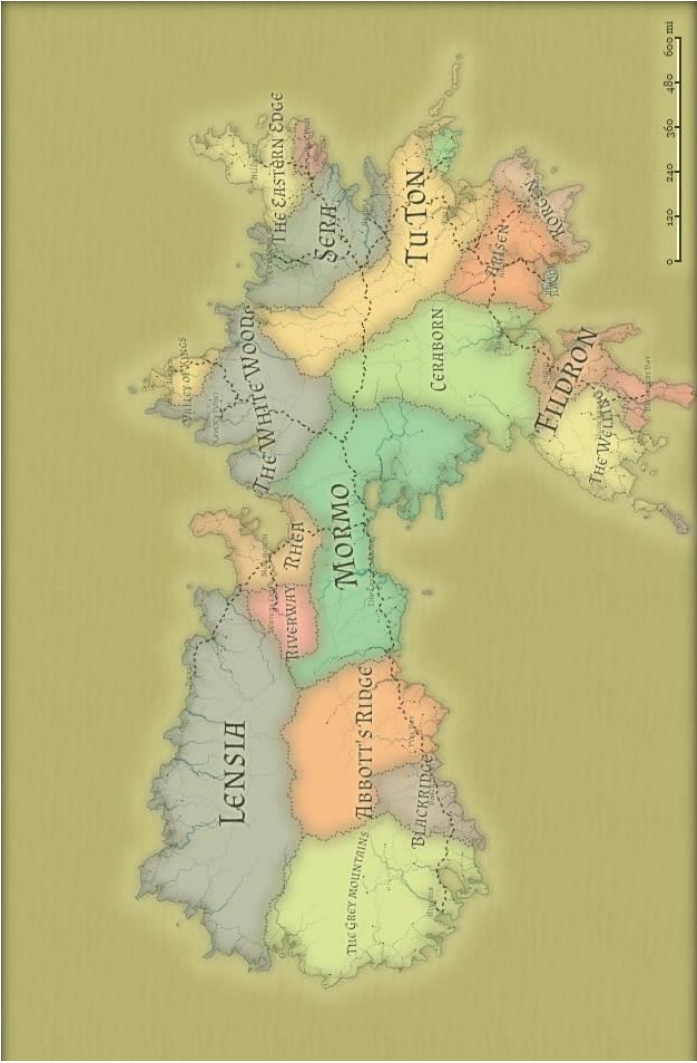


The Fires of Cerran

Dedicated to Charlotte Morris, the girl who made me
believe I could do this.

AJ Collins



Prologue

Looking out from the parapet, with the morning sun rising across to the East, and the grass covered in a thin layer of morning dew, Lord Commander Assan Maar inhaled a long and thoughtful breath. To either side of him stood fifty archers, spanning across the entire expanse of the Northern Wall of Erengon. Behind them, standing ready against the cool morning breeze, an infantry of 12,000 men stood in perfect rank, bolstered by cavalry which now were pushed against the raised drawbridge. In the silence Maar now turned and looked down to his men.

'On this day, with the will of the Gods and strength of our souls, we shall take what is ours. We shall amend the atrocities which have bled these lands dry and we will begin a new, true Kingdom!' He proclaimed, his low voice echoing around the court, his words carried by the wind and flying off into the distance like birds in Spring. Beside him stood his most trusted advisors, three Lords of the West who had come to this man in hope of victory against the Crown. The men roared in mighty unity, and the sound of boots smashing hard into the stone ground beneath them reverberated around Erengon like no sound had done before. Maar smiled, his long auburn hair fluttered softly as the wind began to pick up and in the distance the sound of drumming finally began to arrive.

'They are here, My Lord.' Castor Asmara said through gritted teeth, his gaze never faltering from the

horizon. Maar turned to face him and putting a heavy hand on his shoulder he shook him slightly.

'This day shall be remembered until the end of days my friend. Your children will sing songs of you, and so will their children and so on.' Maar said gladly. He took his tankard of ale and took a final gulp before throwing the thing out into the moat below. The drumming slowly rose in sound, until at last the faint silhouette of men came over the hills and began to march down into the green valley below.

'How many?' Maar asked quietly.

'Twenty-five thousand we believe my Lord.' Replied Ser Wexford Barrick, his large imposing frame only accentuated by his thick golden armour. Maar nodded, he showed no fear, it was too far gone for that. Death was inevitable, whether it came today or in thirty years' time. Either way, it would come for him. But he had come too far now, done too much, to back down. A letter had been sent, signed by the King's own hand, with a final peace offering and a promise that they would live should they surrender. Maar had laughed, spat in the paper, and sent the message back to Ceraborn within an hour of its arrival at Erenгон. But as the distant hill gave way to the marching men of Ceraborn, Arisen and Tu-Ton, the same could not be said for those who were closest to Maar. Sweat began to bead from Elmar Clayborn's brow as he stood, longsword beside him, staring out into the now shimmering mirage of men. A young man, only now in his twenty-fourth year and soon to be wed to Elsara Cordosi of Cyronos, he had seen little in the way of war. Yes, he had been trained in swordplay by his father and his uncle's,

but those were men who never pierced his chest when he moved his shield to clumsily or sliced his arm when he attempted to balance himself atop the squelching mud of the courtyards of his youth. They had cut him, just as they had been by their own father, for a boy must know of the true dangers a sword possesses. But this was different, this was war.

They watched closely, every man with clear eyes upon the battlefield. The grass, now shaken of its dew, swayed softly in the breeze. Trumpets rang clear, and the drumming came to a sudden halt. The enemy stood in clear lines, six clear cohorts, three lines of light troop. There were perhaps a thousand or so on horseback, a light cloud of steaming breath rose into the clear morning skies, drifting between the banners of Ceraborn and its allies. The valley seemed so small against such a backdrop, and the lands beyond seemed to shrink beyond recognition, as if locking the two sides in place until one came out victorious. Above the rows of men, riding down the hill and into the valley came a small procession of riders, six men in total and each well known to Assan Maar. Brodon's steed was the finest in the country, a thick purebred destrier with a long shaggy mane of black uncut hair. The King wore his signature golden armour, a mid-length blue cape draped from his shoulders to his waist. Maar placed a hand on his own sallet that sat beside him, the metal shining brightly, his face perfectly mirrored by it. He watched closely as the riders cut through the lines of men, before stopping a few feet in front of the. The King unsheathed his sword and held the grip tightly as he

pushed the thing into the air, a thunderous rapture returned from his armies.

'We do not surrender. Remember that, we do not surrender.' Maar said to the men beside him. And as the men duly nodded, he grasped his sallet and slid it across his face, the metal cold against his skin.

'Archers! Ready!' He sounded, and a moment later the sound of bows pulling back echoed around the parapet. From the valley a line of men began to advance upon them, and horses galloped at full speed ahead. Maar focused on Brodon's horse, still against the sea of men that now swarmed the land before him.

'Archers, fire!'

The sky darkened momentarily, and the grass was dulled as the sunlight was blocked out by the barrage of silent arrows as they fizzed across the skies before slowly falling. Men began to fall, and to Maar's eyes several horses either bolted or threw their riders as they scared or were pierced by the hellfire that reigned above them. But still the stream of men advanced, and though the field now was dotted with fallen men, the forces of Ceraborn still appeared undeterred. Maar seemed only to blink before another wave was quickly sent from the parapet, skimming along the morning breeze like a bird above the sea. And again, they fell, only this time they seemed to find far more men. A few struggled on, perhaps pierced only slightly and now overtaken by the vicious lust for war.

'Open the gates.' Maar said calmly, and the order was rebounded down the parapet until at last the great iron chains screamed as the bridge fell into place. Dust flew

into the air and began to fall like some dark untrue snow, and from this dusty blanket was delivered the cavalry of Erengon.

It was not long before the two sides met, with those from Erengon running through the men of Ceraborn on large steeds and coordinating impressive manoeuvres that seemed to round men up like fish in a net before striking them down. A large fierce cry, the cry of over a thousand men, rippled through the valley in one enormous voice. The two cavalries were well matched, each perfectly trained in the ways of the West, and many men had stood as allies only months before, but in war there could be no loyalty. Men were pulled from their rides and dragged without mercy along the fields, the crunching and crackling of bone seemed a quiet afterthought to the overall orchestra. From below the parapet, in a rush that seemed almost without tactic or purpose, a slurry of men rushed from Erengon, and the bridge shook, and the wooden pallets cracked below the weight of the wave upon wave of infantry as they bound like wild dogs along it. Another barrage of arrows fired off, though now the difference between targets and friendly fire were narrowed beyond recognition. Against the hills, Brodon's forces stood in perfect rank, each awaiting the order for attack, like a well-trained hound at its master's side. Soon enough the orders came, and trumpets rang out as cavalry and infantry charged down the steady slope and out into the valley. From Erengon, Maar and his commanders stood, though they were now spread apart across its tremendous width each busy in their own personal battle. Maar turned

back and his gaze fell to the courtyard below him, and the place was almost empty. It scared him for a moment. From behind him an arrow fell to his side, splitting the oak barrel that stood not a foot in front of him, turning back he saw the flock streaming towards the parapet, and for a moment he wondered if he should try his luck and stay standing, for he was sure the Gods were on his side. But as he held his arms wide, inviting those thousand arrows each to find its mark, he was suddenly pushed away and fell into a small crevice of stairway and thick stone wall. His helmet shielded the blow to his head, but still he felt the force with which he hit that cold, unforgiving rock. Flicking his gaze back to where he had been, he saw the body of a young archer, fall without thought and down towards the courtyard.

Maar inhaled a deep breath, and as another blanket of arrows fell down around him, he listened closely to the men as they fell. He kept close to the wall, sliding along it until at last his boots touched the hard earth of the courtyard, to his right he heard the clear sounds of battle, the ripping of steel against steel and the moans and groans of those who fell. He unsheathed his broadsword, Erenbore, and it shone like a star, its slight curving blade carefully decorated, and the golden guard shaped into the head of roaring lion. And then he ran, and the thoughts of fear and worry were left to mellow with the dust that his boots kicked up behind him. As he left Erengon, his gaze fell upon the valley, and now the grass was speckled with blood, and bodies of men and beasts littered that once quiet place and the twisted corpses of both friend and foe

were laid around him like some hellish fauna. From above him a flurry of arrows shot down to the enemy, and he heard the distant roars of his commanders as they rallied the archers to continue the relentless assault upon the men of Ceraborn. A lone rider came upon him with vicious speed, but a quick swing of his blade against the belly of the beast saw the rider fall under the weight of the shivering mare. But there was little time to think, as from behind a harsh strike connected to the Commander's back, scrapping against his hinge. Maar made a quick turn, striking low to his opponent but being blocked. The two men stood facing one another, Maar on his knees with the strength in his arms as he pushed against the man, a man he recognised all too clearly even though his face were masked with Arisenian armour. Lord Louton of Arisen was a tall man, with thick arms and strong legs that seemed to be that of a man beyond the Lord's own years, with soft dark skin and eyes of amber, the Lord was well known for his prowess with a blade. Maar threw his weight forward, disengaging the blades enough to pull himself to his feet as his opposite stumbled. He pulled a shield from beside him and caught a blow high onto it, the wood crackled as the blade sliced it and again pushed back against the almost Iron strength of Louton's blade. The blade released, but in a flash was brought down again, splitting the shield further splintered fragments flew through the air and bounced off both men as they tussled in place. Louton pulled the blade back, ripping it from the shield and yanking against the grip of Maar who, in that moment, took a chance to push his shield against the side of Louton's blade and push his arm upward before stabbing

at the man's raised arm with the tip of his own longsword. The metal scrapped together, and the blade slipped down the Lord's counter, before a thick stream of blood wept from the gash as the blade fell away. Louton growled, as he pulled his arm away, his grip loosened, and Maar again slammed the shield against the sword. The blade fell to the ground, and the midpoint of it was seeped in the still dripping blood of its owner.

The two men stood together, Louton's weary legs buckling as his arm fell to his side limply.

'Fool.' Said Maar softly, as he prepared his sword for the killing blow. But as he did so he was grabbed from behind, his sword taken from him by the sudden jerking motion as he was propelled across the field by an unseen force. Crashing against the carcass of a mare, he tumbled across the mud and felt his chest compress against the ground as the force took him in its unforgiving strive. Pulling his head up, and scrambling quickly for a blade, he found Brodon's steed riding off into the crowded plains beyond, with the King swinging a longsword at his right side and cutting down man after man as if he were dead heading deceased flowers in his castle grounds. Maar turned back towards Louton, now a far-off figure crouched but protected by both cavalry and infantry as they huddled around him and carried him back towards the hill. For a moment, the Commander felt safe, as if he could simply lie here and wait until it was all over, and whatever the outcome, he could hide and ensure his survival. A fallacy, he thought. A thunderous booming shook him, and turning his gaze back towards Erengon, he saw the thick wall of

the watch tower crumble away into the moat below. A moment later and another explosion of rock and rubble erupted from his stronghold, and the tower seemed almost to fold in on itself, falling into the water and scattering along the bank. A rallying cry was heard from the hills behind him and for the first time he saw the six large catapults that were now being loaded with a mixture of large iron cannonballs and rough stone from the Northern Mountains. He watched his banner, ripped and now falling gracefully into the water, sink without a trace.

As the walls shook violently, Ser Wexford Barrick called on his men to fall back into the courtyard below. From his left a huge blast fired across the walkway, and a thousand shards of rock and stone flew through the air, as a cannonball struck the parapet. The men, though few there were now, began to fall back as he commanded. But the constant pounding on the outer walls coupled with the blasting cannon fire, saw many either fall or be trapped. Some, he saw, fell away with the wall itself as the walkway gave way and the watch tower fell down, leaving a spire of thick dust in its wake. Barrick pulled a lacklustre band of men down the stairway but turning to face the drawbridge he saw that it had, at least partly, been crushed by the weight of the falling tower. The moat surrounded Erengon, and the Southern walls beyond were now home to deep, wide trenches that had been dug out and filled with sewerage on Maar's orders. Atop the parapet a few brave men still stood in unquivering unity as they sent quick, seemingly unending waves of arrow fire across that way and into the valley.

"The bridge will hold, move the men forward! We will give you cover!" Shouted a stout, balding man from above Barrick. And as the arrows were sent out, and without hesitation, the men ran forward across the bridge, the splintered and smashed panels quivering and creaking as they did so. The band were met, less than fifty yards from the edge of the moat, with heavy infantry from Ceraborn. His longsword drawn; Barrick slashed at the three men that stood before him. He did not see his men behind him, only the ringing of blades communicated the battles that were occurring beyond his vision. The three men stepped back, one directly in front of him with two edging towards his side. The man who stood before him held his sword in both hands, his legs wide and strong. The men beside him held theirs along the top ridge of their shields, oval oak painted with the sigil of Ceraborn. Overhead, the terrible sound of cannonballs whizzing through the skies, told the Lord that the destruction of Erengon was almost accomplished. A second quick blow, this time from his right, saw the man edging towards his side momentarily clash his sword with Barrick's. But the Lord was strong, and as he pushed the blade further along the length of his opponent's, he heard the terrible gurgling of the man as he choked on his own blood. Pulling his sword away, Barrick was quick to pull the dying man's shield from his grasp and cover himself from attack at his front, before swinging his sword and clashing blades with the opposite flanking Knight. With arm twisted above him, his strength was forced away from his blade and onto the shield, and with a tremendous push he was able to momentarily disarm the man before shoving the splintered

wood into his opponent's face. The man was knocked back, his face pricked by fragments of wood, and blood streaked across his face like some terrible war paint.

Commander Assan Maar was charged, and a moment later the two blades clashed heavily against one another. Sliding his blade down, the steel spitting and growling as he did so, he met the man's eyes for a brief moment. He kicked the man, who's stance showed Maar he had been trained in only the basic arts of combat, and with a brief but decisive swing of his blade, he brought it down upon the man's chest and pushed it deep, until the tip of it came through the other side. As the man fell, and with his sword still lodged within him, Maar was tackled from the side. Feeling his breath leave him he was, for a moment, shook. As he looked up, he saw the blood-smeared sigil of Ceraborn upon the man's breast plate, and a moment later the shining tip of his axe as he swung it down towards the Lord. He scrambled around him, the weight of the man pressing down on him, and in the last moment he pulled a shield from his side and let that take the brunt of the blow. The man pulled at the axe, desperately trying to release it from the grip of the wood. With his own desperation, The Lord scrambled against the man's weight and pushed him from atop him, shoving him away and watching as the man was caught in the path of a galloping steed, being crushed beneath its feet.

In the moments after, Lord Commander Assan Maar stood with an almost ethereal quality amongst the hordes of men as they battled around him. He seemed to be in a

quiet bubble, surrounded by silence and in a momentary paralysis against the backdrop of death and war flames. But it faded away quickly, as a band of cavalry began to circle around him. He stood, alone amongst the corpses of his fallen friends and foe, bruised and bloodied but with a sword still clasped tightly in his hands. The horses cantered about him, tightening the circle until at last they stopped, each beast within a pace of the other, and the riders pointed to out to the man's throat. The riders, six in total, wore black solid plate armour and on the chest, they bore not the emblem of Ceraborn but instead that of a black arrowhead that was embossed in with silver trim.

'Surrender Maar, and perhaps the rest of your men will be spared.' Said a low voice from behind one of the dark helmets. Maar turned to the rider he felt the voice had come from; a half-smile was hidden behind his bloodied helmet.

'Lenren, my friend.' The Lord Commander returned.

'You are no friend of mine.' Lenren returned quickly, spitting his words from behind his own mask. Maar's gaze flickered from one rider to the other, assessing them one by one and slowly nodding his head.

'The Black Archers of Ceraborn. I should have known that Brodon would send his dogs for me, though I must admit my surprise that it did not come sooner.'

Lenren dismounted, and the circle widened slightly as stood beside his mare. The lances did not lower.

'Brodon requests that you surrender, and that should you accept his terms that you may, after a trial, be spared.' Lenren said. Maar pulled off his helmet, throwing it to the ground as if were nothing to him now. From behind the

horses, he saw the carnage that had unfolded, how the grass seemed almost to be burn with blood. His men, or what remained, were being rounded up by light cavalry, and those who attempted to fight were quickly slain.

‘A trial? What good is that to a man who believes so little in the men who would sit and judge him.’ The Lord replied. Lenren pulled his own helmet off, resting it against his side. His sword, seemingly having not seen action at all, swayed against his hip.

‘Regardless, the King is supreme in court. If he offers you a fair trial, then a fair trial is what you shall have.’ The archer returned. The two exchanged tired glances.

‘I will see no fair trial, neither will I see my name be dragged through the mud by a King who serves only his Lords and not his people!’ Maar spat back.

‘The King had no choice but to do as he did. The Welling provided him with information, and as he is bound by his crown, he ensured that his people were-’

‘Starving?’ Maar retorted, taking a step forward but quickly retreating as the lances sharpened focus on his neck again. ‘, Brodon took crops from those who faced the harshest winter we have ever known. And for what reason? So, his men could spend another six months fighting wars against the War Lords in Mair?’ The Lord Commander’s eyes drew close to tears, he stared down at the bloodied ground below his quivering lip betrayed his overwhelming emotion.

‘Tens of thousands have died for this rebellion.’ Lenren replied after a few moments, though his voice was low and quiet now. He signalled the riders to lower the lances, which they did begrudgingly.

‘My men have fought valiantly. And for that there will be a place for them with the Gods, and when those poor people die at the hand of your King, it will be us who takes them to everlasting peace. But you? You will never find your seat, you will wander forever in the lands of the Gods with no place to rest, until the skin from your feet is blistered and bloodied, and you will do so for the rest of eternity.’

Lenren did not respond, but his gaze fell from the man and did not return to him for the remainder of Maar’s life.

Three thousand men were taken as prisoners from that dreadful valley, once bright and lush but not squalid and feared. Six months of rebellion, which had begun in the Eastern port towns, had ended with a flock of perhaps a thousand crows as they came down to feast on those who had fallen that day.

Carts came through in the hours that followed, mostly those of The Yellow Sisters as they gave aid to those who were injured or near death. And in those moments the Commanders of the West shuddered as they watched these yellow-robed priestesses as they wandered the battlefield, blessing the bodies of the fallen and tending to those who were in their final moments, as if they were sent from the Gods to ferry those who had fallen, rather than try to save those who were teetering on the delict slim edge of the mortal world.

As the sun fell began to fall beyond the hills, and the winds softened down into a gentle tide that seemed intent on wiping away the stain that was that day, Brodon and his

Commander's cantered along the edge of the moat leading to Erenгон and surveyed the ruined visage in all its former glory.

'A fine place this was.' Said one man, older and having memories flood through his mind of times spent dancing and singing in the halls that now lay crumbled beyond the walls of that place.

'Perhaps it can be restored, in time.' Brodon said, though in his heart he knew too well that the financing of such a fortress was beyond the current reach of the Crown. The wars in the East had stretched the finances beyond what The Welling thought wise, and with the delay in Brodon's trip to Dai to meet with the Assai Lord to discuss trade treaties, the rebellion had only further plunged the Crown further into financial demise. The Master of Coins now held up in his own quarters in Tu-Ton, was in constant negotiations with the Low Lords of the shipping ports in the South-East. Progress, the King had been told, was slow and the chance of a successful outcome that would satisfy all parties seemed unlikely. The Low Lords had quietly favoured the rebellion, though the strength of the armies held by Brodon and his allies was never to be underestimated. And now that the rebellion had been defeated, in the back of his mind, Brodon now thought that perhaps those same Lords may soon find agreeable terms to his taxation policies.

*

The former Lord Commander Assan Maar shivered as the cold night winds whipped his exposed back with an unbearable delict touch. He closed his eyes, though sleep

had denied him by the thoughts that now plagued his mind. Seven days had passed since the loss at Erenгон, but the trials had been delayed after the King called a meeting of the High Lords to discuss the ongoing campaigns in the East. The guards, who passed by more than they ought to in order to snicker and spit at the fallen man, had told him that the gallows were already being equipped with new ropes, and that the King had even requested three spikes to be erected in the centre of Ceraborn town square, and that the heads of Maar and his companions would be displayed there until they rotted and fell away, like fruits left over after harvest.

And in that darkness, with rats scurrying around waiting for the time in which the man would fall gently to sleep, the Lord Commander felt for a moment as if he were not alone, and turning, he saw it. And, more than anything before, it terrified him.

Chapter One

They had been riding for days. They had stopped, only occasionally, for essentials like water or sleep. Even then they watered and ate hastily, and they slept uneasy. The winds had been rough from the start and the cold fronts had rendered any chance of an easy pass through the lands as nothing but a decent dream. Lenren slowed his mare to a steady patter, his companions soon followed. The Eastern Road had led them ever closer home, or what the Riders called home in any case. The rider allowed his mind to wander for a moment, he recalled how quiet the journey had been. Brodon had ruled for nearly thirty years now, and the lands were peaceful. Lenren recalled the last time he had ridden The Eastern Road, formerly a place strategically connecting the city to the strongholds near Blackridge. He turned and saw his companions following, Elson was gravely ill and though Lenren had managed to stop the bleeding it was doubtful that the Knight would see morning. All that could be done was to see that he was given a comfortable bed to sleep in. A sleep that he wouldn't awaken from. Elson had been the King's choice, and though Lenren had maintained his own reluctance to have the boy as part of the clan, the King had had his way. The mare had now come to a stop. Lenren turned and faced the castle moat. He whistled three times, as loud and clear as a hawk's cry. The bridge was lowered slowly. Lenren dismounted and walked beside his mare across the drawbridge. His sword swayed at his hip, the tip still

slightly bloodied and a bag weighed heavily against his shoulder. He removed his helmet, freeing his greying hair and sighed. The place smelled like home. He stood for a moment in silence.

'The boy will die.' said a low, sombre voice.

'Aye, I know. But he fought hard and took each blow as a Knight should. The King will be proud. And so, will the boy's family.' the Rider returned. Astriel looked back towards the boy, a few knights and gatekeepers were carrying off into the Tower. She returned her gaze to the castle, a place she had left three months ago. She was glade to be home. The sound of the drawbridge being lifted the clanking of the iron gates shutting brought both back to reality. They watched as a stout man wearing a long grey cassock bound towards them at a frantic speed.

The man, short and fat with cheeks as red as cherries let out a few hurried breaths.

'His majesty is waiting for you. Please, come this way. We will see to your horses.' the man gestured the two to follow him.

Astriel turned, she watched Ramon as he stroked his mare's mane. He hadn't said a word the entire ride back to Ceraborn. He had hardly said a word the way there either. He removed his armour methodically, as any King's Knight does. He wiped the dried blood from his chest plate and asked the gatekeepers if he could have his sword sharpened. It had taken him six blows to kill it. It shouldn't have taken six blows, not for Ser Ramon. Astriel saw the man staring towards the Tower where they had taken the boy Knight. She knew what he was feeling. Knights are brothers, in battle and out.

'Ramon,' she called out, the man returned a steely gaze but nodded and lumbered his way after them.

The Riders followed the quick paced priest and made way from the outer defence towards the stables. The horses were fed and watered, the stable boys knew well how hard these mares had been worked in recent weeks, they would take good care of them.

'His majesty has been waiting eagerly for you.' said the man.

The group made no reply, they knew exactly what the King had tasked them for. They had known the moment they been taken to the dungeons and seen what had happened to the band of thieves who had tried to hunt and kill the beast. Five men had set off, each was told that he would be a hero, a God amongst men. All were dead. The beast had been merciless in its actions. It had dragged the men back down from the Tower and laid the bodies along the main road towards Redmire. It was a travelling band that had found them. Soon enough every Fort and township was abounded by rumours of the beast.

The King had ordered a meeting the moment the news reached him. The Lords of the Western Regions met at Redmire Point, just East of the Tower. According the transcripts taken by Arch Maester Tulloch, the beast had taken refuge in the Tower sometime after the Winter had set into the mountains. Clearly it had been forced down and found the Tower as a homestead. Tulloch had remarked about how the King had wanted to ensure that the Beast was moved back to the mountains instead of

being killed. However, with the deaths of the thieves, as well as cattle and herds being attacked, that would be impossible. The beast had found itself a hunting ground, where food and shelter were abundant. In the mountains it would take elk, deer and perhaps the occasional bear. But in the Tower, surrounded by rugged Highlands and the first outer rims of forests, it had nothing to fear.

The group made their way through the Outer Halls, Astriel ran her hands softly along the banners that hung along the walls. Lenren barely paid any note to them, Ramon looked at them with pride. The Eagle flying across the sun was the sygil which flew over the Castle, and it had been so for over one hundred.

The King had taken great care in ensuring that the sygil reflected his reign over the lands, he had overtaken his Grandfather's legacy with pride, but also fear. The King knew nothing of war or toil, his reign had been spared of that. No pretenders had claimed the throne, no bastards had been born and no peasants had revolted. The King himself drew strength from this, he believed solely in peace. He had seen to it that the ships in Korgen Bay gave safe and clear passage to the Eastern trade vessels. But peace was never eternal, and the King remembered that war wasn't the only foe that could bring a downfall. He had seen his Father grow weary with age. The peace had slowly turned him ill. Brodon had watched as his father began to become more and more erratic.

He heard tales of him sending soldiers to the Eastern Edge in search of dragons, even though they had not nested there since the days of his Grandfather. Brodon

took the throne at the request of the council, with his father locked away for the sake of the Kingdom. It was claimed that he had attempted to send assassins to the Further West Kingdoms, to kill the Lords. That was his final true act as King of the West. The Lords had banded together, along with the Queen Regent and Prince to see that the King were stripped of his powers. He went, surprisingly, with ease and comfort. His mind, truly, had warped beyond recognition and it had stayed as such until his passing in the Summer along fifteen years ago. Brodon had assumed command of the Kingdom and had acted as King in waiting until the death of his father. His steadfast approach had turned the tides of any potential uprising or any rumour of revolt against the crown.

The group came to the iron clad doors that led to the main hall, the man stopped them and turned. He looked at each of them, almost inspecting them from head to foot. He turned to Ramon.

'The King will want to know about the boy.' he said, avoiding Ramon's glare.

'Surely that is your job Chancellor?' Astriel enquired.

'Actually child, that would fall to the leader of the Kingsmen. And it's Arch chancellor if you'd be so kind.' The man returned smugly. Lenren caught Ramon looking at the badge on his breast, the badge of the Kingsmen. He often thought of asking Ramon of how he had earned such an honour but knew better than to pry into Ramon's past.

The Arch chancellor sighed heavily, cleared his throat and shoved at the doors. Light hit the group, shimmering flashes of gold, purple, blue and orange.

The room was enormous. It was the grandest of all the castles in the Western Kingdoms, built by the first settlers and originally used as a place of worship before being fortified and used by Brodon I as a home to the Kings of the West. The group walked down the marble staircase which led down into the main chamber hall, on each side six huge stone pillars stood in ten feet intervals. Lanterns hung from these pillars and illuminated the hung banners displaying the House colours. The white marble, speckled with black and gold, seemed to shine in the sunlight which flew through the stained-glass windows which adorned the outer walls. As they moved along, they were greeted by a band playing harps, The King's personal favourite, and a few ceremonial guards in armour which shone like the first moon of Spring. Ramon looked at it all with bitterness, the ceremonial halls were a hell to him. He preferred the forests, the mountains or the road lands. He preferred the world. Astriel halted just short of the Arch Chancellor and Lenren, her gaze fixed solely on the large stone platform which held the throne. The throne itself was carved from stone and marble, a magnificent and immovable blend of the land on which the place was built.

'Your majesty, may I present The Black Archers of The Western Kingdoms. Lenren of Cerran, Astriel of Mair and Ser Ramon of Garth.' The Chancellor bowed and eagerly awaited his King's response.

The King tapped his fingers against his armrest. Lenren noted that he seemed thinner than before, his eyes

were darker around the edges and his skin clearer. But still he showed an almost ethereal essence, with a thick, long swept bun of auburn hair and an imposing frame.

'My friends, welcome home. I trust the journey was swift and that The Gods were with you.' Brodon's voice echoed around the halls. A low, yet every hopeful tone.

'Your majesty the Archers have suc-' The chancellor began.

'-The boy is dead Brodon.' Ramon cut in. His hoarse Northern voice almost grating against the walls around him.

The tapping fingers stopped. The King leaned forward, picked himself up and moved slowly towards the group. He was a tall, well set man, he had his Father's face, the strong sharp jawline along with narrow sunken eyes. He moved past Lenren and the Arch Chancellor without so much as a glimpse. His eyes met with Ramon, but Ramon almost seemed to look through The King.

'How did this happen?' he said.

'You sent a boy to kill a monster, what did you think would happen.' Ramon replied coldly.

Brodon stood closer to Ramon, the two men were almost equal in every way.

'Technically the boy is still alive your Highness, we've had him taken to the infirmary.' Said the Arch Chancellor sheepishly.

'Ha! He'll be dead by morning if he's lucky.' Said Ramon, now he met Brodon's gaze for the first time.

'You were supposed to protect him.' Said Brodon. Ramon sneered.

'And you, My King, sentenced him to death. I could do nothing, and neither could those two. The boy was not ready, not for that creature.'

The King turned to Astriel, he smiled and nodded.

'So, was it a Grey Bear?' he said.

'No, my King, not a Grey Bear.' she returned, Lenren took the bag from his shoulder and passed it to his companion. There was a small circle of flies around the neck of it, a pungent high stench began to fill the air.

'You managed with that around your shoulder?' The Arch Chancellor gasped at Lenren as he held his purple blotches nose.

'I've smelt worse, believe me.' The archer returned.

Astriel held the bag for a moment before resting it on the ground, she untied it and let the contents roll slowly toward the foot of The King. Brodon stood silent, but she had noticed the quick dilation of his silver rimmed pupils. He looked at the dismembered head of the beast at his foot, taking his sword from its sheath and slowly poking at the dark grey scales of the skull before slowly peeling back the Black lips to reveal row upon row of viciously sharp Amber coloured teeth.

'A Kludde.' Ramon said, almost at a whisper.

'Impossible. They're as rare as hen's teeth.' Replied the Arch Chancellor as he examined the skull closely.

The King, sheathing his sword turned to Ramon again.

'Why is it scaled? I thought these things were like wolves.' He asked.

'It's likely an infection of some sort, the skin has become irradiated and fallen, the beast has been clawing at

the exposed flesh and the flesh has hardened. Almost like a frost bite of some kind.' Astriel replied quickly.

'The frosts have been vicious this past Winter. We think it came down for food. Once it found the farmlands near the Tower, well, it only makes sense.' Ramon Interjected, throwing a quick glance to the skull.

The King returned his gaze to the skull and sighed heavily. He returned himself to the throne and looked to the high ceilings above him.

'The boy, I must see him.' He said, the words barely formed from his tight lips.

The Archers made quick glances towards one another.

'Sir, I hardly think that a King should see such a hideous-' The Arch Chancellor began, stepping towards his King as he did so.

The King simply waved him away, he didn't speak. A King shouldn't have to speak to be heard, that was a lesson his father had taught him.

Elson struggled to keep his eyes open, flashes of light and dark seemed to dance in front of him. Every now and then he would catch a word or a sound, but for the most part his world seemed silent. Or perhaps not, he swore he could hear the sounds of horses' hooves against the mud or was it the sounds of hammers against iron. He couldn't be sure. Again, silence and darkness enveloped him. He wasn't in pain, from what he could tell, he was perfectly warm. Or cold, he could not quite tell. It all felt the same now, it all felt like a dream. It all, soon after, fell away.

The room was smaller than Astriel had presumed it to be. She had, admittedly, never been to the infirmary. Her nostrils were filled with the mixture of burning pine from the fire and the familiar smell of death. It was a high, sour smell. It caught the back of her throat, even now after all these years. She stopped short of the small window and looked out; the Outer Walls of the castle cascaded down towards Ceraborn. She could see, even with dusk falling, the busy marketplaces and ironworks, children running and playing and tradesmen moving large barrels of salt, fruits and vegetables across the city from the river docks.

'We permit the spirit of Elson Greynire, son of Lord Elser and Knight to the King of the West Brodon the second of his name, to the Holy Gods of Men. So now, he shall rest in peace and his soul forever cared for by the Holy Gods. We bless him, we thank him, and we remember him.' Astriel turned as the Arch Chancellor removed his hand from Elson's bandaged chest and prayed to the Gods. She whispered the remainder of the prayer and returned her gaze to the window. Ramon was sitting beside the fire, carefully unwrapping his own wounded wrist and washing it in warm water. Lenren was stood at the foot of the bed with the King.

'Poor boy.' Brodon remarked, before pointing towards his chest.

'Six wounds my Lord. The beast attacked from high ground and pounced onto him.' Lenren returned. A slight sneer from Ramon was followed by dead silence.

'Are the parents here?' The Knight asked, his eyes focused only on the dying embers of the fire.

'They are in the city; I believe they have a small place near the docks. I'll send a messenger in the morning.' returned the King.

'The body will remain here; he will be buried with his brothers of the sword in the Palace gardens.' He continued, nodding assertively to himself.

'We should have been more careful.' Ramon said, staring down at the boy.

'You mean you should have been more careful, blaming yourself won't bring him back Lenren, you ought to know that by now. I'm sure The Gods will see him to peace and rest.' said Astriel, she turned from the window. The Arch Chancellor sat beside the bed and began to write his sermon for the boy. Brodon kept himself quiet, she could sense a fear within her King. She remembered his coronation, the streets were alive with Western folk from all Kingdoms, there were children and elderly, the cripples and the whores, everybody stood side by side on that day. She remembered his speech to the Kingsmen and the High Lords of the West, how he had poured his soul into the words and left nothing unsure. He had sought peace and prosperity for all under His rule. She remembered how she had cried, she had cried because she had believed, as all the Lords and folk had. And now, as she looked at the man, he seemed so much more ordinary, so much more fallible. She turned her gaze to Lenren, the thick curled locks of his hair were almost consuming his eyes, but she could see within his eyes a longing for rest, though he would never admit it. Lenren, as far she knew, had led The Black Archers since before Brodon had been crowned, he had a wisdom of the lands which was almost unrivalled

amongst any travelling band she had ever encountered, and he had proven it time upon time.

'We should go, we need rest.' she offered, resting a hand on his arm.

He smiled at her and nodded.

'We can make beds for you in East Wing if you'd like?' The King offered, with a grateful smile.

'It's kind of you my Lord but there is a tavern we know, we'll rest there.'

'You'll do no such thing.' Commanded a voice from behind them, a voice Astriel knew only too well. The sunlit figure that greeted her was slender and tall, with long braided golden hair and delicately tanned skin.

'Neriel.' She said with a smile, as she embraced her friend. The Queen squealed with delight, the two held one another almost as reunited lovers, but in truth they were friends from the East, Neriel the daughter of the Asaai Lord of Dai, married to bond the Kingdoms in love and trade. She was a treasure of the realms, a loving wife and mother with the heart of the Asaai burning deep within her. With her beside Brodon the crown was secure.

'I trust that you have had a safe journey Ju'Rai?' she enquired.

'As safe as it can be my Lai.' Astriel returned, the two escaped the embrace and stood together.

'I'm sorry about the boy. But he will be remembered well.' The Queen replied both to her friend and Lenren. She exchanged a glance with the King, she knew him well enough to see the worry bubbling within him.

'I've had chambers made up for you in the Western wings my Archers, will be dining in the Great Halls

tonight with breakfast in the morning. Your horses have been bedded down for the night too.' Neriell said sternly, she held Astriel's arm tightly.

'Thank you, my Queen.' Lenren said, with a slight bow.

Brodon looked around the room and sighed.

'What is it my King?' Neriell asked.

'It appears as though I won't need the messengers.' Brodon returned, and one by one they realised that Ramon was not there, just a blood-stained rage hung above the dying embers of the fireplace.

Chapter Two

As Ser Ramon of Garth looked around him, he came to realise that the city he had once known was gone. As the light subsided, and the streets became more and more indistinguishable from one another, he wondered if he would ever be able to walk along the roads and streets without having those thoughts running around his head. They were like crows, squawking at him every day, merciless. He walked past the taverns and the ironworks and down towards the riverway. There were several large groups of soldiers, he noted, and saw that all of them appeared to be new to the sword. Ramon stopped short of the makeshift docks and looked out towards the Eastern Road, each side was flanked in the distance by tall trees and shrubbery. Deeper still, and with his eyes squinted, he could see the outline of the Grey Mountains, although they looked no bigger than a molehill from here.

'Ser Ramon of Garth, the legends are real indeed.' said a familiar voice from behind the Knight. He turned, looking down the street to a group of knights that were enjoying an ale. Ramon walked closer to the group, before stopping short of them.

'Hersan.' He said, almost in a whisper.

Ser Hersan, Commander of the Third legion, rose to his feet and saluted his former leader. Hersan was a tall, imposing figure. He had slick blonde hair with opal eyes and fair skin.

'Indeed Ser, in the flesh.' The two men met and smiled at one another.

'It's been a long time my friend.' Ramon returned still grinning.

'Aye, too long. Since you appear to have all your limbs, I would suggest that the last trip was a success.'

Ramon's smile faded, Hersan knew all too well what that meant.

'Come sit with us. Have an ale, I imagine you're parched.' He didn't wait for an answer. Ramon felt himself pulled towards the nearest stool. He sat and picked up an ale. The knights had taken to using the streets as a tavern it seemed. There were maybe seven or eight of them, Ramon didn't really care.

'Why are there so many of you?' he asked.

A few of them chuckled.

'Well, in truth we've got nothing else to do. The King has given us permission to use the city as we please before we get sent off again.' replied one of the younger ones. He pointed down towards the docks, Ramon saw a small troop carrier, sails raised and being loaded.

'The Eastern Edge?' he asked.

'No, we're hearing it'll be Korgen Bay, there's been some trouble with pirates recently. Nothing huge but a few ships have been boarded. We'll soon sort it.' Said Hersan, sitting himself opposite Ramon and raising a toast.

Ramon drank, the bitter taste of ale was a refreshing change from river water and the occasional boiled siff drink that Astriel had made them on the journey.

It was getting slowly darker; the sun was setting, and the place was now stripped in yellow and pink dying light.

'How did it happen?' Hersan asked, his face deady serious.

Ramon took another long gulp of his ale before throwing the rest out in the street.

'It was a Kludde. It ripped the poor bastard's chest open.' He replied.

The chatter of the knights died down. Hersan looked around his men, he saw the fear in their eyes.

'A Kludde? The Palace kept that one under wraps.' He spoke.

'Well, the beast is dead now, as is the boy. It's done.' replied Ramon bitterly, as he stood and began to walk on. He rounded a corner and allowed himself a few fast-paced breaths.

'I'm sorry my friend.' Said Hersan, standing in the dim evening light.

'Just fuck off. I've no need for a Knight.' Ramon spat back at him, still trying to control his breathe.

Hersan stood forward, he held out his hand and touched Ramon face.

'Come with me, you need to rest Ser.'

Ramon batted the hand away.

'I need to find the boy's parents; I know they have a place near here.' He returned, avoiding his friend's gaze.

'Yes, they do. I know them well, but you can see them in the morning. You need rest Ramon, please.' Hersan returned. Ramon stood, his eyes wary and his skin cold. Sweat had begun to bead on his forehead.

'In the morning my friend, in the morning.' His friend returned. 'Until then you can sleep in my quarters. Come.'

As Ramon sat in the steaming water, his hands numb and his skin crackled, he could think of nothing. Hersan returned with another bucket of water and duly poured it into the tub. He looked down at his friend and wondered what he had seen since Erenagon. He looked across and saw his sword, Helmare, and smiled at the thought of the last great battle of the West. It was, by now, over twenty years since they had marched down to that small now abandoned village and laid siege to it. The High Lords knew the cost of it, so had all the men that had fought that day. It was mercifully short, a few hours or so, and the casualties had been minimal. It had been Brodon's only active military assault in the Western Kingdoms, and one the Lords had convinced him of only at the very last moment.

'You need to stop thinking about it.' Ramon's growl brought Hersan back to reality sharply.

'You're one to talk.' the Knight replied with a laugh.

'He took a seat beside his friend and cracked open a fresh bottle of wine. He poured two servings and passed one to Ramon. There was silence.

'How do you do it,' Ramon said, looking only towards the fireplace. ', how do you take it so easily?'

'I don't Ramon. I don't live a day where I don't think about that day. None of us do. But we fought for our King, and our Kingdom. We did what was right, what we were trained to do. You should know that better than anyone.'

'Erenagon doesn't even exist anymore Hersan. It's nothing but scorched earth and piles of rubble now.'

replied Ramon, his hand circling over his scarred kneecap.

'I'll never forget the scream you made when that arrow hit you.' Hersan returned.

Ramon looked up to his friend.

'The King knew.' he said.

'Knew? What about?' replied Hersan with a confused expression.

'The rebels, he knew what they had against him. They were our friends Hersan.' Said Ramon assertively.

Hersan took a moment, he looked back to Helmare and down at his friend. He traced the scars along the man's back with his eyes.

'They were traitors Ramon, all of them. Traitors to the King and his father. They were traitors to all of us.' He replied.

'An entire village.' Whispered Ramon.

'For the Kingdom Ramon, that's our duty.'

Ramon shook his head and turned.

'Then why do you still serve? Give it up and go live in some shit farmhouse somewhere in the North. Or become a fisherman.' Said Hersan angrily.

'I don't serve the King, Hersan, I serve the Kingdom.'

Lenren relaxed himself onto the bed, removed his bloodstained overshirt and sighed. He placed the badge of the King on the bed and slowly unlaced his boots. His feet were saw and swollen from the journey and his bones ached. Perhaps he was too old for all this, perhaps it was time to go South and find himself a quiet place to live out the rest of his life. But he knew that wouldn't happen, he knew deep inside that he couldn't leave it behind. He loved the thrill of it all, and besides, he was a Black Archer through and through. He let himself fall onto the bed, looking up at the stone ceiling he found himself wondering

if it would all be worth it. If in a thousand years Ceraborn was still standing, would there be tales of the Black Archers, of how they'd fought against beasts to protect the Western Kingdoms. They were fairy tales, that's all. Fanciful dreams that he was sure would not come to pass. Legends were overrated at any rate and the children had enough tales to keep them up at night. Lenren rubbed his stomach, his hands tracing the familiar scars of his lifetime. Children had stories; men had scars.

He relaxed himself further, allowing his feet to hang from the edge of the bed, and his eyes to wander around the room. He looked at his bow, carefully leant against the wall beside the door. He had no need to fear an intruder, and besides he had his pocketknife under the pillow. He had made it himself, back when he was little more than eighteen, he had stripped the branch of a Hazel tree and carved the curved body over several days. He had used the finest hemp he could buy; it was said to be Seren hemp from the Great Eastern Seren Na'Menn, but he knew that was likely not the case. His first grip had been made from the hind of a Grey Bear and the arrows were adorned with the feathers of a Golden hawk. He had replaced the grip several times by now, along with the string, but the body was still intact. He recalled back to a time when he was practising, firing off to hit overripe apples that the Generals could not feed to the knights. He smiled. Those were good times. Those were times when he had wanted to learn, he'd watch Knights jousting and even join the regular archers for practise.

Lenren was returned to reality by a knock at the door, he pulled himself warily from his bed.

'Hello my Lord.' Said the woman, dressed in a pale green dress.

Lenren removed himself from the doorway and beckoned her in.

She was younger than he had expected, tanned skin with hazelnut eyes and thin lips.

'I've not seen you before.' He said, pouring himself a cup of wine. The woman smiled at him, he turned and could tell she was looking at his scars.

'What's your name?' He asked, handing her a cup.

'Massai, My Lord.' She returned, taking a slight sip of the wine before placing the cup on the fireplace. Lenren sat on the bed once again and smiled.

Massai looked at the man, untied her dress and let it fall to the floor. She moved closer to him; he felt her thighs as she straddled him. The two held each other for a moment.

'You have sad eyes.' Massai said softly.

'They've seen a lot of sad things.' Lenren replied, cupping the girl's neck.

'I've often wondered what Ser Lenren of Cerran, Leader of the Black Archers and Knight of The King would look like. You're older than I expected.' The girl returned, running her fingers gently along his back.

Lenren held the girl close, as he had done to a hundred before. She smelled nice, like jasmine flowers and lavender.

'Is that a bad thing?' He asked.

She laughed but didn't reply. Instead, she held him closer and kissed along his neck.

'A whore and a Black Archer, the things legends are made of.' Lenren said, looking deep into Massai's eyes. She allowed herself to stop a moment and looked at the man once more. She lowered herself and felt his breathe on her neck, then and only then, did she smile.

As Astriel sharpened her blades, she became aware of the silence that surrounded her. Beside the slight distant laughter of the knights on guard, or the hoots of an owl, there was silence. She turned the blade in her hand, checking it met to her standard. Satisfied, she slid it slowly back into its leather casing and slid it under her bed. She let her hair fall, and softly ran her fingers through it, she felt a relief any time she did this.

'You think he's safe?' Neriell asked.

'Ramon? Yes, he's safe. It's the people he might meet that should be worried.' Astriel returned.

The Queen held her baby close to her chest and hushed him.

'He worries me though.' The Archer said suddenly.

'How so?'

'His eyes, what he's seen. He's changed my Lai; I see it every time we leave. He's cold, colder than before.'

Astriel replied.

'Trust me Ju'Rai, Ser Ramon is a strong man. He's a man of integrity, he's served the Palace since the Old King. I'm sure the Gods will bless him.' The Queen replied with a smile.

The Black Archers of Ceraborn had served the Old King, originally, they were mercenaries and thieves who were spared death by giving they're life to the King. They

were an organised squad of vicious killers, highly skilled in archery, swordsmanship and strategy. But they didn't last long. They were used by the Old King to take missions that were too dangerous for the Kingsmen or that needed a more subtle approach than military might. Lenren was the longest serving member, followed by Ramon and then Astriel. Astriel looked down at her leather wrist bands, adorned with golden leaf and painted with red and white. They'd been made for her mother, a gift from her father. Her memory was hazy at best, but she could remember the screaming, and a vague picture existed in her mind of a shadow looming over her. She was a child at the time and the Ashira Kahn had lost its power over the people long before she had entered the world. She fingered the paint, it was still bright, but was cracking slightly at the sides.

'I remember when we arrived.' Said the Queen.

Astriel turned and smiled weakly.

'I remember first seeing Korgen Bay, how everyone spoke so funny. But I can't remember much of home.' Neriel continued, looking at nothing in particular. She held her child closer.

'I remember even less.' Astriel returned, almost in a whisper.

'Perhaps that is for the best. Better to leave the past where it belongs Ju'Rai.' The Queen replied, sitting beside her.

'I wish I could see it, just once.' Astriel said.

The Queen sighed.

'What? Have you never dreamt the same?'

'Every evening,' Neriel returned. 'But this is our home now.' The Queen held Astriel's hand tightly.

The Archer looked down at the child in the Queen's arms but said nothing. She would protect him, with everything she had.

The Great Halls were lit with high rigged chandeliers, all forged with black steel from the mountains of Lensia. The large oak table was dressed immaculately, with six golden wine goblets along the centre and wreaths of all the Queen's favourite in season flowers. The King sat at the end of the table, his chaired carved from the same granite as was within the throne room. He refilled his cup again and surveyed the scene before him. On his left, Lenren and his wife and on his right Astriel and the Arch Chancellor. All were deep in conversation, the King watched intently but said nothing. He looked around him, seeing the slight outlines of his guards silhouetted against the candlelight. It was a calm but rainy night, and the patter of the rain echoed through much of the castle. He looked down at his plate, the remnants of pie and poached pears stared back at him. He drummed his fingers against the tabletop, slowly at first. The King looked at the Archers, he weighed up his options, smiled to himself and then returned to his plate.

The Arch Chancellor watched his King from the corner of his eye, he watched his fingers tapping against the table and saw his gaze fall upon Lenren and Astriel. Then he saw the King return to his food, exhale and slowly lift his head again. The two men found each other and duly smiled, the King raised a glass to the Arch Chancellor and the Arch Chancellor returned the honour.

'Has something spooked you Chancellor Velgar?' the King said with a chuckle.

'Erm, no your majesty. Nothing at all. I trust you enjoyed the meal?' Velgar returned convincingly.

The King licked a slither of caramel from his finger and laughed heartily. Velgar laughed too, but kept his eyes locked on the those of his King. The King turned to Lenren; the Archer met him with a gracious smile.

'I worry for Ramon, my friend.' Brodon said.

The chatter died down.

'You needn't worry yourself Your Majesty, he is tired and weary. That's all.' Replied Lenren affirmatively.

'I've checked, the parents haven't been told anything about the boy yet. Where do you suppose he is?' The King returned.

Astriel flicked her eyes to meet Lenren's.

'In truth my King, I don't know. But he will return, when he is ready. The man is, and always has been, loyal if nothing else.'

'Nothing else? He is everything else and more my friend. Ser Ramon has protected my family since I was a child. He is, without question, a master of the sword and I count it a blessing from the Gods that I am the King who has him on my side. As I do, of course, for all of you.'

Brodon returned, raising his glass. The guests returned the favour. Again, the Archers gaze fell to each other, in truth they were terrified about Ramon. They had been for a while now, he seemed fragile in ways they couldn't explain. Astriel looked to the darkness around her, the dimly lit hall felt as though it were losing size with every passing moment. She looked deeper into the darkness behind Lenren and kept her gaze there for a moment.

'The Archers have served me and the Kingdom well this past year. You have gone beyond your duty to the crown. For that, I thank you.' Brodon declared, again raising his glass.

'That is what we do my Lord, and we will do so until our last day.' Returned Astriel defiantly.

Lenren smiled.

The drinking continued long into the night, tales of days long gone and singing of songs long written were enjoyed, until at last, as the last candle let go of its flame, the Halls of Ceraborn fell silent.

Chapter Three

As the girl walked through the forests, with the rain pouring heavier with every passing hour, she realised truly how far from home she was. She looked around her, the thick tree lines brought no comfort, and she was aware of the stalking beasts, roadside bandits and convicts that were undoubtedly within them. She held her cloak tightly, her knuckles swollen and scabbed and her fingers turning a light blue. But still she kept on her path, and the howling winds and lightning which followed her; crept ever closer. After a mile or so she came, at last, to the outer edge of the village. The tall stone walls ran across road and cut through the forests that flanked the path. She came through the gate keep without trouble and found herself in the large market, though the place was all but barren at this time. There were a few farmers herding cattle along the road, but otherwise the place was quiet. The girl looked up, there were no guards on the walls, neither were there any royal flags flying above the gate keep. And yet this was the stronghold of Cerran, one of the Furthest East holdings but by far the most powerful. From this stronghold King Brodon's armies were trained and, for the majority, housed. The town the stronghold enveloped was a small but adequate market town, full of bakers and ale houses. It was from Cerran that the great legions marched West towards the White Woods to hunt for boar and practise archery when the deer were plenty, and marched East towards the Eastern Edge where the coastal winds blew fierce and men often did not come back from. The

Kingdom itself, Sera, was held by Lord Tharandal, formerly Master of the Treasury. Tu rarely vacated his home, other than for the rare meetings of the High Lords, though they were now few and far between. The girl kept herself close to the shadows, somehow, she felt safer there than in the open of the market. She stopped and entered the long narrow streets which ran away from the gate keep and continued to search for the Inn House. Eventually she came to it, they had told her that she'd know the place when she saw it, and they were right. The Inn stood alone, an old stone-built structure clad in black painted timber and adorned with a newly thatched roof. There was firelight emanating from within the place, the soft glow against the windows held an almost heavenly appearance. The girl opened the door slowly, The Bear and Bard was a simple place in its interior, long tables covered most of the floor space, with curved seating areas cut into the corners of the main bar.

The Inn keeper stared at the girl keenly, the place was quiet at this time of night.

'What brings you here miss?' He asked, with a well worked on smile.

'Nothing much, I need food and a bed for the night.' the girl replied, still taking in the place.

The Inn keeper poured a pint of ale, slid it across the bar to the girl along with a small bronze key.

'Third room on the right up the stairs.' He said, lowering his tone.

The girl nodded, took her drink and key, turned and made way towards the narrow staircase against the back wall. At the last step she turned again, the bar was empty.

The crackle of the fireplace subsided, and the windows slowly replaced themselves with solid stone.

Melran was a woman with experience of the world far beyond what her years should have permitted her. Thrown, as a barrel from a trade ship, from place to place and tossed aside once her duties had been completed. Home was a foreign concept to her, and as she unlocked the door to her room, she felt that familiar feeling within her, of misplacement and an overwhelming sense of distance from her truth. She took off her heavy bags, unbuckled her cloak and let it fall to the floor. She threw the bags in a corner and let her hair fall. It felt like the only way of relaxation in her life, the only thing she could let go of. She tugged at her clothes, soaked from the storms that had followed her, and sighed.

PAIN

She tilted her head, narrowed and slowly closed her eyes.

PAIN

Melran breath slowed as she held her focus.

FIRE

She felt a jolt and released her breathe, she gasped for air and stumbled onto the bed. Her hands began to shake, she struggled to catch her breathe. Eventually she returned to a calmness, but not the same as before. She held herself, as she had done through nights before, and waited for the shivering to stop. Eventually it did, it was usually the last thing to go. First was the bond itself, that would snap almost like a twig under foot. Then it would be the breath, it was as she'd been kept underwater and was, at the last

second, allowed a gulp of desperate air. Her lungs would begin to burn and claw at her from the inside. After that she'd get the headache, vicious but fairly quick, like the cut of a guillotine. Finally, her body would shiver, mainly her hands, as the energy left her body and left her a husk of what the bond had made her for those few minutes or seconds, it changed every time it happened. Melran sat on her bed, and as the shivers subsided, she felt herself returning to herself again. The whole bond had lasted maybe five minutes, if that, but it had been strong and certainly stronger than before. He would be proud of her, proud of her control and her fearlessness. She was scared, as she had been every time, and as she would be every time after that. She picked up and held her ale close to her chest, almost as if were a hot tea or at the very least the closest to it that she had.

Melran had been wandering for days, perhaps weeks, it had all started to blend together as she had made her way along the Iron Paths and through the White Woods. All that seemed a distant memory now, it was nothing more than a snowflake in a snowstorm to her. Somehow, amid her travels, she had lost her connection to the weather that had tormented her along the roads and hills. She thought back, to the night where she'd slept in a small cave along the borders of the White Woods, and how she'd seen a small juvenile golden Eagle watching over her from its nest, built from twigs and moss and tucked into a crevice within the back wall of the cave. It had watched her keenly, bobbing its small head up and down and occasionally letting out small bleating squawks. She had

been soaked that evening too, sheltering from a sleet storm that came over from the North with ferocious power and might. She had bunkered down quickly afterwards and made sure to keep herself far enough into the cave to keep warm but also close enough to the opening that if, in the likely chance of a wandering beast approaching, she would have eyes on it and be able to act accordingly. The White Woods were quite foreign to her, and indeed they had earned their name. The place covered, to the best of her knowledge, around twelve miles or so and incorporated very little in the way of settlement for travellers. There was a path leading North to the Valley of Kings, where Brodon I had landed over a century and a half ago and had spread his armies across the lands of the West to conquer and thrive, but there was little else. The place was covered in thick tall spruce and pine trees, most of which had seen both the conquest and long before that. There were one or two small frozen ponds, thick ice sheets covered the black waters now, and the pike that swam within them would now be swarming. Melran, as she had advanced through the thickets, had also noted small, raised hillocks, most coming deep within the Northern Quarter of the forest, and that she suspected to have been remnants of times before the Western folk. She had spent two days and a night within the White Woods and seen all that she needed to in order that she knew better than to go there again. From deep within she heard snarls and calls, the likes of which she had not heard before, along with the unmistakable howling of grey wolves. She had, on her final day, come across fresh tracks of a pack which led off the main path towards the Valley of Kings. Melran knew that, had she

followed the road she would have been met perhaps not by the pack, but at the least by thieves or black folk, who now called Kraven's Point they're home. Kraven's Point was North East of the forest, towards the coast and a notorious place of the Kingdoms. It was the place men went to die, an ancient hell built by the Elder Folk long ago and now manned by one hundred Kingsmen of Ceraborn. She had heard stories about Kraven's Point, all she hoped not to be truthful.

As she sat on the edge of her bed, cupping her ale tightly, Melran became aware that the rain was beginning to soften against her window. The bright beams of moonlight were now piercing the once grey blankets of cloud and the night was becoming more and more calm, she stood looking out across the town square and saw small groups of soldiers wandering the streets. She didn't doubt for a second where they had been, she could hear the laughter and the conversations from the whore house not two streets away. She watched the men; some were even bold enough to carry swords with them and saw that they were heading south down towards the end of the town. In the distance, silhouetted by moonlight, the outline of the fortifications could be seen. It was a mammoth sight against the forests, sixty feet tall, constructed of huge wooden logs and six stone towers that lined across the frontage of the stronghold. It had been built by the Old King and had changed little since its original construction all those years ago. Melran investigated the distance, the skyline was dotted with the light of lanterns that were strung in ten feet gaps across the frontage and she could

hear the dull clanging of chains as soldiers were transported up and down the structure by a series of pulley systems. She moved away from the window, looked up into the stars and moonlight, she felt her heart racing in her chest, she took a swig of ale and sighed.

When Melran awoke she found her room sparkling with sunlight. She tossed and turned in her bed but finally gave in as she heard the tapping of ravens atop the Inn House roof. She went to the ale, took a rather unsatisfactory sip and, realising that the liquid was lukewarm, promptly spat it back into the tankard. She listened, the sounds of soldiers being drilled rang across the town square, as did the snorts and squawking of the animals that were to be sold or butchered. Melran quickly dressed, her clothes were still slightly damp, but the sunlight had dried them beyond what she had expected. She reclasped her hood and picked up one of the smaller bags, she rummaged through it and found the scroll that she had been tasked with handing to Commander Azin. She brushed her hair and quickly covered it with her hood before making her way back downstairs and into the main bar. The barman from the previous evening was there, standing in the same place, polishing a few pieces of cutlery.

'I need to find Commander Azin.' Melran said, keeping her voice low even though she could not see anyone but the barman in the place. The door to the place opened, three spearmen bundled themselves in and sat beside the fireplace in the far corner.

'Morning lads, come for my famous breakfast I presume?' Said the Inn keeper with a hearty laugh. He hadn't so much as glanced at Melran.

The spearman broke off from their chatter and confirmed that they were indeed here for food and drink, it was their day off from watch and they intended to use it by sitting in the Inn and drinking as much as they possibly could. Melran looked at the men, all were young with thick golden hair and fair olive coloured skin. They were probably Southerners, she thought to herself, the sun had parched their skin as it had done hers, though she felt that hers was almost fading from years in the East. She could tell they were spearmen by the yellow linen shirt that they wore, along with the grey woollen cloaks that hung to just below the knees. They were distinctive in their way. Melran held her gaze on the men, she watched them return to laughter and loud chatter as they waited for their meals and drinks.

'Commander Azin, I need to find him.' She said, turning back to the bar. The Inn keeper was gone, the polish rag and cutlery still in its place. Melran grumbled, she couldn't see into the kitchens, but she could smell something cooking. She found a stool and waited, minutes went by and still the keeper did not return. Her patience, which at the best of times was a delict thing, was now being tested.

Closer.

She felt her hands begin to shake.

Closer.

She closed her eyes, held her breath.

Fire.

She focused on the voice.

Fire. Burning.

She tried to speak, she tried to reply, but all too quickly she felt her hands shake more violently and soon her breath returned. Melran felt a hand on her shoulder, she turned in a flash and brandished a small pocketknife from her bag.

'By the Gods! Careful miss, I was only checking you were good.' Said one of the blonde-haired spearmen as he backed away from Melran. She struggled to control her breathing but kept her arms up to keep the knife pointing at the man's chest.

'Please miss, it's alright. My name is Benji, I'm a spearman for the stronghold. Are you alright?' He said slowly, unsure of the girl. His friends stood behind him, one with his hand on the tip of his sword whilst the other kept his eyes firmly on Melran.

'Commander Azin. I need to speak with him.' Melran said, her words stumbled over themselves as she tried to control her shaking. The men looked to each other, and then back to Melran.

'Commander Azin?' Said the one with his eyes on her. Melran moved her outstretched arm to face him. The boy gulped and looked to his friends.

'Yes, are you deaf? Commander Azin. I need to speak with him.' Melran replied angrily.

Again, the men looked to each other.

'Well?! Do you know where he is or not?' she said, her voice still trembling with a mixture of fear and anger.

'We know where he is Miss, yes. We can take you if you'd like?' Said one of the men meekly.

'No, I don't need you to take me. I just need to know where he is.' Melran replied.

'Then you'll get nowhere, they won't let you past the first guards without someone from the stronghold who can confirm you.' Replied the tallest man, still with his hand on his hilt.

Melran slowly felt the familiar feeling of the bond fading away. Her eyes shut for a second and she slowly lowered her knife. She fought to catch her breath.

'What's your name Miss?' asked the first man.

'Melran. I've been walking for a long time trying to find the Commander. I've got a message for him.' Melran said.

'What message?' asked the boy, looking more confused than before.

'I cannot tell you. The message is for Azin and Azin only.' Melran returned quickly, almost without thought.

The boy nodded slowly.

'We can take you to the keep and see if they'll see you. But without telling us who the message is from then-'

'Lord Elmorc.' Melran said.

The men looked uncertain.

'Elmorc? The Lord of Blackridge you mean?' Interjected the taller boy.

Melran nodded, she took the scroll from her bag and showed them Elmorc's seal.

Benji inspected the seal. He'd been stationed at Blackridge not six months previously, only for a short time before Elmorc had stationed the guards further South near Abbots Ridge, he knew the seals the Lord used, and he knew that this was all too real.

'Look miss, I don't know what you want with Commander Azin, but I do know that Lord Elmorc and Azin don't exactly see eye to eye. We've all heard the stories.' Benji said, his voice quietening as he finished.

Melran looked at the young men, time was shortening and Azin needed to be given the scroll. She placed her knife back into her bag and gazed towards the door.

'Take me to him, and I'll pay you.' She said confidently.

The men chuckled, but Benji met her gaze and saw her seriousness.

'Look lads, I don't know about her or this message, but I know his mark. I know Elmorc, it must be something important. Don't you think?' He said turning back to his friends.

The two men sighed heavily. The taller one looked Melran up and down.

'How exactly would you pay us?' He licked his bottom lip. Melran turned and smiled at the man, she looked him up and down before getting off her stool and standing not a foot from the man. He smiled, running his finger along the edge of sword which was still holstered in his sheath.

'You seem like a boy who can handle the heat.' She said with a seductive wink. She turned back to Benji, his blonde hair was fell to the left, she brushed it to behind his ear.

'Now please, can we go.'

Chapter Four

Ramon awoke with a jolt. His head was banging, and his body ached. A usual morning for the Archer. He looked around; he was alone. Again, nothing unusual there. He fumbled around the dark room for his shirt, he slung it over himself with a grunt as the pains from his bruises enhanced. He found a wine glass beside him and quickly gulped down the last quarter before finally allowing himself to take a moment. He moved across the room, opened the wooden shutters of the window and let the sunlight barrage its way onto the bed. There were a few dry blood stains from his wrist. He looked at the rag he'd tied around it, it would have to do for now. He looked down into the street, he saw a few beggars sat near the fountains with handmade wooden tools. He scoffed as he looked across and saw Arch Chancellor Velgar performing a sermon to a quickly growing crowd. Ramon remembered his first meeting with Velgar, in the Tower of Erin in Arisen following the birth of the Prince. Velgar had been voted as Arch Chancellor by the High Lords in what had been a unanimous decision following the death of Arch Chancellor Nempal the previous winter. Velgar had been a student of Nempal for many years, first serving as a missionary in the Southern Seas and even serving as a guide to the Ashira Kahn when they had visited Brodon nearly three decades ago. Of course, Ramon hadn't known all of this prior to his meeting with the man, but the Chancellor had a way of telling him things. Ramon looked

at the crowd, people were barging at one another to get but a step closer to Velgar. He would be reading from the Dhaka Minara, book of the Gods. Ramon remembered little about the book itself, he'd forgotten all that when he'd joined the Kingsmen. In war, no matter how much you prayed, it still hurt like a bastard when the arrow went through you.

Ramon held off until the crowds began to disperse before heading out into the streets. He preferred it when it was quieter, he had spent most of his life flanked at either side with row upon row in front and behind him. Now was his time to be alone. The Arch Chancellor had returned to The Inner Halls of Ceraborn no doubt, having offered the people a dose of hope in the name of the Gods. The man walked on, he avoided most of the main streets, instead he made his way steadily along the side roads until he came to the banks of the river. He looked ahead and saw the troop carrier, it floated almost silently, but distance laughter and clanking of chains and whips could be heard amongst the birdsong of the river way. He walked further along the bank, along the Outer docks and down towards the outer walls of Ceraborn. There he found it, a large white and black building, not six months old, with a large sprawling front garden with lush green surroundings. It was right along the riverbank; two small boats were anchored off a private dock and there was a large ornate fountain at the front of the property. There was a house guard stood at the entrance to the place. He was a tall thick black man with deep set purple eyes and long dark hair. He had a golden bracelet around both wrists and ankles

and a long thin spear in his hand. Ramon strolled across the bank towards the man.

'Stop. Who are you?' the man said in a low deep voice.

'Ser Ramon of Garth, Black Archer of the King Brodon II of the West. Now move you fucking glorified statue.' Ramon replied before shoving his way past the man. The man pulled Ramon back by his shoulder, the two shared a tense stare.

'The master isn't here, he's fishing.' Said the man, still grasping Ramon's shoulder. The Archer shrugged the man off and looked around the garden.

'And the Lady?' He asked.

The man glanced across and gestured off towards the back end of the place, past an overhanging treeline.

'Be careful. The Lady has already lost one child in the name of the King.' He said solemnly.

Ramon readjusted his shirt and walked down a paved pathway past the fountain. He could hear intense birdsong now, along with the slow running water of the river to his right. He ducked down to avoid the overhanging ivy and found himself at the back of the property. It was an enormous lawn with perfectly primed plants and bushes. The Archer looked around but saw no one. He followed the path further and came to the edge of a raised patio, carved out of huge chunks of white stone from the Southern cliffs of Korgen.

'I thought you'd come.' Said a woman sat underneath a wooden veranda with a large bowl of summer fruits in front of her. She was an aging woman, her face wrinkled but still with a shadow of beauty. She wore a long duck

egg blue tunic which was patterned with golden circles. She spoke softly, quietly as if speaking only to herself.

Ramon climbed a few steps, the woman looked at him and pointed to his sword.

'Foul weapons.' She said fiercely.

'Lady Greynire, my name is Ser Ramon of Garth-' the woman held her hand out and wagged her thin fingers at the Knight.

'I know who you are Archer, and I know why you're here.' Ramon watched a tear fall from the lady's face.

'I had three sons once. Now, as each has pledged himself to our King, I have only one left.' She said, spitting at the thought of the King.

'He did his duty.' Ramon returned.

The Lady snorted.

'Duty? We are at peace dear Ser and yet here you stand at the feet of a Lady who has lost two sons to battle. Tell me if you think that our soft-bellied King knows as much about duty as I do.'

Ramon grunted, he began to turn and walk away before the woman called to him.

'My Eldest boy, he was killed during Erencon. You were there weren't you. The great battle of Erencon. I've tales of you Ser Ramon of Garth, and now I know they are true.' She screamed.

Ramon turned quickly, he fought to control his temper.

'Your sons died for the Kingdom, I tried to save them and -'

'You failed.' replied the crying Lady.

Ramon heard the words echo around him as he marched through the garden, he swung his arms in fury at the ivy, ripping it from its branches before finally barging past the man once again.

'She's told me to kill you if you return again.' the man said with a vicious smile. Ramon stopped, but left without another word.

As Ramon walked back through the city, he looked up at the sky, a perfect blanket of light blue dotted with a few pure white clouds and found himself whistling a familiar tune from his days in the Kingsmen. The Song of Servants, of so he believed it to be called, had been a firm favourite amongst his men during the long marches along the roads and mountain passes. He remembered those long marches more than most battles, only because those were the times when a man had chance to catch a thought as well as a breath. Ramon had been a Commander, rising through the ranks from a spearman in his formative years under Commander Melson. Melson had been a cold-hearted bastard, leading troops across the Grey Mountains in storms and vicious snowstorms. Ramon had been taken under Melson after showcasing skill and valour following an attack on a small troop by a band of Draugar. It had long been suspected that Draugar had been summoned by Rhamanthor during the Long War of the West several centuries ago and long before the Western Kingdoms had been conquered by Brodon and his armies. The troop had begun with thirty men, it ended with ten. Ramon stopped walking through the town, he stopped whistling and turned to face a fruit seller. Astriel stood, her cloak and scarf

concealing her face, facing away from Ramon but all too aware of his presence.

'The King has been waiting for you to return.' She said, turning and throwing him an apple. Ramon caught it easily.

'The King has far greater things to worry over than me, I'm sure of it.' Ramon replied.

Astriel sighed heavily.

'What?' Ramon asked.

'Why must you insist on being like this?' She asked.

'The boy died in our care Astriel. No, in my care. The King looked me in the eye the day we left and told me to bring the boy home safely.'

'You couldn't promise him that Ramon and I'm sure as the Gods that you told him so.' Astriel returned.

'Aye, but you think that makes a difference. You think that just because I know the world, how it works, that that makes it any easier? It doesn't. Not a single bit.' Ramon replied, throwing the apple to the street as he spoke. 'The boy was a soldier; soldiers fight and sometimes they die. If the Gods didn't want it to be so, then they would change the-'

'Don't talk to me of Gods and wars Astriel! I know wars and by the hells I know what little mercy the Gods show during them. The boy was under my protection and now his body, or what's left of it, is being prepared for burial. They're the facts of it.' Ramon returned with frightening anger. He stood closer to Astriel now, he stood towering over her with his thick frame shielding her from the sunlight.

'The King wants to see you. Now.' Astriel returned calmly, but with the tip of her fingers brushing her side, fumbling for the hilt of her dagger.

The two Archers made their way slowly through the city. They kept themselves close, Black Archers weren't always welcome in Ceraborn. They came with a reputation, one of bloodshed and raging vicious campaigns against any who dared to speak against the King. Most of the rumours were just that, rumours, but a few had roots of truth buried deep within them. The Archers had few restrictions in the Western Kingdoms, and Brodon's peaceful rule and alliances with the High Lords meant that more often than not the Archers moved easily through the realms of the West. Yet still the two remained close as they wandered through the streets. Recently there had been rumours regarding the Kludde attacks, and certain fractions of Ceraborn felt that the King had ignored the threats that those who travelled along the Tower Road had faced. The Archers had done the job, and that had now been announced by the Castle to great review. But still the rumbles continued. Brodon's advisors had known of the rumours and rumblings longer than they had cared to admit, though eventually word reached the King. His people, whether in the North or South, had an issue with the Black Archers. The Archers were seen by many as being an antiqued band of mercenaries, thieves who were hired for coin and then killed whatever beast or man the highest bidder could afford. And whilst that origin was undeniable it had not been so for years. To some the Archers were heroes of the realm, though those with this

view often stayed quiet about it. The beast had first been spotted four months previously, as a lone sale sword had encountered it whilst camping along the Tower Road. The beast had not shown itself but had marked the territory and had stalked along the road until dawn. The sale sword had been, according to the tavern crowds, blessed with the luck of all the Gods. Following this the beast had begun to stalk the fields of the farmers, tearing sheep and cattle into pieces and leaving the limbs scattered across the field fences. Many soon began to speculate on the vicious beast of the Tower, with a reward eventually offered to the group of thieves if they could hunt and successfully kill the Grey Bear, as it was thought to be. Of course, the bodies had been found not four days later, with deep slash wounds across the stomachs that were left purified by the salvia that had dripped onto the men as they had fought desperately against the beast.

Ramon kept close to his colleague, not for the fact that he felt she needed any sort of protection, but for the fact that he spotted several men keeping close behind them. The men wore thick grey cloaks, but the attempted concealment of weapons did not fool Ramon for a single moment. He glanced across the town square; a pair of men covered each of the smaller roads that branched off from the square. The Knight put a firm hand on Astriel, she stopped but didn't look to her friend. Suddenly the Archers were aware of the stillness of the place, the market stalls were abandoned, and the people kept inside.

Ramon felt for his sword. Astriel unbuckled her dagger from its holster and slid the blade up into her firm

grip. The pair turned away from one another as a group of three men approached them from the through road, each held his sword defiantly.

'How many?' Ramon asked from the corner of his mouth.

'I count ten in total.' Astriel replied quickly, glancing to the alleyways.

'That's five each.'

Astriel smiled. There wouldn't be an even split, she'd make sure of it.

'You can end this now. No blood needs to be shed here.' Ramon proclaimed loudly as three heavily set, dark skinned men walked up to him. He recognized one of the men as the guard from the garden of Lady Greynire's house.

'The Lord wants blood. As has been taken from him.' Replied the guard, swinging his sword gently in the wind.

'Tell me Ser, what exactly has your Lord asked of you?' Ramon replied.

The men stopped six steps from the Archers.

'The head, a hand or a foot. Just something to hang from his hearth to ensure that Ser Ramon of Garth is dead. As he should be.' Returned the guard with a wicked smile.

Ramon snorted.

Astriel looked to her own group, two held short swords whilst one held a large gilded one with a magnificent bronze handle. She felt the daggers blade against her skin and slowly turned her feet to open her stance. 'Lord Greynire will be tried for this. No matter what, Brodon will not stand for this.' Astriel shouted.

'And I will gladly die. The King of has taken all else from me.' Said Lord Greynire, as he strutted from an alleyway, his sword scratching the ground as he dragged it beside him. Greynire was a thick set man with a sunken face, his hair was greying but flecks of sun fire hair still shone through in places.

'Your boys, they died fighting. As knights should and will for ages to come. You know this more than any, you served Haurtaff. You've held a seat with the Old King and Brodon. You know they want only peace for the Kingdoms.' Ramon shouted, turning to face the Lord. Greynire stopped short of the Archers, flanked by two more sale swords.

'The Old King went mad and his son knows nothing of war or conflicts, yet he sends my sons to die against rebels that dare to raise against his pathetic rule. You think that's true or fair Ramon?' Returned Greynire in a hoarse tone. 'No, no son should die before his father. But the realm must be protected.' The Archer returned.

'And the King? The crown? What of those?'

Ramon remained silent.

'We fight to protect the people of the West. The things we have seen, they would haunt you until the end of days my Lord. Do not think we value any over the realm.' Astriel replied, spitting her words like fire.

The Lord laughed, he drew his sword and pointed it out towards Astriel.

'Says the girl whose life was saved by the King she now serves. Astriel, daughter of the Ashira Kahn. One of the last reminders of a crown that lost its power to those who it had sought to control.' He replied with a smirk.

Astriel bit her tongue and held her ground. It was one of the men that stood against Ramon who made the first move, an ill-advised swing of his sword which Ramon blocked quickly. The clang of steel rang out in the sun-drenched streets and soon after it began to form a melody as the pair engaged in quick paced combat. The guards began to close around Ramon, he threw a quick swing to one of them before grappling him and running the blade of his sword along the man's neck. Ramon felt the warm blood run down his arm as he held the man in at his chest. He pushed the dying man towards the two that remained. It was then that Astriel engaged her own band of assailants, quickly crouching and grabbing at the dry dirt and throwing it at them, the man in front of her was blinded and fumbled at his eyes. Astriel took her chance as she extended her dagger's blade out and slashed the man across the cheek, the skin ripped open and the man screamed as his eye was caught by the tip of the blade and was pulled from its socket. Immediately a second man was on the Archer, he pulled at her cloak and tried to pull her into his blade, but the fabric fell away as the girl unclipped her cloak and pushed it over the men. At this moment she pushed her blade deep into the man's chest and twisted it, the gurgles from under the cloak ensuring that the man was dead. As Ser Ramon engaged the guards, he found that they were established and well trained in swordsmanship. They had skill, that was without question. But as the two attempted to strike the Knight he blocked the blades with his own and pushed back against them. The men encircled Ramon, as sharks do with wounded prey, and slowly began to twirl their blades in an effort to

confuse the Knight. The man to Ramon's left assumed a high guard as the other swung, Ramon parried quickly. Ramon pushed against the man and his blade slid down towards his enemies' hilt. The two were less than a few inches from one another when Ramon quickly pulled away as he caught the sound of a swinging blade against his back. The blade fell, slicing across the neck of the guard, his eyes widened, and his hands quivered as he fell to the floor still writhing. Ramon swung round, the sale sword pulled his blade from his associate and wiped the blood against his shirt. Ramon stood, his breathing heavy and sweat dripping from his brow. Lord Greynire and the sale sword stood in front of him and held their blades outright. Ramon sighed and wiped the sweat from his brow before quickly thrusting hard, the blow landed on the sales sword's blade and pushed it back slightly. Ramon quickly swung again, further knocking the man's balance. With a final swing Ramon knocked the man down and cut deep into the man's right leg. A scream bellowed out across the market. Ramon slashed again, the crunch of bone against steel as the limb was left hanging from a flap of blood-soaked skin.

Astriel lifted herself from her kill and was met with a swift kick from her left, it knocked her down, but she quickly met the blades as they swung at her. Her daggers, though slender, were strong against Western steel. She took her moment and as one of the men swung, she clipped his leg with a blade, forcing him onto his knee. She used the moment to push the man's own blade from his hand, and as he went to steady himself, she cut at his neck. She turned, but was caught on the thigh, the cut

sliced at her skin and she gritted her teeth as she felt her blood drip down over her leg. The man pushed the tip of his blade deeper before pulling it out and readying a final blow. Astriel closed her eyes but was met with nothing. She felt the blade against her side, she turned her head and saw the man stumbling backwards, his hands clutching an arrow that had struck his chest. Greynire looked around the place but saw nothing, his men looked around but saw nothing. Another arrow was fired, this time hitting the Lord in the back of the leg, before a final one hit his shoulder. The Lord fell to the ground, he held his sword to prop him up. Astriel and Ramon looked around them, the men in the alleyways quickly began to scatter off. Ramon kicked at the Lord's sword, knocking it from his hand and forcing the Lord further down. He looked up to the Archer, spat at his feet and waited for his fate.

Chapter Five

Brodon sat on the throne, his Queen beside him and flanked on either side by Kingsmen in pristine armour. He looked around, there were eight men shackled and kneeling before him. All had committed an act which he could not afford to simply ignore or have his council deal with. The attempted murder of Ser Ramon and Astriel, as well as hate speech against the King himself and questioning of his rule over the lands had seen Lord Greynire and his conspirators condemned to death.

'I have not condemned a man to death by Royal decree during my reign. I had hoped, maybe foolishly, that we had passed those days. Perhaps I was wrong.' He said, staring down at Greynire, who still wore his bloodstained battle armour. The Lord turned his head, the iron collar forcing his head to hand against his chest as he fought to keep himself somewhat up right. He saw Lenren, leaning casually against a pillar, and snarled at the Archer. Lenren looked back to the Lord and then to the King.

'On the count of attempted murder against The Black Archers of Ceraborn, I sentence you to death by hanging. Those who this sentence is passed to include Lord Elser Greynire, and Sers Mason Revlar, Padstone Relmy and James Condor. The sentence shall be carried out tomorrow morning in the name of I, King Brodon Second of his Name and Ruler of the Western Kingdoms. For the rest, they shall be sent to Kraven's Point and serve the sentences as prescribed by the laws of the land. Thirty years to each

man.' The King announced, and with a final fling of his wrist the men were dragged from the Great Hall and taken down into the depths of the dungeons, with no hope of escape and awaiting death- in whichever form it came.

The doors were closed, and the hall once again fell deadly silent. Lenren began to walk toward the door but was stopped by a heavy hand on his shoulder. He turned, Brodon stood beside him.

'You think there's more?' the King asked.

'We captured who we could my King. Those who were involved are long gone by now.' Lenren returned. The King seemed unconvinced by the response and looked back towards the throne; his wife sat waiting for him.

'If the people are unhappy at my rule, what if a rebellion begins? What then?' He replied.

'A rebellion? Brodon, the Kingdoms are at peace. You will be known for that until the end of days. The people are happy. This changes nothing, the Lord is mad with grief, but murder will not fill that void.' The Archer returned. Brodon, with eyes plagued of worry, bit his lips and patted his friend on the shoulder before returning to his wife and sitting on his throne.

Lenren walked along the halls alone. The walls were lit with the occasional lantern but otherwise they were oddly dark. Dark, and quiet. As the Archer wandered the South halls, he came to the astronomy Tower, a long winding staircase which led towards a large room with a domed roof and four enormous astronomical clock faces. Built by The Old King during his early years, when his

mind was occupied by simpler things than dragons and other legends, he had spent several years enhancing his knowledge of the stars that shone above his Kingdom. He had even traded an astrolabe from Cyronos, though this now lay covered by a large net and covered in thick layers of dust. The room now lay bare, the book shelving's now held barely a quarter of the old collections, as they were now kept in the vaults of The Welling down in the Southern edges of the Kingdoms. Softly the Archer climbed the stone steps, he opened the wooden door and it creaked loudly as if it were yawning awake from a long sleep. The place lay thick with dust, the clocks were covered in thin covers of linen embroidered with the Old King's seal. Lenren smiled, there had been good times under Haurtaff, though history offered instead to misplace those details and replace them with his cruelty and madness instead. He lifted one of the covers and saw the glinting golden outlines of the signs of Men. There were six signs of Men, each found within the stars by the Eastern astronomers that had charted the skies centuries ago.

It was believed, as Lenren knew, that Cyronos had been the birthplace of the Signs and that the once great Keep of Kherla was where those men had first seen the signs within the stars. He further pulled at the cover; the signs glistened in the sunlight for the first time over twenty years. The Dragon, The Pike, The Bear, The Dove, The Sister and The Waters. Lenren had been born under The Pike, and it seemed as though it had borne some truth to his life. He felt the scarring on his arm, the healed but still twisted flesh that forever reminded him of his sacrifice to

the Kingdoms. Lenren was a man weary with age, his mind a swirling vortex of memories that had shaped him into the man that now stood looking at his own reflection against the astronomical clock. He looked deep into his emerald eyes, his skin greying and his long jet-black hair speckling with grey, and found a sadness reflected back. He replaced the cover and moved towards the shelves; thick wooden plank built from the old oaks that once forested where Ceraborn now stood. Of course, the forest still spread out around the place but Lenren could not help but wonder if the forest felt a part of itself had been ripped away with the construction of the city. The old leather-bound books that were still stored were thick with dust, he pulled one from its place and wiped the cover, the gold leaf font pressed into the cover revealed itself in ancient Elder Folk, a language few now read or could understand. He opened the book, the quiet crackling of the spine echoed around him as he found handwritten text with beautifully illustrated pages.

'The books of Si'Namar.' The familiar voice of Velgar announced. Lenren turned and smiled. The Arch Chancellor walked closer and examined the pages, pointing to the illustrations. 'Beautiful, I've often come up here and stared at them.'

'Aye. But what do they mean?' He asked, flicking through the pages.

'They are believed, and this was only a theory of Arch Maester Tulloch, to be the legends of the Elder Folk. Stories passed from generation to generation.' The Chancellor returned.

'And the name? What is Si'Namar?'

'The author my boy, Si'Namar was a chronicle of the Elder Folk. Much as with Rha Thu'Ma in the East. Si'Namar wrote many a book such as this, some such as this were discovered buried in the Valley of Kings.' The Chancellor took the book from Lenren and gently closed it.

'Buried?' Lenren said.

'The peoples of the West were at war; they had been for hundreds if not thousands of years. And then, as they settled, Brodon Westermann came and conquered them.' replied the Chancellor, a sadness surrounding his words. Lenren nodded in acknowledgement and watched the as Velgar returned the book to the shelving by slotting it back between three other tomes. The two stood for a moment, in quiet and each embraced the surroundings in his own way.

'The King is worried.' Lenren said finally.

'I know. There have been rumours of discontent around the Kingdom since the Kludde attacks. But rest assured that Brodon has done all he can.' Replied Velgar affirmatively.

'I know that, and I agree. But the High Lords must ensure that these rumblings are quashed. Brodon cannot go the way of his father.' Returned Lenren.

Velgar glanced across the room towards the Archer and sighed heavily.

'The High Lords are doing what they can. As are we, rumours are a part of life. The King's worrisome nature will, in time, subside. I'm sure of it.'

Lenren remained unsatisfied, but simply smiled and left the place, closing the door behind him and whistling as

he walked down the stone steps of the tower and back into the dimly lit corridors of the Castle.

Astriel sat crossed legged sharpening her blades. She held the whetstone against her thigh and ran the edge of the blade against it. She held the hilt softly, feeling the small rubies that were embedded within the metal with the tips of her fingers. Against her better judgement she looked up, Ramon sat in a chair opposite her.

'You ought to be resting.' He said in a low grunt.

'It's fine. I've had them see to it, it's been stitched, and I've got the medicine. I'll be fine.' Astriel returned, wincing as she moved her leg to avoid the pain that was shooting down it. Ramon grumbled, threw the small piece of bread that he had been eating into the fireplace beside him and rubbed his eyes. The two had been mostly silent for the majority of the evening, Ramon had carried his friend nearly three miles along the streets and up towards the castle before they were met by four Kingsmen on horseback who collected Astriel and made way quickly to the infirmary. Ramon had decided to walk alone along the pathway, kicking at the stones along it as he did so. As Astriel was taken to the Castle, she resisted the pain and grappled with the rag that Ramon had tied against her leg. The guards had tried to stop her but Astriel pulled against the makeshift bandaging and felt for the cut, it was deeper than she had expected. It hadn't cut quite the bone but still it was deeper than any she had received so far. She had been surprised to see a young man, barely out of The Welling, treating her wounds with a bizarre mixture of Wenlock weeds and honey. He had bathed the wound in

water, washed it clean and then tightly stitched it before applying a layer of bandaging made from linen brought from the East. The door opened slowly, illuminating the room in a dim golden light. Lenren wandered in, closed the door behind him and stood before his friends.

'What were you doing?' He asked, arms folded.

'They had a right to know, if I had waited the King would've buried the boy before his parents knew of his death.' Ramon returned, staring off into the distance.

Lenren said nothing.

'I needed to find him, make sure he was safe.' Astriel replied, her focus solely on her blades.

Lenren took a few steps, closing in his friend's.

'You could've been killed.' He said gruffly.

'We were handling it.' Ramon returned angrily.

'Oh really? Because from what I saw Astriel was on the ground with a sword in her thigh and you were bathing yourself in a bloodbath. We are not bandits who fight in the streets! You know how things are right now!' Lenren said, raising his voice almost to a beast's growl.

Ramon snarled but returned nothing further as Astriel turned her head to her leader and looked apologetically.

'The realms are at peace, but rumours are spreading, and men are dying. Our duty is to the King and to protect the people of the Kingdoms against whatever the Gods throw against us. We are not here to fight disillusioned Lord's.'

'The bastard chose his fight. He lost; it's the way things are.' Ramon said, standing and facing Lenren.

'And without my arrows Ramon, you'd have faced man after man. You would've lost Astriel and doubtless

the battle. Learn when you have made the wrong call.' Lenren said, standing not a pace or two from Ramon.

'He brought the fight. We defended ourselves.' the Knight returned.

'No, you didn't follow orders. You abandoned us and left without so much as a word of where you were going. Then you decide to inform Lady Greynire of the death of her son when you know full well the vendetta that they hold against you. You knew the risks; you've played this game long enough.' Lenren said, gritting his teeth as he did so.

'They deserved to know. And I don't give a damn what they think of me. All I care about is that people know me for what I am, not what they've heard.' Ramon replied, his voice softening.

'I give a damn Ramon. I give a damn.' The Archer returned, shoving a finger into his friend's chest.

A knock tactfully interrupted the confrontation. Lenren pulled it open, a small skinny messenger stood meekly in the doorway with a worried smile and a scroll in his hand. Lenren looked to the man and knew, at his gaze fell to the scroll, that something was dreadfully wrong.

Having read the scroll, Lenren held the paper firmly before crushing it between his hands.

'Three of the men that Greynire were linked to have been found on the Northern Roads.'

'Dead?' Ramon guessed, sitting back into his chair.

Lenren nodded. 'Poison. Lemrock by the looks of it.'

'Nasty stuff.' Astriel said as she inspected her blades before carefully rubbing them in polish.

Again, Lenren nodded.

'Who were they? Do we know?' Said Ramon.

'Two are sale swords from the West, the other is Alistair Ras-Lews. He's been wanted for a few years now.'

Ramon grunted at the mention of the name, Alistair Ras-Lews was a mercenary who had been sentenced to Kraven's Point after abandoning his post at Lensia and venturing, with a small band of vagrants, to Blackridge before killing a man and his daughter in their own home. The father was found by friends the morning after, nailed to his wall and blood scrawled across the place as if a pig had been gutted. The daughter was not found until three days after, without her clothing and assaulted. Her body battered and swollen had been crudely buried beside the riverbed. The High Lords had sent soldiers at first, they had found the girl's body and had tracked Ras-Lews and his men to a small outpost in the rocky outcrops of Blackridge. The soldiers charged the place, engaged and killed the men but without Ras-Lews. That's when Ramon had become involved, brought in on the request of the High Lords and venturing alone into the outcrop of the West.

He had tracked the man for a week, venturing East from Blackridge and towards Abbots Ridge. His path, to Ramon, was unclear and it soon became apparent that the men was merely scrambling across the continent attempting to simply lose his man. Eventually, as the men scrambled through river ways and across the dirt crops, on an evening blighted with cold grey mists that left the land damp and cold, the Knight found Alistair Ras-Lews. The Knight came upon a crudely constricted camp, the dying

embers of a fire and the carcass of a deer freshly cooked, made way towards a small stream before aiming his bow and shooting twice as Ras-Lews attempted to swim across the fast-flowing waters.

'So, Ras-Lews was in the service of Greynire?' Astriel surmised.

'It seems so. The King has requested that Greynire's son be brought from Cerran before word spreads.' Lenren returned affirmatively. Lenren turned his eyes back to Ramon, who sat with clenched fists and a snarl that could rival that of an alpha grey wolf. Lenren watched his friend carefully, knowing that at any moment the fires could bubble over and burst from the man.

'Ramon, help Astriel to bed and get some rest.' He said, going to pat Ramon's shoulder before stopping himself and simply nodding to Astriel before he left the room. The Archers sat in silence for a moment, the crackle of the fireplace bringing the only relief from Ramon's heavy rage filled breathe. Astriel watched her friend, his gaze shifting quickly from the flames back to her.

'You need to talk.' Astriel said.

'What good would that do? I have been lambasted once this evening for talking, and you've been stabbed for my actions as well. I haven't exactly got the best results from my talking.' Ramon returned with a slight smile.

Astriel laughed, but again winced as the pain returned to her leg.

'I'm sorry.' Ramon said, looking down at the bandage, his smile quickly fading.

'Ramon, we are Archers of the West. I expect a few bruises and injuries from time to time.' Astriel returned with a comforting smile of her own.

The Knight lifted himself from his chair, carefully put his arms around his friend and lifted her, propping her against his chest and putting an arm around his neck as she hobbled towards the bed. Astriel gritted her teeth as she lay her head on the pillow and placed another under her leg. Ramon threw a log onto the fire, igniting a quick succession of sparks as the flames grew higher before slowly burning down as they encompassed the wood and slowly burnt away at the ends, and pulled his chair closer to the bed.

'You need to rest. Lenren is right.' He said, placing a palm softly on Astriel's forehead, he felt the beading sweat on her cold skin. He glanced to the small emerald bottles beside the bed which held her medicine. There were twelve of them in total, one a day until the swelling reduced enough for her to bare weight again.

'Tell me a story.' Astriel replied, her voice descending into a drug induced sleep.

'A story? What kind of story?' Ramon said scrunching his face and relaxing back into his chair.

'An exciting one.' Astriel returned quietly.

The Archer watched his friend's eyes as they slowly looked around the room, not focusing on anything in particular, before falling heavily shut. He sighed, rubbed the back of his head and looked again towards the bandaging.

'Erengon.' He said softly, as he reached down to feel his own thigh, tracing the twisted flesh where the arrow

had found its mark on that fateful day. It seemed almost a dream to him now, but ever so vivid. 'I was there, after the fall of your Father's kingdom, and with our own rebellion gaining force. Oh, I was there. We tore through them, like a pack of wolves at a herd of deer. One by one we got them. Oh, they tried, but they did not stand a chance. Not even with magic.'

Chapter Six

The visions began to fade away, as the great black seas that surrounded Astriel began to melt away around her and the bright beams of sunlight fell from the skies around her and rested against her sweat drenched cheeks. She awoke with a gasp, clenching at her stomach and shivering with a burning coldness. She quickly reached into the darkened room and fumbled for a bottle, brought it to her lips and drank the putrid smelling medicine in a large forcefully gulp. She struggled to keep the liquid down, tangy and staining her tongue a deep bronze colour, as she fought back several heaving breathes. She let her arms fall to her side, long thick rivers of sweat branching across her forehead, and controlled her breathing slowly. She let her eyes adjust to the dull morning light, the few beams of sunlight dancing across her bed and across her face offered little other than annoyance to her. She looked to her left, an empty chair sat beside the bed.

A moment or two passed, until through the darkness Astriel's ears tuned themselves to the quiet settled breathing of an unseen visitor. She looked down the bed and towards the fireplace, but her weariness and the lack of light prevented her from seeing anything other than a vague indefinable outline hunching over the dying embers and stirring a pot.

She quietly moved her hands, feeling around for her daggers. They weren't there. She tried not to panic, tried to remember her training. But her training had never engaged

with this scenario, and therefore she resorted to an abrasive action of smashing the bottle against the bedside table and pointing it towards the visitor.

'Take another step bastard and I'll cut your throat.' She said, summoning as much strength as she could. It wasn't all that much, she struggled to lift herself upright and had to use her arm to prop herself to a suitable angle. The stranger turned from the pot quickly, obviously surprised. It was a slender figure, and Astriel could now make out the outline of a fine fitting dress and coronet atop its head.

'My Lai?' The Archer enquired, slowly lowering the bottle.

'Yes Astriel. Please, put down the weapon.' Said the Queen, taking a few cautious steps forward, her hands out in front of her.

Astriel let the bottle fall and sighed a deep relief.

'I thought you were-' She began.

'An assassin?' Interjected the Queen with a wry smile as she took the empty seat beside the bed. 'I'm flattered you think of me as so ferocious.'

Astriel laughed, though it was dampened with coughs and splutters.

'In your youth perhaps. Though I still think you'd give any knight or mercenary a run for his money.' She said, again coughing. The Queen placed a hand on the girl's head, took a moment and nodded to herself.

'What?' said Astriel confused.

The Queen got up, moved back over the fireplace and began to stir at the pot that sat in the embers. 'I've spoken with the Maester, they believe you are suffering with a fever. We must calm it, before it takes full hold of you.'

Astriel felt her heavy chest and winced. She watched as the Queen further stirred the pot, before removing it from the embers and bringing it closer to the bed.

'It smells foul. What is it?' Asked Astriel.

'Meldew leaf and spices. It will help, I promise.' Said the Queen in as comforting a voice as she could muster. She took the stirrer, held the pot close to Astriel and fed her the softly bubbling concoction.

Brodon stood atop a large wooden platform which overlooked the inner courtyard of the castle. Below him stood several knights, each holding a large spear towards the disgraced Lord Greynire who was stood defiantly in ragged garbs. The air was cool, the sun was beginning to rise in the West, but the courtyard was still dull and filled with shadows. There was a rhythmic wind coming from the South, and the Royal banners fluttered and whipped as they caught the tides against them. As the lifeless body of James Condor was slowly lowered to the ground the King watched the three condemned men closely. He had chosen against a public execution, instead he gave the men a last shred of dignity. The executioner stripped Padstone Relmy, the man shivered in the morning air, he frantically looked around as he was led up the crude wooden steps towards the trapdoor. He was chained around his ankles and wrists, but his collar was removed relieving the harsh bruising underneath. Brodon stared at the man, and the man met his stare with a vengeful stare. The man spat at his feet and barred his teeth to the King. Behind him Arch Chancellor Velgar stood, he gave the man a moment to look around him. He saw no friendly faces, even his

family had rejected the invitation, and had sworn an allegiance to the Crown and renounced any involvement in the plot against the Archers.

'I ask you this, Padstone Relmy, speak now or forever hold yourself until you meet with the Gods.' Velgar announced.

Silence.

The King nodded to Velgar, and Velgar gave the word to the executioner. The rope was placed around the man's neck, tightened and then adjusted a final time. A moment went by, and the King watched as the man began to quiver in fear. The door was released, and a faint gurgling echoed around the place. The man's legs kicked wildly for a minute or so, before once again silence resumed. Lenren walked a few steps forward, resting his arms against the barrier and leaning forward to see down into the yard below. He watched as the body was lifted and the rope removed.

'I hope to the Gods that days like this are at an end.' Brodon murmured to him.

'I hope so too, my King.' Lenren replied. He turned and met with Ramon's disapproving gaze. Lenren knew all too well about the rumours that had begun to circulate as well as the thoughts of his own friend. There was a number of people who believed that the King would only find himself in this position more and more as the years went by. Peace and prosperity could only reign so long, and if the usage of the Archers was to continue, then more and more rebels would voice an opinion. It was the way of things, and it would be so until the end of days. The King

gave another nod, and Greynire was stripped and led up the stairway just as his three conspirators had been.

'I ask you this, Elson Greynire, speak now or forever hold yourself until you meet with the Gods.' Said Velgar. There was a moment of silence as Greynire surveyed around the courtyard, he found his wife and gave a sad smile before raising his head to the King.

'Brodon, you say you rule with peace. You say that your people are cared for and loved by the Crown. How wrong you are. My sons are dead, as are many more from across this great Kingdom. When the day comes, and the castle gates are being clawed at by the people you once ruled over, I want you to think of this day. I want you to think back to this moment, and I want you to beg to the Gods that they take you swiftly. Down with the King.' Greynire shouted, his eyes tearing and his skin red with rage. Brodon cleared his throat, but simply nodded in reply. Soon after, he watched as the kicking of the legs slowed and the body hung, and Lord Greynire swung slightly in the morning breeze.

A short while afterwards, with the knights disbanded and the courtyard empty, Lenren and Brodon stood below the gallows and looked towards the cart where the bodies had been dumped. Brodon had asked that the bodies be buried in the outer corner of the Kingdom towards the forest, in unmarked graves. He had forbid Lady Greynire the body of her husband and had seen that she be taken back to her house and be moved on further South as soon as possible. The courtyard was now awash with bright midmorning light, and the sky above was a blissful blue,

untouched by any blotch of cloud or rainfall. Beside the two men stood Arch Chancellor Velgar, patting his balding head and huffing terribly as he did so.

'The people, I want you to make them aware of what has happened.' Brodon said, turning to Velgar.

'Of course, your majesty. We'll make sure to put out a notice by evening. However, we have more pressing matters to attend to, the High Lords are requesting a meeting to discuss the ventures into the West.' The Arch Chancellor responded, still dabbing his brow.

'Of course. Send word to the Lords, ask that they come within the week.' Brodon responded, his tone had turned to a more affirmative one, though it was still tinged with uncertainty. The meetings of the High Lords offered little for Brodon other than political gymnastics, for him it was a week of dancing on the edge of a newly sharpened sword. He had learned from his father, for before the Old King had recessed into madness, he had in fact been quite a political specimen. The King turned to Lenren and sighed heavily as they watched Velgar hurry off into a nearby doorway.

'Another week of cosying up to the Lords. Fantastic.' He said, rolling his eyes.

'Rather you than me. I presume I'll be required to attend?' Lenren replied, the King stuck a finger onto his emblem to remind the man of his place. They began to walk towards the doorway, as they had done since they were children, but both stopped short of the entrance.

'The High Lords will want an explanation.' Lenren said, looking back towards the cart.

'I know. But they will understand my friend, they must see that murder of Kingsmen, or indeed Black Archers, is not a successful path to my deposition.' Returned Brodon firmly. 'Think of it my friend, I'm a king and yet I'll be sat there grovelling to the Lords that serve me. Sometimes I wish I was more ruthless with them. But then the people would suffer, the Lords control the lands, they have the power.'

Lenren was unsure of his response, instead he looked at Brodon curiously, wondering how much the man really held onto his beliefs. Brodon's heritage made him the only heir to the throne of Ceraborn and though the High Lords had political strength within the Kingdoms, they ultimately served the King. But then his mind wandered to the Old King, and he was reminded of the difference between the crown and the person who wore it. Against his better judgement Lenren remained close to the King as they wandered along the hallways, often musing of the old times they had shared. Lenren had been at the King's side since they were children, a bastard son raised by the monks at Cerran before joining the Kingsmen as soon as he could capably fire an arrow. He had first met Brodon, then a young Prince with a clean-cut face and not an ounce of fat on him, when the Royal party had stayed in Cerran for the knighting ceremony of Commander Enmir Crow. The Old King, then perhaps on the edge of his sanity, had requested that Crow wear a ceremonial gown unlike any that had been worn before, and the King had provided specific instructions for the tailors in order that the Commander seem just right for the occasion. Crow had seen himself as a laughingstock on that day, but it was

during the more relaxed evening dinner that a young Prince had offered a glass of wine to Lenren. And thus, a friendship began, as well as several bottles of wine being consumed too. Lenren had gained much praise during his time in the Kingsmen, but for the last twenty years he had been sworn as leader of the Black Archers, tasked with protecting the people of the West. He had accepted, it had offered him freedom he seldom found in the barracks or on the expeditions that the Kingsmen undertook, and perhaps most of all it allowed for him to protect Brodon.

The two men entered into a room Lenren knew only too well, the council hall. A long wooden table with ten seats surrounding it held the middle of the floor, on an either side curved walls were home to the most unique and detailed maps of the West. To the very end of the room there was a large balcony which looked East towards the Grey Mountains, the vast forest covering the immediate drop off and stretching for miles outwards, though the mountains were visible on clear days such as this. Brodon stood staring at the table, it was decorated with fine cutlery and glasses, though that would soon be stripped away and replaced with a huge map of the Kingdoms, with miniature figurines representing the forces that the King possessed, on which the High Lords would discuss political matters. Lenren held his tongue, instead choosing to focus on the tapestry which hung to his immediate left, it showed the legend of the Denmir, a gift from Astriel's father to the Old King, in stunning detail. Thinly woven silk, brightly coloured, intertwined to create the large dark blue of the

Denmir, as it burrowed deep into the mountains of El Kharthor in the East.

'A precious gift.' Remarked Brodon, softly running his fingers along the surface of the tapestry.

Lenren smiled and nodded. 'Do you think it was real?'

'Perhaps, although many things are said to have been. Perhaps they were real once and are now buried deep beneath us. But I shall never know, I doubt the Gods will tell me either way.' replied Brodon, his attention solely on the tapestry as Lenren walked out towards the balcony. He turned, watching his friend breathe the fine Summer air, and smiled.

Ser Ramon of Garth watched the blacksmith keenly.

Sparks flew as the blade was placed softly into the water below it. He had always been fascinated with the process of making a good sword and had even tried his hand at it in his younger days. Though he had been unsuccessful he had learned a valuable lesson, never underestimate the class and skill required in forging a sword worthy of the man who would hold it in battle. The blacksmith yawned loudly, wiped the soot from his brow and lifted the sword from the water, he inspected it before once again lowering it into the bucket at his feet.

'Your sword, it is a fine one.' The man said, he had a thick Eastern accent.

'Aye, it's from Qhora.' Ramon returned almost smugly.

'Qhora? That would explain the weight. Qhoran steel is some of the most robust in the East. You have good taste my friend.' replied the man, holding out the blade for

Ramon to inspect. Ramon took the blade; it was still cooling but it shone brighter than he had ever seen.

'It's my finest blade, it has served me well.' Ramon said, examining the blade's edge and running his fingers along it.

'You like?' the man asked.

Ramon nodded in reply before sheathing the blade back onto his hip. He felt whole again. The blades he had used the previous day were Western swords, strong enough but built much like tables or chairs, in large quantities and with a distinct lack of character or real personality to them. It sounded odd, but Ramon needed a sword that felt true to him, almost like a horse or even a friend who he could count on in the real moments of life.

'You have a name for the blade?' Asked the man, as he began hammering at another piece of scolding metal. Ramon watched the hammer bounce across the golden surface of the object with the force of a hurricane.

'No, I stop short at that.' He replied softly, thinking that perhaps he ought to try it. He had known many knights and sale sword's with blades that bore the names of legends, monsters and lovers. But Ramon felt that lessened the blade, and that the Knight who welded the blade should allow himself some mystery with those types of things. He was in the minority. But still, it was something to consider. As Ramon shook the hand of the blacksmith, he came to realise that they were not alone. A shadow encompassed the doorway behind the archer, and as he turned, he found himself greeting the King and Lenren. The blacksmith bowed as the King entered the place.

'I see you have made good use of our blacksmith, Ser Ramon.' Brodon said.

Ramon grunted in response, he was in no mood for the King, least of all after the events that had transpired. Brodon kept his eyes on the archer, waiting for a response.

'How's Astriel?' Lenren asked, breaking the awkwardness.

'She'll be fine. But she needs rest, I've requested that the guards keep an eye on her quarters for the next few days.' Ramon returned. Lenren nodded in agreement before turning to the King.

'Neriel, she's taking care of her?' He asked.

'As ever, my darling will always find herself at the bedside of those in need. It's her way.' He replied with a hearty chuckle. The three men began to make their way out of the place, and out into the sunlight that bathed the inner courts of the Castle. There was a soft wind still weaving its way across the sky, rustling leaves around the courtyard as it went. There were men busy at work in the courtyard, a small group of men were playing cards, sat atop boxes and surrounded by large barrels of scotch brought from the Arisen seafront, where perhaps the finest of all the Kingdom's scotch came from. They were acknowledged by the men, the King was saluted, but Ramon heard a few under the breath jeers as he and Lenren passed. And as he looked back, he saw the men looking to him with nothing other than contempt. Though they were home, the Archers, it was clear, were far from welcome.

Chapter Seven

The winds were fierce, the light breeze of the morning had turned, and, in its place, a foul storm was beginning to brew south of Cerran. The messengers had passed along notes, the latest stating that the winds and storms were coming across from the sea bringing with them terrific crashes of thunder. Commander Azin sat quietly watching as his men hurried along the stronghold walkways, ensuring that the hatches were tightly locked and that the flames were protected, ensuring the communication between the strongholds was kept at all times. As the men ran around him, he lit his pipe and smoked thoughtfully. Commander Azin was perhaps the fourth or fifth most decorated officer within the Kingsmen of the West. He had seen service across the Continents, first with explorations into the Further West under the guiding hand of The Welling as they attempted to discover more about the forgotten lands that lay beyond, they're own borders. He had seen two tours of those rocky outcrops, six months each time in which the Kingsmen offered little in terms of a military outfit and were more so workhorses used to carry the scientific equipment of the Maesters. He had craved exploration beforehand, but soon found himself aching for the West. Upon returning he had been stationed in Mormo, an intermediary posting for a man of his experience and seen by many as an easy place to get back into the ways of the West. He remembered the Further West now, the silence that had surrounded them as they

collected samples of the flowers and trees that lined the mountain ranges and found himself craving for that more than ever.

He blew a long thin veil of smoke into the air as his eyes rested upon a young man standing at the end of the walkway looking out into the distance. Azin stood, and lumbered his way towards the man, if you could call him such, he was barely more than a boy. His hair was a long mop, untrimmed and wild and his body skinny with skin soft that showed his lack of experience and years. Azin struggled, the shooting pain along his side causing him to bite down on his lip with enough force to draw a little blood. He'd get used to it, eventually. He stood beside the boy and looked out into the same general direction, the sky was darkening in the distance, with storm clouds slowly rolling over the cliffs in the East.

'Scared of storms boy?' The Commander asked, still looking out into the storm.

'Something like that Ser, I'm sorry.' Replied the boy with a quickly quivering tone. The boy looked at his Commander, he was a fairly tall man with short black hair that came down into sideburns, joining into a thick moustache. His skin was rough, there was a small scar across his right temple that fell into a tattoo of a red-tailed swallow bird. It was the mark of the Brothers Azin, a house crest dating back even before Brodon I conquered the West. Now, as the boy stood staring at his Commander, knowing full well the fate of the house of Azin, he felt that perhaps the man was purposefully taunting death, waving his heritage in its face, awaiting the final blow.

'Nothing to be sorry for son. How long have you been with us?'

'Six months, just over, Ser.'

Azin nodded slowly. 'This is your first posting then. What a shit hole as well.' He said laughing. The boy laughed too. A vicious wind blew across the stronghold, leaving the men silent once again.

'What's your name son?' Azin asked, turning to face the boy for the first time. His hair was a messy shone brightly in the darkness.

'Enrin Ser. Enrin Greynire.' The boy replied. Azin's mouth opened slightly, but he stopped himself. The messenger had arrived earlier in the day. Azin had read the scroll, stamped with the seal of King Brodon of Ceraborn, but had neglected to tell the boy just yet. There were more pressing issues at hand, Azin had received several scrolls from command at Korgen, all stating that the pirating along the coastline was severely depleting the Eastern trade vessels. Azin was commanded to allow men to travel to Ceraborn, where they would be tasked and appropriately outfitted in order to patrol against the pirates. He was less than impressed with this, least of all because Command had not considered that Azin's forces had been ravaged not three months earlier as some were sent to the Eastern Edge.

'Get some rest lad, it's a precious thing amongst the strongholds.' Azin said with a parting smile to the boy, as he walked back along the walkway and into the darkness of his commander tower.

Benji was lagging behind, he was tired, and his legs were weary. He had been on patrol the night before, a patrol which had seen him circling the outer reaches of the woodland and down across the river way, through into the flat plains and back round. They were patrolling mainly for fitness, though they had been tasked with keeping a keen eye for any grey wolves that might be hunting in the area. There had been lambs and cattle taken, as well as a rare attack on a travelling rider, many had worried over the occurrence due to the rumours surrounding The Tower near Blackridge, though Azin's men had bedded those rumours swiftly. As he trudged through the muddy pathway that led towards the stronghold, Benji came upon the realisation that the girl hadn't said a word to him since leaving the Inn, nearly four miles back.

'Perhaps you could wait, I'm kind of struggling here.' He shouted, hoping she would stop and wait. She didn't, instead she simply marched onward, looking down and focused solely on her steps. Benji sighed and moved on, he picked up speed, but his knees began to grate with every step he took. At his back thunder sounded, deep in the distance but loud enough to encourage him to push through the pain and find himself edging closer to the girl.

'You're slow for a Kingsman.' Melran said, with a bitterness in her voice. Benji, breathing heavily and with his hands at his hips, simply nodded in agreement.

'Perhaps we should stop a minute, just to catch a breath.' He said, with a hopeful smile. He was met with silence. They walked on, the pathway opening out into a clearing, the river cutting across before bending away West towards the coast. Melran closed her eyes for a

moment, she felt her head begin to pulse and her breathe shortened.

Fire.

She scrambled for breath.

Death.

Benji caught her as she fell. He pulled her close and tried to wake her.

Destruction.

He called her name, shook her.

They will burn.

Suddenly her eyes opened, and the connection was lost. She shivered, but not for the coldness, for the connection as it ripped itself from her body and floated into the air. Benji held her close to his chest and kept her close as she came to.

'Azin...' The girl muttered.

'Rest. You need to rest.' Benji returned frantically.

'No... Azin.... Take me.' She said, before drifting off into unconsciousness. Benji looked around, the sky was darkening around him and soon the path would be too perilous to travel along. He picked the girl up, struggling with exhaustion, and carried on slowly along the pathway. As he went on, with the thunder at his back and the darkness surrounding him, he realised how alone he was. He looked down at the girl, wondering not only what had happened but also what effect it had had on her. She looked weak, her skin was grey, cold to the touch and she felt incredibly light once he had got into his stride a little more. He looked above him, a lone sparrow hawk flew out from the treetops and across the pathway, it dodged the tides of the winds, an expert sailor if ever the boy had seen

one. He watched as the bird flew along the pathway, perhaps a mile or so in front of him before coming to a stop and hovering. Benji too stopped as he watched the bird twitch its small yellow-beaked head before suddenly swooping down into the left side of the forest line. Benji waited, a few seconds later and the bird flew up out of the trees, a small brown rabbit clutched between its claws. It made have been called a sparrow hawk, but it wasn't a fussy eater. The boy continued his walk, his spear was begging to weigh heavy against his back, not least was it digging into it with every twist or turn he made. He looked forward and continued his march but stopped again as he saw- just about as far out as the sparrow hawk had dived- a figure standing at the roadside. The two looked to one another, Benji suddenly felt a sickness. The air became putrid, and the ground seemed to tremble as the two continued to stare to each other. Benji turned quickly, behind him the path was quiet, and as he turned again the figure was gone and the spearman seemed to return to a normality. He walked slowly, almost edging his way up the path, his eyes darting between the treeline and behind him. At last, he came to the place; it was as normal a path side as he had seen ever before. He looked deep into the trees but saw nor heard a sound other than birdsong, but as he came to the edge of the grassy verge which dipped down slightly between the pathway and the treeline he came upon a scorched piece of earth. The grass had burnt away in a circle, leaving bare untouched hard soil in its place. The boy looked at the spot, and again the faint smell returned to him, and so he quickly and wisely moved on.

As Benji came to the outer walls of the stronghold, which were part stone and part wooden structures built over the past ten years or so, the girl began to stir. The gates were open, Commander Azin was more than willing to leave the gates open for his men to wander to and from Cerran, but with strict rules that the gates were shut and kept as such from nightfall to daybreak. Benji looked to the sky, it wasn't nightfall but there was little light remaining. A quick rumble of thunder, nearer now by far, caused the boy to jolt. He bent down, lowering Melran carefully and propping her against a stone pillar. She began to shake, but her eyes opened, and she returned to the World. Her eyes met Benji, but quickly she drew her gaze back down the pathway.

'What did you see?' She asked frantically.

'A man, or least it seemed so.' Benji replied without hesitation. Melran got to her feet, she massaged her temples and then closed her eyes as she ran her fingers along a section of the stone pillar.

'Erm, what exactly are you doing?' Benji asked.

'I must find Azin now.' Melran replied, opening her eyes as she did so and staring directly at Benji.

'But, what exactly -' he began, but was interrupted by a finger being pointed at him.

'You ask too many questions. Take me to Azin, now.' Melran replied, never lowering her finger.

Benji was too nervous to argue, and so the pair made way past the gates and onward towards the stronghold. Melran looked around her, it was larger than she expected, the crude outer walls provided cover for a stables and Chapel and were overlooked by archery walkways.

Beyond that came the stronghold, sixty feet of thick wooden structure with guard towers, watch towers and all. An impressive sight, and one which Benji seemed particularly in awe of. There were men busy about the courtyard, but few even turned a head to the pair as they made way across the courtyard and towards one of the pulley lift entrances. Benji pulled a lever, and the pair waited before an iron cage rattled down and thumped in front of them. They got in, Benji rang a bell and the distant cranking of a pulley was heard above before the cage began to ascend. Melran looked out as they rose above the place, eventually she could see down the way to Cerran as well as The Grey Mountains further off. A vicious wind struck the cage, and they swung for a moment, before once again ascending further into the heavens.

'My friends, I hope they haven't eaten all that the Inn has to offer.' Said Benji, nervously trying to start a conversation.

'I doubt it. They're probably far too drunk to have remembered to eat.' Melran returned, a slight smile breaking her face. They continued to climb, and Benji kept his gaze solely on the girl.

'That thing, that thing that happens to you. Do you know what it is?' He said eventually.

Melran turned, looked the boy up and down and nodded.

'Does it hurt? It seems to hurt from what I can see.'

'Then you must be a Sister of the West. I didn't know that your knowledge of medicine was so impressive.' Melran replied, staring back out into the distance again.

'You know, for a messenger you're very-'

'I'm not a messenger, spearman. And whatever I am is none of your concern.' The girl hissed. Benji said nothing, instead he took a step back and worriedly looked out in the distance. Soon the cage came to grinding halt, and it levelled onto a wooden walkway. The two wandered out onto the walkway but were greeted on either side by two large overbearing guards, both with swords drawn.

'No whores at the strongholds, spear boy.' One of them said gruffly, he looked the girl up and down unapprovingly.

'She's not a whore. She's a messenger from Lord Elmorc, she's got a scroll for Commander Azin.' Benji replied sternly. The guards looked to another one, before lowering their swords slightly.

'Have you seen the seal?' the same man spoke.

'Aye, it's real.' Benji replied confidently. The guards lowered their blades further, nodded to Benji and let them pass on along the walkway. As the pair wandered along, they found the place quiet, Benji noted how the place had been battered down, likely for fear of the oncoming storm. Even the large mounted canons had been securely locked and covered. He looked down nervously as the wood creaked and crackled as his feet. Looking to Melran he saw that she seemed focused solely on something else. As she walked, and with her fingers lightly touching the edging of the walkway wall, she seemed away with herself.

'Are you alright Miss?' Benji said nervously.

'Yes. Quite fine, thank you.' Melran replied softly. Her eyes flashed towards him and she seemed, to him at least, changed.

'I was scared, you know.' The spearman returned, attempting and failing to produce a laugh.

The two stopped just short of a small pier which jutted out and held a watch platform and flame station, one which held its constant yellow light as a sign to all that the stronghold was safe. Two men were bunkered down in the place, eating small pieces of bread and meat as they kept close to the flame for some well needed heat.

'It is only natural. But you have done well.' Melran replied.

'What was it? It seemed like a man. But I'm sure it weren't.' Again another failed laugh ended the sentence. Melran turned to face him, smiled and put a hand on his chest.

'He is my protector. He is no threat to you, unless you are a threat to me.' She replied.

Benji was confused, more so by the thought of a man following the girl but allowing her to have these seizures and not help her. But more than that, it was the feeling as Melran's hand touched his chest, as he felt himself fading away for a moment. As if something were pulling him away for all that he knew to be true and real. Melran's hand fell, and so did Benji, he fell against the walkway and slumped into a deep sleep. Melran looked around herself, no one was near. She made sure the boy was comfortable, laid his spear down, and moved on. She walked further down the walkway, passing small huts of men as they played chess, spoke scary tales from long ago and drank and sang together. She passed them all, unnoticed, and made way down the walkway and towards the largest of all the huts, there was a guard standing before the door.

'And who might you be?' He said, blocking her.

'My name is Melran, I have a message for the commander.' She replied calmly. The guard looked unconvinced, he looked past her to see if anyone could vouch for her.

'I was brought here by a spearman, Benji, he is resting further up the walkway. He said that the mark of my High Lord would be enough.' Melran said, producing the scroll from within her robes and showing Elmore's mark to the guard. He inspected it thoroughly, held it to the last of the daylight before handing it back and moving slightly to allow her to pass. Melran thanked him, and moved into the hut, it was a small place, slightly rounded in nature and crudely built from mortar and wood with a thatched roof and chimney in the middle from which a fire burned brightly below. Azin sat, smoking and flicking a coin between his fingers as the girl entered. The coin hit the floor, and Azin turned to face the girl.

'Commander Azin?' Melran asked quietly.

'Aye, and who are you?' The Commander returned gruffly. Melran held out the scroll but made no reply.

'What is this? Another message from Command? I haven't seen a lady rider delivering for them though?' He said, taking the scroll but not bothering to look at it. Melran stood, unmoved.

'I am not a Command messenger, Commander. And I think you ought to look at the scroll.' She said sternly. Azin's face cracked with a smile, he was tired, tired enough of riddles and games that the Command were playing. He picked the scroll with no care and tore at it,

breaking the seal. He began to read, and his face began to fall as he did so. He looked from the page to Melran.

'How dare you. Forging messages, playing games. Who sent you?' The Commander pulled himself from his chair and drew his blade, the tip on the edge of Melran's throat.

'Lord Elmorc, Commander. And it is the truth, though you may not like it.' Melran replied, her own smile appearing. She noticed the man's hand shaking at his waist, but the hand with the blade kept as steady as ever.

'This cannot be true. These are vicious lies. Even if Elmorc thinks he has such powers. Lies, and more lies I say!' The Commander said his words spitting from his lips as fear began to tinge his tongue.

'It is over Commander. And it is beginning.' Melran returned, as her eyes began to turn upwards and glaze over. The Commander watched as the girl's body contorted where she stood, she shook violently for a moment before a dark grimace appeared on her face. Azin, with heavy breath, knew he was no longer in the presence of a young girl.

'Is it true?' He said, quivering.

'I offered you everything, Commander. And you take it.' Said the girl, but her voice was now deep and airy.

'I stayed loyal, as long as could be.' The Commander replied.

'As long as could be? There are few who I can trust. But now I see, you are not one of them.'

Thunder rumbled closer; the ground began to shake fiercely around the stronghold.

'What is this?' Azin asked, his voice barely a whisper and tears in his eyes. The girl stood forward; her stomach pulled through the blade, but nothing was cut.

'This, my friend, is death.'

And at that moment, the thunder was replaced by a roar so thunderous in its own right that a thousand birds took off from the forests and scattered like rats from a sinking ship. The winds rushed through the place like a whirlwind and smashed at doors, ripping a few from their hinges and flinging them across the courtyard with the force of Canon fire.

The girl fell back, and Azin ran towards his doorway. He looked out, stumbled onto the walkway and saw his men all at once stare out across the dark skies, as another roar flew through the sky and battered the stronghold.

'What is it?' Asked a bowman beside Azin. The men turned, looking to the Commander, who's face had grown as pale as snow and who's eyes were glazed across with nothing more than pure fear.

'Dragon.' Azin replied, nothing more than a faint whisper. From out of the clouds, with a storm at his tail, came a grey drake with a wingspan of no less than thirty feet across from end to end. It's head, with two huge horns and a moon coloured crest rising from its neck, came out into a long thin crocodilian like snout from which teeth protruded at the very end. It's body, slimline and scaled, shimmered in prestige condition against the storm light.

'Get the canons. Fire everything.' Azin said, attempting to regain his own thought. Quickly men around him began to scramble for the canons, ripping off the coverings and trying to unlock the heavy iron chains they

had placed around them. The winds continued to batter against the place, with the thatched roofs of the huts beginning to rip away. The Dragon, spread itself across the sky before drifting off away to the East.

Azin felt a heavy hand against his shoulder, he turned and found another officer glaring at him.

'What is it doing?' He asked, his own voice quivering uncontrollably. Azin looked back into the now vacant sky.

'Hunting. It will circle us, and as far I know, it will destroy everything.' Azin replied. The officer backed away, turned to his men and ordered that they get to their stations and keep on them no matter what came. Azin stood motionless for a moment, but was brought back when a huge wave of wind threw him from his feet and against the wall, he picked himself up and looked out, the dragon's tail whipped at the wall as it went by, causing a crack to appear along a large quarter of the surface. Azin watched helplessly as the beast flew down, snatched at the iron gates with its huge bird like claws and ripped them almost completely from their hinges, the metal buckled under the strain and the metal framings broke away as the dragon lifted itself again into the sky with a beat of its huge wings. The beast turned its head, its elongated shrivelled neck wagging as it did so, and snarled at the stronghold, a deep bellowing roar crackled from its throat before flames snorted from its nostrils. It threw its head back and eyed Cerran, before taking flight and heading straight for the city.

'Ready men!' The desperate calls of the commanding officers rang out across the winds, answered by large cries of 'Yes sir!'. Not a second later, a huge blanket of arrows

was launched upward into the darkness, about eighty or so, flying with tremendous speed through the clouds and up into the darkness. The men waited; the place quiet save for the quick sounds of archers reloading their bows. The winds around them left them deaf, but the nearby roars of the beast guided them, and they waited for the arrows to fall. Azin turned, he looked around him and found a small blade left by one of the guards and took it, stuffing it into his breast. He marched towards his hut, drawing his sword as he did so.

'You!' He roared, 'You brought this upon-' He stopped, for what he saw was a girl kneeling at the fire of the place, her hands as close to the flame as he had ever seen without them burning, her eyes were closed and she was mumbling to herself in a whisper.

'What are you doing? Heathen! That's what you are, a messenger from Banra! That's what you are!' The Commander said, raising his sword and taking a swing and missing only by the faintest of margins. The girl remained unmoved, she held her hands closer to flame and continued in her trance like state as she recited the only words that had come to her after the connection had broken. Azin threw his sword against the ground, its end sticking into the wooden floor and shooting vicious splinters across the room. He took a moment, reclaimed his breath before walking to the girl and kneeling beside her.

'You may think yourself powerful, but you are nothing. Magic, the Elder days. They are long gone, relics that should be left to smoulder in the ashes of the wars you lost.' And with that, the Commander felt the coldness of a

blade against his neck and the trickle of warm blood as it fell down to his chest. He gasped for air, clawing at his neck and gurgling for aid. Nothing came to him, nothing but death.

As Melran threw the blade from her hand, she felt the burning against her fingertips and recoiled quickly from the fire. She shook uncontrollably, tears began to well in her eyes and she clawed at her hair. Her eyes darted across the place, she felt for sure that now she would die. Her purpose was served, and that could only mean that death was an inevitable conclusion to her story. However, the room remained unchanged, and she felt nothing except for the sudden recollection of a memory as it filled her mind, like a damn swelling and bursting before drenching the valley below. She held her hair softer, and her breath returned slowly. She picked up the blade, previously concealed deeply within her tattered robes, and wiped it of the blood. Turning, she ran from the place only to be greeted by men running along the walkway as they attempted to reload the archers, fire the cannons and pray that the stronghold would live up to its name. She looked around wildly, attempting to find some miraculous escape, but she found nothing, instead she ran along the walkway with all the speed her legs could wield until she saw the cage within her sights. A roar came bellowing from across the darkness, and only then did Melran looked across the valley and see the flames and smoke that engulfed Cerran. The flames grew as tall as the trees around them, deep reds and golden oranges filled the night's blackness and illuminated the stronghold in flickering light. The dragon

could not be seen, but its roar and the bellowing sound of stone smashing against itself and timbers breaking like roadside twigs, spoke an all too obvious message. The girl regained herself, taking off quickly towards the cage, she hurried herself in, along with several armoured soldiers, all brandishing tall thin spears. They took little notice of her; she saw the sweat dripping from their helmets as they stood silent as the cage began to descend with worrying speed. As the cage halted, just short of the ground, the men ran out into the courtyard. Melran kept herself close to the edge of the walls, as close to the shadows as was possible. She saw lines of men in the courtyard, all facing the broken barrier doors and waiting for the inevitable. Inaudible commands were carried across the wind, all intermingled with one another, none carrying anything of much other than the standard military fare. Then there was silence, the men readied themselves and Melran ran to find shelter against a cart that was heavily packed with boxes and barrels.

'Hold steady!' Rang a booming voice above Melran. She looked up; the outer walls were covered in men all pointing towards the gates. The winds flew fierce for a second, followed by a quick collection of ear-piercing roars. Then, silence. The men waited; all eyes watched the gates. Suddenly, the sound of bending metal rang out across the courtyard, a high-pitched squealing flew across the winds and then a large crash as one of the gates was ripped completely from its hinges, taking with it a portion of a watch tower which came to a terrible end. It was all followed by a blaze of fire which erupted from behind the gate posts and flew across the evening air. The dragon,

with a few tremendous steps, clawed its way through the gates and raised its head, sniffing at the air before turning its gaze downward towards the men as they fired arrow after arrow at the beast. Melran watched, peaking from behind the cart, as wave upon wave of arrows shot into the air and hit the thick hide of the beast with little effect other than to annoy it into spurting another round of fire from its nose. It moved its head from side to side, closing its huge eyes as it did so, and enflamed the sides of the strongholds. She watched the lines, which held strong, draw arms, and begin to attack the beast's legs with swords and axes. The beast looked down, before swinging a huge forelimb across the yard and knocking back several lines of men. Melran heard the screams, the last cries, and whimpers of those unfortunate enough to have felt the impact upon them. She looked across, men at the far end of the courtyard were beginning to scatter, all hoping for an escape. Arrows began to reign down upon the beast from the outer walls, but it blew flames across them and soon the walls were lit like enormous candles, large chunks of smouldering wood began to fall around the courtyard and crushed men as they tried to escape the terror. The beast took another step forward, its long slender claws crushing many underfoot. It roared, bringing its head down further and snarled at those brave enough to rush towards it. Flame engulfed them, melting metal armour and skin down to bone with a few short moments. The beast swung its head towards a small band of men, enveloping them within its jaws. Again, it reared up, its powerful hind legs carrying its weight more than enough ease. The beast held its head tall around the place, before ripping at the burning

outer walls, causing more debris to fall and scatter across the few remaining men. The burning intensified, the walls began to crumble as the dragon ripped at stone and wood. The winds blew across the courtyard and further advanced the flames, men scrambled across the higher walls and back towards the huts. Canons fired across the courtyard, three at a time, all missed the creature, and only served to enrage evermore so. As the beast roared, it bounded towards the stronghold, clawing at the sides and whipping at it with its tail. Melran, still under the cover of the boxes, watched as the dragon lifted itself from the ground and climbed the walls, its forearms stabbing into the thick oaken logs as if they were nothing other than thin linen, and it bit down hard as it smashed against one of the watch towers. The structure, as the beast tore away the supporting beams, fell away from the wall and smashed onto the ground with tremendous force. Melran took her chance, keeping to the lower outer walls she ran along the yard, ducking under fallen beams and pillars, never looking back as at last she reached what remained of the gates. Only once she was free of the place, perhaps half a mile or so along the pathway, did she dare to gaze back upon the hell. The place was crumbling at almost every point, she watched in horror as the right-hand walls crumbled further, leaving an incredible void in the place. She heard the roars, along with the final cries of those trapped within, and she ran.

Chapter Eight

Arch Chancellor Velgar often wondered upon the days that had long since passed. Though they were distant, and memories of them were fading, he still found himself reflecting deeply upon them. His mind drifted deeper into texts and chronicles than anything that surrounded him at present. His introduction, quite remarkably, had come from a flea market in Lower Dulwich, just South of The Welling where he studied. As he made his way along the paths, in the bright summer light of Lower Dulwich, he came across a small collection of market traders who were camping along the roadway. The Maester, who at the time was youthful and spry, called upon an elderly woman's stall which found his fancy through the magically coloured bedsheets and pillowcases that the woman had crafted.

'Most beautiful.' Velgar said, smiling to the woman. She smiled, but her gaze was vague towards him.

'You want?' The woman said in a scratching, aged voice. She watched Velgar as he ran the patterned quilts along his fingertips.

'No thank you, I'm forbidden from it.' He held his Welling signet up to the woman, again her gaze followed him unsteadily. He looked closer at the table, flicking through items that covered its dusty surface. There was a little of everything, chess sets, fruit bowls, a few wooden ornaments. All were old, each likely carrying a thousand unique tales. But that wasn't what drew Velgar's attention now. Instead it was the small collection of leather-bound

books that were tightly packed into a wooden apple box. He walked across to them, and pulled at the tops to reveal the covers, three were blank tanned leather, but there was one that was different. He pulled at the book, it was buckled and tightly bound by a second smaller buckle as well. The Maester took the book, rested it atop the others and unbuckled the outer bindings and looked upon the carved coverings. Upon the cover there were three figures kneeling upon an altar. From what Velgar could make out, the people were praying. However, on closer inspection he saw that they were in fact backing away, and it seemed in terror, from a beast within three heads, magnificently long wings and fire belting from its mouth.

'The Elder books.' The woman said, her voice quieter than before. Velgar looked to her, she was sat crossed legged on the edge of the grass and only now did he see the greyness that clouded her eyes.

'The Elder books?' Velgar repeated, unsure of himself. The woman smiled a near toothless smile. Velgar looked around, the other sellers were taking little notice of them. 'What exactly are these?' He asked.

'Books from days long since gone. Tales, stories and legends of people now returned to the Goddess.' The woman replied, she waved her hands to signal Velgar to sit with her. He did so and placed the book in front of the woman, her hands groped the front of it before finding the second buckle and carefully unhooking it. She wiped the front, feeling every detail with her beaten cracked hands.

'Long before your King conquered the West, there were people who had ruled over this land for more than a thousand years.' She said.

'The Elder Folk.' Velgar replied confidently.

'So, they do teach you something in The Welling then?' The woman returned, a wry smile breaking her wrinkled acorn coloured face. As she held the book, she carefully lifted the cover, licked her finger and flicked through the pages. Velgar only caught glimpses of most, they were thick pages, expertly hand-written texts accompanied by extremely detailed artworks. The woman stopped at a page, turned the book to face Velgar and pressed a finger down upon it. Velgar looked down to the page and saw a two-page spread of a map of the Kingdoms, except it was different. Several of the strongholds that now occupied the place weren't there, and the forests extended deep in the South, with large mountains and hills depicted where Arisen now stood. Several names were etched upon the map, where Cerran stood the word 'Cera' was written and Mormo was replaced with 'Miromir'. The Maester looked upon the map with wonder.

'The Kingdoms of the Elder Folk?' He asked, his words barely coming through coherently. The woman nodded.

'These lands were ruled by many Kings, and the ways of their life are written within these pages. A thousand years of peace, with trade and fair justice upon the peoples of this land.' She said, again flicking through a good hundred pages of text. But then she stopped, and Velgar found a rendering which showed a crown falling from the head of an executed king.

'What is this?' He asked.

'War.' The woman answered without a second thought. The man looked to the woman, held his fingers softly against the page of the book and said softly, 'How much for this?'

The woman stayed silent.

'Name your price.' Velgar demanded, readying his purse and beginning to count coins before being stopped by a sudden strong grip upon his wrist. The woman's hand wrapped around his wrist with remarkable strength.

'Take them all. Take them all, keep them safe. Learn from them, as I have done.' She said, pushing the book further towards the Maester. He looked at the pages and then back to the woman, she smiled at him and nodded.

Returning to the confines of The Welling, Maester Velgar quickly hid his books underneath his bed and kept close attention on those who entered his quarters. He spent his evenings studying, but not the books of Rhel or Theb as he had been instructed to by his tutors and found himself completely and utterly engrossed in the Elder texts. They were written in common tongue, for the most part, but Velgar did have to forgo some of the latter chapters as the authorship changed to Elder tongue. Whether those chapters were of particular importance, or whether the author simply preferred the native language in order to best tell his tale, the Maester could not possibly know. He poured over the texts, learning quickly of the histories which lay upon the lands of the West before Brodon had come across from the East and destroyed the Elder Folk. Brodon was a revered King, a leader of triumphant times and a towering reminder of the great

powers that the Kings of the West had come wield. Velgar had not seen Brodon rule, neither had he met a man alive whom had been underneath the King's rule. Velgar's King was Haurtaff, first of his name, elder son of the Conqueror King. Haurtaff's rule was becoming something of a contentious issue amongst the Arch Maesters of The Welling. Rumours were spreading of discontent in the courts of Ceraborn, and that the Arch Chancellor was becoming almost a ghost to the King. His advice, teachings and concerns were falling well and truly upon deaf ears, and Haurtaff had found new confidants with the Commander Generals of his Kingsmen. Further political tensions were being felt in the South, as the advancing of the Yellow Sisters became more and more evident, with great expansions being made across the coastlines and even a small vestry being constructed in Fildron.

Velgar had been invited to, and had gladly taken part, in a small meeting in which Arch Maester Grindine, whom was a peaceful but world-wary man by nature, asked that the vestry be placed in a lockdown under the orders of the King. However, the Palace had rejected the plea. The King had not attended the meeting, instead he had sent some ill-informed Kingsman in his place. Grindine had not taken lightly to the rejection and had requested a personal meeting with the King in order to discuss the matters, in detail, and come to satisfactory conclusion. That too was denied. Shortly afterwards, as summer fell away into autumn and the leaves shrivelled and drifted softly to the ground, The King welcomed the birth of his son, Brodon, and the Palace requested that Grindine bless the child, as was tradition, in the name of the Gods. The Arch

Chancellor held a meeting, again with Velgar present, and began discussing the downfall in the relationship between the Crown and The Welling. The Maesters voted through the night, issue after issue was raised and fought over, until finally the decision had been made. Grindine was cast out of the order of Gods, the Maester's stripped him of his titles and left him powerless. However, they agreed to ensure that his intended betrayal of the Crown did not surface, and so sent the records to be burned and that all those who were involved took a vow of silence upon the Elder alter of Banra, God of death. The Welling sent word to the Palace, stating that the Arch Chancellor had resigned his powers due to illness, and that a vote had been passed to elect the new Arch Chancellor Nempal, with a ceremony of blessing to be performed by Winter's end at the Tower of Erin.

As Velgar sat, looking out into the morning mist of Ceraborn, he wandered back to these days and found himself longing for them once again. Now he was old, his hair a grey mess and his slender frame overtaken by years of feasting with the High Lords and Maesters. He looked down at the scattered remnants of his breakfast and then further along the tabletop and towards that same book from all those years before. As time had gone by, and men became less and less interested in the days of the Elder Folk, Velgar had found any chance of deciphering the Elder tongue had, much like the days themselves, come and gone. He had tried, he had spent a Summer in Qhora attempting to translate the text, and had even sent word to El Man Rhu Ma, the Dhani Rhu Mar of Cyronos.

However, few came to any sort of breakthrough and only a select number of extracts had been successfully translated. It was enough for Velgar to identify that those pages related, in some way, to the latter stages of the War between the Elder King Rhenmer and Rhamanthor, though little else could be correctly identified.

'I would've imagined that you would be able to paint this view perfectly by now.' Said a voice from behind the Chancellor. He turned and found Maester Tulloch standing tall at the edge of the balcony.

Tulloch, a man who was as tall a man as Velgar had ever come across, with shoulders that could carry a world and a thick set frame, fingered his beard as he stood looking across that same expanse of the Kingdom.

'I would, but my artistry abandoned me years ago. Please my friend, sit.' Velgar replied. The man did so, slapping a scroll down as he did so. Velgar took a deep breath, the clean forest air swarmed around him and he felt for a moment as though his youth were returning to him. He would never tire of that feeling, of the pureness of the Western air.

'The Maester's are growing uneasy.' Tulloch said, clearing his throat in an attempt to disguise the fact.

'I know, why do you think I have stayed up here?' The Arch Chancellor replied with a smile. The Maester chuckled before carefully running his fingers over the scroll and moving it across the table to his Chancellor.

'It came this morning. The meetings are long overdue, the Sisters have taken to convening in the caves in Korgen Bay. Tensions are beginning to rise with the Chapter. Something must be done.' He said patting on the scroll.

'I suppose this is the proposal then.' Velgar replied as he removed the wax seal of The Welling and began reading the document carefully. Velgar was a man keen upon the fine details, he ensured he would not miss a single point from anything that was laid under his nose, no matter from whom it came. The Chancellor looked up to the Maester with a shocked expression and sad eyes.

'They cannot be serious. This would be suicide.' He said.

'A small troop, just to discourage the Sisters from those areas. We can contain them Velgar, we can ensure that they don't begin to overtake the Kingdoms. They are dangerous, surely you see that?' Tulloch returned sternly.

'Of course, I see it. Every day I hear of the Sisters, of the healing and the endless teachings. You think I'm obvious to this? Well I am not, but military force is not the answer. I cannot and will not allow it.' Velgar returned, slamming his fist down in a momentary loss of control. The two men exchanged a glance at this, before choosing to let it rest.

'The First Guard, have they been seen at all?' Velgar asked, breaking the silence. His voice was muffled with his own wanting to ignore the previous few moments.

'No, the last sightings were from before the ceremony in autumn. Since then they've been held up in Arisen as usual.' Tulloch returned softly. Velgar nodded his head, drumming his fingers along his chair arm he found himself wondering for the first time if perhaps it were time to engage the King with these matters. For the moment, he chose against that.

'Write back to The Welling. Tell them that following the meeting of the High Lords I will return to my place in the High vestry. After my return we shall begin the process of...dealing with the Yellow Sisters.' He said, his eyes closed and deep in thought. Tulloch stood up, took the scroll and nodded his head in sign of respect.

'Of course, my Holiness.' He said, wandering back into the recesses of the castle. With the sounds of footsteps falling away, Velgar opened his eyes again and returned back to the view of Ceraborn. He looked out across the city and through deep into the horizon beyond, the air was clear and the sun beginning to burn away at the mist that hung low over the city. He closed his eyes and waited, waited for what he knew would come.

As the day went along, and the breeze swept away the rain clouds and left untouched blue sky, the Kingdom of Ceraborn was as peaceful and quiet as could be hoped. Along the river, boats ferried along barrels of whiskies and brandy, sending them along the narrow inlets towards the Southern port towns of Fildron and Arisen. The marketplace was, after the fall out of the previous few days, returned to a bustling metropolis of all people. There were bakers from Mormo, fisherman from Korgen Bay and cheese makers and butchers from Arisen and Tu Ton. Men exchanged cattle for ale barrels, as the villages called for different prospects as they entered harvest times and celebrations across the Kingdom. A small fayre had been erected just south of the city, with jousting competitions drawing men from across all the land, some looking to impress the scouts that were sent from the Kingsmen,

whilst others waged war in private betting circles as father pitted son against son and horse against horse in races across the flats that ran along the edge of the forests. Brodon had sent a few men, in order to showcase both security to his people but also to mark his own select participation in events, as a royal pavilion was set up, adjacent to long rows of seating and mobile wooden platforms for the travelling throne to be placed upon. It was a rare moment for the Royal family to engage properly within such festivals, as had been tradition since his Grandfather had done so all those years before. He had selected his own champion, a fine rider and Knight, Ser Brandon Selston. He was a boy born of pure High Lord blood, a nephew to the High Lord of Tu-Ton William Selston. The Selston's were one of few families which could trace their heritage far past Brodon's conquest, back to the royalty of Cyronos far within the pages of the Eastern histories. Of course, now they were seen as an almost immovable powerhouse of the West, with a secured lineage and more than enough allies whom would trade with them. Tu-Ton held a unique position within the Kingdom of the West, though it did not harbour a stronghold, it did have vast deep mines from which amber ore was hunted for. Amber ore was a precious commodity, a unique substance which could be moulded into some of the strongest and most robust objects known within the entire Continents. It was so called due in part to its golden and almost sunburnt appearance, which only added to its aesthetic value. The Selston vaults were said to be stocked high with the raw material, in huge iron crates that themselves were locked and kept hidden deep within the

mine networks. They were one of the few remaining families across the entirety of the Continents which could claim complete control over such an asset, and of course there had been a few murmurings of uprisings against them, none of which ever came to fruition. In fact, the mining classes of Tu-Ton regularly held banquets in honour of the Selston's, toasting to the prosperity of the family and the lands. Lenren sat quietly as he watched a small group of archers as they competed against one another, trying desperately to hit the centre of a target that they had placed toward the opposite end of the field. Some of them were good, they were the sons of Hunters and so had barely known a day without forging within the forests for rabbits, stouts and ferrets. As the men fired arrow after arrow, some with more success than others, Lenren's gaze fell upon Ser Brandon Selston. He was a tall man, slender but with well-defined features which only a Selston would carry. He was stood beside his horse, softly stroking its neck and whispering to it, calming it to noises of the place. Lenren noted how the boy had grown since he had last seen him, though he was surprised that he hadn't filled out yet and his armour still slid slightly from his arms and legs. The sound of footsteps brought the archer closer to the benching, he looked up and found the tall imposing figure of Ramon silhouetted against the sun. Ramon sat, he was eating a carrot, the loud crunching irradiated Lenren to no end, and Ramon knew so, so he kept doing it.

'So, this meeting of the High Lords, what do you make of it?' Lenren asked.

'I suppose it's necessary, though I can't imagine what they are expecting to achieve.' Lenren returned.

'You think they'll want to see us?'

Ramon sighed.

'The Kludde will have caused concern Lenren, and what's happened with Greynire-'

'Let me deal with Greynire, the King and I are fully prepared for the questions that will undoubtedly arise. And as for the Kludde, we know it's safe along the Tower Road now. The King will collect his coins for our services, and we will be thanked by the Lords. All will be fine, my friend.' Lenren returned, calming himself. Ramon spat the last chunk of his carrot to the ground and relaxed himself further into his seat.

'Do you think they'll call for me?' He asked after a moment's silence. Lenren shook his in reply.

Ramon hated the meetings of the High Lords; he saw them as nothing more than a reason for another ceremonial feast for the rich of the West. Of course, issues were discussed, though few conclusions seemed to ever be reached and even fewer were acted upon in the long term. He had been called to several meetings, mostly to give evidence based on military campaigns, though he had been called as part of the Tower incident. The High Lords took somewhat of a dim view of the King's Black Archers, they saw them as relics of the Old King and nothing more than an expensive band of mercenaries. Ramon was beginning to grow tired of people's opinions, and even more so of the misinformation that those people had access to. It only served to continue turning the wheel of falsehoods, and those surrounded the Black Archers enough already.

A rider passed the men at quick speed, the dust swirled up in man-sized whirlwinds as the horse galloped through the dry dirt of the path towards the castle. Lenren turned his head sharply, catching a glimpse of the banner that rippled in the wind as the rider rode the mare hard.

'That's the banner of Lord Tharandal.' Ramon said quickly, standing up and squinting to catch the horse as it bound further into the distance.

'We need to go. Now.' Lenren said, before moving quickly down the wooden steps and bounding along the pathway. Ramon followed behind him, and the two men went with as much speed as they could muster.

Chapter Nine

The rider stopped short of the castle gates, as men rushed to him and quickly watered his mare and took her reins. The rider took off his helmet, feeling the breeze and sunlight against his face for the first time in several days. He looked around, down towards Ceraborn and seemed to take particular interest in the watch towers that surrounded the city's outer walls. He took a drink of water and threw the rest over his head to cool him from the ride.

'The King, I must speak with him at once.' He demanded in a low, gruff voice. He looked to the group of men that surrounded him, but none seemed to respond meaningfully to his request. They whispered amongst each other, before one of the older men stepped forward to meet the rider.

'We've had no word from Cerran. Is the Lord in trouble, or worse?' Said the older man, the rider saw that he was wearing under armour and held a small blade at his hip. He was a gatekeeper of some kind, but the rider did not care for that. He needed the King, and this man was not the king.

'By the word of Lord Tharandal, let me pass or I shall cut your head from your shoulders.' the rider returned, stepping closer to the gatekeeper and putting a hand on his own blade. The gatekeeper grunted but let the rider through. The man rushed through the gate keep, looking only towards the entrance to the Inner Halls, a place he had seen only as a young squire boy years before when he

had ridden along with a group of knights and banner men at the request of the High Lord as he feasted with the King. The castle was quieter than he remembered, the distant sound of horses and chickens in the courtyard quickly left him as he cornered one of the many dark, dimly lit corridors and kept marching towards the Great Halls. He came to a great door, and held his breathe for a moment before entering, a light cool breeze hit him as the door swung open and the sound of cellos filled the air. The King was sat on his throne, with his wife beside him and his child in his arms, blissfully unaware of the darkness that now befell the Kingdoms. The guards stood to attention as the man quickened his pace and came towards the throne, as he did so he noticed two men stood high above him and a man beside the King, almost in Shadow.

'My King, I bring a message from Lord Tharandal of Sera.' He said, bowing his head and taking a knee at the foot of the steps that led to the thrones.

'Tharandal? I haven't heard from him in months, please say there hasn't been trouble in the mines again!' The King said, holding his baby close to his chest and softly rubbing its cheek with his fingers.

'No, Your Majesty, the troubles are not in the mines. It's Cerran, My Lord, it has been attacked.'

The King looked up, his eyes showing an increased worrisome expression. The man looked from the King to the two men standing above him.

'The stronghold, My Lord, it's been destroyed. As has Cerran itself.' He said, his voice faint.

'What?' Said the King, his face losing colour.

'Yes sir, we rode out six nights back. There were flames, they were as tall as the stronghold itself! The place has been taken.' The man watched the King as he passed his child to his wife and stood, Brodon came closer to the man.

'Taken? By what?' He asked.

'A dragon.' Replied the man, his eyes fixed upon the King as he leaned over him. The King took a moment, his mouth open slightly and his eyes fixed upon nothing. He slowly blinked, closed his mouth and gulped before looking to the man again.

'How is this possible? It cannot be.' his words barely fumbled from his mouth as he spoke. The man fell onto one of the steps and closed his eyes before looking out onto the expanse of the Great Halls.

'We saw the flames in the evening, and we rode across towards them. We thought the stronghold was on fire perhaps from the blacksmiths. When we got there, everything was gone. The village, it's a smouldering wreck of ash and bones. There are buildings that have crumbled entirely, and the walls are melted and broken. We found a few survivors, no more than one hundred or so, they had fled into the forests with whatever they could, most have nothing except the clothes they wear. Then we went to the stronghold. There are bodies, burnt charred remains of good men, and the place is nothing more than rubble now. That's when we heard it, from within the stronghold walls, it's a dragon.' He said, tears forming and falling like spring raindrops and his hands shaking slightly. The King bent down to the man and turned his head towards the man who stood in the shadows.

'Velgar, prepare the High Chambers at once. We must stop this beast.' He said, his voice sounding angrier now than worried.

The man in the shadows nodded, and retreated further into the darkness, as did the men above the place. The rider wept, and the King held his outstretched arm and comforted him. He asked two guards to take the man and ensure he had rest and food, and that a message be sent to Tharandal stating that the King would send everything he could to aid the Lord and his people.

As the men stood around the table, Velgar placed a large map across its top and pressed the edges down with heavy iron weights. It was a detailed map of Sera, drawn some years prior by the Maester's in The Welling and detailing the expanse of the forests, rivers and towns that lay within the Kingdom. The men had not spoken, but as Velgar laid more papers the tension became too much to bare.

'Dragons?! I thought they were nothing but legend.' Ramon said, slumping into a chair.

'Not quite,' replied Velgar as he flicked through the pages of a book, Ramon could tell by the colour of the pages that the thing was old, though he didn't know what it was. Velgar found a page and slid the book across to the men, the page was illustrated with an exquisitely detailed portrait of a golden coloured dragon, with a long snout and a snake-like tongue. The measurements beside the beast claimed it to be around fifty feet in length with a wingspan surpassing that of any other creature. Lenren surveyed the illustration closely, the long serpentine tail which twisted

upwards into a spiked tip along with huge matte scales that covered the beast from snout to tail.

'What do you know of these creatures?' Ramon asked. Velgar looked uncomfortably at the drawings before sitting down opposite the two men.

'Dragons are illusive creatures. They have never been tamed, and few have conquered such a beast. From what I have read they are Eastern creatures. There are stories from the Myaman tribes who say that dragons live past the mountains of the East, in a place called Gorfo.'

The men looked confused; they had never seen a place with such a name upon any map.

'Gorfo is an uncharted land, what lies beyond the Eastern mountains is mystery. However, there is one account, by a chronicler by the name of Rha Thu'Ma, who is said to have gone as far as the mountains and seen a dragon hunting within the ranges. He is said to have welded a sword made from the flames of such a beast, though whether this is true I cannot say. This is, at the moment, almost everything we know of them.'

'Almost?' Asked Lenren, looking back to the pages.

'What is this?' Said Ramon, pointing to the top of the page.

'Ruogon? That is the name of the only dragon seen by anyone other than Rha Thu'Ma. Ruogon was seen a century ago, by Eastern travellers along the mountain passes as they hunted for precious stones that are said to lie within the caves. This book belonged to one of those men, he drew that image and called the beast after the Myaman God of snow. We believe he was quite an elderly beast, by his size and his skin. You see, Rha

Thu'Ma's beast was much smaller and he noted the scales were much smaller as well. So, we hypothesise that they must grow larger and thus the scales grow along with them.' Velgar said.

'You keep saying we, who do you mean by that?' Asked Lenren. At that moment Brodon walked across the room from the doorway and sat beside his Arch Chancellor.

'He means the crown.' Said Brodon. 'Since my father's days there have sightings of creatures, and of other things, that defy our knowledge. Some we dismissed as misconceptions and illusions, but some we have found to be less easily dismissed.'

'You mean to say that you've known of these?' Lenren said, a hint of anger trailing through his voice.

'No. We have, over the years, conducted many investigations and enquiries into these sightings. And as time as gone by, we have found books, such as these, which tell us of such creatures and suchlike, deep within the history of our world. We do not know what lies out there, and our Kingdom has never dealt with such things.' Brodon returned quickly.

'So, what exactly are you going to do with this?' Ramon replied, turning his gaze to the King.

Brodon stopped for a moment, flicked his eyes to the pages of the book and then back to the men opposite him.

'There are ways to kill any beast.' He said.

'You want us to go and kill a dragon? Brodon, this is madness. The entire stronghold could not break the beast!' Lenren replied. Velgar took the book and flicked a few more pages before returning the book to the table.

'We can kill it. Rha Thu'Ma killed the one he encountered.' He said quietly, almost doubting his own voice. Ramon took the book from the table, he looked across the tattered pages, faded text which was handwritten was woven across the page along with a drawing of a dagger.

'A fucking dagger!' Ramon said, throwing the book back onto the table before reclining back in his seat and laughing.

'Laugh all you like, but this is our only hope.' Brodon replied, his voice was low and serious. Ramon looked across the table at his King and his smile faded. He leaned forward and rested his arms upon the table.

'We lost a boy to a beast not even a hundredth of the size. I have lost skin to beasts that breathe nothing but air, never mind fucking fire. How exactly are we supposed to kill this beast?' He said.

'Like all beasts the dragon has weaknesses, they are not Gods. They are mortal creatures. Rha Thu'Ma found that a dragon's neck, behind its ear, is the weakest point of the scales it possesses.' Velgar said, reading from pages of the book. Ramon rubbed his eyes in disbelief, Lenren sat motionless.

'Where is this dagger?' He said after a moment, his voice trembling slightly.

'There isn't one. This isn't a children's tale my friend, there's no special jewel or anointed saviour. We will have a blade made for you. And with that blade, you will kill the beast.' Brodon replied calmly. The room was silent, but it was broken soon after by the close crying of a child, it

quickly fell away with distant and equally quick paced footsteps.

'The Queen.' Velgar said under his breathe. The King nodded but kept his eyes on the half-closed door, until at last the quiet returned.

'This is madness, and besides, Astriel is in no state to travel. We cannot go without her.' Ramon said, breaking the silence.

'Astriel's health is improving, and we have given her the medicine she needs. She'll be back walking and riding within a few days.' Velgar replied, trying to sound as reassuring as possible. Ramon drummed his fingers hard against the table, bit his lip grunted unapprovingly.

'What exactly is your plan?' He said, between gritted teeth. The King turned to Velgar who spread out the map so as to iron out any wrinkles that blemished the surface. The Chancellor held his finger at a mark that read Ceraborn and traced a line East from the stronghold.

'The easiest pathway to the stronghold is to ride North to the Main Road, then East through the Northern Hills of Tu-Ton. From there you can ride as the crow flies to the stronghold.' He said confidently, he flipped another map out and traced the pathway across it with his fingers. He tossed coins along the way as markers, until at last he landed upon Ceraborn. The Archers looked at the pathway, it would be a hard and unforgiving ride. It had taken the rider six days, and that was without the rest it would require for the Archers. They did not ride lightly, and the horses were as prized as any dagger or bow that they carried with them. They would no risk losing they're mares to rough riding through the hill passes of Tu-Ton or the

forests of Cerran. The King held a finger at one of the markers, just past the border to Tu-Ton.

'Herran's Gate. There you restock food and supplies, even change your mares if you must.' He said. Herran's Gate was somewhat of black spot within the Kingdom's. It was known as bad land, few flora or fauna grew there, and the air was thick with illusion. A small outpost had been built there, a relic of the Elder Folk. It was used mainly by passing troops of Kingsmen as they marched towards the strongholds. However, the lands were far less travelled now, with Spring came strange dangers from deep within the forests of Cerran. Large packs of black dogs stalked along the hillsides as the rabbits ate the spring grasses, and when the supplies of the kits ran lower than expected, the packs soon turned to larger prey.

'I understand your concerns, however there are few men I would trust more so than you to perform this.' Brodon said, looking at the two men with nothing but seriousness.

'You mean there are none then?' Said Lenren with a slight smile. The King smiled back, Lenren was right. The King would not trust anyone except for the Archers, not with something as great a task as this.

'What else do we know?' Ramon Interjected, tapping his fingers on the book that Velgar sat in front of him.

'The creatures are very solitary, and it is believed that once they have nested then they will not leave that place. Not unless a larger beast attacks them.' The Arch Chancellor replied.

'A larger beast?' Brodon replied.

'There are stories from the East. However, no Western creature can confront this dragon.' Velgar returned quickly. Brodon nodded, he ground his teeth and winced as the enormity of the task began to hit him.

'The High Lords, they will know.' Velgar said.

'Aye, and they will want answers.' Agreed Lenren.

Brodon thought for a moment, his eyes scanned across the maps and the pages of the books.

'We know the beast has found its plunder. It will not haunt or attack. The survivors are being held within the keeps of Lord Tharandal. Once you have killed the beast, we will send supplies across to them and we will begin relocating the survivors.' He said, his voice filled with authorial power. The men agreed, it wasn't a perfect solution, but it was, at this moment; the best one they had. They knew that the risk of sending a larger infantry, whether it be to battle the beast or aid the misplaced folk, could risk greater threat to the Kingdoms.

'Velgar, send word to the High Lords. Tell them that the meeting must take place immediately. We must gather our strength.' Brodon said.

The Archers stood and made way towards the doorway.

'We will speak with the messenger, see what else he knows. It might help us in some way.' Lenren said, and with an agreeable nod from the King, both he and Ramon left the room. Brodon sat back in his chair, he closed the book the lay in front of him and sighed.

'My father always said he knew that dragons were real, and that they would come to the West.' He said, in almost a murmur. Velgar looked to the King, he stared at

the man as he watched him play with a large sapphire ring one of his fingers.

'You said our strength, Your Majesty. What do you mean?' The Arch Chancellor asked.

'If they lose Velgar, if they fail. That beast will destroy everything. We must be prepared.' Brodon replied, staring blankly at the maps and sighing loudly as he fingered his temple.

Chapter Ten

As the two men walked briskly down the hallway, they came to the realisation of the task that had befallen them. They stopped short of the entrance that led out across the courtyard's upper walls, and simply let themselves be drowned by the silence around them.

'The Kludde nearly took us all.' Ramon said, his words trailing off. Lenren looked to his friend, down to the wounds on his arms and the bandages that still wrapped around his hand and nodded in agreement.

'You think we can do this?' Ramon asked, turning to face his friend. Lenren shrugged his shoulders in response, his gaze now fell only onto the horizon that lay ahead of them out past the doorway. He walked on for a few steps, but at the moment the sunlight hit his fair skin, he walked back and turned to face Ramon again.

'Honestly, I don't know. But it is our duty, and we must fulfil our duty until the day when we are defeated. You know that more than almost anyone in the Kingdoms.' Lenren said softly. Ramon smiled, turned and began to walk back along the corridor that they had come from.

'Where are you going?' Lenren called out, his voice echoing as it was carried along the slick stone walls of the castle.

'To tell Astriel. You speak with the messenger; we'll meet back with Velgar in the evening. From there we can try and come up with a proper plan.' Ramon returned, not

so much as turning to face his friend as he fell deeper into the flickering shadows of the halls.

Against his better judgement, and without much thought on exactly what or how he would brooch the subject, Lenren continued on his walk until he came upon a quiet wing on the East quadrant of the Castle. It was a seldom used place, though some of the rooms were being made up for the arrival of the High Lords. He found guards at the doorway, but they were no bother to him, and with a quick knock at the door; he entered. It was a large, brightly lit room with a huge four poster bed towards one end and a bronze bathing tub at the other. A large stone fireplace was built into the wall beside the tub and that itself looked out upon a quiet royal orchard. Lenren looked around the place, there were iron baskets of coals that had been nailed into place on the walls, from which scented smoke was being softly emitted.

'The King has made you quite comfortable, I see.' The archer said as he found the man sitting at the edge of the bed untying his boot laces.

'I declined at first. But the servants said that the King had given them very specific orders.' The man replied, not looking up or so much as glancing towards his visitor. Lenren turned, over the fireplace hung an impressive portrait of the Old King overlooking the harbour port of Korgen at a festival, the Archer remembered it fondly.

'You were there?' Asked the man, glancing up.

Lenren nodded, still looking at the painting he found himself trying to imagine where he would have been in proportion to what it showed. He traced his fingers along

its surface before stopping at a small pavilion towards the right hand of the frame.

'Probably there, getting my fill of Korgen ale whilst I could. Best drink in the West if you ask me.' He said with a smile. He turned to face the man and was met with his sorrowful grey face.

'You're here to ask me questions, aren't you?' He said softly. Lenren nodded in reply, he found a chair and dragged it across to sit opposite the man. He made himself comfortable and watched as the rider threw his boots carelessly to one side.

'My feet, they're aching terribly.' The man said, looking up but missing contact with Lenren.

'We need as much information as you can give us.' Lenren replied, again conjuring his most sympathetic smile.

'They think you can kill it. You can't. I didn't see the beast, but I saw what it had done.' The man replied, his voice quieter. Lenren straightened himself on his chair and folded his arms.

'I need information.' He said bluntly. The man bit his lip, fiddled with his shirt buttons and then wiped then took a deep breath.

'The village itself is almost completely gone. The main path is still rideable, but the structures don't seem safe at all. If I were you, I'd look to the East Road, try and keep to the forest lines as much as you can for at least some protection.' The rider said eventually, trying to persuade himself of his knowledge.

'Go on.' Lenren replied calmly.

'The stronghold itself, we only briefly scouted it. It looks as though the... thing...has taken refuge in the inner walls, it created itself a cave from the remains of the place. The towers are almost completely gone, as are the walkway along the top. That's all I know; I swear it by the Sister herself.' The man said, holding a balled palm to the sky.

'The Sister?' Lenren asked, sitting back slightly.

'Aye, the True Sister as will be given to us when the Goddess returns.' The man replied with a hopeful smile. Lenren realised the man to be a believer in the faith of the Yellow Sisters, and he was unsettled.

'The Gods are-' He began.

'A fallacy, created by the Maester's to control the people and to blind them from the truth of the Goddess.' The man interrupted quickly. Lenren sat further back, his back resting heavily against the chair. He nodded slowly and looked the man up and down and saw, near to the inner of his elbow, a tattoo of The Sisterhood.

'You feel the need to keep it quiet though?' the Archer said, nodding towards the artwork. The man placed his hand over the tattoo, almost in a protective way.

'We are strong in our faith; we face persecution for our faith. That is the truth of it.' The man replied.

'Not from the King, and not from the Welling.' Lenren returned. The man looked uneasily to the archer and seemed to sneer slightly.

'You think so? Then I pity you Ser, for you are blind as well as scared.' He said, pointing to Lenren's arm. Lenren covered his scar immediately before taking a long look at the man.

'How many survivors are there? Really.' He asked.

'I told the King what I knew.' The man replied.

Lenren nodded slowly as he accepted the man for his word. The man looked across to the fireplace, before forcing a yawn and rubbing his eyes.

'It you please Ser, I need rest.' He didn't look the Archer in the eyes, but Lenren took the hint and walked from the room without another word.

It had never occurred to Lenren that the Yellow Sisters were in fact a credible threat to the religions and faiths that the West had known for so long. They were troublemakers, a band of healers who relied on those who were sick enough and so bereft at their situation that they would take anything that resembled hope. He remembered the first time that he had come upon them, a young farmer in the south had been ploughing a field when he came upon a wolf trap that wrapped around his leg, breaking the bone and digging deep into the flesh. Lenren, who at the time was visiting the village for personal reasons when he came upon the scene. The Yellow Sisters origins came from the tablet that was found during the construction of St Abrahams, the largest of the Sisters palaces in the Southern Kingdoms. The tablet was uncovered by a woman slave, who took the tablet and saw it was engraved with a language she had never seen before. From what Lenren knew, the faith had then stemmed from the belief that the tablet held the last promise of the Goddess Alia, or the True Sister. Upon the tablet was the illustration of a woman holding the sun in her palm as if it were her own child. The Welling condemned the faith of the Sisters, and

since the first days of the Western Kingdoms the Sisters had been at something of a cold war against the Maester's of The Welling. He seldom heard mention of any positive influence that the Sisterhood had made, and though they had been barred from Ceraborn; they did have influence and support with certain sectors of the city. The Crown had remained silent on the matter, and the loyalty of the monarch to the Gods of Men, as the faith of the Maester's were known, was unquestionable. However, the place of the Crown against the religious sectors had in recent times become something of an issue within itself. Brodon's silence against the Sisterhood, along with his insistence on the relaxation of the stricter laws that The Welling had held onto, had seen the King far less in favour with the Maester's than was desirable. The King however, had managed to somewhat subdue the affairs, with his close ties to the Arch Chancellor, and the peace that his Kingdom had found itself in.

Lenren relaxed himself against a wall in some far corner of the castle, sank down to the floor and gave himself a moment to relax in the darkness that surrounded him. He thought back, to the years that had passed since his first ventures with the Black Archers, and the men that had carried those famous colours across the years and smiled at the memories that flashed across his mind. They were good days, spent with good men in good spirits. He wondered now, if he would become a part of that history, if anyone would remember him if they fell upon the inevitable death of which he thought was coming unto the company, and then he let those thoughts fall softly away. Remembered or not, it wouldn't matter. What mattered,

what truly counted now, was that the dragon was killed, and the land returned to peace once again.

Ser Ramon held his eyes closed tightly as he relaxed further into his chair at Astriel's bedside. For a brief moment he felt himself slipping into a sleep, but he did not allow himself such pleasure and shook his head, rubbed his tired eyes and refocused onto his sleeping friend. She had slept, he had been told by the chamber maids, almost all morning since the Queen had left. He looked to his right and saw the small bottles of medicine, two were empty, and a small iron pot, empty of any contents, was beside the bed. The sweating had reduced, and it seemed that she was breathing with ease now. It was a miracle, or at least it appeared so to Ramon. Through the years he had lost count of those he had seen saved by the miraculous medicines of The Welling Maester's. Of course, there were times when the medicine could not help them, but at those moments the gentle touch of the care givers that blessed the souls of the dying helped to calm them before they left this world. Ramon flicked his badge up into the air, like a coin, catching it in his large leathery palm and clenching tightly around it. He stated down at the brooch, it meant less and less to him as the years passed. It was an honour only four men had ever received, Ser Ramon of Garth being amongst them. He was given the brooch as recognition for his services to the crown during his days with the Kingsmen, and for then servicing in the Archers. He was seen as the binding stitch between the two companies, though he himself failed to see the connection. Astriel stirred for a moment, her hands began to hover

lightly over the sheets and grasp at something, she mumbled for a moment, before calming again. Ramon took a damp towel and patted her forehead of the few beads that now marked it. He watched as her eyes opened slowly, and she turned to face him.

'Ramon, where am I?' she said quietly, her voice hoarse.

'Still in bed my friend, resting.' He replied with a comforting smile. Astriel nodded, turned herself to face the ceiling and took a long deep breathe.

'How are you feeling?' He asked her, passing her a small cup of water. She held out her hand, it shook slightly but she managed to take a few sips.

'The pain has settled, it feels numb.' She replied.

Ramon acknowledged the response with a grunt and a nod.

'Why are you here? You should be out with Lenren and the King.' Astriel said softly.

'Something has happened, in Cerran.' He replied sternly. The girl turned her head again, her eyes focused onto him and he could tell she was now fully aware.

'What has happened Ramon? Another Kludde, or grey bear?' She asked. Ramon shook his head, he leaned forward and hesitated a moment.

'A messenger has come. Cerran has been destroyed, as has the stronghold.' He said nervously.

'By what?' Astriel asked.

'A dragon.'

He watched his friend as she tried to make sense of what he told her. Her eyes flashed from place to place and her expression fell away into pure shock.

'A dragon? But how?' she said eventually.

'Velgar has said that the beast has flown from the Far East, far beyond the mountains in a place called Gormo. Apparently, it has wiped out everything. And now the King has asked us to destroy it.' Ramon returned. Astriel sat herself up, her face wincing slightly and a small gasp coming up from an attempt to shimmy her leg slightly.

'The stronghold, are there any survivors?' She asked.

'From what we know, there are a few who managed to flee from the village. But the men, they stood by the name of the crown until the end.' Ramon replied softly. Astriel's eyes shifted uneasily again, he could see the terror that she was trying to hide.

'Brodon has asked us to ride out and kill the beast.' He said quietly. Astriel nodded her head knowingly but said nothing. She tried to gather her thoughts, though this was nearly impossible with the feelings of drowsiness, weakness and fear that were mixing within her.

'When do we leave?' She asked hopefully.

'The meeting of the High Lords will take place within the next few days. Brodon is having messages sent to them as we speak. Velgar hopes that your recovery means we will be riding by the week's end.' He replied. Astriel smiled, she felt weaker than she admitted, and her eyes struggled to focus on anything, but her spirit was pushing her to rise from this and be reborn stronger than before. That, she hoped, would be enough. She held out her hand to Ramon and he took it gently, her slight fingers were dwarfed by his rugged thick digits. She felt him squeeze her palm, and she replied.

'You shall be fighting men with ease in no time.' He said with a slight chuckle. Astriel managed to force a laugh from her dry, tickling throat before it was overtaken by a quick succession of coughs. Silence fell upon the room as the last coughs forced their way out of the girl, like reapers from a dying soul.

'A dragon.' She said, almost to herself as she looked out into the darkness beyond her bed frame. 'Tell me more of this beast.'

'From what we know, it's some sort of fire drake. It is perhaps hundreds of years old, though quite why it chose to fly across from the East is unknown. According to Velgar, these creatures are as mysterious in nature as anything the Gods have ever given to us.' Ramon replied.

'How do we kill it?' Astriel asked.

'Like any beast, we wear it down and cut it until its blood runs dry.' Ramon said coldly.

'The Kludde, that alone took arrow upon arrow. And then the blows you dealt it. How can the King expect us to succeed in this?' Astriel said.

Ramon shook his head; it was his honest and only response. He didn't know how exactly they were supposed to slay the beast, only that they would do so in defence of the Kingdoms that they swore to protect. Ramon watched his friend as her eyes slowly began to shut, she moved her hand from his and tightly gripped the sheet that was laid across her. She drifted away into another deep slumber, and Ramon was left alone once more, with his thoughts circling him like vultures.

Chapter Eleven

As she kept to the edge of the forest, Melran began to notice the stillness of the world around her. She stopped for a moment, resting against the uprooted trunk of an oak tree, and simply listened to the sounds around her. The night air was cool, but the fierce winds that had battered her just a few hours earlier had now vanished, and the air was pure and untainted by the thick smog of the dragon fire. She had been running East now for two or three hours, though her progress was unknown due to her ignorance of the geography about her. Still, the distant chirping of crickets seemed to calm her as she fell against the trunk and caught her breathe. She had not seen another soul since leaving the stronghold, and she had avoided the main road that led back down towards Cerran for fear of being dragged into the woods by a creature or the stragglers that had bound into the dense foliage. She looked around her, she could here running water and so guessed that she was close to the banks of a river. She hoped that by following this, that perhaps she would find herself another village to hold up in whilst she ventured towards one of the Southern port towns, from there she had planned to stow away on a vessel and head East to Cyronos. She had heard many good things about that place. She remembered hearing tales that the sun shone across the waters so brightly that the water had turned crystal clear, so that you could see right down to the sandy bottom without so much as having to squint. As she sat

against the trunk, Melran became aware of voices calling out in the darkness. Her ears picked up, she crouched low and peaked out into the forest. The voices were coming closer, along with the distant sounds of horses and carts. She looked around her, catching a glimpse of torchlight from across the banks of the river to her right. She looked ahead, following the sounds of the voices as they came nearer to her. After a few moments, she crept quietly closer, and noticed that the voices were coming from a troop of men who wore the same armour as that of the stronghold men. Only these men were carrying torches, not swords, and behind them was several horses with several carts. The silhouetted figures of men, women and children danced in the torchlight. Melran knew that these were survivors, and that these were likely the men from the High Lord of Sera, Lord Tharandal. She kept close to the forest edge, where she was covered by the steep incline of the bank that led up to the pathway where the men now stood. She moved closer, trying to hear the conversation.

'...The King... Survivors... Black Archers most likely.' Were the words she caught. She shuddered at the very mention of the King. And at that moment, as she focused on the men above her, she felt a soft cold hand wrap around her mouth and pull her towards the darkness.

'Scream, and I will twist your neck like a cork in wine.' Said the soft, departed voice of the figure as it held her. It slowly let down the hand and Melran turned to face the figure, a dark swollen mass of mist stood tall in the form of a man, but featureless.

'It's you, isn't it.' Melran said.

'Is Azin dead.' The figure asked coldly.

'Yes, but there were survivors.' Melran replied.

'It is expected. Though the main targets are taken care of. I am proud of you, my friend. Now, return to me and we will begin your final training.' The figure replied.

'He was here. He connected through me and spoke with Azin.' Melran replied, her hands shaking as she spoke.

'His strength was never in question. We are loyal, and he knows that. Azin and his kind will bend the knee to him or die. They know that.'

Melran looked toward the being, a tear began to form in her eye. The being came closer, it formed a skeletal hand and took the tear as it fell from her eye.

'Interesting.' It said. 'You appear attached to the situation.'

'Don't doubt me.' Melran replied, suddenly grabbing at the skeletal arm and holding it tightly.

'Believe me, I wouldn't be so foolish.' The being replied, evaporating the arm and causing Melran to stumble forward. Catching herself on a branch, snapping it with her weight, the figure quickly shifted itself so as to back her against a tree.

'Begin the next step. Ensure that the journey is undertaken and bring me what he needs.' The voice said, fading away, as the mist descended softly onto the ground. Melran moved to grab at where the being had stood but found nothing, apart from the sharp bright lamplight of the soldiers as they bound down the incline towards her.

As the cart steadily made its way along the beaten track, with the lamps swinging softly in the night breeze,

Melran offered little to the conversation that was occurring within the small group that she had been introduced to by the soldiers. They had told her that they were searching the woods in search of any and all desperate folk who had found themselves lost and homeless from what the men were now deeming to be 'The Tragedy'. There were four others in Melran's cart, an older woman who had been burned across her arm by falling timbers of her home, a man and his daughter, a small but beautiful thing barely six years old by Melran's eyes, and another woman who had kept herself tightly wrapped in the tattered, burned gowns that she had quickly put on in a desperate attempt to save herself from the raining fire. The older woman and the man had conversed on and off for most of the trip, exchanging names and acknowledging what they had lost during the blaze. They had also guessed at the woman being asleep, or even to have passed due to her lack of movement. For Melran, it was a torturous experience, and she could not help but feel that she heard distant screaming and crying of those who had not been so fortunate. If she was indeed fortunate. The soldiers had asked her name, if she had seen anyone else and whether or not she had escaped with any family members. She had been quick with a false alibi and alias, stating that she had only travelled to the village during her travels East towards the port towns. But the orders were clear, and Lord Tharandal had wanted every sector of the forests searched, and he would send fresh search parties at daybreak. Melran watched as the forest passed her slowly, and was replaced with low stone walls, followed by a jolt as the cart was lifted from the rugged pathway onto a stone courtyard.

Overhead, the moonlight was replaced by the familiar dark silhouettes of water towers. The cart rounded in the large courtyard and the sound of footsteps came closer.

'Everyone out.' Shouted a voice from the darkness. Melran lifted herself from the cart, sliding out she was met with the full scale of Lord Tharandal's abode. It was a tall, black clad building with huge ornate stone statues lining the sprawling gardens that could be seen further on into the distance. The place, to Melran, appeared to be split into three sections, an outer heavily fortified entrance courtyard, in which she now stood, followed by another equally grand inner yard. A moat separated the yards along with a drawbridge and two massive black stone gatehouses. Turning, Melran saw that within the thick outer walls were several stables that were stacked high with reserves of ales and grains, with three being used for the Lord's mares. To her right, dimly lit by lamps that hung from the grey walls that contrasted softly against their darker counterparts, stood a Chapel with two large wooden doors wide open. A warm glow came from within, along with distant sounds of singing. The guards called for the horses to move along, and Melran watched as they turned and headed back out into the forests from which she had been brought. She saw around twenty people standing in small groups around the yard, each looking frantically around the place as well. A man stood atop a wooden platform, cleared his throat and waved a hand to attract the attention of the people. He was a tall man, thick set with rugged features and a dark face that told a thousand tales.

'We understand the troubles you have found yourselves in,' He began with a loud, authorial tone, 'But

we are here solely to protect and aid you. Lord Tharandal welcomes you here, as his people, to rest and draw comfort from this place. The terror that has occurred is truly terrible, and many have been lost as a result. However, the Lord is in contact with our King, and plans are being made. Now please, in your groups you will be given a stable in which to rest.'

Melran shuddered in the cold and was startled as a large blanket was placed over her shoulders by unseen hands. She turned, seeing the previously sleeping woman standing tall to her side, slightly behind her, with long unbraided golden hair and delicate snow-white skin. She gave Melran a nod, but her face had no warmth to connect to her actions. The group followed a soldier across the yard, with others doing the same and all being assigned to the stables that had been quickly made up for those who had survived the tragedy. Melran found herself a makeshift bed at the back of the place, a small bale of hay squished between two support beams. A small fire had been lit, surrounded by large oddly sized stones, in the centre of the stable and a pot of some hastily made soup softly simmered. The hours passed slowly, and the quiet night was interrupted only by the neighs of horses and the rumble of carts as the search parties returned. Melran had positioned herself at the front of the stable, choosing to watch over the courtyard whilst the others kept close to the fire in search of warmth. The woman, who Melran had seen wonder across the yard and towards the Chapel, soon came back and sat beside the girl. A quick glance and Melran saw that the woman held a small book, hardly bigger than her hand, tightly against her legs. The two

looked out into the yard, there were one or two small groups of soldiers, though they kept to themselves for the most part.

'Where did they find you?' Asked the woman, her voice hardly more than a whisper.

'In the forest.' Melran replied after a few moments, she was unsure if the woman were talking to her or the others.

'Of course, but where?'

Melran's brow furrowed in confusion, she turned to face the woman but made sure to keep herself huddled within the thick woollen blanket.

'How do you mean?' She asked, receiving a strange expression from the woman.

'They ask everyone where they are from, why they are here and who they are here with. So, my ask you the same?' The woman returned, looking at the girl and tilting to her head to a side as she did. Melran gulped, she felt as though she were being interrogated, and she did not like it.

'My name is Elyana. I came to Cerran by chance alone, I'm travelling onwards towards the port towns. I hope to go East.' She replied quickly.

The woman smiled, leaned forward and took hold of Melran's hand. She pulled it up, exposing Melran's arm and seemed to look along the arm.

'I'd rather you did not do that.' Melran said, pulling her arm away.

'Curious.' Said the woman with a smile, exposing egg white teeth in a clean straight row. She pursed her lips and sat closer to the girl. 'You're still not a good liar, Melran.'

She said. Melran froze, her eyes widened slightly but she was quick to fall back and not react.

'I assure you, you have me mixed up with another.' She replied, with a fake smile. The woman smiled back, shaking her head slowly and biting her bottom lip.

'I don't think so. I remember you quite well, though you were younger then and your eyes showed so much hope.' She returned.

'Strange, your face means nothing to me.' Melran replied, assessing the woman closely as she spoke.

The woman carefully opened the small book that lay on her lap, flicked through a few delicate crisp pages and found her place. Melran looked at the page, it was a long list, handwritten, of names and dates. Some went back nearly a decade, though towards the bottom the date came closer and closer to the present.

'Your alias, Melran, how do you come by it?' Said the woman, looking down at the page. Melran held her glance at the woman, but as she turned her head to face the girl, Melran's gaze fell to her own hands.

'Elyana is my real name.' She said sternly. The woman sighed heavily, closed her book and turned her body to face the girl entirely. She unbuttoned her outermost blanket to reveal a glance at the bright yellow robe that she wore beneath it. Melran's eyes widened, and memories came flooding back as though a great storm had begun to bash against the recesses in her mind.

'Melran. The orphan girl of the South, a mystery beyond the powers of the Sisterhood.' The woman said.

'Who are you?' Melran said through gritted teeth.

'Sister Nemara Du'Tahnama. Though my friends call me Nem.' Nemara's perfect smile glistened in the darkness of the stable.

'I don't remember you.' Melran said quietly, looking away from the woman. She desperately tried to push back against the tide of memories that flooded her, drowning her in the past she had though long buried and lost.

'I believe you do. Though it was some time ago now, nearly eight years. Though I remember so clearly the Sisters bringing you to me, as though they had found a gem within a mountain of soot.' Nemara replied, looking up into the sky, reminding herself of those years long since gone. She looked down at the girl, tears formed within Melran's eyes and she fought hard against them.

'Do not patronise me.' Melran said, her glare cutting through Nemara like the sharpest blade.

'I see the coldness of time has found a host within you. Much as I thought would happen. Please, tell me what became of you?'

Melran closed her eyes, feeling the tears drip down her face she took a deep breath and forced a smile before turning to face the woman.

'I found what I needed to find.' She said, clearing her throat as the words struggled from within her. Nemara furrowed her brow, before turning her head towards the Chapel and pointing out to it.

'How many faiths do you believe stand within those walls?' She asked. Melran looked towards the warm hue that split from the Chapel building, the silhouette of a young boy running from the place and back into one of the neighbouring stables caught her eyes.

'I don't know.' She replied softly.

'More than those inside care to admit.' Nemara responded. She took the book and flicked through the pages again, though this time her intent was clear to Melran and she hesitated slightly with the thought of stopping of the woman from finding the page.

'I should imagine there are faiths from deep within the history of these Kingdoms. Passed down from mother to daughter, father to son. Though we are forbidden to speak of them.' Nemara said, as she slowed her flickering and began scanning through a particularly lengthy paragraph on one page.

'No, you're wrong. The Sisterhood is rightly shunned, you are Witches with nothing but dark intent.' Melran replied coldly. The response garnered a laugh from Nemara, who quickly closed the book once again and placed her hands over the top of its cover. She paused for a moment, staring out into the darkness before looking down to the damp cobbled ground.

'You hold such bitterness, after all these years. Imagine what would have occurred had you-'

'Been given a chance? As was my right, as was the only thing I should have received from the Sisterhood! Do not dare tempt me to play against you, or I pray that your Sister be watching over you closely.' Melran's words spat out, like lava from a volcanic eruption. The two sat in silence for a further hour or so, with nothing more than the occasional glance being exchanged. Melran was unsurprised by the appearance of the Sisterhood to this tragedy. She held the belief that they had ventured to Cerran in order to find new recruits to the sordid

misplaced faith they held onto. It made her feel sick, just the sight of the yellow robes made her nauseated beyond words, and all the while dark memories surfaced like sharks, waiting for her to stray to close.

Melran awoke from an uneasy sleep. She looked drowsily into the darkness, the firelight had died down to a few small cherry red embers and the lamplight from the courtyard seemed dimmer against the total blackness of the night. She turned on her side, feeling for her bags, the outline of her dagger bringing her great relief in these anxious moments. Softly, the sound of snoring and mumbling swept its way across the stables from the man and the elderly woman. Melran closed her eyes again, trying desperately to save herself from a night of contemplation and despair at the situation she had now found herself in. She relaxed her breathing, tucked the blanket beneath her chin and shuddered as the cold breeze hit against her. As she lay there, her ears caught the distance sound of horses travelling along the pathways that led into the forests, and she wondered how many they had saved. She couldn't remember if she had been dreaming, or whether she had simply slept. She hoped to dream of nice things, though they seemed so far away from her and they doubtless would remain as such. She turned again, facing the ceiling and seeing a small Eagle sitting atop a beam looking out into the courtyard. It bobbed its head up and down, blinking quickly and opening its yellow beak but without any noise or hint of a squawk coming forth. She watched the bird curiously and caught its eye. It turned its head to a side, staring back at her with a large black eye. It

bobbed its head again, before looking out into the darkness and lifting itself from the beam and flying out into the courtyard. Melran stayed in her place, looking now at the emptiness above her and thinking of nothing in particular. After a few moments she seemed to snap from her trance like state and turn back to her side, facing out into the entrance of the stable. She looked out, only to see the bird standing in the doorway silhouetted against the moonlight and giving her a look that could only be described as one of pure impatience. The girl picked herself up slowly, stretched and looked back to the doorway, the bird remained. Melran pulled the dagger from her bag and packed it softly in her cloak before quietly moving out into the doorway, watching as the bird hopped a few feet in front of her until she stood where it had stood. She moved quickly, keeping to the shadows and glancing upwards every few yards to check for watchmen on the walls. As the pair made way across the darkened pathway of the courtyard, they came to a small iron barred doorway which led to a darkened inner corridor. The Eagle sat now, staring into the darkness, beside the doorway.

'What is this?' Melran said quietly, before looking down and seeing that she was indeed trying to communicate with a bird. The pair stood in silence for a few moments, before the bird began to squawk with a ferocious and unbearable volume. Melran got to her knees and grabbed the bird, picked it up and stared at the creature, she shushed it and soon the silence returned. She looked around her and was thankful to find herself still alone and undetected by the guards.

'What exactly are you trying to do Mister?!' She said angrily, tapping the bird lightly on his beak. The bird remained unmoved by her anger and instead limply sat in her hands. She held it against her chest, turning back towards the courtyard before stopping at the sudden pounding headache that caused her to fall back onto her knees, she released the bird and clasped her head as the burning sensation intensified towards something she had never thought possible to feel. She moved towards the wall, the eagle watched her intently, as she fought for her breathe and tears began to form in her tired eyes.

Your journey is just beginning.

The pain seemed to come in great flashes, like lightning over the seas.

The time is now.

She began to claw at her skin as the feeling of the burning wrapped around her body.

Choose your side.

The burning began to subside and was replaced by the harsh icy coldness of the night. Melran opened her eyes, seeing only the eagle standing before her, bobbing its head.

'Who are you?' Melran asked, her words caught between frantic breaths.

This bond is temporary. Who I am is not important, you must choose Melran, choose who you stand with.

Melran held her hands out, but the eagle backed away.

'I can't do this. I don't want to do this!' Melran cried, slamming her hands against the stone scrapping her palms against the jagged rocks of the wall behind her.

You are here now. That cannot be changed, you cannot remove yourself from this. The process has begun. Choose wisely young one.

The Eagle spread its wings, gave a final loud cry and ascended into the night with magnificent elegance. The girl watched as the bird flew into the night, and she shuddered against the cold. Her head dropped between her knees as she sat alone, sobbing in the darkness. Only when the sound of iron scrapping against stone rang across the place did she stop and realise what had happened. She picked her head up slowly, turning towards the door and seeing a regal man stood in the doorway. The two looked at one another, and as the slender figure of the man came forward, Melran became aware of the guards at his back.

'Lord Tharandal.' Melran said quietly. The man stood before her, tall and immaculate in his finery. He stared at her keenly, almost looking through her and into something beyond the girl who sat before him. He motioned his guards forward, and they surrounded Melran with swords drawn.

'Of all nights, the Sister provides me with you now. How very convenient.' Tharandal, stroking his long snow-white beard, in a deep but deceptively soft voice. Melran turned, facing the doorway and seeing Nemara standing just past the doorway, her yellow robes bright against the darkness of the corridor behind her.

'I don't understand. Please, let me go.' Melran begged, her tears returning.

'A Gallerbond, by my soul.' Tharandal said, crouching and looking into the girl's eyes as if she were an unknown creature to be viewed and poked at. She picked herself up

slowly, backing further against the wall and frantically searching for an escape. There wasn't one.

'Bring her with me. We may have use of her.'

Tharandal said, nodding to his guards and seeming to almost float across the ground, his long black robe flickering softly against the breeze.

As the night turned to day, and the breeze fell away to early morning mist, Melran was placed in chains and loaded into an antique yet exquisitely ornate travelling carriage. The seats were plump maroon velvet and the glass windows showed the extreme wealth of the owner. To her side sat a guard, with a dagger pointing towards her on his lap. But it was the people who sat opposite her that surprised Melran the most, Lord Tharandal and Nemara sat side by side, quiet and with eyes focused solely on her.

'Where are you taking me?' She said gruffly, her eyes flickering from Nemara to the Lord. Tharandal smiled, leaned forward slightly and placed a hand on the girl's knee.

'People like you are few and far between. With Cerran destroyed, we have use for you. The King has begun preparations for an assault on the beast that now sits within the ruins of Cerran, and you will help them.' He replied.

'What have you told him?' Melran said, directing her gaze to Nemara.

'Nothing, you showed them yourself.' Nemara returned. Melran thought back to the hours before, to the eagle and the message she had received. The carriage began its journey, the sound of the driver laughing, and the horses cries as the ship hit their backs.

'And what if I refuse?' Melran said. Tharandal leaned back, flicked a piece of fluff from his collar and gave a wicked smile.

'Then, my dear, it is quite simple. You die.'

Chapter Twelve

Throughout the following days the Castle was plagued with rumours, whispers and quiet conversations amongst the members of the Royal staff that the King had ordered an immediate gathering of the High Lords due to a dark and terrible act that had befallen the West. Thankfully, news travelled slowly amongst the common folk and so far, there had been no reports of the terrible tragic events that had befallen the stronghold of Cerran. There was, however, a large and undeniable sense amongst the commoners that the Palace had placed a larger number of troops amongst its streets, and that this signalled the city as a place of great importance within the coming days. The castle walls were cleaned, and the drawbridge roadway was weeded, with newly planted flowerbeds taking residence on either side of the carriageway. Within the courtyards, the Kingsmen had been instructed that the place was to be cleared and prepared in proper fashion for the arrival of the High Lords. This meant moving large quantities of ale and whiskies down into the lower cellars, as well as renovating two of the large stable blocks to house the mares and carriages that would be kept safely within the walls. The High Lords of the West had great respect bestowed onto them by the people of Ceraborn, but nevertheless plans were drawn in order to clear a route directly to the castle and thereby ensuring that there was an almost impossibility of the carriages being held up or coming to any contact with traders or suchlike whilst they

entered the city. The King had instructed his personal guards to practise ceremonial drills, unlike any they had performed before and the bands to play music befitting of the significant occasion. To his pleasure, Brodon discovered that the royal chefs had already begun preparations for the feasts, and had sourced more than enough food, wine and ale to see the meetings throughout. Brodon's sole intention was to ensure that the meeting was deemed as having his whole and undivided attention. This, he believed, was his moment. He had the maids check over the banners, washing them and drying them deep within the cellars to ensure they were perfect for the morning of the arrivals. Furthermore, there was a great amount of work put into the gardens surrounding the Palace, the grass was cut, and the trees and shrubbery shaped into the most elegant of appearances. Deep within the castle walls, in a large open room overlooking the gardens, with the morning sun shining an amber light across the place and dancing from the walls in a magnificent fashion, Ser Ramon of Garth and Lenren of Cerran stood with arms outstretched and with tailors busying about them as they measured for the ceremonial garbs that they were required to wear on such occasions. Lenren had gotten all too comfortable with the idea and had even gone as far as to have chosen the colours of his robes ahead of time. Ramon on the other hand, was not so forgiving. Ramon had spent a number of hours, perhaps days, during his military life getting fitted for such events. Whether it be dinners of the Lord Commanders at the Eastern Edge, or the passing out parades he had attended in the fledgling days of his promotion in rank, he was all too familiar and tired of

these types of things. As the tailor fitted him, pinning small square samples across his arms and stomach, he found himself sighing heavily at the tiresome nature of the preceding.

'I think the blue for the inner lining, with perhaps the black as the outer. How would you feel about that, Lord Commander?' The tailor asked, stepping back and admiring Ramon from afar with his fingers positioned like the head of a python towards the archer.

'I think that's a wonderful idea Gérard.' Lenren agreed, standing beside the tailor and copying that man's pose. Ramon scowled, looked into the mirror beside him and admired the colours.

'It will do.' He replied, in almost a grunt. He pulled at the pins and let the strips of fabric fall gently to the floor as he replaced his own outer shirt and sat down on one of the few chairs that had not been stacked high with robes, fabric books or the tailors other things. Gérard smiled, bowed to the man and continued to pick up the fabrics, replaced the fabrics into a silver tray atop the table and began to write down the man's measurements.

'I think, with the Gods by our side, we can manage to get the garbs to you by the end of tomorrow. Though the King has requested that you bare the Sygil of the Kingsmen on the sleeves.' He said, tapping his pencil for a moment before glancing to the man. Ramon growled again, staring from the tailor and towards his friend. Lenren stood opposite the man with a sullen expression.

'Did you know about this?' Ramon asked. Lenren sat opposite his friend and looked towards the tailor, telling him with his eyes that the man was no longer welcome.

Gérard quickly picked up a notebook and made for the door, closing it softly behind him.

'Brodon asked that all members of the High Guard wear the Sygil of the brotherhood they are bound to. For you, that is the Kingsmen.' Lenren said.

'That doesn't answer my question.' Ramon returned.

'Aye, I knew. And I agree with the King, as should you. This is a moment for unity, you were bestowed a great honour by Brodon and yet you act as a man bound to an iron ball for all eternity. Why?' Lenren replied angrily.

'Because of what I have seen, of what has happened before. I don't deserve this, Lenren, and I certainly don't care for it. I will serve my Kingdom until the day I die, but the Crown. Do not pretend to me that you think the Crown holy above all else.' Said Ramon, slamming a heavy fist down against the cold wood of the table. He was all too ready for a heavier handed discussion, and wit his blood boiling him found himself staring into the eyes of a man he had called a friend for years now, and that same man looked at him with more worry than Ramon had ever seen. Ramon calmed himself, gritted his teeth and stared away from Lenren.

'I serve both Ramon. The Crown and the Kingdoms, and I shall continue to do so until I am struck down by whatever man or beast finds my too elderly and slow to show him my true skill. Wear the Sygil, wear it with pride for once in your life. Perhaps then you will realise the honour it gives to you.'

Ramon watched from the corner of his eye and his friend walked quick footed from the room, opening, and closing the door with great force and ferocity. He held

himself on the chair for a few moments, allowing his temper to cool and the moment to pass by him. He looked out across the room and out onto the lawns that grew beneath him and sighed heavily.

He began to wonder on the prospect of things. Of how, with the blessing of the King, he had marched men from coastline to coastline, watching over defence towers that were always, and without a single exception, quiet. Of course, the Kingdoms being at peace was the outcome all Folk hoped would befall on them, though many in the ranks of the Kingsmen had begun to hunger for the taste of a victory in battle. There had been whispers, begun in the Far Eastern Kingdoms under the rulers of Eronmar, that a small band of religious Knights, held bent on the destruction of the old temples that stood as the centrepiece of the Great Cities of the region, were travelling across the Eastern borderlands in hope of persuading the tribe Lords to join them and overthrow the established monarchs and rulers of the region. The very thought, to some of the Kingsmen, of blood-stained deserts piled high with the corpses of enemies, was irresistible. Alas, it was not a conflict Brodon saw any requirement of his forces to enact upon. Ramon had spent far longer in the company of Brodon than he cared to admit. Over the passage of time, as Ramon had risen in the ranks had gained influence in the Kingsmen, the King had sought him as a confidante. Ramon, of course, had denied him. Instead, Ramon eventually arrived at the Table of High Commanders, which convened with the King every three months in order to allow all parties to air out any complaints, issues, or suchlike that they might have with the current campaigns.

He was proud, deep down, of his achievements within the forces of the Kingdoms and his sense of pride had afforded him many years of happiness within his own heart.

However, those years seemed like distant memories now. The only thing that swelled within him now was a mass of confusion and frustration. He had, on multiple occasions, ventured towards the Castle in order to confront the King and to talk through his furies, though each time his mind failed him.

There were few who Ramon trusted, and fewer he actively persuaded in the ways of his own true thoughts and feelings towards the campaigns in the South all those years ago. And, to the folk of the Kingdoms and the Kingsmen who now protected those lands, it was almost as though nothing had ever occurred. But Ramon remembered all too well, all too vividly about the days when the rain crashed against the earth and thunder rumbled in the dark ashen clouds above. He thought now to his conversation with Hersan, of how desperate he had been to achieve some sort of resolution with the thoughts that had burned through his for so many months now. The pain had grown, as a weed wrapping itself around the trunk of a titanic tree and slowly squeezing the goodness from it. The man picked himself up, walking slowly towards the balcony and looking out and seeing the dark clouds that were now amassing into the East. A knock at the door brought the archer back to the reality that surrounded him. He turned and bowed his head at the realisation of the guest who stood in the doorway.

'My Queen.' He said softly. The Queen nodded her head slowly, smiled and gestured for the man to sit again. She walked, lightly and almost as if not touching the floor at all, before sitting gently into the chair opposite the man. She looked across the room, at the carnage left by Gerard.

'I hope you have found some suitable colours, Lord Commander.' She said, pursing her lips in a curious way. She relaxed herself into the chair and waited for a reply, Ramon did not offer her one.

'You know, the common curtesy is to answer a person when they engage in conversation with you.' She said, watching the man as he kept his gaze away from her. He looked agitated, angry and worried.

'I want to be alone.' He replied softly, the words barely passing his tight lips. His eyes flashed to her fair face, and the two met one another with a considered silence.

'There are whispers amongst the servants, of Cerran.' The Queen said.

'The Dragon. Aye, it's true. Burned down the whole town, ripped the walls of the stronghold apart and crushed anything that dared cross its path.'

'In the East, we were told stories of dragons. Of the fire breathers that would battle in the skies beyond the mountains near Gorfo. The children would look out, in the Spring when the evenings were bright and the sky clear, in hope of seeing these beasts. They never did.' Neriell smiled at the memories as they came back to her. Ramon watched as she unconsciously held her bracelet tightly in one hand. She rubbed the metal, dull with age, and thought back to those glorious days.

'We never had stories like that.' Ramon said, looking deeply into the Queen's eyes as she gazed back at him curiously.

'How so? My husband once told me of the faeries that fly across the treetops of Arisen. He always wanted to go and catch them in bottles.' The Queen returned. Ramon produced a half smile; he knew those stories all too well.

'Aye, or the White Whale, that broke the tides with such force that it cracked the Earth and created the Islands off the coast of Korgen.' The archer responded with a laugh. And then, they grew silent again.

'You believe in the Archers?' The Queen said suddenly, avoiding his gaze.

'As if they were my own blood and more.' Ramon replied quickly, he had not once ever thought anything less of his company other than that they were the best of the men of the West.

'And if you fail?' The Queen asked, now her eyes flashed towards his grey face and searched for any seed of hesitation that might be upon it.

'Then I will not be here to see the consequences. Dragons, surely, do not leave many alive once they try to tackle such a beast.' Ramon replied.

Through the valleys that led West, against the wide banks of the Elyen River, the carriages slowly advanced towards Ceraborn. There had been little in the way of conversation, and Melran now held her gaze outwards to the trees and lush grass fields as they passed by. At this time of year, the place was busy with youthful crescent owls and white beaks, small predatory birds that hunted

the field mice and ferrets that kept close to the riverbanks. As well as this, large swarms of bees would descend from the treetops and look for the nectar that was now in plentiful supply from the fauna that lay in scattered but thick patches within the fields and along the pathways. In the distance, the fast-flowing river could be heard bubbling and frothing as it hit the large boulders and rocks that had fallen into it over the years, with some even dragged down by mighty currents during the floods that had occurred centuries before. The forests and fields were wild, but seemed to tend to themselves, with few barren patches and fewer unnatural or unsavoury attachments. The place, which as a whole was named Tu-Ton from the Elder Folk and translated to 'Great Plain', seemed the most fitting title to Melran.

It was now approaching midday, and the ride had been long and arduous. Against his better judgements, Tharandal allowed his men a rest period beside the outer edge of a large oak forest, the trees tall and canopy dense. No one knew the name of the place, or even if the place had a name. Though to Melran, it felt that the name was buried somewhere deep within the woodland.

Soon after, with the early evening drawing close and the soft winds giving way to the harsher howls of the darker hours, a small campsite was set out and the men were roasting wild boar and fish atop the wild red flames of the fire they had constructed. Tharandal was uneasy, and he kept watch over the tree lines and every few moments he would mutter inaudible things to himself whilst rubbing the palms of his hands together. Melran

was confined still to the carriage, with the door on her side bolted firmly shut and several guards standing closely at the other. She made no attempt to converse with Nemara, who had spent the hours reading from a book, which Melran recognised as the Sixth Chapter of the Sisterhood. To her knowledge, there was eight chapters in total, that had been written by the first Sisterhood and described in details the visions, experiences and theology of the faith. Melran watched Nemara closely as she flicked through the pages with impressive speed.

'I have read these words many times.' Nemara said suddenly. Though her gaze still kept to the text.

'I'm sure you have. Though that doesn't make it anymore fallible.' Melran replied softly.

'You have a gift, Melran, a gift given to you by the Sister. You should respect her words.' Nemara returned kindly, leaning over and placing a soft hand onto Melran's knee. The girl recoiled, batting away the hand and folding her arms tightly around herself. Silence returned to the carriage and soon afterwards the camp too fell away into a relaxed atmosphere. With the sun now set, and a clear star lit sky above them, Lord Tharandal gave the word and the carriages moved on.

The journey thereafter was relentless, with the countryside laying barren for large patches save for the occasional farmland crop field or cow pasture. Melran counted three farms across that particular night, each large and seemingly alone in the large stretch of wilderness that separated them. It was a quiet night too, with the wind

having died down long ago and leaving just a cool stale air in its wake. Tharandal kept a close eye on Melran as the carriage slowly made way across the land, occasionally murmuring across to Nemara who gently nodded in response. Melran did not sleep that night, though her eyes were heavy and her head foggy. And as the night went on, the lands slowly began to change once again. The fields were slowly replaced with vast bog land, thick with dark pools of putrid water that was lined with thick weeds and foul fruits that would kill anything that ate from its bushes. This was Terentor, the Western border of Tu-Ton and noted for its rugged and unkempt pathways and lands. Few lived in these parts and fewer stayed in such lands. The place was home, in most part, to reed farmers who spent most of the late Summer months harvesting the thick reeds that had collected at the edges of the pools before binding them into baskets and other things that they would then look to sell at the markets. However, there was another reason why the place was so scarce of man. Large Garthenhogs roamed these marshes, beasts weighing more than the average man and larger than a wolf, with thick tusks that pierced flesh. Garthenhogs were dangerous and aggressive creatures, thick with muscle and strength but weak of mind and intelligence. If a man were wise, he would have no problem with a Garthenhog. It was simple, stay quiet if you saw one and remain still until it passed. Garthenhogs did not take kindly to loud noises or movements which they perceived to be a threat to them. And so, when the carriages came to a sudden halt amongst the putrid pools and thick smog of Terentor, it was perhaps

not the wisest of actions for Lord Tharandal to bang loudly on his carriage window.

Chapter Thirteen

It was a quiet evening. The air was stale and not a single leaf on any branch swayed so much as an inch as Arch Chancellor Velgar wandered slowly along the inner walls of the Castle and down towards the dungeons. It was a terrible place, where the soft smooth stone was replaced with cracked and jagged rocks that had been crudely shaped into steps which led a narrow pathway down into the large sunken courtyard. There was a darkness that surrounded this place, and a low hanging mist seemed ever-present. Velgar kept close to the wall as he made way down the stairway, a thick chain had been erected and ran along him, with huge iron holdings hammered deep into the rock. At the bottom of the stairs, with the darkness surrounding him and the sound of water dripping gently down onto the mossy ground beneath his feet, Velgar came to the thick wooden door that led into the main courtyard. He knocked twice, and after a moment heard the sound of chains being unbound and locks being opened. The door opened slowly, as if the very wood itself wished to stay closed to the World beyond its walls. A tall man stood before the Chancellor, with a broad sword at his waist and thick armour against his skin.

'Name.' The man grunted.

'Arch Chancellor Velgar.' The Chancellor returned with a smile. The man looked at the visitor with emotionless emerald eyes, nodded and moved aside. The Chancellor moved slowly across the ground, his feet

making soft padding sounds against the damp earth beneath him. He looked around, there was a small group of armed men standing at six foot intervals around the edge of the yard, each with a large thick broadsword and shield in each hand. Most of the cells were empty of occupants, and now used for storing grains. Velgar passed by the cells quickly, a shudder going along his spin like a spider climbing a web. He passed torch after torch, but the darkness enveloped nearly all light that surrounded him. Against the walls that towered above him there was thick moss entangled with the roots of weeds and long dead scaling plants. There were few who now sat awaiting sentencing in the dungeons of Ceraborn, and Brodon always preferred a proficient system of justice. However, there was one who sat within this darkened courtyard whom Brodon would never allow to be sent to Kraven's Point. The Chancellor came upon the cell, it's wall thick and strong and the roof a thick slab of rock that had been cut away before thick iron bars were moulded into crudely made posts.

'Henrin?' Velgar called out into the darkness of the cell. His hands clutching the cold iron. The steady dripping of the water along the wall was the only sound to break the silence. Velgar's eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness, but a moment later the hunching silhouetted figure of Henrin, second son of Haurtaff, Brother of King Brodon II of the West, came into view.

'Henrin? Are you able to speak?' Velgar asked. The figure remained hunched, unmoving and silent.

'I must speak with you. I must-'

Within a second the old man's hand was in the grasp of an unseen grip from within the cell. He tried to pull away, but the strength of the man within the cell was too strong.

'You must speak with me now? Am I a dog to you, Velgar? Where were you when I requested your council?' Said a low, whispering voice. Velgar stopped a moment and brought his gaze up to the face of Henrin. He looked older than his years, betrayed by his time within this cell. His hair, once light and soft was matted and dark, with his eyes now deep set within a tired looking weary face. The old man could do nothing in sight of the fallen Prince, nothing except let tears fall from his face and softly fall to the ground. Henrin let go of the man, shoving him back into the moonlight momentarily.

'What is done is done. The hours I have spent lamenting on my mistakes have been countless. Henrin, you must believe me now, because I believe in you.' Velgar said, his voice trembling. Henrin's eyes narrowed and he stood forward facing the Chancellor directly.

'You believe me?' He said.

Velgar nodded.

'Why now?' Asked the Prince.

'I have kept close watch over your brother, and since the first sightings of the beast in the Tower I have seen moments of...change.' Velgar returned.

'As his eyes were not his own and his voice darkened.' Henrin replied quickly.

Again, the Chancellor nodded in agreement.

'My brother is a good man, but if his mind is corrupted then we may have no other choice but to destroy him.'

Henrin said, his voice trailing to a whisper.

'The King has his mind, for now. Though these moments are coming more and more.'

'And they said I was mad.' Henrin said with a chuckle. Velgar looked now at the Prince with different eyes and saw what remained of the noble man that once was. The brothers were not who they once had been, and Velgar worried if it was too late to save them both.

'What do you know of these changes?' Velgar asked.

'They came not long after the birth of his child. That day changed him, suddenly he had someone to protect. His own blood, his own seed. I do not know how or why, but soon after I saw the changes within him. They began as quick flashes, mere seconds, where he seemed to be unaware of anything around him. Then they grew stronger, I watched him speak with advisors, and I watched his eyes closely and saw the look of a man who was not my brother. Those were the eyes of a man who hates all that Brodon and my family stand for, and who hates all that is in this world.' Henrin said.

'There are legends of men who have long since been dead, but who did not pass over to the Gods.' Velgar replied knowingly.

'And there are rumours of dark sorcery in this land. Of those who made pacts with men who sought nothing but to devour all living things.' Henrin replied.

'So, you do believe it to be him.' Velgar asked.

'Yes, I do.' Henrin returned with a nod of his head.

Velgar nodded, almost to himself, and looked back out into the courtyard.

'The High Lords are meeting within the next few days. The Archers will go to Cerran, a dragon has destroyed the stronghold.' He said in a whisper. Henrin could not take the news in, his eyes darted from the Chancellor's eyes to the floor and back.

'He is beginning to grow in strength.' Henrin said, grasping at the iron bars of his cell.

'I fear so.' Velgar replied.

'Then we must act fast. The child and mother must be sent East. We do not know how strong the connection may become. He will kill them if he sees a chance.' Henrin said.

'The King will never allow it!' Velgar protested.

'Then do not tell the King!' Henrin returned.

The sound of distant footsteps caught them off guard.

'Go to my Chambers, there is a hidden chest with a book of the Elder Folk. I read about this kind of curse, this kind of sorcery. The Gall and the Gallerbond. That it what he is using, that is what has cursed my brother.' Henrin said frantically. He grabbed at the old man, held him close to the bars of the prison cell and looked into his eyes for a sign of trust and reassurance.

'May the Gods bless you my boy. Soon you will be free, I am sure of it.' Velgar said, and a moment later he was gone. Henrin watched the man waddle away into the darkness, listening closely as the footsteps came ever closer. There was silence, followed by whispers carried along on the midnight winds. The Prince held himself close to the bars still, though he made sure to ready

himself to head back into the darkness, the guards cared little for the man they called the 'Mad Prince of Ceraborn'. He watched along the fortresses, the small silhouettes of men walking slowly along them with thin spears and large oval shields in hand and newly polished armour glistening in the moonlight. He remembered back through the years, to himself as a youth when he climbed along those same walls and shot arrows out in the hopes of catching a deer or rabbit unaware as the creatures grazed upon the grassy slopes that lined the South side of the compound. His father had disapproved of his insistence on staying around this area of the castle, for in those days dangerous men awaiting trial would be kept within these cells. When he was perhaps eight or nine, and his Father had received word of his son spying upon the place, he had had Henrin walked along the walls and into the dungeons by Ser Garston the Black. Ser Garston was a fierce man, even at his tender age the Prince knew well enough that Ser Garston was a trusted man to the Crown. He had the eyes of a crow, soulless but with signs of cunning. Short thick legs and a wide back showed his years of hard labour building ships in the Southern ports as a young man, and the scars on his wrists told a thousand tales of bare knuckles fights and tournaments that now had been outlawed. Garston came from no lineage, and he never sought a wife or any companion. Henrin shuddered as he heard the man's voice within his mind on that cold winter day, as he dragged the Prince through the courtyard with a small party of Knights behind him. In those days the dungeons were full, often with three or more men to a cell. That day was situated deep within the years of the King's

madness, and several out of favour advisors had found themselves within those cold stone walls. More often than not, after the failed attempts to send ships across to the Further West in search of the Elder Kingdoms, many men had deserted their post from the Kingsmen. They now found themselves locked within these cells too, shadows of their former selves and shuddering in the cold air with nought but old rags for comfort and warmth. He could still remember the smell of the place back then. It didn't bare thinking about. Henrin was the first to notice the madness that began to dwell within his father, a man whom he loved and feared in equal measure. As a boy, the Old King would not hesitate to show his dominance to his sons by use of his fists or belt. The relationship the two had had faded slowly, as a cliff against the currants of the shoreline. It began as Henrin had told to Velgar, but never had the Prince sought to confront his father. He knew all too well that he would face even more than a fist if he dared as question his father's sanity. In fact, Henrin had been chosen as the King's representative aboard the next expedition out into the unknown Kingdoms of the Further West, a venture that would not sail during the two men's lifetimes. It was this venture, propositioned by the Old King as the start of a new dawn for the West, and the legacy of his own Father to conquer the Kingdoms of the West, that eventually led to Henrin becoming engaged with the scrolls of the Elder Folk that were kept hidden deep within the walls of the Castle. The young Prince spent night after night day after day and countless summer evenings pouring over those texts and fragments. He was a wise and intelligent man, able to translate the text and

discover the world of the men who had held this land before the New folk of his Grandfather. Through careful study, and intense dedication he soon found that the words came forth with the stories they were a part of, and with them came legends of good and evil, of Kings and Queens and immortal men who used dark sorcery against the fierce enemies that looked to conquer those peaceful lands. Entire lineages were wiped from the Earth, with Father and Son slain together on the battlefields and legions of men lost in the mists of the Mountains in the West. Darkness had befallen the lands for decades as men fought against one another for what they thought as 'true' and 'right'. This was no battle of monsters or demons. This was a war of men.

Henrin opened his eyes slowly, the cold night drawing around him as the warmth of days long gone slowly pulled away from him. As he opened his eyes he became aware of a figure standing in front of him, tall and broad with a thick chest and long thick arms. A balding head tattooed in deep violets and greens revealed it to be the silhouette of Turen Marwan, the Keeper of the Keys for Ceraborn. Turen was a man whose loyalty could not be questioned, he had sworn an oath to the King and Crown as a young boy, and ever since had been in service amongst the servants of the Castle. Originally, he was an understudy to the groundsman, digging the deep ditches which now surrounded the moat and were filled with iron spikes. He soon grew in size, and moved to become a stable hand, often helping to move the heavy loads that had been brought to the Castle. There he stayed for several years

before finally falling into place as the right-hand man to Ser Garston. In Garston's old age, with loss of sight and weary limbs, it fell to Marwan to perform the duties his Commander could not. He did so and did so admirably. At the death of the Old King, and thereafter the passing of Ser Garston, he was promoted by Brodon and now held almost complete command of the dungeons. Only the King held more influence in the place.

'I hear you have had a visitor, is this true?' Asked Marwen. The two men stood almost toe to toe, only the iron bars separating them.

'You know full well, likely you were watching the whole thing.' The Prince replied. Marwen smiled, large gaping holes interrupted the expression. The Prince gave a lazy half smile in return.

'What's the Chancellor wanting you for then? Praying to those Gods, are we? Trying to get some help before Brodon cuts your head off.' Marwen said.

'My brother would do no such thing.' The Prince returned.

'Ha, maybe not. But I still think it would be the best thing for you. You don't let a lame horse suffer, so why a mad Prince?' Marwen replied, another smile.

Henrin took a deep breath, smiled and returned to the relative comfort of the stone slab that doubled as his bed. An old bundle of rags was now used as his covers to keep him from the cold. Marwen grunted, turned and walked off back into the darkness.

The throbbing pain that gripped Astriel's leg made her groan and toss in bed fiercely. The night seemed never to

end, and as the darkness enveloped her, she could think of nothing but the pain that clung to her wounds. She scrambled to the medicines, quickly pulling at the cork top with her teeth and shooting it far off into the room before gulping down the entire liquid without so much as a breath. Sweat drenched her, and she could tell that she was beginning to smell by the way the maids looked as they entered the room. She had half a dozen bottles left by her last count, and she was sure that they would last her little over a week at the rate she currently drank them. The pain had shown little sign of slowing, and the wounds had been redressed daily but still the flesh seemed raw and bloody. She felt weak, not as weak as before but by no means as strong as what she had once felt. She heard the unlatching of the door, and slowly light crept across the walls and fell atop of her bed sheets. The familiar silhouette of Lenren came into view as Astriel fought to focus her gaze. He said nothing as he came closer, focusing his view only on the bandaged wound before slowly counting the remaining bottles of medicine. He placed a cold palm on her forehead and sighed.

'The fever, it's still not subsiding.'

'Don't worry, I feel stronger day by day.' Astriel returned with a weak smile. Lenren rested himself on the bed.

'You cannot ride with us.' He said sternly.

Astriel pulled herself up, resting her head against the wall and producing a wheezing cough as she fought for breath.

'No. I will ride, and I will fight beside you, as is my sworn duty.' She said.

'Astriel, please, we have lost one member of our clan through ill judgment and preparation, do not make it a second. Rest, recover. There will be another time, a time when we need your strength. In that moment I will count on you.'

Tears filled the girl's eyes, Lenren held her hand but she pulled it away with as much strength as she could muster. This, in Lenren's mind, only confirmed to him what he suspected. The girl was slipping away, and the medication would not last long. She would be dead by the end of the month. For many years had Lenren watched over the Black Archers of Ceraborn, and with each new spring that passed he found himself longing more and more for the day when he would be given a reprieve of his duties. Astriel, when she had come into the order as a young girl, had soon found herself within the leader's favour. She was a naturally skilled swordsman with quick hands and a razor-sharp mind. Few had bested her in any tournament or training. There was little doubting that she had the heart of a warrior, and her agility and physicality only aided her in that endeavour. In her youth, she spent hours watching the archers practise, and countless more in the courtyards where the knights would duel one another for coins. It was there that she learned about the Western fighting style, it was slower than the Eastern style, and the men showed little care for proficiency within they are strikes, instead aiming wildly and often times with little effect. And Lenren had seen this, and he had watched the young carefully, adopting her into the Archers initially as a messenger and escort, riding across the lands with the group and carrying messages from the High Lords to the

King and ensuring that the Archers had ample food and water for the journey. Soon after, he began to train her in the style she best suited. Lenren's knowledge of Eastern swordsmanship was not total but it was more than proficient. She was a natural, with a slender delicate frame that allowed her to glide across the ground with ease, and strong legs that let her balance during intense combat. The tutoring last three summers, and during those golden days the girl grew in stature and strength and earned her place amongst the finest of the company of Western men.

Astriel's place in the West had often been amongst the hot topics of discussion within the Walls of Ceraborn. Many advisors had urged the King to protect the girl by sending her Further East and into the care of Rahathal El Nanmar, the Sixth Regent Emperor of Shalia. The forces that man possessed, along with his strong alliances, many felt would prove ample protection for the girl. However, the King could not be turned, and the girl stayed well within his reach at all times. His word was his bond, and his decision was absolute. The girl remained under his watch even now and as Lenren turned slightly to face the open door he came to see the King standing solemnly behind him. Astriel had faded back into a dream, her breathing was quiet and almost peaceful.

'The maids say she will die. Is this true?' Brodon said softly.

'Aye, more than likely.' Lenren answered. He turned to face the King and saw the man holding a small package wrapped tightly in a silk throw and bound with rope.

'The Queen has sobbed every night, the thought of losing Astriel is all she thinks of. We must stop this, if we can.'

'There is no cure for this sickness my friend, our hope lies with the Gods.' the Archer returned sadly.

'Perhaps not.' Said the King as he carefully unbound the package and handed a small wooden box to Lenren. Lenren held the box, no bigger than jewellery box, and carefully placed it in his lap before lifting the small brass latch and opening it.

'Endell root? But how?' Lenren asked, his voice quivering.

'With great difficulty my friend, and at great cost. Endell root is all but extinct in the West, but a small patch of wildflowers was found in the Further West.' Brodon said.

'But a man cannot touch this root, simply touching the root causes searing pain and death.'

'As I said, it came at great cost.' Brodon returned.

Lenren shut the box and turned his gaze back to the King.

'There is no guarantee, the ancient books are vague with recipes and more often than not they cause death to only hasten its pace. If she dies, it will be by your hand.' Lenren said sternly. Brodon nodded in agreement and his eyes flashed towards the women in the bed.

'We must try, or we will lose her for sure.' He said, his voice fading into the silence of the room.

'Very well, we will do it tonight. But we must do it without the knowledge of anyone else. Have you got the

other ingredients?' Lenren asked. Again, the King nodded, and the plan was put in place.

Chapter Fourteen

Melran kept her eyes tightly closed as the horrible shrieking rattled in her ears. Even here, within the carriage, the sound was barely muffled, and the sound of crunching bones and blood-curdling screams rang all too clear.

Tharandal sat patiently, his face portraying a fake calmness amidst the chaos that was occurring beyond his window. Three men had cambered from atop one of the carriages to battle the beast. It had wandered too close to the party; it was an elder Garthenhog with greying fur and a chipped tusk that now had rotted and was covered in a black fungus. The beast was enraged, and it bellowed loudly as the men stepped forward with their swords held out in front of them. It stamped on the ground, marking it as its own territory and a thick pus dripped down from its snout as it snorted.

'They should have dealt with the blasted thing by now!' Said Tharandal between gritted teeth.

'Patience, My Lord.' Said Nemara softly as she flicked through the pages of the book on her lap. She seemed quite peaceful at that moment, as if the calamity outside somehow soothed her.

'Open your eyes girl! Surely you have seen worse than this! Ha! A fat hog and all you can do is whimper and wallow in sadness.' Tharandal spat his words like venom, every word pointed and as sharp as steel. Melran clutched at her bags tightly, opened her eyes and watched on as two men drove swords deeper into the beast from one side as it

clasped a third unfortunate one by his leg and bit down hard. The man screamed as the beast lifted the limb up and ripped it from his body, blood pooled beside the man as he writhed for a few moments, which to Melran seemed so slow and agonising, before he fell silent. A moment later the beast turned, slashing at one of the men at its side with a huge thick tusk, he let out a defiant cry before quickly stabbing at the side of the beast's neck with his sword. The beast let out a loud cry and fell with a loud thud onto the ground. Its back legs fell slowly into one of the shallow pools as it clambered at the muddy ground beneath it. Another sword sunk deep into the animal's hide, with the twisting hilt proving too much for the beast. Melran looked on, tears still falling softly from her face as she held her breathe.

'You feel his pain.' Said Nemara suddenly.

'No. But I see it.' Melran replied quietly. She turned, facing the Sister and staring at her with swollen, red eyes. Tharandal sneered, he understood little of the true complexities of the Gallerbond and cared only that he, in his own mind, possessed one to gain favour in the court of the King. Tharandal was a manipulator, a man who was as cold and calculated as any who had come before him. His presence drew men to shiver, though his days were few his power within the Kingdom still held much weight within the true ruling powers. He looked at the girl curiously, gave a grim smile and turned back to face the carriage window. He closed his eyes, imagining the congratulations he would receive from Brodon, and again smiled. Nemara watched Melran closely, her soft skin prickled by the cold

air that slowly swept over the carriage and wondered whether the girl knew of true power at that moment.

Not another word was spoken as the carriages made way across the marshes and mudflats of Tu-Ton. The light darkened, and the cold air began to come faster now as the wind gripped the carriages and shook them with greater force with every passing hour. Melran, exhausted and cold, fell to an uneasy sleep as the sun set, and soon after Tharandal too fell to a slumber. Nemara, though her eyes weighed heavy, kept her mind clear and made use of the quiet to read the pages of the Chapter again. The words were so familiar to her that she could recite them clearly and without so much as a pause, yet still she read them. The words would never change, nor should they, but the Sister still found new meaning within them with every reading. As the winds howled, and the sound of an oncoming thunderstorm interrupted her silence, the carriages came to a sudden halt. A knock came from the door closest to the Sister, she closed her book and readied the blade concealed within her sleeve robes before slowly opening the door. A tall, broad shouldered man stood at attention with his sword beside him.

'Good evening soldier, how may I help you?' Nemara said with a smile. The cold of the night air hit her fully now, and she shivered involuntarily as it did so.

'The night is cold and there are storms ahead my Sister, we request that we shelter for the night and head out again at dawn. The pass through to main road will be -

'You will do no such thing,' said Tharandal quickly. 'We move on through the night. I pay you well enough. Rain never hurt a man to my knowledge Ser Marsden.'

The man sighed heavily and nodded before trudging through the damp grassless bank and back toward the lead carriage. There was a quick, loud conversation that ended with a disgruntled moan. Tharandal flashed a unapproving glance at Nemara.

'Storms are dangerous things my Lord.' She said softly, keeping her eyes firmly on the greying skies above them.

'Perhaps, though I wager my wrath be far more deadly.' Tharandal returned.

The carriage began along the road again, though noticeably slower and with no real sense of urgency from the drivers. Tharandal rested his head against the soft cushioning and wrapped his robes tightly around himself before grabbing a small peach from a bag that lay beside him. He bit into it, juice dripped down the edge of his mouth and down his bearded chin. He looked toward Melran

'Your mind is restless.' Nemara said, again keeping her gaze away from the Lord.

'Her powers, I thought they were only legend.' He said, leaning forward to examine the girl further. Nemara turned, she too examined the girl.

'Legend? No, this is no legend. This is given. This is a gift from the Sister to us in our time of need. Just as is written.' The Sister returned with a smile as she recovered the girl's legs with blankets. 'Aye, that it is.' The Lord agreed with a rare, authentic smile. His regal features

seemed lessened in the darkness, as if his true nature had been revealed with the darkness.

'The Sister has provided you many gifts, ensure that you repay her.' Nemara said, she met with the Lord's gaze and saw his smile fade.

'The Sister will require a gift in return?' He asked.

Nemara nodded and flicked through the pages of her book before handing it to the Lord. He looked at the page, read the text and then slowly read it again before returning a frightened face to the Sister.

'Is this all she will accept?' He asked, his voice quivered slightly as he spoke.

'It is what she requests of all to whom she gives such gifts.' Nemara replied. The Lord returned the book to the Sister.

'Then it will be done.' He replied softly, his voice quieter than before.

The midnight winds continued to howl loudly, with a strong but fine rainfall following closely for several hours more. The mountain pass was a treacherous road for any traveller, but for a large procession of carriages it was by far the most unpopular road in the Western Kingdoms. Tharandal had, during his time in Ceraborn, asked that the road be widened and the mountainside to be chipped away, allowing for easier passage for tradesmen and travellers alike. This wish was denied. The pass, which ran almost three miles in total, was a winding road that narrowed and widened at its own leisure. Eagles were often seen circling the mountaintop, gliding across the winds effortlessly, hunting for white rabbits and small mice that lived in the

pass. However, there were no such sights on this night. The coachman saw nothing in the way of nature, the rain swept across his ashen face as he drove the horses to keep steady as the lightning and thunder crackled above them. Ahead, just before the road began to turn off, a smattering of rocks fell across the path as shelf was brought down by the force of the winds. The coachman watched above the procession with keener eyes, though his tiredness was now plaguing his mind with insecurities. He lit his pipe, handing the reigns to his junior before wrapping himself in a damp but warm blanket.

'I won't be sleeping boy, too dangerous round here for that. Just keep the girls straight and steady and we'll be fine. Alrigh'?' He said gruffly.

'Aye sir.' Replied the junior, a boy little over sixteen years old. He watched only the road ahead, his weary eyes weighing heavily and his skin tight against the winds. He had little experience on the roadways beyond Cerran, except for a few choice excursions across the Southern Borders and the smaller townships across those thickly forested land. But those had been different, those had been smooth summer rides with wine and fresh bread. They were rides with songs, stories of the Elder folk and faeries, and scandalous tales of warriors and women from across the seas. He thought back to those stories now, they warmed his heart but not his fingers and neither did they relieve his eyes of their tiredness.

'They're wandering lad.' Said the older man softly, his voice muffled by the robes and blankets that wrapped his tightly. The young boy pulled at the reigns, the horses righted, and the journey continued. This would be no

journey of songs or scandalous stories, and bread and wine were nothing more than a distant memory now, and as the thunder rumbled around them, both man and boy realised just how long the night would be. Against the darkness, and with the winds seeming only to grow stronger, the party continued along the mountain pass with great care and trepidation. In the first carriage, three men sat quietly drifting between uneasy sleep and careless conversation. Lord Tharandal commanded a small but powerful legion of men, many the sons of the Lower Lords of his lands, made up of those who had sworn allegiance to the Lord. These men were loyal, decent and honest men who wore the sygil of Tharandal without hesitation. They did not say a word about the Garthenhog, a letter was drafted by the most senior member to the mother of the fallen guard. It was the first letter Ser Marsden had written in several months, and that was something that he was quietly proud of. Ser Edgar Marsden was a proud Kingsmen, a gentleman who held his heart upon his sleeve but also had the determination and cunning required of a man who hoped to climb the ranks of the military. Marsden had seen little in the way of warfare, and for that he counted himself rather lucky. He had dealt, briefly he admitted, with the Et Tobi tribe in the Northern Ridges of Myaman in the East, thought that was barely more than an uncoordinated assault that resulted in far more casualties for the enemy than for the men of the West. During that time, in late summer, Myaman was a place that was plentiful with traders and sailors from all corners of the lands. Sailors from the West, along with those from the other Eastern kingdoms, docked along the coastline hoping to trade in

linens, fruits and sugars and earn quite the price for them. You see, Myaman was a harsh place past Summer, a place where long days of golden sunshine would be robbed and replaced with a blanketed darkness that brought with it cold arctic winds and fierce thunderstorms. The people of Myaman, although scattered in great tribes that lived in an uneasy union more so than in any form of organised society, found refuge during these months by living in an ancient city built thousands of years prior and extending deep into the earth beneath the luxurious cities that the tribal leaders had built. This place was Deryan, or in the Western tongue it would be called The Ancient City, and it was home to almost twenty thousand men, women and children. There were six layers to Deryan, each interconnected with miles upon miles of carefully constructed tunnels that were reinforced with huge timbers and iron supports. The lowest layer was home to the cattle, and the grain stores, whilst the layer above was home to a marketplace and prayer rooms and sacrificial chambers where the people of this ancient metropolis gave thanks and praise to the Gods they served dutifully. Further to this, the place was home to massive oil and wine presses, with enormous wooden vats held under close guard. Food stores were kept cold and housed dried fishes and meats that were packed tightly and salted to preserve them during these dark days. Barrels of fruits, often kept in sugars or syrups, were kept behind large iron bound doors. During these months the people of Deryan came together in almost all respects, with three families often living in a small quarter with little more than a small fire pit and whatever they had managed to bring with them from the

main city. Ser Edgar Marsden sat quietly as he thought about that place now, with his eyes glancing off into the distance and almost hoping that by some miracle he would be pulled from this dark, cold and thunderous place and returned to the caverns of that ancient city. But this was nothing more than a dream now, and as he regained his composure, he signed the letter of bereavement and packed it safely within his cloaks for safe keeping.

Soon after, and with the night giving way to a damp but light morning, the carriages made way along the narrow paths of the mountains before coming, at last, to the other side. A long, quiet stretch of road now saw them cross the border into Cera and would lead them South towards Ceraborn within the next day or two. They saw no other traveller during that journey, instead passing only small villages and townships that were not even large enough to have been named on the maps that they carried with them. And they continued on, through morning and into evening, to Ceraborn.

Chapter Fifteen

Ser Ramon of Garth watched from the castle walls as the High Lords of the West began to pour into the courtyard of Ceraborn. There were five at his count, all flying banners that he had not seen for months, if not years. And yet he did not wish to see them too often, and he wished even less to greet the men who held these banners. Lord Rhaysar Mulmet was the first to arrive, High Lord of Fildron. Fildron was an ancient stronghold, amongst the first to be erected during the conquests and held tightly by the Mulmet's ever since. Rhaysar, now a man long in years, looked weaker than ever Ramon had seen him. His skin was pale, blotted with light patches of bruising. He required a cane to walk, and even then, he gripped his bannerman tightly as they climbed the steps to greet Brodon. The man attempted a respectful bow, though it was in vain. Soon after, and with pleasantries duly attended to, the old Lord was shuffled across the entrance and into the halls to find his bed. He brought with him several guards, all in fine silver armour that bore the sigil of The Four Bears, each a representative of the four Mulmet brothers who had originally held that stronghold. Ramon watched keenly as a small boy was brought from a carriage, walking hand in hand with a nurse maid and only perhaps five or six in years, the future of Fildron and the only surviving heir to Rhaysar Mulmet, Rhayner. The boy was small, even for his age, but a tightly knotted mop of blonde hair showed his heritage proudly. Brodon greeted

the boy in much the same way as the High Lord, and the boy bowed as he had been taught. Against his better judgement and sensing that Brodon would only keep on at him should he not do so, Ramon joined the King at the entrance.

‘I called for you nearly an hour ago.’ The King said, without so much as a glance towards the oncoming archer. Ramon stopped short of the King and looked out into the courtyard.

‘Aye, I heard.’ He replied. The King turned and looked at the man unapprovingly before gesturing him to join him at his side. The two men stood, like stone soldiers, with blank expressions and in awkward silence as they watched the Men of Fildron take large travelling cases into the castle.

‘Who else are we expecting?’ Ramon asked after a moment.

‘Fenkel.’ Brodon said quietly.

‘You seem thrilled.’ Ramon returned smugly. The two shared a knowing glance before returning to the outward gaze towards the busy courtyard. Brodon flicked his eyes upwards, focusing on the Gatehouse and the towers, he watched men hurrying around them, passing through the various doorways and into and out of the darkness that lay within. Brodon was not a man who was naturally wary of those within his Kingdom, though now he felt an odd uneasiness about him as he watched these unnamed men carry large trunks, supplies and weapons through his halls. In the distance, though not clear exactly where from, he swore he could hear the cries and shrieks of his own servants as they were brutally murdered. He shivered, re-

focused his gaze on the drawbridge and tried to let the sounds fade away. They stayed, longer than he desired them to.

Ser Ramon welcomed several Lords to Ceraborn on that day. His mouth began to dry, and his smile slowly faded as pleasantries after pleasantries were exchanged. But it was his mind that wandered quicker than anything else, and soon his gaze glazed over as he began to think of the task that the King had set for the Archers. He stood, broad shouldered with his back to the winds on those swept and well-preserved stairs, and felt his palms begin to clam as he thought back to the cold knight with the Kludde. The snarling, low and harsh against the rainswept night, rang in his ears louder than any drum. He steadied himself as he stumbled slightly in his dream, Brodon caught his arm and held him softly.

‘I’m fine.’ Ramon said quickly, though his eyes betrayed him. The King kept his hand against the man’s chest, both with eyes locked on one another.

‘I’m fine.’ Ramon repeated, though this time with far more self-confidence in his voice. Brodon released the man from his grip, the two seemed to have frozen in time and as they looked around, not one man had stopped to aid them.

Brodon’s eyes wandered further ahead of the courtyard once more, and his ears strained to hear the distant but distinct three-beat gait of a mare.

‘Lord Louton of Arisen, My King!’ Yelled a watcher from above the drawbridge, as the iron gates were slowly

pulled up and the echoing canter was lost for the scrapping of iron against stone. Ramon grunted, and Brodon duly held his arm tightly.

‘Remember your standing my friend. A simple pleasant welcome is all I ask.’ The King said through gritted teeth. A moment later and the first mare broke through the entrance and came to a halt at the head of the courtyard. A rider, dressed in fine furs, dismounted and patted the animal lovingly. The figure, tall and slender, began to walk towards the King and the Archer. Removing thick fur gloves to reveal delicate pale fingers, before also revealing her face, Saveen Al Nam, Yellow Sister of Arisen, stood before the King and offered little more than a nod in way of respect to him.

‘Sister, I welcome you to Ceraborn. I trust your journey was pleasant?’ Brodon asked, extending his hand out and delicately shaking the young girl’s hand.

‘There are storms towards the East, they will come soon. Ensure these men are kept warm and in safety.’ The Sister replied, her eyes evading the two men that stood before her, and to Ramon at least, her gaze focusing on nothing in particular.

‘Of course, there is no safer place in the West than Ceraborn.’ Brodon returned gruffly. The girl turned, to Ramon’s eyes she was no older than twenty and her copper hair ran thinly across her brow as the veil fell softly to one side. She looked around her, first towards the battlements and across to the barbican before resting her gaze towards the drawbridge. Her mare, a tall and thick snow-coloured Lipizzaner, was taken to a stable and she watched the stableman with an almost accusing regard.

She had counted the men that stalked the battlements, to each side there were at least ten archers, most with arms folded and relaxed against the stone crenels as they looked out towards the township and across the horizon towards the Eastern Road. Turning back to the men, the girl removed her furs and displayed her cote, brightly decorated with sunshine coloured dye and patterned with woven symbols of the flames of The Sister. An amulet rested gently in her bosom, a thinly chained silver which at either side anchored to an equally fine Sun. Ser Ramon stood beside the girl, his hulking frame shielding her from the sunlight that danced around the courtyard as it snuck through the clouds that now enveloped the skies.

‘I am Ser Ramon, Guard to the King and Knight of the West.’ The Archer said, surprising himself with his own self-assertive tone. The girl nodded but did not look to the man.

‘I hear it is your party who will face the beast of Cerran, should the Lords approve of the propositions?’ She asked, her eyes still firmly fixed on the drawbridge.

‘Aye, that’s true.’ The Archer returned, though the previously held assertiveness had now almost entirely faded. He looked to Brodon, though the King denied him any comfort with a steely gaze that held in it its own judgements. And it was to some relief, not least to Ramon, that a cry was then heard from the battlements that a procession was now upon the Castle, flying proudly the banners of The Sun & The Sister.

‘The Lord is here.’ Saveen said proudly. ‘And he asks that only the King greet him.’ She said, turning now to cast a fierce glance at Ramon. The Archer flashed a look to the

King who nodded his approval, and Ramon made his down the steps and towards one of the Towers. In the darkness of the tower the Knight felt his rage begin to burn within him, his fist clenched the hilt of his sword and the scrapping of the tip against the stone as he stormed through the stairway only served to further bleed him of any calmness. Stepping out onto the small quiet space of the parapet he stopped short of the edge and violently kicked a small barrel that stood beside him. He threw his sword to the ground, a small flash of light emerged as the tip ignited against the stone. He felt the scars on his burn, and his skin itch as he fought for breath. His past, like a spider from the deepest cesspit, crawled up his spine slowly. He felt the tears drop from his ashen face and fell against the wall, and there he stayed, weeping quietly, thinking only of what had been.

Chapter Sixteen

In the dying light of the evening, and the rain beginning to slowly fall, Ceraborn fell strangely quiet. The courtyard, which mere hours before had seen over a dozen carriages come and go, and with that also perhaps a hundred men, now was scarce of sound, except for the occasional neigh of a horse within the stables or the striking of iron against molten metal as the blacksmith worked into the evening. A few men patrolled the battlements now, with torches lit at intervals along the place that filled the misted evening with balls of bright warm light, but the roads were now derelict, and the perimeter of the place seemed dead to all life. The men, who sat seemingly uninterested in what might lie beyond the walls, stood in quiet conversation or in small groups huddled beside fires that had been lit in the fire pits, with a few barrels of ale beside them for warmth in these cold nights. The thunder now rattled across the Eastern borders of the forests, and from the Castle it could be seen that the storm was approaching with great ferocity upon the City and Castle. Against protocol, a few of the men had chosen to lock off the doors to the parapets, and instead reserve the patrols to the lower battlements during such weather. Rats scuttled along the walls now, often lurking in doorways between the protection of the darkness and the warmth of the firelight, in search of food scraps that the men left beside the pits. Bread and chicken were the main diet here, washed down with a few good pints of ale or

brandy wine to keep them warm. A few games of Cragg's Pass were played, with three men to each team attempting to gain points above the opposition through playing a card against once another. And in the misted visage of the horizon, kept almost as a secret against a blanket of now fierce rain, came the final carriages towards Cerran. There was no bannerman riding ahead, no grand entrance. Instead a small procession made its way along the dirt road, was halted at the drawbridge before being quickly allowed to pass into the place. Men watched from above, carefully studying the carriages, seeking an emblem or a sigil, but in the darkness they found none. A small band of men scurried along the side of the carriages, covering the mares in large warm blankets as they were led towards the stables. Soon after the large main doors of Cerran were pulled open, and a great creaking bounded around the courtyard and wound up the spires into the evening air. A warm light escaped from within the place, and equally inviting smells steadily swam across the wind and out into the night. Brodon stood, illuminated as if he were a living incarnation of a stained-glass window, and waited. From within the carriages there seemed to be little movement, and the King heard little in the way of conversation. He scowled, focusing his eyes upon the crest and growing weary as he then heard a growling command. It was a voice he knew well, though time had deepened and cut at the cords of that once soft and rather gentle tone. Lord Tharandal emerged from the carriage, his small dark eyes darting from one corner of the yard to the other, surveying like a hawk. The man stood alone, his bannermen, if

indeed you could call them that, stood with bowed heads and solemn expressions.

‘Greetings, my Lord.’ Brodon exclaimed in a loud, welcoming tone.

‘Good evening, my King. Such fine weather, it seems to have followed us through every field and pass.’

Tharandal returned, his own voice seemed dry and harsh against the rains.

The Lord was followed by a small band of men, three on each side, and to a passer by it might have seemed that he was King and that Brodon were the Lord, for the King stood alone.

‘I trust we are the last to arrive.’ Tharandal said after a few steps, looking up at to Brodon as he climbed the stairs to meet him.

‘You are, though not by much. Lord Elmore arrived only an hour or so before you.’ Brodon returned, extending his hand to clasp the cold, shrivelled hand that Tharandal offered him. Tharandal, just as every Lord had done, kissed the ring that sat upon Brodon’s finger and bowed before him. Behind them men stood in silence, as if they were men of stone, unmoving and expressionless against the cold of the evening. Brodon saw this, and he was troubled, Tharandal could be cruel man to those who served him, though he was true to every word he had every spoken. If a man dealt with Tharandal, then Tharandal would honour that agreement to the letter. The men’s eyes met for a moment, and Brodon could not help but see something beyond what those eyes now conveyed to him. There was something behind them, something more. But in a flash the moment was gone, and Tharandal bid his

men to bring forward his chests. Six were quickly brought to the steps of the castle, thick oak that was tightly packed with leather straps that wound around the chests like a boa with its prey.

The Lord stood with the King, not for any sort of company or conversation, more so to ensure that his luggage was properly cared for. The Lord was meticulous in every sense, every item was accounted for and never was something cast away without his approval. Once satisfied, the old man turned towards the King and took a quick step forward.

‘I have something of interest, my King.’ He said, his voice quiet, soft.

‘I assure you that gifts are not necessary, though I thank you all the same.’ Brodon replied gently, smiling as he did so.

‘Oh, but this one is, especially if we are to solve *your* problem...’ Tharandal returned. The Lord took a step back, and signalled to his carriage, a short stout man promptly opened the door furthest from them, and Brodon could make out only the silhouettes of a tall and smaller person as they clambered out of the wagon. The two visages began a slow, almost unnerving advance through the courtyard, and the weather seemed now to crescendo as a thick mixture of rain and swirling winds protected the oncoming masses from all that surrounded them. The Lord watched his companions carefully, but his eyes flickered to Brodon as he waited for the inevitable moment. *What is this?* Thought Brodon as he watched the two, as he now saw clearly, women walk towards him.

‘Ladies, please introduce yourselves.’ Tharandal exclaimed.

‘I am Nemara, Yellow Sister of Arisen.’ Said the older woman, her blonde hair damp and frizzy and her robes blotted with dark splashes of rain. In her hands, Brodon saw, she clasped a small leather book.

‘Welcome Sister, you will be pleased to hear that another of your...type, is here.’ Brodon returned, his smile wearing thinner with every word that passed his lips. He turned his head and squinted, she could not have been older than eighteen, bundled tightly in robes that were discoloured and torn and with a pale and almost vacant face.

‘And to whom do I now speak?’ The King asked.

Melran looked towards the King, she shivered slightly in the cold evening air, and as the winds wrapped around her, she wished nothing more than to be carried far away from this place. To where she would be taken, she had no thought, just so long as it were not here. She turned her gaze to the men that stood atop the parapets, silhouetted against the black starless sky, they flickered and seemed to dance with the flames that came from the lanterns and fire barrels that dotted the walkways.

‘Girl, have you no respect? Answer your King!’ Tharandal hissed. For a brief moment the dagger that hid within her bags seemed to call to her, and she wished nothing more than to slice at the Lord’s throat and watch has grasped for air and gargled in the bubbles of his own blood. A sweet moment, but for another time perhaps.

‘My name is Melran, my King.’ She said softly, her head now bowed but out of fear or tiredness she could not

tell. A crackle of lightning illuminated the figures on the steps, and the winds seemed to wrap themselves tighter than they had before. She lifted her head, and as she did so the men on the parapet disappeared into darkness. Her eyes met with Brodon's, though they were not his own, and from inside the doorway that stood quiet, a dark mass formed. It did not step beyond the darkness of the doorway, and neither did it speak. It simply stared, a man taller than any Melran had ever seen before, clad in armour that was scratched the dented, with a longsword to one side and an axe to the other, gripped by hands that bore cracked flesh that was dotted with thick white bone. And it stared, and only now did she realise how dangerous Ceraborn had become.

Chapter Seventeen

The corner tower was a dark, cold and unnerving place. A spiral staircase, lit only at the small pass into one of the three main floors, housed a damp and sterile air. The walls, thick stone that stung your hand with their coldness, closed around the place and offered little in the way of space or freedom of breath. There was a quiet, almost inaudible murmur from the storage basement, and to Melran these murmurs seemed almost ethereal in the darkness that now surrounded her. The room was of ample size, of that she could not complain, a large bed sat within the room and at either side sat large wooden cupboards that were bolted shut. A window, overlooking the Southern yard, was now misted and gave the illusion that nothing lay beyond the small glass square from which the girl now stood staring at. She turned, two large oak doors that were braced with horizontal black bracing, were placed at either end of the room. One, from which she had just arrived, took her directly out onto the stairwell. The other, though it was locked, she was sure would take her into one of the long corridors that ran across that corner of the building. She shivered again, though the fear that she felt had almost entirely left her now. At the entrance, she had fainted, caught delicately by Nemara who quickly advised that she be taken to her rooms to rest. Looking into the corners of the room, she paid close attention to ensure that no one stood in the darkness that was offered there. Another shiver, she pulled her robes tightly, leaving

only her face exposed to the cold. Sitting on the bed, she softly rubbed her hand against the headboard, a white poplar wood that had been ornately decorated at either end with a carved design of roses, gave her a strange comfort. Closing her eyes, she felt a calmness come over her, it warmed her, and she felt her heartbeat slow and her breath steady. A knock came from the door behind her, she turned her head as the latch slowly unhooked and a slow vibrating thudding filled the room.

‘Child?’ a soft voice whispered from the darkness of the staircase.

‘I’m fine.’ Melran replied, Nemara stepped forward, she held a chamberstick in one hand, the other shielding the flame from the draft.

‘The King has requested that you stay here until tomorrow evening. He will send maids to tend to you.’ Nemara returned.

‘I don’t need maids, and neither do I need *tending* to.’ Melran replied, spitting her words like venom. Nemara looked at the girl with a sorrowful expression. Against the darkness the Sister’s face was delicate, and she seemed almost angelic in a place that was so bereft of light. The girl pulled her legs onto the bed, sitting cross legged and wrapped tightly in her robes, she looked down to the floor and shuddered.

‘Are you always cold?’ Nemara asked, taking a step forward but at the last moment choosing to remain standing.

‘I have known nothing but the cold for months now.’ Melran replied.

‘You shiver so fiercely; I worry for you.’ Nemara said. Melran scoffed at this and turning her head she spat at the feet of the Sister.

‘You worry for me? How exactly do you worry for me when you have brought me to this...this...pit! You do not *care* for me, and I wouldn’t expect you to. I do not expect *anyone* to.’

Such fear, I cannot imagine what she has seen. The Sister thought as she looked at the girl.

Melran stared hard at the woman, and her eyes showed both fear and rage beyond what Nemara had ever known.

‘Lord Tharandal has taken to his own quarters; you will not see him until tomorrow evening.’ The Sister said, her gaze moving away from the girl. Again, Melran scoffed, throwing her head back and sighing loudly. Had this become her life, had this become her only reward. It was these thoughts that had preoccupied her mind for almost the entire journey to Ceraborn, and they seemed never to relax into the recesses, instead they only circled like sharks, steadily growing closer and closer to her own sanity.

‘Does the King know?’ She asked suddenly, biting her lip as she said so. Nemara shook her head.

‘In the confusion of the... of what happened, nothing was said to the King.’

Melran rolled her tongue around her mouth as she wrestled to find the right words.

‘What is this?’ She asked eventually. She had fought to find a greater question, to try and dig deeper and figure out what was happening here.

‘Those who have a gift such as yours are...rare. The Kingdom is in need, and the Sister has delivered you to us.’ Nemara replied calmly.

‘I am not a dog! I will not be passed from one Lord to another, to do his bidding when he can’t figure it out for himself.’ The girl returned.

‘I have seen those who fled the beast, you may have seen the power it possesses, but have you seen those who the Sister allowed to live?’ The Sister asked, now she sat beside the girl, carefully putting the chamberstick beside her on the floor before turning to the girl. Melran sat quietly, she did not want to imagine it. Nemara watched her, until at last the girl could do nothing but look to the woman.

‘Some men were lucky; some may live beyond the end of the month. But countless will have died since we set out on our journey. Flesh and metal burned and melded into one. Blistered wounds that fester, flies dancing about them sucking the puss like some kind of sick kitten at its mother’s teat. Some, with skin so badly burnt that the bone shines brighter than the most polished of Arisen armour. These are the truths of what that beast has brought upon this kingdom. And to the darkness that is sent there is always a light to counter it, and that is you Melran. That is why you are here.’ The Sister said, her voice was soft and light, and Melran heard the words and regarded them as almost childlike, though she knew the truth to be far more terrible.

‘These creatures, they know nothing but hate and death.’ Melran said quietly, her gaze once again falling to the floor.

‘Until recently my girl, these creatures were thought long dead. The darkness that has come to this land must relinquish, and it must do so to you.’ Nemara returned, placing a hand softly on Melran’s back. The girl shivered, but not at this, her mind returned to Cerran and to the fires that had burned through that place with such ferocity that even she feared for her life.

‘Tell me what you saw.’ Nemara said, and for a moment her voice crackled with fear. Melran did not move, instead she simply moved her gaze towards the frosted window, now dripping with condensation.

‘Fire.’ She said softly, without hesitation. And the two sat in silent thought, with the cold and darkness surrounding them, and fire within their minds.

Chapter Eighteen

Neriel relaxed herself against the headboard of her bed as she sang tenderly to her child. Wrapped tightly in thick woollen blankets, she held her child close, with her hand lightly touching his own tiny hand. She often sang to him, songs from her homeland, songs that she hoped one day to hear again. These were joyous songs, ballads of love and glad tidings that warmed her soul beyond anything she had known. On occasion, she would sing these songs with her maids, teaching them the words, though it often amused her when they tried to pronounce some of them. She found solace in these words, it was a part of her truth, a part of her that could never be taken from her. And as the baby snuggled against her bosom she smiled, and with her heart she knew that one day her son would grow to be King, with blood of the East and West flowing through him like fire, burning to unite those distant lands which for too long had been locked in civil unrest and destruction against one another.

The Queen was not out of touch when it came to the politics of which her husband presided over. In fact, on most occasions, he sought her council in the privacy of their quarters. For years now the two had been bound by not only the love that they shared but by the promises they had made to one another on the first night after they had wed, that they were equal, and that the rule Brodon held over these Kingdoms would be one of truth, of justice and

of prosperity for all. In truth her marriage to Brodon was one of convenience above all else, an easy way to bind the Kingdoms of the West to Dai. However, love grew strong between the two and still it stood strong after so many years.

‘You seem troubled.’ Said a voice from beyond the darkness of the doorway. It was a familiar voice, and she barely let her gaze escape her child as she smiled at the words.

‘And you seem tired.’ She replied. Brodon stepped forward, smiled and slowly closed the door behind him. The latch was quiet as it closed.

‘The High Lords offer me little rest.’ The King said with a yawn.

‘And neither does this one.’ Neriell replied, now looking up to her husband as the child squirmed in her hands for a moment. Brodon smiled as he sat beside his wife and softly held a tiny finger against his own palm.

‘I would rather have council with him than with those fools.’ He said softly, Neriell laughed at this.

The two sat beside one another, as if in a dream, perfectly quiet and content for that moment. Brodon held his wife’s hand, stroking the inner palm in small circular motions.

‘You believe the beast can be destroyed?’ She said after a moment of silence. The motions stopped, and Brodon’s eyes fell to the edge of the bed.

‘Perhaps, though at what cost I do not know.’ Brodon returned, his voice quiet and unsure.

Neriell felt the cold air brush against her, and in that moment, she could have sworn she heard the far-off

whispers of men long dead. The moment passed and the room was quiet.

The halls were oddly quiet, and though a few rogue squadrons of men sat together at tables or rested against stone pillars, it was all so peaceful that night. The High Lords had been seen to their respective quarters and the servants, maids and men all had been shown to equivalent rooms. In the darkness of the night, with the flickering candlelight the only beacon of hope against the blackness that surrounded him, Ser Lenren of Garth tread lightly. Climbing the spiralling stairways, the knight's mind was drawn suddenly to the true intentions of the High Lords. He knew most of them well enough, some he had seen grow into their role as Lord, others he had seen wither with age. Much like Ramon, Lenren cared little for the political games that these men so often found themselves involved with. To Lenren these were decisions that would alter the lives of thousands, whether it be the distribution of grains during the colder days of Winter, or the heightening taxations of fish during the Summer. He did not fancy himself as one who should be privy to these conversations, and it burned within him to get rid of each and every one of them.

Still, the King knew better than he. And the word of the King was above all else. In the darkness he stopped for a moment, his breath blew misted in front of him and a sudden deep coldness wrapped itself about him with a brutal strength. Pulling himself further upwards, he became aware of a terrible ringing in his ears. The sound

was high, like the screaming of a child or the final desperate cries of some poor animal. Second to this came a sour odour, light at first but growing more and more foul with every inhale of cold breath. From below him the sound grow closer, and though he listened for footsteps he heard nothing but the terrible scraping of chains against stone. His stomach began to turn as the smell grew thicker and more putrid and he gagged his mouth with his shirtsleeve, only now for his eyes to sting wildly. In the darkness something stalked him, and hellish cry bellowed out. Lenren of Garth struggled to hold himself upright, and his vision blurred as he fought for the familiar feeling of the grip of his sword. He shook his head violently, trying to regain control of his sight and balance. Another hellish scream, though closer now. Lenren pushed himself hard against the wall, a lightning strike of icy stone struck his back ferociously.

‘Who goes there?’ He mumbled, his lips barely parting, and the words meagrely formed. A low grumble came from below him, and at that moment all became still again. Lenren waited a moment, listening closely. Again, he shouted down, sweat beading on his forehead.

(*The girl...*) Replied a hushed, broken voice. Lenren’s heart missed a beat, the voice of his father blew through him like a storm against a city of sand.

‘Father?’ Lenren replied, his sword held tightly in his iron grip.

(*The girl...*) The voice replied, it seemed closer now but still Lenren saw no one.

‘Whoever you are, you are not welcome here. Go! Leave this place at once!’

A single whisk of whispering wind thudded against the stairway beneath the man, and all afterwards was silent.

An uneasy few moments went by, and the man stood with his sword held tightly between his hands and with the sure thought of an imminent attack flashing through his mind. Nothing came. Lenren allowed himself a release of worried breath and slowly crept against the inner wall of the stairway before peering down into the darkness below. Again, there was nothing. The sound of his own hurried breathing caught his ear, and the man released the grip on his blade before falling onto the cold floor in a confused mixture of relief and fright. Resting his head against the stone a curious thought arose from that whirlpool of emotions: It was the voice of my father, a man who is still alive. The notion, and its potential consequences, plagued the man's mind for the rest of his slow walk up the stairway and into the large unlit corridor.

Brodon watched over the girl as she slept and touching her forehead, he felt the burning fire that swept through her body. She is lucky to be alive, he thought. A sad smile came across his face as he thought back to the girl's youth, she had always had that endearing quality. It was a trait she shared with the Queen, and to Brodon's mind it must be a gift bestowed to all women of the East. He wiped her head, the damp cloth in his hand a reminder of just how hard her battle was becoming. The medicine's that sat on the bedside table now looked merely palliative,

and Brodon prayed to all the Gods that this one might be spared her almost certain fate.

He made sure to be kept informed by the maids that stayed at Astriel's bedside, but the news had begun to play on his mind more and more with every passing remark that had been made to him. He had no doubt that the maids and his wife had done all they could, and that perhaps in some way the girl had shown more fight than she had right to against such a terrible foe. He cursed the men responsibly, and the image of them in their final moments played in his mind. For a moment he wondered if he had been too lenient on them, if they had deserved a death as brutal as the one they had bestowed on her. There were those who whispered in his ear during his early reign, begging him to parade his powers against the rebellious outcrops that had begun infecting the Southern portion of the Kingdom. But he was not his father, and neither was a tyrant who would see his people fear him. That was a delict lesson for the King, something which only he had learned how to manage, the true difference between fear and respect. And it was something he had fought for, and as he held the girl's pale hand in his own, he prayed that he had chosen the right path not only for himself, but for his Kingdom.

The door behind him opened slowly, and Lenren came in. The two nodded to one another, and the knight lit the fire, engulfing the room in a warm glow.

‘The place is quiet.’ Lenren said, almost to himself.

‘Aye, I fear there are men jostling to hear one another.’ Brodon replied casually, he knew too well the

games that were being played in his Castle. Lenren took a seat next to the King, his foot kicked a small cauldron that appeared to have a broth bubbling inside it. The two men looked at one another, not sure of what to say.

‘How do you know of this?’ Lenren asked eventually.

‘There are manuscripts and scrolls deep within these walls that no one will ever see or know of.’

‘From the Elders?’

Brodon nodded.

‘And how do you know if this works?’

‘There are some accounts from the East, in Myaman and El Khathor.’ Brodon replied in a hushed tone.

Lenren shook his head, and his eyes widened with panic.

‘We cannot do this; it could kill her!’

Brodon closed his eyes and sighed.

‘If we do not do this, then she’s dead anyway.’

Lenren turned his eyes towards his friend, her skin seemed almost blue and her face shallow against the light. Finally, he nodded.

Against the firelight the two men camped over the cauldron and began to stir at the foaming soup within it. To Lenren it smelled of herbs and spices, not the sickly concoction he thought it might be. Brodon took a small silk bag from within his robes and emptied the contents into his palm. Six small black berries, with dark red juice seeping onto the King’s palm, sat unmoving.

‘Now, we add these to the root mixture and then we must get her to drink it all.’ He said quietly. Lenren nodded and gently shook Astriel’s shoulder.

‘Astriel.’ He said, his voice nothing but a whisper.

And soon the girl came round, her eyes slowly opened and closing as she fought for consciousness.

The knight felt a faint squeeze against his fingers, and he brushed her arm gently.

‘Astriel, you must listen to me. We have something that can help you, but you must drink it, and drink it all. Do you understand?’

A mumbled mess of words came as a response to him. His eyes flashed to Brodon who returned a worried look before crushing the berries and watching them fall into the soup below.

Astriel struggled, lifting herself slowly to a hunched over position with a sea of pillows at her back. She coughed, and thick bile clung to her cloths as she fought for breath. Slowly pouring the mixture into a small wooden bowl, Brodon’s hands shook as he tried to imagine what might happen should this potion fail. Steam rose from the bowl as Lenren took it from his King and rested it before his friend. Astriel’s glazed expression gave him little confidence.

‘Be strong my friend and drink it all.’ He said, as he slowly guided the bowl to her mouth. Her thin purple lips parted, and the steam wrapped around the bridge of her nose as she took her first sip. It was warm, but her dry throat made her gag against the sea of flavours. And with the last of her strength she drank, until there was no more. And there was quiet, until at last something began to occur.

Chapter Nineteen

There was an awkward silence around the table of the Council Hall as the meeting of the High Lords of the West began. The day was quiet, the sky blue and the winds gentle. Against the wall with the tapestry of the Denmir, Ser Lenren stood over the meeting in deep thought. The King was seated facing away from the balcony, so that all eyes would be drawn to him. He was flanked, on either side, by the High Lords of his Council and Kingdom. Opposite him sat the Lord of Blackridge, Lord Elmore, in fine robes of a fair brown colour, with crisp white undershirts and a perfect smile running along his clean-shaven face. A slow grinding, almost painful sound came from the door, and in walked a solemn looking Ser Ramon of Garth. Velgar shot a quick, disapproving look to the man who nodded in apology and stood opposite his Captain, Lenren. The curved walls of the place made the whole affair tight, almost claustrophobic and Lenren let out a deep uneasy sigh amongst the silence. A moment later, Lord Louton of Arisen came in, dressed in golden finery but with a hard expression on his face. He took his seat without so much as a glance to Brodon and were it not for the arrival of Lord Fenkel of Rhea and Rhaysar Mulmet of Fildron, the tension may have boiled over quickly. Beneath a furrowed brow Ser Ramon's eyes shifted between the Lord's, and he wondered just how these proceedings would play out. So much power, he thought, all in one room. A perfect storm.

Only now did the silence end, with the slow and somewhat self-conscious sound of Velgar's gabble against the wooden tabletop. The red-faced man stood, a large leatherbound book sitting open in front of him and his arms out in warm greetings in front of him.

'Friends, Lord's, I welcome you to Ceraborn. However, I only wish that it were in times far brighter than these.' Lord Louton shifted uneasily in his seat.

'Yet, it is times such as these that the powers extended upon us are most vital. My Lord's now is the time for action, for the good of the Kingdom we hold most dear.' Velgar's eyes fell across all men that sat before him before resting gently onto Brodon. The King let out a deep, sad sigh and clasped his hands tightly together.

'This Kingdom is facing great threats, not only the farmlands in the South, but now the fear of beasts we did not to exist beyond the pages of our Elder texts.' The King's voice was grave, every word was pointed like the tip of a spear.

'There have been rumours in the North about Cerran.' Replied Fenkel bluntly, his gaze held firmly by his closed palms.

'Aye, we know.' Brodon returned.

'Brodon, you must tell us.' Louton said after a moment of quiet.

Brodon's voice was merely a whisper now, and his lips seemed to gently quiver.

'A dragon.'

The winds blew cold against the sand dunes of Ilad D'Maar, Zhai. The sky was a deep blue lit by an endless sea of unclouded stars. A bald eagle landed softly against the sand and gripped helplessly at the sand as it shifted along the ground. Eventually, heaving its exhausted body up the incline of the hillock, it reached the bare twisted roots of an orchid tree and sat calmly by its trunk. The bird's eyes shifted focus, sensing something but not quite able to see it. Turning back, it faced the trunk of the tree and squawked. The branches of the tree swayed softly in the starlight and the white, pink flowers started to fall around the squawking bird. A moment after and the bird felt its feet fade away, as slowly its body gave way to the sand from which had been born, and with a final glance out across the dunes that lay for untold miles ahead, it saw what it feared. The sand settled, and it seemed to mirror the twinkling stars above it, and on the hillock, where no tree grew and no birds found refuge, a dark shape shifted into form.

*

Words became inaudible as voice after voice fought for ultimate authority amongst the thunderous arguments that were now being fought around the table of the High Council. Lenren and Ramon exchanged tired glances, with the latter shaking his head and rubbing his tired eyes as he fought with every fibre of his being not to storm from the room and ride off into the forest where he might find some

peace. Eventually a single voice rebounded around the place loud enough that it split the sea of venomous words long enough for a moment of agreed silence to fall.

‘The archives of the Welling have been known to be false before, why should we take any notice of those tales of high fancy now?’ Lord Louton demanded, pointing an angry bony finger to Velgar.

‘I agree, but the Maester’s work tirelessly to ensure that we root out those fanciful details from our histories. The writings of Rha Thu’Ma are well documented across the West and Eastern Kingdoms, and as such we must accept that the details within those pages are of high importance and value. We must not and cannot dismiss them!’ Velgar returned, slamming a fist down on the table, an action which surprised both Lenren and Ramon.

‘You are asking us to believe in the journals of some mad sell sword from over four hundred years ago! Arch Chancellor, with all due respect, this is madness!’ Fenkel interrupted.

‘So, how exactly would you explain what happened at Cerran?’ Velgar returned smugly.

‘Under whose protection was Cerran being held?’ Lord Louton interjected, throwing a knowing glance to Brodon. The King grumbled. ‘Please, do tell.’

‘Commander Maar.’ Brodon replied, a snorting laugh returned from Lord Louton.

‘Enough!’ Brodon cried, an action which stopped the laughing within a second. All grew quiet as Brodon’s fingers traced the maps upon the table and tapped on the detailed image of Cerran.

‘Men were burned alive within those walls, crushed under the weight of those doors and ripped apart by the savage claws of this beast.’ He said quietly.

‘And in the South, we hear of men and women starving to death. Yet there was no form of concern shown from within these walls.’ Said a voice from beside the doorway, looking up Lenren saw the veiled figure of Saveen, Yellow Sister, standing tall beside the door.

‘This is a private meeting; faith groups have no place amongst these tables.’ Velgar complained.

‘Then allow me to walk along the halls with you, Arch Chancellor.’ Saveen replied.

‘What do you want?’ Brodon asked, his harsh gaze fixed on the slender girl. Her bright dress almost dazzled the men as she walked into the place and took her place beside Lord Louton.

‘We want the truth. The people of the South are dying, and they are dying under your watch. Perhaps it is no wonder at all that such a terrible thing has happened.’ Saveen said, resting her eyes onto the map of Cerran. Brodon gulped, his eyes narrowed.

‘The harvests in the South have not been as fruitful as years before, but food is being rationed fairly. That, I have made sure of.’ He returned; his voice trembled slightly. A thud on the table announced the arrival of a small string-drawn bag, no bigger than an apple.

‘What is this?’ Velgar asked wearily, his eyes darting between the bag and the girl. She removed her veil and unveiled her soft almond skin and bright eyes.

‘The monthly allowance afforded to a farming family in Tebock.’

‘This if from my lands?’ Rhaysar Mulmet muttered.

‘Imagine it, for that is all you can do in your vast castles and tightly packed food stores. A husband, a wife and children all reduced to eating this small bag of wheat husk.’ Saveen said.

Ramon flicked a quick glance to Lenren whose face clearly exposed his shocked expression. Turning his eyes to Brodon, Ramon saw the shame and sorrow in the King’s eyes.

‘You think the Gods are punishing me?’ Brodon asked. The Sister shook her head.

‘Only the Sister, the true Power of all life.’ She returned softly, a tinge of self-righteousness in her voice.

‘I had no idea.’ Lord Mulmet said, his head in his hands.

‘Far too often the Lords of this Kingdom have held their gaze towards lands far beyond the borders of their own.’ Louton responded, aiming his angry eyes towards Mulmet.

‘This is no time for civil war.’ Velgar grunted. Saveen smiled at this, Lenren’s eyes narrowed.

‘I find it odd in such circumstances that the Welling has, thus far, not sent a single message to those in need. We have attempted to contact the Maester’s, all have been denied.’ The Sister said, her eyes falling to the Arch Chancellor.

‘The Maester’s are well aware of the difficulties that the Southern folk currently find themselves in. In fact, it was by the power of the Welling that the fair distribution of food was enacted.’ Velgar spat back, his teeth grating, and his fists clenched tightly.

‘My Lord,’ Brodon began, shifting his weight as he turned to face Lord Louton, ‘There have been whispers of rebellion in the South. Have you heard as such?’

‘Yes, we have. But the men under my banners fight for the Kingdom. We have seen rebellion before, and I hasten to add that I wish never to see one again.’ Louton returned quickly. Brodon nodded his head and bit his lip as he quickly thought.

‘Perhaps we ought to reassess the situation.’ He said in little more than a whisper, his hands floating across towards Velgar’s before patting them lightly. The Arch Chancellor’s eyes closed slowly, and he released a long held breathe before nodding in quiet agreement. Again, The Sister smiled, and Lenren could not help but feel weary.

‘And as for the stronghold?’ Lord Mulmet interjected after a moment.

‘The beast, according to the writings of the sell sword, come from Gorfo.’ Velgar began, looking down at the book before him. ‘It is an unruly place, barren and rarely travelled by man. According to Rha Thu’Ma, this is the home of these beasts.’

‘Beasts?’ Louton returned, looking less than amused.

‘From the texts, we have deciphered that there were a number of these creatures. Though how many there are now is unclear.’ Velgar replied.

‘How do we kill it?’ Mulmet asked.

‘They are not impenetrable; they are flesh and blood. They can be killed with axe or arrow.’

‘We cannot risk our men against this beast.’ Fenkel said, looking down at the maps. ‘If this beast has taken the

stronghold, it has already killed more men than I dare imagine!’

‘I will not risk the lives of our armies. Maar’s men were strong, and amongst them were some of our finest commanders. The beast took them apart as if they were nothing. I will not risk the lives of more men.’ Brodon replied, sending a quick glance across to Lenren.

‘The beast will be obliged to protect its plunder, but from the writings I have discovered that these creatures are greatly wary after such an act.’ Velgar said.

‘Tired?’ Fenkel asked, Velgar nodding in reply.

‘The beast will require rest, that means that we must act now if we are to stand any chance of defeating it.’ Velgar returned.

‘And what should happen if we did not act?’ Louton enquired.

‘Then it will hunt again.’ Brodon replied sternly. Louton’s palms were sweating, and as he looked around him, he seemed to figure that he was not alone in this.

‘This is our only chance to destroy this creature. Why it is here I do not know, and why it chose Cerran I will perhaps never understand, but I will not rest whilst that creature lies breathing in the ruins of that stronghold. It must be destroyed.’ The King said, his voice trembling with fear and rage.

‘The Archers then?’ Said Fenkel, turning to face Ramon. The Knight winked at the man and was duly returned a grimace.

‘Aye, that is the long and short of it.’ Brodon replied.

‘The Archers? Brodon, please have some sense. The Archers cannot do this!’ Louton replied.

‘And why is that?’ Velgar returned.

Fenkel gave a sneering grimace and flicked his eyes onto Ramon before biting his lips and pursing them. The arch chancellor looked across towards Ramon now, who gave a weak shrug of his formidable shoulders.

‘Many in the North feel that the incident at the Tower left the Archers somewhat.... exposed.’ Lord Elmore broke in, his voice quiet and suggestive. Lenren turned his eyes across to the man, but the Lord did not meet his angry gaze.

‘How so? The wolf-beast was killed.’ Brodon retorted.

‘Of course, and for that the people are quite rightly glad. However, the time it took for these.... people to track the beast cost the farmers many of their flock.’

‘Bullshit.’ Ramon scoffed before being subdued by a strict warning glance of Velgar and Brodon.

‘With all due respect my Lords,’ began Lenren as he moved away from the wall, ‘the beast was held in the Tower for warmth and shelter, the surrounding farmlands made no attempt to move their flocks.’

‘So, you blame the working men then?’ Elmore returned.

The two men’s eyes met, each assessing the other but remaining silent amongst the low rumble from the others within the room.

‘All I mean is that the beast felt safe, it had good shelter and plentiful food. A Kludde will not move from such plentiful lands without good reason.’ Lenren returned.

‘Of course, of that there can be no doubt. But nevertheless, the point remains. And then of course there is the young...boy.... what was his name again?’ Elmorc replied, waving his hands in a vain attempt to recall the name of the youth.

‘Elson, Elson Greynire.’ Ramon spat angrily, his voice low and trembling with fierce rage that now began to bubble over.

‘Ah yes, of course. Such a young boy, with so much life ahead of him.’ Elmorc replied, his eyes feigning sadness as he clasped his greying hands together with a light tinkling sound of his rings as they met one another.

‘I fail to see your point, my Lord.’ Brodon said through gritted teeth.

‘Well, unfortunately, it was by your insistence that the boy be taken as part of this...escapade.’ Elmorc’s tone lowered, and his hands spread across the tabletop as he began to lay his cards bare to all before him.

‘I warn you, Lord of Blackridge, that the actions taken at the Tower of Erin were taken with the expressed approval of the High Lords of the West. I would ask that you think twice before throwing accusations towards *your* King.’ Velgar interjected.

Elmorc smiled, before reclining in his chair and resting his chin upon a clasped bony fist. One long grey finger ascended the side of his face before resting at his temple.

‘This is getting us nowhere, look at us, pointing fingers like a group of Eastern savages! I will not have it!’ Lord Mulmet protested after a moment of silence.

‘Quite, we have a duty to this Kingdom.’ Lord Louton attested. Behind him, Saveen nodded and her lips curved to a half smile.

‘Then do we have an agreement.’ Brodon said, surveying the room slowly before resting his eyes on his opposite. Elmorc’s eyes narrowed, and his teeth clicked together as he pondered on his response.

‘The death of the youngling will weigh heavy in my heart, but the greater threat still looms large. I agree with the proposals.’ The Lord returned, nodding curtly to his King. Brodon returned the nod and sighed heavily.

‘There is one question still remaining, just how will they manage to come close to the beast? Even if it is in slumber, and whilst they are trained, surely a creature that size will hear or smell them long before they come close to Cerran?’ Lord Mulmet returned, his eyes dancing between Ramon and Brodon. Velgar flicked through a few pages of his book and examined the pages.

‘You have no answer.’ Lord Elmorc announced, Velgar’s eyes darting up to meet with the Lord’s. The Arch Chancellor gulped.

‘Then it is a very good thing that *we* do.’ Announced a clear, soft woman’s voice from beside the open doorway. As soon as the first word was uttered Saveen Al Nam knew the voice all too well. Turning, she saw the tall slim figure of her Sister, not in blood but in bond, Sister Nemara Du'Tahnama. The woman stood with her blonde hair bound tightly and running along the crook of one shoulder and down her bosom. Her robes, similar to those worn by Saveen, were weather worn but seemed refreshed amid patches of needlework.

‘Sister Nemara, I had word that Lord Tharandal had been taken ill this morning. Is there news?’ Brodon asked the woman.

‘No, my Lord, though he sends his best wishes. He is feeling the effects of a slight cold from our travels.’ The Sister replied, though her voice seemed distant as she examined the room. She smiled as she came to view Saveen, and for a moment the two stood in silent greeting across the room.

‘If I may, why do you interrupt us?’ Lord Mulmet asked as he looked from both Sisters in both frustration and boredom at the current circumstances. He was fed up with these games and illusions, wanting only to return to his quarters for a well-deserved mid-morning drink. The girl turned her gaze to the man and smiled softly, he shivered in response.

‘I apologise my Lord, but the Lord Tharandal requires the presence of all in this room at once.’

‘What? Where?’ Asked Velgar.

‘In the Great Hall, of course.’ Replied the woman, turning away as she spoke.

Chapter Twenty

The chandeliers that hung high above the main table of the Great Hall were casting a bright golden light across the dark surface of the walls and floor of the lofty room. The King followed closely by Arch Chancellor Velgar, Ser Ramon and Lenren, came to the edge of the table to see Lord Tharandal sat with a sly smile across his greying face. Sat next to him was the girl, Melran. She looked tired, her face was faded of colour and her eyes adorned dark rings of fatigue.

‘What is the meaning of all this?’ Arch Chancellor Velgar thundered as he came to the edge of the table. The group of Lords, who had been busy in muttered, inaudible discussion since they had left the chambers, huddled around the King in a half circle and now in silence.

‘Forgive me my King, I awoke this morning with a tired and weary head and was light of breath.’ Replied Lord Tharandal, as he bid the hoard to sit.

‘I trust you feel better.’ Brodon returned as he sat opposite the Lord. Only now did he realise that the Lord was sat in his own seat, and a shiver came across the King’s back as he came to this realisation.

‘Of course, my King, I feel wonderful. Alas, I fear our Kingdom is not in such fine fettle.’ Tharandal replied. A murmur descended from the Lord’s and Velgar became aware of the Sister, Nemara, as she softly padded across the way and sat beside Tharandal.

‘It would seem that you have something of interest.’ Velgar said, fingering his belt beneath the table.

‘Indeed I do, the girl.’ Tharandal said, a cruel grimace across his face as he slowly patted the girl’s crossed arms. To Velgar’s eyes the girl shivered slightly at the touch of the Lord.

‘The girl?’ Asked Lord Louton, Saveen Al Nam standing beside him.

‘Indeed, she possesses incredible abilities. The type of abilities that have not been seen in these lands for centuries.’ Tharandal returned.

‘Abilities?’ Asked Brodon. ‘What.... abilities?’

Tharandal flicked a wrist and the girl stood to her feet, but still her face was held to the tabletop.

‘Tell them my dear, tell them of what you have been given.’ Tharandal’s cruel words spat like venom, and even to the ears of the Lord’s and King they seemed overbearingly vicious in their delivery.

The girl stood unmoved, and the Lord’s waited with bated breath.

‘She has a tongue?’ Asked Mulmet with a snigger that drew foul looks from Brodon and Velgar.

‘Come young one, you need not be frightened.’ Nemara said softly, a gentle caressing of the girl’s shoulder with soft hands. The girl pulled away from the woman’s hand, and for a moment she seemed to want to raise her hand against the Sister.

‘Child, you are safe in this place.’ Brodon said after a moment, his voice holding the reassuring tone of a true King.

‘Safety...now there’s a wonderous notion.’ The girl returned softly, her voice barely a crackling, dry whisper.

‘And why do you say that?’ Brodon replied. Lenren sharpened his gaze on the girl now, and he felt his brow furrow in curiosity. He did not look to Ramon, but he felt sure of his companion’s own thoughts.

‘You think this place safe? You think the Kingdom safe?’ The girl replied, her eyes flashed up to meet Brodon’s and the man gulped.

‘Of course. My people are safe from war, they are safe from –’

‘Ha! A fallacy! I wonder what the people of the South would think of that. As the days pass, they come closer to the doorstep of Banra.’

‘Banra?’ Returned Louton quickly, shocked at the hearing of the word.

‘The Elder God of Death.’ Velgar replied calmly, though his tone betrayed his true worry.

‘So, you have read some Elder books? Good for you, though I would caution you against being so cruel in the palace of the King.’ Lord Mulmet returned; a bony finger held up towards the girl.

‘And I would caution you Lord.’ Melran replied quickly.

‘This girl is a savage! Nothing more than a savage! Be done with her Brodon, and shame on you Tharandal for bringing a beast like this into this Palace!’ Mulmet sounded, his voice trembling with anger as he threw his arms up in dismay.

‘I agree, quite unruly.’ Returned Fenkel, but Louton remained quiet as he nodded to Tharandal to explain himself.

‘I wonder what you would think if the girl displayed some of her powers?’ The Lord asked, sliding his hand down into a small basket that sat beside him and pulling out a small field mouse. The little creature curled in the man’s enclosed palm, sniffing its small pink nose and unsure of what to do. The Lord’s quieted, and Brodon watched cautiously. Nemara opened the girl’s arms slowly, and the small mouse was dumped unceremoniously in her palms.

‘Tell me girl, what thoughts go around that small creature’s mind?’ Tharandal theatrically asked, looking down at the mouse and the girl menacingly.

‘She’s scared. She wants to be back in the fields.’ Melran replied softly, her eyes gazing lovingly at the creature.

‘Good.’ Tharandal said, placing a raisin down next to the rodent. Its small nose twitched for a moment before it slowly padded across the palm and held the raisin in its feet. It began to nibble at the fruit, its small black eyes constantly scanning around the large abyss that stood before it.

‘What is this nonsense?’ Lord Mulmet sighed.

‘It would appear the girl has.... senses the animal’s thoughts.’ Lord Elmorc returned for the first time; he had remained quiet throughout proceedings, as was his way.

‘She’s calming.’ Melran said, her brow now beading with sweat.

‘Is she alright?’ Asked Lord Louton, slowly cranking himself forward on his chair to take a closer look.

‘She’s fine.’ Tharandal snapped back quickly.

Melran stood now, with her eyes glazed over yet still set upon the creature. And for a moment a smile seemed to form on her face, before slowly dropping as her brow furrowed in panic and realisation. The mouse began to froth at the mouth, and for a moment it seemed to spasm before falling to one side. Dead.

‘Poison.’ Velgar muttered under his breath, catching the eyes of Lenren as he said so. The Archer nodded slowly before returning his gaze to Tharandal and the girl. Melran’s cheeks were blotched with running tears and her lips began to quiver. Nemara took the small creature from the girl’s palm and placed it under the table within another basket. Slowly the girl sat back down, though her left arm seemed to shake uncontrollably for a few moments after.

‘What in the name of the Gods is all this?’ Mulmet said, stunned.

‘I believe our Arch Chancellor may be able to shed some light on the situation.’ Tharandal replied. Velgar gulped as the room turned to face him, with his book clutched tightly to his chest he let a few uneasy breaths come and go before answering.

‘I have read of such abilities. Deep in the histories of the Elder Folk. As I understand it, they called it Paraninr. An ability to converse with living things, perhaps all living things, without so much as a single word uttered.’

‘I don’t understand, is this some sort of witchcraft?’ Lord Louton enquired, his voice hoarse and dry.

‘No, it was a gift. A gift from the Elder Goddess. A gift to the Eldest of the Elder Folk. The stories are few, and light in detail, but it is believed that those with this ability were able to converse with creatures and even tame them.’ Velgar returned, glancing back to the girl.

‘Creatures like a dragon?’ Brodon enquired.

‘Perhaps. No one has ever tried.’ Velgar returned.

Brodon gave the girl a grave, serious look before sighing heavily.

‘You believe her to be of use to the Archers?’ He asked Tharandal.

‘Beyond useful my King, crucial. Imagine her abilities to this Kingdom. The Kludde, the dragon of Cerran. She has been delivered to us at this time for a purpose. She is a gift from... The Gods.’ Tharandal returned, opening his arms out and laughing heartily.

‘What think you, Lenren?’ Brodon asked, turning to face the man. Lenren sighed, rubbed his brow and struggled to find the words he needed.

‘She could be of use...but she seems weakened now.’ He returned, nodding to the girl. Melran sat quietly, her arm now simply spasming in odd jerks.

‘Her abilities are not without consequence.’ Nemara replied suddenly, placing a small book on the tabletop. Saveen smiled at the book but bit her tongue from speaking.

‘She’s a child! For the sake of the Gods will you listen to yourselves! Not six weeks ago did we lose a youth to the rash decisions of this council and now you pull another one from the cold and throw her at your problems!’ Ramon shouted, the anger erupting from him

like a swirling hurricane of hot ash and vicious flame. And with a final angry look to Brodon he stormed from the room and slammed the doors shut behind him with powerful strength. The council sat in quiet, nervous silence. Tharandal tapping his fingers along the tabletop before flashing a knowing look to Brodon, now thumbing his temples.

‘We cannot guarantee her safety.’ Lenren said softly.

‘I know.’ Returned the King, and he sighed.

Chapter Twenty-One

There was a quiet, unnerving sense around the corridors which led to the incapacitated Astriel of Mair's rooms. Whispers of dark magic, sorcery and even dealings with Eastern satanic worship, had begun to spread across the chambermaids and ladies in waiting that sat in quiet, judgemental circles around the various upper palace rooms. Of course, The Queen was all too aware of these fanciful rumours and vicious suggestions, and upon hearing them she made quick work of ensuring that those had circulated such vulgar tittle-tattle were kept well away from the bed-bound girl. A close group of maids, along with Neriël herself, were the only ones allowed to enter the room thereafter. Nevertheless, it was a shock indeed to all who entered the room on that morning, as the King held his High Council in the chambers below them, to see Astriel lying peacefully asleep with not a single bead of sweat about her brow.

Neriël examined the girl that morning and was astonished. Her cheeks were returning, like ripe apples in Summer, to a rosy glow. Her ashen face returning to a sun-kissed colour and her palms were warm to the touch. A miracle, Neriël thought to herself. No, she would not allow herself to fall into such traps. This was magic, though what kind she did not know. There were no signs of it, no roots or herbs about the floor or strange vial with the remnants of some potion. But the feeling within her stomach was

one she had learned over time to never let slip by unnoticed. No, this was magic.

She clasped Astriel's hand tightly, and after a few moments she felt the embrace of her friend's fingers as they wrapped around her knuckles. A smile came over the girl's face, and her eyes slowly opened onto the room.

'Good morning.' Neriell whispered, joyful tears in her eyes.

'Ju'Rai, heavens...how long has it been?' Astriel croaked, her dry throat caught every word viciously. A maid opened the windows around the room and bright golden light erupted into the room and this was followed by a light welcomed breeze.

'Days and days my Lai.' Neriell replied, rubbing the girl's hands in her own as if she were holding a long-lost daughter of her own.

'Ramon.... Is he alright? The rebels in the market!' Astriel stirred, shaking her head violently. Neriell leaned in and pushed the girl's shoulders down into the pillows again before resting a hand onto her face and rubbing it gently.

'Ser Ramon is fine, as are all the archers. You were hit...poison.' Neriell's voice trailed off in sorrowful thought. Astriel's gaze turned from the Queen to her own wounded leg, the bandaging fresh and only hours old at most.

'Thanks to the Gods.' The archer returned as she let out a long, thankful sigh. She looked out into the pale blue skies beyond the windows and wondered how she was still alive. Who had saved her? And by the look at the small

vails at her bedside it had seemed that the medicines she had been prescribed had not been too effective. She felt for blades, they were safe at her side, sheathed and protected. She fought for recent memories, and only vague words and visions came to her, almost like reflections on a stream. None were complete and few had meaning to her now. She was glad to be alive, but she was lucky.

‘Where are the boys?’ She asked.

‘The King is holding a council of the High Lords.’ Neriell replied softly, a warm smile came to her face but Astriel saw something beyond it.

‘Something is wrong.’ She replied quickly, her eyes narrowing as they flashed from the Queen to the doorway and back. Beyond the bright light of the corridor, she could sense chattering maids and servants, though the words were inaudible.

‘Rest now my Lai, recover your strength.’ Neriell said, beginning to rise. A harsh tug to her arm brought the Queen close to the bedside and for a moment she was scared.

‘Please, do not lie to me my Queen.’ Astriel begged, her hand still tightly wrapped about the Queen’s elbow. The Queen’s eyes hurried from the hand to Astriel and back.

‘There has been an attack upon a stronghold in the East of the Kingdoms.’

The grip on the elbow loosened slightly. ‘Beyond Tu Ton in Sera.’

‘The dragon.’ Astriel returned.

Neriel nodded slowly, and a tear trickled along her cheek.

The grip fell away, and the Queen straightened up as the fabric about her elbow loosened again. She patted it, straightening the silk back to its finest appearance.

In the darkness of the castle corridors Ser Ramon of Garth found himself curiously calmed. His earlier outburst was one he was not proud of, but it could not be taken back or apologised for. He had heard those conversations too many times now, and the anger had been building and building for so long. It had been bound to happen, he told himself. Was he wrong? No. She was a child, and certainly no older than eighteen or so. Gods, he'd seen men and women twice her age join the Archers and last no longer than a few weeks. They never learned, that was the problem. All these Lords and Ladies, they did not know what it was like out there. They did not know what it was like sitting in the cold, with nothing to warm your stomach but Astriel's sour root soups. He thought back to the Kludde, to the sound it had made as it clawed at the young Greynire boy. Oh, how he had screamed. Turning a corner and Ramon came onto a display of armour, standing like an emaciated skeleton against the stone wall. He came close to the shining breastplate and imitated the clawing of the creature, and in his ears, he heard the terrible screeching and crying of the metal as it ripped away along with the skin and muscle of the boy's chest. In the reflection of the armour, he met his own tired, weary gaze and he shivered.

I wonder what it felt like. Ramon asked himself as he stared at the armour. What was he thinking of as the beast came upon him? He had certainly pissed himself. Poor lad, and Ramon remembered how he had watched the boy in Lower Dudstone in a little Inn House chatting up the baker's daughters and telling them how he'd return with the head of the beast and show them all the scars of battle.

'Brodon is furious, you do know that?' Lenren said as he came to stand next to his friend.

'Fuck the lot of them.' Ramon replied without so much as a glance.

'Such a poet.'

This drew a half smile from the knight.

'She'll be just like the others.' Ramon said after a moment. Lenren looked the armour up and down, only now realising it to be that Ser Randall Terny, Second Commander of the Black Archers. A predecessor of long ago. There was no sigil on the breastplate, but the enormous size of the armour could lead one only to the identity of its once occupier.

'That is our duty Ramon, we are here to fight for the Crown and the Kingdom when it most requires it.' Lenren returned, the two men turned to face one another and Lenren looked up slightly to Ramon with sad eyes.

'Our duty is to protect the Kingdom. Our duty is *not* to watch idly as children are thrust into our missions.' Ramon returned.

Lenren's eyes narrowed and he sighed, he could not disagree with Ramon. He knew deep down that this was

wrong, he could smell it a mile away. But that was not his judgement to make.

‘Have you been to the tombs recently?’ Ramon asked after a moment, though he knew the answer already well enough.

‘No, I do not go there.’ Lenren replied, his voice croaking as he spoke.

‘Well perhaps you should, how many stones do you think lie down there now?’ Ramon asked, his brow raised.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Guess. Humour me.’

Lenren shook his head, hand on hips and let out another deep sigh. ‘Six?’

‘Ha! Six? Gods! From our days alone there are five! I count forty of ours now! Forty poor bastards who’ve died for this badge.’ Ramon said, pointing a finger at Lenren’s chest where the sigil of the Black Archers sat proudly. Lenren shrugged him off, batting away the hand softly.

‘The life of an Archer is never an easy one, we both know that. We both know the sacrifices we have had to make,’ Ramon’s brow furrowed in anger. ‘You more than most. But we must remember why we do it and we must remember that those who we have lost have not died in vain.’ Lenren’s voice was hard now, authoritarian.

Ser Ramon of Garth stared at his friend with angry eyes and a heavy breath on his lips.

‘You could always go back.’ Lenren said after a moment. Ramon’s eyes shifted focus down the corridor as the illusion of a shadow caught his gaze.

‘No. I can never return.’ He replied, his voice now quiet and thoughtful. He watched the shadows cautiously,

listening for any slight sound that would betray the person who lingered within the darkness. Lenren cocked his head to listen, shifting his hand down towards his longsword. The two men stood in silent anticipation before feeling that there was nothing there. It was quiet, perhaps too quiet.

‘I don’t like this place.’ Ramon said as the pair wandered aimlessly along one of the long internal hallways, almost indistinguishable from any other.

‘It is grand but cold, I’ll give you that.’ Lenren returned.

‘I wonder if the place were ever besieged, how long it would take to search the grounds. Days perhaps.’

Lenren thought it an odd comment but went along with it.

‘They’d have to get passed the outer walls first.’

‘Aye but say they did. Then what?’

Lenren thought for a moment, retracing the courtyards in his mind, searching for entrance’s.

‘I suppose the main doors would hold, even if they were rammed for days they would not be broken. You’d have to go up the watch towers.’

‘In single file.’ Ramon remarked as he recalled the claustrophobic nature of the towers.

‘Aye, along the parapets and into the sideways. Even then the defences would be strong. The iron doors would be bolted.’

‘Only if the key master was able to get to them first.’

Lenren gave his companion a sideways glance. Ramon was a son of war, a spawn of conflict. His mind was bred for brutal fighting.

‘And as you say, even after that there are acres of hallways. I haven’t a clue where we are in all honesty.’ Lenren admitted with a half laugh as he checked the way that he come from, seeing only the dimly lit corridors that seemed to maze and weave endlessly.

‘Upper floor on the East wing.’ Ramon replied quickly and with utter certainty.

‘It’s a good job you’re on our side.’ Lenren responded, another half laugh followed by a grim smile. But Ramon didn’t smile, he just kept walking on.

‘Of course. Otherwise, you’d be well and truly fucked.’ He replied after a moment, a quick side glance failed to reassure Lenren.

After a while, the men stopped for a moment at an intersection of hallways and wondered which way to proceed. After a moment Ramon turned back, the hairs on his neck standing on edge.

‘What is it?’ Lenren asked, his voice a whisper.

‘I feel it again.’ Ramon returned, his greying opal eyes flashing from one corner of the darkness to another.

‘I hear nothing.’ Lenren returned, though again his hand had found the hilt of his blade.

‘That’s what worries me.’ Ramon replied, pulling a lantern down from above his head and offering it into the darkness. Nothing.

Beyond them, three or four doors down, the creaking of an opening door altered both enough to quickly unsheathe their blades and tightly pack themselves side by side.

‘I don’t like this.’ Lenren said, his own eyes now darting between the different corridors that led off to either side of him.

Ramon did not respond, instead he slowly padded along the corridor from which they had come until at last the unlocked door lay in front of them. Pushing it aside, the dull scrapping of wood upon wood stood the only interruption to the silence, the two men found nothing. And it terrified them.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Saveen Al Nam sat alone looking out onto Ceraborn, with the wind gently stroking at her and the sounds of birds chirping all around her. She had not been surprised at the way the meeting of the High Lords had ended. To her, every major decision in the Kingdoms ended with someone storming off like a tantrumming child, and it amused her more than anything. Wrapped in a golden overcoat, dyed wool trimming catching at her neck, she felt the Northern cold and shivered. Despite only being a few days ride from Arisen, the North appeared almost unbearably cold to her now. Springtime in Arisen usually came with fresh winds sweeping in from Buckle's Bay, carrying with it salted air and the chiming of the Sisterhood temple bells as they announced the beginning of Saseen Mass.

That, for the moment, would have to wait though. She wished that she had had the autonomy to deny the High Priestess her position of personal chaplain to Lord Louton, though she understood that the duty was honourable one. Lord Louton had retired to his chambers, probably to drink himself into a slumber and drown the voices that nagged at him from within the sacred city as well as out of it.

Alone, with nothing but her own thoughts, Saveen Al Nam waited for her inevitable visitor to arrive. She had played out the conversation at least three times before the slow creaking sound of the door that sat in the dark recess

of her residence came calling out to her. She smiled but did not turn away from the city, simply clasping her hands together as the figure came to her side and sat leisurely in the chair beside her.

‘Good afternoon Sister.’ Saveen said.

‘And the same to you. I must admit I was surprised to see you here. I had not been informed that you had taken my position.’ Came the reply, it too carried a saltiness in its words.

‘It was not my decision to make. The High Priestess sought council before arriving to my door. You left her with little choice.’ Saveen flashed a glance to her side and saw the still face of Nemara watching over the city just as she did.

‘A letter would have been nice.’ Nemara responded, her voice low and sombre.

‘Curious, the High Priestess said much the same after your disappearance.’

A half smile rose on the elder Sister’s face and for the first time she turned to face Saveen, cocking her head like a hawk examining prey and pouting her lips in thought.

‘Disappearance? How can I disappear when the whole temple knows where I am?’ She replied.

Saveen met with the woman’s steely gaze and her own eyes narrowed slightly.

‘As I say, it was not my decision to make. They say it was three months since your last letter. They presumed you had disbanded.’

‘Ha! My faith is never in question.’ Nemara returned, furrowing her brow, and tutting in disgust.

‘There were rumours of an affair with the Lord of Sera.’ Saveen said through gritted teeth, her voice matching Nemara’s previously low tone.

‘They really think me so crass to involve myself with that fiend. Sister above!’ Nemara cried out.

‘It has happened before.’ Saveen replied, casting a knowing glance down to the City beyond.

‘They thought you might be here. Once the letter came through from Velgar.’ Saveen said after a few moments of awkward silence.

‘A good assumption.’ Nemara replied. ‘What do you make of the girl?’ She cocked her head slightly and traced her gaze along the woman’s neck and up to her gaze. Saveen’s eyes narrowed and she thought for a moment.

‘Where did you find her?’ The woman answered.

‘In the courtyards of Tharandal. She was picked up amongst the survivors of the tragedy.’ Nemara replied, only now did Saveen noticed the slender book that the woman held tightly in her grasp.

‘Does she remember?’ Saveen enquired.

Nemara nodded in reply.

‘Strange, I have never known *it* to have left anyone with memories of our sanctum.’

‘Neither have I, and now that her powers have been realised, I fear the worst.’ Nemara returned quickly, ensuring her voice was still low and a whisper.

‘You fear the High Priestess was right?’ Saveen’s eyes widened.

‘Yes.’ Nemara replied simply.

Saveen's heavy sigh told Nemara the internal worry that was coming forth in the young Sister, a worry that was matched within her own heart.

'The poison?' Saveen asked quickly.

'No, that was Tharandal alone.' Nemara replied.

This somewhat calmed the younger Sister as she reclined back into her seat and began to tap with her delicate fingertips on the armrests. Her copper hair glistened in the afternoon light.

'Then we cannot be sure of what will come next.' Saveen replied, turning her gaze back to her Sister and showing her true dread. Nemara nodded and began to finger through her book before finding the relevant pages.

For a moment, the two sat in silence as the sound of footsteps drew near before descending away.

'There are too many eyes and ears in this place.' Nemara said, cutting through the silence with her velvet tones.

'Indeed, there is.' Replied Saveen, though she seemed less willing to give up the silence so soon. Something in the footsteps had made her feel uneasy.

'The child knows of the Sisterhood. She has said so to my face, of her past I cannot speak.' Nemara said, turning her eyes from the page and back to her Sister.

'Then the High Priestess must be warned of her.' Saveen returned, her voice trailing off as she glanced across to the doorway behind them.

'The High Priestess failed in her attempts to subdue the child before, what makes you believe that we can do

something now?’ Nemara sniggered. Saveen swung round to face her elder and wrinkled her brow.

‘The Paranimr is a danger unto us all if it left unkept. Those with such abilities are best kept away from places where they could cause trouble. Do not attempt to meddle in affairs that are beyond your own understanding my Sister.’ The younger girl snapped; an angry finger pointed to Nemara.

‘And if she is what we believed her to be?’ Nemara asked softly.

‘Then I pray that The Sister saves us.’ Saveen replied, her eyes falling to the floor and a look of fear on her face.

Listening to those words, hearing the fear and the worry flowing through them like unbarred tidal wave, sank Nemara’s heart. The letter she had received from the Greynire widower sat within her robes with a broken seal. The pieces were beginning to come together, far quicker than she imagined through the dark nights in Sera as she had served the Lord, but now they were beginning to come to fruition.

‘Tharandal will not give the girl up without reward.’ Said Saveen after a moment, but it was not a question.

‘I know.’ Replied Nemara.

‘Then what have you offered to him?’ Saveen asked now, turning back to face her Sister with a harsh expression on her pretty face.

‘Everything a Lord could desire.’ Nemara returned, and her eyes drifted down to the city and she imagined what it would look like in a few Spring’s. She smiled.

‘And you think he’ll take the bait?’ Saveen answered after a moment of thought.

Nemara’s lips curled into a smile. ‘Has he not already done so? He has allowed her into the House of the King, he lies at night dreaming of the day he will be crowned as King of the West, with the girl by his side.’

‘His beast to rule over the people.’ Saveen replied knowingly.

‘Precisely.’ Nemara agreed.

‘Her powers will only grow stronger, and with that she will look for a source of knowledge. You are to be that for her?’ Saveen asked.

‘Yes, the girl is our gift, even if the High Priestess does not see it. Blinded by ancient faith, unable to read between the lines that the Sister offered to us.’

‘And what if the girl is killed by the beast in Cerran?’ The young Sister returned; her brow furrowed curiously. Nemara’s half smile dropped for a moment as she thought of the grey serpent that now slept within the ruins of Cerran.

‘No, the beast knows of her. It has spoken with her before, and now it’s waiting for her.’

Chapter Twenty-Three

Arch Chancellor Velgar watched the High Lords leave the Great Hall one by one in a hushed, awkward silence. He rested his palms against the large Elder Eastern text of Rha Thu'Ma and let out a heavy sigh. The meeting had been all that he had feared it to be, a unbridled mess of squabbling and political power plays by men who twisted the 'good' of the Kingdoms into their own devious wants and desires. The King had left with a sour expression on his grey face, and Velgar knew that the stress the man was now under would be more than most men were able to take. He felt uneasy at his core, as if history were retreating to older ground where only dark, hideous memories now dwelt. The Old King's shadow lay over the Castle whether the Chancellor acknowledged it or not and the brutal truth of Brodon's recent turns had troubled the Arch Chancellor deeply. His discussions with Hersan had proved useful, though he had been unable to find the texts of which the Prince spoke. The room had remained locked, and Velgar had had to use a great level of cunning and deception in order to retrieve the keys from the key master. He was, in a perverse way, quite proud of himself on that particular evening.

Nevertheless, the troubling events at the council had left Velgar now feeling that the tensions within the Kingdoms was beginning to bubble over. Lord Louton's appearance with the Sister girl, as well as Tharandal with

the elder Sister, had left Velgar feeling vulnerable. The Welling's position on the Yellow Sisters was well documented across the lands, and if rumours were to spread of the King openly accepting two of them into the place, with licence to wonder and browse amongst the place as they wished, then that would add a whole other level of unnecessary strife to the Castle. In truth, Velgar had been well aware of the ongoing issues in the South. The Welling had backed the King's proposals without contest, but now rafts of reported thievery and small riots had become to flood into the gates of the God's Castle. And the truth of the situation had been kept far from the ears of the King. Crop failures had been reported in large swaths across the South-East, mainly along the coasts of Fildron and Arisen, and disease amongst the cattle herds in Terrock Bay had been reported in unusually high numbers. One farmer had come to The Welling after several days travel having lost over a hundred of his cattle in under seven days. He was not alone.

Velgar had seen little change in the weather in the preceding autumn and winter months, and the previous year's grains were stored well enough for rich and poor alike. There had been a few days of harsh rain in the late Winter, but it was nothing that would cause anything more than slight flooding along the marshes. Not a single report had come to the Maester's to report fields or croplands being sodden by the rainfall and the earth was good and strong. But now the crops were failing, and those that had grown were in smaller quantities than had ever been documented by The Welling. On three separate occasions

it was reported that market stalls in Lower Epping, south of Arisen, had been ransacked when they came with bread and grains.

The rioting, though minimal, was still of large concern. The Lower Lords had requested that they be given extra reinforcements from the Kingsmen Guard during the Sunday markets. It had been debated in The Welling, and after several days and a final report of discontent in the Korgen fish markets, a decision was made. A small troop of men from Arisen were sent out into the villages, watching over the people. Velgar pondered on that decision and wondered how a starving man might view a small guard of Arisen soldiers as they paraded themselves around the compacted streets of some poor neighbourhood, in shining armour and with strong full frames. The thought shivered down his spine, and he looked across the large oak table to the small basket of staling buns and sighed again.

As Arch Chancellor, Velgar was sent to Ceraborn to aid the King with both political and religious issues. He was the stopgap between the Lords of the King, whether High or Low, and the religious men who proclaimed the throne as Holy and the power that Brodon held as divine. And in times such as this he had presumed the King would confide him, but this was not so. The King had remained quiet, enclosed within the boundaries of his own mind, waving off invitations of discussion with Velgar and focusing more so on the daily operations of the Castle. He found Brodon to be more focussed on his guests now than

the issues to which he had invited them here. And though the Chancellor was inclined to agree with Brodon's overall policy, he found it excruciating that the man seemed so worried and yet so closed off from those who served him.

In the Great Hall the man sat alone, quiet and deep in his own thoughts. For a moment he thought he heard something, the scrapping a metal against stone. Flicking his eyes upwards the man saw that both doors to the place were closed, and no movement within the place itself. All was quiet, even the band had been dismissed. Nothing but the gentle sound of the breeze against the windows, a steady tapping, could be heard beneath the man's breath. Strange, and as he stood away from the table, he heard the sound again. A vicious, purposeful scrapping of steel against stone only this time closer than before, and almost certainly coming from the doorway that stood before him. There were no workmen in the Castle, nothing scheduled for renovation. The sound seemed to climax above the man as it spun around the room, like a tornado swirling through and leaving not an inch of the place undisturbed. The man's hands shook, and his eyes widened as his gaze fell upon the shadows behind the throne.

'Who are you?' Velgar stuttered, his chair falling back and smashing against the floor with more force than it ought to have. The grim figure stood, outlined against the black and rippling like the waves of the sea.

'Come now, answer me! Terrible thing, intrusion into the palace is punishable by death!' The Arch Chancellor's words fumbled from his fat mouth.

The being stood still, staring into the light with piercing eyes that showed nothing but hatred and malice. They appeared almost reptilian, snake like as the pupils dilated. A terrible gurgling came from the creature's mouth, though Velgar could not see anything that resembled it.

'By the power of the Gods I command you to leave this place at once! Foul creature!' Velgar's fingers clutched at the heavy tome that he hugged to his chest and underneath him his feet tangled as if he were a new-born. He backed towards the entrance doors, thick hulking doors that appeared so tall and brutish now that he feared he would not have the strength to open them. His eyes remained fixed upon the creature at the throne, and to him it appeared that all the shadows of the place had converged to conceal the thing from the light. A nearby candle was touched with the darkness and instantly extinguished its bright flame. A low rumble of fierce, harsh growls came from the thing and it stepped forward.

'Death will come to this place.' It said, its voice a whispering mass of vicious tones. And as it came forward the face of a man was momentarily flashed between the light and dark. Velgar's body shook in uncontrollable fear, and sweat beaded along his cherry brow, and he began to weep.

All was quiet. Arch Chancellor Velgar stood beside the doorway to the Great Hall of Ceraborn and wept uncontrollably as Lord Louton of Arisen arrived back at the room, followed closely by Lord Elmorc of Blackridge.

‘Good Gods!’ Louton said as he ran to the man, thinking him in pain. ‘What is it Chancellor?’

And he pulled at the Chancellor’s robes and held him steadily as the man continued to weep. Elmore looked around the place, searching every corner and crevice with his worried gaze.

‘Shall I call for the guards?’ He asked quickly, turning back towards the doorway.

‘No! Do not go!’ Velgar said, grabbing the man’s collar as he passed. Elmore pulled himself away from the weeping man’s sweaty grip.

‘What happened?’ Louton asked again, sitting the man down and placing the book the man clutched a top the table.

‘A terrible thing my Lords, a terrible thing has appeared to me!’ Velgar said, his words barely escaping his quivering lips.

‘Thing? You mean some sort of illusion?’ Elmore replied curiously.

‘No, my Lord, not an illusion. Though what it was I cannot say.’

‘A man perhaps? An intruder?’ Louton offered, thinking perhaps that the weeping man had been attacked by some lunatic who had found his way into the Castle whilst the Lords had arrived, taking advantage of the meeting and the chaos it had brought to the courtyard of the place.

‘Nay, not a man. Though it looked like one, no man stands in shadow... is made of shadow!’ Velgar returned. Louton sat beside the man and patted his back, not quite knowing how to comfort the man.

‘I had best alert the guards all the same, he could be under the influence of some poison.’ Elmorc responded as he quickly carried himself away from the room, not waiting for a response from either man.

A few moments later and the Lord returned with a small troop of men. Each checked over the Great Hall, all levels were scouted. Amidst the chaos, Velgar had returned to some sense, though he still shivered in some sort of nervous twitch at the mention of the man. It was framed by Elmorc as there having been an intruder who had taken the Chancellor had given him some sort of poison that had seen his mind wander into such strange and bizarre hallucinations.

‘Do you know of such poisons?’ Lord Louton asked.

‘There are some roots and weeds that, when combined, could cause some sort of psychosis.’ Lord Elmorc returned curtly. Louton’s gaze fell from the Lord and back to Velgar.

‘Has the guard notified the King?’ He asked.

Elmorc shook his head, he had come upon the troop at the entrance to the Castle and had pulled them to his aid immediately.

‘Death...’ Said Velgar after a moment, turning slowly to face the Lord’s. ‘Death will come to this place. That is what *it* said!’

The Lord’s calmed the King before walking to the entrance, out of sight and sound of the trembling Velgar.

‘Have you ever seen something like this before?’ Louton asked, his voice hush.

‘Not for many years, some soldiers have been reported with such conditions, but I must say that I have never known a Maester...sorry, a Chancellor, to exhibit them.’ Elmorc replied, running his fingers through his greying black hair.

‘Drink?’ Louton ventured.

‘No, the man would have to consume an entire nation’s worth of drink to get like that!’ Elmorc replied with a curious smile.

Louton bit his lip and furrowed his brows in deep thought. He looked back into the room and saw the Chancellor, an armed man by his side asking questions.

‘I worry when I’m in this place.’ He offered.

‘How so?’ Elmorc replied.

‘Because whenever I’m here it usually means something bad has happened. I’ll do well to never see this bloody place again.’ The Lord responded. ‘Still, you’re lucky, you’ve the excuse of when Winter comes you cannot travel anywhere beyond the borders of Mormo!’ A short half, worried laugh followed.

‘Believe me my friend, Blackridge requires more attention than you could possibly imagine. I could well do without this place as well.’ Elmorc returned.

‘Of course, but then again we hear little from your folk. Since the Winter it appears that the famines in the South have affected them very little.’

‘My folk are hardy, well stocked and ready for any eventuality. We’re almost on our own up there.’ Elmorc said, licking his lips and his gazing off into the darkness of the corridor beyond Lord Louton’s shoulders.

‘Please, do excuse me. I must attend to something.’
He said with a smile. And without waiting for so much as
a nod from his peer, he was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Strange things had been occurring in the days during the meeting of the High Lords at Ceraborn. Maids and servants had recounted tales of footsteps about the place, coming upon doors that had been locked and finding them opened but seemingly untouched by any key. Indeed, even the key master had himself had been taken for questioning by Lenren and the Kingsmen guards, and he offered up the names of all those who had previously held a key during the High Lord's stay at the Castle. The ironmonger's sheds had been looked over, but nothing out of the ordinary was found. Watches had increased, and all that were questioned swore total loyalty to the King and the Lords which were now in their care.

'These occurrences are becoming more frequent.' Lenren said, his lips barely parting as he chewed on the end of a lengthy wooden smoking pipe.

'Has the girl said anything?' Replied Ramon, taking his gaze away from his partner and towards the doorway which stood ominously before them.

'No, she hasn't said a word since the meeting. She eats, drinks and watches from her window.'

Ramon sighed heavily at the thought of the girl standing behind the doorway, scared and in this terrible place. He pitied her and following a gentle rapping on the door he slowly opened the creaking door.

'Good day, young Lady.' He said gruffly as he arched his way into the room. It was cold, and there was a strange

misting on the glass. He turned to the bed and saw the girl sitting cross legged, her hands tucked into her skirts.

‘I am no Lady.’ She replied with venomous fury, though she remained unmoved.

Lenren followed into the room and the two men stood looking down at the girl at the foot of the bed. Both felt the hairs on their necks stand on end and both instinctively felt for their sheathed blades.

‘Are you cold?’ The girl asked, staring towards the men and carefully watching as they found the hilts of their swords.

‘Aye, just a bit.’ Ramon returned.

The girl nodded.

‘Do you not feel it?’ Lenren asked, arching an eyebrow.

‘Oh yes, though I am quite use to it now.’ Melran returned, and Lenren noticed the bag that sat tucked under her right arm, perhaps the only thing she owned. Her skirts were grey and brown, tattered and weather worn, and though she had washed when she had come to the Castle, her hair was now twisting and frizzing at the ends.

‘We have come to ask your help.’ Lenren announced as he pulled himself back to reality.

‘How so?’ Melran asked, again unmoving and with her gaze still fixed upon the men’s hilts.

‘People have been... there have been... sightings.’ Ramon struggled, ending his sentence with a rough clearing of his throat.

The girl raised a half smile for a moment, and her eyes blinked as her gaze re-focused itself on her misted windows.

‘Sightings?’ She whispered.

‘Aye, by the chamber maids and the servants. All over the Castle there have been... things. They say they hear doors opening and closing, and the sound of chains and swords.’ Ramon replied, again sounding unsure of himself.

Melran pursed her lips in a curious way and lifted herself from the bed and walked across the room. She ran a finger along the window and water trickled down the pane until it rested on the sill. Looking out through the slit, the girl saw the guards of Ceraborn marching along the grounds in smart uniformed troop.

‘The Chancellor has been effected?’ The girl asked, cocking her head to the side as she awaited a response.

The two men exchanged glances, where had she heard that from?

‘Yes, though we believe that to have been some kind of madman or intruder.’ Lenren replied, clearing his own throat as the cold air wrapped around his lungs.

‘Ah, I suppose that would make sense.’ Melran returned, smiling sorrowfully. ‘Though sense and logical are quickly disappearing in this place.’

The two men scowled as the girl turned to face them, bare footed and in ragged clothes she looked like some kind of Wild Folk witch or poor travelling girl.

‘You speak in riddles.’ Ramon returned quickly.

‘No riddles Ser, only truths’ Melran answered.

Arch Chancellor Velgar sat uneasily opposite the girl. To his side sat the King and the two archers, and opposite

them sat the ragged girl and her protectors, Lord Tharandal and the Yellow Sister, Nemara.

‘I assume everything is in order?’ Tharandal asked of the King, sliding his gaze across to the large bags that sat beside the King.

‘Of course, my Lord, I am a man of my word. The girl will be taken good care of and my recommendation for your installation within the High Council has been noted by The Welling.’ Brodon returned with a kind, fake smile.

‘Recommendation?’ Tharandal replied, the word slithering over his tongue like a bad tasting wine.

‘Merely a formality.’ Brodon returned quickly, and the Lord smiled in the knowledge of his rise in status and wealth.

‘The girl will be taken good care of my Lord.’ Lenren said, with a gracious nod to the Tharandal. The Lord gave a mocking nod in return but no reply.

‘Well then my King, it would seem that all is sorted. I wish you well in your battles.’ The Lord said, with an outstretched hand to the King who duly took it.

‘Where shall you be going, surely not to Sera?’ Velgar asked.

‘We ride to the South, for warmer weathers.’ The Sister answered, smiling warmly at the Chancellor. The two stared hard at one another for a moment, assessing each other before the Chancellor gave his best farewell nod to the woman.

The doors closed behind the Lord of Sera and his Priestess, if indeed that is what she was, and all was quiet. The monies that the Lord had requested had angered Brodon in truth, though he felt his hands had been tied by

the powers that the girl had showed. With the departure of the Lords, the Castle felt quiet now. Quieter than perhaps it had ever been.

‘I wonder, my girl, if you can explain what you said to these fellows.’ The Chancellor asked, staring towards the girl with both curiosity and fear.

‘You said that these occurrences were the spectres of those who had fallen in the attack on Cerran. How can that be?’ Lenren interjected.

The girl sat with a dejected expression upon her face, and her gaze fixed only on the banners which hung behind the men that showed the conquests of the South some years before. And she remained silent.

‘Indeed, a strange one.’ Ramon noted, throwing a disapproving glance to Brodon who returned with a shrug of his shoulders.

‘She did not want to die.’ The girl said suddenly, making Velgar jolt slightly.

‘Who?’ Brodon returned.

‘The mouse. She was scared, she wanted to be back in the fields near Arisen. She liked it there, where it was warm, and the grass fields ran for miles and miles.’ Melran replied as she shifted her gaze to her cupped hands, imagining the animal to still be sat there. ‘That was her home and that’s where she should have died. Not here, not in the dark and the cold.’

‘Are you illuding to these spectres as being stuck here?’ Velgar asked, his voice stuttering.

‘Not stuck, they choose to be here now. They choose to haunt these halls.’

‘But why?’ The Chancellor answered, his voice sounding desperate. But a grasp at his robes stopped him from talking further, and he looked to the King who sat wide eyed and with a fearful expression.

‘Do you not see? They haunt this place because they were killed in such horrific ways that they now haunt the halls of the one who sent them to Cerran.’ He said, the gripping arm shaking and his voice harsh as he struggled for conscious breath. The Chancellor turned quickly to face the girl, who sat with a knowing smile on her face.

‘Impossible!’ Velgar retorted, shaking the King until he came to. ‘The Gods protect all those who perish, no matter how they depart this world, and especially those who died to protect the Crown.’

‘But perhaps they did not? Perhaps they rescinded in their final moments, and the beast burned or crushed them nevertheless! Could it be true? Are the Gods shunning the Kingdom’s because of my foolish leadership?’ Brodon returned, his bottom lip quivering in pure fear.

‘Nonsense. The laws of the Gods are clear.’ Lenren responded quickly, with a firm nod to Velgar.

‘Indeed, they are, yes. But perhaps they look upon my rule and the rule of my fore-fathers and see it for nothing but sorrowful ruin. Look at the Southern croplands, those poor families. Perhaps these plagues were a warning? A warning I was blind towards!’ Brodon returned, now rubbing his fingers together as he attempted to go through the rush of thoughts that occupied his mind.

The girl sat quietly as she watched the King’s mind unravel. And as Ramon flicked his eyes away from the

jittering King, he saw the girl's frosted eyes remain unblinking, but as he cocked his head and sharpened his gaze he found them returned to normal. A trick of the light perhaps. And as Velgar calmed the King the two archers turned to one another and whispered.

'We cannot allow her on this journey.' Ramon said, keeping his eyes firmly on the stone-faced girl.

'But we must, her powers are –'

'Far beyond our knowledge and look at the madness of the King. Her words are venomous, and her mind works in ways I do not understand or enjoy.' Ramon returned quickly.

'We must take her if we do not then we will die.' Lenren snapped back, keeping his words hushed.

'And if we take her, we will be torn apart by her.' Ramon ventured.

The two men stopped and stared towards the girl, each unsure of her and untrusting.

'Better her than a dragon.' Lenren answered after a silence.

'I'm not too sure. I'll have to think about that one.'

And as the men smiled at one another they found the girl sitting as she had been, again unmoving and expressionless.

'Can you help us with the dragon?' Ramon ventured; his eyes fixed upon the girl.

'Of course.' She answered simply, and her voice cracked as the words escaped her mouth. With the King calmed, though his eyes were now focused solely on the tabletop, Velgar began to make note of the routes that the Archers would take, the supplies they required and the

weapons and armour they would need. And watching over all of this, Melran screamed within herself as she fought for control of her body, but the bond was too much at this moment, as it had been seen she had arrived at the place.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Against a backdrop of pouring rain, with the evening winds howling and the skies overcast, Ser Ramon of Garth sat awkwardly on an upturned ale casket and waited for the blacksmith to be done with his blades. Watching the man work was quite soothing, but the dripping of the rain against the ground soon interrupted any peace that the man had hoped to find.

The furnaces roared as the heavy-set monger threw them thick cut wood to boost the flames, and for a brief moment Ramon could have sworn he had heard a belch come from deep within the wombs of the thing as the smith continued on his way. He half-turned to face Ramon, and furrowed his thick, unkempt brow as he waved the man forward.

‘Are you sure this is what you want?’ The man asked, he was slightly hunched, and his stance was awkward as Ramon stood beside him.

‘Aye, for sure.’ The Archer returned, looking down at the drawings he had brought the man.

The smith nodded, grunting as he heaved the flag into the fires ahead of him. The heat was outrageous, but Ramon did not step back, he wanted to get used to that kind of heat. He knew all too well that soon this might feel like a light summer breeze. The coals beneath the flames burned white, crackled like frying eggs, splitting to reveal golden rivers of fire dancing about the edge of the miniature crevices.

Hours went by, and Ramon sat beside the man as he poked at the ingot as it slowly began to break down. Soon after, with the sun beginning to set and the courtyard now shrouded in a cool dusk air, the hammering began. The ingot held strong even now and sweat poured from the smith's arms and blackened face as he continued to pound it down. Against the dying light of the day, the last dregs of sunlight being dragged across the upper walls of the forge, and the blade was finally beginning to take shape. Crusts of hot steel began to bend and fall away as the hammer struck, each blow sending a shocking ringing through the heavy air of the place.

Another hour or so went by, and Ramon's eyes still remained totally focused upon the work of the smith. He had watched blades be forged hundreds of times before, both in the West and the East, and each time it seemed both similar and totally unique. It was like watching the birth of a sentient being, a demon from the flames and the ashes, and that terrible ringing of iron on steel erupting like a hellish cry of pain and torment. The hunched-back smith turned again, dipping the blade deep into a large barrel of water and watched as the water hissed and fizzed with every movement of the blade. Pulling it up, he examined it in the light, his small dark eyes examining every inch of it until at last he was satisfied.

He turned the blade in his palm again, feeling the weight and watching the newly arrived moonlight shimmer against its surface. 'Come, it's done.' He said in a triumphant, hoarse voice.

Ramon stirred and held out his hand, taking the blade he looked at it in the moonlight.

‘Happy?’ The hunchback asked.

‘Aye, very happy. You make fine weapons sir.’

Ramon replied with a smile, though his gaze never left the blade as he held it tall.

The grip had been wrapped in fine tanned leather, a request of Ramon’s after suffering his injury during the Kludde encounter, as well as the pommel being riveted to include an upper guard. Thirty-eight and a half inches of pure steel doubled edged and with a three-inch diameter. The weight was testing the man’s arm for sure and holding it in both he felt the burning in his shoulders come far quicker than any blade he had previously carried. Perhaps it was age? Perhaps he was weakening in his elder years? But a dragon would not care whether he were young or old, if he were fat or fit, if we were fast or slow. No, it would not care for anything like that, and so he resisted the burning in shoulders and let himself smile.

‘Most of ‘em get given a name. What ya’ thinkin’?’ Asked the smith from beside the man, already poking at his furnace again.

Ramon chuckled a quick glance towards the flames. ‘Hellblaze.’ He replied, the smile still unfaded.

In the quiet halls of Ceraborn, Lenren wandered in a lonely walk. Twice he had walked along the same corridor, quickly swivelling on his heels as he approached the doorway to the young Paraninr girl’s room. In the dim light of the evening, as the rain pattered and dripped down the small windows and the last quiet murmurs of servants

called along the hallways, he seemed oddly on edge. He turned again, facing the doorway, and sighing heavily before taking the last few steps which brought him within a few inches of the door.

It was the scraping sound, just as he brought his hand to knock at the wood of the door, that softly floated past him as if carried by some previously unfelt breeze. The man cocked his head, his hand already at the grip of his sword, and listened. His eyes narrowed at the distant sound and he knew too well that it came from within a room just off the side of one of the interconnecting hallways of the place. He tuned his ears further, trying to clear the sound in his mind without moving so much as an inch closer to its origin. It was wood, the sound of a blade upon wood, being driven up and down as if someone were scrawling upon a tree trunk. It was his choice now, whether to move or stay, whether to charge or retreat, though retreat would mean edging towards the room any way in order to get to the nearest stairway. Sweat began to bead on the man's neck, dripping down his back, just as before. It was always the same feeling; every single account had recounted it as such. A feeling of sickness, of worry and terror beyond any that had been felt before.

'Do not go into the room.' Said a hushed voice from behind the man, and for a moment he could have yelped in fear as he heard the words brush past his ears.

'Come, quickly.'

And a moment later he was within the room of the girl, facing the doorway and with his sword drawn in preparation for...anything.

‘You’re safe now.’ Said the voice, and slowly he lowered his blade and began to blink again.

‘You’ve encountered it before, haven’t you?’ Melran asked, looking towards the door herself.

Looking at the girl, Lenren gave no reply, and she seemed so much different to before. She seemed kind and warm. Her voice was soft, caring.

‘What is this? What is happening in this place?’ He asked, though he kept his own voice hushed.

Melran turned and sat on her bed, her feet dangling awkwardly, and her position slouched. She sighed heavily and looked around the dark room.

‘I don’t like this place very much.’ She answered a few moments, and it seemed to Lenren that she was close to tears.

‘No, at the moment it’s most certainly not the nicest of places.’ He returned, sitting beside the girl. She turned and looked at him, her face was still dirty, but her hair seemed to have been brushed and washed. So strange.

‘I never wanted to come here. It was that bastard Lord and the Sister, they forced me here.’ Melran said, her voice cracking as she forced back the tears.

Lenren’s brows furrowed, he looked at the girl for what she was now, just a girl.

‘What were you doing in Sera? Why were you there?’ He asked her.

The girl turned to meet his gaze and in the darkness her tears glistened like stars as they fell down her cheeks, leaving clear trails as they muddied with dirt.

‘In honesty my Lord, I cannot remember. I remember a boy, Benji. He was my brother... I think.’

Lenren's eyes narrowed further. 'You think?'

'Yes, it's all mixed up you see. I can't remember what's real and what's not. It's like everything is all one thing now, all merging. It's like I can't think straight.'

'How old was Benji?' Lenren asked curiously.

'I can't remember sir, older than me but not by much.' The girl replied, coughing as she cried.

'What did he look like?' He asked.

'Blonde hair... I think, maybe brown.' Melran answered, shrugging her shoulders. Lenren sighed, scratched his beard and pondered on the sight before him. His fear had subsided, but the uneasy feeling remained deep within him.

'I think it's trying to find something.' The girl said after a moment, her hands shaking.

'In the meeting you said that there are spirits within these walls, that they are here because of the Cerran attack.' Lenren returned quickly. The girl looked at him curiously, her gaze switching between his eyes as she sat wide mouthed and in thought.

'Did I?' She asked.

'Yes.' Replied Lenren.

'I can't remember, its all...all muddled up.' She said, her words trailing off as she turned to face the door again.

'What is it?' Lenren asked quickly, his hand going to his blade at an instant.

'It's gone.' The girl returned, her voice a whisper and her eyes wide with fear.

'That doesn't answer my question.' The Archer replied.

The girl's frantic eyes betrayed her, and for a moment he thought he saw a glimmer of something within those blood-shot eyes, a glimmer of something else.

'It is a spirit, that I know for sure. But it doesn't make sense. The voice I mean, I can't understand it.' She replied.

Lenren loosened his grip on the blade and looked about the room, feeling like a small child hiding from some greater threat, and he shivered in the sudden cold.

'What do you mean? I don't understand.' He returned in a worried tone.

'It's like it's warped, like it's not able to talk as we do.' She answered. 'But it's gone now.'

'Are you certain?'

The girl nodded, and as Lenren's hand fell away from the grip of his blade he began to wonder about that night on the stairway.

'Why did it follow me?' The archer enquired after a moment of silence. The girl's pale eyes turned to meet his own, and she shook her head solemnly.

'It wasn't, it doesn't follow anyone. It was looking, looking for something.'

'This is dark magic, surely something such as this cannot be real.' Lenren shot back quickly.

'It is all *too* real sir.'

Lenren's hands shook as he thought back to that night, and all too vivid memories began to flood his mind. He tried to force them away, something he was familiar with, but they stayed, and they swarmed him until his eyes began to well and redden. He padded them with his

sleeves, his nose sniffing as the girl placed a warm hand on his thigh and showed him a soft, gentle smile.

‘It asked for a girl.’ He whispered.

‘Me.’ Melran returned, and the man nodded the affirmative.

Lenren fought for words above his sobbing, until at last all he could muster was simply, ‘why?’.

The girl turned to face the misted windows, and the cold seemed to rise again within the room.

‘I do not know, but I fear this beast at Cerran is a warning of some kind.’ She replied softly.

‘Against Brodon?’ Lenren asked, his sobbing subsiding.

‘Yes, but the voices are all messed up. I cannot tell which are talking truths and which are speaking lies.’

The archer looked down at the girl, her head now resting against his shoulder and her hand still gently on his thigh.

‘How many do you hear?’ He asked.

‘I lost count all long time ago. I’ve heard them since I was a child. It never scared me, not until I went to Sera.’

‘And why did you go there?’ Lenren probed.

‘I had a message.... I think... for Benji.’

‘Benji, he was your brother.’ Lenren returned, his eyes narrowing. The girl’s hand fidgeted on his thigh for a moment. ‘No.’

Chapter Twenty-Six

The bedsores felt warm. Broken, cracked skin, that glistened red and leaked clear puss, extended across the lower half of Astriel's buttocks and thighs. Though the maids and servants had tried, and the Queen had regularly washed the girl during her daze, there was still a good bit of damage to the poor archer of Mair. The alchemist had seen the girl in the morning, and a small ointment was applied to the area. The girl's coprolalia were heard in almost every corner of the place and having told the alchemist exactly where he could shove the other bottles of medicine he carried; she was finally left in peace.

She was walking now, and though her wounds were still healing, the swelling had almost entirely receded, leaving only bruising around the scarred skin. Being a warrior, Astriel wore the scar with pride, and she offered no apologies for her actions to anyone whom frowned upon them. Against the advice of the Queen, she had begun to take regular walks along the corridors of the Castle. Her strength was returning to her now, and the feeling of cold stone across both her feet was almost euphoric for her.

Soon after, the crutches she had requested, lay unused in the corner of the bedroom where she had assumed she would die, and she began to walk unaided for the first time in what seemed a lifetime. She held her blades now, refocusing herself on the training she had received as a

young girl. Closing her eyes, she returned to those long-lost days and watched herself perform the flips and tricks she had been taught. Her wound still pained her when she crouched, and for a time she wondered if her style of fighting would need altering to accommodate it. No, she decided. She had never lost a fight in her life, and she certainly would not allow herself to fall to this inconvenience.

Relaxing against the wall, sharpening her blades and listening to the steady crackle of the fire embers, Astriel caught a shadow against her doorway.

‘You’d be dead the moment you opened the door.’ She called out.

‘Thank you for warning me.’ Called the familiar voice of Lenren as he entered the room, a warm smile across his face. ‘Hello Astriel.’ He said.

‘Hello Lenren, how are you?’ Astriel asked, offering the man a stool that sat at her opposite.

‘Worried, to say it plainly.’ The man returned as he sat with a heavy sigh and thud. Astriel put down her blades and pulled her legs up to rest her chin against.

‘How so?’ She enquired.

‘There is a girl here, Melran. She claims to be from Sera but cannot recall anything about the place other than a boy she claimed to be her brother.’

‘Claimed?’ Astriel replied curiously.

‘Aye, until she didn’t. Benji, name ring any bells?’ Lenren returned with a knowing gaze.

‘Benjen Westbrooke?’ Astriel replied, her brow furrowing as she fought to recall the boy.

‘Aye, the second son of Lord Westbrooke, Lower Lord of Crayton Bay. The boy was sent to the Kingsmen after his father’s passing.’

‘He doesn’t have any sisters.’ Astriel returned.

Lenren nodded and sighed again, heavier this time as he rubbed his face.

‘Why is this girl here?’ Astriel asked.

‘She’s a paraninr, she is able to form a bond with living things, whether animal or man. She can sense things, hear true thoughts and desires.’ Lenren returned, his eyes now watching the embers die.

‘The dragon?’ Astriel enquired, receiving an affirmative nod from her commander. Her face sunk into her knees at the thought of such things. ‘Can we trust her?’

‘Honestly, I don’t know. I don’t know if she evens trusts herself. But she’s got a job to do, just like we have. When we’re out there we need to protect her as one of our own, that’s what she becomes once we leave these walls.’ Lenren returned, he sounded unsure of his own words and his gaze still eluded Astriel’s angry eyes.

‘And what if something happens? What if she tries something?’ Astriel said.

‘Then we have each other’s back. Just as we always do.’

A small table had been laid out, breads and freshly baked pastries lined the centre along with pies both savoury and sweet. Jugs of wine and brandy, some from the King’s own private reserve, were placed at equal intervals between the occupants of the meal. It was a grand affair, backed by a familiar band playing familiar songs on

their harps and bows, and a sweet symphony of ballads from years gone by. In the centre of the table there was a glorious roasted goose, laid on a platter and surrounded with high towers of vegetables and grains. The Great Hall of Ceraborn had seen many meals like this across its long and mirky history, but as Brodon sat looking out into the place now, he wondered just how many of those past guests and banqueters were there now, lurking in the shadows.

A light touch on his hand brought him back around, and Neriell filled his cup with wine and gave a warm smile. He smiled back, but his gaze caught the guardsman standing silently at the doorways, shrouded in darkness, and he could not help but feel that same fear once more. Velgar, who's own plate was piled high with pastries and fruits, drank merrily that night. He wore his finest purple gowns, the tradition garb of the Arch Chancellor of The Welling when at any official dinner such as this. Atop his balding head he wore a white silk hat, trimmed with purple fabric, and from his shoulders hung a golden amulet depicting the Gods watching over the world. It was all very proper, all very official.

Lenren drank little, but he ate meat and fish and grains plentifully, as he always did before a long ride. Food was always scarce on such journeys, and no-one ever quite knew what type of reception the Archers might receive at an Inn house or suchlike. Astriel stayed away from the heavy drinks, instead sipping slowly on wine and enjoying a meal that seemed all the more delicious to her deprived and placid taste buds.

Ser Ramon of Garth drank from a large goblet, the stripped remains of the Goose's leg sat resting against a few mashed carrots. He didn't like the pastries, he had never had a sweet tooth and so elected to send his portion across to a rather delighted Velgar. Across from him sat the girl, now fitted in fine shirts and trousers, much more akin to those of Astriel, and he noticed that she had left a large amount of her own meal, simply moving the chunks of meat from one side of the plate to the other, her gaze never faltering from it.

The Queen, of course, sat in splendid gowns of green, with extending elegantly from her slender neck and resting at her bosom. She ate daintily, as she had been taught by her mother in the East. She had grown to quite enjoy Western foods and drinks, though she still harboured a great desire to taste the succulent orange pears of Cyronos once more before she died. It is said that they are the most delicious fruits grown anywhere in the world, and that the grounds on which they grow are guarded not only by a legion of men in Cyronosi armour, but also by an elusive band of assassins. Perhaps it was also fictitious, but she did not really care to admit that. The dream excited her.

Once the meal had been consumed, and the music had begun to slowly drift away into soft melodies of Spring and Summer ballads, the King glanced over to Lenren.

‘I wish you well, all of you. This is by far the most dangerous task you have ever been asked to perform. I cannot imagine the fear that you may be feeling, but I say

this with the upmost conviction, I am proud and honoured to have such fine warriors in my service.'

Lenren looked away from the King and across to his colleagues, Astriel evaded his gaze whilst Ramon simply stared blankly into the darkness beyond his commander.

'I thank you my King,' Lenren began after a moment. 'From us all, I thank you. And I hope that we be seated here again soon, on our return.'

The King raised his cup in response and nodded appreciatively at the man.

'You ride tomorrow?' The Queen asked after a moment, her eyes shifting between her left and right.

'Yes, my Lady, at dawn.' Ramon answered, his voice softer than Lenren had otherwise heard.

'You will have use of Lord Tharandal's rooms.' Velgar interjected, passing a scroll to Lenren.

'Ah, good. We will sleep there before we come back.' The Archer returned, looking to the scroll to see the aforementioned Lord's signature at the bottom of the paper. *If we get back, Gods hope.* He thought as he pushed the paper into his pockets.

'Then, may the Gods bless each of you.' Neriell announced, erecting her own cup and signalling Brodon to do the same. All cups followed, all except Melran's. Lenren nudged the girl, and her startled eyes seemed to show he had interrupted a moment of deep thoughtfulness. He nodded to her cup, which she took and raised it to meet with his own.

And as the night wore on, the girl watched as the men and women around her laughed and joked with one

another. She listened to the tales they told to the legends and the myths. And for a moment, she felt at peace.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It was a cold morning. A mist had descended from the mountains, lying flat and stretching out to the edges of the forests that surrounded Ceraborn. The sun, though it had risen early, had yet to burn away that low lying mist.

In the streets of the city, there was a quiet and unnerving nature. Inn houses had been ordered to remain close until noon, an order which had not gone unchallenged by many an angry innkeeper. Nevertheless, the order was clear and sure, enforced by a small regiment of Kingsmen as they patrolled those same quiet streets on that misted morning in Spring.

In the quiet of the Castle, a small band of servants and stable workers began to ready four mares of the long journey that lay ahead of them. They fed them, watered them, and ensured that they were good and strong. One young hand strapped the saddles to each horse, patted them and prayed to the Gods for their safe return. Soon after, the blacksmith came and shod them, and he too prayed for them.

In the few short hours that followed, the mood around the place changed little. It seemed to those on the parapets, that even the morning songbirds had become mute, as they patrolled in utter silence. And breakfasts were taken in personal quarters rather than in some grand style. This, to those involved, was no great send off to slay some

wonderous beast. No, this was a small band of warriors going, against all reason and hope, in order to kill a dragon. Messages still came from Sera, as the number of survivors dwindled as the hours passed. A note from a Priestess had arrived in the early hours, asking permission for the immediate construction of a mass grave in which to bury the dead. Velgar had granted it, and a tear had run down his reddened jowls as he had done so.

Lenren of Cerran did not feel much like eating on that particular morning, his stomach was full from the night before and in the darkness that had preceded dawn, in those murky hours of complete darkness that sit at the heart of a night, he had found himself already dressed and ready to ride. He had met with Astriel, sitting beside the front doors of the Castle, listening to the shrill calls of owls as they hunted in for mice and other rodents in the conjoining fields, as she sharpened her blades again. A habit she would take to her grave, he thought. The girl had been the next to arrive, her new clothes fitted her well, and she had been given a riding cloak, long and thick, with a large brass buckle at the front. She nodded to the others as she emerged from the darkness, appearing to not make a single sound as she walked. Ramon was not far behind her.

‘We ready?’ He grunted.

‘Aye, just about.’ Lenren returned gruffly, clearing his throat from morning phlegm.

Astriel picked herself up, sheathed her blades and placed her hood over her face. Her features were distinct, but in the darkness of the night and the hood she was utterly unrecognisable. Lenren checked his bow and

arrows, each had been freshly crafted in the previous days. Those, along with his sword and dagger were all that he carried.

All wore similar armour underneath those same riding cloaks as that which the girl wore. Dark black breastplates which had been embossed with the sigil of the Black Archers, and underneath they wore thickly entwined mail skirting which ran to the knee. They had chosen against armoured trousers, instead opting for standard black ones which were easier to move in, and quieter in the darkness.

As the group emerged from the darkness of the entranceway, a small group of servants and stable hands bowed to them. Muted cries of ‘Bless you’ and ‘May the Gods be with you’, softly wavered through the dawn air.

‘Stay with us young one.’ Astriel said, as she helped Melran to mount her horse. The girl looked down to the hooded figure, one hand placed tightly over her own dagger, and nodded.

‘These roads are dangerous places for the most experienced riders, I will ride before you and Ser Ramon behind. We will not lose you; we all rest together; we all fight together. Promise me that you shall honour those vows?’ Melran could sense the harsh gaze that was masked by the hood, and again she nodded. The hooded figure patted the horse and mounted her own, whilst slightly ahead of them Lenren had begun a slow trot towards the outer gate.

The gate opened with a rumbling grate, and ahead the drawbridge had already been lowered. The dying moonlight speckled the misted path ahead, and the water of the moat sparkled. A moment later there was a whistle from Lenren, and each rider followed him out into the darkness, slowly picking up speed until at last they came to gallop. From above the courtyard, cloaked and shivering in the morning cold, Velgar watched over the group, clasping a small book in hands, praying that what he had discovered bore no truth.

The road North was banked on either side by thick forest. In the dark morning light, with the sun gently caressing the tips of the firs, the place seemed almost a never-ending blanket of blackness. Melran turned her gaze to that blanket, looking deep to find any gap in the twisting branches and heavy foliage, she found none. Against the East, which fell away into a valley, Ceraborn sat in quiet slumber. There were a few ships, gliding over the gentle waters of the Elyen, but otherwise the world seemed almost totally at peaceful sleep. But the girl found now solace in this, and as she fought to control her mare, she shuddered at the sudden thought of what she was now embarking upon. *I could ride away*, she thought as she glanced back to the forest edge. And she prayed that she would have the courage to ride off into that darkness, losing this band of warriors, and find herself a place to sleep and sit and quiet and peaceful reflection. But no, that was not to be, that was not her path and deep down she knew it to be as such. Up ahead, Lenren steadied his mare to a trot, a fork in the road with a sign which read ‘East to

Tu Ton' and 'West for Mormo' in dulled white tempera, stood before him. The group came together, the mare's snorting heavily with thick clouds of hot air blasting from their muzzles.

'There have been reports of bandits along the Eastern roads.' Lenren announced, and Melran felt it was more so for her own knowledge.

'We saw none on the journey here.' She replied quickly, her own voice quivering in the cold morning air.

'Aye, none would trouble the caravan of a High Lord. Too much protection, too much trouble if you get caught in a fight.' Ramon returned, but his eyes were fixed on the road ahead.

'Surely they wouldn't come after you though?' Melran replied, and Ramon snorted.

'Imagine what sort of price you could get for all this armour and weapons down in the black markets.' He said, patting his sword as if it were a pup.

'We cannot waste time heading West.' Astriel interjected, and Lenren nodded.

'Stay tight, and if anything happens then we must stay with another. No one becomes separated, is that clear?' And again, Melran felt herself being singled out, she nodded the affirmative and once again the band made way.

For a few miles they went uninterrupted, the roads were clear and the air quiet. There were no signs of travellers nor bandits, and except for the occasional hoot or crow from an unseen forest bird, the keen ears of the Black Archers picked up nothing of note. The ride East

was always one of the worst, the land climbed, and the well-trodden paths and roads of travelling caravans and merchants now gave way to pot-holed, harsh roads which were sodden and puddle-ridden. Here, the morning mists seemed to have gathered, and the ride was slowed for fear of being thrown from your mare on account to a misplaced rock or sunken earth. Lenren hated these roads, and he grumbled to himself as he slowed his mare again as the party came into a clearing that had been flooded and now stank of stagnant water. The mare, rather begrudgingly, stepped into the sludge cautiously.

‘Hold steady until I reach the road.’ He called back to the others, with Ramon the last to arrive at the place.

‘Are you thirsty?’ Astriel asked as she came to Melran’s side. Until now the girl had been focussed solely on the rippling waters of the pool. It came to the mare’s hock and brushed along Lenren’s boots as he pulled on the reigns to keep the mare’s head above it.

‘Erm, no thank you. I’m fine.’

‘You sure? We’ve been riding for a good while now, it soon catches up on you.’ Astriel replied.

‘No...thank you.’

The girl returned to watch the water, certain that at any moment the man would be grabbed by some unseen hand and pulled into the murky waters. She held her breath, and for a second she closed her eyes to avoid that terrible sight.

‘Okay, Astriel take the path I did.’ Lenren called, perfectly alive and well at the edge of the waters.

And so, they all crossed those murky waters. Not one of them was attacked or mauled or thrown from his or her ride. Climbing up the embankment, the path re-joined towards what Ramon described as the ‘main’ Eastern road, almost a perfect straight through the dense forest that flanked it. By now, the sun was high, and the day was warming. A cool breeze was a welcome reprieve, and the riders set off again after a quick drink. In the distance, the landscape appeared unchanging to what had come before, but Melran knew what was to come for the group, and she prayed that the flats of Tu-Ton would be as tranquil as this. In her heart however, she knew that this would not be the case.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Savagery is not something which comes inherently to those who have grown within houses of good standing. In fact, many in the South were of the opinion that it was in fact *only* a trait that came from those who had come from darker lands or townships, not that many dared to give names to such places. In the days before the rebellion, those who had prospered in the South often wondered what would become of the Western Kingdoms should they ever decide to actually come together and realise the potential that those lands gave to them. Fruitful harvests, good crop land and plentiful cattle plains had all been provided to them. And indeed, some of those who sat upon the greater areas of land often tried their luck with the local Low Lords in the hope of easier taxations. Some, those who sat in good stead with those same Lords and sheriffs, actually achieved such privileges. A few quiet drinks in a tavern one evening, followed by a miraculous *chance* meeting with the town sheriff, resulting in a long, firm handshake was all that was required.

But those days were long since gone. They were days that were remembered by few and spoken of by even fewer. Indeed, the South had suffered the most of all after the failed rebellion. The Sisters had come shortly after, from Korgen and Arisen, converging on those bloodstained lands with large caravans of medicines, ointments, and good prayers. Most were too worn to worry about which God they now prayed to, only that they be

saved from the starvations and the diseases which were beginning to take hold. Dead carts came day after day, bringing home soldier after soldier and warrior after warrior, sometimes in the whole as well. Mothers, daughters, and wives sat on porches in tears, watching as their sons or brothers buried their men. Murdock, a small village less than seven miles from the Erencon, had lost all but six men to that terrible war. The men that remained, too old to fight and too weak to work, were left without choice but to beg for the assistance of the Crown. It did not come. Instead, a small procession of Sisters arrived with men in the golden armour of Arisen, and they buried the dead.

Baldric Falstaff recalled those days now, staring into the last dying embers of a fire he had spent three hours trying to light, and his anger for the Crown seemed renewed. He pulled himself to his feet, the aching in his back crushing his rib cage, and spat a glob of phlegm on the forest floor. He unwrapped his arm from its bindings and massaged the stump of flesh where his right hand once was. His bottom lip trembled still, sub-consciously of course. His matted hair, now trailing to the midpoint of his back, fell in ragged bands of unwashed waves. His beard was trimmed, he had always enjoyed a trimmed beard. Looking at the shattered mirror that was hung precariously from a low hanging branch, he saw that otherwise his face still bore the scars of that ill-fated campaign. A long crescent shaped scar, running from his left ear down towards his lip was perhaps the least of the

constant reminders his bruised and battered body liked to bestow unto him.

The party had rested in a small valley just East of the main road, it was densely protected by the firs and bushes of the surrounding forests. For the six of them, there had been plentiful food. The deer were slow and fat from the Winter, and the rabbits were always a good chase no matter where you found yourself. A rough stew had filled their stomachs that previous night, and now the pot bore nothing but bones and a small chunk of bread that someone had tossed in after the glorious feast was finished. With the merchant now sailing off into the distance, they began the morning by ransacking his cart for anything worthy of their plunder. A half a dozen barrels, empty. A large leather satchel, nothing but maps and papers. A few small pots, nothing but cheap Korgen copper.

‘Waste o’ time!’ Bellowed one of the party as he chucked a small wooden fork into the bush behind him.

‘Aye, caught him goin’ the wrong blasted way!’ Replied another, tapping a pot to see if it was genuine Serensean porcelain, it wasn’t.

‘Bloody typical! Told ya’ we should ‘a gone for that one we saw the other night! Loads of barrels on that one so there were, all full-ed up to the brim as well I bet!’ Returned the first, this time scratching his behind and farting as he spoke.

‘Aye! Be rich as King’s now if we’d done that!’ returned the second, sending a fiery glance towards

Baldric. The others of the party were sat beside the cart smoking or drinking, they said nothing.

‘If you’ve got a problem, dear Fendr, please do make me aware.’ Baldric returned, his voice mocking a happy tone.

‘I ain’t got nothing to say to you that I ain’t already said.’ Fendr replied mockingly. His hands clasped on his belt and his chest puffed out, a stony expression on his round face. Baldric looked at the man for a moment, his eyes tracing him from his weather-worn boots to his hairless head, but he thought better of his initial plans.

‘Get on with it.’ He said, throwing his hand up in a dismissive manner. Fendr spat another glob of phlegm filled spit in the direction of his ‘commander’ and grumbled as he returned to his looting. This was happening far too often now, and if an hour went by without some sort of argument or full-blown fight, then Baldric was glad of it. He prayed to no God now, though the inking on his chest, now over thirty years old, denied him the right to leave his previous alliances as speculative fiction. Instead, the praying Sister stood proudly on his right pectoral, with a soft face and golden hair.

As he watched over his campmates, the quiet of the forest seemed to bring him to a chill. He looked about the site, and to him it all seemed too quiet for his own liking. They had been in this place for three weeks now, venturing from the Western corner through to the main road where they had made camp the previous evening. Here the site was flanked by old Cedar’s, with a small stream that had split from the river that ran near the entire length of the

Kingdom. Against his better judgement, Baldric Falstaff decided to leave the safety of his campsite and move off into a place he had never been before. At first, the place seemed nothing special, except for a strange sense that called to him. If he were sat with you now, perhaps in a tavern with a roaring fire and a full tankard of ale, he would say it was the sound of a thousand beautiful birds calling to him all at once.

Deeper into the forest he tread, with the laughs and jovial remarks of his companions now seeming less than distant cries, until at last he came upon it. The clearing was large, the earth was bare and the trees about him were also stripped of any foliage. The sun, however, did not penetrate this place. Narrowing his eyes, with his hand upon his dagger, Baldric Falstaff turned around to see what lay behind him. Expecting that there would be some terrible creature, or even some dark soul who had inhabited this strange place, but instead finding nothing but the dense forest from which he had come. He swallowed hard, sweat began to drip from his brow and he blinked madly as it blurred his vision. To his right, there stood a large stone wall face of basalt, now overgrown with moss and ivy but with the clear and obvious markings of those long since gone. Moving closer, he wiped a part of the wall clean with his sleeve and traced his fingers along the delicate details of the wall. To his eyes, they appeared to show a group of riders on horseback. The leading one, who seemed the tallest, carried a large sword from which dazzling light sprayed in six bolts of lightning towards his enemies.

Wiping the adjoining moss from the wall, the man soon discovered the remainder of the markings to show the line of enemies. However, these were no riders on horseback. Instead, dark figures of various sorts and shapes had been etched into this wall, with some looking more beast than man. Here, the etchings gave way to a clawing mark that ran down towards the forest floor. Standing back, the impact of a heavy blow upon the wall could now be seen clearly. It was as if someone had been thrown into the wall with such force that it had crushed parts of it into the earth behind it. Here, a tangled mess of roots and ivy had intertwined over the years to leave a jumbled ball of nature.

Baldric looked upon the markings, turning his head towards the thing that he had most feared to view in its fullness. Ahead, there lay a crumbling stone structure. Three stone pillars, two of which now lay cracked and ivy-strangled upon the forest floor, flanked a heavy stone door that had been pushed inward. To Baldric's gaze, the structure in total must have been near the height of the tallest trees that stood about him. He took a few gingerly steps forwards, peering into the dark abyss that lay behind the punctured doorway, until his eyes fell upon a carved stone altar that stood just to the right of the doorway.

'Eri Venti Alum Eadwig', it read, and Baldric could barely contain his gasp as he came to the last word on the altar. His eyes flashed at the sight of it all and for a moment he could not catch his breath. *It cannot be, surely this is some cruel illusion of my mind?* He thought,

grasping at the wall to strength his weakened legs. *It's just a legend, a myth the children tell one another to stay out of the woods.* He flashed his gaze around him, and still he was alone here. He felt no fear for the place itself, only for the words he had read. Eadwig, last King of the Elder Folk of Ceraborn. Eadwig, The Fallen King. The tales and songs spun around his mind like a vicious whirlpool until he sank down to the floor and wept silently.

Baldric Falstaff stayed upon the forest floor, in fits of tears and anguish for longer than he could possibly have realised when the gentle snapping of a fallen branch brought him back to reality. He pulled his head from between his knees and brought his dagger to his side, listening like a hawk for any movement. He narrowed his eyes, searching the dense forest that lay beyond the clearing. And what met his gaze, at the centre of his vision, caused him to cry out in fear without so much as a second thought. He scrambled for his footing, but the moss and ivy tangled him against the stonewall, trapped like a fly in a web.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The screams were horrendous. Blood-curdling, high pitched yelps that rang across the forest and flew through the mid-morning breeze. Lenren pulled the reigns of his ride tightly, coming to a stop just ahead of a small fork in the road. He turned to face the East, tuning his ears to the sounds. Behind him, the rest of the archers came forward to meet him, and they too listened.

‘What is that?’ Asked Melran, shifting her gaze from one side of the road to the other.

‘A man, for sure. No beast makes a sound like that, and there’s no poachers around here.’ Ramon returned; his eyes fixed to where they had come from and a strange sense of an unseen foe continued to play in his mind.

The screaming died; a sudden burst of sound followed by uneasy quiet. Lenren dismounted his ride and made for the edge of the road. He unsheathed his blade and for a moment stood in complete quiet at the edge of the forest. Astriel was the next to dismount, unsheathing her daggers she stood in between the young girl and Lenren, her eyes scanning the forest.

‘What is it?’ She whispered to Lenren.

Unmoving, with his sword at his side, the man whispered back. ‘A feeling, all of you stay here.’

And with that he parted the thick foliage and low branches and was consumed by the forest. His footsteps became inaudible after no more than a few steps, replaced

instead by the distant songs of the birds and insects that flew through this dense façade of nature.

To all that knew this place, it had no common name. There were few forests that were given the luxury of any meaningful title. There was the White Wood in the North, and Blackridge was home to the Grey Woods, but otherwise there were little other than local titles used to distinguish these thickets of redwood and pine. These were places that worried Astriel, and though her youth had been spent riding and training within the woods about Ceraborn, she still suffered from grave anxiety and fear whenever she found herself within them. *Too many places to hide, too many sounds and illusions*, she thought as she listened for Lenren's familiar steps.

Time seemed to slow as they waited, and every call or tweet from an unseen thrush or hawk seemed all too familiar to them. Like a ballad played by a bard that for those not yet drunk enough to realise it, would play over and over again. Ramon stayed on his mare, silent but constantly shifting his gaze from behind the party to in front. Every so often, he would grunt or grumble, murmuring unheard words to himself. Melran, tired and weary, sat quietly watching the same spot the man had entered the forest.

'I don't like this.' Astriel whispered. 'It's too quiet.'

No one answered, instead each listened keenly as the sound of light footsteps came toward the roadside just behind them. A moment later and Lenren returned,

chopping, and hacking at the leaves and branches, sweating and panting for breath.

‘Dear Gods man! What on earth happened?’ Ramon asked, turning his mare to face his friend. The beast pulled at his reins but he quickly regained control.

‘There is a camp site beyond those trees, and a looted caravan.’ Lenren returned, brushing leaves and twig from his cloak.

‘Bandits?’ Astriel replied.

‘Quite, and all are dead.’ Lenren returned, his voice low and sombre. He sheathed his blade again and sighed heavily before glancing up and down the road. Again, all was quiet.

‘Ties the horses to the gate post at the fork, let them eat and drink. We need to look at this.’ Lenren ordered, walking down towards his mare and patting her gently.

‘We cannot leave the horses, what if whoever killed them is still here?’ Astriel replied, her voice still a nervous whisper.

‘Not likely.’ Lenren answered, shifting a worried glance towards Ramon. The two met one another and silently both narrowed their gaze towards the young girl. *Keep her safe*, Lenren told Ramon with only his gaze. Ramon nodded dutifully.

A few moments later and the horses were fed and watered. Ramon watched over the road but was satisfied that they were the only ones who were travelling along this particular pass. Lenren led the party, Astriel to the left of the girl and Ramon slightly behind. The dense foliage tugged and pulled at their cloaks and hoods, and underfoot

the noise of snapping branches could not be kept under wraps. Ploughing through, they came upon a clearing. A cart lay to their right, a few unloaded barrels with discarded tops littered about the floor. Astriel kicked at one of them, it fell with a dull thud and revealed itself to be carrying nothing. A smouldering fire, surrounded by small rocks to keep it from spreading, lay toward a stream that gently passed through the centre of the site. The group came upon the site, and for a moment all seemed peaceful and content, until Lenren pointed down towards the hub of the rear wheel to the cart. Laid upon the ground, bare of flesh and fibre, a skeleton sat. Astriel moved forward, crouching beside the cart and removed her hood.

‘No man did this.’ She said, moving her head from side to side as she looked across the corpse. Not a strip of flesh had been left, and the bones seemed to glint as if they had been perfectly preserved.

‘There are more over there, as if they fell as one group.’ Lenren announced, pointing vaguely off into the woodland beyond.

‘You mean they were running?’ Ramon asked.

‘Aye, they had weapons as well. No blood though, no guts or limbs.’

‘Not much of a fight then.’ Remarked Ramon as he scanned the site, a cracked mirror hung from a low branch, and he turned it in his hand until the last piece of twine snapped and it fell at his feet.

‘What did this?’ Melran asked, opening her question to all of her companions.

‘No man, that’s for sure.’ Ramon muttered, staying close to her.

Astriel lifted herself from beside the corpse and sighed heavily. She sheathed her blades and stood beside Lenren.

‘This corpse, how long has it lay here?’ She whispered, beyond the reach of Melran’s ears.

‘By my knowledge, that man was alive not thirty minutes ago.’ Lenren replied, his breath betraying his worry.

‘I’ve never seen anything like this, it’s impossible.’ Astriel said, shaking her head vehemently.

‘No, it’s not,’ Returned Ramon, now standing just behind her with the girl close by. ‘but it’s not been heard of in centuries.’

‘A Necro?’ Lenren said, flicking his eyes across to Ramon. The man nodded in reply.

‘What’s a Necro?’ Melran asked, almost stealing the words from Astriel.

‘A creature of dark magic, a creature made to hunt and kill any that come upon what it guards. This is no creature of our realm; this is the work of darkness beyond any I have seen before.’ Ramon answered, his hand tightly wrapped about his blade. And as the man spoke Melran felt her gaze be drawn to something, something just beyond the trees. It called to her, like a beautiful song, and all at once her mind was overtaken.

‘This way.’ She muttered, softly tugging at Astriel’s robes as she began to walk towards the treeline.

Her steps were light against the forest floor, and to her companions she made no noise as her feet gently pressed against the earth. Soon they came to her side, each

with blades in hand and ready should anything come upon them.

Soon the trees and bushes gave away, and bare earth replaced the detritus. A long basalt wall emerged from the side of a hillock which wound up towards the forest once again. The group stood in the place, wondering what horrible thing might come upon them at any moment. Lenren kicked at the dirt, and it blew away into a dark cloud, revealing large black slabs of stone that led to the pathway from which they had arrived.

‘What is this place?’ Astriel muttered.

‘I’m not sure.’ Lenren returned, watching Melran as she ran her hand along the basalt wall to his right. The group continued on behind her, until they came upon the entrance to a crypt, and the corpse of a man stripped once again of flesh and muscle. A dagger lay beside him, and his torn clothes sagged from his bones.

‘Someone got too close for comfort.’ Ramon said, looking at the skeleton before eyeing the impacted doorway that stood beyond. Astriel pulled Melran away and the group stood side by side.

‘Here lies Eadwig.’ Lenren read, inching forward to read the inscription that lay etched upon the entrance way.

‘Eadwig? The Elder King?’ Astriel answered, and for a moment she was taken back to the days of listening to the Elder Folk tales and myths that she had been told by her Maids as a young girl.

‘Aye, Eadwig. Last King of Ceraborn to be descended directly from Elfrid.’ Lenren nodded. He

looked upon the crumbling structure, moss-covered and stinking of decay, and shivered.

‘Eadwig the Fallen.’ Melran mumbled, her brow furrowed and her arms shaking as she stared into the abyss of the doorway that lay before them.

‘This is his crypt?’ Ramon asked. ‘But I didn’t think they ever found a body? At least that’s what the tales said, that he was –’ and as his eyes fell upon the wall he saw the scratch mark upon the wall face. Just to the side of the corpse, where the wall began to crumble, and the etchings of the Elder Folk had stood for over a thousand years.

‘Rhamanthor.’ Melran said softly, as her eyes fell upon the scar on the wall face. And she moved towards it and again placed her hand upon the wall, gently feeling along the broken rock, with light dust sprinkling about her feet as she did so.

‘What do you know of this place?’ Lenren asked, stepping forward to meet the girl. She looked up to him, and she feared him.

‘Lenren, stop!’ Astriel protested, but she was held back by Ramon.

‘What do you know of this place?’ Lenren repeated, his breath drawing deeper and deeper and his glaring with fearsome anger.

‘He fell here,’ Melran began, tears pooling in her eyes. ‘The King of Ceraborn, he fell here. The war had taken so much, so many. The lands burned and the rivers ran red with blood. At last came the days of The Elleron, the United Clans of the Elder Folk. And they fought him, for years they fought him.’

‘This place, have you any connection to it? Can you sense anything?’ Lenren commanded, lost in his own fear.

‘No! I hear no one, but I sense magic here. Dark magic, old magic. Magic that has not been seen or used for centuries upon centuries. This place, it is kept hidden from all in these lands.’ Melran wept, tears falling from her pale face. Lenren fought for his breath, and he knelt down and held the girl tightly in his arms.

‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.’ He whispered, cradling her gently as she wept silently in his robes.

‘No, I’m sorry. I felt this place pulling at me, it was so strong.’ She whimpered, before all at once grasping at the man’s arms with strength he had never before seen. He looked at the girl, but her eyes had clouded over, and her breath was vile, her veins ran blue and her pale skin began to lose all pigmentation until she was almost clear to him.

‘Death! Death to you all!’ She yelled, though not in a voice of her own, and it was cruel, and snake like in nature. Lenren pushed himself away from the girl, who caught her head against the wall and became silent as she slumped to a side. About the archers the trees rustled, and the winds blew fierce.

From beyond them, a terrible sound of hissing and moaning began to rattle, and the birds and insects drew silent amidst the emergence of this dark sorcery.

‘Quickly!’ Lenren shouted above the wind, ‘protect the girl! Whatever comes protect the girl!’

Each drew their weapon, and Ramon with Hellblaze was a magnificent site. Astriel crouched low, spider-like in her stance with her twin daggers held tightly in her grip.

Ser Lenren stood the closest to the doorway of the crypt, and the foul smell from within shook him as he tried to focus on the task at hand. About them, they heard a thousand indistinct sounds of rattling and whispering, until at last a section of forest was pulled away and revealed the terrible sight of the creature. The Necrophidius, a snake-like creature made of bone, with the skull of a man, stood before them. Its writhing movements, hissing and gentle cracking of its bones, sent shivers down their spines.

The creature raised its head above them, and Lenren estimated it to be as tall as two men atop one another, before bringing itself down in a frighteningly quick flash of movement. It lunged for Astriel, biting at her with venom-dripped pincers that protruded from its skull. The girl though was too quick, and she dodged and rolled, unclasping her cape as she did. A moment later and Ramon slashed at the monstrosity, a heavy blow which cut through the Earth and cracked the stone beneath the sword. The creature bull-whipped its tail, rapping at Ramon's mid-section and causing him to buckle over in pain. The creature charged, ramming its skull into the man's chest and pushing him to the ground, but Ramon held it off with the side of his blade as the pincers scrambled for his neck.

A terrible screech from the creature, followed by it reeling in pain, exposed the blow that Lenren had dealt it, with a shattered piece of bone now lying on the forest floor as the man swung his blade again. But the creature was quick to slither away, whipping its tail at the man's leg before pulling him to the floor. The man kept his blade tightly in his grip as he fell, but the creature came upon too

quickly for him to swing as it lunged for his mid-section. His armour held, and the snarling beast scrambled to find flesh. It bit down on his thigh, and but for the leather strapping that held his boots tight, he would have been pierced. Astriel came upon the creature as it bit down, a leg at either side of it and lifted it up with all her strength. The searing pain in her own leg, announced by a terrible scream, loosened her grip as she shoved it to one side.

The creature clattered against the basalt wall, and it hissed at the three as it came back to its towering stance. It lifted its head high, and lunged again to the fallen Lenren, and as it fell was hit at the neck with a blow from Hellblaze. The creature's head detached, and spun downward, still writing and snapping as its body fell into crumbling bone. Astriel moved over, placed her boot upon the creature's head and crushed it, hearing a final screeching exit it as the bone crumbled beneath her foot.

The group gathered themselves, and Ramon pulled Lenren to his feet.

'Did it get you?' He asked, as Lenren examined his trouser leg.

'No, damned thing nearly had me though! Thank you.' He answered, still finding his breath, before turning to see Astriel kicking at the few broken pieces of bone that lay in a small pile on the forest floor. About them, the place was silent again and sunlight steadily moved in to warm them. Melran sat quietly, her head against the wall, blood matted into her hair and tear marks etched on her face.

'Are you ok?' Lenren asked.

‘Yes, I’m fine.’ The girl returned softly, her voice cracking as she spoke.

The doorway to the crypt had been broken only recently, and though the darkness within gave little in the way of clues as to the perpetrator, the smell of foul magic and sorcery gave all too clear a picture.

‘I don’t understand, why destroy the crypt of Eadwig? There wasn’t even a body in there.’ Ramon asked, scratching his beard in puzzlement.

‘Whoever has done this knew exactly what was here, they knew how to get here and what was here. I don’t like that.’ Lenren returned, moving away from the doorway, and looking towards the wall beside it.

‘This place was well hidden and guarded, it took strong magic to break through here.’ Melran answered.

‘And the Necro?’ Astriel enquired.

‘A guard from whoever broke the original protection. Probably trying to keep people away from here now that it’s exposed to the world again.’ Melran answered, shrugging her shoulders.

Lenren let out a deep, thoughtful sigh. He was tired, his bones ached, and his eyes were weary. They still had long to travel, a long and harsh ride ahead of them. He looked up and saw the sun’s placement above him.

‘We need to move if we lose daylight out here then we are in the shit.’ He said.

‘Why?’ Melran answered.

‘Bandits, wolves. You name it, this forest is nasty at night.’ Ramon replied, with an agreeable nod from Lenren.

The girl turned away from the ruins of the crypt, looked down at the skeletal remains of the man and the necrophidius and shivered.

‘Doesn’t seem too friendly in daylight either!’ She remarked as the group left the place and headed back towards the main road.

Chapter Thirty

The day's ride was long and hard, the steady climb of the roads soon became harsher, and the density of the forests gradually faded into an odd patchwork of dying and twisted elms and firs. It was now sundown, and atop a hillock, marked out by a crumbling ruin of an Elder Tower, known by many as Erad's Mark, served as a perfect place to camp.

Ramon felled two withering firs, bereft of branch and foliage, and set them down at the eastern edge of the tower, allowing for a small fire to be constructed and the pillars of light grey smoke to dance into the evening skies and be carried off into the winds of night. Lenren tied the horses at the foot of the hillock, in shade and with plentiful grass and grain to feed upon. He looked to his maps, the sunlight dying about him, and he reckoned them to be closer to the borderlands of Tu Ton than he had anticipated. He looked East, scanning the horizon, but in the dimming light he could scarcely find a path that led to those lands. It would have to wait until morning dawn.

About the campfire, now burning brightly with writhing bands of gold and red, a small clay pot sat bubbling beside the feet of Astriel.

'You're the cook then?' Melran asked as she sat beside the woman.

'We all cook, but I prefer to stay busy on nights such as these. I'm no maid to them, don't mistake me for such.'

Melran turned her eyes to the pot, Astriel stirred in cabbage leaves and a small amount of dried herbs.

‘It smells good, you feed them well.’ Melran said, with a half-smile. Astriel snorted and smiled, pulling herself back to the log and sitting the wooden spoon on the edge of the pot as it bubbled and fizzed.

‘How are you finding it?’ She asked, shifting herself as her leg drew a sharp, sudden pain.

‘As good as it can be, I suppose, though I’d prefer to be far away.’ The girl returned softly, and she huddled in her robes for warmth.

‘Back in the ruins, do you remember what happened?’ Astriel said suddenly, as Ramon sat beyond the flames opposite them. The girl’s eyes flicked down, as if she were a pup being told off for messing where she should not, and she nodded solemnly.

‘The voice.... the voice that came from you, it was not your own.’ Astriel continued, lowering her head to meet with the girl’s eyes.

‘It has happened before; I know it has, but I remember so little of it all.’ Melran returned glumly. She shifted her hands within her robes, clutching at her dagger.

‘How long has it happened?’ Ramon asked suddenly.

‘Since I can remember, and I cannot remember much.’

The man’s gaze flicked to meet Astriel, and he frowned curiously.

‘You mean to say you don’t know where you come from?’ He asked.

‘Not for certain, I am an orphan of some kind.’

‘What makes you say that?’ Astriel interjected.

‘My earliest memories are with the Sisters in Arisen, in the convents.’ Melran returned, her grip loosening as she fell away into the memories. Her eyes darted towards Ramon, and she looked to him with a curious expression.

‘Ser Ramon of Garth, is that a Southern port town?’ She asked, unsure of her own knowledge.

‘Aye, indeed it is. Though I’ve not been down there for many years now. Not a lover of seagull shit and the smell of the seas.’ He returned gruffly, setting his sword at his side, and resting his head upon his thick arms.

‘Garth, it sounds like a nice place. I remember being taught about the port towns; the Sisters love the port towns.’ Melran replied.

‘Of course, they do, only damned places that listen to their waffle.’ Lenren announced as he came from the darkness and sat beside Ramon. He poked at the fire with a stick before tossing it into the climbing flames.

‘Your own voice is Southern for sure.’ Astriel said, budging at the girl with her shoulder and a warm smile. ‘Even an Eastern girl like me can tell you that.’

‘You think so?’

‘Aye, as thick as any I’ve heard.’ Ramon agreed, with a rare, hearty laugh.

‘They try to make you speak properly in the convents; they try to –’ But her response was stopped as she looked beyond Ramon and into the darkness, seeing the figure standing beside the tower, a shape of purest black that was set against the darkness of the night, an unnatural colour against the skies of evening light. It looked to her with cold undead eyes, taking the form of the

skeletal figure she had seen in the forests of Cerran, it bowed and disappeared, leaving darkness in its wake.

‘Melran?’ Astriel said, shaking the girl back to her reality, the voice filled Melran’s ears slowly until at last she blinked and was returned to her surroundings.

‘Melran, Gods! Are you okay?’ The Archer asked, tightly gripping the girl’s cold hand which had fallen from her robes.

‘Yes... Yes, thank you. It was nothing.’ Melran reassured her, tapping the woman’s hand with her own and smiling.

Ser Ramon of Garth had taken to a quiet corner of the interior of the tower, or what remained, and thought himself alone until he turned to find Lenren standing in the old doorway.

‘Gods man! I thought you a ghost!’ He gasped, letting out a huge sigh of relief.

Lenren entered the place, the crackled top of the building streaming bands of moonlight onto the men as they stood about fallen rocks and tangled vines.

‘I apologise.’ He returned. ‘But I’ve got something to talk with you about.’

‘What’s that then?’

Lenren inhaled deeply and turned back to see to the exterior of the place, ensuring they were alone.

‘Velgar has plotted us to Herran’s Gate, we should arrive there tomorrow evening if the ride and weather are fair to us. I wonder if we can perhaps... find out some more information about the girl.’ He whispered.

Ramon's thick brow furrowed, and he pushed himself against the wall, a light sprinkling of dust fell from above him.

‘How so?’

‘There are guards there, and you know as well as I of the rumours and tales that spread amongst passing guards. Perhaps they know of her, or of the attack.’

‘You think she’s got something to do with Cerran?’

‘Perhaps, her origin changes daily, as if she cannot remember what she has told us before. Now, the powers of Paraninr are unknown to me but not to Velgar. I spoke with him on the morning of our leaving, he found something.’

‘This is all sounding very sneaky indeed, what exactly did the old man find?’ Ramon mocked; one thick brow now stood to attention.

‘An Elder book, with fragments pertaining to these abilities. The girl was born with this ability, that’s why she was taken into the convents of the Sisters.’

‘They are known to take strays, bastards and cripples. I’ve never heard of any with such abilities as this.’ Ramon returned.

‘Of course not, can you imagine what the response to that would be? Ramon, open your eyes, this world is changing. The dragon came to Cerran for a reason, a reason I don’t know but I am damned sure to discover! But this girl, she has something to do with it for sure!’ Lenren said, his voice hurried but shushed, and he advanced towards his friend with arms wide.

‘You sound like you’ve had too many tankards of ale my friend, we should rest.’ Ramon said, patting his friend on the shoulder as he moved past him.

‘She is a descendant of the Elder Folk.’ Lenren said, looking toward the wall where his friend had just stood. Ramon stopped at the doorway, his hand upon the wall, and he swallowed hard.

‘What?’ He returned, turning again to face his friend.

‘That is what Velgar discovered, those who possess these gifts are descended from the first lines of the Elder Folk. Only those with a direct lineage have such abilities.’

‘But the Elders were destroyed, wiped out by Brodon at his conquest.’ Ramon returned angrily.

‘Nay, not all men of war kill. Some, some do terrible acts my friend. And some find love with those who their crown has deemed to be unworthy of life.’ Lenren said, sighing and resting himself atop a fallen pile of stones. Again, he sighed, and the winds of the night made the place creak. Ramon pulled himself from the doorway and back into the shadows of the tower, he rubbed the back of his head and racked his brains for a reasonable response, he found nothing.

‘The powers the girl possesses, they are well known by those who would wish terrible things upon this Kingdom. The Sisters themselves threw her out, have you ever known the High Priestess to do such a thing?’ Lenren asked.

‘No, all those who serve the Sisters serve for life.’ Ramon returned, and Lenren nodded.

‘If what you say is true,’ Ramon began, ‘then where did she go after the convents? And how did she end up in Cerran?’

‘That, my friend, I do not know.’ Lenren replied softly, his voice a crackling whisper. And in the distance, a dragon slept. Waiting, waiting for her.

Chapter Thirty-One

They left the ruined tower by daybreak, and it was quick ride along the road that led them further North along the borderlands. This place, largely wide-open lands dotted here and there with farm buildings and intersecting stone walls of long forgotten cattle grazing fields, was a welcome change from the harsher trails of the woods and forests further South. The sun was set high, the morning breeze light and the sky the clearest that had been seen that year, a welcome diversion from the cold, misted weather of the days prior. Along these trails they passed small collections of travellers, some sat at roadside with makeshift stalls, selling fruits and vegetables, whilst others offered watered ale barrels to quench a rider's thirst. Lenren commanded them to ride through them all, stopping for none, wasting little time. To Melran, the night before had seemed like a distant dream, or more so a nightmare, a dark thing of twisted shadows and distant howling shrieks. She had slept little, instead watching over the distant hillocks and plains, waiting to see the terrible shadow appear before her again. Lenren had said little to her all evening, and he and Ramon had returned from what they had called a 'quiet walk' with little cause for conversation. The camp had eaten supper, a cabbage and rabbit stew, in quiet self-contemplation, and had watched the firelight slowly die until at last they fallen each to an uneasy sleep.

Now, riding again, the days seemed to be merging into one for the young girl. And though she looked out towards the road ahead, keeping close control of her mare and riding with the speed and skill required, her mind wandered almost every hour. Her lies and deceptions were growing thin, and though her youth had been sent with an almost constant regard for learning the arts of deception, they now seemed to be failing her. Being in such close quarters to the King, along with the dark figures that had stalked the halls of Ceraborn, were beyond her control and far beyond her own comprehension. The task she had been given, clear and precise, now seemed muddled and confused. *Surely, he could not have foreseen the events that had transpired.* She thought, her glazed eyes scanning the road ahead as her mare galloped below her. *Surely, he would have told me what to do?* She argued, now almost wanting the shadow that followed to pull her from her ride and take her, so that then she might receive the answers she truly desired.

A few miles past, and Ramon kept close eye on the girl as he rode behind her. Her body seemed hunched, riding but unfocused on the journey ahead. Her tugs on the reins were almost automatic, perfectly timed and rhymical. Even he, with as many years of riding experience as he had, did not ride in such a fashion.

The previous night's exchange with Lenren had left the man pondering deeply, and as the troop rode on her found himself beginning to take the same riding form as the girl in front of him. He patted the mare every now and then and eyed the East in search of any hidden enemy that

might try to come upon them, though in the back of his mind he knew this to be unlikely in these lands. With her head exposed to the winds, her riding cloak and hood flapping in her wake, he could not help but look to her features and see if he could identify any as being familiar to him. It was true he was from Garth, but it was far from true about his self-exile from that place, and he though he shivered when he thought of it, he felt more shame than fear.

Her dark hair and pale features, distinct to those of those South East, gave away little to him. Her skin was soft, smooth, her veins showing blue, like spilt ink upon snow. She was little older than eighteen, and he wondered at what age she had been taken to the care of the Sisters. Again, he shivered. The Sisterhood was often the first to arrive to those homes of those who offered up cripples or bastards to the faith, with the Welling far more reserved in its approach to new Maesters. Indeed, he even heard talk that Velgar himself had come under scrutiny from his peers, though he knew or cared little for the fat man's lineage. But as he looked closer, he could have sworn that her ears were misshapen, or at least that they curved oddly against any he had seen before. The Elder Folk were little changed from those of Brodon's, but it was said that they were shorter than man today, but quicker and lighter in combat. A distinct advantage that he, for certain, did not possess.

A little further along, coming to a bridge upon a river, the troop were met by a small band of merchants. Lenren

stopped ahead of them and dismounted to meet with the man as he waved him down.

‘Yes, can I help you?’ He called, staying a good few foot away from the man. The man was old, pot-bellied and his skin dirty with grime and grease. His face contorted and scarred with small deep-set eyes looking off scale to a long thin purple hued nose.

‘Aye ser, indee’ ya’ can. Been tol’ to make sure that people pay their way across the bridge, so I have.’ The man said, his thick arms held firmly across his hairy chest. Lenren raised a curious eyebrow and smiled.

‘I’m sorry good sir but we have no time for games, we are riders of the King. We will pass.’ He returned.

‘Is that so? Well, ‘en, ain’t it a pity. Cause I been tol’ to make sure that peoples is kept paying as they should.’ The man returned, spitting to the ground in front of Lenren. Behind the man, blocking the bridge, were a collection of equally odd-looking characters who lazily sat along the back of a wagon. From Lenren’s line of sight they carried no weapons.

‘Only a Lord has authority to place such restrictions in place –’

‘Aye so it is Ser, and I can see by your armo’ that you is a very distinguished gentleman. So, you know the laws and that is good. Now, pay up.’

Again, Lenren smiled, half turning to his friends and raising a hand to hold them off. Ramon in particular was looking incredibly frustrated.

‘Ser, these are the lands of the King, there are no laws in place from Brodon.’ The archer returned.

‘Six crowns, *each*. That’s final.’ The man said, puffing out his chest and producing an almost porcine grunting laugh.

‘I think not Sir.’ Replied Lenren, and before the man could move a foot forward a dagger from Astriel found its way through the man’s right eye. He went down with a thud, his fat arms quivering for a moment before a stream of blood ran away into the grass.

The crew on the bridge now stood to attention, each with a wild expression upon their faces.

‘Listen Ser, we’ll move for you.’ Stammered one of them, before quickly ushering his band to move the cart out into the roadside. Lenren remounted, glanced to Astriel and shook his head ashamedly. She dismounted, pulled her dagger out from its crevice, flicked the detritus from its blade and wiped away the smeared blood upon the corpse’s greasy shirts. She cocked her head towards the cowering men beside the wagon and sheathed her dagger, making sure to show them the other weapons she carried.

‘If I hear of anyone who you’ve swindled, I will find you.’ She hissed, before remounting and riding off along the bridge. The men turned to one another, and one met the harsh glare of Ramon as he passed.

‘She means it.’ He grunted.

They rode towards Herran’s Gate with little disturbance thereafter. Astriel gave herself a wide berth from Lenren from the remainder of the ride, and the party continued on in the quiet vain it had done beforehand. In that day they rode hard towards the Eastern Road, riding

North. The terrain changed little, and here it seemed peaceful and oddly charming. Lush fields of tall grass and sunflowers were cut through with those same crumbling walls, and a few small townships were come upon, though they were little more than rider villages, to sleep and eat before heading off again. However, Lenren again had ordered them to ride on through those streets, and Melran wondered what the children thought as the four mares bound along the dirt road, snorting, and hissing, with riders dressed in long cloaks and dark armour looked on with fierce expressions. Whether it was terrifying or inspiring she could not tell, but the opinions of those mothers and the fathers was clear. They shunned the riders at every turn, glancing down or turning away as they came by, almost wishing that if they kept their eyes shut that the Archers would vanish from the world.

As the darkness came upon them again, the road widened, and the ground changed anew. About them the large fields and walls fell away, leaving large parts of bare rock lands, home to nothing except the thin remnants of bushes and shrubs that had died in the preceding winter. The road rose above the land, winding a path along it that opened up to stretch across the barren landscape and continued for miles both West and East. The Eastern Road, a place Melran had only heard of until now. She looked ahead, and unobscured in the distance she saw the visages of the furthest easterly mountains, beneath her, she saw a thin streaming running away from that place. And though the waters here ran clear, she knew that they were sourced from the bogs and marshes of Tu Ton.

When at last they came to a halt, the road ahead blocked by a large wall and gatekeep, made from Greystone that was jaggedly cut away from the surrounding lands and cruelly placed so as to appear like the teeth of some dark beast, the girl could not help but feel the darkness that was held beyond those walls. Looking up at the gatekeep itself, she saw men standing guard in uniforms she did not recognise, with one standing beside a huge crossbow of thick iron and steel.

There was a short exchange between Lenren and the gatekeeper himself, who never left the spiralling iron stairway that led up to the parapet on which the other men stood over them. The man seemed satisfied enough, and the gates slowly opened with a terrible clanging ring. Ahead lay a road, and Melran did not want to follow.

Chapter Thirty-Two

It was a dark, ramshackle collection of slanting and crudely constructed whorehouses and taverns that flanked the dusty road that met the riders as they came into Herran's Gate. The wall of Greystone, as Melran turned her eyes back to it, had been cut away and replaced with rudimentary internal parapets from which several heavily armoured men peered down to the new arrivals with arctic glances. About them, a small collection of soldiers sat wearily on upturned barrels and boxes, surrounding fires built from rags and emanating columns of thick black smog into the clear skies above. It seemed colder here, like the sunlight itself was merely a mirage and not permitted entry into this harsh land. This place, a place she had not passed through with Tharandal's carriage, appeared bereft of morals and proper assertions. From above her, as she came to the side of a building where she could tie her mare, she heard a whore collecting her crowns with shrill fake cries of enjoyment. Melran swallowed hard, pulling her robes tightly and giving Astriel a counterfeit smile in reply to her assuring nod.

The group, having rode for a good few hours, where hungrier than anything, and a tavern at the opposite side of the road offered a glimmer of hope.

'Go with Astriel, sit and eat.' Lenren commanded of the girl, passing her a few coins for her lunch.

'Do they not know we ride for the King?' She asked, eyeing Ramon's surprised expression as she spoke.

‘They care not who we ride for, be careful in this place. Eat, drink and stay out of trouble.’ The man returned with a nod, and then he eyed Astriel and nodded to her. The girl took the woman’s hand and they passed over the road, quiet except for a horse and cart of an elderly merchant steadily making their way along the way.

‘Hear what Lenren says, stay at my side. Do not engage with anyone, we will sit and eat. Do not look upon those in this place.’ Astriel whispered to the girl as they stood before the place. It was a large thing, made of old timbers and straw, grey in colour and boarded windows only adding to the initial impression. It had no name, at least there was no signage at the front of it. It totalled three stories, with a porch where a few glum faces sat drinking or gambling.

‘I can look after myself.’ Melran answered, feeling her dagger beneath her robes.

‘So can everyone here, do not underestimate them.’ The woman returned sternly before they made way into the place. Melran took a final deep breath of clear air, and they entered.

Watching as Astriel and Melran entered the place, Ser Ramon of Garth patted his mare as she took a well-deserved drink.

‘I’ve heard that some of them that survived are here.’ Lenren said, glancing up to the whorehouse.

‘Where else would you go after something like that, try and take your mind off things.’ Ramon replied with a heavy sigh. He covered his sword with his robes and removed his hood. Lenren took the lead, moving around to

the back of the place, to be met with a doorman of considerable size.

‘Not seen you two before.’ He said in a low, grumbling voice. He was taller than both men, his arms and leg thick as tree trunks and covered in black tattoos, his balding head was scarred with burns and slashes.

‘From Ceraborn, riding East.’ Lenren replied with a smile. The doorman huffed, his folded arms unmoving from his chest.

‘East? Not many heading that way nowadays, most is going West. What takes you East?’ He asked, now eyeing Ramon.

‘I think you know exactly.’ Ramon replied, exposing the crest on his breastplate for a moment. Again, the man grumbled, flicking his eyes to either side of the men as he searched for any who may be listening.

‘So, it is true then. Got word from a messenger a few days ago. Been the talk of the town so it has. Thought they’d send more than you lot though.’

‘No need, we’ll do just fine.’ Ramon replied, narrowing his gaze as a smirk crept across the doorman’s face to bare ale-stained teeth.

‘They’ve been betting on you lot, how long you’ll last. Which one of you will die first, if any of you will make it back alive.’ The man returned with a harsh laugh, like stones scrapping against concrete.

‘Well, let’s hope we can disappoint you then.’ Ramon returned, a smirk appearing on his own face.

The doorman growled, his eyes shifting back to Lenren.

‘What do you want here anyway?’ He snapped.

‘We need to speak with him if he’s here.’

‘He’s here, he’s always here. Just what do you want to speak to him about?’

Lenren sighed again and bit his lip as he looked back to the alleyway. ‘Again, I think you know perfectly well what about.’

‘He doesn’t have anyone from Cerran in there, not allowed is it. All the men who survived are accounted for, in the care of Lord Tharandal or The Sisters.’

‘Of course, they are, the records are impeccable.’
Lenren returned softly.

‘Indeed, they are, deliver them to the messenger myself.’ The doorman returned, a sense of self-pride in his voice.

‘How much?’ Lenren asked.

‘Five crown for five minutes.’

‘His rates are as exceptional as ever, so I see.’ Lenren grumbled as he pulled the coins from his pocket and handed them to the man.

‘The best rates on the borderlands.’ The doorman returned with another ugly smile as he moved aside to let the men enter. *The only rates on the borderlands*, thought Lenren.

Inside they were met with a curtain fashioned from Eastern flags, sewn together into a patchwork of oddly mesmerizing colours and shapes. The air was thick with tobacco smoke and the dusky scents of whore perfumes, a luxury afforded only to those under the employee of one man. The place was a quiet haven for those with enough coin and time to wallow in shallow pleasures. Above the

shrieks and cries of those above, the soft sounds of a harp being played gave the place a much-required gentrification.

The two men sat beside a crude bar, sinking into leather backed chairs and immediately receiving tumblers of Benanzi malt.

‘From the owner.’ Said the waitress as she sat the drinks down. Her dark complexion and curves undeniably those of a Benanzi girl, left them with the knowledge of the man having recently acquired some new servants to the place.

‘I wonder what happened?’ Ramon mumbled, guzzling his malt in a single gulp.

‘Whores have a shelf life.’ Lenren returned, his own drink untouched and his eyes focused on the dark corner of the room that he knew led into the basement.

Entering the tavern, the two women were met with side eye glances from soldier, merchant and drunkard alike. Grunts and whispers followed them to the bar, and as the two sat together, Astriel kept close attention to those floating words that came her way.

‘Bread and soup for the girl, ale for me.’ She said, pushing a few crowns across the countertop to the burly barman.

‘Don’t want your kind in here.’ He returned after a moment, pushing the coins back to the woman.

‘Please sir, it’s been a long ride. We will eat and drink and then be on our way.’ The woman returned gently, her voice an unthreatening hush.

The barman judged the room, glancing across the tables. He lowered his brow and took the coins.

‘One drink, one meal.’ He grumbled.

‘Very kind of you sir, we appreciate it.’ Astriel returned. The barman didn’t reply, instead moving off into the kitchen to prepare a substandard onion soup and bread for Melran. A glance from the girl betrayed her worry, and Melran took her hand in her own and squeezed it.

‘What is this place?’ The girl asked.

‘A military barracks, or at least it used to be. Now it’s a township run by and for the military.’

‘For Brodon’s men?’ Melran asked.

‘For any, those of the Crown, or the High or Low Lords. They come here if they journey East, in search of pleasure or drunken fights.’ Astriel returned, she spat the words and her distaste for the place was palpable. Melran swallowed hard, her throat was dry, and the air was thick with smoke and the thousand intertwining scents of ale, malts and over alcohols.

The barman returned, only to harshly rest a plate of bread and bowl of soup at the girl’s place. She thanked him, and again he grumbled before moving off into the kitchens. Astriel drank from her tankard, her eyes seemed to glisten in the darkness of the tavern, and only now did Melran appreciate her features.

‘You have beautiful eyes.’ The girl managed.

‘Thank you, we are famed for them.’ Astriel answered with a sad smile.

‘We?’

Again, Astriel smiled, and she thought of her homeland, of the waters and the mountains and the sandy

dunes. She had seen none of them, never touched them or smelled them, but they were within her still, as bright as the stars on a clear autumn evening.

‘Yes, we. My people, of Mair.’ She answered, her eyes closing slowly as she fought back tears.

‘You are so far from home.’ Melran said, playing with her soup as she looked at it with disgust.

‘Indeed, but I am where I must be. I am where the Gods have placed me.’ The Archer returned with another weak smile.

‘Do you not wish to go home?’

‘Of course, I wish for nothing else. But I cannot, not whilst *they* sit upon the throne.’ Astriel returned, spitting the aforementioned ‘they’.

‘A Usurper?’ Melran asked, meeting the woman’s gaze.

‘Yes, a man who fought under my family for nearly thirteen years.’

Melran’s eyes flashed away from Astriel’s and found her twin daggers, the silver tips of the sheaths glistening in the gloom.

‘So, you are a Princess?’

‘By blood, yes. My brother would have been King at my father’s passing. *He* killed them all.’ Astriel returned meekly.

‘That...that is wrong.’ Melran answered, gently holding Astriel’s arm and squeezing it. Astriel answered with a sad smile and sighed as her tears and inward torment fought to explode out of her. She did not let them, not today, not here.

‘Many things in this world are wrong, but we cannot change them. Time will change them; time will heal those wounds.’ Astriel said with a nod.

‘And if you had the chance to change them, would you?’ Melran asked, her eyes narrowing as she met with Astriel’s gaze again.

‘I cannot allow myself that false hope, I cannot think of that.’ She answered, her voice cracking. And Melran returned to her soup, thinking of what could be.

The man sat atop a pile of cushions, two nude concubines at his side with a small fire burning golden in the far corner of the room. He was older than both, his body scarred from combat, his thick arms tanned harsher than his exposed chest. His beard was greying, like an upturned mountain.

‘Friends of old! Ha! What brings you to my palace of pleasures?’ The man asked, his booming voice and cackling laugh a sure sign of his own contented nature.

‘We had to pay to see you.’ Returned Ramon glumly, crossing his arms as he stood before the man. The concubines giggled at the man’s side and he fondled with a breast in each arm as he sat there.

‘Of course! I know my worth Ser Ramon, only a fool would offer his council for free! And a fool I am not!’ Returned the man with a laugh.

‘Enough with the theatrics Beric, you know why we’re here.’ Lenren answered sternly. The man huffed, and his smile left him quickly. He motioned the concubines to leave him, but not before slapping each on their rear as they stood. Ramon glanced at one, who blew

him a kiss, and he was quick to evade her gaze as she left the place. Once alone, the men stood in quiet for a moment.

‘They say that the beast came with whirling winds and whispers unheard of before,’ Beric Bjorn began as he rummaged through a small leather satchel at his side. ‘, that they could hear whispers upon the winds themselves as it flew above them.’

‘Whispers? What whispers?’ Lenren replied, his brow furrowed in curiosity.

‘Whispers of the Elder language, dark tongue I believe is what they call it?’ Beric answered, passing a piece of parchment to Ramon.

‘What’s this?’ The archer asked, looking at the scrawled notes that lay upon the crinkled page.

‘The testament of one who survived.’ Beric answered swiftly.

‘And where is he?’ Lenren asked, eager to speak with the man.

‘Found him hanging from a tree not two nights ago. Poor fellow was driven mad by it all, terrible.’ Beric returned with a false sympathy. He cared not for the men who graced what he called his town. He cared only for their coin, and even then, it would have to be of the correct amount for him to entertain them.

‘Gods, poor fellow.’ Lenren returned, his gaze falling to the floor, a genuine sense of remorse came over the man. Ramon read the parchment over and over, the crude writing scrawling and overlapping as the mind of the writer had slowly been driven mad.

‘Doesn’t mention her.’ He said, looking up to Lenren. Beric’s head twitched like that of a hawk at this, and Lenren turned to meet the man’s gaze.

‘*Her*? How very interesting.’ Beric smirked.

‘What do you know of her?’ Lenren said, taking steps towards the man.

‘Easy now Lenren, I am no thief in the dungeons, and you are not my interrogator.’ Beric warned.

Lenren took a step back and regained his focus, he looked beside the man and saw the hidden crossbow. He smiled and nodded to the man.

‘Many have mentioned her, the girl of the flames. The girl who remained unscathed, unburnt and unmaimed. The girl of Cerran. Gods! You’d think they saw an angel of Terinen by how they make her sound!’ Said Beric with a chuckle.

‘What else do they say?’ Ramon asked.

‘That she came with a boy, Benji. Poor boy hasn’t been accounted for.’ Beric returned.

‘So, she was there.’ Ramon said, turning to Lenren.

‘Indeed, and she went to the stronghold itself.’ The archer replied, scratching his beard thoughtfully.

Behind them a door creaked open, revealing the imposing doorman.

‘Times up.’ He grunted to them.

‘Shame, I’ve enjoyed this little reunion.’ Beric remarked as his girl’s returned to him, one deliberately squeezing passed Ramon as if he were a giant in her way. He felt the curves of her breasts and buttocks against him as she moved but averted his gaze from her.

‘Indeed, and profitable.’ Said Lenren, nodding to the coins that sat beside Beric. He patted them gently and the concubines giggled as they sat beside him again.

‘Indeed, my friend, and if you had come with me then you may have sat with me in these glories too. Alas, you chose the sword above the coin.’ The man returned smugly, and with a fake smile he motioned them out.

In the alleyway the two stood alone, the sky had darkened, and the rainclouds were slowly coming forth from the Eastern mountains.

‘She cannot be trusted.’ Ramon said.

‘I know, but neither can we say that she did this for certain.’ Lenren answered, tucking the parchment into his robes.

‘Lenren, Gods! The men themselves say she was in the bloody place! She might as well have ridden the damned beast to the gates herself!’ Ramon returned; his angry tone muted only slightly by his hushed volume.

‘Gods! Do you not think I know that? But the girl has powers beyond our understanding, and until we get to Cerran and destroy the creature we cannot continue thinking that she had a part in it!’

‘Lenren, please, you yourself spoke with Velgar about her powers. Whatever she is, whatever her powers are, we *know* she was at Cerran on the night of the attack. We cannot deny that she is part of this, if there even the slightest chance of her being involved then we have to take it as a certainty.’ Ramon replied, standing closer to Lenren now.

‘We have a duty to the King; the King has requested that we kill the beast that lies in those ruins. We must use the girl to our advantage, only after we return to Ceraborn can we then assess her true nature.’ Lenren returned, pushing the man aside.

‘And what if she forms a bond with the creature, what if she converses with the damned thing and seeks to kill us all. What then?’ Ramon demanded, glancing over to see the girl and Astriel coming toward them. Lenren, now mounted, looked down to his friend and then over to the approaching pair.

‘Then we fight.’

Chapter Thirty-Three

The rains soon came, as harsh and fierce as any amongst the company had known. The winds shrieked and howled, the earth beneath them became sodden, the embankments of the roadside became like muddied cheeks or open wounds, bleeding mucked blood onto the plains below. About them, every few miles, hung large signs warning of the infamous hounds that stalked the lands. Ser Ramon, at the rear of the troop, kept a close eye on the plains, but the flats were misted, and his vision dulled from weariness and weather, and shadows and illusions crept upon him more than he wished to acknowledge.

To him, every mound of Earth or misshapen boulder harboured the terrible image of those mire beasts.

Ahead, Lenren kept the troop moving, his robes flowing and flapping in the winds, his hood his only saving grace from the hard rain, which felt to him almost meant for him. It followed them, relentlessly pounding them with the might of an angry god or vengeful spirit. And there was no place to hide, no safe corner to wait for respite, no tavern or inn house to dry your head and rest your ride, here was unbroken land, unconquered and unclaimed. Many had tried, and Lenren recalled stories of men who had set camp on these vicious moorlands, only to have been found, or in some cases lost, to the unforgiving wilderness of which they attempted to tame. He recalled times that the royal carriages had made way East, towards the military camps on the Eastern Edge, heavily armoured

and surrounded by loyal men, only to evade these roads and lands as best they could.

Along the way, tattered flags, placed along the right side of the road, offered a sign of hope to any who dared travel these lands. It had become a tradition, to Astriel's mind, when Ser Baydon the brave, hand of King Brodon the Conqueror, had been offered a wager by the first Lord of Sera, to cross the lands alone, with nothing but a sword and a flag to win his daughter's hand in marriage. Ser Baydon was a formidable fighter, a brute of force that was well placed amongst the finest of his time, and he was never to be outdone by a snivelling High Lord. Now, Astriel had read several accounts of this wager, with one from Celtic of Sera, a monk and chronicler, saying that the man came upon Sera after fourteen days carrying the head of a great hell hound in one hand and the heart of an unnamed terror in the other, and that he threw them on the ground at the foot of the High Lord and took his bride to bed her. Others however, such as those written in the hand of Arch Chancellor Valmarion, the first of Arch Chancellor of the West, stated that the men did indeed come upon Sera after some days, though here they were uncounted, whereupon he lay before the High Lord barring the scars of many duels with beasts, and that he was without his right ear, and that he begged to never walk amongst those lands again. In all accounts the man won the wager, but his mental state and the manner in which he did so, varied most often. To her mind, Celtic's version was the greater of the two.

Melran was weary of these lands, she had travelled them before, and she was fiercely motivated to move from them as quickly as she could. About her, the grey lands sprouted only rough patches of twisted vines and sprawling weeds. Bushes that held only dark berries, poisonous to most, hung plentiful within the embankments of the main road. Ahead, the East became clearer, the mountainous regions were wrapped in blankets of thick fog and whirling winds of rain and sleet. Dark clouds moved overhead, and the rain thundered down upon them as they came upon the boglands through which she travelled before. Lenren slowed ahead, beside the road lay a small runestone, now crumbling and being pulled down by the serpentine weeds. He looked down, seeing the Elder tongue etched on the sun-bleached stone.

‘What does it say?’ Astriel asked as she came upon him.

‘Some dispute what The Welling have decided upon, but to most it means only this, forgive us Terinen, Mighty of All, these lands are forsaken to Darkness untold.’ He returned, eyeing the misted landscapes about them. Both Melran and Ramon came to them now, and all looked upon the runes and shivered.

‘We were attacked in these lands.’ Melran said sullenly, her eyes wandering to the dark pools that lay ahead of them.

‘Hogs?’ Ramon asked, and he received an affirmative nod. He sighed heavily, and unsheathed a smaller blade from his side, its blade was long and thin, and its handle was golden.

‘Got this made back when I was in the guard, should do the trick if any cross our path.’ He said, his eyes set upon the blade.

‘They killed two men. I saw what they can do.’ Melran answered, and her hands shook as she spoke. Astriel, now beside the girl, leaned over and patted her back.

‘We are here, don’t worry.’ She said softly, with a warm smile.

From a bag at his side, Lenren pulled a glistening pair of gauntlets. Hourglass shaped, he strapped them to his hands and flexed his fingers for range of motion. They were short things, made of cooper and steel, with a sharply flared cuff to them. He nodded to Astriel and she removed some of the same and put them on.

‘You have some too.’ Ramon said, nodding to Melran’s bags that hung from her mare.

She pulled them from the bag and put them on, they were cold, and the steel tingled on her skin.

Lenren turned to face the road ahead, and as the rain began to die, he saw the rising columns of rank air moving across the lands. The road, which to now had been consistent, grew harsher. Large patches of bare rock sprinkled with holes of squalid water lay before them.

‘We all know the dangers that lie before us, do not move from the road. Do not stop for anything, ride. Ride with speed.’ He said, his words trailing as he looked to the distance and for a moment saw a shape dance between the columns of air.

As they rode onwards, with caution and fear, the roadside became steadily flanked by twisted cypress', linked by tangled spider webs and torn rags. At a point, they came upon the wreckage of a merchant's cart, upturned and rotting on the roadside. The skull of the horse was the only remnant of what had been before. About them the rains had eased, but they were watched over by black clouds that threatened to burst at any moment, and the air was thick with the stench of decay. Small frogs and toads lumbered across the road at points, passing over carcasses and scrambling to return to the relative safety of the pools. Around them soft calls and whispers danced amidst the breeze; the origins masked by the thickets of fog that lay upon the marshes.

Ser Ramon looked over the lands, his ride slowed as he listened to those whispers. He recalled the tales of this place, of how vast legions of men had vanished in the days after Brodon's conquest, of how folk saw vultures bare of feather or skin, with piercing dark eyes in perfectly polished skulls, watching over them as they came through this place. Swamp stalkers, men of moss and with the stench of a thousand years of death on their lips, where said to wander these marshes in search of any lost traveller. The Welling, and even the few tales he had heard in the taverns or on the ships during his years of warfare, often described the horrors of these barren lands. *A sickness lays upon this place*, he thought as he passed along a steaming pool of black stale water.

Ahead of him, Lenren's own ride was proving much the same. The ground was like sludge, the rains had matted the earth, and his mare was struggling to offer him little more than a canter. About him he watched for any sign of movement amongst the mist, fighting to keep himself from seeing what was not there. These lands had cast doubt upon many a man who had rode through them, and he had heard of terrible things and terrible acts that had been committed by those who fell into the traps that these plains placed upon them. Conversations here were left mute, and eyes and ears left focused upon survival alone. No one, to the man's knowledge, knew of the true origin to this terrible place. It had been theorised, mainly by the drunkards of the port towns, that a curse had been put on the lands by the Gods as punishment for a sin committed by the Elder folk. Lenren always laughed at that. In other times, he had heard tall tales of this having been the birthplace of Banra himself, and now also his tomb. He always smiled at that. More recently, in a rather long and intriguing conversation with a young Maester at The Welling, he had discovered that the records pertaining to these lands offered little more than to say that they once may have been green and lush, a sprawling utopia of lush warm springs and meadows with graceful creatures bounding about the place, only to have been lost to a darkness that befell the lands during the reign of Cedrid the Warhammer. He had pondered on that one, and as he rode through the plains now, he hoped that what lay before them was salvation.

However, in his subconscious, an ugly thought began to rise amidst those clearer waters. It spread, dark ink across a perfect crisp parchment, and it writhed and twisted like an untameable vine until it squeezed the last desperate breath from that salvatory thought. Ahead of them, lurking amongst the pools, lowering themselves amongst the patched landscape but with eyes glowing like fierce flames, Hellhounds watched over them.

Lenren saw the head of the pack first, it sat amongst a thicket of reeds at the edge of one boggy pool, licking its muddied paws before rearing its large, scarred muzzle upward to meet his gaze. It was a female, distinguished by its grey strip which ran along its humped spine down to a clipped tail. A scattered assortment of bones, some still with a few stretches of sinew on, circled the beast as it stared at the man. The troop came to halt beside Lenren, cramped together as the road was not wide enough for all four. The beast took them in, and low growl came from it. It turned its head, the size of a rear cartwheel, and from beyond it stalked two of the same. These two, however, seemed far less welcoming than the bitch they served. They barred foul, bloodied canines, jagged and stained. The thunderous growling increased as they came forward, standing at it either side to the leader of the pack.

‘We should move.’ Astriel whispered towards Lenren, her eyes unmoving from the hounds.

‘No, if we move they’ll think we’re running.’ Ramon returned sharply.

‘Isn’t that what we *should* be doing?’ Melran asked.

‘Trust me, not even our mares could outrun one of those, just stay quiet and still. They’ll leave us be... hopefully.’ Ramon returned; his voice hushed.

The pack leader remained unmoved, watching them, and then flicking its gaze towards where they come from. The hounds at either side growled still, easing only as they too looked towards the misted road.

‘They’re not hungry, and they’re not moving.’ Ramon said to Lenren, furrowing his brow curiously.

‘Perhaps she’s injured?’ Lenren replied, straining to see the rear of the beast amongst the weeds.

‘No, nothing in these lands that can take on something that big.’ Ramon returned.

‘Nothing we know of.’ Astriel interjected, with worried laugh. Ramon shot her a disapproving glance and then turned to face the road again, his vision impaired by the smokes and mist of the bog. Ahead the hounds grumbled restlessly, but soon they too rested beside the alpha. A restless few minute dragged by, the deafening silence relived only by the intense internal hurried rhythms of the rider’s hearts as they watched over the lurking pack.

Melran looked towards the hounds, and for a moment she caught the gaze of the alpha, its golden eyes rimmed with darkness.

Not for us, it snarled to her.

No, not our feast. It growled.

Why? She asked of it, *what’s stopping you?*

Fire, they are for the fire. It grumbled, barring its amber teeth to her.

The bond was broken as Melran felt a hand clutch at her robes, and for a moment she was petrified. A few beads of sweat trickled along her neck and her breath was hurried.

‘Come, we must move on.’ Said Astriel with a warm smile. Melran nodded, and they rode onwards towards Sera.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The words of the Hellhounds hung in Melran's mind as the company rode onwards into the early evening. Under the dark sky they saw little change as the sun set and the skies were blanketed with the stars. The marshlands of Tu Ton lay as memory now, dark and cold and best kept at the very edge of the mind, and as they set up camp on the edge of a dark forest, they talked little of the day's ride.

Melran, now huddled against a tree, sat with her chin resting on her knees. Her backside ached from the ride, and she now realised how much of a terror saddle-sore could be. *If only that were my only worry*, she thought as she watched Ramon hacking at dried wood as he went about building a fire. Her hands were wrapped tightly around her dagger, almost on instinct alone and the whispering woods that sat behind her offered little other than more paranoia.

She watched Lenren as he looked over the horses, a caring soul and honourable both to man and beast, and she smiled as the man whispered to his own ride in some apparent private conversation.

Astriel had taken to sleeping early, and already she lay snoring against a thick elm, only her brow poking from beneath her cloaks and robes. A princess, never to sit upon a throne or feel the love of her people, her family usurped by a man they trusted and brutally murdered. Melran

shivered at the thought of that, it rang too close to home for her to contemplate further. The girl drank from her skins, the water cold to her throat, almost burning. She thought back to the days before she had taken to walking East, to what had been before that. Little true memory remained, purposefully blocked or taken she could not determine, but even now she realised that her powers were draining her. Little by little, like an hourglass draining the sand from one bulb to the next. But she did could not turn her hourglass again, she could not refill the bulb that was her mind. Her sand, which was herself, was slowing leaving her.

Flashes of memories came to her sometimes, in the days of her stay in the caves of the White Woods. Though whether they were fact or fiction she could not attest. She had hoped them to be true, but the powers she had been opened to had influence over most things, including the desires which a person may hold in the deepest caverns of their minds. It made her laugh sometimes, that things that came into her mind, for she knew them to be threads of life she had never lived. Something felt untrue about them, and of these she often cared more than most things. She wondered where they had come from, who's life she was watching over as she slept or daydreamed. In her dreams she had seen valleys, seemingly endless, with folk dancing and singing. She would be dressed in fine golden dress, adorned with a pearl necklace, and watching over the children as they performed their melody of hymns for her. A Queen perhaps, or a Lady of the realm, she could not be sure of whom she shadowed in these dreams, but she was

certain they were not her own wants or desires. She held no thought at all for power over people, no dreams of holding any throne. She was a pawn, a play piece, and at only eighteen years of age she knew full well of how those around her viewed her. She was a commodity, taken from place to place, serving as much of a perhaps as they might find for her until they ran out of things to do with her.

It was a cruel life, a life she had never wished for but one she would never leave. Her fate was sealed, whether she did as he had asked of her or not. Her part was being played out, her section of the song now being sung, and it would end as quickly as it had begun.

In her time with the Sisters, she had read of slavers in the East. She had read of vicious men with vicious thoughts who performed vicious acts. Of course, the Sisters would never speak of such things beyond then general flippant comment that The Sister would serve them the truth upon her return to the earth, whenever that was. Watching over the growing flames, with Ser Ramon's hulking figure beyond them, the girl thought back to those days. And in the firelight, she was certain she saw the shadows of those long-gone days, dancing and weaving themselves between the flickering flames. *Let them burn*, she thought, *let the whole damned thing burn*. She looked up, seeing Ramon staring down at the flames himself.

'Your eyes wander so far so often young one,' he said without looking away from the flames. ' , it makes me wonder what you think of.'

Melran glanced away to Lenren, himself now huddled under his cloaks, but she was unable to see whether he was asleep or simply silent.

‘What makes you say that?’ She answered.

‘I have watched you closely enough to notice.’ He returned; his eyes flashed to meet hers. His brow was furrowed and his expression like stone.

‘You don’t trust me.’ Melran returned.

‘I have no reason to trust you, and you have given me no reason to doubt my suspicions.’ He answered, spitting his words.

Melran gulped heavily and her eyes wandered out to the darkness beyond him.

‘You look to the darkness so often, but whether you are scared or hopeful of what you might see I cannot tell. Perhaps it’s both?’ The man said, shifting himself to meet with the girl’s eyes again.

‘I was brought here against my will. You think I gladly came on this quest? You think I want to go to Cerran and –’

‘I don’t give a damn what you want,’ The man growled. ‘I care for those I ride with, and I care they return safe.’

‘As do I, like it or not I can use my powers for the good of this company!’ Melran spat back.

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the gentle night breeze and the distant hoot of an owl.

‘I have watched many enter the court of the King and parade themselves as honourable men or women. I have seen knights ride off with this company and never return. I have watched as beasts cut through those I ride with as if

they were made of butter. But never have I watched someone come to this company and stay as quiet or distant as you.’ Ramon said eventually.

‘So, you think that outs my ill intent?’ Melran answered sarcastically.

‘Perhaps, but I will tell you one thing girl. If either of them,’ and Ramon pointed with his sword towards Astriel and Lenren, ‘get hurt because of you, I will not hesitate to do what I must.’

Melran did not answer immediately, instead she let the words sink in and she narrowed her gaze. She smiled and swallowed hard as the words came to her.

‘You hide yourself so well Ser Ramon of Garth, but to those who have also been hidden you are as clear as the days of Summer. And I wonder, of the deaths and tragedies you have seen across your time, just how many come to equal the ones you have falsely created in your own mind.’

Ser Ramon sat, stunned into silence as he looked at the girl beyond the flames. The shadows of the first seemed to be tight against her, forming a wall of darkness around her.

‘Enough! You will not make mockery of me or my past.’ He snarled, trying to keep his voice low.

‘Mockery? No Ser Ramon, I do not mock you. I pity you, you judge me, but you do not know me. My mind wanders because of the abilities I have been saddled with. I did not ask to be like this, and neither do I wish to live as this now. Do not judge me because you do not have the slightest idea of what my life has been.’ The girl returned, fighting back tears.

‘And you do not know my life.’ Ramon said, his voice quiet and hoarse now as his eyes sank to the earth at his feet.

‘I think I do.’ The girl returned softly, the anger fading.

‘No, no you do not.’ Ramon protested, slamming his sword to ground, and hanging his head in shame. She could not see if he were weeping, but his shoulders heaved, and he evaded her contact as she came and sat beside him. She placed a hand gently on his knee and he pulled away.

‘You weep for what you keep hidden.’ Melran said, feeling the bond fade from the man.

Ser Ramon did not respond, and soon after both fell to an uneasy slumber. In the midst of the night, as the last flames died and the column of grey smoke spiralled into the sky above, Melran dreamt of a soldier returning from war. But he did not go home, he rode North. He wore the tattered, bloodied clothes and chainmail he had worn on the battles he had fought. His mare, the same he had ridden into battle upon, died upon a hillock just South of the city he had come upon. He bathed in a natural spring and wept in silence. She saw the man as he made way into the city, in search of honest work, and watched over him as he laboured in a dock. The days and nights twisted together, forming an endless moment of time that became indistinguishable. One day, a troop of guards came upon the man, but not to arrest or challenge him, they came for his skill with the sword. As the girl looked on, the misted vision of a Castle grew clear as the man-made way towards it, followed closely by the guard who had found

him. The gates of the castle closed as the last of the men went into it, and the dream was over.

Chapter Thirty-Five

They awoke to dew-speckled grass warmed under a bright, unobstructed sun. The breeze was lazy, and the foliage above danced and waved softly as the sparrows took off for morning hunt. A slim column of charcoal smoke rose slowly from the charred remains of the fire, and the morning air was sweet and light with all the joys of Spring. Astriel was the first to awaken, her robe stained by drool that betrayed her sleep as a rare, deep one. As she stretched out her bones cracked, her leg was stiff, and she rubbed it to return the blood flow. She relaxed against the trunk which had served her so well that night and yawned. As her gaze focused, the bright golden beams of Spring morning parted to reveal the horizon beyond, not a day's ride away it stood: Cerran.

Soon after Ramon stirred grumbling and aching from both ride and poor, uneasy slumber. He glanced to the younger girl and then Astriel.

'I suppose you heard it all then?' He said, his voice groggy and harsh.

'I hear what I am meant to hear my friend.' Astriel returned, throwing her skins across to him. He opened the silver catch and drank, the water cleansing his sour breath and easing his burning throat.

'Ha, then that settles it.' He returned, throwing the skins back to her.

'You should not have done that.' Said a previously unheard voice from beneath a hood and cloak. Lenren

lifted his head, his eyes sparkling in the shade of his hood and with a disapproving look to his friend.

‘I did want I needed to do. She knows I’m watching her; she knows the consequences of her actions.’ Ramon returned sharply under an angry brow.

Lenren shook his head, dropped his hood, and revealed a sorrowful expression on his greying face.

‘And now she is closer to you than ever my friend. You allowed her into your mind, perhaps not intentionally, but nevertheless she has seen into every corner of yourself.’ The man said.

‘She saw nothing.’ Ramon answered quickly.

‘And how can you be sure of that?’ Astriel interjected.

Bereft of an answer, the hulking man pulled himself up and stomped down towards the horses. Astriel turned to face Lenren, offering him a sad smile.

‘I fear for him, since Elyson he has not been himself.’ She said, watching the distant man trundle onwards.

‘What happened with Elyson cannot be changed, but we cannot allow ourselves to become driven mad by what we fear to be true. We cannot allow fiction to take precedence over truth.’ Lenren replied sternly, wiping his tired eyes with his sleeves before yawning. He looked off to where his friend now stood, amongst the rides, patting them and tending to them as they needed. He turned to face the girl that slept beside Astriel and sighed heavily.

‘I hope she is true.’

‘To what?’ Lenren replied quizzically.

Astriel turned her gaze to the girl, huddled as a newborn babe in intertwining robes and cloaks. ‘To herself.’

Melran woke from a deep slumber, the first she had had in a very long time, and she found breakfast cooked and her mare ready for another day of riding. They ate quickly, berries and cheese along with bread, a simple but filling meal for the girl. She felt Ramon's glare upon her as she packed away her things, but she never met his gaze that morning. She kept herself to herself, a natural recession now.

The rolling hillocks and valleys of Sera were in stark contrast to the lands they had rode in Tu Ton. Here, the grass was long and soft, with bees and birds dancing amongst the fauna and flora as they rode amongst it all. Lush fields, uncorrupted by man, spread out to all corners, flanked by untamed forests of thick elder elms whose canopies grew so wide and strong that the paled skies were obscured by them. Here were well maintained roads, made of dirt but kept to the highest of standards. A few small townships emerged from the emerald forests, with houses made of thick stone and with thatched roofs that held a central hearth from which steady streams of dull grey smoke rose into the soft morning breeze.

Soon, at midday, they came upon a town unlike any they had seen before, it flanked the main road and was busy with men, women, and children of all ages. Colmare, as the painted sign announced, was under the jurisdiction of a young noble man of fair descent. It seemed a happy place, for here the children did not shy from the riders as they rode amongst them and the men and women did not cower from them as they went by. They came upon an Inn,

a jovial place judging by the laughter and spirit of the folk who sat outside the place. *The Gatekeeper's Wench* drew a smile from Lenren as they came upon it. They tied their mares to the fenceposts and were soon met by two young and rather scruffy looking children, perhaps no more than ten years old, who offered to water the mares for half a crown. Lenren accepted, and the smile that silver coin gave those muddy-faced urchins stayed with him for many years to come.

Once inside they found the place warm and comforting. A long bar, with a long oaken countertop, greeted them with long, highchairs that were backed with tanned leather.

'Nice place.' Ramon admitted as he took his seat, they had opted for a corner table that sat beside the doorway.

'Indeed, much nicer than the drums you get in Ceraborn.' Astriel agreed with a laugh. About them, in clusters of yearlong friends, were farmhands, labourers and lumberjacks, all strong and lean with dark eyes and thick brows. A young tavern girl, no older than Melran, came to them and took their orders. Lenren had relented to Astriel's nagging as they had ridden through township upon township, asking that they might stop a final time to toast themselves before heading into the ruins of Cerran.

Soon after and the girl returned, four tankards of ale and a small bowl of nuts, chestnuts that had been gently roasted and salted. A local delicacy, so the girl had announced to them with a smile.

Lenren sat beside Ramon, whilst opposite them sat Astriel with Melran. To those within the place, who took any notice of the new arrivals, they looked like quite the odd assortment of characters. There were a few side glances from men at the bar, seeing Ramon's blade and glaring at him with perhaps a foreboding warning to not start any kind of trouble in the place, but nothing more than that. There was a moment of awkward silence as each sat in quiet contemplation, staring into their tankards, and perhaps realising that this might be the last drink they ever tasted.

'Listen,' Said Ramon all of a sudden, his fingers circling the tabletop awkwardly as he avoided everyone's gaze. 'What happened last night... it was wrong of me. I admit that now.'

Lenren and Astriel glanced to Melran. The girl looked up to the man with sad eyes.

'It's what any loyal man would do to protect his friends. This company....it has known death in the name of both duty and cruel fate, I understand that. The ghosts of the past will always walk amongst us, but it is our choice to let them shake us or make us stronger.' The girl returned softly, her voice quivering slightly as she spoke.

The two met one another's gaze and nodded to one another. Lenren watched over both closely, and in his mind, he hoped that both had meant the words they had spoken, but his heart pulled at that thought with cruel insecurities. He was saved only by the sudden rise of Astriel's tankard as she announced a toast to the company. One by one the rest followed, each tankard touching the next.

‘We ride together, we protect each other,’ Astriel said proudly, ‘and we fight together.’

The tankards clanked together for a moment; a few splashes of ale spread across the tabletop. A moment later and the landlord arrived, a ragged cloth in his wrinkled hands.

‘S’cuse me folks, just mop that up for ya.’ He said in a tobacco clasped voice. He pressed himself beside the table, his stomach resting gently atop it and his greasy shirts amplified by the daylight as the doorway opened and shut beside them. Feeling Ramon’s blade at his leg the man drew a curious expression on his round, cherry washed face.

‘By the Gods above! What sort of man carries a thing like that?’ He cried.

‘Don’t worry sir, we mean you no harm.’ Lenren said with a wave of his hand.

‘Ah well, that’s alrigh’ then. But anyways, what sort of man *needs* a blade like that around here?’ The man asked, glancing to Ramon.

‘We come from Ceraborn.’ Replied Astriel, and the landlord’s gaze shifted to meet hers.

‘Oh, I sees, well then...’ and his jovial tones trailed off, as did the smile across his face. His brow furrowed and he looked from one rider to the next. ‘Ceraborn you say?’

And the man turned to study the men around his Inn house before turning back to the table.

‘Been rumours, suppose this makes it true then?’ He said, gently tapping at the blade. Ramon grunted

disapprovingly and the man quickly stopped and straightened.

‘Been some terrible things said about that place, that the place is as quiet as graveyard.’ Said the landlord with a nod. He scratched his jowls and furrowed his brows.

‘He only sent you four then?’ He asked.

‘Brodon has sent us, yes.’ Ramon returned, visibly angered.

‘Rumours are that Tharandal hasn’t had a man step foot around the woods or the ruins since the day after the attack.’ Said the Landlord.

‘And why’s that?’ Lenren asked with a curious air to his voice.

‘Well, these is just rumours o’ course...but they say that they have *seen* the dead. Said that they *hear* them, those that was lost in the fires of the place.’

‘Just rumours, I’m sure.’ Said Astriel quickly with a false smile. The landlord’s beady eyes flicked to meet hers and he nodded slowly. Melran sat quietly, simply listening to it all, knowing it to be true. These were no rumours of some drunkards who had mistaken a tree for a devilish beast, or the mists of the night for the shallow shadows of spirits, these were signs of what had come upon that land, and it terrified her.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Deep ravines cut through the lands of the South. Rivers, streams, and estuaries ran like veins and gathered in small lakes and pools along the way to the coasts. The riders came down a steep, well-trodden embankment and dropped into the shallow stream which slithered through the valley, with boulders and fallen elms gathered amongst the waters, until at last they could see their destination clearly. Tharandal, High Lord of Sera, looked along the ridge of the mountainside until his eyes fell upon the place. It was a magnificent site, built deep into the mountainside and overhung with charred grey granite, now streaked with copper tributaries as the salts ran along its surface in the summer sun. Beside him, the Sister Nemara rode her mare, a speckled white Caspian of great size. They had abandoned Tharandal's men and caravan a few miles south of Arisen and would meet with them later in the evening.

Looking upon the ancient chapel, Tharandal found his lips curving into a vicious smile. The soft scent of the sea, not five miles South of them, hung on the spring breeze and about the cry of distant gulls echoed amongst the cliffs above.

'I told you of its beauty.' Nemara remarked as she came beside the Lord.

'Indeed, you did, but I never thought your words *so* true.' The Lord returned; his gaze unmoved as they set off again along the shallow waters.

They came, eventually, to the bank of the stream and the beginning of the large curving road that led up the cliffside to the mouth of the chapel. It was a narrow road, large white slabs laid carefully along certain sections and with two crumbling ruins which seemed to have once been guarded gates.

‘Who built this place?’ Tharandal asked, looking forward to see the Sister riding before him. They were at a light trot now, nothing more than walking pace.

‘That I am not too sure of, the scriptures say little of the acolytes that came before the conquest.’

‘You mean to say that this is Elder Folk lore?’ Tharandal answered sceptically.

‘No, the faith of The Sister runs as the water below us, from the depths of the Earth and through the mountains. It has always been.’ Nemara returned softly. And as they climbed higher the Lord saw the cliffside had been carved away at certain points, and in these crevices sat small relics made of that very same stone. Most were small statues of one kind or another, showing a figure in a flowing gown. On the wall itself were etched runes, their ravines thick with moss now, but they appeared in a language he had never seen before. It was neither Elder tongue nor Dark Tongue, and certainly not something even the Maesters had ever come across.

‘You have many questions.’ Nemara said as they came to the top of the place, the mouth of the chapel dark and unnerving. It swallowed all light, and the winds rattled about it and made it moan. Nemara dismounted and looked about the place, Tharandal knew not for what reason.

‘Yes, indeed I do. But I imagine you cannot answer them.’ Tharandal returned, unmounting his own ride, and straightening his cloaks. Looking out, the entire valley below seemed a distant memory, vague visions of streams and lands that now appeared as minute as a bug on a tapestry. Tharandal shivered slightly as a breeze lifted his cloaks, and here the smell of the sea was greater than he had anticipated. But he heard no gulls, nor the sounds of the stream or the cries of any animal about the place. The silence, save only for the cries of the shadowed opening, was deafening.

A few moments passed, in which both riders marvelled in the sites about them. Soon after, and Nemara removed her riding cloak, letting it fly away into the valley below them. She took a long, deep breath and began to remove her robes.

‘What is this?’ Tharandal said, shocked as the woman came towards him in nude.

‘This place is Arathac, Home and Temple of the true Goddess, The Sister. This place requires all those who come here to remove themselves from the bonds of the life they knew before. The Sister was natural, and so should we be.’ Nemara returned, smiling at the Lord, and waiting.

The Lord looked around, sure of their seclusion, and then turned to face the opening to the chapel.

‘We are alone my Lord; you need not be embarrassed.’ Nemara said as he turned back to meet her gaze.

‘Embarrassed?’ Tharandal returned in a disgusted tone.

Soon after and the man was the same as the Sister before him, his robes neatly folded and placed on the ground before his feet. He was cold and was glad that now the Sister beckoned him towards the opening of the place. The opening, a wide and semi-circular one that was smooth to the touch, had been left bare to the savagery or nature, but except for a few cracks and short spouts of fauna, seemed untouched from the day it had been built. The interior of the place was a marvel, large white stone slabs extended out into the far shadows and the ceiling had been carved away and painted, now harbouring the remnants of the vision of The Sister upon a mount, with her tablet of commands for them. It was an image portrayed by the Sisters of Arisen, as recognisable now as the sigils of the great houses of the lands. As Tharandal looked about, he saw great pits of burning flame in the back of the place, gyrating columns of bronze, silver and copper flame unlike any he had seen before. The light in the place was almost sentient, seeming to show what it desired and to cast immovable shadow into corners where things best lay hidden. The fires made the place warm, and to Tharandal it could have been that he were wearing the finest silk gowns and riding furs he had ever known, for his skin felt so soft and smooth, and his mind so rested and cleansed, that he lost all thought of the valley that lay beyond the entrance way.

Soon they came upon a stone altar, in the flickering light the Lord saw that the thing was sculpted to show two

maidens holding a large bowl above themselves, this bowl formed a trough, but it was empty. He turned, facing Nemara who was trailing behind him.

‘This place, you said –’

But he was cut off by a low humming that slowly rose around the two figures. The man shook, his eyes darting about the place to find any hidden occupant. He found none. He turned his gaze back to Nemara, now stood at the altar and holding her arms towards the ceiling, she was performing some kind of prayer to her Goddess. Tharandal moved closer to the woman, and she turned to face him then with eyes that glowed in the flickering darkness of the chapel.

‘You wish to become King of these lands?’ Nemara asked, her soft skin touching his own.

‘I... I do.’ Tharandal returned, his voice quivering as he felt her next to him. Her eyes studied him, and then she lightly touched his arms and ran her palms along them, warming the blood in his veins.

‘And you know the sacrifice that must be made?’ She said.

‘I...I do.’ Tharandal returned, he choked on the words and his worried eyes shifted beyond Nemara.

‘Do you pledge yourself to the Goddess of All, the True Goddess of Us, The Sister?’ She asked, raising her voice, it echoed around him like a lion’s roar.

‘I do.’ He was surer of himself now.

‘Good, for there is no going back once you vowed to The Sister. She can give life and take it.’ The Sister said with a warning smile, and from behind her she pulled a small blade, its handle made of bone.

‘The blood of the Elder Folk are within you my Lord, if you are as pure as you say, then the Sister shall give to you what was taken.’ The Sister said, softly pressing the blade against Tharandal’s right wrist.

‘I am sure of it; the lineage of my blood is without question. My powers, hidden for so long, a sign of my *pure* blood. I welcome The Sister into my soul, into my being, to be her warrior amongst these conquerors’, and to take the throne of Ceraborn as is *my* birth right.’

The Sister smiled anew, and as the Lord looked into the shadows of the ceiling above, he felt the blade pierce his flesh and the warm trickle of blood escape his veins. What followed, the patter of the droplets upon the floor, and the light sensation that began to take hold of him, stopped only when Nemara placed the blade upon the alter and steadied the man. She led him to the bowl, blood still running from his wrist, and she moved her own hand along his arm so as to squeeze him of every drop. The stone, now tinged with dark red, slowly drew a clear water. To Nemara there was no specific origin of this water, and Tharandal’s vision was blurred such that he was beginning to lose all sense of his environment.

Slowly the bowl filled, and the blood mixed with the water and then settled at the bottom of it, as water and oil, and the flames of the fires beyond them began to burn brightly. The humming came to sombre end, and Nemara turned to face the Lord, his eyes unfocused and dancing from one corner of the chapel to the other.

‘There will be no crown for you my Lord.’ She said, and the Lord’s eyes slowly rolled over to meet her gaze.

He looked scared, as if in that moment all of his senses had realigned. ‘And now the Sister must take her sacrifice.’ She said softly, the edge of her lips curving slightly as the man’s face turned to horror. His legs buckled beneath him, his arms weakly hanging.

‘I am purebred of the Elder...my powers... you saw them...’ He said, his voice harsh and cracking.

‘No. When I came to your side, I sensed you may have Elder blood, but it was not you I sensed, it was the girl.’ Nemara returned, pulling the man over the bowl.

‘But... I....’ The Lord struggled in the grip of the priestess. The bloodied waters swirled beneath him now, turning black and smelling of decay.

‘Be quiet now my Lord, we all make mistakes.’

And with a final motion she cut the man’s throat, his cries soon engulfed in his own gargling. His body writhed in the woman’s grasp, and his blood fell into the waters below and were consumed to the darkness within. A moment later and she heard it call to her, a faint whisper. She closed her eyes, her bloodied hands grasping at the walls as her eyes rolled over. She came upon the vision, clouded by the darkness that surrounded it.

I smell her. The beast grumbled.

Nemara did not answer, and in the darkness, she saw no sign of the creature with which she was now bonded.

Fire will come upon them. The voice said with a terrifying cry.

I will watch them burn. It cried.

And as Nemara turned to face the darkness she saw it, as if the creature were beside her. Its grey scales and bright reptilian eyes watching over her in the shadows.

Who sent you? Nemara asked, though her mouth did not move.

You shall see, you shall see...

The vision faded, but the terror remained.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The still smoking ruins were less than a few miles from them now. A line of husky redwoods flanked either side of the dirt road, and a thin layer of ash had settled atop the higher canopies. The day was clear, bright skies overhead with the sun burning high. These were quiet parts, and they met no one on the ride which would eventually lead them to Cerran. To the East, like a distant vision, stood the spiralling towers of Tharandal's keep, watching over the valleys. Ahead of them, forking West and East, the road came to a stop as a thin line of redwoods forked the road. Lenren halted the company here, and beside the road an ancient well sat with a bucket to draw fresh water. These were plentiful lands no matter of the time of year, and the Elder folk had dug away at the lands that led to the first settlements and had found more marvellous things than I can possibly recount. They watered the mares quickly, and it seemed that even Lenren was stalling them now as the distant spires of grey lifted into the clear air.

Having taken the West road, the familiar road that Melran had taken with Benji soon came upon them. The girl remained quiet, though she felt the burning glare of Ramon on her neck as they rode towards the old town. To the right of them, where open fields now lay untended and the last withering roots lay stay, were makeshift tents. At first glance you would think them perhaps tradesmen or merchant tents, ones which would have once held

sprawling lines of bowls, weapons, or charms. But a quicker inspection showed tables that were soaked in blood, now dried, and staining the surfaces. There were six of these tents, all with upwards of ten or so tables. Some still had buckets and blades stashed in the corners, whilst others bore nothing more than pilled boots and armour. Astriel dismounted and, upon entering of the tents, looked about the place. A bucket beside one table made her eyes water, the decaying foot and the charred remains of a hand were swarmed by flies. She spat at the ground as she felt the sickness in her stomach rise.

‘This is the work of the Sisters.’ She said as she returned to the roadside, mounting again.

‘Aye, always the first to arrive.’ Lenren responded in a mumbled, half-caring tone. Looking at her companion, she saw his eyes fixed upon the road ahead, and she sighed heavily as she realised that this would only be the beginning of the horrors they would encounter today.

Atop a hillock they came to another stop, looking down they saw the devastation the beast of Cerran had caused. At the bottom of the valley, leading towards the old stronghold, sat the ruins of the place Lenren had called home. A dark mist seemed to hang over the place, like a fog, and the air was harder to breath as they came down the ashen sprinkled slopes to the outer buildings of the place.

They were met with crumbled spires and broken glass that sprinkled the dirt road.

‘We should walk from here.’ Lenren mumbled as he looked about him.

‘Aye, tie the horses here.’ Ramon agreed, dismounting, and leading his mare towards a post which held some hay and grain. The others soon followed and came back to the entrance on foot. Ramon drew his blade and kicked at the glass as he took the lead. They entered a main street and were flanked by the crumbling ruins of both stone and wooden buildings. Doors, cracked and hanging limply, opened onto bare exteriors that were scorched and blackened. The street itself was marked in soot, and the exterior of the building held scars of claws and the vicious flames that had engulfed them. Smears of blood gave way to imprints of hands and doomed footsteps which led into imploded taverns and houses. Looking around, they saw not a single house left untouched by the evil of the dragon. Melran came to a doorway, the top of which had crumbled away and now lay half blocking the entrance way to the building. Pushing a stone away, a limp charred hand became exposed. Lenren came beside her and pulled away another stone, the corpse was unrecognisable.

‘These people, they did not deserve this.’ He said, his voice cracking as he placed the stone back over what remained of his kin. Melran did not reply, her eyes fell to the floor as the true extent of the devastation came upon her.

For Ser Ramon of Garth, it was the smell above all else. The high smell of sulphur, mixed with the musk of burning wood and melted stone, made his eyes water and

his nostrils flare. It was a smell he would never be able to describe to another, and nor one he particularly wished to describe, he looked around and his eyes were drawn now to the corpses that surrounded them. Men, women, and children huddled together in the last embraces of fear and despair. There had been no hope here, no reprieve. This beast, this evil, knew no sense of compassion. The husk of an upturned cart, under which bunkered three small children, holding each other's hands in what the man realised was the sacred binding of the Gods, a group prayer, left him truly broken.

They came to the town square, and about them the small carts and stalls sat either burned or bound in thick layers of ash. The spire of a tall inn house lay atop the crumbled ruins of a corner street house, and there was a long trail of stone and splintered wood that showed the course the beast had taken. As they walked through the place, they heard more wreckage fall away amongst the streets, and dust clouds rose and fell as the buildings shifted and slowly fell into themselves.

'I imagine no one will ever return here.' Ramon said as they came to the edge of the square, looking out now to the straight road that led to the stronghold beyond.

'No, I imagine not.' Replied Lenren softly.

'Are you alright?' Astriel said, placing her hand gently on the man's back. He turned and gave her a weak smile, his eyes glistening with held back tears.

'This place, I have... *had*, fond memories. This was no great place of legend. It was a quiet, peaceful place where a boy could watch as legions of men walked the

streets. It made you proud, made you *want* to do your part.' He said, his voice a hoarse whisper.

'You need not hold back your tears my friend.' Said Ramon as he joined in Astriel at placing a hand upon the man's back.

Lenren smiled at them, and tears fell from his pale face. Ramon turned to face Melran, who herself was still facing the ruins of the town.

'Do you sense anything?' He asked her, joining her in looking over the devastation.

'No, there is nothing *alive* here.' She mumbled, looking up to meet his steely gaze. The man nodded and cleared his throat.

'Come,' he said, 'we must move on.'

They walked along the path as a group, Lenren only slightly ahead of them. Only Ramon had his blade at his hand, whilst Astriel kept her cloak and hood tightly about her.

'The beast is at slumber?' Lenren asked, his gaze falling to Melran.

'Yes, like Velgar said, these beasts will fall to slumber once they have their plunder.' The girl replied.

'And what of the rumours? Of the visions of the dead?' He asked.

'They are true, I sense them though I cannot commune with them.' Melran returned, her eyes falling to the forest that flanked them on the left side. Overhead the skies began to darken, and the breeze held a chill unlike anything they had none thus far.

‘What is it?’ Said Astriel as she came to Melran’s side, and the girl suddenly noticed she had fallen behind the group. Amongst the trees, in the shadows where the darkness seemed most black, she heard something stir.

‘I sense something.’ She said, and below her robes she felt for her dagger. ‘Something is watching us.’

The group halted, and beyond the first line of the trees came the distant crackling of branches. At once Lenren drew his blade, as did Melran and Astriel. The winds became rough around them, and the darkness seemed to seep from the forest and with it came the wails and cries of those who had been rumoured to haunt this place.

‘My God,’ gasped Lenren as he saw the spectres come forth. ‘, it’s true.’

And before them, parting the thick branches and crushing the leaves beneath their feet, came the lost souls of Cerran. These were the men of the stronghold, still clad in sparkling armour and untouched by flame or fierce claw. They were perfect, perfectly true in form, except for the misted vapours which flickered from them as they stood at the edge of the forest.

‘Nyrmor.’ Said the nearest of these men, of which Ramon totalled sixty score or more, and amongst the darkness he seemed to find more with every glance.

‘Nyrmor?’ Repeated Lenren, his blade angled before him, sweat beading on his palms.

The nearest of the spectres, a man of youthful appearance, turned to meet the eyes of Melran. He looked down upon her with an unearthly expression, his eyes without colour and unblinking as the leaves rustled about him in the winds.

‘Nyrmor.’ The man repeated, his voice echoing along the winds, the word repeated by his kin amongst the woodland.

‘The beast.’ Melran said, and the spectre nodded slowly.

‘What is it?’ Asked Astriel, her voice betraying her fear.

‘The name of the dragon, Nyrmor.’ The girl returned, sheathing her blade, and offering out her hands as a sign of peace to the spectres.

‘Why tell you this?’ Ramon asked frantically.

‘They know who we are, they know why we are here.’ The girl returned, and again the spectre nodded.

‘Why are *they* here? They should amongst the lands of the Gods?’ Lenren asked.

Melran turned back to face the spectres of the forest.

‘They’ve been protecting it... they’ve been making sure no one else gets killed.’ She answered, her voice hushed.

Lenren flashed a glance to the men in the woods and saw them nod in agreement.

‘They are Gall.’ Said Astriel all of a sudden, her mouth wide in shock and her eyes unblinking.

‘Gall?’ Asked Ramon, easing his stance a little.

‘Yes, men not of this world but without home in the land of the Gods.’ The woman replied quickly, straightening, and nodding to the men.

‘You mean to say that they have chosen to protect this place?’ Ramon asked.

‘Yes, and they will do so until the beast is dead.’

Melran stood quietly now, watching out into the darkness of the forest, meeting with the eyes of the creature she had been followed by since she had first come to Cerran. It was much the same as how it had been then, though now its hood shrouded a skull. *His power is returning*, she thought as she looked eyes with the creature.

I could kill them all right now. It said, as Melran felt the world around her fade away.

I could watch them scream in agony as the might of these men bore down on them, tearing flesh from bone without mercy. Imagine it, young one, imagine the sounds of their screams.

Melran struggled to keep herself awake, and her eyes watered as the bond began to break.

The beast has served its purpose, and these little pawns are the perfect way to kill it. It will make them weak, perhaps even maim them. I shall enjoy watching you all, in the fires of Cerran.

A hand grasped Melran's shoulder and shook her back to the edge of the forest. As her eyes re-focused, she saw no sign of the spectres at the edge of the woodland. Instead, only the four of them stood on the road that led towards Cerran.

'What happened? Did you commune with them?' Astriel asked, now on crouching beside the girl.

'No... No, I just...the beast is waiting.' Melran answered, her voice hoarse as she came back to the world around her.

'You bonded with the beast?' Asked Lenren.

Melran nodded, and as she turned her gaze from his to Ramon's eyes, she was met with a fierce look of untrust.

‘We must hurry, whilst we still have the sunlight.’ Melran answered, hurrying along the road as the skies overheard darkened and thick clouds rolled over the stronghold ahead.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The two towers of the stronghold entrance, half crumbled and parading their inner stairways to the open countryside, were the first sights that beheld the company as they came upon Cerran. From within the place a thick mist, almost snow white at the edges, poured out long grey vines of smoke and ash. The ground was heavily ridden, and large pools of dark water smeared with blood and broken bodies littered the way. Chainmail, helmets, and spears lay upon the ground, as if thrown in desperation to lighten a man's futile escape. There were men too, or at least pieces of them, scattered and stripped of most flesh as the wolves and crows fed in plenty.

The company halted at the entrance, looking about the walls of the place, or what remained. Trunks of redwoods, some one hundred years old or more, lay upon the ground like litter, stripped away from the surrounding walls as if they were nothing more than a twig to the serpent that now dwelled there. They could not see into the place, and as Ramon scouted the West side of the structure, he found a large hole through which the smog was just as impenetrable.

‘Can you sense anything?’ Lenren asked of Melran, as the girl traced her fingers along the marks left by the creature's talons.

‘He is asleep, but he waits for us.’ She returned gravely, the mark itself as big as her.

Lenren sighed and bent down, from within his cloaks he produced his bow and arrows. He ran his fingers along the curving edges and pulled at the strings.

Astriel sat beside him and they counted the arrows, twelve in all.

‘Is this all we have?’ She asked, looking to her leader with worried eyes.

‘Do not fear, the tips have been laced with a poison.’

‘And how do you know that they will find the creature’s hide? Especially if the beast is scaled as Velgar said.’ Ramon enquired as he joined them, the tip of his longsword cutting at the ground beneath his feet.

‘The beast is not impenetrable; it is no god or demon. It is flesh, flesh and blood.’ Lenren returned, palming off the question Ramon has asked him.

‘What have you got?’ Ramon asked Melran as she looked to them. Removing her riding cloak, she unsheathed her dagger and he nodded.

‘Is that all?’ He asked.

‘Aye, my strength is not with my sword.’ Melran answered confidently. Ramon grumbled an inaudible reply, though Melran guessed it was one that held little hope or appreciation for her talents.

Lenren lifted himself and looked towards the entrance of the stronghold.

‘We shall need to contain the beast as much as we can. I suggest that we enter as two groups, one from the side and one from the front. We can use the mist to our advantage.’ He began, ‘We can then look to draw the creature from its slumber.’ He glanced to Melran.

‘I can wake it, but once awakened then we cannot fail.’ Melran warned them, and they all nodded in uncertain agreement.

‘We will use arrow fire to keep the beast from entrapping any of us, but we must use brute strength and speed in our own attacks. I think Astriel has the best chance of any to get close to the creature.’ Lenren continued, and he saw the flash of terror across Astriel’s face as he spoke.

‘If you can get close enough to the beast, find a mark, then I can focus my arrow fire on those marks. Once the beast bleeds and the poison begins to take effect, we can begin our final assault.’ He said with as he unhooked his riding cloak and pulled his quiver bag across his shoulders, letting it rest against his back.

‘And what of Hellblaze?’ Ramon asked, looking to his own blade as it shone in the dying light.

‘That will kill the beast.’ Lenren said confidently, and then turned to face Melran again.

‘We are trusting you now, with everything we have. No matter what our arguments or misgivings along the way may have been, we ask now that we all come together and fight as one.’ He asked, stretching out his hand. The girl took it, and confidently shook the man’s hand.

A few moments passed, and the silence was deafening. They prayed, each in quiet, and to which Gods I do not know. But a man who fails to pray before a battle is a man ill-prepared for the consequences it may bring. Astriel and Ramon moved away into the darkness of the

West side of the place, whilst Melran and Lenren stood at the entrance.

‘Are you ready?’ Lenren asked after a short while.

‘As I’ll ever be.’ The girl returned with a furrowed brow. As Lenren looked to her, he saw that again she was dirtied, her hair frizzing, and her skin blotched with dirt and mud.

‘How will I know that you’ve...bonded?’ He asked. Melran threw a quick glance to the West side of the stronghold and sighed. ‘You’ll know.’

They passed over the entrance way as quietly as they could. Leaves rustled by unfelt winds as they came into the darkened courtyard. About them was quiet chaos, and in the dim light they were saved from some of the sights that they might otherwise have come across. The place was a maze of carts, stones, irons, and woods, all sprawled about the place and some overlapping and intertwining with one another. Deep crevices appeared before them, a thin layer of squalid water and the remains of some poor soul who had been crushed under the weight of the creature. Large, tattered swaths of banners hung torn and clawed at, some lay as depressed masks over bodies and carts. There were crows, though Lenren noted few of them, atop the remainders of the parapets, much of which had been pulled down or hung against the walls like limp appendages.

Across from Lenren and Melran, the two other archers descended into the place with equal trepidation. Ramon went first, unsheathing his sword quickly and edging forward to meet the mists as Astriel climbed over the rubble to meet him. Beside them was the remnants of the

old forge and stables, now a husk of broken and bent irons and crushed stable blocks. A few, seemingly untouched, bails of hay sat in the very corner of the place, and Astriel shivered as the thought of what had once been here entered her mind. They did not call out to one another, instead they hoped they would meet together again amidst the clouds of smoke and ash that seemed perpetually swirling in the place.

‘This is unnatural.’ Whispered Ramon to Astriel as they ducked under a large broken timber and made way down the side of the wall.

‘All of this is unnatural.’ Astriel returned, her keen eyes scanning every possible angle for the slightest movement. And she felt the sweat beading on her brow, but her hood and cloak remained tightly bound.

About them they heard nothing, not a single solitary sound. Even the crows above them seemed silent, only observing them as they walked through the ruins.

They moved deeper through the place still and found more bodies. Some had been trampled, some were slashed and torn with dried intestines now staining the damp floor of the place. Some were charred, with melted helmets and chainmail fused with bone and not an ounce of flesh upon them. Of some there were only limbs, a hand grasped a spear and a boot still with a foot inside it. Edging along the wall the two came to a tall pile of Earth and rubble and looking up they saw the swinging remains of the old pulley system that led to the parapets. But still they heard nothing.

‘I thought a beast as big as a dragon would make some noise.’ Ramon whispered cautiously, expecting at

any moment to snapped up in the jaws of the unseen creature. Astriel nodded, again her eyes scanning around them. She kicked a stone, but again it made no noise and her mouth dropped. She moved slowly back and patted her friend on the back to draw his attention away from the rubble. With his curious brow raised she repeated the move again.

‘Something is wrong.’ She said to him, looking around them and quickly drawing her blades.

‘Sorcery.’ Ramon affirmed.

Lenren sat his quiver bag against the wall, covered by a small and hopefully un-collapsible cove where men had sat and drank over a roaring fire, and nodded to Melran.

The girl was stood slightly before the cove, and as she looked outwards, she felt her foot hit a small stone. Silence, and only then did she realise what had become of this terrible place.

Well now, who do we have here? The voice grumbled from within the mists. The girl froze as she felt her head begin to pulsate and her eyes rolled to white. The bond was like nothing she had experienced before, so strong, and true.

Look upon your work young one, look upon what you have done here. Now I lay in slumber, fat from the meat of those worthless men. I can still taste them now, so tender. Have you brought me more food? It asked her, and she fought to remain standing, balancing herself against a nearby fallen chunk of parapet.

My work? I did nothing. Melran replied, unsure of where the beast lurked.

Oh, but you did young one, he told me everything about you. I remember your kind; I remember when they used to beg for mercy. I have slain so many of your kind, faced countless Kings of Elder Folk as you would not believe. It mocked.

You know nothing, foul beast. I was taken over by him, he took from me something I can never retrieve. I did my duty. Melran returned angrily.

Indeed, you did, and perfectly. Quite the little soldier, aren't you?

Melran felt her strength waning as every second passed, and Lenren could do nothing but watch as she slumped against the wood and slid towards the floor.

He is far more powerful now young one. He will return, oh his glory shall be unlike anything you have ever seen. The serpent gloated, and Melran could be sure of hearing it lick its lips as it spoke.

We come from Ceraborn, to kill you Nymor. She returned, every word taking an age to form. But the beast did not respond, it had not heard its name, so ancient that even the Elder Folk had not known its origins, spoken.

You come to kill me? I have destroyed this stronghold when it held so many men. If you wish to join them then so be it. The beast returned.

You will leave this place, or you will die. This is by the order of Brodon, King of Ceraborn and Ruler of the Western King-

But the beast was quick to cut her off, and she felt the pressure in her head rise as the last embers of her reality began to fade away.

Do not speak for a King of Men who you yourself do not serve. Filthy creature if I do not have your head than he will have it instead! The serpent cried, and from the depths of the shadows came a terrible whale and roar. And the grounds about them shook, and debris rained down about them as they ran for cover at either side of the courtyard. The mists began to rise as the wings of the beast unfolded, crashing against the sides of the place, and enveloping all in the beast's darkness.

And as Lenren looked outwards, he saw his friends dashing to cover as the rubble fell around them. Of the girl, he now could not see, and the terrible roars of the beast shook him so that he dare not move from his spot. All fell silent then, though his ears rang, and his stomach turned, his skin grew cold as the winds of the beast thrust against him. He moved within his cove, peering out from the darkness, and was met with the gaze of the dragon.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The beast's eyes stared down at the man with a soulless energy. It was raised high above them, the crest of its head parallel to the tops of the battlements of the stronghold. It snorted, thick clouds of dust and ash flew in every direction, and a forked tongue slipped through cracked lips as it smelt the air around itself. Lenren slowly turned one arm from the beam above his head and scrambled the darkness behind him, searching for his quiver bag. He found it, pulled at one of the arrows and brought it to the bow. The beast watched over the courtyard, unmoving apart from its huge amber eyes which searched the corners of the yard for the intruders.

Lenren held the nock of the arrow, placing it softly between the string of his bow. The harsh sound of stretching bowstring caught the beast's attention and it turned its crocodilian snout towards the darkened crevice. Again, it snorted, breathing in the misted air which rose around it. It turned its head, the sound of bone cracking as it did so, betraying the beast's stationary nature since it had taken the stronghold. Lenren dipped between the beams of the crevice and aimed, sighting the neck of the beast which hung in sagged crests of twisted grey-scaled skin. He fired, the arrow flying as true and straight as any he had fired before. It whistled through the wind, hit the beast and the head lodged itself between the scales where the white flesh of the creature lay exposed. The dragon flailed its forearms, snapping away the arrow and gnawing

at the wound. Only now did the company see the teeth of the creature, as tall as a man and viciously sharp, each like mountains with jagged edges, the bottoms stained yellow.

The beast shook its head, refocused its gaze and lowered itself down towards Lenren's hiding place. It was blocked however, fallen debris and broken carts lay upon one another like an uneasy tower, but the eye of the beast seemed so bright as to vanquish all shadow about the archer. It blinked, sighting the man and again bared its fangs. The smell of its breath lingered, wrapping itself about Lenren and choking him with the fumes of death and decay. He vomited, bending to a knee, and held himself against the side of the hole. As he did so, and the pattering of his sickness echoed, the dragon roared. Its roar was mighty, like a hurricane cut through with the harshest thunder. Even the beast itself seemed hoarse, like the sound itself caused it pain. Still, it waited beside the cavern, watching for the man as he stumbled to find his quiver.

Astriel watched over the beast, its gaze focused solely on Lenren. She moved quickly; her feet as light as falling snow. But the roar of the beast shook all about her and sent her tumbling into a crumbled ruin of rock and wood. Splinters and jutting stone cut at her cloak and only now did she unbuckle it and move on with her armour alone. She ducked, barely a few strides from the beast, where a cart and barrels shielded her, and drew her blades. She gripped the handles tightly, the shimmering steel glistening in the glum light of the place, and the handles

cold to her palms. She moved across, edging to look over the barrels. A quick glance showed her the crocodilian snout of the beast open wide but still focused on Lenren. She let out a deep breath, her heart racing and sweat lining her hands as she readied to make her move. She was quick to roll to the side of the cart, which came to the neck of the creature, before sprinting across the bare yard until she came to pull herself onto the animal. At an instant the dragon swung round, and as she pulled herself onto its neck it shook her with all its might. She slashed at the beast with her blades, aiming for the parts where the scales met and showed thin crevices of snow-white flesh. The beast roared as the blades cut away at its skin, and its jawed snapped wildly as it fought to shake the attacker from itself. Suddenly the beast threw its head back as a blade hit its neck, and the bony crest atop its skull fell down onto the archer. She was knocked away, slammed against the side of the creature as it swung its head to back around to find her. Astriel scrambled to her feet, grasping her blades as she felt the creature find her. Again, it roared, and the shadows of its wings fell over the girl as she ran along the side of it, one blade stuck into the running crevice, blood spurting for the wound as she went along.

The sound of its left horn scrapping against the side of the stronghold, ripping timber and bending metal as it went, rang in Astriel's ears so loud that she felt that her eardrums were sure to burst. The terrible screeching stopped as a part of the wall came down, smashing against the animal as it lifted itself away from the wall's edge. As the rubble fell about her, Astriel turned quickly to glance

back, seeing the long snout of the animal closing in on her as it turned its titanic body around.

Its nostrils flared and its eyes narrowed, white nictating membranes enclosed around the amber pupils as flames bellowed forth from nostril and mouth. The girl ducked, sliding along the courtyard until she came to piled rubble of the highest wall to the stronghold, above her the flames burst in wild veins of light, like lightning, and the heat of them scorched at her skin as he huddled herself against a bank of stone. She felt the heat, her armour seemed to crackle as the beast moved closer, still exhaling its hellish breath. Only then was she reprieved of the dragon's flame, as the bellowing cry of Ser Ramon swamped the courtyards, allowing with the rumbling of his boots on the ashen soaked stone. What he said, Astriel could not recall, but to say that they included many expletives, so she had never heard before, would be an understatement.

It was only as the beast turned, its snout momentarily obscured by the grey smoke of its fires, that Ser Ramon of Garth realised what he had brought upon himself. He was open to the elements, not a cart of wagon stood before or behind him, and the beast reared up high above him now. It roared, its wings unfurling to bathe him in shadow. And yet still he ran, knowing his death would likely come within mere moments, but uncaring in that moment for himself at all. He swung his blade at the beast as it came down, catching it on the side of its snout. Its jaws snapped together, whistling foul air past him as he ducked beneath

them and held his sword high to cut the beast's neck. His sword scrapped, sparking against the scales, but drawing forth a river of near black blood in his wake. He came toward the beast's right eye now, and again he snatched at it, cutting just below it, leaving a flap of skin hanging as the dragon brought a huge forearm down towards the man.

In the moment between the forearm crashing to ground, sending splintered wood and cracked stone flying in all directions, Ramon scanned the banks of the rubble for Astriel. He saw her, thin wisps of smoke rising from her upper back. Dragon fire had scorched the stones she held as shelter, the heat coming upon her armour and leaving it snapping and crackled. The girl seemed to be shivering, her blades wrapped tightly in her arms as she looked away from them. But that must wait, for the beast was upon him again, shifting its weight and bringing down its head again, snarling and grumbling as it came down to him. He rolled away, feeling the breath of the beast pass him as his blade stuck to something. He felt himself be pulled along with the blade, and as he turned, he saw that he was in the air, the blade stuck into the gums of the dragon's mouth. The creature clawed at the sword. But as it did a quick barrage of arrows came flying towards it, four flew and three found clear marks in the side of it. Again, it roared, tipping its head towards the skies as it bellowed. Ramon held to the grip of his blade but felt his shoulder tiring. Whether it was luck or not that, as the beast swung its head upwards, the blade dislodged, he could not decide. But he fell away, crashing onto the wooden platform that had once been held high above him.

He groaned, but for the most part seemed uninjured from his fall. He lifted his head and felt blood trickle down his neck. He patted it and shook himself as shadows encircled his vision. He growled pulling himself from the platform and landing hard against the stone of the courtyard. Here, he felt for the wound, a sizeable lump had started to grow about the cut that still wept his blood.

‘Ramon! Gods man, are you alright?’ Cried Lenren as he pulled the man towards his hold. Ramon staggered along, shaking himself back to the world as he fought for clearer vision.

‘We must get Astriel, she is hurt!’ He returned, his voice groggy and hoarse. He turned, seeing Melran in the corner of the place, her own face a field of mud and her nostrils thick with coagulated blood.

‘Is she alive?’ Ramon asked Lenren as his friend reloaded his bow.

‘Aye, but she has not stirred yet.’ The archer returned as he ducked down below the beams and fired again, the roar of the beast ringing around them.

‘You must cover me, I will get Astriel.’ Ramon returned, wiping his bloodied hands against his cloak and his blade against his trousers.

‘I have six arrows remaining, and five have hit the beast.’ Lenren said confidently. But as Ramon looked at the man, he saw his friend’s eyes wild with panic.

He turned towards the beams and ducked below them, eyeing the beast as it searched for them. He took in a deep breath, eyed Lenren and nodded.

Chapter Forty

Astriel felt her skin wither beneath her armour. She felt the armour plating, and the leather strapping underneath, depress into her skin and leather its mark as the heat burned through the stones she had taken as cover. Her hands shook uncontrollably, and her teeth chattered, cutting at her tongue. She lifted her hand away from the floor, slowly moving so that she sat against the wall of rubble with her legs stretched before her. All seemed quiet to her, the ringing drowning out any noise that tried to come to her. She let a blade gently floor to the floor, and moved her hands to her face, she felt the ash the covered her skin and felt for any wounds. A thin cut underneath her right eye, caught by her own blade or by the jagged edges of the rocks as she had slid into them, she did not know. Mixed with the dirt and ash it felt more like a deep gouge than a slim recess.

As the ringing in her ears began to fade, slowly at first and seemingly echoing about her skull and drumming against her eyes, she began to reclaim her thoughts. She blinked, gasping as the shooting pain of the cut caught her again and again. She turned her neck and felt the back of her armour plating as it began to cool. Her hands were shaking less now, but she still fumbled with the dagger that remained in one of her hands. Only now did she turn fully, lowering herself onto her stomach and lifting her upper half to look over the rubble and view the courtyard. She saw the beast, flailing as arrow upon arrow was fired into its left side, and they came to look like a delicate

ladder up to the beast's throat. She had seen four come upon the beast's hide before Ser Ramon came to her side, his hair wild and his bloodied and bruised. His armour was crushed around his lower waist and streaked with blood. His cold blue eyes held a wild stare as he came to the girl's side, resting his blade up towards the beast.

'Are you hurt?' He said, his voice a harsh whisper as the beast drew flames upon the western wall of the stronghold, causing huge chunks of timbers to fall.

'Not too much, I can still fight.' Astriel answered, wincing as she pulled herself to a crouch.

'You look hurt.' Ramon returned quickly.

'Well, you don't exactly look like a King right now either!' She returned.

Ramon's lips curled into a rare smile and he shook his head in disbelief.

'I should leave you to the beast.' He returned, not looking away from the courtyard.

'I could handle it.' Astriel replied quickly.

Ramon opened his mouth to answer her, but as he did so the beast turned its long neck towards them, baring its fangs to them and roaring. Its speed was frightening at that moment, coming down upon them within a heartbeat, and crushing the rubble before them with its tail. Bits of timber and iron stuck into the creature's back end as it rose, ripping away at them with its clawed forelimbs. It beat its wings, bringing a cloud of smoke and ash across the courtyard like a waterless wave, and Ramon only just managed to clamber atop Astriel as the dust and debris came towards them. Ramon turned his head as the dust around them plumed again as the dragon took a swipe at

the wall behind them, bringing a large section of stone and timbers crashing towards them. He pulled Astriel up, Hellblaze lifted high, and ran at the beast as it brought its head down to meet them. It roared, the flickers of flame deep within its throat. But as the creature went to exhale it yelped in pain, quickly turning away to reveal an arrow embedded into its eye.

It frantically clawed at the thin wood, the thin membrane and thick eyelids conjoining as the shaft snapped from the head. Almost at once did the pupil begin to blur and wisps of murky fluid filled the eye.

Ramon took his chance, slicing at the creature's throat, drawing a thick line of flesh and sinew as he brought his blade down again. The beast went to move, but again Ramon came hard with his sword, sticking it hard in the wound as the creature roared anew.

'Go!' He yelled, turning back to Astriel as Lenren came over the flaming wreckage of the cavern to pull his friend into the hole. Astriel went reluctantly, Lenren pulling at her arm with formidable strength.

Ramon turned back, and as he did so he plunged his blade deeper into the neck of the beast.

Astriel was thrust into the darkness of the cavern.

'We cannot leave him out there alone!' She called, trying to get past Lenren.

'Astriel, stay calm! We need to be focused!' He returned quickly, blocking her way before turning back. Above them the timbers of the wall began to creak and crackle, as the wall above them began to fail.

‘We need to get out of here!’ Astriel cried as Lenren produced his final arrow.

‘Get the girl!’ He cried, keeping his eyes on the courtyard as they began to move forward. Astriel searched around the place, but in the shadows, she found no sign of Melran. But as she began to search again, the place now empty save for her. She felt the thin slithers of dust as the wall began to crumble.

In the courtyard, Ser Ramon had dealt the beast blow after blow, his chest plate now coated in the blood of the beast as it gushed from the wound. But now his arms were weak, his shoulders feeling as though they would drop from the rest of his body if he issued another strike to the creature. And as he pulled the blade from within the neck of the dragon, it roared and batted the man away, causing him to be smashed against the side of the cart where Lenren and Astriel had emerged from. Astriel went to run to the man, but as she moved the beast turned to face them, its brow furrowed in anger never seen and with smoke pouring from its nostrils as it prepared to exhale another fury of flames.

Lenren stood before his friend and aimed towards the beast as it snarled, edging itself closer towards them. Beneath its weight the stones and muddied grounds of the courtyard gave way, but the beast did not care. It growled low; its eyes unblinking as it lowered itself like a serpent ready to strike its prey.

Come for me. Said a voice in the mind of the creature, a small weak voice that held little hope and reeked of fear.

I brought you here and look at the pain you have endured. You are now serpent king here, you are a Wyrn of no-good reputation. The voice cried, and as the beast turned itself towards the girl who stood before the great wall of the stronghold it allowed the bond to form again.

You dare speak to me, peasant girl. I am more powerful than you can imagine. I am a lieutenant of Rhamanthor, Lord of All and Mighty King of All these lands. The dragon returned, now edging towards the girl.

Melran stood alone, atop the pile of debris that was banked against the stronghold's wall. Above her were the collapsed parapets on which she had taken the lives of Commander Maar and Benji. The beast looked up to that place now and then returned its gaze to her.

You feel shame. Shame and sorrow, you are weak little one. You are no true messenger of Him. It growled.

He wants you dead foul creature! That is the truth! You are nothing to Him! Melran cried back, feeling herself be pulled apart by the bond as it ripped through her mind like an uncontrolled storm.

You lie! The beast returned, rearing up and spreading its wings, its grey body stained with its own blood and torn flesh. But as it roared now, with its wings unfurled and its jaws wide, a final arrow found its mark in the wound that Ser Ramon had dealt it. A great gasp came from the creature. And it fell away onto the floor of the courtyard. It lay, barely breathing, weak forelimbs scrapping at the stone to pull itself back up.

Melran came to the side of the beast, to its clouded eye.

Do you serve him truthfully? It gasped, the bond beginning to fade. Melran turned to face the company that stood away from the creature, Astriel and Lenren holding Ramon as he staggered with Hellblaze held limply in his hand.

I serve my King. Melran returned, turning back. The dragon seemed to smile, and with a final long inhale of air it said its final words.

His power grows now, he will return. Choose your side carefully or face the consequences. It wailed and fell into an unawakenable slumber.

Melran swallowed hard, her head was pounding, and her arms shook. But the bond was broken now, and the feeling of the shadows was, for now, lost. She shivered as the grey clouds overhead began to spit rain upon the courtyard, the last embers of flame searing into nothing. She turned and walked from the place as the west wall came crumbling down. She looked back as she came to the entrance, and saw a tsunami of stone, timbers, and earth as they fell and rose in an unnatural tide. The body of the beast could not be seen from the entrance, and as the last sections of wall came down soon after, it was likely buried beneath the ruins it had once ruled over.

Turning to face the company she found them standing, looking over the wreckage. Each was bloodied, bruised and with torn or broken armour. But they were alive, and they had won.

Epilogue

The remainder of the day drifted by without celebration. They clambered down the road that led to the ruins of Cerran, stopping often with exhaustion, until at last they came upon the wrecked streets of the old town. They did not encounter any spectres at the side of the road, and neither did they hear the sounds of the town crumbling around them. All seemed quiet, peaceful.

They found their rides, saddled up and rode back towards the village where they entertained before. Again, it was a quiet ride. The spitting rains slowed, and eventually halted to reveal a spring salmon sky, dotted higher with stars. The breeze was warm and soft, like a well needed blanket, and the smells of the forest wafted through the trees and brought with them the songs of the birds and the insects of the place.

Ramon rode at the back of the group now, his eyes seeming to fall greyer as the day passed by. His braided hair had fallen, now wild and tangled in a mess of mud, ash, and blood. His riding cloak, which he used to wipe his bloodied armour, lay at the side of the road some miles behind them. Indeed, he was so quiet than none amongst the company realised that he diverged from them some miles before they came to the edge of the Colmare as evening set in. They dismounted and tied their mares, Astriel the first to turn back towards the road in hope of seeing the archer returning to them.

‘Let him be, he needs time.’ Lenren said, everything about him seeming tired and weary. He patted his mare and glanced towards the road, thinking to himself: *I hope he is alright.*

Astriel turned back but said nothing, and as they entered the quiet tavern they were met with the same jovial landlord as before. He was stunned at their reappearance and claimed he would lose two silvers after betting they would perish. He gave a hearty laugh and then served them with three tankards of ale and a large tray of hot meat, breads, and cheeses.

They sat at the same table, each resting themselves against the soft leather of the chairs and smiling to themselves as they began to realise what they achieved.

‘You did well.’ Said Lenren, lifting his tankard and looking over at Melran. She half-smiled and nodded.

‘I mean it.’ He said, taking a long gulp of ale and sighing as he put his drink down again.

‘Thank you, Ser, though I did little, if anything, in truth.’ She returned.

‘Little or nothing? Ha! My girl, you saved us from that dragon. Without you I would never have made that shot.’ Lenren returned to her.

‘But Ser Ramon –’

‘My girl, Ser Ramon has suffered greatly over his years of service within both the Kingsmen and the archers, he will return to Ceraborn when he is ready.’ Lenren said with a smile.

Astriel squeezed Melran’s hand and nodded to her.

That evening they took a room at the inn house, and without having to pay. The landlord was glad to have them and said that the famous ‘dragon slayers of Ceraborn’ would make his tavern twice as popular now. In the darkness of the night, when the earth is at its quietest and the moon is in his highest point, Melran sat unable to sleep. She felt the bond surround her, clutching her with unseen hands and pressing down upon her. She let it in, it was futile to resist.

You have done well young one, the beast is dead, and the stronghold destroyed. The voice said, in a thin hushed voice. *Now begins the second part of our plan, he is pleased with your work.*

How can he know? Melran answered, fearing what she already knew.

He sees all, watches over his servants. You have pleased Him most of all. Replied the voice.

Good, now can I please go. Pleaded Melran, only for the voice to begin a dark laugh.

My dear, we are only just beginning. But your time shall come, your freedom is guaranteed once the tasks are completed. The voice returned.

And what task is next? Asked Melran, clutching for air as the bond grew tighter around her.

With the stronghold wiped out, the next target is clear to Him. Destroy the naval fleets and passages of the Kingdom. Cut Brodon, the Pretender King, off from his allies and watch his power burn away. The whispering messenger said.

You mean Korgen? Melran asked.

Yes, my dear, the waters of Korgen are a place of great strength to Brodon and his allies, but those waters harbour dark things now. And it is only a matter of time before they come to the surface to feast.

The bond broke before Melran could respond, and cold sweat ran along her back and face as she shook uncontrollably. Tears formed in her eyes and she turned to face the sleeping company. It was all becoming too much now, all too real. People had died, by her hand and by His, and now she knew that more would soon follow.