slid gracefully over a preparation table and disappeared. A few moments later she returned with a metal plate piled with scraps of meat, and a thick slice of bread. In her other hand a stout wooden mug.

'Find some cups,' she urged. 'Come on, I'm hungry.'

‘What do they call you farm-boy?’

‘Drai.’

‘Drai? That’s an odd name. Is it short for something?’

‘No. Just Drai. Are you going to pay for that?’

‘Uh-uh,’ she shook her head, ‘the owner can afford some left-overs.’

It was oddly endearing the way she smiled, chewed, and ignored me all at the same time. Each mouthful of food instantly washed down with a slurp from a metal mug.’

‘Is that wine?’ I asked, already knowing the answer. Her drinks rich aroma sweet and spicy. ‘Is that leftovers as well?’

‘Hmm, from a bottle I found. They won’t know it’s missing.’ She offered me a chunk of bread. ‘So what were you doing outside?’

‘Nothing.’

The bread stopping halfway to her mouth, now frowned, her nose scrunched. ‘You looked angry about something.’

‘I had a dream,’ I admitted. ‘A bad one. I needed some air.’

‘Hmm, I have bad dreams,’ she said, ‘but they’re only dreams. They can’t hurt you. Where are your parents, upstairs?’

I shook my head. ‘No.’

‘Huh, they left you on your own?’

‘Mama is dead,’ I shrugged. ‘Father is, somewhere else.’

‘Oh, sorry,’ For the first time her appetite seemed to diminish. ‘My parents are dead too, not that I ever really knew them.’ A moment of silence, followed by a cocky smile. ‘My friends call me, Mistri,’ she wiped her hand on her shirt and offered it to me.

You’ve got friends? I slid my fingers into hers. As our palms touched and shook, I felt a strange sensation that I had found someone special.

‘So what was it about, this dream that made you throw up in the street?’

‘My father. It was just a dream.’

The last piece of bread slid into her mouth which was barely large enough to contain such a bold crust. ‘It, ust, av be, ad.’ She held a finger up and emptied her mug. ‘It must have been really bad,’ she repeated.

I didn’t want to talk about it. ‘That’s a nice name, Mistri. I like it. Where do you live?’

‘Change the subject, good move. I always do that when I don’t like the question. Are you sure you’re not hungry; there’s loads of good stuff in there. Oh, and thanks for opening the door and letting me in. You do know that makes us partners in crime, right?’

‘We’ll pay for it,’ I said.

‘We? I thought you were alone,’ she got up and checked the door.

‘I have a friend. She’s asleep upstairs. I think she’d like you.’

‘Why wouldn’t she like me? Everyone likes me. D’you think they have cake?’

‘What do you know about the Khassari?’ I asked. I don’t know why, it just came out. Her face stretched in an odd way and I wasn’t sure it was concern for the question, or her tongue dislodging food from her teeth.

‘Enough to know that you don’t want to mess with them. They’re not nice people.’

‘So I’m told. But who are they? What do they do?’

She traced her finger across the plate picking up tiny pieces of salt, then stuck it in her mouth. She sat back in the chair and raising her feet onto the table. ‘Why do you want to know?’

‘I saw one.’ *And I felt his mind search the crowd for me.* I was more sure of it now than before. ‘Why are people scared of him?’

‘Derr, he’s a Druid. A religious bully. The Emperor stamps his feet and his kind make things happen.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘Oh, let’s see. They make people like you and me disappear,’ she waggled her finger as if telling a small child off. ‘Bad people,’ she frowned. ‘Were you brought up in a nutshell? I can see you need to be taken under my wing.’

That didn’t seem to be such a bad idea; I would welcome instruction on a wide variety of subjects. She took her feet from the table.

‘I should be going.’

‘What, why? Go where?’

‘I’m not rich like you farm-boy. I can’t afford to stay in a place like this. Go back to your warm room and get some sleep. No more nightmares, and no more running out into the street in the dead of night. You never know who you might run into?’

She winked at me. An innocuous act, but it stirred me; gave me reason to smile. My new friend was half-way to the door and adjusting her long and oversized skirt before I’d gotten to my feet.

‘Where will you be later, say, about midday?’

‘At the market, I suppose. My friend’s rented a stall. She’s a healer.’

‘Good, everyone nows where to find a healer,’ she pointed at me. ‘I’ll come find you tomorrow, farm-boy.’

‘Where are you going, it’s cold outside?’

A moment later I was alone again, staring at the door. A thick stupid grin plastered on my face. For all intent and purpose I’d met the female version of Brak. I raised my own feet to the table top, and then removed them as I saw the empty plate.

God’s teeth, if anyone comes in now, I’ll be branded the thief.

I rose from my bed reluctantly, still half-dazed with tiredness. Trying to forget my dream. My first encounter with what lay deep within the sleeping world; within the realms of Shari.

Perhaps the mischievous Goddess had teased me, how could any of it be real. My father . . . Maybe even the girl. After all I had never been this far from home before. My senses were being saturated with strange new encounters. Everything was so different here. I was different. I felt more vulnerable, and yet I was more aware.

“It’s important to get to the city square early, to find a good pitch.” Joran had said as she’d shook me awake. And before I knew it I had my rucksack on my back and was following her to the stable outside. Outside where the sun prepared to rise, and the dew warmed into plumes from the rooftops to spread a solemn looking mist. Birds congregated on chimneys and chattered in welcome of the new day. At one point they cawed together with such a racket I wanted to throw something to shut them up. Early morning in the city smelt of piss, emptied indiscriminately into the street. Not that Tilly or Joran seemed concerned, as the cart bumped forward through the narrow side-streets, that grew wider with each turn of the wheels. Until we trotted out into a vast opening Joran called ‘The Grand Square’.

What a sight it was, this huge expanse in the middle of a densely packed city. It made me dizzy to look up at the surrounding houses and buildings. Four hundred and sixty-seven windows, many quartered by much smaller panes. Forty-eight chimneys, twenty-seven of which were billowing smoke. At the Square’s centre we half-circled a great and ornate fountain that rose to four times my height with the statue of an unknown hero saddled to the back of a fish. At least I think it was a fish. The tall marble effigy

surrounded by eight smaller figures who poured constant streams of water into a walled basin almost as high as our wheels.

All about us carts were being unhitched, their sides dropped. Awnings being opened in readiness. What a wonderful sight.

Our pitch was small, but adequate. The market superintendent keen to take coin from Joran. The bags in the cart held everything from a small awning to fabric racks which I unfolded and stood upright and then filled with the pouches in which her potions were prepared. The herbs I hung from the side of the cart until there was no more room and wondered if I should hang them on Tilly, who snorted indignantly as I sized her up for the task.

As the Square filled, the sounds from the fountain faded. The birds flew away in search of food, and a clear blue sky unfolded above us. Sellers shouted to be heard as the first of the city dwellers began to arrive. Before long I was overwhelmed with the mass of people who jostled down carefully prepared aisles.

We were inundated with folk sifting through our potions. Some looking for specific treatments, others keen to browse. Our herbal drafts were especially popular. Tonics to be stirred within a cup of fresh water drawn from the fountain. In a short time I realised just how much I had learnt in the previous months. What particular remedy would suffice for a particular ailment, and how much to prescribe. I was in good demand for my advice, and found my sales technique improved with each sale. Even our herbs sold well giving off a pleasingly fragrant odour that stifled the more peculiar smells wafting from some of the other stalls. Mistri was right, healers were in high demand. Joran's products were difficult to obtain for a fair price within these city walls. I watched that little tin box by my feet fill with old and tarnished coins, small denominations of varying shapes and sizes.

There were so many people mingled within the market, so many individuals with lives of their own. It was an incredible feeling to be there, and a wonderful sight to behold.

The day was a blur with barely a moment to think for myself we were so busy. Even so I watched for her, that girl, despite all the distractions.

It wasn't until the middle of the day when my eyes were tired and my feet sore, that I saw her, leaning casually against the pole of the butchers several stalls down. Her name should have been Mischievous, with a smile like that.

You came. Passers-by blocking her from my sight. My aged customer demanding my attention. 'Yes, no. Err, take two each night. It will feel much better.' *What?* 'Oh, coin, thank you.' *Mistri? Where is she? I can't see her.*

A sudden chill on a hot day provoked a wave of perspiration that shed across my skin. I saw someone else; an even more familiar face. I'd recognise those finger like bunches of hair anywhere. It was the Mercian woman, walking boldly amongst the crowd, and not a dozen feet from where I stood. Every hair on my body stood tall as the market went quiet, no silent. Everyone around me became still. No-one moved.

Just her; the girl in the bright purple shawl. That long skirt trailing from her ankles along the ground. She stared at me and I at her. I watched those innocent blue eyes roll upward in her head and turn white.

'You said two, one every night. I need two.'

'Two? What?'

The old woman held her hand out expectantly. 'It's the old problem flaring up again.'

The noise returned. All these people, each in their own little world, all interacting in the Square. I'd taken my eyes away for a moment and the Mercian was gone.

'You said two. I've only got one.'

‘Sorry, yes, here,’ I pulled a sprig from the wagon’s side. All the time trying to see, as I filled a small wooden cup and crushed the leaves. I saw nothing but awnings, and wagons, and so many people. ‘Here,’ I said, and slipped my powdery mix into a tiny bottle.

‘It looks disgusting,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘Err, no, it’s good for your problem.’

She’d told me I would see her three more times and that pain would always follow. I hadn’t liked the sound of those words, and I didn’t like them now.

‘Are you sure you’ve mixed it properly?’

‘Trust me, I’m a healer.’ That at least felt good to say as I smiled, and invited her to leave. Two more already waiting. My eyes still distracted as they searched the crowd.

‘Perhaps you could give a little something for the taste?’

‘Hmmm? Yes, of course.’ *Taste?* She hadn’t even sipped it yet?

‘And something for the lumps I get under here, they do itch a lot. Would you like to see?’

Lumps? ‘No, please,’ I took a step back. ‘Here, try this. It’s dry honey, it will help. No charge,’ I dropped a small square of dried honey onto the carts tailboard. ‘Oh, and this,’ I took a folded leaf from a box on the stand, opened it and took one white ball from the package. I held it up to the sky to pretend the perfumed ball was a cure. ‘This,’ I said in a tone of wonder, ‘is a cure for all lumps, bumps, rashes and sores.’ I held it close to her wrinkled face and watched a dreary expression turn into a haggard grin. ‘Take the potion, and then walk briskly for at least ten minutes.’ It was the fastest and most battered coin dropped into my palm that day.

‘Walk for ten minutes, you say?’

‘It’s the most important part of the cure,’ I said. ‘Ten minutes,’ I shouted, ‘and don’t come back,’ I whispered.

‘Nice move farm-boy.’

What? I turned to see Mistri poking at the pouches. She lifted some strands of dillweed; pulled a face, and let it flop back against the side of the cart. ‘What have you got that can soothe a sore tooth?’

‘Some balm,’ I suggested. ‘Rubbed on the gums twice a day. It will reduce inflammation and help calm the nerve.’

‘And the rash on my arm?’ she pretended to scratch her forearm.

‘I’d recommend a patchel posey. Ground lightly and mixed with water it turns into a paste. Apply it every night, and then wrap a vinegar leaf around, tied with string.’ I leant forward over the dillweed. ‘Can I ask if madam can afford to shop here?’

‘Madam is like royalty, she doesn’t carry coin.’

I smirked and cast an eye toward Joran who was encouraging a very ugly woman to lift her shirt to reveal whatever problem lay beneath. She was refusing the indignant request and insisting on more privacy. Quite where that would come from I was unsure.

‘Have you seen the rest of the market?’ Mistri asked, something orange held in her hand. It looked peeled and ready to eat.

‘You didn’t . . .’

‘Steal it? Probably.’

I checked to see if anyone close sold fruit, and was relieved to see they didn’t.

‘Don’t worry, I paid for it.’

My face gave must have given me away.

‘I will later, I promise,’ she dangled a segment of the fruit in front of me. ‘Open,’ she said, and put the juicy flesh into my mouth.

It was sweet, tangy and delightfully sharp.

‘Your hair, it’s different.’

‘You like?’ she twirled it in her fingers.

I did. The titian shine was gone, replaced with a dark appeal. Not quite black, but close, and she had a plait that hung from both sides each one tucked behind an ear.

‘Come on, I’ll show you around.’

‘What? No, I can’t just leave.’ I nodded toward Joran and shrugged my shoulders.

‘I think she can get by without you for, what, an hour?’

I looked at Joran and then again at Mistri. ‘I’ll ask, but no promises.’

To my surprise I was actually encouraged to go.

‘She looks like a nice girl, ‘Joran said, ‘I’ll be fine for a while, but don’t leave the Square.’

She made me promise.

It was like we swam against the tide, Mistri pulling me by the hand. Encouraging me not to let go. Her cheeky grin infectious, as we made our way through the crowd. What a place this was; the familiar, and the strange. A place where smells hung like pendants, and then merged like fog. From each stall bartered traders, colourful and loud. I had no idea that so much stuff existed. I saw fish and poultry; carpets and rugs. Metal-ware of all shape and description. Even weapons, sold by a man I would not wish to meet at night. Fruit, vegetables, and grain were in abundance. Even toys and furniture. Most of all I liked the stalls of clothing where I slowed her down by trying on new boots just to see what they felt like.

Mistri showed me how to eat for free. We sought out the vendors offering small samples of their meat and fruit. Indulging in generosity, with a sour face to avoid the hard sell. We moved on quickly. It was a game she played well, and with the skills of an actress. We were well fed for the price of a walk.

Finding out that she was a good thief was much more alarming. She'd try to distract me; to mask her intention. Her hands swift, but not quick enough to catch me out.

She dared herself to steal, I could see it in her eyes, and I found myself caught up in the moment. Mistri, my new friend, was engaging and exciting. She showed me a different side to life I would not have dared to enter.

'Let's go up there,' I pointed to the roof tops, 'we can see everything from up there.' I wanted to put an end to her pilfering. Just as she stole an apple, and hid it in her skirt.

'Hey, your friend said you weren't to leave the Square.'

‘Seriously?’ Could I believe what I was hearing? Was that apprehension I detected? ‘Since when did you do as anyone asked? Besides, we’re not actually leaving the Square are we?’ I pointed up. ‘You’re not scared of heights are you?’

I ran backward and saw indecision for the first time. ‘Come on.’ I headed up the steps of the closest building, sure that she would follow, and she did.

The door of the house was locked and wouldn’t budge, even when I barged it with my shoulder. Such a big door, much taller than me. The obstruction heavy and thick, and fastened firm to a stocky frame. It had keyhole half way up below a big round handle.

‘Drai, we should go back?’ I felt her hand on my shoulder.

‘Why? I want to see it all from up there. Go on, open the door. I know you can.’ I was daring her to do so.

‘Drai . . .’

‘Are you scared?’

‘No.’

‘Then open it for me. Please.’ I was on a high. Feeling bold, and rebellious. Her fault, not mine.

She lifted her skirt right up to the top of a slim thigh. An act I found as pleasing as it was a shock. I was even more surprised as the raised hem revealed a small dagger no longer than the length of my hand, strapped to her smooth olive skin. A menacing specimen that drew out, her skirt dropped, a questionable look on her face. I was staring. A moment later the blade was inside the lock pretending to be a key.

‘Why do you need a knife?’

‘Shush, this is more difficult than it looks.’

For a slip of a girl she was full of surprises. One hard thump on the hilt with her palm whilst twisting the blade, and like magic the lock turned.

I was impressed, and also aware of the pleasure she took from my appreciation of her skills. She removed the knife and rolled it around her fingers. I wanted to see that again, but the heavy obstruction opened with her back leant against it.

‘You coming farm-boy?’ she asked.

Yes, that's the look I wanted; the bit between her teeth again. My heart thumping with excitement. A quick look around to assure myself that no-one was watching; I followed her in.

What sort of people live in such splendour? I swear the entrance was bigger than our house, and was that a carpet on the floor? I knelt down and ran my hand across the dense grain of the woollen surface, my eyes absorbing the intricate pattern in its weave. Six hundred and sixty-six squares in the design with fine white tassels fluffed out around its edge. One hundred of them, twenty-five on each side.

‘Have you never seen a rug before?’

I looked up to see her standing on a landing. A big wide wonderful staircase swept upward in a curve to the next floor and then on. A balustrade of polished wood. More carpet on each step with a brass bar across each. Beautifully carved spindles that I couldn’t wait to count. My nerves were tingled to their limit.

A door closed unseen further up to distract us both. Mistri’s finger to her lips, as we waited. The door closing again somewhere above

‘Hey, what are you waiting for?’ she was around on the next stairs, leaning over to encourage me.

With a triumphant laugh I leapt from the hallway to the stairs and ascended them two at a time, but was far too slow to catch her. God’s teeth, she was quick. The pace of a small lizard climbing a wall, on stairs that seemed endless. At the top I found her balanced on one foot atop the banister and reaching for the skylight which was just about in reach.

I looked down. Six floors, it was a long drop. ‘Careful,’ I said.

But she already had the hatch open, and was climbing through. A wave of encouragement for me to follow.

She’d made it look so easy, but I couldn’t atop looking down.

‘Drai, are you sure you want to?’

It was awkward, but I got onto the handrail, my hands well gripped on the flower shaped post. I teetered as I stretched to reach for the frame above me.

‘Here, and here,’ she said. ‘Get a good hold.’

I wasn’t letting go. I grabbed, clambered, and pulled. I felt her hands grab my shirt and trousers to pull me through. I was dragged through the gap in the roof, to emerge in an ungainly fashion. My feet followed as I managed to slide head first down into the valley below. A welcome feeling to finally have my backside planted firmly on the roof slates outside.

‘Come on farm-boy.’

Her taunt sounded triumphant as she ran up to the ridge and tottered across. She jumped into the gully that ran the length of the terrace, her back steadied against the aged bricks of a parapet wall. I followed, laughing. She held out her hand to assist me, but I refused. My pride at stake, I slid on my arse down the valley towards the wall. A moment later I was looking over its edge.

Dear Gods, it was a longer way down than it had looked from the Square below. I felt a sudden rush of blood and the need to breathe. Instinctively I gripped firmly at the stones that capped the wall, around chest height they felt safe. This wasn’t like climbing trees in the forest. Up here the space was so open and vast. No branches to block the sky, or to help break a fall. On the other side of this small wall was a free fall to the ground. Too far down with too long to think about what would happen at the end. Even the breeze felt dangerous with only the slightest tug at my shirt.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she said, ‘so clear and, well, blue.’

I had to agree but it was hardly the first time either of us had seen the sky. I leant a little further to see more. Surely this was the largest market in the entire Empire. It sprawled throughout the Square and I counted the number of awnings. Like tents they fluttered in a shifting breeze. I watched in awe the multitude that milled between the stands, their movement chaotic, but with a strange, almost orderly flow. Was this how it was when the Gods looked down at us from the stars?

‘Careful,’ Mistri pushed me with her hands, holding firm at my shirt as she did. I froze and then burst with laughter as the resultant fear of falling diminished as suddenly as it had sprung to grip my heart.

‘Not funny,’ Actually it was, and I resolved to pay her back knowing how close I had come to screaming. ‘This way,’ I was empowered with the thrill and followed the parapet, leaving its sanctuary to walk on the hips of the neighbouring roof.

‘Drai, that’s dangerous.’

Yes, it was. And it felt good, if a little unsteady. With my arms outstretched I teetered. One, two, three steps and I was over, sliding again on my arse to a flat piece of roof a short distance below. I landed backward, no harm done, but was able to watch as Mistri jumped the slates and moved effortlessly to cross the roof. She didn’t even look at her feet as she hitched her skirt above her knees, her gaze fixed always on mine, she exuded a cheeky grin that showed no fear. No anxiety or thought at the prospect of falling. I was full of admiration for her poise and sureness of foot, like the rodents that played in the trees back home. She landed beside me, then winked as her skirt fell down to her boots. A movement of her eye that inspired me to share in her confidence. But even so, one thought did occur to me.

How are we going to get back up?

The air is so fresh up here. We were birds perched and watching the busy shapes below without a care. The fear of falling no longer a fear. Life up here was sweet as I bit deep into the flesh of an apple that Mistri had given to me, which somehow tasted more exotic knowing that she'd stolen it. The shiny red fruit had been hidden in her skirt, and I wondered if her whole life was concealed somewhere within its hidden pockets.

'Do you actually live on the city's streets?' I asked. 'Brak told me about beggars once. The homeless that drift within the city walls.'

'Brak?'

'He's my friend.'

'I'm surprised you have any friends with questions like that.' Her own apple-core bounced off my head and landed on the parapet. I scrambled on all fours to watch it fall to the cobbles below. As usual the words came out with little forethought to what I was saying.

'Is Mistri your real name?' I stole a glance back at her. 'It's a bit odd for a name.' It struck me she had very white teeth for one so, homeless. 'Where do you come from?' The tanned tone of her skin suggested another part of the Empire. I could just make out the faintest of freckles below her eyes, barely noticeable, hiding in the pigment.

'Didn't I say that Draï was an odd name?'

Fine, she wanted to avoid the questions. So I ignored hers too.

'Three thousand seven hundred and sixty-four,' I said. 'The number of cobbles between the flower stall, and the bend in the street.' She didn't seem impressed.

'Can you see them down there?' was her reply. 'All those people, all gathered in one place. It's life, Draï. It's what people do. They leave their beds to forage; to find the things they need to survive. They communicate,

congregate, and then fight when the fancy takes them. Then they return to their beds and go to sleep. And when their time is done, they are no more.'

Really? That's a strange thing to say. Perhaps it was because of my dangerous flight across the rooftop, or my heightened senses now subdued. But as I lay there I did see the people below in a very different way. Much smaller, and no longer individuals; they'd merged into a larger seething mass. *Like ants, I suppose.*

I felt her elbow dig into my ribs. 'Follow me, I'll show you something more interesting.'

I thought that three thousand seven hundred and sixty-four was interesting. Apparently not.

Mistri was off again. Two steps and a short stride through the air and she landed like a cat, her legs absorbing the short fall onto a slightly lower roof, its angle less threatening than the last as she sprinted up its large slates. I spared a thought for the plight of the apple core.

Beirdin's teeth, she's mad.

Apparently, so was I, as I ignored the danger and followed her lead. Able to jump the gap, but not as she did, not like a cat; more like a beast of burden. I clattered the roof opposite and stumbled, slipped, spread-eagled myself with a wave of panic. I took a moments pause for thought. Above me I could see her, sat on the ridge, smiling.

Fine then. I knew what Brak would do. The parapet would catch me anyway. So I lifted myself and began a slow walk up to join her.

From where we were now I could clearly see the main street that ran south from the Square, and the city beyond. Such a warren of streets and houses, its skyline congested by roofs so tightly packed together. A maze of sorts, and separated only by the stony causeways we followed in the cart the day before.

‘Look over there,’ she said, and I followed her hand.

I saw a group of buildings more formal in their design, and much larger than the others. Their colour was different too; their walls bleached somehow for a whitened effect. I wondered what they were, as great effort and expense had gone into their building.

‘That’s the Warden’s residence, the one with the fancy windows and the flags. That one next to it, the white building with all the steps, that’s the city treasury. I think the Warden likes living next to all the coins. He probably counts them every night. And see there, the taller one opposite. That’s the chambers of the City Council,’ she gave me a stern look. ‘That’s where all the important people meet and decide what the rest of us want to do.’

‘You don’t like them. Why?’

‘They put profit before people.’

Maybe that was true. Whoever had built that building had been fond of columns, and ornate intricacy. Everything designed to impress. I’d never seen anything like it. So grand in its scale, and yet beholding to the detail. The finials above the windows, and the corbeling within the walls. The numerous reliefs, and the statues set within the walls. Unfamiliar figures. I wondered if they were Gods.

I needed to get closer and got to my feet. I jumped to a gully opposite, behind the safety of a small parapet. As I wandered down I left the Square

behind, the rooftops ahead steeper pitched and dangerous. But I was getting good at this, and I managed to find a vantage directly opposite the Treasury itself. From here I could see groups of people that were gathered on the steps, standing in several clusters. Each group wearing different dress.

‘Who are they?’ I asked.

‘It must be tribute,’ she said. ‘Once a year the tribes come from the plains to the city to honour the Emperor.’

‘That’s good,’ I said. I felt a similar call myself. I gathered that she didn’t. ‘Shouldn’t he be honoured?’ I asked.

‘Drai, honouring the Emperor means paying him coin. It’s a fealty to the Emperor that they can’t afford. They bring a chest filled with coins to the Warden; the Senates representative in Pillio. They pass tribute on to him, and by doing so pledge their loyalty. In return the Emperor doesn’t send out the troops. Ah, you get it now. The Warden takes a small cut, and he passes the tribute on to the Governor. Who’s responsible for the tax collection. It happens all over the Kingdom. Every Governor gets paid; he then takes all tributes to the capital. The more coin you take, the more important you become. I think it must be a good life to be a Governor.’

‘The Emperor must have a big chest to keep all the coins in.’ Of that I was sure. But I was more interested in the people on the steps. ‘Who they are?’ I was curious about the strangers, all dressed in colourful cloth.

Mistri settled down close to me. I hadn’t noticed before that she wore perfume. The sweet scent of corriaster, a very rare flower to find. Mixed with other fragrances I didn’t recognise. Who did she steal such an expensive perfume from?

‘See the ones on the farthest left,’ she said. ‘If you look at them, and not at me.’ I was staring. ‘The ones with the blue paint on their necks,’ she said, ‘they’re Francs. In war their warriors paint their face and their bodies. It gives them a wild and edgy appearance. I bet you didn’t know that their Gods live in the clouds. There’s a whole tribe of them up there, apparently? Which must be quite nice; sleeping in the clouds, and floating on the wind. A peaceful existence.’

I had to admit the fantasy had merit.

‘They used to be nomads until they resettled in just about every corner of the Empire. About a hundred years ago, I think. They were always rebelling against someone, until the first Emperor fought a war to subdue them. I think he bribed them in the end, it was cheaper. He gave them land and title all about the Empire. He eroded their strength in numbers and now their way of life is nearly gone. He was a clever man, the first Emperor. Did you know the plains Franks breed the finest horses in the Kingdoms?’

I shook my head.

‘Do you have any idea how much the rich will pay for one of their horses?’

Obviously I did not, but I assumed it was a lot.

‘They breed cattle and other animals as well. They say you never see a poor Frank, and I think that’s the truth,’ she seemed to feign disappointment. ‘No eye for fashion though. All that coin and they still wear traditional clothing. I mean, who wears a towel round their head? And sandals, it’s hardly the weather.’

‘Who are they?’ I motioned to the group with long hair who stood furthest from the others. A smaller delegation stood on the lower steps.

‘One of the desert tribes,’ she replied, ‘who knows which one, there are so many. I think they take it in turns to come.’

‘I’ve never seen anyone with such dark skin,’ I said, finding a little more comfort in a narrow gully. Keeping my head down, keen not to be seen. I was fascinated by the colour of their skin. The colour of mud been washed by rain. Much taller than the others and wearing sleeveless shirts that clad about muscular torsos. Their trousers too wide at the top and ankle narrow at the bottom

‘Their children have blue eyes,’ she said. ‘That’s a bit odd. I mean, blue? Every child born in the Desert Nations has blue eyes, male and female. They turn brown at puberty and stay that colour for the rest of their lives.’

‘What do you know about, Vampyrar?’ I asked, keen to take advantage of her knowledge. And from her reaction I guessed quite a bit.

‘What interest does a farm-boy have in . . . Are you a traitor to the Empire?’

‘What? No, what made you say that?’

She got closer to the wall. ‘Drai, look, I see Naribs. I so love Naribs, don’t you?’

I wouldn’t know as all I could see now was the back of her head. I squeezed by and managed to see the steps again.

‘Don’t you just love what they do to their hair. Do you think it would suit me?’ she pushed at her ponytails with her hand. ‘Well, do you?’

No, I didn’t. And felt angry that she was ignoring my questions again.

What do you know about the Vampyrarai? I squeezed myself between her and the wall. Settled my eyes on the Naribs who moved light-footed up the steps. They certainly stood out, dressed as they were in pale leather, sown boldly with dark lace. Each one clad differently, yet oddly the same, and they struck me as more warrior-like than the others. One even had a feather sticking out from his hair. Hair woven so tightly it fell in locks that draped full flow from their heads to cover their shoulders. And half their delegation were woman, unlike the others, whose groups were formed only from men.

‘Did you know that when a Narib loses their mate, the male will cry out each night for a month. It’s to let the spirits know that he’s ready to walk with her. He’ll sleep on the same mattress for the rest of his days, and will never share with another woman. If it’s the male that passes on, the female will fast for three weeks; no food and only a single handful of water each day. If she dies then their souls are fated together, and forever. If she survives, then it’s the Gods will that she must move on and find another mate.’ Mistri slumped against the bricks, her arms dangling over the parapet. ‘It’s so romantic. Don’t you think it’s romantic?’

I didn’t think she actually wanted an answer as she ran her fingers through her hair again.

‘Huh, look, they’ve brought a Shaman,’ her fingers grabbed the wall and for a second I thought she was actually going to stand up and shout. ‘Now that’s strange, because they never leave the mountains. Ever.’ She lowered herself back behind the wall. ‘That can only mean one thing.’

What? What does it mean?

‘The rumours are true then. I’ve heard rumours that the mountain’s song has changed. That there’s been a disturbance in the winds. They say that Alusia’s harmony has returned.’ She gave me that look again, the one she’d first shared with me outside of the inn.

I gave her a look of my own. The ‘who cares’ look, and was flicked hard with a finger on my forehead.

‘She’s the Goddess whose spirit roams the Mountains of the Veil. They say her song can be heard by anyone brave enough to climb the mountain, and who is worthy enough to hear. The Naribs say her melody is a sign that the old Gods are returning.’

How do you know all this? Regardless, it was time to get back. ‘We should go,’ I said. ‘Joran will . . .’

‘Will what? I hate it when people don’t finish a sentence.’

Below me tall horses had arrived, their riders clad in grey. The same one as I’d seen at the gate, and someone else with them.

‘Drai, what’s wrong?’

The Druid was close, I could sense him.

‘Dog soldiers,’ she said, that’s all. Do you know why they call them that?’

No, I didn’t, and I couldn’t see well enough from where I was. I needed to move.

‘It’s because they never leave their master’s side,’ she laughed.

One hand lead the other as I shuffled slowly forward towards where the rainwater emptied into a large iron hopper below.

‘Drai, where are you going? Hey, be careful.’

I wasn’t listening. I leaned through the hole and peered out through the brickwork. The whole wall about it was shelled, the bricks soft. I could feel the clay crumble at my touch.

‘Tell me about the Druids,’ I asked, still unable to see him. ‘Why is he here?’ I knew he was down there, I just couldn’t see. Not yet.

‘Drai, no further.’ I heard her shuffle towards me.

‘Who are they, tell me?’ I’d heard nothing but stories. If only I could reach a little further I’d be able to see.

‘The Druids are Ideologues,’ she said, and I felt her hand on my leg. ‘Do you know what that word means? It means they believe in a stricter form of religion for all. The Druids want to take us back a hundred years; back to the days when we had to ask permission from the Skellits to take a piss. The Empire is too liberal for them; there are too many Gods. We don’t worship fervently enough at the altar. And guess who wants to write all our sermons?’

I half-turned. ‘Skellits?’ I asked.

‘They used to be local priests indoctrinated in the Druid way. Zealots trained to enforce the ideals of the Khassari Druids. These days they’ve been traded in for Clerics,’ she frowned at the last word. ‘Don’t you know anything?’

‘How do you know so much?’ I was finding gaping holes in my education and was eager to fill them.

‘Drai, stop. I said no closer.’

I had a hole and I wanted to see. ‘Tell me more,’ I said.

‘Only if you stop wriggling.’ She still held my leg. ‘Thank you. Now before the Empire came along there were only individual kingdoms. Kings and Princes who constantly fought over, well, everything. Land, titles, women, sheep, ear-wax, bars of soap. Are you listening?’

‘Yes,’ but I was watching too. Keeping vigil for any sign of the man in black. He was close, I could feel him. I wondered if he could sense me too?

‘The Druids were the only ones revered by everyone,’ she said. ‘Borders meant nothing to them. They have dark powers, or so I hear. Not even princes want to mess with magic. So they were allowed their influence, as long as it didn’t interfere with the politics, or affairs of state. Their influence became as important to the rich as it was to the poor. Kings and princes got men’s lives, which left the Druids with their souls. The rich got the cash, and the Druids got more power.’

I felt a tug on my trouser leg.

‘Did you know that every second son of Noble birth was required to be indoctrinated by Skellits? From the age of three, can you believe that?’ she

laughed. ‘Then politics took a hand and Aurista became a separate nation. Your Vampyrai gave them competition in the more mystical arts.’

I turned, my head still in the hole.

‘So its personal?’

‘I’ll say. A great big enemy state as big as all the smaller ones put together. That’s more than enough to focus ruling interests in a similar direction. There was a nationalistic surge, and it backlashes the Druids. That’s another reason they hate the Vamps.’

‘The First Emperor forged a Great Alliance, and subdued any nay-sayers, so the power balance was restored. The Empire was born. But even Emperors have to negotiate treaties. In return for loyalty and the support of all the rulers, he served the Druid Order up on a plate; sharing their accumulative wealth about. Making sure the Druids were hunted down.’

‘But they say the first Emperor went lenient on those who survived. After all, you need magic to fight magic, right? He did a deal with the Druids; gave them protection for obedience and service. Good deal all round, huh?’

‘Why didn’t Scroll tell us this?’

‘Who?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’ She’d let go of my leg so I squirmed forward a little more. A most uncomfortable stance but I could see all three ‘dog soldiers’ down below. I could also hear a horse taking steps towards them. *Black boots*. I saw black boots in stirrups. *It’s him*. The air seemed to tingle as horse and rider flirted with my view. The hem of a dark leather coat and black boots. I reached and leaned as far as I dare. *Just a little more*. A few more inches and I could see.

The bricks moved in my hand and I lurched forward as they tore away. I began to slip but Mistri grabbed my leg. I watched the broken bricks tumble down and a moment later crash to the road below around the Druid. I saw his horse shy, and then rear. I heard someone shout . . . ‘Assassins!’

Swords were drawn as all below us stared up.

The last thing I saw were the grey coats dismount and hasten to the building, weapons drawn. More armed men who ran from the Treasury and

formed a ring on the steps. Shouting, and orders, gave instruction to force entry below. The emissaries being ushered inside still staring and pointing. I felt the eyes of the city staring at me in scorn.

‘Drai, help me.’ Mistri pulled at my legs. ‘Drai!’

Yes, yes. I pushed with my hands. *I can’t move.* As more loose masonry was flung down to the street as I pushed and squirmed to force myself back into the gully.

‘Drai,’ she grabbed me by the collar. ‘Get up, we have to get out of here.’

My head was nodding, but my legs refused.

‘It was an accident,’ I said. ‘I didn’t mean to do it.’ But she was already dragging me by the arm. ‘Drai, we have to leave. The soldiers will be here any moment.’

I was still looking down as she pulled me away. I could see him now, on his horse in the middle of the roadway. The Druid staring straight up at me.

‘Drai, move yourself.’

Yes. ‘Yes . . .’ I could hear them in the building, the sound of heavy boots ascending the stairwell. I heard one other voice, my own, screaming at me to run.

Don't look down, don't look down.

I stumbled and slipped more than I ran, my hands traumatised by tiny cuts as they pawed at the rough texture of the slate.

‘Come on Draï, run, before they arrest us.’

Mistri pulled my arm to quicken my pace as we crossed yet another summit from increasingly steeper roofs. I tripped again going down and stumbled to my knees, the fabric of my trousers threading as I slung my body back to stop my fall. Spreading my weight instinctively, my shirt pulled into my armpits. Mistri’s hands grabbed at me with urge to rise. I was slowing her down, and yet she risked herself to help me.

In that momentary lull all my emotions spiked; I was scared, like never before. She pulled me down and ushered me on as I heard the sound of men beyond the ridge. My senses so heightened I felt them, such determined anger, and I saw them as if they were ghosts. Five armed men, and not too far behind. Moving quickly, more freely than us. The sounds of heavy boots clunking across the rooftop in pursuit. Below us as well, down on the street. I heard men shout for us to, “Stop” “stand down” “You can’t get away” and the prolific sound of horses as more men joined in the chase. As we fled from our pursuers.

Didn’t they understand? *It was an accident.* I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. *I was just curious.*

I was practically dragged down the roof and then forced to jump, down to a flatter roof lined with lead, and I finally managed to run unhindered. Leaping the parapet walls that came one after another. All thoughts of falling lost in the panic.

Beirdin’s teeth, I didn’t even know why I was running. But she did, and I trusted her. And now I feared the soldiers as much as she, as they clambered

across the roof-tops behind, intent to seize us. So I ran. We ran. We jumped onto surfaces that seemed to always be below. From one roof to the next, the buildings set on descending slopes. Far less challenging, but I knew that made it easier for the chasing pack.

‘Down there,’ she pushed me, and we slid down a short pitch of large wooden tiles that cracked and splintered at our weight.

I could see it now, a timber stairwell at the rear of the next house, a way to escape the roof-tops. We dropped down onto the flat planking to hear the wood groan scarily from the effort to shoulder our weight. I didn’t care; it felt like the world was once again beneath my shoes and for that I was grateful. Happy at last we were off the roof.

We’d barely descended the first flight when soldiers started to ascend. A mixture of boots and clanking metal preceding a swaying motion in the stairs from too many soldiers climbing at once.

‘Through here,’ a door that barred our path. Her boot removing the hinges and we were through. ‘I’m sorry, Draï. This is all my fault.’

No, no . . . It had been my careless actions that had knocked the bricks from the wall. Another door was flung open and we began to go upward again. All I could do was follow as she searched for an escape. Her eyes aware and probing at every window and corner. Testing the doors as we ran.

‘In here,’ The last door on the landing, and the only one unlocked. We entered into an open space with stairs, and the only way back up. Into an attic space with a glazed door to the rooftop outside.

I hated that door the moment I saw it, and with two sharp kicks the lock splintered and the door flew crooked in its frame. We were through and running, across flat roofs that seemed suddenly endless. We followed them until their end, and I didn’t want to do it, but I leapt across the gap as I watched the emptiness of a narrow street pass such a long way below.

‘We have to go up,’ she was dragging me again.

‘I can’t. Please . . .’ I had to stop, catch my breath. ‘Perhaps we shouldn’t have run.’ No matter how deep I sucked at the air, it wasn’t enough.

‘Do you know what they’ll do to us before they accept it was an accident? If they accept it. You dropped half a wall on a Druid. On a Druid. No, we have to run.’

I was bent double staring at the lead below my feet and gasping to breathe.

‘Drai,’ her hands grabbed my cheeks and forced me to take her gaze. ‘Trust me, we will find a way out.’

‘You should go,’ I said. ‘It’s me they want.’

‘Very noble, but you listen. I’m not losing you, you understand? I won’t fail you.’

‘I don’t . . .’ She was pulling again, and I was nodding. Up and following. Running up a valley onto the steep roofs again. Trying to think it through, what she’d just said. What it meant? Hard to do when your heart is bursting with fear.

‘We need to go down,’ I shouted. ‘Find a place, any place. We have to hide,’ my breathlessness turned to fatigue. I was so woefully inadequate to flee like this.

‘It’s too late,’ her voice lost determination and I turned to see what she saw.

Four very large men in brown uniforms jumping the gap ahead. They too seemed exhausted as each moved slowly forward, spreading out to our left to block any escape. I had far too much time to watch them close in; to catch the detail of their uniform. A loose fit with light leather armour to protect the most vulnerable areas. They were members of the city guard, each with a dagger drawn. They looked none too pleased at having chased us half-way about the city.

Still, I saw indecision in their eyes. None wanting to take the lead. Perhaps it was our age that confused them. They’d clearly expected to find grown assassins, and not, us.

‘He wants them alive,’ another man jumped the gap. A mixture of relief and indignation on his face, soon turned to determination when his boots found the flat surface. ‘Alive,’ he repeated.

Mistri pulled the dagger from below her skirt and backed me away. An act that seemed to break the tension on their hardened faces. Mature men more used to breaking up fights outside taverns. I think it amused them as the officer advanced, a hand held out to constrain them.

Others came, but stayed on the far side of the gap.

‘You’re a bit young for seditious acts?’ the officer said. ‘Drop the knife little girl, you’ll hurt yourself.’

Somehow I doubted that as she held her blade towards him.

‘It was an accident,’ I shouted. ‘It was my fault, not hers. I didn’t mean it to happen.’

‘An accident? Then I’m sure this can all be sorted before dark. A few hours and you’ll be on your way. Just kneel down with your hands behind your head. We’ll bring your mother and father in to explain, and it will all be sorted.’

I didn’t believe a word he said. He spoke as if my parents were part of some conspiracy.

Mistri grabbed my arm and pulled me up the roof behind, using the side of a chimney to help us reach the top. It all seemed in vain as we found nothing but a steep drop down the other side. Tall walls that had no break, and a sheer fall that waited at the end of the roof. She grabbed at her hair and kicked at the side of the chimney. Finally realising we were cornered. And then a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

‘Look,’ she nodded below. The narrow copings of a wall, and the dark silhouette of a staircase.

‘No, we can’t drop down there. It’s too narrow, too far.’ From up here, so high, the ground seemed too far down. ‘It’s impossible,’ I said. ‘We have to go with them.’ Words I didn’t want to say.

‘They won’t believe you, Draï,’ she said. ‘He’s a Druid; protected. I know what they’ll do if they take us in.’

I believed her. I felt her hand take mine, and then let go. Mistri turned, took a breath, and stepped off the gable.

My heart stopped beating as she disappeared below the roof.

The look on the soldiers' faces. They believed she'd jumped to her death to avoid capture. As did I.

'Stand down,' the officer ordered. Gesturing with his hand to lower their weapons. 'Alive,' he said again.

I swear, they didn't know what to do.

'Drai?'

What? I heard my name spoken in a hushed whisper. *Mistri?* I had to force myself to look over the edge. *How?* She was standing precariously on the wall.

Dear Gods it was old and fragile; the drop of several tall men below me. How could anyone have . . .

The soldiers advanced, slowly. He'd said it himself, the Druid wanted me alive.

'Stay back, or I jump,' My eyes a wild stare as I looked over again. *Mistri* beckoned. She was crazier than I thought to have jumped. But to have made the fall and landed on the wall. Though I saw with my own eyes, it was still impossible. There were steps to one side of her high enough that she could drop down further. Steps that led down into a dark and narrow alley. All I had to do was drop.

I can't. It was a sheer plummet to the cobbles if I missed. A dark well that I knew would be fatal if I landed in the empty space.

'Drai, jump.'

They couldn't hear her, but I could. Encouraging me to my death.

'I won't let you fall. Trust me.'

I couldn't. There was an invisible tether holding me back.

'Trust me,' she winked and held out her arms.

‘One way or another you’re coming with us,’ the officer said. At least eight men on the roof-top now. ‘Don’t be stupid, kid. You don’t want to die like her. We’ll sort this out. Just tell us who else is involved, and I’m sure they’ll go easy on you,’ his narrow face insistent I complied.

I looked into his eyes and saw darkness. A prison cell, and even worse. They’d hurt me, and I’d tell them I was Joran’s ward. They’d come for her too.

‘Trust me,’ Mистри’s voice again.

What choice did I have. I didn’t look; I didn’t take my eyes from the officer’s weathered face. I stepped from the edge and fell.

I fell for the longest moment of my life, arms outstretched and hoping. To feel them taken by my friend as I landed. The soles of my new boots on a wall-top no wider than the spread of my hand. I felt her arms wrap tight about me as we stumbled back, my toes working hard not to leave the narrow ledge. I fell against but as we went down she held on tight.

The wall took my landing even harder, as part of the stonework shifted, and then fell. It tumbled away from the ledge and left emptiness in my hands, and I began to slide. I went down onto my chest which struck the wall-top with the force of a club swung free at my chest. I spread out instinctively and wrapped my body about the bricks, desperate to become as one with the wall. For us not to be parted. A union I dared not break despite the heavy load that now threatened to drag me away to oblivion.

My body smarted with the shock and my mind erupted with sudden panic, but somewhere in the emotional maelstrom my hand held steady and refused to let her go. I held fast to Mistri though she swayed like a pendulum, helpless. Above me I heard the sounds of heavy boots and the furious clank of metal as the soldiers scrambled up the roof to see. No doubt expectant to find our bodies smashed against the street. I heard orders shouted, but not the words.

‘I won’t let go,’ I said. My face hard pulled to the jagged bricks as it scraped my skin. ‘You’re hurt!’ Blood trickled down her face from a wound I couldn’t see. She dangled with only my hand to stop her falling, and it was a long way down. The steps I’d seen now on the other side of the wall. Her weight beginning to burn through my shoulder.

‘Drai,’ she was searching for a way out. She tried to climb but couldn’t find a grip, nor the strength, her eyes well dazed. I cried out as my shoulder dislocated. ‘I won’t let you go, I won’t,’ tears streaming down my cheeks.

I groped with my free hand and my leg for better purchase. I could do nothing more than lay still as a rabbit, aware that the hawks were circling overhead. I dared not move, or breathe, for fear of letting Mistri go.

More soldiers arrived above us, and then scuttled away. No-one seemed sure of what to do. Nor apparently where we were. This part of the city was the warren I'd seen earlier. The only access to this well of darkness was a staircase I couldn't reach.

When you look into the eyes of another, knowing your actions alone will decide their fate, there is only truth to be seen. The truth was I couldn't help her. The zest she possessed was gone, her mind struggled to stay conscious. I could feel my grip weaken.

'Hold on,' I said. *Please, just hold on.* I closed my eyes to concentrate, but could feel my body slide. Tiny movements that seemed to be in a hurry. That couldn't be stopped.

'Drai,' her voice a whisper.

'Yes . . .'

'I'm sorry.'

'Shhh, no. This was my fault. I should have listened.'

'I've failed you,' she said.

I don't know what that means? 'Hang on, they'll find us.' *They won't let us fall.* 'He wants us alive, remember.' *Please hurry, I'm slipping.* 'I'm fine,' I lied, 'I won't let go.'

She hung motionless as I stared down, blood dripping from her face. This girl I barely knew, and yet she'd shown me so much. I felt as though we shared more than just our time together.

'Let go,' she said.

'What? No . . . I won't'

'Let go, or we both fall.'

She was right. I could hear the sand and dust strain on the wall below my torso. My shoulder burnt like fire, and I was tiring, exhausted from the chase. I could feel each tiny movement of the bricks as I slipped towards the inevitable.

‘No,’ that one small word was the most important I’d ever uttered. It meant life, and I repeated it over and over in my head. *No, no, no.* ‘They’re coming,’ I said.

But she was right, I was slipping. The not so solid wall below me being teased away. Grinding me mercilessly towards the fall.

Soldiers shouted somewhere close-by as they searched for a way to reach us. As I clung to hope as dearly as I did to the wall, and then I felt its biggest movement yet. I was sliding, slowly but surely being pulled over the edge.

In that moment I became a believer. I found faith and began to pray. I begged the Gods to help me, and they did. I felt Mama take my hand. I heard her voice and knew that she would help. I found renewed strength and would not let her go.

‘Drai?’

I opened my eyes again.

‘You have to leave me,’ she said, her face so pale. ‘Drai, he mustn’t take you. Run, Drai.’

I didn’t see it at first, her free hand rising from her side. I caught the glint of something metal, then realised it was her blade.

What are you . . . ? ‘No, don’t!’

‘I’m so sorry,’ tears merged with blood had spread across her face. ‘Drai,’ she was pleading. ‘Run!’

The blade came down, its tip struck at my hand, and for a moment I refused the pain. Mama was holding me. The blade was insistent we let her go.

‘Find me,’ she said. Find me . . .’

I cried out and opened my hand. I let go rather than take the pain. I watched the abyss pull her quickly away and the space in-between stretch as she fell. I watched Mistri fall in silence, her eyes unable to leave mine. I heard impact of her body; the sound of my friend breaking at the end of the fall.

THE WILL OF THE FATES

The candle's wick hissed as Narcista's fingers extinguished the flame. One of three candles, the other two still lit; enough to keep the shadows at bay in the ascetic space around him. A single bed against the wall, a colourless blanket to keep out the cold. A desk and the means with which to write. His only possessions, the Druid clothing he wore and a small pack for his saddle in which he kept what was necessary.

Working within shadows was where Narcista preferred to be. There was clarity in light hid where others couldn't see. It was a place where secrets were locked safely away, and left to be found. Secrets that would trap their owners in a web of Druid intrigue. *She*, had taught him that long ago. How to weave the dreams of others into nightmare. *She*, had shown the young Narcista how alleviating the secrets of others, could service the needs of the Order. How a lifetime's endeavour was small sacrifice, and offered gladly, to see the Khassari Order rise again.

She, understood that. It was what they worked towards. They had Faith; the most important of meaning. Its essence would be returned to the masses. The Druid teachings enshrined in law. For only the pure were worthy to nurture the new generation. Only the strong could lead the weak. *She*, understood that.

Narcista cleared his mind. Now was not the time for shadows, there was work to be done. He unrolled his saddle-pack and took a mirror from the largest pocket. With both hands he placed it on the desk between the two remaining flames.

‘Clat-deu enmor laman,’ his voice hushed, the words repeated. A breath released on the glass, but tethered to his mind’s eye. It ordered symmetry in the air about him.

‘Welcome Brother,’ he said. ‘I greet you in the name of the Eight.’

The image was weak as the mist cleared from the glass. The features in reflection were hazy, but not Narcista’s.

‘Brother Hystin, this is unexpected. My report is for Brother Amastic.’

‘The brother’s presence was required, elsewhere.’

‘I understand.’ He didn’t. This was troubling. The fair-haired, blue-eyed, Hystin, was the last person he’d expected to see. ‘State your reason for this intrusion.’

‘You misunderstand, Brother. My *intrusion* is ordered by the Eight.’

More than troubling, it bordered on disrespectful. This Druid was young, too young. Fast-tracked because of his rank in the Clerics. Hystin was the focal point for a new and younger breed of Druid who were rising too quickly from their Cleric ranks. He was not alone in his concerns that the purity of the Order was being diluted. By this new and spurious breed. There were many who considered the Cleric to be inferior. Why were the Eight setting them on a par with the Druids?

‘Explain,’ he said.

‘Amastic has been dispatched to the Veil. There are problems with the mountain tribes that inhabit the Great Veil. They have refused to raise arms against the growing threat of Aurista.’

‘The Veil is nowhere near the front-line?’ *What don’t I know?*

‘Perhaps *threat* is too strong a word, Brother. We’ve had reports that the Auristans are infiltrating in small numbers; spreading propaganda and feeding dissent. It’s to be expected I suppose; they are a devious and divisive race.’

‘And what steps is Amastic ordered to take?’

‘That’s not your concern. Suffice to say the Eight have advised the Emperor to deal more firmly with the tribes.’

‘In what manner?’

‘If you must know, the Emperor has despatched two legions to the Veil, and a large contingent of Kartach. We, or rather, the Emperor, feels that the presence of the Emperor’s personal guard alongside his legions will help deter any familiarity with the rebels. A show of strength for the local populace. A signal of the importance that the Emperor now places on the region. Amastic will ensure that the families of the tribal elders receive *appropriate* Imperial protection.’

‘The Emperor wants hostages?’ *Why wasn’t I told?* ‘One of us should be in the capital. I, should be present when the Imperium meets.’

‘You? I think we can handle things without *you*. And the, Eight agree.’

‘So it seems.’ *What aren’t you telling me?* ‘The Emperor was feeling somewhat vulnerable the last time I spoke to him. To release so many Kartach from the capital surprises me. I would have thought he’d keep his personal guard close, and at full strength. Who advised him to send them . . . You?’

‘And this is why your presence is not required. You are not to be distracted by the politics of the capital. The importance of your presence in, where is it again, Boundary? It is paramount. You should be proud they chose you.’

‘Should I?’

‘Of course.’

‘So you share their confidence as to why I’m here?’

‘I have faith, Brother. Your work in the Borders is of great importance. Now, time is of the essence; report. What have you discovered? Do the locals still dance naked and howl during the full moon?’

So no-one’s told you why I’m out here. Interesting.

He’d begun to wonder if this was a fool’s-errand. That the Eight were punishing him for some unknown reason. What he’d learnt suggested not. He saw no reason to enlighten Hystin.

‘What news of G’Tor?’ Narcista asked.

‘He’s of no concern to anyone but his embalmers.’

‘And his successor to the office?’

‘I’m told that I am to grace the office. Such an honour. I’ll be invested with the robes of Inquisitor General within the week,’ he paused. ‘Are you surprised, Brother?’

Surprised was an understatement, but not one Narcista was willing to show. He’d assumed Amastic would take the robes. He was well experienced in the machinations of the Senate, and had numerous contacts and agents within the Imperial Court. For a Cleric to be elevated to such high office, was unprecedented. Also disturbing.

‘Congratulations, Brother, Your new office will serve to better the Empire.’ *And yourself.*

‘We all serve the Eight,’ Hystin replied. ‘Now, please, your report?’

‘I . . .’ Narcista thought to choose his words carefully. ‘I’ve engaged fully with the Seers’ instructions. But something interesting has occurred, which I believe has defined my purpose here. The Seer’s will understand.’

‘Yes, of course. They always understand. What shall I report?’

You don’t know do you? They haven’t told you why I’m here, interesting. ‘I think our business is concluded,’ he said.

‘Of course. Though I’m not sure the Eight will find your lack of detail particularly informative. Not the team player you used to be; I wonder, is that why they chose to send you so far away. And at such a critical phase. Just as our plans for the Empire have been escalated. It’s an incredibly bold play. Such a pity you’ll miss out.’

That’s quite a statement. He was intrigued by it. *How much will you share to find out why I’m here?* ‘You’ve moved up the time-frame?’

‘Everything’s gone up, Narcista. It’s a new and grand design for the Empire. The Imperium just won’t be what it was.’

‘You’re going ahead with the arrests, aren’t you?’ *It’s too soon.* ‘On whose orders?’ *I should be there.*

‘Arrests? Oh dear, you really have been left out of the loop.’

What are you talking about? ‘How many?’

‘Forty-three arrests will be made. Evidence of treachery by Royals and Senators is about to be made public.’

‘Forty-three?’ *But that’s a third of the Senate.* ‘That is a bold move,’ he said. *I don’t understand, that’s five times what we’d planned.* ‘Has anyone considered the instability such a power vacuum will leave? Or the adverse affect on the Imperial Kingdoms when you strike so openly at its members? There *will* be retribution.’ *This is madness.*

‘All in hand, Brother. A small purge to ensure the loyalty of the Senate. And so much more. Now, time is short, Brother. Are you sure you have nothing more to add?’

‘As you say; my work here is more important than the politics of the Imperium.’ Narcista enjoyed Hystin’s displeasure at the statement, and then placed the mirror face down.

‘Pretentious little prick!’ *Why such an escalation?* ‘Why am I here?’

The rise of the Clerics had been unprecedented in the last few years. Advanced by the Eight beyond their station, and in such numbers. *Why?* *And* something else Hystin had said.

“Not the team player you used to be.”

What in Ba’als name did he mean by that?

So many questions and not enough answers. Being out here, so far from his beloved Shai'valet. *For what reason?* To be excluded from the politics and plans he'd spent the last two years crafting into place. Usurped and escalated beyond all measure. *It will be chaos.*

There were other things, little things. On their own they meant nothing, but together . . .

No, the Seers speak only the truth? Perhaps he'd only ever known one side of the plan. *The capital, the Veil . . . Boundary?* He sat back. *What link threads them all together?* Or was he thinking too linear; too small. The Seers after all, saw all.

'I don't think he likes you, that young Druid.'

Narcista smiled as he felt Regana's arms about his chest, her hands pulling open his shirt. The full length of her lustful red hair draped down his torso.

'Be wary of that one,' she whispered, her fingernails gently clawed at his chest. 'He's not to be trusted,' her breath on his cheek. 'Cut his heart out the first chance you get.'

Plain words, good advice; time enough.

Her presence, her touch. Fuel enough to reignite his faith. He raised his lips to touch hers. The questions, so daunting a moment ago, now paled within her perfumed air.

She put a finger to his lips. 'There's more, isn't there? What's happened, my love?'

'I'm not sure. There was an incident. An attempt on my life, perhaps?'

'But you're not so sure. Why? No doubt should be entertained if your life was under threat. Tell me what happened.'

‘Two minors; a girl and a boy. Some debris fell from a roof. It may be something. Or it may have been as they say, just an accident.’

‘Where are they now?’

‘The girl is dead, killed by a fall. The boy is with the Warden. I’ve left the matter to him.’

‘Hmm, that’s not it. There’s something else. You *felt* something?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Then be sure. What happened?’

‘I was at the North Gate this morning. I saw a woman, she was with the boy. A coincidence.’

‘Really? And I know how you feel about those.’

‘It’s nothing.’

‘Nothing always turns out to be something. You say it was the same boy?’

‘I can’t be sure. I didn’t get a clear view. But . . .’

‘You made a connection, didn’t you?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Be certain, my love. Clarity come from focus. The politics of the capital are beyond you now. They can only cast shadows of indecision.’ She was tall, slender; magnificent. Her body draped in a dress so black it barely reflected the candlelight.

She stepped around and straddled him; his face held gently in her hands. ‘The Seers sent you here for a reason,’ her voice reassuring. ‘Is it possible, that reason could be the child?’ her lips lingered on his. ‘Is it possible?’

‘I don’t know. The Warden is eager to please, he’ll keep the boy somewhere unpleasant for a few days. I’ll be informed when he’s feeling more compliant. Until then, I have more pressing matters.’

‘More pressing than an attempt on your life,’ she kissed his cheek. ‘Than the Seers sending you across the Empire? Oh, do tell.’

‘Fine, I’ll question the boy in the morning.’ He moved his face away. ‘Regana, something is going on in the capital. I’ve been *pushed* out of the loop.’

‘You think they want you out of the way?’

‘Yes, but for what reason? My loyalty . . .’

‘. . . Is not in question,’ she kissed him, and then again several more around his face. ‘Is it because they sent you here, or because you think the golden boy of the Clerics knows more?’

‘This isn’t a game, Regana.’

‘Of course it is. And it’s a game you play well.’

She’s right. She’s always right. ‘I think Hystin only knows what he’s been told. As do I. I believe that someone is playing a much bigger game here than either of us know.’

‘That leaves the Eight?’

‘Yes, but why? Why keep myself, or Amastic for that reason, in the dark?’

‘Questions, questions. Here, I have another one to add,’ she ran her finger down his cheek, and then pricked it off his lip. ‘Are the Seer’s capable of lying?’

‘Lying?’ *What would make you ask that?* Something he hadn’t considered. ‘They speak the truth of what they see.’

‘Yes, but do they see more, and speak less? Could they be, *selective* visionaries?’

‘You think the Seers would manipulate the Eight?’ *That’s ridiculous.* ‘I thought you were trying to help,’ he said. ‘No, that’s a question I don’t want to consider.’

‘Why? You don’t even like them.’

‘It would mean everything I’ve been taught, would be a lie.’

‘Ooops, that wouldn’t be very good. I suppose you must fall back on, *faith*. Faith in men like, Hystin. Or in blind men who see futures that we may, or may not; well, you know. Your faith in the Order,’ she said. ‘It runs as deep as my love for you,’ she plucked gently at his lips with her own. ‘I just wonder if, maybe, perhaps, there could be more going on here than even the Eight realise.’

That wasn’t a place he wanted to go.

‘Go see this boy,’ she whispered. ‘Perhaps he has answers that the others don’t. You go to him first thing in the morning, and remember to be polite.’

Her nails left marks as they drew down his chest. 'Right now, I have other suggestions for how to ease your mind.'

Each peck of her lips was reassuring. But still, to be shut out, it gnawed at him; it offended him. Was she right, were the Eight being manipulated? Was there another power at play? He felt his head pulled back as her tongue teased up his neck.

'Pay attention to me,' she said.

Slowly, surely, Narcista's mind began to calm.

Regana was his companion. It wasn't love; he wasn't sure he was capable of the emotion. No, it was much deeper than that. A bond of trust in all things. She'd been his companion, his consort, his friend, as he'd risen in the Order. Been elevated to the highest position of trust by the Eight. Not that he felt quite so trusted right now.

Her skin glowed in the light from the candles. Her features smooth and flawless; like silk to the touch of his lips.

'There's one thing more, my love,' Regana wrapped her arms about him. 'I've recently felt a presence that I've not been aware of; not for a very long time.'

Just as he was relaxing. 'Should it concern me?'

'No, not yet at least. We'll talk in the morning. No more talk, not now.'

His tongue coveted hers as their lips tangled in desire.

A firm knock put them on pause. But not for long.

Again the door was thumped from the outside.

'Are you going to answer,' she asked.

'Fuck . . . You'd better go,' he said, then took her hand. 'But not too far, this won't take long.' He pulled his shirt closed and took a deep breath that wrestled with his irritation.

Narcista turned the key in the lock and opened the door

'Yes, Hera. What do you want?'

Hera entered, head bowed. 'Pardon my intrusion, but you wanted to know when the Lurker had returned.'

'Good. Tell him I'll be down shortly. And our Cleric friend?'

'He's still with the Warden.'

Narcista nodded, then gestured for Hera to leave. He closed the door softly and moved back towards the stairs. Castlin waited on the landing.

'Well?' Castlin asked. 'Who's he got in there?'

Hera paused, then shook his head.

'He's all alone in there.'

'Well, that's not right, he was talking to someone. He's got one of the local girls hiding in there?'

'Have you seen his room? There's nowhere to hide anyone.'

'Crap, then he's talking to himself?'

'Or chatting to the spirits?' Hera touched his forehead and made the sign of the dead. 'Why don't you go and ask him?'

'Fuck, no. He might suggest I speak to the spirits.'

A door opened. Both men took to the stairs.

'There are times,' Castlin said, 'when that man brings me out in a cold sweat.'

SECRETS AND LIES

Hystin placed both hands on the mirror, then placed its glass face-down in a bowl filled with water. He pulled a cloth over the bowl.

An obvious precaution, by a careful man. Once the connection had been made, could he ever really be sure it was closed from the other end? Trust, was not an option. A man who keeps secrets could leave nothing to chance. They were a sharper weapon than any sword ever forged.

What are you up to, old man? He drummed his fingers in quick rhythm against the marble surface of the altar, a brief contemplative pause between each rhythmic timbre. *I will find out before the end.*

He put such thoughts aside as a tall figure stepped from the shadows. He held a stick in one hand to aid him walk, the other slipped his hood back from his head.

Hystin bowed his head. 'Brother Sermile,' *Skulking about in the darkness again.* 'I trust you heard the conversation?'

'I did, Brother.'

'Do you think he'll be a problem?'

'Perhaps? Brother Narcista is a true believer in the old ways.'

'Like the rest of his generation,' he scoffed. 'But that man is nobody's fool, and a dangerous adversary. Should he ever become aware of the Cleric's true purpose?'

'But where we lead him, he will follow. At least for now.'

'We should consider accelerating the programme. *End* the old ways once and for all.'

‘No, his kind is recognised and respected; the Clerics would not have such a free hand. There will be no actions against him, or any of the others, not yet. Not until he returns.’

‘Returns? What with? Why have the Eight sent him so far? And why now?’

‘Why do you question what is not your concern? You will have what you desire, when the time is right.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he lowered his head again. *So you don’t know any more than I.* He gave his best smile to his Druid Brother. Another Druid of the old caste, who now gave his support to the new. He was the mouthpiece of the Eight, and accepted by both factions. Though Hystin doubted he worked for either; just for the Eight. He struck one last rhythmic strum. ‘I’ve often wondered,’ he said, ‘what’s it like to see so much without use of . . . You know,’ he pointed to his eyes.

‘A true believer does not need eyes to see. Trust in one’s faith will always light the way,’ was the answer, delivered with its usual gruffness. ‘There is no other way.’

It was as if the old Druid were staring. His eyelids closed, the skin around them crumpled; scars where they’d been stitched together, a time long ago. Blinded when he’d been caught in the Druid’s downfall. At least that was the story he’d heard. A child barely accepted by the Faith. His eyes plucked out during the purge, then left to die. A near century of unwavering service, and not a smile since Hystin had known him. His face had fattened somewhat, and his hair had turned white. He’d recently had it cropped tight to his head.

It was impossible to read the face of a man who never expressed emotion. Though he was sure such an open reference to his disability had annoyed him.

Sermile pointed his stick.

‘You are summoned,’ he said. ‘You will follow me, now.’

Sermile took each step without pause, the thick stick in his palm used for support, and not to test the way ahead. He knew every step down here, in his Druid temple. His home for the better part of his life. He'd lived and breathed in the service of the Khassari, down here in their Underground Palace.

Sermile was old enough to remember the final days of the last Druid Order; when they'd fled the persecution. Before the First Emperor's vision had ended the bloodlust that had so diminished their numbers. His patronage had allowed them to survive below the streets of Shai'valet. Deep below the Palace where he'd finished his indoctrination in the Druid ways. In a faith that he blessed every day.

As a child he'd been blessed to sit and listen; to hear first hand the history of his Order, and from the lips of the last of the Primaries. It was they who had saved the Holy books and scriptures. The ancient pages that the pagans were so eager to destroy.

The words of the Prophet. The voice of the Primaries. Forced to hide below the very institution that had brought about their demise. But from their ashes had come *the Eight*. Their vision now promoted a new, younger breed of Druid. And their Clerics would soon rule over an empire.

Hystin thought he knew the Palace well, for he'd worked tirelessly within its walls as a Cleric. But this quarter was unfamiliar. Catacombs in which he'd not walked before.

'This way,' Sermile instructed. He was old, but walked with the gait of a man his junior. Each stride struck out in earnest, no hesitation.

Hystin followed. Unsure in the darkness that hindered his sight. He wondered if the stick the old man used somehow whispered where each foot should fall.

'Your footsteps are uneven,' Sermile noted. 'It is in darkness that we find the light to see.'

Really, quoting scripture? A torch would be of more use.

'Perhaps Brother Sermile would tell me where the darkness leads us?'

'Without guidance, it leads all men to the same place.'

Of course it does. 'Still, it couldn't hurt to light a torch.' *No, fine.* These were passages for rats. *Why are there no torches down here; no lamps?* The only light an eerie glow from the green algae that grew within the loose and damp mortar. Barely light enough for a man to find his way. *This is because I commented on your eyes. I get it.*

The blind man stopped, turned, and offered the way forward with his hand.

'You've been blessed to receive an audience with the Eight,' Sermile bowed his head. 'You will not raise your eyes at any time. You will not speak unless directed to do so. From here you will go alone, and I will wait for your return.'

'So, not invited?' Hystin strained his eyes to see ahead, but saw only darkness. He felt his boundless confidence slip to be confronted with a

feeling of insecurity. 'I'll miss the conversation,' he said, and walked on. Picking his way forward. Loose debris more prevalent than before.

'A man with true faith does not need the light to find illumination,' Sermile's voice raised from behind.

Fuck off, blind man. Its dark down here. He imagined the old Druid would dance his way through the fallen masonry. Insecurity was twisting his gut into something more malicious; more than just apprehension at a meeting with the Eight.

Why? Why call me now?

He'd grown up with their teachings, and honoured their name. But in twenty-five years of Brotherhood, he'd never been graced by their presence. Just their intermediary, the old fool behind.

'Will you keep the Holy Ones waiting?' Sermile's voice had a scathing nature at the best of times. Here in the vacuum of the passage it cut like a knife.

But then that's what it's supposed to do. He took a deep breath and moved on, water splashing about his boots. *Enjoy the moment while it lasts, old man. Your time will come.*

The passage ended in near blackness. And then a glimmer in the dark as if a candle had been lit.

Follow the light then? With each careful step the ground below became more obvious. Ahead he saw a single torch, to its left some wide circular steps; eight in number. Leading upwards from the dank passage to an archway built from large stones.

The door shaped to fit the arch was old. Numerous carvings on its surface; ancient symbols he didn't recognise. *Well, I'm not going to knock.* Both his palms pressed on the door's surface, and hinges the size of his hand revolved with near silence. *So what are we hiding in here . . .*

What he saw beyond, took his breath away.

A single beam of light funnelled downward a stone's throw from the entrance. He'd never seen its like; somehow silver and not white. Being poured like water through a circular aperture high above.

What is this? It was beautiful. Difficult to look away. Silver light, not white, that flowed downward. Drawing at his senses, he felt unable to look away. *No!* Hystin turned his back on the light. *What the fuck?* He'd felt himself being drawn. Encouraged to float upon its sedative tide.

'Hello?' His voice intensified by the acoustics. *I'm here?* His eyes adjusting to the gloom. Becoming aware of the chamber he'd entered. Barely touched by the residue of light from the stream. Most still steeped in shadows. He caught his breath and walked in. Careful to avoid looking directly at the light.

Impressive. The skill of the masons as imposing, as it was inspiring. All around the falling light were ribbed vaults of brickwork; each lined with multiple groins of stone. Yellowed rafters of masonry that hung like webbing to frame the massive roof above. Three levels, each supporting the next. At their zenith was the light. It was difficult to stare anywhere but upwards. 'I'm here,' he called. *Be patient, fool.* He felt no presence but his own.

The floor now fully viewed, he could see it set in a perfect circle. The surface laid with tiles, and a pattern, no, symbols. Like the door, set with a script he didn't recognise. All around were steps leading up; eight in number, separated at intervals. A pattern that formed a perfect octagon on the secondary level. Plain pillars evenly spaced around the floor to shoulder the ceiling above. Eight in number, they separated the spaces in-between.

As his gaze moved upwards the extent of the chamber came fully into view.

Eight steps. He smiled. *Eight columns.* He gazed up at the vaulting above. *Eight sections around a pillar of light.* Hystin coveted the sense of achievement that now surged through his veins. An outflow of gratification as he realised where he was. *The Octragen?* He bent down onto one knee. Bowed his head in reverence. *Can it truly be?*

If so, he was about to realise a dream. By summoning him here; to this place. This one single act. It meant the Eight were finally ready to recognise the Clerics as equals to their Druid overlords.

An aged voice startled him. Its hushed timbre carried with it the authority of the chamber about.

Hystin's reaction was to search out the orator, but Sermile's warning cautioned him. "You will not raise your eyes at any time. You will not speak unless directed to do so." Hystin lowered his gaze. Now he sensed it, another presence. Not like any other before.

'I was curious to see for myself,' the voice said. 'What makes *you* stand out from the others.'

Who are you? The need to seek out the stranger was intense. The silence that followed even worse as he felt the full intention of the Octragen; the chamber, the light. They made him feel small in their presence. *Got me.* He wasn't used to cowing like this. He lowered his eyes further, and his head followed. The presence he felt was overwhelming. *As it should be.* It was right that he should feel so humble, here, in this place.

'You heed instruction. Good. Then it is decided.' There was coarseness in his voice, and heavy breaths, more prominent as he came closer. 'We have decided,' he said, 'that the time of the Clerics is upon us,' he paused. 'Time that they understand exactly what we expect from them. And what is expected of you.'

Yes, time. About fucking time. He felt his heart race. To be in their presence. To hear the words. "The time of the Clerics has come."

'Principle of the Cleric Brotherhood, I have work for you,' he took a deep wheezing breath, 'and you have a short time to achieve your goals.'

It shall be done.

Look upon me, Hystin. Raise your eyes to greet the Eight.

Hystin raised his head, but remained knelt. It was still difficult to see as his gaze moved across the hall. He was in the presence, at last, of the Eight. Though he did wonder where the other seven might be.

From the back he looked like a Druid. The light too bad to see much detail, as he passed three of the eight pillars without making a sound; not a word spoken, not even a scrape of his feet?

Hystin had so many questions. He felt such extremes of emotion. The realisation of his life's ambition, a lifetime of dedication to their scripture, and now he'd turned the final page, and was standing within the Circle of the Eight.

'You may speak,' The Druid said, still walking. The light flowing down, being poured by the Gods, obscuring his sight.

Hystin realised he wasn't sure what to say.

'Life is order,' the Druid said, still circling the chamber.

'And through order we find life,' Hystin replied.

The Druid ceased his walk. 'Do you think yourself worthy?' He asked. 'Are you free of all doubt?'

Doubt? I have no doubts.

'Are you free of all doubt?' more demanding this time.

'Yes,' Hystin replied.

'Then let us begin your initiation.'

Initiation? A sudden sense of panic gripped Hystin, as an unseen force seized at his wrists; pulled his arms upward and lifted his body from the ground.

'What, what is this?' he tried to pull free. 'What are you doing?' His heart doubled its beats; flooded his body with adrenaline. 'Stop . . .' *Ahh, fuck, it hurts.* 'Why?' A powerful force grabbed his hair and jerked his head around to see the hooded figure approach.

'Do nothing to resist. Allow the process to happen.'

'The what? Brother, this is not necessary. I, I, dear Gods!'

Pain seared through his joints. His wrist's burnt as he was dragged upward, and towards the light. 'I, I follow the Faith.' *Life is order, and through order we find life.* 'You will not find me wanting, Brother.'

‘In our experience, it is best not to take such statements on their face value. If you wish to serve. You must submit.’

‘My only wish is to serve.’ *Stop, stop . . .* ‘I’m burning!’

Hystin screamed as he was fully engulfed by the light. As it scorched at his skin.

‘You are being cleansed, brother. Do not resist,’

White. Hystin’s mind was the colour of white. He felt his eyes glow with the same intensity. The pain stopped hurting as he fell limp, his body held high above the floor. And then the learning began. Flashes of images too swift to realise, and yet what he saw was incredible; unbelievable. Images, or were they memories, being overlaid with voices in his head.

It’s, it’s wonderful . . .

A calm settled within him as the download purged all doubt from his mind. The pain subsided, as Hystin began to initialise, evaluate, and then to understand.

‘It’s so vast . . . so incredible.’ His illumination was glorious. ‘The Dark One is coming. The creation of light must be purged.’

Hystin was released; dropped to the ground. He fell to his knees, unable to move as the feeling crept back through his limbs.

‘I had no idea,’ he said. ‘How could I?’ He raised his eyes to the Druid stood before him. ‘We’re not alone,’ he said.

‘Hystin, first among the Clerics, you have been accepted. Lift up your eyes and gaze upon the *true* face, of the Eight.’

The Druid reached up and drew back his hood.

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

Time had stopped since they'd thrown me inside this cold lonely room. Where I'd wept until the well that fed my tears had run dry. Until I could sleep no more and my pacing had begun. Incessant and pointless; my feet blistered from the grind of the bare stone on which they walked. My only company was the sound of the wind through a hole too high up in the wall to reach. A cold window where light shone, and then withdrew into long periods of darkness, before returning.

Several days, I guessed, the longest of my life. And only the memories of what had happened to comfort me. To scorn me. Between them a bitter search for the reason *why*?

Why my life had become such as it was?

The only conclusion possible, that it was *my* fault. Me, the fool who never listened. The child with no experience of anything, who thought he knew best. All that had befallen me. What was yet to come? All because of *me*.

I curled myself small; consciousness drifting like a gentle tide without end. The same questions repeated in my head. Over and over, until they hurt. *Why . . . ?*

Why, did I do it.

Why, didn't I listen?

Why, why, why . . . ? Did a stranger sacrifice herself for me? Why, was it so important, that I, someone she barely knew, should escape?

She could have left me. She could have chose freedom, but chose me. Why?

And what did her words mean, spoken with her final breath.

"Find me," she'd said. "Find me."

Each time I closed my eyes, all I could see was her face, as she fell. “Find me?”

I screamed aloud so the Gods would hear my pain. A hysterical wail at the cold window. And then again at the heavy wooden door through which I’d been thrown, what seemed a lifetime ago. I felt the madness begin to tie me in knots again.

No, get up. I have to get up. I had to move before the cold made me numb to life. I had to pace again. Overcome the savage assault by the cold; my joints frigid from its touch. *Get up Draí, or rot where you lay.*

Six hundred and three blocks in the walls. Ninety-seven flagstones set side by side on the floor. One thousand three hundred vertical joins. Ten fewer that were horizontal.

Count, I have to count. See the numbers . . .

I’d counted them one hundred and six times. Rapped on the door forty-eight. Stared up at that hole . . . I had no idea how many times I’d done that? My mind had lost count of the shouts, screams; times I’d begged for the door to be opened. I’d not lost count of the time I’d heard that voice.

‘We told you not to trust the She-Wolf,’ it said again. ‘That she would lead you into harm.’

‘What do you want from me?’ It was true. I was going mad. My mind teasing me.

‘He doesn’t believe us. Even now he doubts.’

‘Leave me alone.’ Even my eyes were numbed. My prison had become a blur. *I’m dreaming . . .* I was lying down, not standing. *It’s just a trick of the wind.* A desperate fancy that I wasn’t alone. *Sleep. Go back to sleep.*

‘Lift your head, Halfling.’

‘Hmm?’ I opened my eyes again. *Go away. I don’t want to hear you.* The cold caused me pain. I remembered now, I was going to pace. Try to make it stop. *No, no, no.* I could hear whispers again.

‘He thinks this is a dream, Sisters. Poor, fragile, little Halfling.’

‘Who’s there?’ I shouted, not really caring. My mind was playing tricks; causing me to hallucinate. It had to be, because what I saw could not be real.

Crooked blocks began to protrude outward from the wall, began to form a shape. No, it was a face, that writhed as if in pain at it's making, and then stretched out from the wall to stare with curiosity.

'I told you we'd meet again,' she said.

This was intolerable. I lowered my head back onto my arm and made awkward sounds from my throat. Laughter, I think; its sound barely able to penetrate my lips. How could any place be so cold, so barren, and so cruel?

'We can make this stop,' the face said. 'Would you like that?'

My silent laughter turned into a sob, as I nodded my head.

'You only have to ask, Halfling. You only have to say the words. We can help you, just as we helped him. As we helped, *Derlin*.'

Father? The man sworn to protect me. 'Fathers gone. Leave me alone. *Just like him*.

More whispers; chatting and snarling. Like a web of words that closed around me. That chuntered away inside my head.

'Go away!' I shouted. 'You're not real.'

'He doesn't believe us.'

'He thinks his mind has left his body, Sisters.'

'Were we real in the forest, child?'

The forest? I wish I was in the forest. 'The forest?' I remembered now. How the leaves had . . .

'He remembers. Yes, Halfling, remember.'

I tried not to look, but madness is hard to ignore. So was the wall as it warped outward and came closer.

'Perhaps this will help,' the face said, as it breathed on me.

Beirdin's breath. It was as if a warm summer's breeze had engulfed me. The sweet scent of the forest recently in bloom.

I reached out my crooked fingers as though they were petals outstretched for the sun.

New life flooded throughout my frame as frozen muscles began to gently thaw. I felt ecstasy rise above pain, as the Sisters' voices competed to be heard. Each one enticing me to embrace their words.

'We can help you, like we helped him.'

‘Like we helped your father.’

‘Yes, tell him sister.’

I would have begged them to take me. Pleaded for my return to the forest. They didn’t have to ask, as I felt fresh hope pour through my veins. Warm and welcome, as it bubbled and spilled with the ease of a warm-flowing-spring.

And then it broke free and threatened to drown me in memories that I didn’t want to find. I saw my father’s daggers; felt the grip held firm in my hand. I remembered the darkness that filled my mind as I’d held it, and let it fall. As I’d let Mistri fall.

‘No,’ *This is wrong*. ‘No, please? . . . I can’t. I won’t.’ I retracted my hands, pulling them both to my chest.

A wall, it’s just a wall. Blocks lined with mortared joints, with nothing to say.

I felt myself crash; my head once again on the floor. My silent stare counting at the blocks, and then distracted by the movement of hinges.

The door? Someone is opening the door.

‘Come on boy, it’s time to go upstairs.’

I was being lifted. My arms pulled upward from both sides at once as two men lifted me to my feet.

‘No,’ I didn’t want to go. *Leave me alone . . .* ‘Joran?’ I called out. ‘Joran?’

‘Friend of yours?’ One of the men asked. ‘I’ll let them know. They’ll want to talk to her.’ Rough hands pulled me from my cell to the hallway beyond. A corridor filled with the smell of oiled torches. Wooden steps that groaned beneath our weight as we ascended.

‘You’ve been a naughty boy,’ the voice said. ‘Someone upstairs wants to know just how naughty.’

The other man laughed; then yanked me as I tried to pull away.

‘Where . . . ?’ I muttered limply.

‘Where? Oh, where are you? You’re in the city’s finest guest house. We know how to look after people like you.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘Most visitors are,’ his voice devoid of sympathy.

I tried to look back. *The wall . . . Spirits?* I wanted them to save me. ‘Help, me.’ I wanted this to end.

I was dumped unceremoniously into a chair. Leather straps buckled about my wrists. My jailers still a blur as they chatted casually about their meal last night. It seemed it had been very agreeable, and sounded a fine feast, as I watched them leave, left alone in my new surroundings, nothing but a new sound of silence to keep me company.

'I'm sorry,' I said, but doubted I'd spoken loud enough to be heard. 'I'm sorry,' this time with a tinge of defiance. Quickly forgotten as I heard strange sounds behind me. 'Hello?' *Who's there?* Like hurried footsteps on dried bracken. *Something's burning?*

Not bracken; it was tinder. A fire. I could feel its warmth awaken my senses. Sound and feeling making more sense as the warmth penetrated my skin. Veiled me in a golden blanket.

Yes, I can see it. My gaze catching shadows being cast about behind me. Forgotten as my jailers re-entered the room. A third man who pulled a chair behind him, its legs scraping on the floor. He was shorter than the other two. His tunic unbuttoned, its fit more casual. He was older, and unlike the other two, unshaven. His hair thinning on top, and unusually long at the sides. There was something about this man I liked less than the others. The chair he pulled found a space before me; left facing the wrong way.

'I want you to take a good look around,' he said, his tone inviting. 'This is a miserable room, I know. Don't let it to be the last place you ever visit.'

Visit? 'I want to go home.' My every fibre pleaded with him.

'I know,' he said, then gestured for the others to leave.

He stared at me, as if I'd disappointed him somehow. A look that lingered, and then ended as he turned and left. Pulling the door closed behind.

I don't know how long I'd been left. Long enough for the fire to bring pain to my bones, as it put the cold to flight. I felt like bread rising in an oven as my life returned. My senses restored. Perspiration leaking from my skin.

It was more comfortable here, but still a prison with four walls. Walls flat and painted, though not for some years. Oil lamps lit, one on each wall. A few old cobwebs above the door. There were stains on the planking that crossed the floor; twenty-seven strips that I could see, and the obvious attempts to wash, I didn't want to know what, from the patch below my feet.

I looked away, my imagination too keen to speculate. My sight diverted to a small table, a cloth spread unevenly across its surface. I had an awful thought about objects hidden below.

'It's too hot,' I shouted. The fire's heat stifling. 'Please, let me go.' *Anywhere, I can breathe.*

The man who'd moved the chair returned. Stood in front of me. I felt a wave of anticipation, but not towards him. I still stared at the open doorway, at the presence beyond.

'He's unharmed?' The man in black asked.

'As you instructed, lord. Time down below, that's all. I thought it may loosen his tongue before less subtle measures are applied.'

No . . . I didn't like the sound of that. Let me go.

The hollow steps of the Druid's boots sent waves of dark emotion through my veins. Just the way he stared at me, with those eyes.

'Has he said anything of value?'

'No, but the guards heard him mention a name. Joran? We don't know who that is. Not yet. If I could apply more direct questioning?'

The Druid ignored the request, and the soldier stepped aside.

‘Why were you on the roof,’ the Druid asked. ‘Was it your intention to harm me?’

‘No . . .’ I shook my head to prove it.

‘Who was the girl?’

‘My friend,’ I uttered, and then felt my heart sink as I remembered how I’d let go of her hand. ‘I’m sorry,’ my words a pathetic whisper. ‘It was an accident. I didn’t meant to . . .’ I looked into those sunken eyes. My own felt as deep and old, as they pleaded with him to believe.

I couldn’t help but wonder what force of nature would make a man look that way. Dressed in black; without any hint of kindness. He nodded to the other man. A gesture that pleased him. That entitled him to proceed.

No, please, stay. I didn’t want him to leave. I wanted to explain. To beg his forgiveness. But the words lacked the spirit to jump the chasm between my mind and my mouth. So I did something stupid. A thing so bold that I regretted my action almost before it was done. As the Druid walked away, I passed on a thought. A gesture barely conceived, but instantly acted upon. I reached out to him with my mind.

I don’t know why, I just did. I touched him in the same manner as I had the stag, and the bitark. A foolish and desperate act that I didn’t mean to happen. But too late when the act was done. In that moment I knew, somehow, that I had changed my life.

He caught me the moment we touched. The instant he felt me violate his mind. I felt his anger cross the room before he shut me out. But not before I caught a snapshot of who and what this man was. So many faces of people I would never know. The jumbled memories of places I wouldn’t know with a map. They all flashed before me, and more.

I saw death and deception, and a way of life that filled me with dread. There was no joy in his heart, just a restless and ruthless need to serve. To succeed. In a mind that saw the world as a strategy; for his kind to mould, manipulate, and even to spoil. But as quick as the spark had lit, the darkness arose to douse its rise. The moment frozen.

With some surprise, I observed a woman. Sat alone in the half-light, her gaze fixed towards a mirror, long gentle strokes of a brush through hair as

red as my blood. The dress she wore as dark as a raven's wing. If she were surprised, she showed no sign.

'Who are you?' she asked. Her brush engaged in another languid stroke. 'Why have you come?'

Come, where? Where am I?

If her curiosity was so aroused, then why didn't she turn to face me? Why was I left to peer in to the glass.

Who are you? Even in reflection her dark eyes coveted more. They searched me inside and out.

'I'm sorry,' I said. My voice slow to catch up. My gaze drawn to the curves of her body. Strange desires unfolding in her presence. Like the coming of spring my heart swelled to pump blood through my veins. I couldn't help but stare; the sight of her skin so exposed, through the slits in her dress. Its sheen as lustful as my gawking eyes. She beguiled me. Tempted me. I couldn't help the shameless nature of my gaze as it toured her curves; caressed her slender neck . . . I'd never seen a woman's complexion so glossy and pure. So soft, and yet so wonderfully intense. I knew her the moment our eyes met in that mirror.

'Syren?' I said aloud.

She was a Syren. A cursed creature who dragged men to their destruction. A Spirit who prowled the primal mists of a man's mind. One kiss would secrete a lifetime of lust and desire. It was said the love of a Syren would turn a man insane.

I felt her mind tangled within the Druid's. Her darkened pleasures coupled to his. And yet neither one was ascendant above the other. It was a union of souls, not a fight for domination.

I heard a raven caw. Powerful wings that flapped in the darkness. As I looked back the woman's hair had reared up in threat; many lances about to strike. Her figure risen like a spectre, the full length of her dress unleashed like waves. I thought I was about to die. But a smile parted her jet painted lips, and she screamed. The sound tearing through me like flying shards of glass.

I turned away, our bond well shattered. My eyes locked with the Druid's. *Narcista*, that was his name.

I think he was as surprised as I. But where I shrank with panic he swelled with fury. Two steps were enough for him to reach out and seize my face with his hand. I expected violence; an assault he refused to unleash. Instead he knelt down in front of me unsure of what I'd done.

He was so intense, so ugly. A face battered with the scars of age and the struggles of life. There was no kindness to be seen, just a ruthless stare from those bulbous eyes.

'Can it be?' he asked. 'Are you the reason I'm here?'

I was shaking my head. 'I'm sorry.' *I want to go home.* These last few hours, they were too much. And then I saw her again, Mistri. Despite falling to her death, she'd shown no fear. "Find me," she'd said. "Find me."

'Get your hands off me,' I demanded. I was angry. Hatefulness even, that circumstance, and my stupidity, had brought me to this place.

Narcista turned to the soldier. 'I want to know everything, am I clear?'

'Yes, Lord. It will be my pleasure.'

I watched the Druid leave. The soldier turned his full attention towards me.

'Let's try to be civil, shall we? Let's begin with introductions. My name is, Imax. And yours is?'

'Drai,' I said with pride. 'My father is a warrior,' I added.

'Is he now. Well, Drai, son of a warrior. You see that door? You can pass through it at any time. Just release yourself of the burdens that hold you here. The truth will release you. Don't lie to me, because I will know. Don't try my patience, because it is infinite,' he pushed the door closed. 'And don't be shy, because I want to hear you scream.'

Imax edged the sheet away from the table's top to let me glimpse what was below. To see tools, and knives. They were instruments of fear, my gut told me so.

'It, it was an accident.' I desperately wanted him to believe. 'I swear, I . . .'

'I understand,' he interrupted. 'Truly I do. You just happened to be on that roof. The tiles slipped away by accident. All perfectly reasonable, if I wasn't paid to think otherwise.'

I watched his hand trace along his table, undecided of which instrument to choose. His fingers paused to hover over one in particular. One he seemed to favour amongst the others, and he took it up in his palm for me to see.

'I shouldn't have favourites,' he said softly. 'It's silly, I know, but I give them names too. This one's name is, Yurl. Why? Because I knew a man with the same name once. He was just a lean, and almost as sharp. Do you like the way Yurl curves?'

It was more like a hook, and no, I didn't care for the tool. I didn't like the way it spoke to me. Not in words, but a cold serious tongue that taunted my imagination. It left me in no doubt that it sought to gift me pain.

'I think he's my favourite,' he said. 'And I don't agree with those who say you should save the best for last. I think it's a better place to start. What do you think?'

'Please, sir. It was an accident.'

'Yes, so you say. Outrageously bad luck. Or, and more likely . . .' he motioned of his finger along the curve of the shiny blade, ' . . . that you tried to kill a Druid.'

'No, we were curious. *I* was curious.'

‘So, are you politically motivated?’ he replaced the curved blade and picked up a long metal needle, its handle carved from wood. ‘Do you know what that means?’ he asked. ‘No, I think it’s more likely a personal vendetta? Did the Druid kill someone you know? Mummy or Daddy?’ he glanced toward the door and lowered his voice. ‘Personally, if I were in charge, I’d tie weights to their feet and take every one of them for a nice swim. Now what I mean? Yes, you know. “Where Druid’s tread, Raven’s fall,” isn’t that the old adage?’

I don’t know. ‘It was an accident,’ I repeated. How many more times could I tell the truth?

‘An accident, is that your defence? Plausible deniability, is that it. Oh no, poor me, I didn’t mean to kill the Druid. Oops?’ He lifted a large pair of pliers, then held them in front of my face. ‘I think you’re an Auristan spy. Those bastards will use women, *children*; fucking dogs to do their bidding.’

He grabbed my hand and levered my finger out between the two metal prongs.

‘Tell me who you work for. Give me the names of your contacts? Tell me where to find the others?’

Others? ‘There are no others.’

‘So you freely admit that the two of you were working alone.’

‘What? No, please, it was an accident.’ I couldn’t think straight, I was too hot. My joints filled with the same dull pain from being warmed too quickly. Sweat was oozing now from every pore in my body. ‘Joran,’ I said. ‘She’ll tell you. We came here to sell . . .’

‘Sell what, poison?’ he removed the tool and let my finger go. ‘Who’s this, Joran? Is that a he? A she? Ahhh, so it’s another female. A lover, then? No, your mother? Did you plan this together? I’m beginning to understand now, it was all her fault. She filled your head with murder and dissent, is that it?’

I was shaking my head. *I can’t breathe.* ‘Please, I need a drink.’

‘Of course,’ he pulled the sheet completely away and began to fold it.

He’d waited for me to ask. The last thing the sheet had hidden was revealed. A jug and two small cups.

‘It’s ice-cold,’ he said, and poured water into a cup. He touched it to my lips, and then took it away before I could sip. ‘Was it *Joran* who ordered you to murder the Druid?’

‘No, she wouldn’t. She’s a good person, I swear.’ I just wanted to explain. ‘We went up on the roof to see the market. I wanted to look at the treasury. I, I’ve never seen a building that big.’ I was feeling faint. Feeling sick.

‘So, a crime of convenience? You saw the Druid below, and then what? The girl decided to act?’

‘No.’

‘Look, just tell me it was her. Tell me who else is involved and we can get you released. I have a lot of sway with the Warden. I can get him to show you, mercy.’

Mercy? ‘No, no, we were just having fun.’

‘You enjoyed such a heinous act?’

‘No.’

‘So you were forced to behave this way?’

‘No, no-one forced me . . .’

‘Then you admit your part in the conspiracy was voluntary?’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘But it’s what you said?’ Imax pulled the other chair closer. He sat. ‘Your friend, the girl, she’s downstairs. Hmm, right below us in the basement. She’s laid out on a slab down there, and it’s because of you. You did say that *you* wanted to look at the treasury. Right? If it’s not someone else’s fault, then it must be yours. Was this your idea? Would you like a drink?’

He reached for the cup and put it to his lips.

‘This room can get a bit warm, I know. But working in a place like this, the cold, it’s not good for me. Shall I put more wood on the fire?’

I was shaking my head. Staring at his cup.

‘Ooops, spilled it.’ Water dripped from his chin. ‘Look, you don’t have to suffer. Just talk to me, Draí. Trust me, I want to help. But I can only do that if you’re honest with me. Tell me the truth and you walk through that door.’

I almost believed him.

'I, I, just want, to go home.' I began to sob. *Why won't you believe me?* I tugged at my restraints, and then again. Then I had at them like a wild animal desperate to be freed. As tears streamed down my cheeks, sweat dripped from my skin to the floor. My nose had begun to leak so badly I could taste the mucus on my lips.

'Whoah, that's not the actions of an innocent man,' he stood and turned his back. 'Well, I tried to be civil. Let's begin with the assumption that you're an agent of the Senate. A young man with ideals which have got him in over his head. It wouldn't be the first time a member of the Senate has attempted murder for political gain.'

His attention returned, a small knife in his palm. The blade serrated on one side, smooth and sharp on the other. He extended the tip to touch my face.

'You have to admire the craftsmanship of something so simple,' he said, then tapped the blade against my cheek. 'How old are you, fifteen, sixteen? You've barely left a mark on life at that age. Don't let today be the end. Tell me about the woman, Joran?'

It was strange, but I could feel her presence. I closed my eyes to him as he said her name. Other words he uttered seemed somewhat distant. Whatever he wanted me to say about Joran, I would refuse. She was a good person.

At that moment I couldn't hear his voice. But I could hear hers. I could see her too, in my mind, walking about me. Her hand on my shoulder. And what I felt wasn't fear, not any more. It was her grace, her protection. She was out there, somewhere, looking for me. I knew then that she would come. I finally realised what it was she'd shared with me, each and every day. In her voice, her features, the way that she moved. What I saw was hope. Always hope. That the world was not what it really was, but what it could be. Always something better; I heard her whisper in my ear.

Imax grabbed my hair and tugged my head back. 'Joran?' More a question than a name. 'You will tell me.'

'No,' I said. *No, I won't.*

I strained at my bonds again. Scowled at him with all I had. I was angry; determined to fight back. I wanted my friend, Mistri, to be alive. I wanted to share the strength and defiance I'd seen in her face as she had fallen. I wanted to be strong like my father.

I spat at him. My mouth so dry the few drops I mustered refusing to leave my lips.

'You're guilty of sedition,' he said. 'When I'm done, you'll beg to tell me everything.'

'No,' I said.

His passive manner turned mean. His hand slapped hard across my face. The first salvo, and it came with a smile.

'I can't wait to hear you scream.'

I believe you.

Joran watched the gaol from across the street. An older construction, built on three floors. A simple square design topped by a pitched roof. Its walls bare, all the windows barred. The only obvious features to hint at the building's purpose.

Drai, can you hear me? He was weak, she felt that much. *I'll get you out, I promise.* She felt the presence of numerous soldiers inside, but one stood out from the others. *The Druid.*

She'd considered the decisions that had led them both here, now. Draï deserved a life beyond the forest. A chance to experience the world about him. But in doing so she'd failed to protect him.

Why has the Druid come? Only one reason made sense. *You've come for Draï . . .* Joran backed herself against the wall. *How could I have let this happen?*

She'd found Draï, inside on the first floor. The second room on the right from the landing. He was in pain, so much pain. They both were.

A man and a woman walked by. They seemed surprised to see her, but smiled cordially. The woman's expression suggested recognition, and a willingness to stop and talk. Soon overwritten by surprise, as if she'd made a mistake. Then confusion as they hurried on by.

Joran recognised the well dressed couple, but refused the polite gesture on offer. They'd chanced upon the humble healer; a gracious soul, always so eloquently attired. The woman who stared back had wiped tears from her eyes, and she'd glared at their passing. Her trim figure clad in brown leather. A man's shirt below a male tunic. More unsettling was the anger set

fierce her eyes, that made them both look away. When they'd passed from sight, she stepped out into an empty street.

You've brought this upon yourselves.

There were two ways in or out of the gaol. She'd chosen the front entrance, beneath a small arch; through the double-gate below. Two men in uniform, chatting.

In her hand was a pouch that she opened and from it she smeared a soft cream into her palm. With a grinding motion she pushed the nails of her free hand into the balm and then wiped the excess into both palms.

This wasn't what she wanted. But they'd left her no choice. People were going to die today.

Joran strode across the empty street. The locals considered it a bad place to be seen, and a worse place to be taken. This was an area of the city that most avoided.

‘Hey? Hey! Where do you think you’re going?’

Two Guardia came towards her. They were the Warden’s guard. Well-trained soldiers who stopped her; not the ordinary militia who made up the bulk of the city troop.

‘What do you want?’ He was tall and unmoved by her presence. If somewhat confused by what she wore. One hand on his sword’s hilt, the other threatened with a half eaten loaf.

‘Careful, she may be one of the Druid’s gang.’ His compatriot cautioned with a whisper.

The half eaten bread lowered. ‘She still needs a pass from the Warden. Stop there, and state your business?’

‘My *business* is inside; with the Druid.’

‘Shit, I told you.’

‘She still needs a pass.’

Joran stepped closer, his indecision his undoing. Before he could object again she’d grasped the taller uniform’s face. Her sharpened fingernails clasped into his cheek. Both men were stunned by her action, and the speed at which she’d struck.

He fell like a coat casually dropped. The second guard died before his hand could draw a blade. Neither able to shout for help. A scathing swipe of a woman’s nails the last thing either man saw, or felt. A moment later their bodies had been dragged out of sight.

She took in the detail of the small courtyard within. Two trees the only colour beyond the walls of bricks. The entrance to gaol opposite. She looked

to a window one floor up. Draï was in pain, she could feel him. And there was someone else. An ally who would help. Joran knew she stood a better chance of success if they acted together.

Draï, I'm coming.

She could only hope he could still hear her.

A small pot hung suspended above a tiny flame. The sweet smell of soup, strong within the gatehouse where two dead soldiers were heaped one atop the other. A trail of blood from the door was the last thing Joran saw as she closed the gatehouse door, her heart raced, and her hands trembled. Urges she'd so long restrained, so easily returned.

There was no turning back, nor did she want to, as Joran stepped from the door-well into the courtyard beyond. An open space busy with soldiers, but barely a lingering glance, as she walked brazenly across its shingled surface. She even managed a smile towards a guard who took a smoking break, pipe raised towards her, as he sat below the largest tree. Its branches bowed umbrella like, filled heavy with apple coloured leaves.

She acknowledged the simple courtesy, as each audacious step brought her closer to the entrance. Ten, nine, eight steps from safety.

'Stop,' a sharp voice called out. 'Can I help you?'

The intervention by a clean-shaven man. The older smoker showing a keenness to stay out of sight.

'Paget,' he offering his name. 'I'm the Officer of the Watch. Can I be of assistance?'

'I was looking for someone,' she answered.

'May I ask who?'

Now she'd turned, his attraction to her was obvious. Along with grave doubts. Unsure if she were a maid, or a new mistress to one of the many officers he served. Joran's grin spread into a smile.

'Perhaps you *can* help,' she said.

He was being careful not to offend, and in doing so had offered an opportunity. She whispered as she walked towards him. Unintelligible sounds being spoken softly.

'I'm sorry. I, I didn't catch . . .'

More whispers, spoken louder as she approached. Her eyes locked onto his. Strange words that meant less sense than a passing breeze. She touched his hand.

'A young man, and a young girl were brought here. Tell me where?'

'Where? I, err . . .'

Joran moved her face closer to his. This time the wind teased more directly.

'The girl is downstairs,' he said, and looked unsure as to why. 'The boy is on the first floor,' he added.

'Take me to the girl. If anyone asks I'm her mother. The Warden has allowed me a visit. Do you understand?'

'Yes, of course. Please, this way. I'll show you to the infirmary.'

Joran took his arm and allowed him to lead.

The building was a maze of straight lines as they followed one corridor after another, down two flights of steps. Joran was careful to memorise the way, paying attention to each of the rooms they passed. Her keen senses observant to gather information, aware of the conversations within. Paget stopped outside a door at the end of the passage. He took a brass latch in his hand and opened the door.

'I think this is who you're looking for,' he said.

'Show me inside. Close the door behind us.

'Of course.'

The room inside was rectangular with white-washed walls. Glass cabinets suspended on three of them. The third bare, with a work-top below, divided by two sinks with a hand-pump between them.

'Where are we?' she asked.

There were several long tables. One had its surface covered by a grey cloth; the outline of what lay below suggested a body.

'It's the girl,' he said.

It's not true. Joran took hold of the cloth. *Mistri?* She slid the sheet away. 'No . . .' The naked body of a female uncovered. 'How did it happen?'

‘She died in a fall.’

‘What else?’

‘They attempted to murder a Druid. This one fell from a roof before the arrest could be made. We followed proper procedure. Shall I take you to the other one now?’

‘Sit down and be quiet,’ she told him, then covered Mistri’s body from her neck down. She took her hand.

There was tranquillity about the dead. An aura shared by all who passed on. Memories of deceased and dying flooded back. Faces she’d forgotten. The corpses of those struck down in battle, cut down in their thousands; they’d all shared the same reflection. A short time when serenity and peace is shared amongst the departed; no matter what reason they fought. Until the forces of nature intervene and the image is soured.

‘She’s well preserved, don’t you think? It’s been several days since the incident.’

Joran placed her fingers on Mistri’s cheek. *So cold*. First the soldiers at the gate, and now Mistri. *So very cold*. The dead were mounting. The peace of the forest was at an end.

She made the sign of the dead on Mistri’s forehead, and kissed her fingers, before placing her hand back on the table.

‘Kai’ shaaa . . . Netso Yat, Mistri,’ she whispered. Then repeated as her lips touched Mistri’s. ‘Fee na, so . . . Impoten terror na, Mistri.’

Paget’s hands clenched at the spindled arms of his chair. He tried to move, but couldn’t. ‘What are you doing?’

A wisp of mist spiralled between Joran’s lips and Mistri’s.

‘Rise, Child of the Forest,’ her words a hush. More being whispered in the air between their lips.

‘Witchcraft . . .’ Paget’s eyes glazed in alarm. His world was empty to all but Joran’s voice. Still, it stirred him as Mistri opened her eyes.

‘You came for me?’ she said. ‘I knew you would . . . Draï?!’

‘Shhh,’ Joran stroked her cheek. ‘It took some time to find you, but I’m here now.’

‘Where’s Draï? Is he safe?’

‘He’s in this building. Can you walk?’ She helped Mistri to sit up.

‘Why is he here?’ Mistri swung her legs awkwardly over the table. ‘He was there when they took him.’

‘No, he’s not a threat. He’s been influenced by the Whisper.’

‘I should kill him,’ she let the sheet slide to the floor. ‘Where are my clothes?’

Paget shrugged.

‘What the fuck is he staring at? Please tell me we can find Draï without his help.’

‘Where?’ Joran asked.

‘Two floors up. Third door on the right from the landing.’

‘Good, then he’s got one more use.’ Mistri motioned for him to stand. Paget looked to Joran, and then complied. ‘Take off your clothes,’ she said. ‘I think your about my size?’

Mistri stepped out from the infirmary. 'I think they need advice on fashion,' she said. The last button on Paget's tunic pressed in. She adjusted his cap; almost a perfect fit. 'It's a good job you didn't Whisper to a fat guard,' she listened for movement. 'Shall we?' She led Joran down the corridor.

'He's this way. Mistri, they're hurting him.'

Mistri drew the officer's dagger from the thick black belt around her waist, but was cautioned by Joran's hand on her own.

'Only as a final resort,' she said.

Mistri nodded her understanding. 'Nice look,' she said. 'The new outfit. Not too keen on the colour though.'

'I was trying to blend in.'

'By wearing leather pants so tight they become a magnet for men's eyes? How long's it been since you . . .' she patted the dagger she'd wanted to draw. 'Can you still remember how?' The grin that followed was playful. 'Just stay behind me, you'll be fine.'

'Up here,' Mistri quickened the pace. Then slowed as she stepped from the stairs onto the first floor landing.

'I can feel him. Those bastards! We need to hurry.'

'Where are you going?' A voice asked, A uniform speaking from the room behind. 'What are you doing up here?'

Shit. Mistri grabbed Joran's arm. 'This one needs interrogating. She's the mother of the girl downstairs.'

He looked confused. 'I understand,' he said. 'Sorry, sir. Err, Ma'am. But I, I don't recognise you?'

Too many questions. Mistri stepped closer, knife held behind Joran's back. 'I haven't got time for this,' she said.

‘Nevertheless, I have to see some . . .’ The man’s voice curtailed to an onerous sigh. A gurgling noise followed. His life expiring as Mistri pushed him back through the doorway.

‘We don’t have time to talk them all round,’ she said, closing the door. ‘Drai’s close, I can feel him.’

‘A knife will not be enough if the alarm is raised,’ Joran took Mistri’s arm. ‘Stealth,’ she said.

‘And if they kill him whilst we skulk around?’ Mistri pushed on, touching each door as she passed. ‘He’s here,’ she said. ‘In here.’ The third door, just as Paget had told them.

‘There are others up here.’

‘We can’t help them all,’ Mistri lifted her bloodied knife. She placed her hand on the lever. ‘He needs us now,’ she said, and pushed the door open.

The man Mistri had startled took a step away. He held a metal tool in one hand, and a blood soaked towel in the other. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, his tunic hung by the fire.

‘Who the fuck are you?’ he demanded, and fingered his hair away from his sweat covered face. ‘I’ll have those fucking pips off your shoulders for this.’

Pips? On her shoulders. ‘Oh, you think I’m one of you,’ she was shaking her head as she stepped towards him.

‘And who the fuck is that? Get out of here, now!’

‘Drai?’ She couldn’t see him, this bastard was in the way. ‘Drai . . .’

‘You know him?’ he asked.

If he’d intended to defend himself, he didn’t get the chance. Mistri stepped across the wooden floor, her gaze locked with his. She took his wrist and bent his arm, taking the spiky tool away from his hand.

‘No, stop. I’ll have you locked up for this.’

‘Dear Gods, Drai?’

He was slumped in a chair, arms bound and bloodied. Joran already by his side.

‘Drai?’ Joran sank to her knees, his face in her hands. ‘What have they done to you?’

From the bruising it was clear he’d been struck many times.

‘Who the fuck are you people?’ A glint of realisation spread out across his face.

‘That’s right, we’re with him,’ Mistri confirmed.

‘Oh, fuck . . . It’s my job; nothing personal.’

‘Well, this is very personal,’ she said, and levelled his tool before his face.

‘No, no, they made me do it. You don’t get a choice . . .’

The spike ran slowly through his eye. His plea petering to a wretched gasping sound that quickly ran out of air. He fell back.

‘Drai, talk to me,’ Joran unbuckled his bonds. ‘Mistri, we have to get him out of here.’

‘Can you stand?’ Mistri asked. ‘Drai, you have to help us. Try to stand.’

I was dreaming again. Dear sweet Mistri, trying to help me stand. My heart leapt as Joran took my hand. But all I wanted to do was sleep.

‘Drai, you have to stand. Come on, up you get.’

‘No, go away.’ This was a rotten dream. The dead trying to save the dying.

‘Drai, it’s me. I know this seem strange, but I’m alive.’

‘No, I saw you fall. Leave me alone.’ *I’m losing my mind. I want to go home.*

‘Joran, can’t you do something?’

‘Drai, I’m sorry. This will only last for a while.’

She was untying a small red pouch hidden beneath her tunic. She rubbed the powder she’d tipped into the wounds on my arm. A moment later I was stirring; my head clearing. A fire began to burn in my veins. I was too hot; couldn’t breathe. I had to get out.

‘There we go. That’s much better,’ Mistri took my arm. ‘Up you come.’

‘No, you’re dead. Let go. I have to get outside.’

‘Drai, listen to me. Listen.’

I heard her, Joran. Her voice speaking without need for words. A calm descending, despite my body’s urge to run, run, run like the stag.

‘Trust me,’ she said. ‘You’re not dreaming. We’ve come to get you out. Trust me.’

‘Yes.’ *Always.* I took her hand and got to my feet.

‘Here, you should put these on.’

She offered me a pair of trousers. They felt real. Taken from the body on the floor. ‘You’re not dead?’ I touched her cheek, her lips, her hair.

‘You can’t keep a good girl down,’ she replied, and unleashed a welcome smile.

I threw my arms about her. 'I thought you were dead.' *How can this be?* Joran? I took her hand, and then rested myself against her. Tears streaming again.

'Put them on,' Mistri was insistent. 'I'll get his tunic. Then we have to go.'

'I'm all right.' I lied, and eased Joran gently away. 'I want to go home,' I said, as Mistri helped my arm into Imax's jacket. The bastard was dead, but that wasn't enough. I wanted to take his other eye.

'Drai, he's gone. He can't hurt you any more. Drai?!'

I had a pair of boots thrust into my hands. His footwear and clothing were scarce recompense for each pain soaked moment I'd endured. But I put them on, Mistri helping with the buckles.

'We must go,' she insisted. 'Before someone comes.'

But I wasn't ready, not yet. There was more to be done. as I stared at his body, laid out in nothing but his underwear; a lifeless hulk. My anger towards it was a spear. Joran tugged me towards the door. I resisted. I wanted to take out the other eye.

Give me his eye!

The chill of the hallway broke the spell of that cursed room. My Senses became mine again as we walked quickly towards the stairs.

Mistri? She was alive, but how? Joran's hand pulled me to follow. Adrenaline and hatred were the fuel that kept me moving. I'd been cut and stabbed; the intention not to kill but to inflict pain. Each cut and bruise a torture that now delivered an unexpected twist. A new vision of my world that Imax had crafted. The soldiers were my enemy now. They all were guilty, and I despised them all.

The stairwell threatened to bring me to my knees. Each step ascended was more difficult than the last, but managed with Joran's aid, and the help of the wall. Mistri too offered her hand, but I refused. A part of me was frightened to touch her, in case she melted away, or my senses recovered to find she wasn't real. How was she alive?

'Joss, we need another way out. There are too many soldiers, and we're too slow.'

Joss? I'd not heard anyone call Joran that name. And who was she calling slow? I was ready to fight. 'I saw you fall,' I said.

'Drai, Mistri is fine.' *Trust me.*

There she was, in my head again. *I'm dreaming. This is what people do. Bizarre images play out, and then disappoint when you awaken.* I was still sat in that chair, unconscious. The heat playing tricks with my mind. Asleep within Shari's realm of madness. *I'm running with ghosts.*

Trust me. She whispered in my mind again. 'I won't leave you,' she said.

'This is taking too long.' Mistri came closer. 'I'm real,' she scolded. 'Look,' she grabbed my arm. 'I'm real, she's real.' She put her hand over my mouth, then dug her nails into my arm.

I screamed muffled objection through her fingers, and felt tears try fill my eyes. Dear Gods, The only thing I knew for certain was the pain.

‘There, happy now? Shall we go.’

‘That’s enough,’ Joran’s hands cupped my face. ‘We’ll get you out of here, I promise.’

‘We need to go.’ Mistri took my hand and led me like a puppy. ‘Come on, sleepy-head.’

We followed a long sweeping corridor with windows that viewed out onto a pretty garden. Not what I expected. Its shrubs and bushes lush and green, with banks of flowers already begun to bloom. I was sorry to see it pass as a wall blocked my view, and I was pulled through two big doors that opened into a huge kitchen. Two men, cooks I supposed, turned to watch us pass.

‘Get on with your work,’ Mistri ordered. ‘Or the Druid will have your balls.’ One hand pushed Joran, the other pulled me behind. ‘If you don’t want to suffer their fate, look away. Do it now, on the Druid’s orders!’

It wasn’t just our uniforms that showed confusion, or the threats. I felt their fear of the Druid’s image, that Joran had laid deep in their minds. So, it wasn’t just disobedient children who feared them, but soldiers as well.

I’d never seen so many pots and pans in one place. Fresh herbs hung in batches, and fruit lined across the worktops as we made our way through. The Warden’s henchmen were obviously well fed. I took an apple as I passed, and slid another inside my jacket. I didn’t see it as stealing; more recompense. As was the fear well laid in the cook’s heads. I prayed that the Goddess Shari would darken their dreams until the day they died, as I bit into that apple. A wave of juicy sweetness across my dry tongue, that spilled out between my lips to trickle down my chin.

All thoughts of vengeance were washed away, as I tried to catch it with my hand, my taste buds thrown into a frenzy. For a moment I was no more civilised than a wild animal keen to savour its kill. That simple piece of fruit brought tears to my eyes. But I spurned them. Refused to be party to any process that required self-pity. I’d shed too many tears in recent days, and I

vowed there and then that I'd shed no more. No matter what the cause. I spat the fruit from my mouth.

I pulled my hand from Mistri's too, no longer requiring her support. That apple lit a fire in my belly. A flame so hot that it dulled the pain of my flesh. I was my father's son. A tree in the desert, unwilling to wilt below the sun.

My pace quickened across the kitchen and we came to a set of glazed panels, that opened into a hall. At the other end was a door, that I already knew would lead us outside.

'What? What's wrong?' The fertile fragrance of freedom was snatched away.

'Soldiers,' Joran warned, 'outside, and coming this way.'

'How many?' Asked Mistri.

'Too many,' she said.

I didn't care. I wanted to leave. I felt Joran's fingers slip into mine and caution me for patience. Her hand was trembling.

'Can we fight?' I asked, not realising how desperate the question sounded. We had only one weapon between us, a dagger; held in the hand of a girl barely older than I. 'I have to get out.' I'd face the soldiers.

'Hey, hands off.'

'I want fight,' I said.

'Really, with this?' she pulled the knife away from me.

'Drai, you have to trust us. Mistri knows what to do.'

I didn't know what to think. My body was pounding out the need to leave. Flooding my body with the urge to fling the door open and breathe the air on the other side. I was ready to take them on, alone, if necessary.

'How much of that stuff did you give him?' asked Mistri.

'I'm not sure. I didn't have time to weigh him and measure a dose.'

'I'll fucking kill them all,' I said.

'Okay, I'm guessing it was too much,' Mistri's hand pushed me back to the wall. 'Drai, you have to stay calm. Your father would know when to fight, and when to melt away. It's what warriors do.'

'He left us,' I said. 'That's something else they do. Give me the knife.'

‘Joss, if you don’t, I will. It will hurt more, and then we’ll have to carry him.’

She was nodding.

Drai, listen to me. Listen to my voice. I want you to . . .

Fight!

You will, I promise. But not now. Now you must be calm. Calm . . .

‘I must be calm.’ I said aloud.

I caught Mistri’s reflection in the glass; shaking her head. Beyond her image I could just make out what was outside. Through the frosted pane I saw a raised walkway. Soldiers on its summit, crossing the bridge that was our only way out.

‘Can you hide us?’ Mistri asked.

‘I can try,’ Joran squeezed my hand. ‘We must move quickly when we leave. Drai, I beg you, remain calm. Don’t look at the soldiers, and don’t make a sound. Are you ready?’

The fire in my belly was doused by her persuasion. I intended to have words later, about her persistent intrusions in my head.

My guardian took a deep breath, and a last glance toward Mistri. She closed her eyes and opened her arms in a wide circular motion above her head, then down to her feet. She knelt and touched the floor. She began to whisper. I don’t know how, but I knew she was summoning a veil.

She stood. ‘Now,’ she said. ‘We must go, now.’

Mistri, opened the doors.

This is crazy?

Silence. Not a word or a sound.

I wouldn’t have to, they’d hear my heart thumping with panic as she led me outside. Beirdin’s breath, I’d never felt so exposed.

But if I was going to die, it would be out here. Not caged in a room like a frightened whelp. I clenched my fists and instinctively looked up toward the sky. “Don’t look at the soldiers” that’s what she’d said.

I was convinced that the sky would be the last thing I ever saw.

It felt like an omen, the light fading; drifting further towards its sister, the night. Her moon already visible alongside a fading sun. My mind cast back to the old bench that I'd so often shared with Mama. How we'd looked for a new star, that I knew would one day outshine all others. Grateful each night that we saw nothing.

I supposed, if I had, the feelings would be similar to the ones I felt now. The rapid heart-beat and the nervous breaths; almost impossible to keep silent. A gut-turning apprehension as three men in grey walked casually towards us. One wore a hood to cover his head, and a skirt about his breeches. They spoke to each other as if the sight of us was inconsequential. As many more had reached the summit of the bridge behind them. One of them was dressed in black.

Don't look at them. Don't . . .

I looked down, away, anywhere but towards them. I wanted to close my eyes. But to what end? It was the cruelest of fates, and stubborn chance, that everywhere I walked, the Druid walked too. We were destined to be a part of each other's lives. I felt my eyes lift and my head rise. I felt compelled to witness those bulbous shaped eyes. That moon-shaped face of destiny. How could I not look?

I'd never felt time slow, the way it did now. Each step taken in water, or so it seemed. The closer to the Druid's entourage we came, the narrower my focus, the longer my steps. The words of our enemy drawn out into sounds I didn't recognise. My blood ran cold as they passed us by.

Slowly, very slowly, the first of them moved on. Out of our future and into our past. Their voices trailing away. But *he* was still to pass.

Don't look. I knew he would see me if I took his gaze. *Look down. Look away.*

The man in black striding amidst his personal guard. The prophet of darkness, his every move, no matter how minute, delivered with indomitable purpose. I knew him now. I knew *what* he was, and I despised him for it.

Four steps, I could feel his presence.

Three steps, and a spark of anger ignited bile in my gut.

Two steps away and the fire in my belly spread out to fill me.

How different he'd become since our first encounter. At the city gate he'd cut a mystical figure. A Druid sat proud on his dark horse. But he was just a man shrouded in darkness; a paragon of malevolent virtue.

One more step and the sounds of his footsteps filled our circle. They beat like a drum on the spell that kept us hidden. I wanted to spit at him as he strode alongside, and then he passed. The sounds of men's boots moving away on the bridge. I felt my fire quench with relief. My body's weight return. My pain reminding me that I was still alive.

Ahead of us was an avenue of buildings. The chance to lose ourselves in the tightly packed streets beyond. We'd made it. We were clear and free. And then a sound carried from behind that froze my body, and my thoughts.

One word. One fateful sound. Dispatched from the Druid's mouth.

'Wait!'

It sent a surge of dread tingling up my spine.

That one word caused the breeze to pause. I did more than stop, I froze. Joran's hand tightened about my own.

Be very still, Draï. She was struggling to maintain the illusion. *Be ready to run. Follow the steps down and head towards the house painted blue. The street behind will take you to the inn. You'll be safe, I've made arrangements. I'll find you.*

I'm not leaving you.

Draï, run. Run and don't stop.

'Hey,' Mistri whispered. 'Look down there.'

Gathered around a stone trough were six horses. I recognised one instantly. He belonged to the Druid. A single groom sharing his attention between them, dropping hay and feed. I heard their grunts, and snuffles, as they bickered to be first to feed.

'I want the black one,' I said, and then raised my eyes to look behind me. At the five men looking to their master for direction. Confused by his actions and demands. He was giving instructions to spread out, but not to advance. He could feel our presence.

Well, if he wanted me, he'd have to come and get me. I stared at the grey uniforms one by one, and then took the Druid's gaze. Knowing he couldn't see me. Fully aware that he knew something was wrong.

Draï, no! Joran squeezed my hand and tugged. But I stood firm. 'Mistri?' she whispered. But my friend just shrugged and gave a mischievous smile.

Be warned, Druid. I will never let you take me again.

Mistri stepped beside us, her dagger raised.

'It was always going to end this way,' she said.

Why don't they come for us?

It was a stand off, with neither side willing to strike first. The youngest, still wearing his hood, was asking the Druid what was wrong. Strange, how I could every word from such a distance.

'What's wrong?' he asked again, but received no reply.

Joran's efforts were taxing her. Draining her resolve. Her fingers trembled with the effort. 'Don't move,' she whispered. 'I, I, can't . . .'

I wanted to help. To will the soldiers to turn and leave.

'My Lord, what's wrong?' the young man asked.

Your name, it's Elspar. I looked down, remembering my joining with the Druid. How badly that had gone. Too late, I'd got his attention. He too was staring down an empty bridge.

'What is it?' he asked.

'You feel it now?'

'Yes . . . Yes, I do,' Narcista motioned one of his grey soldiers forward, then he gestured for the rest of the Vildegard to advance. To a man they drew their swords, still unaware as to why. But a soldier's instinct is as strong as his will, and they moved slowly forward.

'Drai, get ready to run for those horses.'

'Why don't we run now?' I whispered.

We couldn't possibly fight them, they were professional soldiers and outnumbered us three to one. 'We should run, now,' I advised. My need to fight such odds waned. I was ready to run, and run fast.

The Druid cautioned his men to stop. No more than a few paces from us now. 'Do I know you?' he asked.

He can see us?

Shhh, we may escape this yet.

I watched a bead of sweat roll down her cheek.

Run. I urged. *It's now or never.*

Elspar moved to my right. Three of the soldiers moved around to block the bridge. To a man they looked confused.

'Who are you?' Elspar asked. 'How did you pass . . .'

'The Warden's business,' Joran said. 'Let us pass.'

'Let them pass,' the Druid said, and Joran pulled me back. 'No, wait,' he seemed unsure. 'Don't I know you?' he was staring straight at me.

My hand? She'd stopped the blood running to my fingers.

'Mistri, I can't . . .' *Drai, run.* 'Run!'

I'd never seen a movement as swift, nor as brutal. One sweep of my friend's dagger in an outward arc. All it took to end a man's life. A soldier staggered back clutching his throat; blood seeping from a deep laceration. She'd already turned on the other two who blocked our way. Like a circus performer, but trained in the art of death. Her dagger plunged deep into a second man's torso, both hands on the hilt. She used it as an anchor to step up his comrade; wrapped her legs around his neck. I heard the bones disconnect in a most unnatural way.

Another moment, but this time it happened so quickly. As I stood; terrified, watching. I wanted to help, but I wanted to cower too as Joran's finger nails clawed down into the Cleric's face, dragged deep into the flesh of his cheek. The man grabbed at his face and screamed as if it were on fire.

Before I could move, long blades were drawn. Two soldiers out for blood. Mistri, her small dagger and a dead man's sword, on the defensive. A blur of steel as it slashed and thrust. Forceful and relentless. The men in grey no longer surprised by her lethal force. But they were no match for Mistri's movement, or the use of her body as a weapon. Agility and mobility more than a match for their professional guile.

Another parry and a sweeping leg that took a man twice her size from his feet. A boot in the face of the other, as her back arched in a flip that took her to the other side of the bridge. The Dog Soldiers angry; out for blood. Their blue-eyed captain grappling with Joran. Her nails being held at bay just inched from his face. He was too strong for her.

‘Stop this,’ I said. ‘Let us go.’

The Druid hadn’t moved, Not so much as a flinch; his gaze still set upon me.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, as if the melee about us were somewhere else. ‘Answer me, or they’ll both die.’

Fuck you. I stepped away. I wanted to help Joran. But found myself held against my will.

‘Who, are, you?’

My head lifted against my will, my neck gripped by a powerful choking force. I was raised up, my toes barely in touch with the ground. An invisible noose pulled taught about my throat.

‘I, can’t, breathe.’ No air in my lungs. My hands pulled at a knot that wasn’t there.

I was thrown like a child’s toy across the bridge, to hit the ground rolling, my lung’s gasping for air. He’d wanted to hurt me, badly, I felt that much as I sloped away on all fours. The thick stone parapet of the bridge barring my way. My hands raised against another assault. And then I saw why he’d let me go. Joran had interceded. Placed herself between the Druid and I. That crazed and violent moment had finally come to an end. Literally. No-one moved on the walkway.

Mistri was caught frozen in a leap, her dagger poised, the Vildegard she attacked already forced back and in defence. Two men lay motionless, another on one knee withdrawing, blood running from his arm. They were frozen in time. Only the Druid and Joran still engaged within my space. The others caught somehow.

Drai, you must go. Run.

No, I won’t. I refused to leave her. Unsure of what I could do to help.

Drai, I can’t stop him. Please, go. Go now.

A few feet away was a short blade. The kind of sword a soldier would stab with in a shield wall. My father had shown me one just like it. “A perfect tool for pricking your enemies’ ardour,” so my father had told me.

I flinched as she dropped to one knee, her arms held aloft as if fending off an invisible rock that threatened to strike her. She was in trouble. Losing

whatever conflict the two of them had engaged. She was too drained to defend herself. To defend me.

Drai, please? I'm begging you, go.

'No,' I got to my feet. 'I won't leave you.' I could feel the powers at war between them. The air was charged with energy, as though a mighty storm were brewing above us all. The heavens about to burst with lightning, despite a deafly silence enough to herald the coming of the dead.

Drai, I'm sorry. Joran's hands dropped and her body fell limp. I watched him lift her into the air in triumph

I felt the whole causeway drop, enough to make me stumble. Metal struck again against metal, the grunted cries of combat returned. The wounded man fell away, his hand to his arm; lips cursing obscenities, but not yet ready to concede the fight.

Three against Mistri now. Joran already fallen, though her body hung suspended. The young Cleric advancing with bloodied hands. His face gouged and hung with strings of flesh, a blade raised and ready to end her life. He howled eternal malice upon her as his steel swept down with a savage lust for vengeance.

‘NO!’ *I won’t let them die.*

I thrust out my hand to bring about one *final* moment. One to end them all.

The air was still charged about the bridge, the energy of the fight no longer lingered. It was summoned. And in an instant brought to bear. The approaching storm drawn in at my command. And like the stag who had rutted with defiance, I felt the heat of all those on the bridge. I felt it pulse and multiply, swell and burn in my heart, and then it was released through my hand to do permanent damage to that Cleric.

Barely a heartbeat passed; everything stopped. And then something extraordinary: the energy pulsed outward like a wave. The Cleric took the full force of my rage and was thrown clear from the causeway. Everyone else caught in its wake.

The wounded soldier sent crashing through the glass doors; the beautiful panes shattered into a thousands tiny darts that ripped at the Vildegar’s clothing and stabbed at their flesh. A violent backdraft sucked the Druid onto his back and sent him head over heels away. One of the Vildegar screamed as he was cast over the balustrade.

Another strange moment; it seemed the last few minutes was rife with them. As the eye of the storm settled, Joran was still held suspended, but at my will, not his. As Mistri picked herself up and helped Joran to stand. Both stared in disbelief.

The ornate parapet was rubble, spread across the causeway. Debris and glass covered the fallen soldiers.

Mistri had my arm, pulling me to stand. Eyes wide and staring, not fully grasping what I’d done.

‘Wow,’ she said. Nothing more.

It felt so good to take Joran's hand. For me to help her to walk. Her face white and bloodless.

'Now we can run,' I said.

We fled the bridge, down the steps to where the horses waited. The groom had fled. The animals were nervous; had they not been tethered they would surely have scattered.

Seconds later reigns were loosened, and we were mounted. I pulled my mare, but before I rode, I touched at the simple minds of the other horses. I told them to *run*. And they did. Hooves clattering down the cobbled streets. But not the black horse. He stamped his hoof and snorted his defiance.

Tell your master. My name is Drai.

I'd taken the brown mare. I didn't look back again.

The sound of the hooves as our horses raced through the city's streets, was exhilarating. The buildings and rooftops a blur as we passed. Heads turned, but no one tried to stop us. Most were keen to get out of our way. For we rode soldier's horses, and wore the uniforms of the Warden's own guard. We were untouchable. The guards on the gate stepped aside as we left the city, riding hard towards east. Chasing the sun before it finally dropped below the horizon. The night closing fast, and eager to help us hide.

In the distance I could hear the sound of bells being rung. The sign for the city's gates to close. It only added to the thrill.

They were too late. We thundered across hard dirt, the city now a blip in the distance.

No-one spoke for an hour. A hard ride had taken us, I had no idea where. Not even time to pause, eat, or water the horses. At best a canter, and then a trot, and then we were riding again. The sweat on my mare's neck had built into a lather, her heart raced at the effort involved. Mine too. The moon had reached its pinnacle when Mistri slowed us to walk the horses again.

Tan, I'd named my horse, was breathing hard, as were the others. They couldn't go on like this much longer. I wanted someone to order a break. To get off the horses and let them rest, properly. I wanted to talk about what had happened. What was going to happen?

'Okay, I'll say it. Did you see what Draï did back there?' Mistri was full of admiration. 'Whoosh,' she exclaimed, her hand sweeping away from her. 'That Druid went down. Wedan's woes, he didn't stop until the wall got in the way. I wish I could have seen his face.'

I suppose it was pretty impressive. I had no idea how. I *was* glad to see her cheeky smile return. But there were other things I wanted to talk about. Like how my mild-mannered guardian had struck down that Cleric. Or how my new friend was alive and well. *I saw you fall.* I'd watched her fight?

'Well?' she asked. 'Someone tell me what just happened? Draï's got some sort of gift, right? Tell me.'

Yes, let's talk about this. I pulled on Tan's reigns to stop. And heard her sigh with appreciation. The two of them were at either ends of an emotional scale. Joran, unable to look me in the eye. Mistri, seemed happy. I'd start with her.

'I saw you fall,' I said. 'They told me you were dead.'

'Well, it's not the first time. And probably not the last that someone's made that mistake. Draï, you took half the bridge down on those soldiers. How?'

‘No, it’s not about me. No more secrets.’

‘Drai, we’ll talk about this when we’re safe.’ Joran moved her horse on. ‘I know a place, but it will take time. They’ll be following.’

‘No, not later,’ I knew that meant, never. I kicked Tan on to catch her up. ‘We can’t ignore what’s happened,’ I said.

‘Hey, what about the bridge?’

I wasn’t listening. ‘Joss?’ I asked, wanting her to open up. ‘Mistri called you Joss back there?’

‘It’s just a name.’

‘How many have you got?’ I asked.

Her horse was a mare like mine. A white and brown coat that caught the light as she turned her towards me. Joran, Joss, whoever she was, looked so pale. As if the night had drawn the colour from her face. I suppose that’s how fighting with Druids left most people.

‘Drai, I’m so sorry. I should have seen this coming. I should have looked . . . far more carefully.’

Looked, at what? I saw it in her eyes. *Oh, at me.* That’s what she meant. She could have read me like a book, but didn’t. *Shit.* I could have told her about, *them.* Been more honest about my gifts.

‘A Druid in Boundary?’ she said. ‘That’s never happened. I should have realised they’d . . .’

‘Was he looking for me?’ *Shit.* ‘He was, wasn’t he?’

She was reluctant, nodded anyway. ‘Yes, he was looking for you.’

‘But why?’

‘Because you’re a threat to him, and to his Order.’

‘A threat, how?’ The moment I spoke the words, dreadful images flashed through my head. *The Dreaming?*

Yes. I heard her voice clear as if the words were spoken aloud. *Drai, please, I promise. I’ll tell you . . .*

Everything? Or what you think I need to know. I’m not a child anymore.

No, I think you proved that at the causeway. But now’s not the time. They’ll come for us. Your secret’s been revealed, and it changes everything. A terrible uncertainty has been provoked, Drai. Our entire world is threatened.

I've seen them.

You should have told me. No, it's not your fault. I should have looked more closely.

'Hey, are you doing that thing?' Mistri's horse sent dust into the air as it skidded up beside us. 'Talk with your lips. Look, like this. It's so rude.'

I couldn't even look at her. And yet I was so happy she was here.

'Come on, Tan.' I encouraged my sandy coloured mare to walk on. I needed space between us, and them.

I had no idea how many leagues we crossed before we came upon a small bridge. The first structure of any kind in a long night. I wondered just how big this Empire of ours was as we crossed in single file. The horses' hooves clunk-clunking across old wooden boards.

Where are we? For the first time in several hours I left my own space to take in my surroundings.

The long night was unusually bright, being lit by the glow of a full moon. Its reflection rampant amidst the lapping surface of the river-water below. And I could see what looked like sheep's bladders bobbing about. Small buoys, I assumed. And somewhere close-by the chinking of metal discs in the breeze.

'Fisherman's boats,' said Joran. They fish the river, and live in huts where the river bends. She was pointing. 'Hopefully they're unaware of our passing.'

I thought of the mill, and Jorge, and wondered what he was doing right now. Probably sound asleep in a nice soft bed.

'We'll water the horses on the other side. Let them rest. Then we have to move on.'

'I'm tired,' I said. My bruises hurt, and I was weary. My backside was sick of my saddle. 'We could stay the night; build a fire?'

'Drai,' she slipped from her horse and took my reigns. 'We can't stop for long. Those soldiers will have drafted the Warden's best men. They are already in pursuit.'

'I can't.'

‘Yes, you can. You must,’ she held out her hand.

‘What is that?’

‘Take this,’ she said. ‘It will help.’

One of her potions? *No*. I shook my head. That last draft had sent lightning surging throughout my body.

‘Just a mild potion, I promise. It will ward off tiredness. It will help dull the pain. Draí, I know you’re in pain.’

I could feel every cut and bruise that man had inflicted. ‘Fine,’ I took it. I’d probably fall asleep in the saddle without it. ‘I’m hungry,’ I added. I needed food to fill my belly and a cushion under my arse.

‘There’s a small forest about an hour from here. We’ll stop and make a fire without fear of anyone seeing the light. They won’t be far behind us.’

I nodded and opened the tiny paper parcel she’d slipped into my hand. The dry powder sticking to my tongue before I could swallow. It tasted like pig-shit.

‘Ten minutes,’ Mistri said in a hush as she left the bridge. ‘Don’t let the horses drink too much. Then we move on.’

It was dawn when we saw the trees; as the rain began to fall. Just a few drops at first. Then a torrent that saturated the soil and roused the dips and hollows into puddles and pools. They seemed to bristle from the downpour, and as we hurried for shelter the rain clattered like hail against the leaves above.

What a relief. To know we could light a fire and cook some food. I was so hungry. Just to be able to close my eyes and not risk falling from my saddle. I helped Mistri unload the horses.

To most people a forest at night would be a fearful situation. A dark ominous world where shadows slink and creep amongst the bark. A place where souls roam and whisper. It was the perfect shelter and comfort for me.

Mistri emptied the saddle-packs on the ground.

‘They came well prepared,’ she sounded impressed. ‘Here, find some long sticks and stretch this over them.’

She threw me a rolled sheet made from skins, that I unrolled and perched on branches as a makeshift tent. Within minutes Joran had lit a fire to keep us warm.

The saddlebags were filled with treasure. We found tools and weapons, biscuits, seeds and dried meat; rations that tasted divine. And as the last droplets of rain dripped down from the leaves, I said a prayer to the Gods for Mama.

There was another who’s life had been affected; who was in prayer. Minstrel, my pup, I doubted I would ever see him again. I missed him, and wondered if he’d feel the same. I hoped his new life with Sage would make him happy, as I dropped another stick onto the fire.

‘Who’s going to go first?’ I asked, as I stared at the flames. Knowing they glanced at each other; neither wanting to say what *I* wanted to hear. ‘Fine, I’ll start the conversation then, shall I?’ I got up and walked towards the horses. They too, just as relieved to be rested and fed. ‘Fine, I’ll start . . .’

‘Drai, it’s not what you think.’

‘Not what I think?’ I scowled at my guardian. ‘And what is it that I think? What could I possibly be thinking?’ I don’t know why her remark irked me so much, but it did. *Who the fuck was that man?* I should have said it out loud. Filled the air with profanity. ‘Why is the Druid looking for me? Why did he want to hurt me? Why?’

‘Drai, there are things . . .’

‘If you are about to tell me, I don’t understand? Don’t! Tell me what I want to know, not what you think is necessary.’ I beat my palm on my chest. ‘I’m sick of being told lies, and half-truths. If there’s one good thing to come from all of this, let it be the truth.’

There was an exchange of looks, and I just knew they considered lying. If not in words, then by omission of facts, they were going to hold back and treat me like a child.

‘I’m not a fucking child . . .’

‘Drai, please?’

‘Please? Please, what? Don’t ask awkward questions? They tortured me.’ I pulled up my sleeve to show them. Then pulled my shirt at the collar to prove it was real. ‘Why?’ I asked again. ‘Why did they want to hurt me?’

‘Tell him,’ said Mistri. ‘Get it over and done with.’

‘Yes, tell me. Tell me how a girl who falls from a rooftop is walking and talking, as if it didn’t happen?’ *How?* ‘I saw you fall. I saw them take your body away. Who?’ *Fuck.* ‘What are you?’

For the first time since I’d met Mistri, I saw her vulnerability.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean . . .’ I stepped towards her, but she turned away. *I shouldn’t have said it. Not like that.* She couldn’t hide the hurt, not from me. I may as well have slapped her face, and for what? Her selfless act to try and save me.

‘Tell him,’ she sounded angry.

‘Tell me,’ I demanded. I wanted to know what kind of magic she’d conjured at the gaol. Why my friend was still alive? But the one grinding question at the fore. Incited now by the recent conversations I’d overheard between Father and Mama. My insides coiled and ready to spring on the first one who lied.

‘Joran?’ I spoke her name softly, as if fearful of frightening her away. ‘Please . . .’

For the first time I realised the toll the last few days had taken on her too. Her beautiful hair now limp and weary, tucked uneven behind her ears. Her eyes filled with sadness. The graceful nature of the woman, it was gone. Had I just met her I might have thought she were grieving. Filled with pain for a loss very dear. Slowly, almost begrudgingly, she put her hand under the blanket she wore as a shawl. It reappeared with something small clutched in her fingers.

‘What is that?’

‘The beginning of the end of your previous life,’ she said. ‘You’re right, it’s time. But once the words have been spoken, they cannot be unsaid.’

I dropped to my knees in front of her and took what she offered. A brown paper-covered object that my fingers teased open.

My heart sank with recognition at what lay hidden below.

I felt the blood drain from my veins. *This can't be?* 'How?' I asked, and hesitated to touch the cover of Mama's little black book. The memory of its pages fresh.

'Open the cover,' she said.

'Why?' *The book is empty.*

There were no wise words or lessons written within. No prophetic statements to ease my burden. Just blank sheets that had made no sense then, so why would they now?

'How did you get it?' I felt my anger return. 'I buried this next to Mama.'

'It was her wish that you kept it,' she said. 'Open the cover, Draï.'

It seemed an age had passed since I had last felt its soft binding between my fingers, and I remembered how compelling the urge to turn its pages had been. How great the anticipation to read its secrets.

'Draï, open the cover. Tell me what you see.'

I put the book on my lap preferring to stare at the fire. I considered throwing the book into its flames. Whatever powers it held had done Mama no good. She'd suffered her entire life with pain and disappointment.

'Perhaps the fire *is* the best place for the past,' she said, 'but you'll never know the truth. Isn't that what you want, the truth?'

I was trapped. Well and truly snared by desires that walked in two directions. My need to understand what was going on. And now a sudden fear; that this little book might break my heart again. *Mama?* Surely nothing could change how I felt about her. *No. I wouldn't allow it.* But I knew that some doors, once opened, could not be so easily closed.

I flipped the cover open and looked down. Blank, the first page was blank. Just empty space where words should have been.

'Why? Why did you take this?'

‘You look, but you refuse to see. Open your eyes, Draï.’

I did want to see. In the name of the Gods I yearned to know what was hidden inside this damn book. As the tip of my finger pressed across the leather in frustration, I felt a bump on the inside of the cover. An invisible shape embossed onto its surface.

No, not invisible, just difficult to see. It was getting more defined the harder I stared.

Some kind of staff? A shape coiled around it. *No*, I dropped the book. ‘I’ve seen this before.’ A staff with three snakes coiled about it. This was the symbol I’d seen in the City of the Dead. The last thing I expected to see. *Mama, where did you get this book?*

Long black strands began to spread across the paper. Ink creeping out across its surface, as if it were alive. Shaping into symbols I didn’t recognise.

‘What are they?’

‘So you can see them.’ Joran reached out and took my hand. ‘The symbol inside the cover is called a ‘treble helix’. A very rare and special thing. The fact that you can see it is the final evidence of how *special* you are. It is both a blessing, and a curse.’

‘Curse?’ I took my hand away. ‘My entire life I’ve been told I’m special. *That, and ungodly.* ‘Why? Why didn’t she tell me?’

‘Would you have believed her if she had? You’re only listening now because of what’s happened in the last few days.’

‘She lied to me?’

‘No, she just ran out of time. Draï, the Dreaming may not have come at all. Life would have gone on and waited for someone else,’ she pulled the blanket away and put it around my shoulders. ‘Draï, all Estha ever wanted was to love and protect you,’ she picked up the book and held it out to me. ‘I promised Estha that I would protect you. But it seems that every turn we take is a twist to send us back to where we started. I was wrong, Draï. There is no hiding from the truth.’

There it was. Proof in my hand that the Dreaming was real. That somewhere up there, evil had taken notice of me.

‘Who am I?’

‘We’re going to the Veil,’ she said. ‘All your questions will be answered when we get there. By the only person who can answer them all. He’s the only one who can protect us now. It’s not just the Druids who will come for us. There are others.’

‘Others? What others?’ The questions were mounting, not being struck off my list.

‘I can only tell you so much, and it’s going to be difficult to hear. Even harder to understand. You’re going to have to be patient.’

‘I’m sick of being patient. Apparently I’ve been doing it all my life. I’m sick of all the lies. Sick of the half-truths. Of what other’s think is best for me.’ My stomach ached from not knowing. I felt sick.

‘Drai, let me look at your wounds.’

‘Don’t touch me. Don’t come near me, either of you.’

The look on her face. *I’m sorry*. I just couldn’t make myself say it out loud. ‘Who am I?’ I asked again.

‘Estha wasn’t your birth mother,’ Mistri said.

Joran’s eyes closed as if a terrible truth had been told. That’s how I knew it *was* true.

‘Why would you say that?’ *Of course she was.* Though I doubted the statement as soon as I’d spoken it.

That night, when they argued. I remembered well what Father said, “When I brought you a child.” *Beirdin’s breath . . .* That child was me.

I stood up and dropped the blanket. Mistri, stood by the horses, refusing to even look me in the eyes. The animals about her oblivious to everything but the grass they chewed, as I pleaded with her to refute the statement.

‘I’m Estha’s boy,’ I said. ‘I’m a warrior’s son.’ *Don’t take that from me.* My hands gripped firmly about her book.

I suddenly understood Mama a little better. Some things are just known, until they were not. I realised then and there, the absolute power of a person’s faith. And how it felt to have it stripped away.

‘Who then, if not Mama?’ *Oh Mama?* Neither of them keen to elaborate. ‘Who?!’

‘Your birth mother died when you were born,’ Joran said at last. Then she pointed up at the gap in the trees. All I could see were the stars. ‘Drai, your mother came from up there. She came with others. Sisters, just like her.’

I looked towards Mistri, her hand gently stroking down Tan’s slender neck.

‘Estha knew more than she should have. Derlin knew less. He didn’t know who you were when he made a pact with the Sisters. It was a dark and terrible pact, which has brought us to where we are now.’

This can’t be true.

‘Tell me about her. About my mother?’

‘Estha was your mother,’ said Mistri. ‘For all intent and purpose she was . . .’

‘. . . Not my mother. Tell me about my *real* mother?’

Drai, not now. Joss is tired. What she did back there, to protect us. It took too much from her.

She did look tired. But I didn’t care. If I didn’t push her now, she might never tell.

‘Your mother was a Sister of the Sabilyne, okay.’

‘I don’t know what that means.’ Mistri said it as if I should.

‘They’re different,’ she said. ‘Creatures very different from you and me, who drift up there in the endless Void. They’re rare, Draï, very special. And they’ve been hunted to near extinction by those who want to abuse their gifts.’ She took a deep breath. ‘We’re going to the Veil to find a man named Chorus. For some reason, that I can’t fathom, Joss thinks it’s a good idea to ask him for sanctuary. We may as well cut our throats now and get it over with.’

I didn’t even know what that meant. And yet I recognised the name, Chorus.

‘Your mother was captured in the Void,’ Mistri added, ‘along with her Sisters. Chorus freed them all. But as usual with that man, there was a price to pay.’

What price? Is that why she abandoned me?

‘What did she look like?’ I asked, and liked the way Joran smiled at my question.

‘After what I just said. All you want to know is what she looked like?’

‘Her Sisters said she was pretty.’

I like that. I picked up the blanket and slipped it back around her shoulders.

‘Pretty?’ I repeated.

‘Not in the way that corporeal’s are. Not in a solid, static existence.’ She pulled the blanket tight. ‘Chorus said, she reminded him of sunlight streaming through glass.’

‘I wonder if he’ll say something as nice when he’s cutting our throats. Draï, he’s a dangerous man.’

‘He’ll understand.’

‘No, he won’t. There must be another way.’

‘Mistri thinks it’s a mistake to go to the Veil.’

‘You think?’

‘I want to meet him,’ I said. ‘He knew my mother?’

‘Better than anyone else. I think that over time he developed feelings for her. Perhaps that’s why he chose *her* above the others.’

‘Oh, please. More like she was less hateful than all the others. She understood that freedom came with responsibility. Unlike her Sisters.’

‘Is Chorus my father?’

‘No,’ said Joran. ‘Chorus thinks of himself as a *giver of life*, more than a father of children. He does things. Terrible, and yet, wonderful things. You won’t understand. You couldn’t. Please, don’t ask.’

‘Then my mother and Chorus. They never . . .?’

‘No,’ she smiled again, ‘they were too different for anything like that to happen. Maybe that was part of the problem. You have to understand Draï, that existence without purpose, it’s not life. Not for any being. There has to be a reason to live, or you just exist in time. And time is a harsh mistress; too much of her attention can send any life-form insane. Besides, there was someone else.’

It could have been my tired eyes, or a simple trick of the fire-light. But the more her memories tumbled into view, the more her features began to age. Her youthful pleasure deserting her as she pulled the blanket tight about her neck. Lifted as if she’d felt a sudden chill.

‘Your mother broke the rules of the Sisterhood,’ she said. ‘She fell in love.’

‘With my father . . .’

‘Yes, he was the brightest protégé that Chorus had ever . . . discovered.’

‘Is that what we’re calling it now, *discovery*?’

Mistri looked puzzled. There was more than they were telling. But I didn’t care. I just wanted Joran to keep talking.

‘He was a genius, Draï. A pathfinder in the religion of science. He worked tirelessly, and in absolute secrecy, to give your mother what Chorus had always denied her. He broke many of Chorus’ laws to make it happen.’

‘He broke all of them, Draï,’ said Mistri. ‘But that wasn’t such a bad thing. Stupid, but not bad. Look, let Joss sleep. We have a long journey ahead of us, and it’s an even longer story.’

‘We’ll talk more tomorrow,’ said Joran. ‘I promise.’

I’d never seen her so weary as she got to her feet. I decided to throw one last pebble into the stream. To see how the ripples would react.

‘My father?’ I asked, remembering what the Sisters had shown me. ‘Was he, Vampyraï?’

Joran stopped, more a pause, and then walked on without answering.

‘I’m right aren’t I?’ Now she knew that I knew. So perhaps she wouldn’t get any sleep either.

I was feeling cruel.

The fire was enlarged. Wood stocked to keep it going for the night. I felt broody, and angry. I kept looking at Joran who'd fallen asleep. I wanted to wake her and press harder with my questions.

'How did you know?' Mistri asked.

'Know what?'

'About your father? You didn't pluck a Vampyrai out of thin air.'

'I saw it in a dream,' I lied. *Why should you two be the only ones with secrets?* Until I knew the truth; the whole truth, I wouldn't tell them everything about the Dreaming, or my relations with the Sisters. Who I'd just realised were family, of sorts. *God's teeth, what's going on?*

'Is that right, a dream?' Mistri spoke the words as if sprinkled with vinegar. 'You don't dream, Draï. Haven't you worked that out yet? You broadcast. That's what the Dreaming is. A message you send across the universe. You're a Siren, Draï. A beacon that the Dark Hordes will stop at nothing to follow.'

'No,' I didn't want to believe that. 'I, I don't even know what a universe is.' Not really a lie, more a half truth. Somehow I knew more than I did. Which made no sense at all. Less sense if I said it out loud.

'It's ironic really,' she said. 'The one shining light in all our lives, is the lamp that draws the shadows down upon us,' she was shaking her head. 'You think we don't know what's out there? Well, we do,' she reached up and stretched. 'Look, it's not your fault. Things happened a long time ago. And now we're stuck with the mess.'

'Mess?' *That's not what I'd call it.* I waited for more, but heard the crackle of damp wood and an occasional whinny. 'Where are you going?'

'We need wood for the fire.'

I got up; got close. I wanted more, but didn't know from what end to try and unravel this, *mess*. Without thinking, I did what felt natural. Or was it stupid? I reached out to touch her mind.

A moment later the sticks she'd collected were dropped. My shirt up round my neck, grasped in her fist.

'How dare you!'

'I'm, I'm sorry.'

'Don't you ever try that shit with me.'

I grabbed her hand. 'Then tell me what I want to know. Talk to me, Mistri.'

'I thought that's what I was doing.'

'You're telling me too much, but it's not enough.'

'Oh, well, that makes perfect sense.'

'I don't care about the universe. About Sirens. Just tell me about my father. About my mother? Please?'

She gave the sigh of all sighs, and let me go. 'Drai, I don't have all the answers.'

Stop looking at Joran. 'Tell me what you do know. Please. Tell me about my mother, start there. Where did she come from? How did she meet my father? How did they find a way to be together?' *No, look at me.* 'Mistri, please?'

'Fine. They broke with centuries of law,' she said. 'They knew the risks. Knew what *he'd* do. And they defied Chorus. They defied his laws; put in place for good reason. He's someone who doesn't forget, and rarely forgives. They broke the law, Drai.' She didn't look too happy about it herself. 'That's why we're all in this mess. Because of . . . Because of your mother. This is a direct result of what they did back then.'

'Were you there? Are you . . .' I poked her, 'one of them?'

She poked me back, harder. 'No, not one of them. And how could I be there? I'm barely older than you,' she grinned. 'And I'm dead too, remember?' A wink followed.

It was hard to stay angry with her, so I relented. She had a way of shifting the mood with that mischievous grin. As if all we'd been through. I'd been through, it wasn't that bad.

'What I can tell you,' she said. 'Is your mother gave up everything for love. Chorus, the Sisters . . . Wow, even her true form. And despite all the shit that's coming our way, I think it was brave, romantic, and most definitely, irresponsible.' She began to untie her hair. 'Your mother gave it all up to be like you, and me. Well, you anyway.' A wry smile followed. 'Little baby Draï.' Mistri's hair fell with a shake of her head. Her finger's roughing it out to encourage some volume. 'They didn't think it was possible,' she dipped her head, then flung it back to let her hair settle about her shoulders. 'But here you are,' she said.

Her hair was brown, no, red. She had eyes like precious stones.

'Gods on an ever-grey cloud. What I wouldn't give for a nice warm bath,' she said. 'What? Why are you looking at me like that?'

'It's the first time I've seen your hair, down, like that.'

'Oh,' she shied her eyes from me. 'It saves me brushing it so often, that's all. Draï, can I ask you a question? Do you think I'm pretty? Most boys I've ever met think I'm, too forward. I make them feel insecure.'

You won't distract me. I knew she was trying to take the narrative from me. 'He found them, didn't he,' I said.

'Fine, yes. He found them,' she pulled her hair back and began tying it again.

The look on her face? She really was asking me if I thought she was pretty.

'You want to talk, okay, let's talk. Your parent's fell in love. Your father struck a bargain with the Sisters. They in turn found, what's his name . . . Derlin? Another man desperate to fulfil his wife's dreams. Together they conspired to save a baby's life, okay. Derlin did it for Estha. The Sisters did it to spite Chorus. Mum and Dad wanted to save their child. They all defied him. Well, I guarantee that he knows now. And I for one, don't want to be around when he finds us.'

'That still doesn't explain why everyone wants me?'

‘Derr, you were born. You’re half Sabilyne, and half Vampyrai. You do know what a Vampyrai is? What dark magic was weaved. . . Never mind. I don’t know everything. Here, let me take a look at your wounds. We don’t want you getting infected.’

‘They’ll keep,’ I said. She had the look of someone who’d already said too much. So I made it simple for her. ‘Who am I?’

‘That’s not for me to say. I have horses to feed.’

‘You’ve already fed them once. Just tell me why? Why I’m so popular?’

There was that sigh again.

‘Because you’re a Child of the Dreaming, a one-in-a-billion. Anyone with any connection to the universe can feel you stomping around in it. So I’m hoping she’s got a bloody good plan to get us out of this.’

‘What about my birth-mother?’ I asked. ‘Where is she?’

‘Don’t you listen? Your mother’s dead, Draí. Both of them. And I’m really sorry about that. It looks like we’re all you’ve got now.’ She was picking up sticks again, and wearing an angry face. ‘Here, put these by the fire,’ she said. ‘And stop asking so many questions. That’s really all I know.’ She shoved the sticks into my arms.

A moment ago they’d all been loose and lying about. Now they’d been collected into a lumpy and uneven bundle, that felt a bit like my life.

The rain came and went again, and brought with it a strong breeze that danced about in the higher branches. What moon I could see was blurred by swaying leaves. Outside of the firelight the forest seemed moody.

I was Draï, a love child; the melding of a spirit from the stars, and a blood-sucking demon. Or so the Empire had taught me. An enemy we'd been at war with for decades. Lying on a bed of leaves opposite was a girl who'd died, and then miraculously returned. Close by the fire was a woman who the Sisters had told me not to trust. Who'd lied to me my entire life. Who'd risked everything to save me.

Mistri's ride, the grey gelding, suddenly snorted and tugged on his tether, the others reacting similarly.

'What is it?' I asked, seeing nothing beyond the trees

'He's just worked it out,' Mistri replied, 'that's all.'

'Worked what out?' I asked

'That you're an idiot.' The rebuff came with a smile, of sorts.

Did that mean she'd forgiven me, for not saying she was pretty? Because she was. I'd seen her shake her hair down a hundred times since, and then the look of regret she'd shared after.

'My skin hurts,' I said. The bruises Imax had given me had begun to ache. The cuts he'd levied were sore and burning.

'Let me see,' she was up, Joran's potion in her hand. 'Lift your shirt. No, take it off.' I complied. 'Shit, that bastard . . . This will help.'

'Thank you,' I said.

'Thank Joss, she made it.'

'No, thank you for killing him.'

Her fingers stopped their delicate work. 'Draï, don't think like that. It won't help.'

'I hate him,' I said. 'And I hate the Druids.'

'Anyone else on the list?'

'My mother.'

'No,' she cupped my face in her hands. 'That's not fair.'

'She left me.'

'She sacrificed everything to protect you.'

'Ow, that hurt.'

'You're such a baby.'

You did that deliberately. I opened one eye and scowled. Then closed it again. Counting how many times her fingers touched my skin didn't help. What did help was remembering how she'd leaped over those rooftops; so much fun, at first. I remembered how I'd felt that first time, outside the inn. My first reaction, that she was *very* pretty.

I was desperate to ask how it was that she was still here, alive, and sat beside me. The balm finally taking effect; soothing the pain that Imax had inflicted. But then maybe too much had been revealed already. Perhaps a little mystery between us *was* a good thing.

Mystery . . . Mistri?

'What are you smiling at?'

Shit, am I really that gullible? 'Is your name really Mya Stri?' I asked.

'No,' her face lit up. 'Did you really think it was?'

Yes.

'No,' I felt foolish. Angry even. 'I saw you fall,' I said in a hush, and felt her fingers hesitate.

'Did you see me land?' she asked.

No. 'I heard you hit the ground,' I said.

'I'm like a cat. I always land on my feet.'

'Joran's my mother, isn't she?' I said, convinced it was true. The pause of her hands was confirmation enough. 'Don't bother denying it. I can feel it . . . Ouch!'

'Sorry, did you feel that too?'

'That wasn't funny. Just tell me why she's lying to me?'

'Drai, where are you going?'

'If you're not going to tell me, I'll ask her myself.'

'No, no!' She had a hold of my arm. 'Drai, she needs to rest. You need to . . .'

' . . . Be told the truth.'

'You little shit. You don't feel anything from her, not unless she wants you to. Fuck . . . *Fuck*.'

For some reason the Sisters had shown me a vision. Joran, held in that light, changing. Or being changed? There was a Vampyr'ai with her.

No, that's not possible. Could he be my father?

'Tell me the truth, or I'll ask her,' I stepped closer to where Joran was sleeping.

'No, no . . . don't you dare.' She looked ready to hit me. 'Drai, stop. Damn you, she won't thank me, or you. It will only make what has to be done, more difficult.'

'Then let it be *our* secret.'

She hesitated.

'I won't tell, if you *do*.' *Come on, you're part way there.* 'I will wake her.'

'Oh Drai, you understand how hard it was. Letting you go, it broke her heart. You were a secret that couldn't be shared, not with anyone. Not even Estha.'

Dear Gods. I looked to where Joran lay. *She's my mother?* I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, as a squall of emotions rose up to batter away at my insides.

'She pretended to be someone else, so she could stay close to you. So she could be ready. In case something like *this* happened.'

Words had emptied from my head as I stared at Joran. *She's my mother.* I felt paralysed.

'She needs to know you, Drai. She needs to find you again. Please, give her a chance.' Mistri threw the ointment towards the saddlebags. 'Here, chew on this,' she handed me a leaf. 'Go on, chew. It's good for pain. Hey, are you hungry?'

Are you joking?

'No,' I pulled down my shirt, grateful that the pain had been masked. I put the tiny leaf she'd given me in my mouth.

'We have a deal, right. I tell what I know. You give her a chance?'

I got up, still staring at Joran. *She's my mother?* I was nodding.

'She needs you, Draï. And you need her. Get to know her before you do anything stupid.' I felt her hand on my arm again. 'Estha brought you up. She loved you. But I can't think of any greater love, than a mother giving up her child so he can live his life in safety.'

Is that why? Is that the truth?

Oh, how I needed life to be simple again.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Royal torches always burnt brighter than most. But the flames in the royal bedchamber barely flickered. Their effort to stave off darkness were almost spent, as Hystin leant towards the Emperor. He needed to be certain, there was no room for mistakes, not now. By tomorrow evening the Druid Order would be a memory; the Clerics risen to take their place.

Hystin slapped the young man, his body limp; arms slumped either side of his favourite chair. He opened the Emperor's eyes to be sure that no light was reflected.

'So, how does the throne feel now?' he asked. 'An Emperor rules by right of might, not by birth. You should have seen this coming.' He closed the eye.

Jolon's demise had been a dizzying affair. Too much wine, or so he'd thought. A slight pain in his chest, and then confusion as his mind had been drawn towards sleep. His consciousness being dragged into the dark. The Emperor's final breath had been a fruity sensation. A tasteless draft hidden within the wine. A pleasant, if unexpected exit from a world that had despised him.

Hystin peeled the silver flute from the corpse's jewelled fingers. He replaced it with another, that he laid on the satin cushion directly below the open hand. Hystin placed the over hand over its heart.

'There, far more dramatic don't you think?'

'Death is all we require.'

'Well, let's at least make it look good,' he pulled the lips into a smile. Then turned towards the secret entrance. Toward the shadowy figure of his new best friend. 'Young Emperor dies clutching at his heart. Happily

heading towards his new role, as piss-pot retainer for the Gods. A job he royally deserves, don't you think?'

The Nazdi was unmoved. 'Make sure he's found before morning. The news will ensure that all members of the Senate are present in the Imperium.'

What a great voice? His own seemed inadequate in the Nazdi's presence. *The words rolls off his lips like thunder.* 'I'll see to it,' he said.

Hystin still gloried in the revelation. He revelled in the secrets revealed in the Octragen. That which he'd learnt . . . It would soon be welcomed across the world, whilst on its knees. He'd welcomed the knowledge with open arms, and in zealous salutation. He, above all others, had been chosen to be his new master's instrument; his conduit to the faithful. He would prepare the way for the coming of the one, true, God.

'A guard remains on that door at all times,' the Nazdi's voice impassive and commanding.

Hystin could sense the nightmare that revelled in its tone. He felt its edge brush his shoulder as if it were a weapon of fear.

'The captain of the Kartach will verify the Emperor's *natural* demise.'

'Good. Then return to your office, Inquisitor General. You will serve the arrest orders on all the members of the Senate on this list.'

Hystin accepted the scroll, and bowed his head.

'Send the Kartach. Their presence will lend validation to the orders. I want the city under curfew by sunset. Instruct your Clerics that they may proceed against the Druid Order. I want them cleansed before the sun rises a second time.'

'My Clerics will not fail you.' How long had he waited to hear those words. 'Consider it done.' How sweet it would be when the Druids learn their precious, Eight, were never more than, just One. *Clever clever, Nazdi.*

'One more thing, Hystin.'

'My Lord?'

'Disband the palace guard; they have dubious loyalties. Every officer above the rank of captain is to be arrested, and then executed.' There was a moment of silence as the darkness below the hood seemed to survey the

grandeur and opulence within the room. 'When you're finished,' he said, 'I want everything in these apartments taken outside, and burned.'

Hystin could barely contain his satisfaction. At long last the wait was over; he could finally move against the Druids, and the Senate. There were others too, that he'd personally add to the list.

Such a joyous day. He would see to it that his participation was well documented for posterity.

The Nazdi left the room. Pleased that his plans were finally in motion. But there was so much more to do.

He wondered, if Hystin understood the true meaning of the prophecy, would he so eagerly anticipate in the coming of the end of the world?

Hidden below his hood, the Nazdi smiled.

It was the Time of the Gathering; the tribes of the Narib nations had come together from the plains. Sixteen tribes descending on the Veil. Its slopes rich with floral colour. Trees fresh with bloom. A warm breeze of summer that shimmered vast swathes of cattle grass. It was the season of growth. A bountiful pasture for all Narib to share. A hundred thousand sheep and cattle brought to graze. A time of procreation; rams ready to fight for a flock; bulls rutting for the pick of the herds. A time for bellies to be filled with new life.

For a short time the tribes of the plains were together. Old friends met up and told new stories. A spectacle of celebration, and collaboration, below the mighty Torta; the tallest, and the most revered of the mountains in the Veil. A holy place where the spirits of all Naribs, future and past, collected to watch over their brethren. The Torta was eternity. The spirit world above its peak, was eternal.

This was a time of feasting, of tournament, and of remembrance. Young warriors encouraged to find a bride; to challenge for, and hope to be chosen by, the woman they desired. But most important of all *was* the 'Gathering'. The coming of the herds. The wild horses of the plains that came to graze below the Torta. An annual migration. The chance for the young warriors to find more than a wife. To bond with his most prized possession, his horse. To break the wildest, most admired creature of the plains, was both a right of ascension, and a privilege. Choosing from the herd was the most important decision a Narib would ever make.

Within a week the vast southern slopes would be swathed in colourful tents. Facing south, always south. Pitched to welcome the rising sun. For a new day brought new hope. A home pitched in shade, was a home ruled by shadows.

For one month of each year the tribes became one; the Sewa'Orta, a city of nomads. A gathering that assured the preservation of a culture that was as ancient as it was free.

One banner rose above all, its pole bending as the wind strengthened. The sign of the horse, an arrow clasped in its mouth. It flew high above the complex of tents below. Numerous modules sewn into one large pavilion. The heart of the city, and the nexus of the tribes. The home of the Korma; elected Warlord of the gathering clans.

A loose flap on the south elevation stirred to a sudden gust of wind, and was then flung open from the inside. A tall muscular Narib left the pavilion. On the other side of the heavy flap was a small anti-chamber; empty except for a desk and chair for the Korma's secretary. The last hurdle to clear for an audience with the leader of the tribes. Behind which hung a large flap that led directly into the Uma; the inner sanctum. A grand circular arena where the clan chiefs assembled. A palace of hides, held aloft by tall poles, in which the Korma held court with his tribal Elders. A forum of debate and tribunal, and feasting. For one month of each year the Korma's word was law. His judgement was final.

Amastic was always reluctant to spend too much time in the pavilion, its pungent odours offended his sense of smell. Aromas captured deep within the hides, enthused with the sweat of generations. Heightened by the oil-spitting lamps and open fire at its heart.

He considered the wine a young Narib woman had placed in front of him. A crude distillation of milk derived from a goat, and then fermented with sugars bleached from mountain grass. A disgusting brew. Coarse and heady like the cuisine. This was a wretched existence, but a beautiful landscape. The Naribs themselves he felt were a nation of barbarians, that for two weeks now he'd endured.

The crowd in the hall cheered and clapped with enthusiasm. Buck-skinned nomads sat crossed legged around their spiritual leader. Hardly the Imperium, but the cultures of the Empire's peoples were to be respected.

'He's announced his second son's marriage to a princess of the Abastine tribe,' Tristic whispered. The Cleric sat behind him and translated.

'How many more?' he asked.

'I believe the marriage confirmations have been concluded.'

'Small mercies,' Amastic raised a smile and feigned a heart-felt clap of his hands. He listened patiently as another Narib Chieftain spoke. The Cleric continued to translate.

The Eight had insisted he be sent along, being a master of languages, Amastic himself spoke five but his Narib dialects were limited. Amastic understood the next man to stand, another tall Narib, his skin well-browned from years of exposure to the sun, on the plains. Like all the others around him he wore a simple leather waistcoat to cover his torso. A tanned loin cloth to cover the more intimate parts. Thankfully most of the others wore trousers sewn from leather.

As he expected, the mood changed within the pavilion. The man's rhetoric was a predictable challenge. He invited the Cleric to respond.

Tristic stepped out into the centre of the tent, and strode around the tall flames of the fire at its centre.

'This is an Imperial edict,' he scowled. 'One child from each of the Chieftains *must* accompany us back to the capital. The Royal-Kartach will protect them, as if they were the Emperor's own children. If you cannot decide which ones; we *will*. The Emperor has decreed.'

The sounds of an unhappy gathering filled the hall. To a man they stood and vented their displeasure. A moment later all voices fell silent. Every man present bowed his head, as the aged Warlord left his fur covered seat.

'It has not been decreed by me,' he said.

The gathering roared support for Constin's words. The silver-haired chieftain glared his dissent at the Cleric. His long plaits woven with silver braid and beads hung heavy about his shoulders. Age had faded his once muscular body, but his mind was as sharp as in his youth.

Amastic watched in silence as the leader of the Sewa'Orta rounded on the young Cleric. For forty years he'd sat on his fur clad throne. Since his father had passed on to the Hunter's Hall; joining the God Crarn in the fertile hunting lands of Stersin. Somewhere above the Torta, apparently.

'Who are you, you bony arsed yelp. What right do you claim to stand here, before this council, and demand its children?!' The response from the Uma was negative, and aggressive. The chieftains began to stamp their feet in support of their leader.

'You come here, to the Gathering, and demand hostages with your legion camped outside the Veil. Am I to be intimidated by this show of force? By the point of your spears? I could have fifty-thousand warriors descend on your, *royal* soldiers.'

'You would start a war you could not win,' Tristic replied.

'Then perhaps we will find more favourable terms if we looked for new allegiance, elsewhere? Perhaps the Auristans will show more respect for the Tribes?'

The hall erupted with cheers, and then jeers, all directed at the Cleric. He in turn looked to Amastic for support.

The Druid sat impassive. Why upset the natives when you can have someone else face their knives. He gestured for Tristic to continue.

'You will be showing the Emperor your respect, and loyalty,' he said.

'We have always been loyal to the Empire,' Constin stepped back to his throne, his hand raised for silence. 'We send young men to serve in the Imperial army, as the treaty requires. We give generously at each census,' the hand lowered and was pointed in accusation. 'You, come here, and threaten war with the Narib nation if your demands are not met. I think it is you, *Cleric*, who does not understand. Our brave warriors are your only defence along this stretch of the Auristan border.'

A swell of mumbled agreement resounded around the hall. Dozens of angry chieftains, who seemed willing to string the Cleric up by his balls.

'Who are these city dwellers who came to the Veil to threaten and disrespect us?' said one

'You insult us little man,' slated another.

‘Feed him to the pigs . . .’ Ushered cries of accord. And then raucous laughter followed by more insults.

Amastic was well aware that Tristic had affronted their loyalty; their honour. He understood they were angry, and unafraid to share the sentiment. But the Emperor had decreed, and the Narib would comply. Send the Cleric in to upset the natives. Then offer a more cordial compromise. Perhaps he’d even let them hang the Cleric, as a gesture of good will.

‘Your cubs will be honoured and respected. No harm will come to them, as long as you honour your Emperor’s commands.’ Tristic’s voice being drowned out by the Narib response.

‘So long as we whimper like dogs.’

‘I’ll not give my children as hostages!’

More displeasure from angry voices. The Naribs in the hall were reaching the limits of their patience. For the first time, Tristic looked concerned by the animosity that flowed his way. He looked a lonely figure stood beneath the roof of hides.

‘Calm yourselves,’ he urged. ‘Stand back,’ he demanded. ‘I have the floor, and you will listen. As is your custom,’ he beckoned with his hand and four uniformed soldiers stepped forward.

‘Coward . . .’ shouted one.

‘Toss him out,’ shouted another.

Words Amastic found difficult to translate, there were so many being hurled.

‘Draw a sword inside this hall, and you all die.’

Amastic’s attention was drawn to the owner of the voice, as he pushed a path through his Elders.

Ahh, Orath, Such an impressive figure. The Narib stood a head above the tallest of his guard. *What took you so long?*

‘You threaten the Korma?’ his words spat with contempt. ‘Little man, I’ll cut your dogs in half and feed you their entrails,’ He flexed his considerably muscular frame.

The captain of the Druid’s guard looked to him for instruction, and seemed relieved as he was gestured to withdraw.

Time to intervene before this idiot starts a war.

‘That’s enough,’ Amastic stood. ‘There’s no need for threats. We can resolve this peacefully.’ It seemed the gathering had forgotten his presence. Their unchecked anger chilled to a more resentful apprehension. ‘The Kartach will wait outside the pavilion,’ he said. ‘Cleric, you wait outside with them.’

‘I should remain,’ Tristic replied.

‘Go back to your tent; I will join you shortly.’ For a moment he thought the Cleric might deny him. ‘Now,’ he insisted.

Amastic watched the soldiers retire. Defiant faces; obvious relief, that they’d not had to fight. The mood in the pavilion calmed.

‘Aren’t you afraid to be alone with us, Druid?’ Orath asked.

He considered the jibe, and then surprised him by taking steps toward the heavy-set warrior.

‘You are Orath?’ he asked. ‘The Korma’s champion, and most trusted. Yes?’

‘I am. And you are a Druid sorcerer. One whose words will never fly straight. It pleases me that you have a death-wish. I can help you with that.’

‘Hmm, I’m sure you can. But not today,’ he clapped his hands and the space between flashed with a brilliant light and a flame. It startled every man in the pavilion. A serving girl dropped her tray. Even Orath had taken a step away.

‘Look at you. Fearful of a parlour trick. I say this as a matter of fact, and not a threat. I have two legions camped outside of the Veil. That is where they will stay, unless they are provoked. We are here to help defend our border. And we want our friends, the Narib tribes, to stand by our side. As it has always been.’

‘You want hostages,’ said Orath. ‘That is not the act of a friend.’

This was the man Amastic had waited for. The great Orath, Defender of the Nations. *And quite the specimen.* Square jawed and heavy browed. A torso so well defined, the muscles resembled armour. He could break a man with a stare.

I wonder what the markings mean? He knew the Naribs covered their bodies with strange symbols. Usually dyed, and not permanent. Essential before battle. But this man had tribal markings inked into his skin. Strange runes that merged within the sharp patterns, that covered his considerable frame.

He turned to the Korma. 'We, all of us, understand,' his voice raised, 'in war we lose the ones we love. It is inevitable. The Emperor's intention was not for hostages, it is to protect the Royal Lineage, the tribal succession. War *is* coming. The legion is here to fight with, not against, the Narib Nation. We are brothers in arms.'

'So you say,' said Orath. 'But what proof do we . . .'

'As a sign of good faith, and to show the importance of our alliance.'

Amastic stepped towards the Korma. Orath shadowed him. He didn't need his Druid sense to understand what the big man was thinking. Perhaps he was hoping. But conflict between them would not arrive today.

'The Emperor offers a thousand silver trilllets to each leader of the tribes. He offers a new trade agreement that I'm sure you will welcome. He understands the coming sacrifice the tribes will be asked to make.'

'Does he?'

'Orath,' the silver haired Korma stepped down from his throne and put a hand on his shoulder. 'Amastic is here as our guest. We will hear him out.'

He took the larger man's distrustful gaze.

You'd like to cleave me in two, wouldn't you? Well, I'll give you that opportunity. And when I'm done, I'll have your skin hung as a portrait. 'Orath, my friend, let's drink some of that delightful wine your people brew.' He glanced around at the other Naribs, their animosity waned. *Give them a treat, and they will always come to heel.* He lowered his head with respect to the Korma. 'We have a lot to talk about, Constin. Perhaps we could go somewhere with a little more, privacy?'

Tristic spat on the dry earth and then ground it with his sole. It had taken every ounce of his resolve not to openly defy the Druid. It was a humiliation to be dismissed in such a manner; in front of a tent filled with heathens.

‘I think that could have gone better, sir.’

‘And that is your considered opinion?’ The Cleric rubbed his fingers at his temples then clapped his hands with a sudden burst. ‘What would you suggest we do, *Primum*?’

Lor was a *Primum*. A staff officer attached to the legion camped a few leagues from the edge of the Veil. His hand still rested on his sword’s hilt. His senses still honed to the situation. His suggestion surprised Tristic.

‘This is my second tour on the plains,’ he said. ‘The one thing I can tell you about that lot in there, is they’re disillusioned.’

‘With what?’

‘Us, sir. There’s a rebellion brewing, and anyone with eyes who’s been here long enough will tell you that. Not that any of my superiors will agree. They don’t want anyone back in the Imperium thinking they haven’t got a tight leash,’ he checked he wasn’t being overheard. ‘Talk with the Korma’s son. You’ll find he has a more agreeable attitude, and is more receptive to Imperial influence.’

‘Lor, is that your name?’ Tristic looked back to the pavilion. ‘Tell me, how do you feel about our Druid friend in there?’

‘Feel, sir? It’s not my position to . . .’

‘I make it a point to know who I work with, Lor,’ he smiled. ‘You had a promising career once. A rising star in the General Staff. An officer who many expected would lead his own legion.’

‘That was a long time ago, sir. I have other duties now. I go where the army sends me.’

The signs were there. His straightened back; the slight rub of thumb against finger. Not so long ago that the memories had been forgiven, or forgotten. Tristic motioned Lor to walk with him.

‘They sent you here, and here you stay. Tell me why?’

‘With respect, sir. You already know the answer.’

‘It was one of his kind, wasn’t it? A minor altercation with a man in black. A rare occurrence for anyone to stand up to our Druid friends,’ he paused. ‘And none of the General Staff supported you, did they? Betrayal isn’t an easy thing to put aside. It’s all right, Lor, this isn’t entrapment. Just a conversation in which I’d like your honest opinion.’

‘I’m not paid to have opinions, sir. I really should be getting back to . . .’

‘The two legions that *I* brought here to the Veil. They have Imperial direction to follow *my* commands, not the Druid’s. Tell me, Lor. How would you like your former rank reinstated?’

‘Reinstated? That would be, gratefully received. Returning what is rightfully mine, it would come at a price?’

‘*Loyalty*, Lor. The most defining characteristic in a man. That’s all. The world is about to change. Is it possible that you could change with it?’ he stopped walking. ‘The Eleventh Legion is still without a commander.’

‘So I understand, sir.’

‘I think your talents are wasted out here. We, the Cleric brothers, are looking for men we can rely on. Men who have talents we can, *utilise*, when necessary. Are you such a man? Could you have what it takes to command a legion, I wonder? Let’s both think on that, shall we? Good, that’s good. The future hold great prosperity for those who have loyalty,’ he gestured for Lor to follow him back to the pavilion.

‘I owe them nothing,’ said Lor. ‘Your question regarding the Druid, that’s my reply. My loyalty is to the Empire, and whoever guides its path.’

‘Tact and diplomacy, you do have hidden talents. Qualities I can put to good use. I think we have a lot to talk about you and I. But for now, we do

as the venerable Druid demands. Oh, and bring the Korma's son to me. Be discreet. I'd like to see just how agreeable he is to, Imperial suggestion.'

'Very, I should imagine, sir. Especially if you rescind the hostage order. He is well respected by the younger Naribs. Knowing he was responsible for negotiating its end, would elevate his standing amongst the Elders.'

'Hmm, yes it would. But one problem at a time, Pimum. Or should I say, *Centurion*?'

'I'm honoured, sir.'

'Let's allow our friend in black to deal with the savages. When's he's done, we'll put a slightly different agenda in play. Loyalty, Centurion. It binds us all. Our families also, do you understand?'

Lor put his fist to his chest.

'One more thing. Find out the name of that very large Narib who spoke so disrespectfully to me in there.'

'Orath, sir. The Korma's first amongst his warriors. He'll be a problem to any agenda that isn't supported by the Korma.'

'Well, then we'll have to make both of those problems go away.'

'Yes sir.'

Constin sat back in his chair, arms open in welcome for Amastic to enter. ‘Is this private enough?’ he asked. ‘My bedchamber has seen many a good-deed done in the name of the Tribes.’

‘Sacrifices for the greater good,’ Amastic smiled. ‘We must always be prepared.’ He bowed his head. ‘Allow me to apologise for my colleague’s lack of courtesy,’ he said. ‘He’s keen to impress.’

‘Your companion seems eager to upset everyone who crosses his path.’

Hmm, he does. Why is that?

‘He’s the Emperor’s man, he does not speak for the Order. He is, how can I put it? An irritation, that I’ve been forbidden to scratch.’

‘I have a son with similar qualities,’ Constin replied. ‘Druid, I’ve met many of your kind in my life, and you’re the only one I’ve known to have a sense of humour,’ his tone stiffened. ‘But I won’t give up children as hostages. My people will not stand for it, and neither will I. What’s going on at the capital? The old Emperor was a reasonable man. He knew better than to ask for that which what we cannot, *will not* give. He would not have sent two legions to the Veil to threaten us.’

‘The Emperor wants a more substantial presence, that’s all. It’s your own fault for allowing dissension amongst the tribes. It won’t be tolerated.’

‘My people are free to say what they will. Should I put a sword to the throat of every Narib who complains? My position is by election, not by right.’

‘There are times the sword has its uses, Korma. You were a warrior before you became a statesman. You’ve put down your share of insurgence when your father sat on the throne. He understood that the union of the tribes could only be forged with use of the blade.’

‘He also accepted that same unity had to be blessed regularly with diplomacy.’ Constin clapped his hands, and a heavy flap was pulled up at the far side of the chamber. A young woman stooped as she entered holding a tray. ‘Refreshments?’ Constin offered. ‘I have Roo that is over ten years old.’

By the Gods, that would be a sacrifice. Amastic nodded. ‘It would be a pleasure.’

‘Good, good. I like a man who likes his Roo. Ah, you haven’t met Fruli. Say hello to our guest.’

She smiled dutifully. A slight nod of the head as she offered the tray. Two cups on its surface, and an urn that steamed wilfully from its tiny lid.

Amastic was intrigued. The woman was pretty, but also fair skinned; not olive like other Narib women. Not as tall, and more elegant in her manner than any he’d met.

‘I call her my Sunset Girl,’ said Constin. ‘There’s no better place to be than in her arms as the sun goes down. Isn’t she lovely?’

She placed the tray on a low table to Constin’s right. Lifted one of the cups as she wiped its rim with a delicate cloth. Then filled it with a creamy white liquid. She offered the steaming bowl, head bowed, to the Korma.

‘She’s one of your concubines?’

‘Crarn’s beard, no. I’m considering her as a wife. One of the Northern Clans brought her to my camp a few months back. A peace offering in a silly dispute.’

Amastic read body language like other people read books. Despite her manner and smile, he’d no doubt Constin’s ardour was not reciprocated. ‘How many is that now?’ he asked.

‘Wives? Six, seven? One died recently. Fruli will take her place. It’s important for us old men to remain active. Besides, a man can never have enough sons. I hope she’ll bear me many more.’

Fruli’s face filled with delight at the suggestion, as Constin gestured to dismiss her.

‘Just a moment,’ Amastic stood. ‘I notice her skin is an unusual shade for a Narib woman?’

‘What of it, Druid?’

‘Just an observation,’ he said. ‘One of the northern tribes, you say?’ He was trying to read the tiny markings inked into her neck, just visible below her silken blouse.

She pulled the neck of the garment tight.

‘She was a slave?’ he asked

‘Yes, is that a problem?’

‘No, not at all, Korma.’

‘You want her?’

Amastic wasn’t sure if that was a joke. He respectfully declined.

‘Good, because I don’t like to share, not with anyone, Druid. She’s untouched, I’ve had her checked. She’ll make me happy.’

‘Of course, I was just intrigued by her wealth of beauty.’ *And her markings. They were familiar. But not a slave’s markings, as the Korma suggested.*

Constin sat forward. ‘Tell me. What is it that Druids do to stay young?’

‘We keep the faith,’ he answered. *Interesting?* Fruli held his gaze as she left. Not the usual scowl, or submissive eyes he was used to. Hers held an aggressive undertone, that lingered towards him as she left.

And no-one knows where you come from . . . interesting. ‘Let’s be frank,’ he said placing his bowl on the bright coloured carpet next to the huge cushion he sat on. ‘There is unrest in the Veil, and the Emperor has concerns. Not least about your obligation to protect the border. We have intelligence that suggests the Auristans are massing a large force near Gridia, and Rutell.’

‘Small desert towns. Hardly large enough to support an armed force of consequence. And to what purpose? It would be foolish to cross the desert beyond the Veil; especially now the summer is here. It’s a hundred leagues of sand with no water, to enter the plains, where a hundred thousand Narib warriors wait.’

‘They could cross if disloyal Naribs stored supplies along their route.’

The bowl Constin held was thrown to floor and sent spiralling into the air. Its contents spilled in all directions. ‘You accuse me of treason?’

‘No, of course not. But there are those who would, and do, conspire with our enemy.’

Constin waved away the attention of two burly guards who’d entered. ‘Get out,’ he shouted. ‘You, Druid, show me evidence, and I’ll have their throats opened up by sundown.’

‘Our sources were not so specific.’

‘Then come back when they are. You think that by sending two legions and taking our children hostage you do your cause any good here? I’ll be just as frank, Druid. The new Emperor is a fool. A puppy who likes to be petted and stroked. So long as his bowl is full he’ll lick whomever’s boots fill highest with praise.’

‘Be mindful of your insults, Korma.’

‘Be wary of your accusations, Druid.’ Constin sat back. ‘You’d be better served looking closer to home for your traitors,’ he stood. ‘You talk about faith? And yet you have none. We are as loyal to the Empire now as we have always been. The old Emperor understood that.’

‘As does the Emperor now,’ Amastic rose from his cushion. ‘I can have the order for the children rescinded. But the legions remain. War is coming to the Veil, Constin. It will be a righteous and bloody war, and we *will* be victorious. A victory in which the Naribs will share, and profit well.’

‘When did we ever profit? This is your war, Druid. You picked the fight, and now you expect everyone else to help you finish it.’ Constin pulled on his long silver braids and tied them back. ‘I’m a member of the Senate; do you think I don’t know about the conscriptions the Emperor has implemented in the north? Bodies are getting younger and harder to find. They always do when you prolong a war,’ he sat down again, a grin filled with confidence. ‘You’re losing your war, Druid. You’re frightened that your enemies will open a second front out here in the plains. And you want to put us between *you* and *them*. A nice little buffer, eh? For a boy Emperor who cares little about the tribesmen who get slaughtered.’

‘The Auristans are coming, Constin. There is no doubt about it. They are a pack of wild dogs who want to destroy everything that is good within the

Empire. They'll lay waste to the plains, and enslave the Tribes. The autonomy you enjoy will be a memory.'

'So you say. But opinions are cheap, Druid. I hear them everyday at Council.'

'Do I need to remind the Korma that this was once a sacred burial ground for Auristans? Your people have become rich from the minerals in the mountains. They've profited from the fertile plains. How do you think the Auristans will react against the people who plundered the lands of their dead. How many corpses did the Naribs burn after looting their graves?'

'That was a long time ago.'

'Aurista has a long memory. Korma, the first Emperor gave you autonomy over the plains. The Veil was a gift to your people for their support then, and their continued support now.'

The silk curtains parted again as Fruli entered. She dropped to her knees and picked up the pieces of the broken cup; carefully placing them together. Then began to soak up the Roo from the carpet.

There was something about this woman that drew Amastic's attention. He understood Constin's attraction. Being a Druid didn't mean he was ignorant to her allure. Her fair hair that trailed down her shoulders and back. The silken blouse that wrapped her in a way that men enjoyed, cut low across her breasts. The skirt drawn high upon her thigh.

Constin didn't notice, as Fruli's brown eyes raised toward Amastic, aware of his gaze, and then lowered. No glare, not this time.

'She's pretty,' he said, and watched as she feigned to blush. 'She'll make a nice trophy for the enemy to play with, as will all the women of the Veil, when the Auristans come.' *Interesting. That's not a scenario that worries you.*

Fruli lifted the cloth, and then the cup. Her head down as she left.

'You can rescind the order for the children?' Constin asked.

'Yes, as I said.' *I want to know more about you, pretty girl.* 'Your children are if no interest to us.'

'I believe you. You're a bastard, Druid.'

'I'm a realist, Korma,' Amastic bowed his head. 'Realists see things for what they are, and not how they would like them to be. Someone is helping

the Auristans. Find the traitors and put an end to their treachery. Make an example for all the tribes to see. And if the Auristans do try to cross the desert, you'll fight them because if you don't, your people, and your way of life will be wiped from these mountains. If not by them, then by the legions the Emperor will send.'

'Then you leave me no choice.'

'I never intended to.'

Amastic waited for the inevitable concession. He was sure now that the Korma would fully submit. The other tribes would follow his lead.

'As always, we serve the Empire,' he said. He turned to Fruli. 'Go and find Orath. Tell him I have work for him to do.'

'Yes, Korma, at once,' she backed away through the fine curtains without looking up.

'A toast, Druid. To our continued friendship, and alliance,' he raised the mug Fruli had brought. 'We feast tonight in honour of the Goddess Alusia. You will come?'

'It would be my pleasure. Remind me, Alusia? She's the Goddess of the mountains, yes?'

'An ancient Deity coming back into fashion. It's the younger generation; they're never satisfied with what they have. They always want more than their elders find sufficient,' he sat forward as if to share a secret. 'There have been rumours for years now, about her return. Young warriors have climbed the mountain, and returned with tales about hearing Alusia sing. They say she's up there, on the Torta's peak.'

'I'm told that men have died attempting to climb to the summit. Well, they haven't returned.' He sat back. 'Personally, I don't climb mountains these days.'

'So you're not a believer?'

'The summit is forbidden. Those who attempt to walk its path, risk the consequences. I'll find these rebels of yours, Druid. Until then, keep that Cleric of yours on a short leash. Or don't blame me if he turns up one morning with his head separated from his shoulders.'

Now, wouldn't that be a shame. 'Until tonight,' he stood, lowered his head, and then left the Korma's bedchamber.

Amastic was thoughtful as he followed the hide-lined passage to exit the pavilion. The way out unfurled by one of two sentries stood outside. Their upper torso's naked; stripes of blue paint from neck to waist. He noted they tied their hair back, which was unusual. The practise normally confined to times of conflict. To keep the hair away as they drew the long curved swords traditionally worn strapped to their back.

The flap dropped closed behind him, and he walked on between the tents, beneath the sound of flags that fluttered, and the strong scent of cooked food wafting freely on a warm evening breeze.

Dragon's eyes blinked from a thousand camp fires that blazed along the Torta's lower slopes. A hundred tangled melodies mixed with the sweet smell of swine. As cooked hog, sheep, and game drifted on a warm summer's breeze.

Amastic thought only of home. Of Shai'valet, where he hoped soon to return. He understood the political intrigues of the Senate better than the wilds. It's personalities, rivalries, and ideological factions were more familiar than the incessant bickering of the different tribes.

These people are heathens. He smiled as several Narib women passed him by. *They're not to be trusted.* He'd already decided another legion would be brought to the Veil.

The women sneered, more than smiled, as they passed. On their way, he presumed, to find more wine, or men, probably both. Dressed in the Vorga; an ankle length dress cut low across the breasts, that were ample in each of the group. Its soft leather sewn with sequins of complex patterns that somehow depicted their family's history.

It amused him, the half-hidden resentment, as alcohol fuelled laughter erupted when they'd reached a safe distance. The air was filled with distant laughter and loud revelry, both male and female. A sentry stepped aside. A short muscular man who pulled back a heavy curtain that opened into the pavilion. His face painted with blue stripes, a wooden baton at his side. A sensible precaution, he supposed, when the wine and ale flowed this freely. He noted a brief glance of displeasure as the heavy flap was lifted. It seemed all Narib's would be happy to stab him in the back, given the chance. So maybe it wasn't so different to the Senate after all.

Paint? Why are so many men covered in paint? He'd been told it was in respect for Alusia, the mountain's Goddess. *No, something's amiss.* But what?

Fruli met him inside. She was humble, and inviting; an act for sure, as she led him through the pavilion to the hall. The obvious sounds of men already filled with drink from inside. The noise level raised as one of the painted sentries held the flap open for him to enter.

'Can I fetch you refreshment?' Fruli asked.

'Water,' he replied. Drunk men came with insults. He'd need his wits about him as she led him inside.

The music wined out from pipes. Old men were acting like fools. The young bucks tested each other with games that involved the consumption of wine. The revelry was intense to say the least. Two young bucks tiptoed over shields raised by their companions; both falling to the amusement of their friends, whilst four scantily clad women indulged in strange but fluid dance about the fire at the chamber's centre. The noise level inside the pavilion was oppressive.

Amastic dutifully acknowledged the Council Elders, sat raised on a platform. Six old men, sat with women much younger, all of whom feigned enjoyment at their attentions.

'Thank you,' he said, as Fruli offer him a glass filled with water. He was already trying to single out conversations being made. Where wine was present, so were loose tongues. From gossip and banter flowed valuable information. One subject was of increasing interest; Alusia, Goddess of the mountain. Recently resurrected by the younger generation, many of whom made pilgrimage to the upper slopes to leave offerings. He was keen to understand what *they* expected from *Her* in return. He was sure it was linked with the markings he was seeing on the young all about the camps.

A full blooded cheer erupted from the gathering as a fool entered, juggling eggs and an apple. Taking bites from the fruit each time it returned to his hand. His mouth covered in juice as he tossed eggs above a man to the amusement of his friends.

Another wild cheer as the fruit disappeared into the fool's mouth, and the eggs were collected unbroken in his hands. He gave a low bow to his audience and flipped backwards numerous times to exit, where small dogs were entering on their hind legs. Encouraged to jump through hoops, to the onlooker's delight. The wooden sound of flutes now playing in the background instead of pipes.

'Not quite what you're used to?' asked Tristic, who sat beside him. 'The sight of savages fuelled by casks of ale. Invigorating, isn't it? Reminds me of the Senate,' he pointed to the far corner of the tent, where a group of younger warriors were sat, in somewhat sombre mood. 'That's Guilda,' he said. 'The Korma's son, and his cronies; I don't know their names.'

The Cleric declined the offer of a drink by a servant girl. The slim dark-eyed woman offered the tray to Amastic.

'It's probably poisoned,' said Tristic.

Amastic took one of the cups; raised it toward him, and then sipped from its edge.

'Well don't say I didn't warn you. Ahh, here comes our host. Better late than never, eh?'

The burble of laughter and conversation lowered, before becoming a hush, as all present stood and raised their cups towards the Korma.

'You do realise we should be doing business with the son, and not the father,' asked Tristic, as he raised his own cup in salute. 'Out with the old, and in with the, well, you know the saying.'

'The Elders of the Tribes will follow the wolf, not his pup.'

'More wine,' shouted Constin, and several women entered, a small cask under each arm. The noise level lifted with approval.

'I'm looking forward to seeing how the evening unfolds,' said Tristic, hands behind his head as he leant back against one of many poles that supported the roof. 'I think this will be an interesting night.'

AVALANCHE

'You've allowed one of my Clerics to be slain, Brother. Struck down like a dog in the street, and by a child? This is intolerable!' Hystin's hand slammed against the table; his image blurring in the mirror.

'Remember to whom you speak, Cleric.' Narcista's reply.

'Have a little respect for your fellow Druid.' His image rippled as if to share his indignation. 'Huh, the mighty Narcista. Routed by two children and a woman.'

Brother? You'll never be a Brother?

'You forget your place. A Cleric's function is to serve, no matter his status. Fetch Sermile for me, I have news.'

'Serve? If that was the case, then why would they . . . No, better that I show you.' Hystin held up his fist, then opened his fingers, turning them to show a ring on his third finger. 'Awarded to me in the Octragen,' he said with pride. 'Go on, you were saying? Tell me now that we are not, *Brothers*.'

It's not possible. And yet he wore the ring. He felt for his own, awarded to him for years of faithful service. A badge of rank amongst the Order. *Why?*

Hystin's image withdrew. He gestured with his fingers towards another who was unseen. 'Tell him,' he said, as Sermile's image filled the glass.

'It is true and correct, Brother. Hystin's noviciate is at an end. He is fully elevated to the Priesthood, by order of the Eight.'

I don't understand. He sat back. *Hystin's ring. . . The elevation of others to the Order. . . Each Druid accompanied now by a Cleric. What are they thinking?*

‘Congratulations,’ he said. The word as bitter as salt. *Clerics inside the Brotherhood, it’s blasphemous.* He raised a stoic smile. ‘I look forward to working with you,’ he lied.

‘Life is order,’ said Tristic.

‘And through order, we find life.’ Narcista replied. *And all of its surprises.*

‘I’m instructed to inform you, Brother Narcista, that from this moment on, you will receive, and comply with all instruction from Brother Hystin. He speaks directly for the Eight.’

Does he now . . .? Narcista was appalled. ‘I understand.’

‘It is not important that you understand, only that you listen, and obey. The Eight speak through Brother Hystin.’ Sermile bowed his head, and left. For a moment the mirror was empty of any image or reflection.

‘What shall I tell the Seers, Brother?’

‘I’m sorry, what?’

‘About your incompetence? What do I report; that a small boy has bettered the cream of the Druid Order?’

‘We’ll find him.’

‘Yes, you will. But heed this, Brother. The boy is not to be harmed.’

‘I understand. What about the others?’

‘Do what you will with his companions. But once you have him, he is not to be interrogated, and he is not to be harmed. That is the will of the Eight.’

‘I understand. I will obey.’ *You knew about his gifts, didn’t you? We could have been killed, and yet you said nothing. Why?*

‘I’m sending you assistance.’

‘That’s not necessary.’

‘It’s not your decision. You will report each day until one of my Clerics arrives. Until then you are forbidden to have contact with anyone but myself, or Brother Sermile.’

‘Forbidden, why?’

‘Are you questioning the will of the Eight?’

‘No, its just . . .’

‘Obey your instructions. Say it, Brother. I want to hear the words.’

‘Of course.’ He lowered his head, and then closed the box around the mirror.

‘He won’t like being cut off like that,’ Regana put her arms around his neck. ‘He’ll tell tales to the Eight.’

‘He’s passed on his instructions.’ Narcista eased himself back into the soft leather chair. ‘What’s going on?’

‘You’ve been betrayed, what else?’

‘No, I don’t believe that. There has to be another explanation. A reason I just don’t understand, not yet.’ *To send me out here without telling me why? And why send Amastic to the Veil?* He knew of other Druids sent on unfamiliar tasks.

‘Well? I’m eager to hear your reasoning,’ Regana asked. ‘No, then hear mine. They’re isolating the Druids, distracting them with foreign environments. Making sure they’re facing the wrong way, so the knife can easier find their backs. Treachery, my love.’

‘You see conspiracy everywhere.’

‘And you don’t see what’s right under your nose.’

He pulled her hands away. ‘I need to find that boy. Find out why they want him so badly. He’s the key to this, I can feel it.’

‘He’s a distraction. You think that child understands any better than you? No, my love. The Eight have betrayed you. Their support for the Clerics is a move against the Druids. Look how they isolate you all. Each one with a bastard Cleric by their side. Behind their backs,’ she eased her arms about him again. Pressed her cheek against his. ‘Don’t turn your back on them,’ she whispered.

‘Why would they? The loyalty of the Order is absolute. It makes no sense.’

‘Absolute? Then answer a simple question,’ she raised her lips to his ear. ‘Do the Eight know about me? No, of course they don’t. So what other secrets does the Brotherhood keep from their masters?’ Her head rested on his shoulder. ‘You see, and yet you still deny how they forsake you. The Brotherhood was once a fervent supporter of the war, but now it cautions against hostilities. The Order has become bogged down with the politics of

the Empire. The Druid is more politician now, than warrior.' She wrapped her arms tight about him. 'The Clerics do not bear the same weight of responsibility. They are now, what the Order was when the First Emperor embraced them.'

'That's enough,' Narcista stood. 'I need to think. I'll talk to Amastic.'

'And ignore a directive from the Eight? Tut-tut, a Cleric would not be so bold. Is that an example of absolute loyalty?'

She's right. Other decisions he'd made were suddenly spurred into memory. The need to adapt to a constantly shifting political landscape. *It leaves gaps for interpretation, for manipulation. Could it be? Has absolute loyalty become subjective?*

'There is another possibility, my love.'

'Go on . . .'

'Perhaps we're looking at this from the wrong perspective.'

Narcista rose from his chair. 'What do you mean?'

'What if, a coup has taken place. Within the Eight?'

'That's impossible.'

'When was the last time you were called the Octragen? The last time you spoke to any of the Eight? And doesn't it coincide rather nicely with the rise of the Clerics?'

'No, that's . . .'

' . . . Impossible? Or just improbable? If I'm right, it would explain a lot of things. And would make the Order, expendable.'

It's not possible. A window had been opened. So many things became clear. *She could be right.* The scale of it all; it was breathtaking.

'You can see it now, can't you?'

What if she's right?

'The Brotherhood has been stretched thin. Many ordered to obscure places; for questionable reasons. Asked to do jobs for which others are more capable. Why?'

'To help disguise the deception.'

She placed both her hands in his hair and pulled his head close. ‘The Clerics aren’t just sent to spy. They’re assassins. They’re also your replacements.’

He saw it all now. Now that the blind-conviction was removed.

‘The Eight . . .’

‘Have betrayed you, my love.’

Elspar was an assassin. It all made sense now. ‘It’s not just the Order,’ he said. *Fuck, I should have seen it.* ‘What Hystin said earlier . . . They’re going to purge the Senate. That’s why they wanted Amastic and I away from the capital. It’s an Imperial coup.’

‘A grab for power?’

‘It’s so much more than that. But to sacrifice the Order?’

The solid bedrock of his faith opened up below him. So many deeds, actions, that he’d refused to question. Now stared him in the face. Stared in the eyes of a blind man, who could now see.

‘It’s all a lie?’

‘No, no . . . You’re not the one who betrayed the faith. They did.’

‘But why? Who’s willing to sacrifice everything we know?’

She was shaking her head. ‘I don’t know. But maybe you’re right about one thing.’

‘The child?’ he said.

‘Yes, the Eight want him. He has a powerful gift that they didn’t warn you about.’

Narcista was shaking his head.

‘They didn’t know. I was sent here to watch, and wait. But they had no idea, for what.’

‘You know what’s special about that child?’

‘Fear!’ he said. ‘The Eight recognised a threat, but didn’t know what, or why. I’m such a fool.’

He swept the candles from the table, sending the mirror’s box tumbling to the floor.

‘I’ve been blind, Regana. Too wrapped up in my faith to see behind the lies. I’ve been blind to the truth.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I have to reach out to as many of my Brothers as I can before it’s too late. And then we’re going to find that boy.’

THE WAY IT HAD TO BE

'She didn't have a choice,' said Mistri. 'At least, not one that ended well for you.'

'So we're not pretending any more. Joran *is* my mother?'

'She never stopped being your mother, Draï. Not ever.'

'I'm not aware of any time she *ever* got started.'

'Draï, there's so much you don't know. That you need to understand, if you're going to understand. And yes, I know how that sounds. Look, I'm not very good at this sort of thing.'

'Neither of you are.'

'Oh, well, if you're going to sulk . . .'

What would be the point? 'Tell me about him, Chorus? Who is he?' *There it is again at the mention of his name. She's scared of him?*

'Let's just say, he won't be very pleased to see us. Especially not you.'

'But he's not my father?'

'No, not him. But she's right, we don't have anywhere else to go. Draï, please, try to understand; try to see things as others do. You're different.'

'So people have pointed out my entire life.'

'Of course they have. I told you I wasn't good at this.'

I stared at her. What else could I do.

'Fine, but don't blame me if you don't like what I have to say.' She drew a slow and laboured breath.

'Go on,' I insisted. 'Try starting at the beginning.' *Wherever that is?*

'They gave up everything for each other. She wanted a baby, despite the warnings, the threats. But it didn't happen. And I know that she felt inadequate because of that. Not a complete woman; can you understand

that? She thought the transformation wasn't a complete success. And then your father died.'

'Died, how?'

'Questionably, that's how. It broke her heart. She gave up everything to be like you, and all the others, just like you. She wanted to live and die, with him; to be *human*. She thinks that Chorus had a hand in his death. But you never know with him. Either way, she was left alone, and that's unfair. But life isn't fair, Draí. You're finding that out. Anyway, a few weeks later she found out she was pregnant. And if Chorus had a hand in his death, he would surely have a hand in yours. So she ran. Found a hole to hide in in the middle of nowhere. But how far can you run on a rock as small as this?' She shared a grave gaze towards me. 'They found her,' she said. 'Her Sisters, they found her.'

'Sisters?' I feigned ignorance. 'What Sisters?'

'Oh, they'll pop their heads up, don't you worry about that. But when they do, remember one thing. You can't trust them, Draí.'

'Okay.' *Noted.* 'Is that when she met Mama?'

'No, well, yes. That was the Sisters doing. They convinced her that Chorus would find the child, if she didn't hide it better than she'd hidden herself. They brought Derlin to see her.'

'Why? Why Derlin?'

'Well, all things lead to what we have. Derlin's affiliations were, well, kind of a *military thing*. He's a member of a group who . . .'

'He's an assassin,' I said.

'Okay, that's a fair description. Open your mother's book again. Go on, it will help.'

I took the book from my pocket, and opened its cover.

'The sign of the one true God,' I said, as I traced the marking with my finger. 'Is he real?'

'Depends on your perspective.'

'Of a God?'

'Of what's *real*.'

This was, I could feel it. A staff with three serpents coiled around its shaft. I realised I'd seen it in one other place; when I had spoken to Gharl, the miller. The pendant that hung around his neck. Strange, that I'd forgotten such an important detail.

'Three thousand one hundred and eighty,' I said.

'What is?'

'The number of bricks,' I shook my head. 'It doesn't matter.' *I remember everything. Yet I only recognise the pendant now?*

'Hey,' she put a hand of comfort on my arm. 'The Veil isn't far. When we get there, Chorus will help. I'm sure he will.' She looked towards Joran. 'He'll help her, I'm sure of that.'

'Like he helped my father?'

'We can't be sure of that, Draï. She was scared. People see conspiracy in all the detail when they're scared.'

'Draï, have you ever wondered what lies beyond the sky? What the stars are?'

'Naughty pieces of moon,' I said.

'I'm sorry?'

'They're naughty pieces of moon that have run away,' I shrugged my shoulders. 'That's what Mama used to tell me.' *Mama . . .* that title had a cold ring to it now. And that wasn't fair.

'And you believed her?' Mистри asked.

'No, I'm confused, not stupid. They're suns, just like the one that warms us every day. And there are planets out there that circle them, just like ours.' That took the stupid grin off her face.

'You shouldn't know that. Who told you?'

I shrugged my shoulders, and doodled with my finger in the soil. 'I see things,' I said. *There, I've finally said it out-loud.* Maybe it was time to get everything out in the open. 'I've seen what they look like,' I met her gaze. 'I've spoken to *them*, up there.'

She pulled a face. One that told me there was something I should know, but she didn't know how to put it into words.

'Just spit it out,' I said.

She clasped her hands together as if about to pray.

‘I’m going to get into trouble for telling you this,’ she said. ‘A lot of trouble.’

The Gathering was always below the Torta, and was a cauldron ripe to stir friction and discord between the differing tribes. It had always been Constin's dream, just like his fathers, to unite all the tribes of the plains. To become a nation under one single banner.

Constin had long since recognised that it would not be his flag that would unite the tribes. He was not the reincarnation of the mythical, Hai'cha. "A warrior of the tribes, but *not of* the tribes." Even so, the prophecy was revered by all the tribes. Possibly the only thing the tribes could agree on. That the Chosen One was destined to unite the tribes of the plains.

It was a warm morning, despite the Korma's bedchamber insulated at the heart of the Pavilion. It had been another wine fuelled night. His clothing was flung on the floor; tossed without thought. The bed, the focal point of the room, was unmade. Drawers were open, clothing shed haphazard. For such a meticulous man, it hardly reflected his nature. But last night he'd been searching for something that was lost. That couldn't be misplaced. He'd found it, and slept with it, keeping it close.

Constin reached under his pillow, to be sure. It was still where he had left it.

He levered his legs from the mattress. Not such an easy task these days, as his hand reached to grab the top drawer of a small chest. His hand rummaged, and then found what its fingers sought. Constin parted his long white hair, and slipped on his opticals; a treasured gift from the First Emperor.

I have to stop drinking. A promise he'd made himself on numerous occasions. 'Fruli?' *Where is that girl?* His shoulders were tight, his back

ached. He loathed getting older. The nights so much harder to leave; the days more difficult to receive, with each year that passed. 'Fruli?!'

'Yes, Lord,' she entered with a cloth and a bowl in her hand.

'Is he here?'

'Yes, he's been waiting.' She dipped the cloth in the water-filled bowl, then dabbed it at the Korma's face. Then wiped down both arms as he sat, slumped. 'Shall I tell him to enter when I'm done?'

'Yes, and bring me some wine.'

'You told me not to, last night. There is water in the jug I brought earlier.' She pointed to the silver jug on the floor next to the chest.

'Open it,' he said. 'Get the black one out.'

'You have a heavy head, Lord?' She plucked a black box from the chest. 'I have a potion that will help.'

'Just the box. And stop wiping at me, I'm not infirm, not yet at least. The box, give me the box. Now go. Get out, and tell him to come in. I can wash myself.'

Constin opened the black box as she left. It was filled with bracelets, each one woven in gold. Badges of honour, and of courage. Emblems of respect that every Narib recognised, and aspired to earn. He took a handful, and slipped them on, one by one over his wrists as the entrance opened again.

'You look surprised, Orath?' Constin said. 'You didn't realise I lived like a pig in my own sty?'

'Not exactly what I was thinking, Lord.'

'But close enough, eh? A man needs room to express himself. At least that's what my father used to say.'

'Your father was a wise man.'

'He was a bastard who beat his wife, and his children.'

'He's considered a great man, as is his son.'

'Is that so?' Constin grabbed a tall pot from beside his bed. A moment later it was being filled with second hand wine; well fermented in his bladder. 'How many more have tried to climb the mountain?' he asked.

'Lord?'

‘Tell me what you know about our recently restored Deity.’

‘There are stories from some. Those who have climbed the mountain. They say they’ve heard her sing.’

‘So I hear.’ The last few drops fell into the jar. ‘Fruli?!’ he watched the doorway. ‘I told her to wait after she’d fetched you. As usual there’s no-one around but me to clear up the . . .’ Constin sighed. ‘Our Lady of the Mountain is going to incite a shit-load of trouble for us, Orath.’

‘She’ll be forgotten when the Gathering is done.’

‘No, she won’t. The young flock round new Gods like flies gather about shit. There’s a cult growing around those stories, Orath. She’s being used to undermine the treaty with The Empire. The younger generation are uneasy with our continued alliance. Each year the tributes rise. More of our warriors are syphoned off to enlist in their armies. And now they demand our children to assure our support. Mark my words, Orath. It won’t be long until they demand the tribes gather, and march on Aurista.’

‘We signed a treaty to protect the border. Neither side can march through the desert . . .’

‘Not without help, no. But someone is giving them that help.’

‘Who?’

‘Hmm, who indeed? I have my suspicions,’ he shouted for Fruli again. ‘Damn that girl.’

‘Lord, let me act on your suspicion.’

‘No, it’s a delicate thing, to cut out the heart of an enemy with many limbs. Who uses the love of our new Deity to snare support. Fruli?!’

‘Perhaps one of your wives should be summoned, Lord.’

‘Dear Gods, no. I don’t let any of them in here.’ Two more heavy bands slipped down his arm. ‘What, you look surprised?’

‘You have many sons, Lord.’

‘Yes, I do. But you don’t soil an eagle’s nest, when a pit with a viper will do just as well. Beware of ambitious women, Orath. They’ll try to control everything you do.’ The bracelets chinked as he tied back his long beaded hair. ‘But not in here. Not, in here. Fruli?’ He pulled the towels off a tall mirror and stood back. ‘By the Gods, just look what time does to a man.’

Orath, I should have died young, and with a sword in my hand. Slaying the enemies of my people. I can't even see them now without wearing my optics. No, my friend, if I'm going to slit like a pig, it won't be in my own bed. Fruli?! Orath, tell one of the guards to fetch that woman, and some wine. My mouth is parched like a desert dune. Wine!' he shouted at the door. 'Oh, and then tell me what my son is up to? Is he still cuddling up to that Cleric?'

'He's talking to anyone who'll listen,' Orath pulled the flap back and gestured to the guards.

'Are they listening?' Constin said in a hush. 'Does that spawn of mine have a voice amongst my people?'

'There are some, amongst the younger generation. He works to undermine you with the tribes, Lord. You should have him banished. Perhaps something more permanent should be considered?'

'No, not that. He has a mother and three brothers. If I banish him, I'd have four tongues wagging to bring me down. If I get rid of him, well . . . No, keep your enemies at a sword's length, Orath. Your family where a sharp knife can cut out the pain,' he turned. 'Well?' He asked. 'I've pissed, screamed, and tired of my reflection, and you haven't mentioned *him*. Not once.'

'You mean the Druid?' Orath spat on the ground. 'He hasn't left his tent since last night. I have men watching, him and your son.'

'Hmm, Guilda . . . No, the Druid is the one we need our eyes on. That snake has an agenda that we're not seeing yet. He gave up the Emperor's demand for hostages. Why? What's he playing at?'

'Say the word, and I'll make them both go away.'

'Ha, ha, that would be nice. And I thank you for the offer. But they're not your concern, not any more.'

'Lord?'

'I have a task for you, Orath.' *Dear Orath. You won't like what I'm going to say.* 'It's more important than Druids and sons, my friend. You are the only one that I trust.'

Orath; first amongst warriors. Battle hardened and proud. How fortunate Constin felt to have the Man-Mountain at his side, as his trusted friend.

‘Dear friend,’ he gestured to the bed. ‘Sit, we have to talk.’

Words weren’t Orath’s finest attribute. Though he was tempted to chastise his Korma for the mess in his room. A thought that amused him, but would never find a voice. He did wonder why he’d been brought to the pavilion, and why Fruli wasn’t still outside? She’d insisted he come immediately, and was watchful that they weren’t followed. A duty he’d noticed she’d performed well. Perhaps too well. There was something about . . .

‘Has the guard returned?’ Constin asked.

‘No, Lord. He’s still looking for Fruli.’

‘Good, I don’t want us to be overheard.’ Constin pulled a small box from under his pillow. ‘I have a task that I trust no-one else to perform. It will take you away from us, Orath. And I fear that when I need you most, you will not be here.’

‘My place is at your side, Lord. There are others who . . .’

‘No, there are not. I will not command you to do this, Orath. But I will *ask* you, as my *friend*, to accept.’

What’s going on? Constin looked in concern towards the entrance, so he stepped towards the flap. Pulled it back. ‘There’s no-one listening,’ he said. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Will you accept?’

Before I know what it is you want me to do? He’d not seen him like this before.

‘Will you accept?’ More insistent he reply this time.

‘If it’s your will, then of course. I accept.’

Constin stood; he held his hand out. ‘Your oath of honour, Orath,’ he said. ‘That you will follow my instructions. And that you will not return until your duty has been fully dispensed. No matter what the cost to you, or I.’

Orath narrowed his eyes. If an oath was required, then it would be given. And if his death were necessary to succeed, then so be it. He reached out

and took the Korma's hand. He knelt and kissed the oath ring on his Lord's hand.

'On my oath,' he said.

'Good. Now sit down, and listen.' Constin sat, the box on his lap. 'My father gave me this just before he died,' he said. 'The High-Priest showed it to him when he was voted to sit on the throne. You are the first man without either rank to see what is inside,' he teased the lid's catch open. 'This is the legacy of our people, Orath. It has waited centuries to be heard. That time is now.'

Orath had to admit that he was intrigued to see the contents. To understand why Constin was on edge, and why so much secrecy had been observed. 'What's inside?' he asked.

'Time,' Constin replied. 'And if the prophecy is true, then we're about to run out of it.'

'You remember that I left the tribe, just before we arrived at the Veil,' Constin asked.

'Yes, without me. I remember.'

'Well, I lied about going hunting. I came here, to this damn mountain. I went up, Orath.'

'You went to listen to Her sing?'

'That's what I told the guards. I thought it couldn't hurt if a rumour got round that the old man on the throne was more in tune with the young than they thought. But no, not to hear a Goddess sing. Though you might wish I had when I tell you why.'

What's going on; I've never seen you like this? The Korma was a statesman, a member of the Senate. What could put him on edge like this? *Why do keep you staring at a little box?*

'The truth is, I went up to see, Suila.'

'Suila?' *Are you serious?* 'You went up to see that old fool? What in the name of Antrox possessed you?'

'He summoned me.'

Summoned you? 'Since when do crazed old Shamans summon the Korma of the Tribes?'

'I didn't have a choice, Orath. I received an *invitation* to the mountain. The message said, "It is the time to open the box."'

'Is that it? You get a message from Suila to open a box, and you put yourself in harm's way by climbing a mountain, unescorted? Do I need to crack your head and see what falls out?'

'Suila had something to say. And if it involves this,' he raised the box. 'Then I have to go.'

You're not making any sense. 'Lord, Shaman have a talent for telling us whatever it is we want to hear. That's what they do.'

'Yes, yes, but the Suila is also the keeper of a secret.'

Secret? 'What secret?' *I don't like secrets.* 'I don't like Shaman,' he said.

'And that, apart from your many other talents, makes you perfect for what has to be done.'

'And what is that? What's so important you walk halfway up a mountain because a mad old mystic tells you it's time to open that box?' *Crap . . . this involves magic.*

'Orath, my friend. There are many things in this life that cannot be explained. The sun rising each day. The darkness of the sky when it's leaves us at night. What the stars are that shine at night.'

'Did he offer you food, Lord?'

'Orath, I heard the Goddess sing.'

I knew it. Fucking magic. 'No, Lord. You heard the wind whining through the rocks. Did that old fool offer you food, or drink? It was probably drugged. A wild head helps when a mystic recants a prophecy. Lord, old men don't speak for the Gods.'

'So you don't believe in the Gods?'

'That's not what I said.'

'So you believe your Korma has been made to look a fool?' said with a hint of animosity.

'I know what you're doing, and it's not fair. You're a politician; I'm a warrior. I won't bandy words with you.'

'So now you demean me as a warrior?'

'No, of course not. That's not what I meant.'

'But it's what you said.'

I hate it when you do this.

'Orath, I'm teasing you.'

'Children like to be teased, Lord. Not grown men.'

'Not even by a beautiful woman?'

'Just show me why a box makes a grown man giddy. Then tell who it is that you want me to kill.'

‘Rebuff, *and* a change of narrative? We’ll make a politician of you yet.’

‘I’d rather you gouged my eyes out, and then spat in the sockets.’ *What’s going on? You look, worried.* He didn’t mean to, but he sighed. ‘Lord, open the box.’

‘This is very old, Orath. The words inside were written down centuries ago. They tell of a new star that will one day enter our sky.’

‘I’ve not seen any new stars.’ *How could I, there’s thousands of them.* ‘Are we stargazers now?’ he asked.

‘Suila took me to a plateau, about halfway up the Torta. We walked above the clouds, Orath. Such a clear night, I swear, I could see the ancestors up there.’

Did they wave? ‘He gave you refreshment, didn’t he?’

‘He showed me what I needed to see. Proof that the prophecy is true.’ Constin clutched the box tight. “The robed warriors will bring two legions of arms within the Veil,” he said. “The children of the tribes will be forfeit.”

‘Which means what?’

‘You should read more, Orath. The scrolls tell us prophecy.’

‘I don’t like prophecies,’ he said. ‘Lord, please, get to the point.’

‘War, Orath, that’s the point. A war that will end all wars.’

Orath felt his shoulders fall. The tension in them faded. ‘A War, is that all?’ *Not even original.* ‘Lord . . . Constin . . . friend. That old fool gets high on those plants he boils. He’s mad, you know this.’

‘Normally I’d agree. But still, I have this,’ he lifted the box.

Made of wood, its walls intricately carved. The lid studded with silver. No bigger than a man’s palm.

‘There will always be wars, Lord. A clear sky is doubtless ripe with new stars to a man who doesn’t study them. It’s hardly a vision.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Constin. ‘But we cannot cheat fate. “What will be, cannot be undone; not when it is still yet to happen,”’ he placed the box between them.

‘Lord, I don’t even know what that means.’

‘It means you must leave the Veil. That our very existence will depend upon you, and others that you will meet on your journey.’

‘What journey? What others? Oh, you’re going to send me on a fool’s errand, aren’t you?’ *Myth, magic, and mystery. He felt a cold chill down his spine.* ‘No, I won’t go.’

‘But you gave me your oath.’

Damn you. Orath raised a defiant finger, and then curled it closed. *Outfoxed, and by a weasel.* ‘Lord, don’t bind me to an oath you knew I wouldn’t have given. Not in these circumstances. You need me here, watching your back.’

‘No. You need to be, wherever it is the Fates take you.’

‘And where exactly is that?’

Constin pushed the box towards him. He felt another wave of uncomfortable sensations. He had no intention of touching it.

‘I don’t want it.’

‘Open it,’ Constin said.

‘Throw it in a river, Lord.’

‘Open it,’ this time as a command.

‘Fine, whatever,’ Orath snatched it up. *What could be so bad in a shitty little box like this?* Still, he hesitated, then looked to his Lord, to see insistence staring back.

‘It’s prophecy, Orath. A new star is going to fill our sky.’

REVELATIONS

The early morning was fresh with the scents of the forest. I imagined Joran's house and the safety it had offered, for a brief time. I remembered the grave I'd dug for Mama. The new day brought waking life to the undergrowth, but sadness to my heart.

'Drai, are you awake?' Mistri whispered. 'About time,' she said, lying below a blanket a few feet from me. 'I wanted to ask you. Have you met *him* yet?'

I was too busy being maudlin to answer.

'Well?' she asked. 'Have you?'

'Who?' I whispered back. She obviously didn't want Joran to overhear us. 'Have I met, who?'

'Companion?' she said. 'Huh, you have, haven't you? What's he like?'

She'd taken my breath away with the question.

'How could you possibly know about . . . ?'

' . . . I told you, you're a beacon. It's what *she's* been worried about since the day you were born. It's why Chorus forbid their union. Look, I've been thinking. You're right. You *should* know. I don't know everything. I probably know less than that.' She pulled herself closer. 'Fuck it, you need to know. But what I tell you, it's going to be difficult for you to believe . . .'

'That's enough!'

I nearly cricked my neck looking over the dying fire. Joran was awake, and looking hostile.

'It's not your place to be so bold.'

'He has a right to know,' Mistri rebuffed, throwing her blanket and rising.

‘And what have you told him?’ she asked, and looked worried to hear an answer.

Mistri shrugged. ‘That he’s a lamp-light, what else? Oh, and that going to the Veil is a *really stupid idea*. And no, before you ask, I don’t have a better one.’

And she says I sulk? I watched her skulk off to the trees, and then pick at the undergrowth for firewood.

‘Drai, come, sit with me by the fire.’ Joran’s voice was much softer towards me. She held out her hand. A mother reaching for her child.

How I wanted to take it. I wanted to grasp at any piece of affection I could find. But instead I got to my feet and walked away. More kindling was required for the fire, so I would help Mistri.

‘Tell him,’ Mistri called back without looking up. ‘He has a right to know. He’ll find out anyway.’

All I could do was stare at her. My mother. And she didn’t even know that I knew. Was that cruel?

‘Is it what you want?’ she asked.

Yes . . . Yes. I was nodding. The truth was all I wanted. My life had become a puzzle, too large to see. I needed to grab as many pieces as I could find.

She took Mistri’s gaze; who’d stopped plucking at the ground. I was still staring at her as she patted the ground next to her blanket. ‘Then we must see to it,’ she said.

A wave of expectation consumed me as I hurried to sit with her. Keen to see what it was she took from the pocket of the soldier’s jacket she wore. Her hair limp about its lapels. How tired she looked.

‘You need to take this,’ she said. ‘It will help you to dream.’

‘Dream? Hey, wait.’ Mistri looked astonished. ‘I didn’t mean that?’ she said.

‘He has to understand that what we tell him is true.’

‘Joss, you can’t.’

‘Rhiannum.’ Joran replied. ’

‘What’s Rhiannum?’ I asked.

‘Have you lost all reason,’ Mistri dropped her sticks. ‘You know how dangerous that is.’

‘I’ve already prepared the way. He’s expected.’

‘Oh really, and just like that? First you suggest the mountain, and now it’s Rhiannum. Joss, I meant have a chat with him.’

‘What? What’s Rhiannum?’ I asked. ‘Is it dangerous?’ *Why is everything so fucking dangerous these days?*

Joran lifted a cup in one hand, and what looked like one of her potions wrapped in a tiny paper parcel.

‘No!’ said Mistri. ‘Drai, don’t.’ She knelt next to my mother and took her arm.

My mother? It was the first time I’d thought it, and felt it as real.

‘Trust in me,’ she said. ‘I will always keep you safe,’ Joran raised the cup to me again.

Okay, if it’s what I need to do. I took the cup from her hand. ‘You want me to drink it?’

‘Drai, this isn’t wise.’

My friend’s protestation was too late. The powder was dropped, the water poured. Its taste was sweet and warming as the fluid entered my mouth, and then navigated my throat.

‘Now what?’ I asked.

Oh, I see. That . . .

The effect was instantaneous. I felt my head drop and my eyes roll. Mistri’s voice drifted into another space.

‘The effect will pass.’ Joran’s voice was calm and inviting.

‘Joss, this is foolish.’

‘It’s necessary. You said so yourself.’

‘There are other ways.’

I heard them bicker; their words becoming slow; beginning to lose their meaning. I couldn’t think straight. I could barely muster a thought at all.

‘Relax,’ one of them said.

‘Look at the fire,’ said the other. I think it was the other. Whichever one of them . . . Was someone talking?

‘Concentrate on the flames. Let them take you where you need to be.’

Flames. Yes, the fire. Flames dancing where embers had previously been. Drawing me towards their centre. Voices . . . Faces . . . All about me seemed to stutter and stall. The flames melding into a doorway, of sorts.

I don’t know how, but I felt myself lift, and for the second time in my life, I watched myself part from my physical-self. I was sat slumped by the fire as I drifted away.

‘Welcome.’ A soothing voice broke the clouds that cushioned my head.

‘Who’s there?’ I asked.

The light was a blur. But in it I saw a man’s outline. And then the fire, he was sat beside the fire. Its flames taller and more intense than I remembered, so rich and colourful, powerful, more of a fountain than a flame. And hot, very hot. I crawled away feeling firm ground that moved beneath my hands. Not the soft grass I’d slept on, it felt more like snow.

‘Hello?’ *Who’s there?* ‘Joran?’ No, I knew it wasn’t her. ‘Show yourself.’

Slowly, my surroundings surrendered themselves. My eyes making sense of what they saw. I was sat on something gritty, that seeped through my hands. *Sand?* And short grass for as far as I could see. Behind me the tall flames of a bonfire.

‘Where am I?’ I called out. ‘Who’s here?’

I could hear voices. The rich harmony; a soothing sound, that drifted on a gentle breeze, fresh with exciting new scents. *I smell water. Salty water?* ‘Who’s there?’ I caught his outline again. Walking away; heading in the direction of the chanting. Or was it singing?

There, I could see him better now. A man. No, not a man.

Dear Gods, it can’t be true? I blinked the figure fully into view. *It’s not possible?* My instincts urged me to run. To get as far away as possible. ‘The man wasn’t a man.’ I said. ‘You’re one of them? Beirdin’s breath, you’re Vampyrar.’

‘Yes.’

He almost sounded surprised. Such a tall and elegant frame. So fearsome a glare. I’d seen those same eyes once before; so narrow and crimson, and now settled on me. I felt my skin prickle and my stomach turn, despite him offering no threat. At least, not yet.

I'd heard they were pale-skinned, and he was. I heard tell they hungered for the blood of the young, and that their eyes could burn you from the inside out. That a Vampyrai could see his enemy's heart beating within their chest, before ripping it out with their bare hands. He was no less daunting than the stories suggest. Although he seemed more curious than savage, as the breeze strengthened and whipped his long chestnut hair about his face. As if to tell me why I was in error.

This can't be where she wanted to send me? It can't be.

'Where am I?' I asked. 'Tell me,' I demanded, then wished I hadn't.

'Aurista,' he replied. 'A place we call, Rhiannum.'

He seemed more regal, than monster. His voice polite, but I felt an edge of displeasure at my presence. A well-dressed creature, his clothing slightly longer than his limbs. He beckoned with his finger.

Mother, why have you sent me here?

I had to assume Joran would not send me into the jaws of death. Not after what we'd been through. So I stood, brushed off my clothes, and slowly followed. Wondering where this temperate place could be. Warm, with a clear sky; across white sand that shifted below my shoes. I felt the tall and wispy grass in my hands. That strange sound growing louder as I walked. I'd never seen anywhere so barren, and yet so wondrous, as birds flew squawking their contentment above us. And I realised that the moon was still in the sky, bright and brilliant. I'd never seen that before, the sun and the moon together in the same sky.

He reached the crest of a dune and stopped. A moment later I joined him, careful to keep my distance. One eye on him, and the other keen to see what it was he looked down at?

What I saw below me took my breath away.

Hundreds, no, thousands of people knelt on a golden shoreline below. Their bodies swaying in a mournful gesture, their heads draped in light coloured bonnets. All bowed in prayer, I supposed, to some heathen God. The melody I'd heard, it came from them, as they hummed a strange song that was filled with sadness.

More incredible was the endless expanse of water beyond the land. Its edge emptying across the sand in rhythmic strokes, then disappeared below. One wave after another that broke before the next. I knew instinctively what it was despite never being near the sea. Unbroken as far as I could view, to a place where the water met the sky.

Beirdin's breath . . . it's the sea? I dropped to one knee. *Blessed be Maloona, who sends the rain to fill her rivers.* Through the water I heard her voice, unlike any flow of water I'd ever heard. Stronger and more assertive. It called out with purpose and desire, as each stroke of the water dissipated through the sand .

'The sea.' I said aloud. The taste of salt on my tongue, which was odd. An endless basket of water. And the gathering below conducting their strange ritual. 'Do they pray to Maloona?' I asked, unable to take my eyes from it all. 'Who are they?' Their collective sorrow brought tears to my eyes. 'What happened? What are they doing?'

'They are widows, mothers, sisters. They grieve for those they have loved, and lost. When the moon sits as high as the sun, they come here, and places like this, to mourn. We call them Orphans of War.'

Twelve-thousand, four-hundred and nine women. A hundred and sixteen men dressed in orange robes who walked amongst the dipped bonnets handing out what looked like sticks of incense into hands raised up as they

passed. The fragrance rose from the sticks like heat rising from the ground, and blurred the collective image. Their odour powerful and sweet.

So many people. An impossible expanse of water, on which the moonlight danced. And something else, I could see them now. *Dear Gods, I didn't realise.* Not the light of the moon, but the twinkle of flames from a fleet of candles. Tiny flames drifting out on the tide. 'What are they?' I asked.

'Symbols,' he said. 'Offerings for another life. One more peaceful than the fallen have found on this side of the eternal sea,' he bowed his head with respect. 'Please, allow me a moment.'

He could take as long as he needed. I was spellbound by the vision below. So many people wrapped in their collective grief. I felt humbled by their sense of sacrifice.

'We cannot survive,' he said, 'unless we destroy the Empire that invades us.'

'What? No, you can't do that.'

'Your people have occupied, slaughtered, and enslaved ours. They want to rape us of all that we are. They've already stolen all that we could have been.'

The ubiquitous song from the gathering ceased, and all their, faces blurred by the vapour of incense, stared up at us.

'Join me,' he held out his hand, 'they are your people as well as mine.'

'I won't, no. I know people who have sacrificed: Mama, Father, Sage. I remembered how sad she'd been remembering her family, and Gharl too.'

'Are you frightened?' he asked. His red eyes almost aflame.

I *was* scared. My emotions overwhelming my nerves, that bristled on high alert. And then I heard Joran's voice. 'Trust in me,' she said. 'I will always keep you safe.'

Her sacrifice . . . Me. No, I was here for a reason, and it wasn't to change sides. I'd come this far to discover the truth, the whole truth, and I wasn't about to stop now. I'd go as far as I needed to find out who, and what I was.

Besides, how could I be so preoccupied with my own feelings, when I could still feel theirs; down there on the shore, all mourning the travellers set adrift on the sea.

I felt them all. As their immeasurable sadness embraced my own.

‘So she sends you here to intervene on her behalf.’

‘No, not just that. There are other things I need to know. But will you?’ I asked. ‘Will you help us with Chorus?’

‘Perhaps? What has she told you about him? How much has she told you about yourself? About her Sisters? About *my* people; your people?’ A wry smile. ‘What truths do you know about the Auristans?’

Nothing good. But I wasn’t telling him that.

‘I didn’t think so. Yet she wants me to be the one to tell *him* about *you*.’

‘Why don’t you tell me about, *me*,’ I said. ‘And no lies, I won’t be dismissed or ignored, not anymore.’

Those wonderful, yet terrifying, scarlet pupils began to dilate. Their colour flooding into the pure white of his eyes. They held a crimson fury.

‘Did she tell you her desires cost your father his life?’

What does that mean? ‘He loved her.’ *Didn’t he?* ‘She loved him.’ *Mistri told me so.*

‘Love?’ He leapt with incredible speed to grab me and pin me down. I thought him about to strike. ‘Love is more than shared desire,’ he said. ‘It’s responsibility, to others as well as yourselves.’

I felt my face sag, as his own leered close. He could smell the scent of fear all over me. I thought my heart skip again, and stop.

No, I won’t. I’m not responsible. I wasn’t even born.

‘You don’t scare me,’ I lied. ‘Real terror is coming from the stars. I’ve come here because *you* need my help.’

‘Me?’ I preferred him amused rather than angry. ‘What can your kind offer me? You look inward, always at yourselves. You take what you want, beyond what it is that you need. And never a thought to the consequence.’

‘My kind? I thought I was your kind? Or is that only when it suits you?’

Beirdin's breath . . . His lips drew back to show hidden fangs, curved and needle sharp, and extending. *I'm going to die.* But not without having my say. I wouldn't snivel for him, or anyone. Nor would I cower at his arrogance. I swore a sacred oath as I'd stared down at Imax's corpse that I intended to keep.

'Go ahead,' I said. 'Prove you're just as bad as, *us*. You share nothing but spittle behind your eloquent words.' I lifted my head and offered him my throat, drawing a deeper breath than any I'd ever taken.

"Trust her," Mistri had said.

Yes, trust. Trust in the woman who is my mother. Trust that she wouldn't send me here if she'd thought this creature might harm me. Trust . . .

He scoffed, and then let me free. Turned me over to stare at the sand. I rolled away.

'Don't you touch me again,' I sniped, and said a blessing to whichever of my Gods had been watching over me.

'Half-Breed,' he said, 'neither one nor the other.'

'So what if I am. That's hardly my fault.'

His fiery eyes glared again. They threatened to burrow inside my head. To tunnel deep in search of answers that he wouldn't find.

'If you'd begged for your life, I would have ended it. I want you to know that.'

Fuck you. I believed he spoke the truth. *I nearly did.* I let out a sigh, and with it the last of my courage.

Quite unexpectedly, he held out his hand to me. 'My name's Solieval,' he said. 'You may call me, Sol.'

I took his hand as my emotions drained out through the soles of my feet.

'Has your mother told you she's broken her oath?'

Oath? 'What oath?'

'Not to kill again,' he said. 'How can we trust a creature who has no honour?'

'She had no choice.' *I had no choice.* I remembered the man in the grey skirt. *I didn't mean to.*

'There is always a choice, he said. 'She chose to put your life above another's. A mother's love can prove fatal, so they say.'

'So she is my mother?' *It's true then.* Beyond any shade of doubt now. *Joran is my birth mother. Mama, you should have told me.*

'The Sabilyne still shies from the truth. It did so then, and it does so now. Unable even to tell her offspring what she did, or what lies ahead. Should I do that for her as well?'

'Joran,' I said. 'Her name's Joran.'

'When monsters come in the night, they have no names. Just a wanton desire. A need to please themselves at the expense of others.'

No, she's not like that. I was about to object, but he half-raised his hand to stop me.

'For arguments sake,' he said. 'I will concede its name. *Her* name. And until time more clearly elaborates her intentions. I will give *you* the benefit of my doubts.'

You will? Yes, good, that's better.

'She took me in; risked everything to save me.'

‘Loyalty from an abandoned child. A Vampyrai who fell in love with a . . .’ Sol knelt on the sand and gazed out to sea.

I felt the breeze settle, as if his mood was complicit in its rise and fall, and I wondered what strange and mystical thoughts now engaged him. I supposed this was as great a shock to him, as to the rest of us.

Are you waiting for me to say something? It was difficult to read a face in which so many shadows reside.

He looked at me and the wind rose. A dancing gust that struck his long hair sharply about his face, settled with calm, that cloaked a wildness now kept in check. Well-tempered by those glorious eyes; intelligent and thoughtful, and constantly aware for any sign of weakness, or deceit. He was so different; so unique. And patient too. More so than I.

‘Why am I so special?’ It seemed the obvious thing to ask. *Do you know?* ‘I’ve been labelled by that word all my life.’ It seemed intent to define my future as well.

‘You consider yourself special?’ he asked

‘No. No, I don’t. But others do. Why?’

He looked away.

‘Don’t ignore me, please. I don’t know why Joran sent me here. But you must be able to help us.’

‘For a long time, I thought I would kill her if she ever came out from hiding.’

‘Kill her, why?’

‘The Vampyrai she enticed. The one whom she turned against her own. The one who’s death she is responsible for. He was my son.’

You're my grandfather?

I took a moment to let his words sink in. I half expected the wind to howl, and the sky to bark and bay, but Sol just turned away again.

Rhiannum? Now I understood. I realised why we were here, of all places. And why Mistri had been so horrified that Joran would allow me come.

You're mourning your son. My father?

As he gazed out to sea, I remembered staring at Mama's grave. How I'd left her there, alone. I didn't want to. At that moment I let them all in. Thousands of orphans, their collective grief. I gasped and got to my feet. Close to throwing up, and breathing heavily.

'Can you help us?' I barely got the words out, I was so desperate to block them all out. I stumbled and fell; staring at the sand, and then my gaze latched onto his. 'The Druids want me . . .' *No, don't turn away. We need your help. I need your help.*

'If you are what I suspect you to be. It's not the Druids who should concern you.'

No, please, I'm fine. I really wasn't, my head filled with a white kind of noise, lulling, almost gone. My lungs filled with short sharp breaths. All that grief, it had threatened to consume me. Sol barely registered concern. Perhaps he thought I deserved it. 'Companion,' I said. And now I did feel sick. Remembering him and all he was.

'You know his name? Then the prophecy has begun. Just as he said it would.'

'He? You mean Chorus, don't you?' Someone needed to join the dots here, or I'd be the one leaping at someone's throat. I wanted him to tell me about my father, about his son. But there wasn't time. There was never

enough time. 'Joran wants us to go to the Veil,' I said. *What? What's so funny?*

'She has a nerve. Does she think he will greet her with open arms? That he will welcome *you*? It's more likely he will kill you both.'

Mistri was right then. Going to the Veil was a bad idea.

'For what she did. That which they both did.' He was shaking his head. 'There will be no redemption for her. And if you know Companion's name, there will be no future either. Not for any of us,' he turned on me, eye's aflame. 'You spoke of love, Halfling. Well, my son's love for that *creature* has just damned us all.'

Your son, my father. 'What was his name?' *At least tell me his name.*

'The dead have no names. Only memories, until they fade.' He was looking out to sea again. His emotions caught and parcelled away.

I had to find a way to appeal to him. Get him to help. Surely that was the reason for me being here?

'You think Chorus will kill us. Why does Joran think he will help us?'

'You're a Child of the Dreaming. You tell me.'

'No, that's what *she* does. Answering questions with more questions. Talk straight with me. Or don't speak at all, *Grandfather*.' I wasn't sure if it was the word, or the way I'd spoken it? But I felt a sense of empathy towards me. 'Help me,' I said in a hush.

'He is the creator,' Sol replied. 'He is the Prophet. He is the one who took what Companion could not afford to lose. And my son took it from him. Now he can only listen, when the mountain sings.'

I don't know what that means.

'I'm not responsible for my father's actions,' I said.

'But you are the consequence of what they did.'

I couldn't tell if he were uncomfortable, or just reflective. He only needed a nudge to talk.

'I may be the only person who can put things right,' I said. 'At least give me the chance.' He was nodding.

'I can only tell you what I know. What Chorus told me when we were still friends. Before. . . Before they took what was not created for them.'

Before he changed her,' he said. 'Before your father's infatuation with that creature destroyed him. And ended our friendship.'

Sol turned from grief, to confrontation.

'It's been a long time since Joran dared set foot in the Veil. Things are very different to how she'll remember. He's changed. Lost himself to the mountain. To what it hides up there. I think, truly, that he finally wants to die.'

Die? What could make someone want to die?

A few days ago I'd not heard of this man, Chorus, a recluse who lived in a mountain. The one person who could tell me everything. And now a Vampyraï tells me he wants to die?

'Why? You have to tell me everything you know.'

'And what if it is not what you want to hear?'

'That's my decision, not yours.'

Another smile. There, he was warming to me. That felt good.

'Walk with me, Half-Breed.'

I was glad to. I wanted to see the water again. I'd heard stories about the sea, but nothing could have prepared me. It was a wondrous thing.

'Have you ever sailed out there?' he asked.

I was shaking my head.

'It can be a wild beast, capable of tearing you apart. It can also be a serenity. A flat so calm it can bend a strong mind toward insanity. Like drifting on a mirror, with no soul to look at but your own.' He looked on the water with admiration. 'In the blink of an eye you can be fighting waves that block out the sky. In storms that can put the Gods on edge.'

I followed him down the dunes, and on to the water. To where the water emptied into the land. How could such a beautiful thing be the monster he described? I wondered if it were a parallel directed at me?

'We are at war, Halfling,' he said. 'Contesting our very survival with the Empire. And yet our grievances are inconsequential in the eyes of other, more insidious creatures. Dark Stars, out there roaming our galaxy. And if you know their name, then we are about to be consumed by a war we cannot hope to win.'

How do you even know about them? Wait, you said Dark Stars? Dear Gods, there's more than one?

My Dreaming came vividly to mind. The vast metropolis that floated within an eternal sea of darkness; it all came flooding back. Standing there with the one called, Companion. And something else was there. *Don't look down. Not then, and not now. Don't be drawn towards the abyss.*

"Look upon your God," Companion said. And I did, but I don't remember. *No, I don't want to remember. Whatever it was down there, I don't want to remember.*

'They want us dead,' I said. 'They want to change us into those, *things*.'

'The Horde is a weapon. The Dark Stars are at war with all forms of life.'

'But why? We're no threat.'

'They believe the universe belongs to them. That light has propagated life where it has no right to be. The Dark Stars see life as a plague. Something to be cleaned by fire.'

'I've seen what they can do.' The brave warriors of that army; their utter annihilation. 'How can we stop them? Which of our Gods is powerful enough?'

'The Light and the Dark are the only true Gods, Halfling. What you see up there when the light fades, is all that lies between us and them. Within the darkness of night rages a war eternal.'

It was all giving me a headache. The fact that I understood was inconceivable. Knowing what I did should have driven me insane.

'How do I even understand this?' I asked. My eyes on the water, watching, as another wave emptied into the sand. I took a step closer. Right up to the boundary of sea and land. 'I'm barely a man,' I said. 'I come from a small backwater town.' Another wave dissipated around the soles of my boots. 'A few months ago I couldn't grasp the enormity of the Empire. It was too vast. And now I've seen the Heavens for what they really are.' I wanted to feel the water, so I took another two steps. 'How can I be familiar with any of this?'

'Genetic memories,' he suggested. 'Perhaps there's more going on than we think.'

From where I stand, there always seems to be more. I felt the water rush over my boots, and seep in between the laces. It was cold and refreshing. ‘Genetics,’ I said. ‘The study of genes, and genetic variation in living organisms. The hereditary line through which we pass . . .’ *Oh yes, there’s always more.*

‘So your mother wants me to appeal to Chorus. Smooth your way into the mountain. Be assured, Halfling, he will not be happy to find out about you.’

Then he should get in line. I seem to have that affect on people lately.

SERPENT STRIKES

So far the evening had lived up to Amastic's expectations. The noise level in the pavilion had passed beyond chaotic; inspired by the ale towards a frenetic revelry, the temperature below the roof rising by the hour. The smell of bad food and the odours of men rampant between its hide-sewn walls.

From the outset the younger Naribs had shown dissent to their elders. The festivities buoyed by aggressive undertones. More than one dispute had erupted between father and son. Quarrels soon quelled, but only to resurface elsewhere.

'Are you not drinking, Druid?' Guilda asked. 'What's the matter, can't hold your piss?'

If there was a limit to Amastic's patience, it was being reached. The Korma's first-born might well be the one to breach it. Amastic smiled, he wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Well-built, square jawed, Guilda was what some might regard as handsome. His long hair untied and constantly being groomed back with his hands. The man was vain and objectionable, and drunk. Too much ale had allowed his personality to become even more offensive than usual. His sense of self-importance was legendary; his ego overspilling in all directions at once. Much like the wine in his cup.

'Mind your tongue, Guilda.' Tristic took it upon himself to intervene. 'We are guests of the Korma, and enjoy the blessings of his hospitality.'

'Of course, where are my manners. Here, I raise a toast to you. Both of you.'

‘Perhaps it’s time for you to raise a toast to the Korma. Let everyone see how the son respects and loves his father.’

‘Good idea, *Cleric*,’ he wavered unsteadily, then raised his cup, spilling it down his arm. ‘Quieten down. Silence all you dogs. Stop your bitching, Guilda has fine words to say.’

It took a few seconds, but the motion and sound in the pavilion lulled. Even the infernal pipes whined down into silence.

‘A few words,’ he said. ‘But first, let all the father’s stand, and the Elders too. Stand up and toast the Korma with me. Whilst the young bucks sit on their arses, as usual.’ A roar of laughter burst out from the gathering. Guilda flapping with his hand to quell it. ‘Shhh, quiet. Down, all of you. I want the young to show some fucking respect,’ his arm patted at the air to encourage them down. ‘Yes, that’s better. Much better. The young should always sit at their father’s feet, don’t you agree, *Cleric*?’ Guilda took a deep breath, and let more wine bail from his cup. His arms outstretched as if in welcome. ‘Father . . . Council elders . . . Tribal leaders. All of you now stood. I raise my cup to you all.’ He did, and the gesture was repeated around the pavilion. ‘To Constin. Perhaps the greatest Korma ever. At least that’s what he keeps telling me.’ More laughter. The Elders standing with raised cups. The younger warriors sat nodding.

Amastic noticed the entrance flaps had closed. The serving girls had left. *What’s going on?* Some sort of surprise, he assumed. His train of thought interrupted as Guilda addressed him, personally.

‘Stand up, Druid. Toast the tribes with me. That’s it, up, up. A toast to the Empire,’ he shouted. His cup acknowledging all present with a sweeping gesture. ‘A toast to my father. We haven’t always seen eye-to-eye. Ha ha ha, but then you’re so old, so why would we? You’ve never seen any true value in your eldest son.’

A bemused chunter circled the gathering.

‘Remember your place, Guilda,’ was shouted. Supported by grunts of animosity from those who stood.

‘No, no, I don’t mean any disrespect. With age comes wisdom, and avarice. Sloth and pride,’ he gestured for quiet, as the elder Naribs called for

his respect. Those seated tapped gently with their cups in quiet support. 'No, no, let me explain,' he said. 'How our glorious leader, our great Korma, and my beloved father. The man who laps from the bowl of the Imperial Senate. Who prefers the titivation of young women in the bedroom to the glory of his tribes. I say, hail the sad old man who keeps getting old,' he raised his cup towards Constin.

'I did try to tell you earlier,' Tristic whispered. 'No, don't look at me like that, it's so predictable. Tensions in the camp are rising. The young want to take a different path to the one their fathers have always walked. It's inevitable. They're fitter, stronger; it's the natural succession. The old will always be replaced by the young.'

'You think too much of the pup, and not enough of the old dog,' Amastic replied. 'He allows the boy enough rope to hang himself.'

'You think so? Hmm, perhaps you're right. By the sounds of things, I think we're about to find out.'

Guilda played to his audience. Encouraging those stood to get closer, their animosity growing.

'Come, gather round. You worn out old men, willing to sell our blood and wealth to our Imperial overlords.'

Constin glared at his son. Incensed, but patient. His hand raised to suspend intervention.

'My father is not loyal to the Emperor. He is for the Senate.' Guilda's hand moved swiftly to point at Amastic. 'He's for them, Druid *scum*, whose Order weaves a wicked web about our people. Who uses the blood of the tribes to feed their futile war.'

A different noise within the ranks of the younger Naribs, still sat, but becoming vocal. The sound of cups being tapped in support of Guilda's words.

'Listen father, the young are finding their voice. And you, Druid, how goes your war?'

Amastic glanced up to Constin, who shook his head.

‘ . . . How young are the conscripts these days? Still suckling on their mothers’ tits, or so I hear. You’re running out of fodder, and now you want to sacrifice the young of our Tribes. You threaten our children to force us into the fight.’ He opened his arms as if welcoming the prospect. ‘Why don’t you just ask us nicely . . . ? To shove spears up our arses and dance to your Druid tune,’ he spat on the ground and the young growled in support. ‘Druid scum, you’re not fit to stain the soul of a Narib boot. Druid scum,’ he said. ‘Druid scum . . .’ Those who were sat began to chant the words in protest. The Elder’s demanding they stop.

‘That’s enough!’ Constin rose from his throne. The fur that adorned his shoulders dropping away. ‘Amastic is our guest, and you have said too much. Guards, remove my son. Confine him to his tent,’ he stepped down from his throne. ‘I’ll deal with you later.’

‘Sorry Father, but not this time. We want to be free of Druid chains,’ he raised his hands again as if welcoming rain. ‘There’s a new power rising, Father. And it doesn’t include you, or any of these so called Elders,’ he scowled a defiant gaze towards Amastic. ‘It’s a new world, Druid. Your kind will soon be forgotten.’

What’s going on here? It didn’t make sense. Young men were sat, openly hostile. Guilda almost daring his father to act. *The guards? Something’s wrong.*

‘It will be your head, not his,’ Constin growled. ‘Guards, remove my son.’

Two sentries stood at the entrance, neither moved.

Amastic’s senses bristled with alarm. He moved to Constin’s side. ‘I think we should leave,’ he said.

‘Leave? I don’t think so. Guards, remove my son.’

The Elders called for Guilda’s arrest. The young warriors wildly dismissive of their demand. Their cups rapping a hasty, but unified note.

The Elders stood. The younger warriors still sat. *This is by design.* Amastic saw betrayal. He grabbed Constin’s arm. ‘We must leave, now.’

‘Leave?’ The silver haired leader of the Naribs pulled his arm from Amastic’s grip. ‘Guilda, leave the Uma now. Or so help me I’ll . . .’

‘ . . . What? What will you do? No Father, not this time. This time *you* will leave. All of you old men, it’s time to leave.’

The entrance to the Uma was thrown open and men with bows filed inside. Their strings pre-loaded with arrows.

‘What is this? Guilda, what the fuck is going on?’

‘Change, Father,’ the reply.

‘Constin, it’s a coup.’ He wasn’t asking this time, as he pulled the Korma back.

He could only watch as the Elders were coerced towards the centre of the Uma. Bows drawn and levied against their objection. Confusion and fear guaranteed they complied.

Guilda dropped to his knees, his forehead lowered to rest on the ground. ‘Do it,’ he shouted. ‘Free our people.’

The strum of bowstrings loosed a furious flutter of feathered fletchings. The swoop of projectiles was sharp and penetrating. As helpless men cried out and fell. Their bodies ripped and punctured by flying metal. The brief sound of hailstones against a window, and the cries of the dying.

Amastic pulled Constin away by his arm. There was still time with the Elders as a reluctant shield. The Korma stumbling back, horrified by their slaughter.

‘Get out,’ Amastic shouted. ‘Go, rally your men,’ as he sliced through the heavy buck-skin wall with his knife; pushing the Korma through. ‘Go,’ he urged, and then followed, almost falling through the hole. The cries of dying men faded as they ran through the pavilion’s outer halls.

‘This way,’ the Druid pulling Constin, still stunned by what was happening. As two tall, sword wielding Naribs tried to block their path.

Amastic threw the knife, and it hit its mark. The nearest man falling, his hands clutched at his chest. A sweep of Amastic’s arm sent a pulse that threw his companion aside.

‘Through here,’ Amastic pulled open a flap and tried to push Constin through. ‘Go,’ he urged.

‘No, no. I have to go back.’

‘And do what, die?’

'I'll kill them all,' Constin cried. His long silver hair stuck to the anger on his face. He wanted revenge. 'I'll have my son's fucking head on my bedpost.'

'He'll have yours on his if we don't leave now.'

A moment later he'd forced the older man outside.

'Traitor,' venom in the word. 'Traitor,' louder this time. 'Traitors . . .'

'Wait.' Amastic slowed. *Something's wrong.* 'Constin, where is everyone?'

Colourful tents as far as he could see, but no people. No bustle of life in the pathways between the tents. The camp fires burned without company.

What's going on? 'Where is everyone?'

'To arms.' Constin shouted. 'To arms, loyal Naribs. Your Korma needs his warriors.'

The vast camp lay eerily empty. The only sounds the fluttering of flags on a gusting wind.

'Constin, we need to find horses.'

'No, my people won't allow this,' he threw open the flap of the nearest tent, and was met with screams from the women sat inside, children too. 'Where are they? Where are my warriors?' He demanded. Those inside seemed terrified of their leader.

The next tent was empty. As was the next.

'It's not possible,' Constin lumbered between the tents. The wine's influence returned. He looked stunned as he trod through the edge of a fire, kicking up kindle and flames. He threw back another flap to see a frightened old woman, a spear in her hands; two children at her feet.

'Constin, they're all dead back there. We'll join them if we don't leave. We have to go.'

'No, I won't run. You, tell me where my warriors have gone?'

'Lord, is that you?' her voice filled with disbelief. 'They said you were dead.'

'Who? Who told you I was dead?'

'The young Lord's men. They came and ordered everyone to the mountain. They said you were taken; that you may be dead?' She was shaking her head. 'Please Lord, they came to our tents when they were

gone. They threatened us. Ordered everyone to stay inside on pain of death. They said you'd been murdered by him. By the Druid.'

Now it made sense. Not just a power grab, but a political coup. 'Constin, we don't have time for this. We'll ride for the legions. Find out where your men are. We'll come back and put this insurrection down.'

'The eastern slope, Lord,' she said. 'That's where the young went. The young Lord ordered all the warriors to leave in silence; then gather on the eastern slope,' she got up and handed Constin a knife. 'Please Lord, you must go before they find you. The children . . .'

It was a massacre. The dead heaped where they fell. The few who'd survived, lay with their throats severed. The sawdust on the ground well muddied with blood.

Guilda began to laugh, and then shout through the hole cut in the pavilion's wall. He crawled on all fours to see outside.

'Did you hear them, Father?' he shouted. 'Did you hear the old pigs squeal as they were stuck?' He got to his feet, the young men slowly rising. The weight of Guilda's actions evident on all.

'Well? I think that went well, don't you?'

One young warrior raised himself, and then his voice.

'You said it would be a bloodless coup. You've killed them all?'

'It's what you all wanted. You just didn't have the balls to make it happen. It's a new dawn for us, don't you see? The Narib Tribes are about to become one nation. We greed, remember? To do what was necessary to free ourselves from the yoke of the Elders. It's done. Consider yourselves freed.'

'But the other tribes . . .?'

' . . . Will follow us. And you, will follow *me*.'

It had all seemed so surreal in the planning; too audacious to actually work. But despite its success, he was more nervous now than ever before. The young warriors looked to him with expectation. Demanding his strength and leadership, as he looked back on all fours.

Guilda lifted himself. He brushed at his knees and clapped the dust from his hands. Leadership, yes, he intended them to have it.

‘Get up, all of you. We have a lot to do,’ he gestured to the guards by the door. ‘Take men and find my father. Bring him to me alive, if you can. But I want that Druid dead.’

‘Lord, you must come with me.’ A woman’s voice called in a loud hush. ‘Quickly, I have a place to hide.’

‘Fruli, is that you?’ Constin’s relief evident as he took her in his arms. ‘Fruli, we need horses.’

‘Yes, Lord, I can get them for you. But you must hide until I can. Please, there are warriors everywhere. They’re searching the camp for you.’

‘Come on, Druid. We’ll survive this yet.’

Amastic saw little choice. Narib’s loyal to Guilda were hunting them. Cries from all about the camp as tents were being searched.

‘You’ll be safe in here,’ she said. ‘I’ve sent one of your handmaidens for horses. A few minutes, no more.’

‘And then what? I gallop through my own camp like a bad spirit caught stealing men’s souls?’

‘When the others find out what has happened, they’ll flock to find you, Lord. I will fight with you.’

‘Sweet Fruli, it’s enough that you came. You see, Druid. There is still loyalty in my camp’.

‘Constin, once we reach the legions we’ll . . .’ *What handmaiden? How did you know where to find us?* Before he could question Fruli the flap to the tent was cast aside. ‘Tristic? I thought you were . . .’

‘Dead?’ the Cleric answered. ‘No, not yet at least. We don’t have much time, they’re turning the camp upside down out there.’

‘They’re traitors,’ Constin cursed. ‘They’ll pay for their treachery.’

‘Did I thank you for the hole?’ Tristic asked. ‘Oh, and for waiting. I’m about as popular as you back there.’

‘We barely had time to save ourselves,’ Amastic replied, watchful of Fruli.

She left the doorway. ‘Warriors, Lord. Coming this way. We must leave, quickly.’

‘We were followed?’ *No, I’d have known.* ‘Tristic, how did know where to find us?’

‘This way, Lord. I have a way out the back.’

Fruli stepped by him, and Amastic felt a sharp pain in his stomach. The look in the woman’s eyes as she stepped back. Hatred in her gaze.

‘Fruli, where are you going?’ asked Constin. ‘You said there were guards out there.’

‘Yes, Lord. I sent for them.’

He'd let her get too close. Amastic looked down at his hands. His fingers were covered in blood. His blood.

Bitch, what have you done? Pain now where the razor sharp spike had been thrust. A wave of numbness and perspiration throughout his body.

Fruli lifted the entrance. Warriors painted with blue dye entered, and looked keen to shed blood.

'Kill them,' Fruli shouted. Kill them both.'

Poison? He felt it surge through him. A fast acting compound delivered by her barb. *Resist.* He could feel it trying to hijack his nervous system.

Not his only problem as the first of the Naribs attacked. Impatient to spear himself a Druid. The weapon's tip thrust towards Amastic's chest. Redirected as he stepped aside, grabbing the shank of the pole, then snapped it by striking down with his elbow. The spear's blade stabbed into the man's neck; blood spurted from the wound as he fell. The second warrior already on him. Heavy-set but quick-stepped, his weight behind the sword that arced down seeking blood.

Amastic spun away, the numbness in his body spreading, the air close-by his face swept aside the heavy blade. He didn't feel the shallow cut that sliced his arm, as his foot drove hard into the Narib's knee. Cracking the bone from its socket. With the man's balance removed, he buckled under his own weight.

Amastic grabbed his enemy's head, then thrust the jagged end of the spear's shaft deep into his eye. He let him fall, the broken spear ready for whoever came next. There was only Fruli. Stood by the doorway. He staggered towards her, blood dripping from his wound, his vision blurred. Getting worse.

‘Druid scum.’ Fruli backed away to the wall of the tent. Fear and disbelief had warped her pretty features. The petite fancy of the Korma certain she would be next. The entrance flap was yanked back, more warriors stooping inside.

Can't see . . . Can't think . . . Constin?

He threw the spear, to see it deflected by a shield. The same shield that hit him hard, his balance lost, the advancing figure wielding an axe towards his head. Amastic let himself fall, his back caught by the wall. The taught skin helping him to rotate away. Two more of the enemy advanced.

Amastic thrust out his hand, fist clenched; the Narib's axe faltered on the backswing, and fell. The shield dropped as the muscular assassin clutched at his throat.

Pain . . . He defied the poison. *Choke . . .* He would defy his would-be assassins. *Die . . .!*

The Narib's head jerked as he fell, his neck snapped; dead before his face struck the ground. Those who followed him paused, unsettled by what they'd seen.

‘Kill him,’ Fruli ordered. ‘Kill him, kill him.’

Amastic backed away to the wall; eyes fixed on the Naribs who wanted him dead.

Constin? Weapons all around, why didn't the warrior engage? ‘Tristic?’ He needed help. *No, not possible.* What he saw filled him with dread.

The Korma sat against the tent's central pole. His silver hair dangled, his chest covered in blood.

The Druid shuffled closer and dropped to one knee.

Constin?

No-one had got past. The Naribs by the door looked keener to leave than to fight.

How?

Amastic gasped as a sharp pain burned deep into his back.

‘Didn't see it coming, did you?’ Tristic whispered. Both hands clenched to the hilt of the dagger the Druid had given him.

Traitor . . . He grabbed the Cleric's face with his fingers. 'Bastard!' He felt another stinging pain thrust into his side. It left his flesh only to be stabbed in again, and again, until he grabbed Fruli's hand.

'Die, Druid, die.' She cursed his name.

Amastic struck her, and she fell, her weapon falling to the ground. A short spike with a winged handle. The damage it inspired was probably fatal. The poison working against him again; numbness spreading fast.

'The bitch works for you,' he said.

Tristic put his arm around Amastic's throat. 'She's a very effective agent, don't you think?'

'Fuck you,' Amastic sneered, and he cried out; the air pulsed. Throwing the Cleric as if he were made of paper. Fruli too, cast across the floor. The Naribs by the door toppled by the Druid's will. So much power and yet he was unable to grip the knife in his back, as another threat fizzed through the air. A wave of Amastic's hand deflected an arrow, it stuck into the hide that draped the tent.

Amastic tried to stand. *Need to find a way out. A weapon.* Something to cut an exit in the wall. He doubted he could ward off another serious attack.

More warriors stooped through the doorway. His vision blurred, but his other senses were at work. He counted five would-be assassins

'Can you feel the life draining from your veins?' Tristic sneered. 'You can't fight them all,' he scowled. He was sat against the buckskin wall. His pain evident if only Amastic could see.

'Come finish the job yourself, Cleric. As I look you in the eye this time. Treacherous scum.'

'Fuck you, and your Brotherhood. You'll be a bad memory before the day ends. Well? Don't just stand there, finish him.'

The Naribs were cautious. He looked half dead already, so why bother?

Amastic raised his hand and heard the sounds of boots shuffling their owners back. He could smell the fear; that their spears and swords would be no match for magic.

'You dare strike at me, bastard Cleric. It will be the end of you, and your brethren. Retribution will be swift on you all.'

‘Ha, listen to yourself. Take a good look, all of you. The all-seeing, all-powerful, Druid, deaf dumb and blind to his own demise, and that of his Order.’ He motioned to the closest Narib to help him stand. ‘By the end of the day your Brothers will be just as dead,’ he said. ‘Your Order consigned to a footnote in history.’

What’s he talking about. ‘You’ll die screaming for forgiveness, as will your whore.’ *Finish this.*

‘Can you feel the poison snaking around your body, Druid? Look at you; you’re done, spent. You’re as good as dead. The Eight have decreed, and the Clerics will make it so.’

The Eight? ‘Do you think your lies will save you?’ *Why would he say that?* ‘When the Eight discover your treachery . . .

‘It’s by their decree, you dumb-fuck.’

The tone of his voice. The timbre of the accusation.

He believes it to be true? No, how can that be? It made no sense. Or did it? The Eight’s change of policy. The recent flip of political narrative. All Brothers ordered to retain a Cleric.

‘Look at him, Fruli. Can you see, he’s finally worked it out. It’s true, Druid. The Eight have issued a decree. Four simple words. “End the Khassari Order.”’

‘No, it’s not possible,’ Amastic lowered his hand.

‘And yet it is so, *Brother.* My blade between your shoulders should be all the proof you need. By nightfall, your Order will not exist.’

Cleric filth. Amastic tried to stand. *I have to, to warn the others.* His body refused his commands. Too much blood lost. His debility allowing the poison to gain a foothold. It was getting cold. *We’ve been betrayed . . . Why?*

‘I have to say, I’m disappointed. I was assure the poison was quick, and painful. Does it hurt?’

‘I’ll sit with the Gods,’ he said. ‘Whilst you squirm eternally in the ground. Die, Cleric. Die!’

Tristic jerked, his hands clutched up at his throat.

‘Urrgh, no, stop him . . . Fruli?’

She grabbed a bow from the archer and strung an arrow. The string thumped against the air as the feathered bolt shot towards Amastic, but was waved away.

Too close. Barely an arm's length from his head. His senses waning but still able to hear another arrow hitched to the string. He doubted he had the strength to deny her twice.

He saw her face again. How enraged she'd looked when she'd stabbed him. How satisfied when she'd jabbed her weapon so many times. He wondered what anger fuelled her need for such vengeance.

Irrelevant. The croaking death of the Cleric would be a fitting epitaph for his demise. He lifted his arm, his hand barely able to comply. The arrow moved away, but not nearly enough. It buried itself deep into his shoulder. The pain unbelievably intense. Another shot already on its way. He felt it drive deep into his chest.

Darkness threatened to engulf him. But not until he'd wrung the life from the bastard Cleric. *What?* Death whispered in his ear. *Fuck you . . .* The sweet smell of a woman's perfume.

'Die Druid,' she whispered.

The pain Fruli brought was sudden and intense. What little blood remained now gathered about the spike she'd rammed into his side.

Amastic refused to die before the Cleric breathed his last. His lips gasping for air; cursing Amastic's name. Before he could be sure, Amastic felt the night rush in and wash him away.

'Did you see that?' Guilda's voice was laced with awe; buoyed on excitement. 'Did you see. Did you? The Druid waves his hand and an arrow is swept away. By the Gods, I wish I could do that.' He walked toward the Druid's bloodied corpse and kicked his outstretched leg. 'You think he's really dead?' He kicked again. 'Looks dead. You're lucky your bitch was around to save you, Cleric.'

Guilda knelt before Amastic, and pulled out the spike that had finished him. 'A souvenir,' he smirked. 'Our first dead Druid.'

'My Lord, be careful' one of the Naribs cautioned.

‘He’s dead,’ said Guilda. ‘At least I hope he is.’

‘No, Lord. It’s the Korma, he still lives.’

‘He does?’ Guilda turned to his father. ‘Is that right? Are you still alive, Father?’

‘Why?’ Constin’s lips barely able to carry the sound. His body sat slumped against the pole.

‘Cleric, when you cut someone’s throat. Cut deeper.’ Guilda placed his hands on his father’s shoulders and lowered his lips to the old man’s ears. ‘We’ve done a deal,’ he whispered, ‘with the Clerics,’ he winked.

‘The Druid, warned, a traitor . . . you?’

‘Guilty,’ Guilda replied. ‘For some reason they want the Auristans to cross the desert. Here’s the secret bit, so do I.’

‘You, you would give the enemy a foothold?’

‘I’ll give them a corridor through the Veil. I’ll play pipes as they march.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you wouldn’t. And because they’ve offered us freedom from the yoke of the Empire. Who’d have thought it, eh? They want an end to the war, and I’m helping it to happen. Your son is the Hai’cha. The leader the tribes have waited so long for.’

‘My, son, is a fool.’

‘Fuck you. You never appreciated me. You couldn’t recognise greatness when you saw it.’ Guilda raised his voice to ensure his warrior’s could hear. ‘The Lady sings from the mountain again. A new generation of warriors have risen to lead our people into freedom.’

‘They’re, using you,’ Constin warned.

Guilda pressed his cheek against his father’s. Careful not to be overheard. ‘No, Father, they think they use me, but it is I who use them. I have a very different path in mind for our people,’ he backed away. ‘Fruli, please, show my father how good you are with that bow.’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ she raised the bow and aimed the arrow at Constin.

‘Here’s one for you, Father,’ he gestured to Fruli. ‘Do it,’ he said.

The string creaked as it was drawn fully. The bow readied, then turned, towards Tristic. A moment later the Cleric slumped, his hands still raised in protest. Whatever words he'd intended, left unspoken on his lips.

'Well, now, you didn't see that one coming, did you? And neither will the others when the Auristan's arrive.'

He lifted the spike he'd taken from Amastic's chest. 'Interesting tool, don't you think?' He put his hand on his father neck, then drove the point deep into Constin's heart.

The silver-maned leader of the Narib tribes cursed his son as he died.

I wanted to know why I found myself wrapped inside a prophecy that I'd never heard of. I wanted to know more about Companion and the City of the Dead. Most of all, I wanted to know about this man, Chorus; who he was. I wanted it all, and I didn't care how fantastical it may sound. My life had recently become victim to all things implausible.

'What's so special about the words in that damn book?'

He shook his head. 'Words are enlightenment,' he said. 'Vassals of knowledge. Some inscriptions create a gravity all of their own. To draw us in search of their understanding.'

'That's not what I meant.' I wanted to know why it was following me. 'What's written on its pages,' I asked. *How did Mama end up with that book?*

'Chorus wrote the book. He's a prolific writer. I think the diaries he wrote helped to settle his mind when he first arrived here on Illona. That's the name he gave to this planet. His first books tell the history of us all. It's quite terrifying really. Understanding where it all began.' He still looked unsure whether he wanted to have this conversation. 'Your little black book,' he said, 'it holds the reasons for our being. The very reason that the great abyss, our universe, exists. To those less informed it could be reflected on with more *religious* connotations.'

That made more sense. 'Mama used it to pray.'

'As have others. She's not the first to have had contact with the book. It's prophecies are hardly a secret. It's the worst fear of any man who seeks understanding. Total destruction. The end of enlightenment. The book says, "The Dreamer will seek out darkness." You've met him haven't you, Companion? The prophecy predicts that one day a new star will fill our sky.

A Dark Star. And we'll need more than our Gods to protect us when that day arrives.'

The sounds of angry demons filled my head. The terrible screams as they fell from the sky; spitting lightning that furrowed the ground.

He gave me a wry smile. 'You've seen it, haven't you. The sea of darkness that has no horizon.'

'Does it go on forever?'

'No, Chorus says that infinity stops wherever you find it. When all that you know becomes meaningless, you have found end. Or so he says. What it's really like to be out there, I can only guess. Your Sabilyne mother knows. She and her Sisters have dwelled in the darkness.' Sol refused to look directly at me. Preferring to glance back, his wonderful eyes on the sand. 'Your mother has read the book. I can only assume that she gave it to your *Mama*.'

I'd never known anyone weighing their words so carefully. Not even Scroll, when she was about to enlighten us; telling us more of her Imperial lies.

'Our universe is ancient,' he said. 'But not how it was designed to be. Not how its *makers* envisaged,' he scored a line in the sand with his finger. 'Two sides; two Verses. On one side dwells the Light. On the other there is nothing but darkness.'

Sol drew an ellipse around the centre of his line.

'A Third Verse,' he said. 'Created by darkness to put an end to light,' he stabbed his finger in the middle of the ellipse. 'The Dark Verse unleashed a force so violent and bold that its expansion could never be stopped. A final bid to destroy its ancient enemy, unaware it would expand to envelop their Verse as well. A single grain of darkness, so powerful, that even its creators could not control its expanse. The Third Verse, our universe, was the ultimate weapon to end an eternal war. It was retribution and deliverance. The promised land in which to expand. Now just another place to wage their war. Once both sides realised that the Third Verse could not be stopped, they decided to colonise. Neither willing to concede the others right to exist.'

Light began to seed the darkness with spores of illumination. The Third Verse, our universe, was seeded, or contaminated, depending on your point of view. The eternal darkness of this universe infested with stars,' he looked up. 'Billions of suns, just like our own, to shed light where none was meant to be. Their sole purpose, 'to propagate life'. A viral contamination that the Dark Stars seek to eradicate wherever it is found.'

'Is that true?' I asked.

'All great stories have grains of truth, Halfling. This one is so old, who knows? They are the facts as I know them. As Chorus has written down in your book.'

Why not? Was the tale any more ridiculous than having memories that weren't mine. An awareness and understanding of things beyond my comprehension. In a way, it made perfect sense.

'The sun,' I had no idea, I opened my hands and felt its warmth, in a different way. 'It created us, didn't it?'

'Yes,' he replied. 'Photonic genes, forged within a holocaust inferno. Then distributed upon its solar winds. I studied them in great detail during my time with Chorus.'

He turned fully and took my gaze for the first time.

'It's what happens to the embers of a fire as it crackles and spits. The ashes picked up by a passing breeze. The distribution of life is no different up there, than it is down here. The process is inexorable, its symmetry inevitable. Wherever light cracks open the darkness, the gene is spread. It saturates, permeates, and encourages conditions for change. It is a catalyst designed to initiate a cascade-event. Predicate the process we call life. Very basic, very simple; with one single aspiration . . . Evolve!'

I felt quite humble as he spoke. It was all so, *vast*. What possible part in all this could the Dreaming, and a Half-Breed like me, hope to fulfil?

'We are all built from stars,' he said. 'The sun initiates. Its gene's violate. Change is designed to propagate, and then mutate. To strive for perfection in its task.'

Task? 'What task?' I asked.

‘Consciousness,’ he said. As if it were the rarest, most valuable commodity imaginable. ‘The evolution of life has a single goal, and it will not stop until that goal is achieved.’

I must have had that vacant stare on my face again.

‘What goal?’ I asked.

‘What goal?’ I asked again.

‘To become self-aware. It won’t stop mutating until the consciousness becomes self-aware. Only then can it become weaponised, and learn how to fight against the darkness. We are involved in a war of annihilation, a fight for survival. It’s Us against Them.’

I sensed sadness in his voice. A bitter regret that it had to be this way.

‘Life isn’t a mystery, Halfling, it’s a virus. Unleashed by the stars to seed an empty void. It will never cease to evolve. Never stop learning until its knowledge conquers the darkness. In turn, the Dark Stars will not waver in their holy crusade to sanitise everything touched by the light.’

Shit . . . ‘And I’ve brought them here.’

‘You’ve shown them a path that they would have found eventually. The question is, what do we do now?’

‘Does Chorus know?’ I asked, more with hope than conviction. I didn’t like the look he returned.

‘Chorus has lost his way,’ he said. ‘I don’t think he cares too much about any of us, anymore.’

‘Then we have to make him care. *I* have to make him care.’

‘Then perhaps that is why you are so special?’ he stood and brushed the sand from his clothes. ‘Companion’s hordes are beings lost somewhere between the living and the dead. They hear nothing but the words of the Dark Star. Companion is the prophet who speaks on its behalf. Chorus knows them. Perhaps he knows their weakness, if they have one. So go to Chorus. Make your peace. What have we got to lose?’

‘Mistri said it was dangerous. That *he* is dangerous.’

‘More dangerous than a Halfling who shouts our existence across the Cosmos? Go . . .’ he said. ‘I will tell him you’re coming. But be warned, he may not care to help you. He may not care to even help himself.’

What Chorus has lost, no-one can return. What he took from Companion, can never be replaced.

What does that mean? I felt he was holding back. That there was more to this than just light and dark.

‘Chorus knows him. He knows Companion, doesn’t he?’ I was sure of it. ‘What did he take from him?’ *What is it? Tell me.*

Sol turned away.

No. He was breaking the link. *Don’t.*

‘The Druids are hunting us,’ I said. ‘We need your help.’

His pale face remained stoic as he gazed back out to sea.

‘There is no hope, not for what is to come. Read the book, Halfling. Only then will you understand. Now go. You bring nothing here but bad memories, and the opening of old wounds. If it is the fate of this world to burn, then so be it.’

‘Wait, no. Sol, no, you have to help us’

Too late, as the dunes faded from sight.

He’d broken the link.

Damn him. I leapt to my feet and kicked the ground, showering the fire with soil.

‘Do I take it the chat went well?’

‘What? No, yes, I don’t know.’

‘You’re an idiot,’ she said, and threw her arms about me. Then she punched me in the arm. ‘You took long enough,’ she scolded. ‘And you, Joss, you should never have sent him. Anything could have happened,’ she cupped my face in her hands. ‘What did happen? What did the venerable Vamp have to say? Moral platitudes no doubt. Or was it mixed metaphors without ever getting to the point?’

‘We have to go,’ I said.

‘Go? Where?’

‘The Veil.’

‘I told you, that’s a bad idea. When *he* finds out about . . . Draï, what are you doing?’

I was packing my stolen bags and leaving.

‘Joss, stop him. Fine, whatever, but do we have to go right now? I haven’t had breakfast. Oh for fuck’s sake, this is a really bad idea.’

Mistri grabbed at her things, muttering under her breath. Joran came to my side .

‘What did he tell you?’ she asked.

I threw my pack onto my horse’s back. ‘A story about the light and the dark,’ I said. *Are you worried he exposed your secret, mother?* ‘Oh, and some personal stuff,’ I paused, angry, ready to burst. ‘It’s not important,’ I said. Then saw the look on her face, and on Mistri’s too. ‘About my father,’ I said. ‘Apparently he has red eyes.’

‘Nothing else?’ Mistri asked.

‘Just the mysteries of life,’ I replied.

Joran took me in her arms. I felt her body and soul in that hug. ‘Drai,’ she whispered, ‘there’s so much I need to tell . . .’

The moment was spoiled by the sound of Mistri’s spoon being beaten on a metal cup.

‘We needs to pack our bags and get going,’ she said.

‘Yes, of course. The sooner we get there, the better.’

She wanted to tell me, I know she did. Mistri’s finger lingered towards me, as if in warning. Then she threw the spoon at me.

Don’t, she mouthed, and shook her head.

I picked up her weaponised utensil and considered throwing it back. How had I not noticed?

‘You’ve changed?’ I said, tucking the spoon in my saddle-bag. ‘Your hair?’

‘Oh, now he notices. You like?’ She still looked more likely to punch me, than receive my critique. She’d cut her hair in a sharp and edgy fashion.

Did you do it in your sleep?

‘Where did you get those clothes?’ I asked.

A black and grey shirt, tucked into tight leather trousers. Someone else’s boots, their long crisscrossed laces hugging up her shins.

‘He was about my size, and it’s been freshly laundered. Though I did have to take the shirt in a little whilst you were gone. I could have sewn a new one you took so long.’ She twirled. ‘You like it?’

I wasn’t sure. Her new clothing did suit her, but it also suggested she was older, and I didn’t want her to be. Her new look reminded me how I was growing up too fast. And how we could never go back to the way we were.

I took the spoon and walked it over to her. ‘I like,’ I said. Then whispered. ‘I should tell her I know.’

‘No, don’t.’ I felt Mistri’s hand on my own. ‘Drai, get to know her first, please. The present should decide how you feel. The past will only get in the way. Give her a chance.’

Maybe she was right. The future still held me in contempt. Certain death and oblivion, apparently. What I did know for sure, was there was no way back. Mama's death, and an angry Druid had seen to that.

I mounted my horse. Joran and Mistri stood waiting, reigns in hand. My estranged mother, and my new best friend; strange how they both looked to me now for direction.

'The Veil,' I said, and encouraged my horse to walk on.

DEATH TO THE SENATE

‘Look at them down there, squabbling like children. How do they ever get anything done.’ Hystin turned to Lor. ‘Did you ever seen anything so pathetic?’

The young Primum of the Kartach had dispensed with his ceremonial garb. His uniform was darker; less pomp, more aggression. His gloved hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

‘Are your men ready?’ Hystin asked.

‘In place and awaiting your order, Inquisitor General.’

‘Good, then consider it given.’

Primum bowed and left the royal viewing gallery. Outside he was joined by two of his fellow officers. Hystin waited until he couldn’t hear the clunk of their boots on the staircase going down. The only sound was raised voices; protest and argument, from the Imperium floor below.

Another argument amongst the Senators. A debate on the implementation of conscription throughout the Empire had finally reached the floor, and stalled, as was expected.

Hystin leant on the balcony looking down. The noise was ridiculous. The clunking gabble of the Senate Speaker being drowned out by all the voices.

Not long now. Hystin leant over the polished rail, consumed by the sight below. Powerful men jibed and sneered; vented their anger at the motion proposed.

You should have agreed when you had the chance.

The grand Imperium doors began to open.

Ah, here we go. The time is nigh.

Soldiers from the Emperor's Kartach filed into the chamber. The tramp of their boots amplified by the rotundas excellent acoustics. The sound transcending the babble of angry voices, as a hushed sense of surprise spread quickly throughout the chamber.

'What's the meaning of this?' The overweight Speaker demanded. His gavel pounding on the lectern, but lacking any authority. A wave of Senators began to call for an explanation. Demanding the removal of soldiers from the floor. Their appetite to be heard waned when dozens of elite Kartach aligned themselves in front of the Senate seats, and then stepped forward with swords drawn.

He could feel the swell of indignation, followed by the fear and uncertainty as proceedings unfurled.

Little rabbits in a snare; afraid and alone.

'Treason,' the Primum shouted. 'A plot to assassinate the Emperor is exposed.' Murmurs of shock and fear. 'My orders are to execute anyone who resists,' he gestured towards the entrance.

A band of orderlies entered and moved swiftly toward the aisles. Each one held a small pot and a brush.

'Dissent is treason,' they said, with each brush of paint.

The orderlies intent to mark every Senator in the Imperium with a bold brush of colour on their shoulder. A sword placed to the throat of any who objected too loudly. It was over in minutes.

Primum Lor issued further instructions. 'Yellow will proceed in an orderly manner to the southern exit. Blue through the Imperium doors. White will remain and be seated.'

More Kartach filed into position outside the doorways, as a lone voice was raised from the back benches. A singular tone that paused the gait of frightened and angry men.

'On whose authority are these actions taken? The Emperor has no right to impeach the sanctity of this Imperium.'

The orator was an old man; his words gained muted support as the exodus paused.

‘Inquisitor General,’ he called out, and all eyes followed his up to the royal gallery. ‘Stop this, I beg you.’ Normally a quiet and unassuming man, he stood with the aid of a stick. His shoulder brushed with white paint. ‘Inform the Emperor that only loyal men sit in his Senate.’

Hystin raised his hands to calm the aged Senator.

‘The Emperor knows who is loyal,’ he said calmly. *Look at you all, allowing yourselves to be corralled like cattle. You’re pathetic.* The sense of power was intoxicating. ‘Under the powers entrusted to me through the Imperial office of Inquisitor General. I hereby *dissolve* this Senate.’

A collective wave of disbelief was intermingled with protest, jeers and name-calling.

‘Investigations into Senate members will be thorough,’ Hystin called down, and motioned for the proceedings to continue. The Kartach ushered the reluctant members. Force being used where necessary to shepherd them down to their designated exits.

‘It is done, Master.’ Hystin glanced behind, and then along the gallery, that was empty. *You’re here. I can feel your presence.* Most unnerving, but also exciting.

How easy it had been. With one scribble of the pen he’d ordered the Senate’s dissolution. With a dab of a brush he’d branded them. Removed all opposition to his master’s plans.

White could be allies, their loyalty yet to be tested. Blue would be encouraged to support the new regime. Given the choice to accept or withdraw, though he would hardly recommend the latter. It was the brush of the yellow bristles that marked out the enemies of the state. There were many. He’d made a few additions of his own. All those that raised sufficient objection to himself, or his Clerics. It was satisfying to know that none of them would leave the building with their heads still attached.

The moment was gratifying. His senses keen to proceedings.

Odd, how I’ve not noticed before. The architecture of the Imperium, it was stunning. A discoidal forum. One hundred and thirty raised seats, held within a semi-circular pattern. All eyes towards the open marble floor, and

the Speaker's dais. Seating below for the eight clerks who did most of the work.

The pillars of sobriety; isn't that what you're called? You really are quite impressive. Huge drums that reached high above the Senators, each one set upon a grand pedestal, and topped with ornate capitals. *What does it mean?* He studied the carvings. Each one different. And the wide frieze that circled the ceiling. He felt a sense of history that hadn't touched him before.

Is this your influence, Master? I can feel myself changing. How mighty those obelisks were that shouldered the weight of the great rotunda. A huge glass dome set in the Imperium roof.

Impressive, but I have a few improvements in mind. He could almost see them. Long banners draped from the edges of the dome. Wide reliefs carved into the face of the pillars. *Yes, and I think we should have new apparel tailored for the Senators. Black for those who wholeheartedly support. Something different for the others. It will encourage them to support the new Order.*

Even the sun smiled down on him through the vaulted glass above. Divine recognition of the purge. Yes, I can see it, Master. He understood the new direction. Was able to comprehend the enormity of his Master's plan.

Hystin smiled.

'It's a perfect day,' he said, gazing over his shoulder. *I know you're here, somewhere.* 'By the time the sun rises tomorrow, the Druid influence will be a distant memory. This is the dawn of a new age, Master. All hail the Nazdi,' he shouted. Oblivious to those Senators who remained. All eyes now fixed on the gallery as he began to laugh out loud.

Mistri seemed pleased at the prospect of having a price put on her head. She was certain we'd be wanted across half the Empire within the week. Her self-proclaimed value increasing each time she found occasion to mention it. I found the notion a constant reminder that I was a fugitive, and an outlaw.

But in a strange way it gave me a sense of self-worth and identity. It gave me direction, and I knew which road to find it. A place called the Veil.

'Where are we?' I asked.

I'd never travelled this far from home. Seven days and eight nights away from Boundary, travelling fast, our horses weary. They couldn't go much longer.

'Mistri, I can see houses?' I patted my horse, and she shook her head. *I won't ask much more, I promise.* Her breathing had become increasingly awkward over the last day. I knew I was killing her. 'Is it a safe place to stop?'

'Padell's Pastures,' she said. 'And they're not buildings. It's a kind of temple you can see in the distance.'

'Let's camp the night there,' I said.

'It's not safe to stay too long,' she replied.

'If my horse dies, I'll be on foot. How safe will that be?'

'Fine, we'll camp for the night. But we leave before sun-up.'

'Agreed.'

Her mount looked no healthier than mine. But the truth was, it was a ruse. I wanted Joran to find rest somewhere other than in her saddle. She looked so weary. The journey was hardest on her. Had she turned up one day looking as she did, I wouldn't have recognised her.

‘Hey, stop staring at her,’ Mistri said in a hush. ‘She’ll pretend she’s okay, and insist we carry on.’

‘She needs a doctor.’

‘She needs rest, that’s all. It takes more than a dust up with a Druid and his sidekick to put that old-girl down,’ she smiled, then pointed. ‘An hour till we get to the Rings, that’s all. We’ll get a fire going.’

A *fire*? I liked the sound of that. It had been four days since we’d eaten anything hot, and the nights out here were chilly.

As we got closer, the more astonished I became. Not buildings, but great chunks of stone formed in giant rings, each formed well within the other. Four rings from what I could see.

‘What are they?’ I asked. I’ve never seen anything like them.’

‘Ley Stones,’ said Joran.

She came trotting up beside us, the horse’s reigns draped over its neck. Her hands otherwise engaged in pulling her hair back into a tail. Was she feeling better? Or feigning to make *me* feel better?

‘Ley Stones?’ I asked.

‘The Auristans raised them here to act as a guide.’

‘A guide?’

‘To their Gods. They believe the land is as alive as the wind. As powerful as the sea. You can’t always see it, the land is never still. The Auristans built rings like these to mark the places where they believe its currents coincide.’

‘So, like a temple?’

‘Of sorts.’

I could see the Veil on the horizon, still two day’s ride to reach the mountains from here. The only structure on this flat land were these stones. They seemed welcoming.

‘We agreed to stop here,’ I said.

‘No arguments about it,’ Mistri added. ‘I’m knackered, and so is my horse.’

‘It’s a good place,’ she said.

I slipped from my horse to help Joran slide down from her saddle. The weariness of our journey more than obvious as she stood there, her head rested on the fender, the billet strap clasped in her hand. I'd not known her so subdued nor fragile. How much had her magic taken from her back there at the bridge? It's just a short walk,' I said, taking her reigns as well as mine. 'Just until we reach the stones.'

She nodded and held out her hand. For some reason I paused, enough for her to withdraw it and step away from her horse.

'Here, let me help.' *Why didn't I take her hand?* I had it now, but she must have noticed. 'We'll light a fire as soon as we get there. Eat something hot for a change. Get you well again.'

'Is it wise to light a fire?'

I pointed to our watching friend.

'Our presence isn't a secret. Beside, fire keeps the wolves away,' I said. 'How do you build something like that?' I asked, just to change the conversation. 'Those stones are massive. How could you even move them?' I felt her arm link through mine and I was happy to help her walk.

It was nice just to talk, the two of us. It made me realise how much things had changed between us since Boundary. Since one mother had died, and another had been found.

Mistri was right. All I needed to know about this woman was right in front of me. She'd proven herself by coming to find me. By risking her life to save mine. Ours was a relationship that could be redeemed, I was sure of it. Reset in a fashion that would serve us both. I was happy to feel her weight on my arm. It was best not to dwell too much on what may, or may not be. If the past had taught me one lesson, it was the future was uncertain. A blind alley to be walked with care.

'They mark Ley-Lines,' she said. 'The Auristans believe our world bristles with hidden energy that rises up from the Underworld. It's invisible, and vigorous, just like the wind. Places like this can be found all over Aurista. The Auristans make pilgrimage to the stones. And they gather at certain times of the year to welcome astrological change.'

'They worship their Gods here?'

‘They don’t have Gods as we know them. They believe more in the spirit of things. It’s not so much praying to, as harmonising with. The Stones are a place to find union within nature. They believe this world to be the Mother of all life. That She’s a living, breathing, organism. The Lines are like veins that circulate Her energy. They help to harmonise the seasons.’

‘Tell me more about them, the Auristans.’

‘There’s a lot to tell.’

I saw the glint return to her eyes as she said it; as she smiled.

‘Where to start?’ she said. ‘I suppose you have to try and understand, that Auristan society is more of a service than a practise.’ She was walking taller now. ‘They strive to connect with the living world,’ she said. ‘They believe that men, women and children, are the only link between the land and the sky. That they must always be ready to service *Her* needs. The Auristans are a passive and peaceful people by nature.’

‘So why does the Empire vilify them?’

‘Because they’ve become ideologically opposed. The Auristans believe the Empire has reached an age of isolation. That its people have lost their connection to the natural world. That it’s material needs have become their political and military dogmas.’

So many years of war, Draï. It’s turned both sides into an aggressor. A squabble for land has become a war of attrition, with atrocities enacted by both sides.’

‘Are we so different we can’t find peace?’

‘The differences are profound, and all around us. Look, you see the mountains of the Veil in the distance. To an Auristan child those mountains can shape a destiny; just by the awe they inspire.’

The only awe inspired in a child of the Empire, is the kind that can be mined from below them. The very ground beneath our feet was once pasture-land. This entire province was famed for its meadows of fireweed. The land undulating between the Veil and Boundary.

‘But it’s flat and dry. How could that be?’

‘These were sacred burial lands before the Empire came, and brought the first Pioneers. Families who scraped away the natural beauty from its

surface. A practise called 'Scouring'. Scratching the surface of the soil to find precious stones below. This ground was murdered within a generation. Cold and calculating, and with profit in mind. It funded an Empire.

This region was where the war started. Stolen away by the first Emperor from the indigenous tribes. Scoured by pioneers, and then given to their neighbouring tribes, the Naribs, in reward for their support during the conflict. It was a land-grab, pure and simple. Who knew then that it would take us to where we are now?'

'Apologies for interrupting the history lesson, but I'm going to ride out and see what *he* wants.'

We both followed Mistri's outstretched arm.

'I'll deal with him,' she said.

By the look on her face I felt justified in worrying what that meant.

'No,' Joran said, 'leave him be.' She walked towards the edge of the circle to better see.

'What's he doing?' I asked.

'Watching.'

'He's a danger. I should go out there.'

'No, Mistri. He's made no attempt to hide himself. Let him be.'

'And if he's a scout for the Druids?' Mistri looked to me for consent. 'I can make him go away,' she said.

What does that mean?

'He's a Narib, Drai. We don't want to make enemies of them.'

My friend wheeled her horse with discontent.

'You seem very sure he's not an agent of the enemy. Do you know something we don't?'

I looked at Joran, and she refused my gaze. *You do know something, don't you?* I was sure there was something Joran wasn't telling us.

I spent what was left of the light admiring the grandeur of the stones. The toil involved in their cutting, let alone their transportation. The effort of those who'd erected them was as monolithic as the Rings themselves.

Forty-two tall stones, that made up the two outer-rings. Eighty-six smaller stones, barely taller than me. These inner-circles were less imposing, but even more interesting. They had writing scribed into their surface. Chiselled with precision. The symbols meticulously cut.

Strange shapes that I knew were writings, but I couldn't read. I felt, as I ran my fingers across their surface, they were the story of a people, being told across an eon. A lost race from another time. Their circles left to confound us. I noticed the sun had set between the two tallest stones from the direction we'd entered. The great orb going down, and as I stretched out my arms between the two sides, I realised they were perfect opposites. The sun came up between the tallest stones to my left, and set to my right. If I'd stood on the altar at the centre of the stones, I could have passed the sun's energy, through my body, and out through the other side. Towards the big star just above my hand.

'Are you pretending to be a kite?'

I span on my heels to see a large figure. The dwindling sun kept my eyes from seeing his face.

'They say these stones are a thousand years old. Perhaps older, who knows?'

I could see Mistri and Joran still unpacking the horses. I thought of calling for help. But if he'd wanted to hurt me, then I reasoned he'd have done so already.

'Who are you?' I asked.

I recognised the tight locks of a nomad's hair. I'd seen them from that rooftop in Boundary. Tied together in a singular strand as long as his back. Beirdin's bones, he was a big man.

His lower arms tattooed with complex and intricate patterns. His neck and chest wore thin rings in a concentric pattern; just like the stones.

'You're the Narib who's been watching us.' I could see his campfire still burning in the distance. I took a step back. 'What do you want?'

'If I meant you harm, boy. It would already be done.'

'And if you'd tried you'd be lying face down in the dirt,' said Mistri. 'My blade stuck in your, I have to concede, ruggedly handsome face.'

Handsome?

He didn't seem too impressed by her threat.

Handsome?

'Your little vixen she moves like a cat, with three legs. Tell her I'll cut off her tail and hang it from my arse if she doesn't put her knife down.'

'It's a sword,' she said. 'And how about I stick my tail up your . . .'

' . . . That's enough,' I said. 'What do you want here?'

'Tell the woman to come out,' he pointed to the stones on my left. 'Come out where I can see you, old woman.'

Old woman? Was he spoiling for a fight?

The Narib had two swords. One curved and strapped across his back. The other, much slimmer, hung from a belt as thick as my hand. And though I didn't take much from his stoic stare, I was more than sure he was able to back up his threats. I gestured to Joran to join us, and wondered if there was anyone else out there who could sneak up on me.

Old woman? I took his pint as she stepped out from behind one of the stones. This wasn't how I knew her. The uniform, her hair; the knife in her hand. *You look so tired, mother.*

Mother? I'd called her by her real name. *Oh Mama, you should have told me.* I felt all the guilt return. I didn't want this, and I didn't want either of them getting hurt.

'Put your blades down,' I said. 'He's not looking for a fight.'

I glared at Mistri to comply. The girl, now woman, with her new and somewhat crazed look. She only had eyes for him. The rugged, *handsome*, Narib. He looked like he could wrestle a bear, and win. Dark eyed, and unshaven; a face that growled. Like Derlin, he dominated the space about him. And despite there being little trust in those eyes, I felt no threat was intended.

‘Explain yourself,’ Joran insisted. ‘Why have you come to our camp unannounced?’

‘I come with truce, to speak plain words.’

‘I get the feeling they’re all you’d understand.’

‘Mistri, that’s not helpful.’ *Don’t look at me like that.* ‘Consider your truce in place,’ I said, whist scowling at my friend. ‘Lower your blade,’ I insisted.

‘I come with a message from the Korma.’

‘The Korma?’ Joran sounded surprised. ‘What tribe are you?’

‘I am Sewa’Orta,’ he said with pride. ‘I am all tribes, and yet I am none.’

‘Well, that explains everything . . .’

‘. . . Mistri, that’s enough.’

‘My Korma offers his hospitality and invites you to join him.’

‘How nice,’ said Mistri, ‘we’ll think about it. Now on your way, before my patience, which has no patience, becomes impatient.’

She seemed surprised that we were all looking at her.

‘The girl talks too much,’ he said.

I scolded her with my firmest glare. *Really, handsome?* I couldn’t help but stare at him. If I ever wore such a powerful frame, I wouldn’t wear a shirt either.

The ink on his body intrigued me. Four hundred tiny squares in the sleeve about his lower right arm. Forty-one rings around his left. *Why Forty-one? What does that mean?* And the bold aggressive patterns that intermingled on his chest and neck; all so precise and measured. *Do they have a mystical meaning?* I wanted to take a closer look.

‘Pack your things and come with me now,’ he said.

‘Why the hurry? Don’t I get a kiss before a date?’

He appeared as impressed with her mocking wit as I.

‘There are riders less than half a day from here,’ he added.

‘No, that’s impossible,’ Mistri argued, ‘we’ve not stopped.’

‘They’re tracking you with spare horses. Changing mounts every few hours. By morning they’ll be less than ten leagues from here.’

We all exchanged glances at his statement.

‘How do you know,’ Mistri sounded doubtful. ‘Come to think of it, how did *you* know we were here?’

‘This is Narib land. We see all who trespass upon it. Especially dogs who wear black.’

‘Black? Do you mean a Druid?’ I’d almost allowed myself to believe we were free of his influence. ‘Are you sure?’ *Yes, of course you are.*

‘What makes you think they’re chasing us? What would a Druid want with a widow and two orphaned children?’ Mistri lied. ‘We’ve come to the Pastures to see the stones, that’s all.’

‘I don’t know why he trails you. But you have a substantial price on your heads.’

‘How substantial?’ She asked.

The Narib pointed at me.

‘For him, a lot. For you, I couldn’t buy a new string for my bow,’ he took a small box from a large pouch that hung from his belt. He offered it to Joran. ‘I’m told you will understand its meaning.’

‘Is it a ring? Is it? Ooh, can I have one?’

The Narib was right, Mistri did talk too much. I was more interested in what he’d given Joran, as she cautiously opened its lid. Then lifted her eyes to me, then to him. She closed it.

‘Your offer is accepted. Do you have a name?’

‘Orath,’ he said. ‘I’m first among the Sewa’Orta.’

‘Orath?’ she looked impressed. ‘I’ve heard of you.’

‘And I’ve heard tales of you, Forest Witch.’ He looked at me. ‘You are Draï, Child of the Dreaming. And you, girl, I don’t know you.’

Which went down well. But now that we’d all been introduced, I wanted to know what he’d given her?

‘What’s in the box?’ I asked.

‘Opportunity,’ Joran replied. ‘Mistri, saddle the horses, we’re leaving,’ she gestured politely for Orath to walk with her. Then raised a hand to ward me from following.

I glared after them. Then offered my help to prepare the horses.

‘I should be with them,’ I said, throwing the saddle over my horse. ‘I’m not a child to be excluded.’

‘Are you sulking?’ Mistri asked. ‘Because that’s not proving your point.’

‘Hey, whose side are you on?’

‘Yours, always, but there are times when you have to let Joss take the lead. Trust her, Draí. Finding the best way forward is something she’s good at.’

Fine, whatever. ‘What do you think they’re talking about? And what was in that box?’

She pulled sharply on her girth strap. ‘I have no idea,’ she said. ‘But Handsome over there looks uncomfortable with the witch, don’t you think?’

He kept his distance from her, listening as she spoke. Making the occasional nod of his head.

There was a familiarity about that man; I’d felt it the moment I’d realised his presence. And then it came to me.

‘The Painted Man,’ I said.

‘The who?’

The Mercian woman? I should have remembered. Her words unsettling, but clear in my head.

“You’ll be sought out by the Painted Man.” she’d said.

Who else could it be?

“The healer and the warrior,” she’d told me.

I hadn’t a clue what she’d meant at the time. But now I realised it had come to pass. The Painted Man and the Healer, together, talking by the altar.

‘Draí, what’s going on in that head of yours?’

‘Nothing,’ I lied.

Ten minutes later we were in the saddle again; Joran, Mistri, and I, following the Painted Man.

The Lurqer's horse snorted its disapproval at the way he hauled on its reins. Legs outstretched, hooves scrabbling to slow and stop the powerful animal. A cloud of dust overtaking them.

'What news?' Narcista asked.

'They've been seen a few leagues inside the border of the plains.'

'Then we're close. Are there any farms near here?' asked Horbin. 'We need fresh horses.'

The Lurqer nodded. 'There's a village on the other side of that hill. Supplies and horses.'

'And what of the reward?' Narcista asked. 'Flashed by lantern to all outposts last night. Riders were sent to more rural locations.'

'You stipulated no payment unless captured alive? Good.' He turned in his saddle. Eight of the Warden's finest men had ridden out with them. Dressed in civilian clothes. An ample covering of dust from a hard ride. He wanted them to blend in, should the need arise. 'Twenty minutes,' he ordered. 'Water your horses, and yourselves.'

The Lurqer turned his horse on its back legs, then urged it away at a gallop.

'They're heading for the Veil,' he said.

'The Veil? Why?'

'I don't know. But I do know we have two legions there. We'll be able to send out patrols. Horbin, I didn't ask; how are the others?'

Horbin dismounted.

'Able didn't survive his wounds,' he said. 'Hera will live. Castlin wanted to come, but he'd be a liability with his injuries. The surgeon said a week,

maybe less,' he paused. 'Your Cleric friend had less than a handful of bones left unbroken.'

'Unfortunate for him. It will be difficult to replace your men. They've proved themselves loyal.'

'Is it true?' Horbin asked.

'Is what true?'

'What the Warden's men were saying about that girl?'

'And what did the Warden's men say?'

Horbin sipped from his water-sac. Narcista noting the concern in his voice.

'That she rose from the dead?'

'The dead do not rise,' he said.

'Patron, I saw that girl fall thirty feet. That leaves injuries at best. The surgeon who stored her body was adamant that she'd parted from this world. She didn't look very dead, or injured, on that bridge.'

'Yes, I find that interesting, don't you?'

'With respect, Patron. No, I don't. Able's dead, and Hera had to be sown back together because of that bitch and her kids.' His hand slid to the hilt of his sword. 'They took us by surprise last time. Next time I intend to take them down.'

Horbin wanted blood; he understood that. *Time, Captain. We'll discuss it when the wounds aren't so fresh.* 'I understand. But I want that boy alive.'

Horbin nodded. 'Do we know anything about the woman?'

'The Warden's agent's say she's a healer.'

'A healer? No,' Horbin was shaking his head. 'She's a witch.' He turned to the men behind. 'Ask any of them what we should do with a witch?'

'You want to burn her?'

'I'll light the fire myself.' Horbin put his foot in the stirrup, then levered himself into the saddle. 'They killed your Cleric, don't you want them to answer for that?'

'We're going to run them down, Captain. What you do with the others is of no concern to me. But we're taking that boy, *alive.*' He kicked his horse to move on.

AND SO IT BEGINS

My backside ached, and I had a pain in my leg. But I kept pace with Orath, his tight bound hair whipping about like a dog's wagging tail as he rode hard; he had somewhere to be, and was keen to get us there.

I felt an aura around this *Painted Man*. It was difficult not to admire the art so carefully inked onto his body. The serious lines that swept from his neck down. The powerful symbols inscribed on his sleeves. The sword well strapped to his back. I wondered if a man could be any more perfect in physique and bearing. I was also aware that Mistri watched him, and wondered if her mocking behaviour was her way of flirting.

Handsome?

I felt scrawny by comparison. Anyway, he was too old for her. I eased my horse's pace, and began to drop back. Joran was not so hurried, so now neither was I. Besides, a son should ride with his mother.

'That's it,' Joran said, pointing to the mountain ridge ahead. 'You see where the cloud masks the peek. That's the Torta, and below it is the entrance.'

'How do we get through?' I asked.

A line of mountains stretched as far as my eyes could see, and in both directions.

'There's a pass, just through there. On the other side is the Veil, and then the open plains.'

In single-file, our small band slowed to walking pace. Ahead of us the rocks opened and led us deep into the pass. The high precipice on both sides would be daunting even for a goat to climb. The ground wild with thin grass, and rocks the size of fists strewn in abundance.

I was surprised, and then in awe of what lay at the end of the pass. Between the cliffs, and through the hollows, was a wall built in stone. Another marvel of ingenuity and toil, that showed its age. A fortification that stretched the entire width of the mountain pass, and then up into the rocks. Tall towers at steady intervals between the wall's crenelations; like teeth running its length.

I felt humble as we rode towards it. As I gazed up at the ruined ramparts, and imagined murderous arrows falling from above. I had more than an uncomfortable feeling as we rode towards its gates, the likes of which I'd never seen. A portal as tall as a city building, and twice as wide. It was a wonder to me, that they could ever be opened and closed.

Whatever horrors these ramparts had seen, they were long past. The fortifications were old, and in disrepair; broken and fallen. And there was stillness in the air. A lack of atmosphere that set itself against the drama of the cliffs above. This was a place that had seen conflict and death on a tragic scale.

I had to twist and turn to look up at the arch though which we'd passed. One door intact, the other fallen, it's hinges rusted in place. Inspiring enough, but then I saw the giant reliefs, half man and half animal. Two on either side. Long since carved from the rock-face in homage to the Gods. But not my Gods. I'd never seen such images before.

'These mountains used to be the border of Aurista,' Joran told me. 'This was the farthest reaches of their lands.'

‘It’s incredible,’ I said.

At the foot of the rocks I saw the ruins of houses made from stone, their roofs long since fallen. The remains of fires scorched deep into their walls. There were grave-markers too, but not for individuals. Mass graves. I watched as Orath raised his hand to his forehead and made the sign of the dead.

‘What happened here?’ I asked.

‘The Empire,’ Joran replied. ‘War is how empires expand.’

It wasn’t what I’d expected. Truth was, I was glad to leave it behind. As inspiring as it was, I had an ill-feeling about the place

Beyond the hollow ring of granite was a peaceful vista that rolled away from us in all directions. A green and lush land filled with hills and valleys. I heard the sound of water.

‘Over there,’ I followed Joran’s hand. ‘is where the garrison would get its water.’

A tall waterfall, free-falling down the rock face.

‘And there; that’s where we’re going. The Torta.’

So much bigger now, and standing alone. I’d thought it a part of the precipice we left behind. I was pleased to see trees again. Their canopies filled with the colours of blossom, their sweet smell reminding me of home. Our small house above the valley. I wondered if I’d ever see it again.

A hollow screech drew my attention upward, to a blue and cloudless sky, and the broad wings of a giant bird soaring above. Its long wings outstretched, the bird gliding gracefully. Its head stooped as it searched for food.

‘That’s an eagle,’ Joran seemed pleased at its sight.

‘Welcome to the Veil.’ Orath seemed pleased at my appetite for my surroundings. ‘This is my home,’ he said, and then pointed. ‘As the old woman said. My Lord waits for us there.’

A lone mountain, perhaps half-a-days ride. Its slopes broad and steep. The only cloud I could see seemed to hang around its summit.

What lay between the mountain and us was a paradise to behold. An oasis bathed in warm sunshine. I was glad to leave the melancholy of the pass behind. And all the land that preceded it.

Was this was how the Pastures once looked?

I began to realise the crime that had been committed against the land beyond the pass.

It was three hours before we finally dismounted.

‘We walk from here,’ Orath said. ‘It’s a short distance. My Lord is waiting.’

It was more of a climb than a walk. A steep and narrow path to a small plateau. “A city of awnings,” was how he’d described what we’d find. “The Narib tribes are settled on the southern slopes of the sacred mountain,” he’d said. I didn’t know why we couldn’t ride in the front way. Joran would have preferred that too. I held out my hand to her when I could.

I’d never seen a mountain, let alone climbed one. And a sacred one too. Its virgin slopes covered in wispy grass, broken by crags and clefts that jutted out with dramatic effect, and left the whitish-grey rocky surface. And then there was the cloud, that hung too low for the sky, but lingered around the mountain to conceal the summit high above.

‘Drai, wait.’ Joran took my arm.

‘We’re nearly there,’ I said.

‘Something’s wrong,’ she said.

Mistri had drawn her dagger. ‘If he’s lied to us . . .’

Orath was only yards ahead, and had stopped.

‘Whats wrong?’ I called to him, then double-timed up the narrow path to join him. ‘What’s wrong?’ I asked again, and followed his gaze.

‘This can’t be right,’ he said. ‘Something’s happened,’ he was off, running down the slope; moving fast. I wondered if I should follow.

‘Wait, Drai.’ Joran held my arm, her words on laboured breath

‘Where’s he going?’ Mistri asked. ‘What did you say to him?’

I ignored her; the sweeping landscape below began to make sense. I was seeing now what Orath had recognised instantly. ‘They’re gone,’ I said.

Hundreds of scorch marks. The residue of camp-fires. The scattered remains of Orath's, "City of awnings".

Faint wisps of smoke to be seen.

'Those are burnt out tents. Should we go after him?' Mistri added.

The tents had been torched deliberately. But the skins of the dead animals had been too stubborn to burn, defying the flames. Their frames half-eaten by fire but still standing. Something terrible had happened here.

What is it?' I asked. Joran stopped me from following her inside one of the tents. She looked troubled.

'Don't go inside.'

'Why, what's in there?'

'Don't go in any of them,' said Mistri. 'There are still people inside.'

I took a moment to process her words. Then realised the gravity of the statement. How could anyone do such a thing. It sickened me. As did the smell now because I knew what it was that had burned.

'This was no battle,' said Mistri. 'There are no bodies; no weapons.'

'That leaves murder,' said Joran. 'Where's Orath?' she asked.

I pointed towards the remains of what had been an enormous canopy. The main structure half burned, but its outer roof still stood. 'He went in there,' I said, and followed.

'No, Draï, wait.'

I ignored my mother and lifted the flap.

Whoever had tried to torch this structure hadn't waited around to ensure it was fully ablaze. The smell was foul as I entered the empty outer chambers. I caught my breath at the entrance to the main arena. I pulled back the flap to see the roof partially burned away, its blackened edges flapping with the breeze.

Dear Gods! Not what I'd expected. Dead men piled at its centre. *Look at them all.* I cringed at the sight of the poor souls, many half-burned, the skin on their faces shrivelled by heat. There were legs jutting up, hands clawed and reaching out. Dozens of men struck down by the arrows buried deep in their flesh. The chaos and fear of their last moments captured in their pose;

still present in their eyes. Terror, frozen forever in their faces. It had been an execution of the most calculated kind.

‘Orath?’ He was knelt in front of a man sat in a huge chair, as if posed to mock him. A crown of sticks on his head, his eyes open and gazing. It seemed his final act had been to call out to let his Gods know of his demise.

Orath had the dead man’s hand in his own. He was speaking in whispers. Then my feet nearly left the ground as he roared a sound so angered, I needed no interpretation. A howl he directed up towards the sky, through the open roof. He intended his Gods to hear. Perhaps to warn them, that the man on the throne must not be denied. I had no doubt that they should listen.

There were far too many bodies to bury, so they were left to scavenging animals that would soon pick them clean. Only one man received his proper rites, as Orath wrapped his Korma in whatever he could that would burn. I watched the flames from his body rise with growing intensity, and in a colour that surprised me.

The man-mountain knelt before the pyre, a short blade in his hands.

‘What’s he doing?’ I asked. I wanted to stop him. ‘Should we do something?’

He took the blade to his hair and began to saw the sharp edge through each individual lock. ‘Why?’ I asked. When so painstakingly grown and woven over the years? ‘What’s he doing?’

‘Making his failure public,’ said Joran. ‘Marking himself so that every other Narib can see his shame. It’s what they do to criminals.’

‘But why? What shame; I don’t understand. Stop him.’

She didn’t want to look anymore.

‘He was the first amongst his tribe, Drai. Sworn to protect his Korma; his friend. He was absent when they murdered him. He lives, but his Lord doesn’t. The only thing he’ll live for now, is revenge.’

‘Tell him, it’s not his fault.’

I wanted to stop him as the lengthy tails dropped to the ground one by one, his hair already mutilated with the sawing action of his blade. I got to my feet but was tugged back.

‘Leave him, Drai,’ Joran cautioned. ‘It’s his custom, not ours. From this day on he’ll pray to his Gods for the right of revenge, on whoever did this? You saw that woman on the wheel?’ she asked.

God’s teeth. The memory turned my guts. *What could she have done to deserve . . . ?*

‘Well, he’ll do far worse than that when he finds them. Whoever did this had best hope for a quick death. Revenge will be the spirit that guides his fate now.’

‘But it wasn’t his fault. Mistri, do something. It’s not fair.’

‘After everything you’ve been through, and you still don’t get it?’ she replied. ‘Drai, life doesn’t understand the concept of fairness.’

‘But . . .’ She was right of course. What had fairness got to do with anything? Maybe Kings and Princes had choices, but in this life, for people like us, things just happened. ‘Where will he go?’

‘The last thing his Korma told him to do, was find us. He’ll tell us why, when he’s ready. I think Orath’s fate has just been bound with ours.’

Fate?

It seemed I could no more avoid fate, than I could my next step. From here on in, I supposed, we would all have to live with its consequence.

I walked away from the others to find a place that was quiet. Then sat on a rock with only the wind to keep me company, whilst I gazed up at the mighty Torta; the great mountain. Stared up at that damn rock until it hurt my eyes.

It was the first time since Mama had passed that I'd stopped to think clearly about what had happened. And what was yet to come. Somewhere inside of the Torta my destiny awaited. As did a man named Chorus.

I was a fugitive hunted by Druids, and every resource at their command. One of their Order had made it personal: the Druid Narcista. I'd shared his mind. I understood what drove him. I knew he would never stop coming for me.

And what of the Vampyrai, out there somewhere? Strange creatures who lurked in my shadows. Their blood mixed with mine. I knew that they readied for a greater conflict than their war with the Empire. I had no idea what I could do to help.

And then there were the Sisters. Two times they had come to me now, with their promises, and lies. *Sisters?* They were my Aunties. I shared their blood too. That is, if they had any?

Most important of all, I had a friend who refused to die. And a new found mother who was *so* afraid to share the truth.

I thought of Derlin; still out there, somewhere. The mighty warrior who'd tried, and failed, to be the man Mama and I had wanted him to be.

I swear that squeezed between these thoughts, and the ache in my head, I could hear the sounds of the waves again. Rushing in against the shore, their impetus lost on the sand, then dragged helplessly back to rejoin the sea. Their persistent motion harassing, mutilating, always changing the

shape of the land. It was impossible not to compare my life with its cyclic ebb and flow.

It seemed that with all the talk of prophecies, I had been fulfilling one of my own. As the aching settled and the mist of confusion parted, I saw her as clearly as the mountain above. I saw the Mercian woman as though she passed right in front of me, young and attractive yet aged and frightening. She'd started all this, with her unique brand of storytelling. She'd foretold the healer, the warrior. I could see now that I'd even found a Painted Man. And they were just the half of it.

My new found bloodline, and the attention of the Druid Order; both thrust me towards the heart of a war between the great powers, the Empire and Aurista. I could also see how they must ally themselves towards a greater threat. Somehow combat Companion and his Hordes.

A new Star was coming to our sky. A Dark Star on a gruesome crusade, to eradicate all life.

It was too overwhelming. Instead, I considered the here and now. Surely it was enough to worry about what tomorrow might bring. And whether we were ready to face it? I looked at my companions . . . At my new-found family.

Joran was tired; drained. The effort at the bridge still too much. She'd risked everything to have me, and then even more to let me go. I knew how she yearned to rekindle the lost bond between mother and child. For which I wasn't ready, not yet.

I looked at Mistri, a stone's throw below me. Sat sharpening her blade. The warrior girl; my friend and protector. The girl who refused to die. I liked her in a way I was unable to describe. I *felt* her. I hoped that one day she may feel the same.

Our newest companion, Orath. He hadn't moved since he'd cut his hair. The funeral pyre of his Lord smouldered, it's flames gone. The man still knelt, praying. A warrior cut and bruised, and set adrift from the world he'd known. He had nothing left, but his oath to the dead.

It seemed none of us had survived the Mercian's vision intact. All the lives we'd lived, were now well gone. Cut away and lost in time. Not one of

us would dare to predict what the new day would bring. Only where it would take us. For as sure as the sun would rise, we would climb the mountain's summit. Find a way in behind its rocks.

I wanted to meet the one named, Chorus. He had secrets and magic, I had no doubt. I would make him care. I would make him help us.

So was all this Prophecy or Fate? I couldn't tell one from the other. Nor did I intend to try. The journey ahead of us would be long, and brutal, I had no doubt.

I had to stop thinking, it was giving me a headache.

NEXT.

Diary of a God: Extinction