



Book 1

SECRETS &
GUARDIANS
DEVIOUS INTENTIONS

H. Chambers

Secrets
&
Guardians
Book One
Devious Intentions
By H. Chambers

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Also by H. Chambers

Secrets and Guardians. Book 2: Conflicting Times

Secrets and Guardians. Book 3: When all Else Fails

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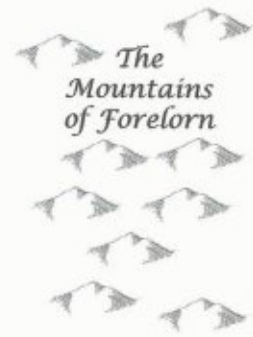
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Map of Pandean and Surrounding Lands



The Thantos Empire



 *Drumlin's Castle*

 *Kerdred's Castle*

The Ancient Forest of Pandean

● *Trimain*

The Spurin Gulf

● *Riftdale*



● *Wilinayne*

● *Brinkton*

Korin

Daranel

● *Capital Sirenia*

● *Capital Landra*

The Meridian Sea

Chapter 1

Shade lived in Trimain, a small village in the North West corner of Korin, close to the edge of the ancient forest of Pandean. Her mother, Summer, was the wise woman of the village and like Shade, beautiful. Beauty wasn't the only thing they possessed. Summer had taught Shade everything she knew about healing: what herbs and plants to use for everything from headaches to infections, spots to indigestion, sewing up wounds with horse hair, splinting broken bones and of course delivering babies. Now she was sixteen she was considered a wise woman in her own right. But there was one thing she thought she would never learn. Her mother had brought her a young kestrel when she was twelve. She was to train it, and this had been the hard bit, to 'mind merge' with it. Her mother had taught her how to meditate and visualise the kestrel in her mind, trying to feel its feathers, claws, wings, trying to see through the kestrel's eyes; learning to let her spirit fly. The kestrel will probably die of old age before I get the hang of this, she thought. Her mother had been very patient with her. 'If it was easy, everyone would be able to do it,' she used to say. Well, after four years the kestrel was well trained and she no longer fell asleep while meditating, but she was no further at mind merging. Until one cold winter's day whilst sitting in front of a roaring log fire, staring at the flames not really thinking of anything at all; Shade closed her eyes about to doze off and found herself looking at the snow falling. Feeling desperately cold, she shook her feathers.

Shade was so excited, her mother had finally agreed to let her go into the great forest by herself. Usually her mother went with her and even that was considered very foolhardy by the rest of the village. Everyone knew that the great forest of Pandean was filled with ghouls, ghosts, ogres, imps, nymphs, dark elves, bad spirits as well as wolves, poisonous spiders and snakes. When Summer kept being told how foolish she was, she would smile and remind them that as a wise woman, she had certain gifts herself and therefore felt very much at home in the forest. Sometimes the villagers never quite knew whether they should be afraid of her or not. It also seemed to confirm their beliefs about the forest and its unworldly inhabitants. Some of the men went in to hunt deer and trap rabbits but even they never went in too far and would never have stayed in after dark. This suited Shade and her mother as it meant the forest was more or less left alone, unlike the smaller forests which were sadly getting smaller each year. Shade knew her mother felt it was time she started taking over from her as the wise woman of the village. The responsibility daunted her. She knew

enough, but putting it into practice with someone's life depending on it, well that was scary. This morning though she did not have to think about any of that and picking up her basket she headed off to the forest, repeating again in her mind the list of plants and herbs her mother had asked her to get.

Shade's kestrel flew overhead, he would not go into the forest with her as he frightened the other birds. Shade entered the forest along a well-worn path her mother had used over the years and headed straight for the little clearing where a huge rock sat in the middle. Climbing up onto the rock she crossed her legs, closed her eyes, lifting her head slightly to let the spring sun warm her face. With the sun making her already strikingly blonde hair look as if it was streaked with silver, her pale delicate skin and elfin features, you could be forgiven for thinking she was some exquisite woodland creature.

High up in the branches Gadolin lay back against the tree and sighed, he had a perfect view of her. He had fallen in love with her mother many years ago. Summer used to sit on that very same rock and he on the same branch. When one day Summer had turned towards the tree and asked, 'How many more years are you going to watch me before you decide to say hello?' Gadolin had said nothing, he did not want his dreams to be shattered, where she fell in love with him and he held her in his arms. He was too afraid for the reality of her reaction if she saw him. He would wait until she was much older, when she stooped and her hair had gone grey and her teeth had fallen out. He put his head in his hands. One day, one day he would stand before Summer. She if anyone would understand.

Shade's kestrel screamed through the trees sending birds flying in all directions. He flew wildly around Shade, too wild for Shade to connect with him. She knew that only something wrong with her mother could make him act this way. Gadolin had exactly the same thoughts. Shade clambered down the rock and began running back through the forest. Gadolin, who was not usually one to panic, was throwing himself from tree to tree. Shade had only been gone a couple of hours. What could have happened? As she came close to the edge of the forest she could see smoke. Increasing her speed she ran out and had a clear view of the burning village. Thantos soldiers seemed to be everywhere. Running down the hill she began screaming for her mother. Their home was closest to the forest and she could just make out her mother standing there waving her long wooden staff at the soldiers. Shade shouted, not expecting her mother to hear, but her mother turned and looked in her direction. She made a gesture which Shade understood telling her to go back to the forest. Shade was still running, the momentum making it hard for her mind to think straight, she could not turn and leave her mother. As the thoughts came to her about what she would actually do

when she reached her, a rider saw her and turning his horse he started to head in her direction.

Summer brought up her staff and with every ounce of strength she could summon, hit the horse and rider. The horse reared up unseating the rider who fell badly at her side. She raised her staff again but the soldier rolled out of its path. Shade stopped and stared, the terrified horse ran past her mother knocking her to the ground. Slowly both her mother and the soldier got up and faced each other. The soldier's right leg was injured but now with sword in hand he hobbled towards her mother. She lifted the staff again but was no match for the trained soldier. The staff came down towards his injured leg, he managed to knock it away with his sword. Again and again Summer tried, each time the soldier was ready. Summer, weakened now, tried to send a blow to his chest. He caught hold of the staff and pulled her towards him, the blade of his sword going straight through her stomach.

For a second the world around Shade went deathly silent. Then the whole forest behind burst into the most uncanny sound, birds flying up screeching, wolves howled, the very trees themselves seemed to emit a low grumble of despair. Everyone turned, soldiers and villagers alike, towards the forest. The soldier still with his sword through Summer's stomach turned towards the forest. As he turned he saw not the forest but the huge talons of Summer's golden eagle aiming straight for his face. The speed at which the eagle hit him sent him crashing to the ground losing the grip on his sword. The few seconds the soldier was winded and disorientated was all the eagle needed, talons dug deep into the neck while the beak tore at his face. Shade just stood and stared unable to take in what was happening, the huge eagle spread its wings and rose up from the soldier covered in his blood, it let out a terrible cry, an arrow caught the bird in the chest. As one, all the sounds from the forest stopped, the eagle fell to the ground; Shade fell to her knees. Gadolin didn't fall, he could not leave the forest, he would never introduce himself to Summer, he would never see her again. He turned and slowly climbed down the tree and headed deep into the forest.

Shade looked up as a shadow touched her. A handsome young man, with thick untamed dark hair, hazel eyes and strong jaw got down from his horse. No knight in shining armour, no saviour, but the man who shot down her mother's beloved eagle. Her mother, if only she had stayed in the forest, if only she had stopped when her mother signalled her, it was her fault.

Kerdred looked down at the woman before him. His heart stirred, she had potential, she was beautiful and everything else about her was sound, she may prove suitable to bear his sons. He already had one bride, another beautiful woman with stunning black hair and olive skin. He reached out his hand to help

her up. Shade had other ideas. She ignored his hand and stood up facing him and for a moment just stared at him. He expected her attack and grabbed hold of her arms as soon as she started trying to hit him.

'My lady has spirit,' he said mockingly.

Shade started to kick out.

'Now, now I really wouldn't do that if I were you.'

Pushing her hard to the ground he got on top of her straddling her body and pinned her arms above her head.

'If you don't stop that I will call my men over and let them take turns with you, now you wouldn't like that would you?' said Kerdred a sly smile spreading across his face.

Shade closed her eyes, she felt desolate. In the distance she heard the sound of men shouting and people crying. The smell of smoke filled her nose, they had destroyed everything she loved and at that moment she decided to live in order to one day seek revenge.

Shade obediently followed Kerdred to a cart being loaded with barrels of ale. As he tied her to one of the wheels she looked up and glared at him, he slapped her hard across her face.

'You'll learn,' he laughed.

Kerdred went to help some of the men fill the carts, they were catching pigs and hens, while the rest were keeping an eye on the rounded up villagers. Kerdred was quite pleased he had only lost two men and his men had only killed a few villagers, although by the state of some of them who were left that number would probably rise quite a bit. He was however disturbed by the fact they had killed a witch. The people of Thantos were very superstitious and believed witches could come back and haunt you. Maybe he should not have killed her eagle either as witches are very attached to their 'familiars'. Probably best to have a stake put through her heart, chop off her head and burn her body; probably best to do that to the eagle as well.

It was the following morning that they left the village. Shade had been dumped into a cart with the barrels of ale. Her kestrel had flown close but she kept ignoring him she did not want Kerdred to know what she could do and she didn't want to put her kestrel in any danger. The journey back to Kerdred's castle took six days, following the line of the forest north west. They had only let her off the cart for a few short spells a day; by the time they reached the castle she was sore, bruised and filthy. She looked across at the forest, her mother had told her how vast it was, but only now after six days of travelling and the forest always being there did she begin to appreciate just how enormous it was. She turned and looked at Kerdred's castle, entering through the large wooden gates a

high wall surrounded what was for Shade an awe inspiring sight. She had never seen such a castle before, maybe she would not have been so impressed if she had seen the castle in Landra or in Sirenia or Kerdred's father Drumlin's castle, which was at least three times the size. Awe quickly turned to dread as she was led unceremoniously to her room, and left alone to contemplate what might happen to her.

Chapter 2

Shade sat in the corner of the great hall waiting. If hate could kill, then her husband, his father and his two brothers would be dead. She kept her head lowered. To stare across at them would get her a beating later and although Kerdred would not risk hurting his 'son' she was carrying, at eight and a half months pregnant she was tired, tired of everything.

She was waiting to be paraded in front of Kerdred's family. His father and brothers had come the night before, on their previous visits she had been kept in her quarters. Kerdred now had three wives each one picked only for their potential to produce healthy strong sons. Kerdred's two brothers were in fact his half-brothers, both red haired with light brown eyes that had touches of green in them, they looked far more like their father than Kerdred did.

Shade was a lot better off than many women. The average woman in Thantos had a very difficult life. Seen as property of the men they were expected to work hard, bear children, serve their men without complaint and consider themselves very lucky if they had a man who did not regularly hit them. Shade had learnt the hard way, at first standing up to Kerdred, then just giving him 'looks' as he put it, now she just usually kept her head lowered in his company; which he took to be a sign of compliance. It was however, hard to hide the total loathing she felt for him. The last eighteen months had been filled with beatings, rape and humiliation for Shade.

She heard her name mentioned.

'Come on then let me see the size of her, big I've been told,' laughed Drumlin slamming his tankard on the table. 'And more ale!' he said turning to one of the servants.

Kerdred's younger brothers, Hawke and Tremlin copied their father's, 'More ale!' much to his amusement; at fourteen and twelve respectively their father didn't mind them drinking and falling over after just a couple of tankards. However it would bring shame on his family if they couldn't handle their drink when they were older.

'Shade!' Kerdred commanded.

Shade stood up obediently and walked over to the table. She wore her specially made dress designed to show off her pregnancy to its full.

'Come here girl,' said Drumlin grabbing her by her arm.

She allowed herself to be pulled towards Drumlin. He roughly patted her stomach then went to her breasts squeezing them.

'It will not be long now, she looks about ready,' Drumlin said smiling at Kerdred. 'Your son feels as if he will be a good size too,' patting Shade's stomach again.

Shade wanted to ask what happens if it's a girl, but knew to keep quiet. If it was a girl, she would probably get a beating and the girl would be passed to a wet nurse. As one of the other wives was pregnant, the focus would turn to her, Shade would still be used to bear children, but the first wife to bear a son always held the greatest status. Shade was a wise woman, a witch, she was only meant to have one child, a girl, whose father should be of her choosing.

Drumlin slapped her bottom, 'Go back to your seat now, I have important things to talk about and can't have a woman around distracting me.'

Shade walked past Hawke and he nipped her hard, so shocked was she that she let out a cry and turned ready to slap his hand. She stopped herself just in time, lowering her head she backed away from him and hurried to her seat. Drumlin roared with laughter, Kerdred however was a little less impressed.

'Hawke, who does that woman belong to?' Kerdred said glaring at his younger brother.

Hawke put on a sheepish grin and turned for help from his father.

'Oh, Kerdred let him be, he's still young yet, maybe it's time we found him a young maid,' Drumlin interjected giving Hawke a sly wink. 'Now Kerdred, I need you to tell me how the plans are coming along, it will not be long before your brothers are old enough to fight by your side. They have a right to rule their own kingdoms,' said Drumlin.

Shade listened to their plans Drumlin wanted Kerdred to rule Thantos after him, Hawke to have Korin and Tremlin to have Daranel. There would be years of fighting; she tried not to think about all those who would lose their lives. She did not want to be part of it, nor did she want her child to be part of it. Her decision made, a small grimace crossed her face; how better to get my revenge than to die tonight while Kerdred's family are here, you shall never have a child from me, she thought. Up until that moment she had always thought she was carrying Kerdred's child, conceived through rape, a 'thing' growing inside her that would one day grow into an adult as evil and heartless as Kerdred. Some nights she dreamt the baby was a hideous monster with too many limbs and eyes. Now she had decided to take her revenge, the unborn baby became as much a victim as she was. Shade touched her stomach, something she had avoided doing, never wanting to feel any connection with his child. Shade bowed her head lower, clenched her fists and in her mind, to her unborn baby she said, I am sorry but I have no choice.

Shade pulled gently on the sleeve of a servant next to her and whispered something quietly to him. He nodded his head and approached the table where Kerdred sat. They were still deep in discussions and the servant waited patiently to be acknowledged. Kerdred looked up and motioned to the servant who then passed on Shade's message to him. Kerdred glanced across at her bowed head and nodded, the servant returned and helped Shade to her feet. Shade held on to him and over played her feelings of tiredness just in case Kerdred did look again in her direction. The great hall doors were opened and there on the other side, as she expected, the Nefkin sat waiting for her.

When she had first arrived at Kerdred's stronghold she had been surprised to see these 'apes'. Nefkins had a fearsome reputation as uncontrollable, intelligent apes from the mountains of Forlorn. Their sheer size and power made them dangerous, but their intelligence made them even more so. Fully grown they could reach over seven feet tall and were covered in silvery white fur which in certain light would take on a pale blue tinge. They had long powerful arms, when walking they stood upright but when they were hunting they ran on all four limbs. Shade had not been able to believe they could have been tamed.

Her Nefkin 'guard' had been trained the old way, his incisors had been pulled out and judging by all the scars you could see under his fur, beaten many times. He was called Fingal and was probably the only friend she had made in her time here. Kerdred did not know of her ability to join minds with other animals. She had been unsure as to whether she could connect with Fingal, being so closely related to humans but when she tried, he turned and faced her tilting his head to one side. At first it was difficult, unlike her Kestrel who was happy to feel the great excitement Shade experienced seeing through his eyes and then in time the love they each felt for each other. The connection between Shade and Fingal was one based on their mutual sadness and pain. Fingal knew never to give any outward sign when Shade 'talked' to him in his mind. They would sometimes sit together on one of the fortified walls looking out at the great forest. She pictured her village for him to see and how Kerdred had killed her mother, he showed her the terrible treatment he had received. There were times they were both just staring out at the forest with tears gently running down their faces. It was however Fingal's job to guard her, Kerdred had said 'protect' her, but Fingal was really there so she didn't try and escape.

As they walked away from the great hall Fingal's great arm reached out and touched her shoulder no one else was in the corridor, she turned and looked at him. His battered face looked sad and he gently shook his massive head. She had not been thinking properly, when she had realised what she had to do, the power of such thoughts had touched Fingal, he knew and the sadness was almost too

much for him. They walked quietly, both lost in their own thoughts and out onto the wall. There was a twenty foot drop, more than enough to kill Shade if she just spread her arms and fell, even if she did not die immediately the fall would certainly kill her unborn child. Fingal turned to Shade and opened his arms; she was so small next to him, this frightening monster of a beast wrapped his arms around her, gently holding her, making a low growling sound. She knew he was supposed to stop her, if she died he would be blamed, what would they do to him?

*

Gadolin went deep into the forest after Summer had been killed. After months of wandering aimlessly he finally headed for the ancient oak tree.

Many years ago he had entered the forest as a young man, badly injured he had sat resting his back on the oak and waited to die. As he slept he dreamt of the tree, its huge branches reaching down to him, a woman's face seemed to appear on the bark. The face was kind and smiled gently at him.

'You have a kind heart, do not blame yourself, there was nothing you could have done to save him,' the old tree said.

Gadolin thought that he must surely be about to die as to start dreaming about talking trees was not a healthy sign. The tree laughed, a rumbling sort of laugh causing the leaves to rustle. Gadolin joined in, he didn't realise dying would be this much fun. Opening his eyes he was surprised to find himself on one of the great branches, he looked down and there just where he had left it was his body. Well that wasn't so bad he thought, but what happens now? The bark of the tree undulated and there again appeared the face, a different place this time. The face smiled again and Gadolin felt a great sense of peace come over him.

'Would you like to stay and help me?' she asked. 'You can of course leave if you wish.'

'Where would this 'leaving' take me?' asked Gadolin.

The tree shook with laughter, 'Where do all good men go?'

'Depends who you believe, never been too sure myself,' replied Gadolin. 'If I stayed here would I be able to 'go' when I felt like it?'

'If you agreed to help me, you would have to stay in the forest. But yes, you would be free to move on when you felt like it,' she replied.

'As I have no idea whether this 'moving on' business is all it's cracked up to be, I think I would like to stay a while, but I can't really see how I can help you as I seem to be lacking a body,' joked Gadolin.

'That is something I can help you with, my name is Olesia and I believe yours is Gadling,' said Olesia.

'Gadolin,' corrected Gadolin. 'Pleased to meet you, can I just point out that I am still not sure if I am dreaming as it's not every day an oak tree starts talking to you.'

'It's not every day I talk,' said Olesia.

'So what is it you want me to do?' enquired Gadolin.

'Protect us, not just the oak trees but also the ash, lime, willow, yew, beech, hazel, alder, hornbeam, sweet chestnut, horse chestnut, birch, aspen, pine, all the forest trees,' said Olesia.

'There's a lot of trees in this forest, don't see how I'm going to be able to help them all,' said Gadolin bluntly. 'And anyway what am I protecting you all from?'

'When I was young, nearly one thousand years ago, the forest covered all of Daranel and most of Thantos. Now we are being killed from both sides, great yew trees over six thousand years old have been lost and many great oaks like myself cut down and used to build your houses.' Olesia said sadly.

'You don't want me to kill people who come into the forest to chop down trees, do you?' asked Gadolin who had in his youth helped his father on numerous occasions to chop down trees.

Olesia smiled, 'No, I would never ask you to do that, but humans are very superstitious and easily frightened by things they don't understand.'

'So you would want me to scare the living daylights out of them?' said Gadolin.

'Well that's one way to put it,' laughed Olesia

Gadolin should maybe have asked Olesia what sort of 'body' he would have but at the time everything was so surreal it never occurred to him. He lay down on the branch and went into a deep sleep. When he awoke he opened his eyes and remembered he had been talking to a tree, the whole memory seemed absurd. Had he really talked to a tree? Gadolin moved his right arm, it felt strange and a bit stiff.

'Oh no!' Gadolin screamed and jumped to his 'feet' and then immediately fell over. Slowly Gadolin examined his new body, it was big. It was generally the same shape as he had been used to, but now the skin was more leathery and was patterned like the bark of a tree, more disturbing than that was the 'vine' wrapped all over him. It was not separate, it was part of him almost like having all your veins on the outside, but with leaves! Again he tried to stand, this time taking it a lot slower. The stiffness he felt he realised was not from the vines, just the newness of the body. Slowly he bent and stretched, it was very strange. His 'hands' reached for his face, he would have given anything for a mirror at this

point. His face felt awful, all bumpy and lumpy, his lips coarse, his nose gnarled. Was he a tree? What did he eat? Did he eat dirt? No more roast chicken or ham or ale or honey!

Now when Gadolin thought back to those times so many years ago the thought of eating and drinking those sorts of foods repulsed him. He had soon discovered his new body needed plants, mushrooms, toadstools, seeds, berries all manner of things and all here in the forest. His body had proved perfect for living in the forest despite his appearance he was incredibly strong, fast and agile. His only real problem had been loneliness. He had many friends, some animal, some plant and some that would probably come under the heading of 'spooky'; but Summer had touched his heart. He didn't know if tree guardians had hearts as he had never felt anything beat in his chest, but now he could feel an ache right where his heart would have been. He continued walking deep into the forest. He had done everything Olesia had asked of him. Many of the superstitions that had developed over the years had been his devising. He had whispered in unsuspecting ears, jumped out at unsuspecting people and made noises that would have frightened the dead. Maybe it was time to move on, maybe when he got to Olesia he would sit by her and talk to her about all the good years he had had, but it was now time to say goodbye.

When he eventually reached the old oak tree he found an old woman sitting exactly where he had intended to sit, happily talking to Olesia. He felt a strange pang of jealousy, Olesia was his oak tree what was this old hag doing here?

'Hello Gadolin,' said Olesia shifting her face to look at him.

The old woman turned, 'Hello Gadolin,' she said. 'I need your help, I was just asking Olesia if I might borrow you for a while.'

'Well I was just coming here to tell Olesia that I had decided it was time for me to move on,' said Gadolin.

'You want to see Summer again,' said the old woman matter-of-factly.

'Well, yes,' said Gadolin.

'What I want help with, is to save Summer's daughter, if you leave now without at least attempting to help me, I wouldn't expect a rapturous welcome from Summer,' said the old woman.

'How can I help save Shade when she was taken by Thantos soldiers? She'll be locked up in Drumlin's dungeons somewhere,' moaned Gadolin feeling upset by the thought.

'Not Drumlin's dungeons. She has been wed to Kerdred and his sorry excuse for a castle lies close to this very forest, much further north of course,' said the old woman smiling at her own cleverness.

'I still don't know how I can help, no matter how close it might be, I can't leave the forest, so what do you expect me to do?' said Gadolin.

'I haven't a clue, yet, but you have been in my dreams and in those dreams you save Shade,' said the old woman pointing a bony finger at him.

'Why do you have such an interest in Shade? You're not some great aunt of hers or something are you?' Gadolin had wanted to add a few extra 'greats' but thought better of it.

'Shade is not my only concern, it's what she is carrying that I am also interested in saving,' replied the old woman patting her stomach.

'Child?' questioned Gadolin, 'yes, yes you saw that in your dreams too, I guess,' he continued.

The old woman smiled and brought the bony finger to the side of her nose and tapped gently, nodding her head at the same time.

'I get the feeling there is a lot more that you are not telling me, or are going to tell me,' said Gadolin.

The old woman shrugged her shoulders, 'Well are you going to help me or not?'

'Why do I feel you knew the answer to that question even before you came here?' said Gadolin.

'It's always polite to let people think they make their own decisions,' said the old woman. 'Bye Olesia, will have to stop by again, enjoyed our little chat.'

Gadolin looked towards the old tree, Olesia was smiling at him.

'Little chat? How long ago did she get here?' asked Gadolin.

'About twenty minutes before you,' replied Olesia.

Gadolin chased after the old woman who was setting quite a fast pace for her age, whatever that age was. Catching up to her he asked her what he should call her now that they were going to be together for what he suspected would be a long time.

'Ah now that's an interesting question, I've had many names, which one should I go by?' said the old woman.

Gadolin waited for an answer, she seemed to be thinking about it so they continued in silence. Three hours later she stopped turned to him and said, 'Call me Rona,' turned back and then carried on her relentless pace.

It was nearly two weeks before they arrived at the place in the forest which looked out towards Kerdred's castle. In that time they had hardly spoken, Rona occasionally sang to herself but apart from Rona's need to eat and sleep they had kept a good pace.

Rona looked around and pointed to a tree, 'Sit up there and keep a look out,' she said.

Gadolin sat on the tree branch and watched the castle only coming down to find food, Rona kept making the odd appearance and asking what was happening, as the weeks turned into months Gadolin recognised many of the people who came and went, he watched the guards, the boys training with the Nefkins, shop keepers and of course the occasional glimpse of Shade. Each time Rona appeared he reported what he had seen, none of it was very interesting. Then one day when Gadolin was starting to believe he was going to be sitting on this branch for years, Shade appeared on the wall, as usual with the Nefkin following behind her. As she turned, Gadolin could see she was pregnant. Rona appeared a few weeks later and seemed jubilant at the news.

'I knew my dreams never lie to me, I knew, I knew! Oh this is great news, how far on do you think she is?' asked Rona.

'I have absolutely no idea, but if you want to sit up here for a few weeks, you might just see her and then you'll know!' answered Gadolin.

Rona looked up at Gadolin, her face becoming more serious.

'I need to go and get things ready, do you think I have a few more weeks?'

Gadolin looked down at Rona, he was surprised to see she looked worried.

'Yes I think you have a couple of weeks,' he replied.

Rona nodded her head, 'I need you to come with me, If I am correct when the time does come you will have to act fast to save her'.

Gadolin followed Rona into the forest.

'This is as far as I dare risk, too far and she may die, too close to the castle and we may be discovered,' said Rona. 'I need you to learn the route so you could run it in your sleep,' Rona added.

'How can I stay in the tree and watch, and at the same time run backwards and forwards from there to here and back again?' asked Gadolin.

'I will start coming every other day from now on, this will give you time, in my dream Shade was very heavily pregnant,' said Rona. 'Now don't just stand there, get back to your tree!'

As Rona had promised every other day she came and Gadolin ran to their 'secret' place. Each time he returned to it, Rona had added something new. First a small hut woven through the trees, you could walk past within a few feet and still not see it, then two beds, then pots and pans, a small table and chairs, it was beginning to look very homely.

As the weeks passed, Rona told Gadolin more about herself.

'If you can 'leave your body' why are you getting me to watch Shade? Couldn't you just go to her room and see for yourself,' asked Gadolin.

'Yes, I could, but she might see me,' replied Rona.

'Would that be a problem?'

'Of course it would, if she saw me, then she'd want to chat and then I'd make her feel better,' said Rona as if the problem in this was obvious.

Gadolin gave Rona a puzzled look.

'In my dreams, Shade has no hope and is filled with despair. She has to stay that way for her to do what she needs to do,' Rona added.

'And what does Shade have to do?' asked Gadolin sensing he wasn't going to like the answer.

'Try to kill herself,' said Rona smiling.

One evening Gadolin was sitting in the tree when he saw Shade now very heavily pregnant and the Nefkin standing on the outer wall. There were guards wandering back and forth close to them, but they seemed to be taking very little notice. Maybe she was just taking some fresh air. He watched them carefully. Shade turned to face the huge Nefkin who wrapped his arms around her.

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Shade stepped back from Fingal and looked into his scarred face. She felt more terrible about what they would do to him, than what she was about to do to herself. Turning she walked to the edge of the wall and spread out her arms. Fingal sprang forward grabbing her in one of his mighty arms and jumped from the wall. Landing heavily but still holding her safely to his chest, he set off running using his free arm to increase his speed. She moved her left arm to around his neck to be able to hold on more tightly. Shouts went up, archers ran to the place where Shade and Fingal had been standing just a few moments ago.

Unsure as to whether they should fire at Kerdred's wife or more importantly Kerdred's 'son' they hesitated. Seeing they had a clear shot at the Nefkin, they began firing. The delay had allowed Fingal to get some distance between the wall and the forest; but it was never going to be enough. The arrows began to reach their target. The first one caught him in the shoulder, the impact nearly knocking him to the ground. The next two went into the lower back, one only just missing his spine, the last went through Shade's arm stopping it from going straight into Fingal's neck. The arrows stopped, the archers knew they had done enough. Fingal had slowed, struggling to keep moving for each step was agonising. He could hear the men shouting from the wall, they would soon come after them with dogs. Why had he thought this would work? Even if he made it to the forest the men would soon be able to catch up to Shade, then Kerdred would probably keep her a prisoner until the baby was born, and after that? He had tried to save her when he realised how she cared more for him than she did for herself and now what had he done? Pain racked his body, he forced himself

forward reaching the edge of the forest. He stopped and looked back, they were coming through the gates now, with their dogs. He forced himself to carry on. Shade had been quiet, just holding tightly to him. He hadn't even realised she had been hit.

Shade knew what he was trying to do for her, tears ran down her face at his bravery. When he finally succumbed to his wounds she would be left to face the soldiers. She couldn't even attempt to escape in her state, but for some reason being taken back into the forest gave her hope. This part of the forest was a long way from where she had lived, but it was still the same magical forest. She could no longer feel any pain in her arm, she didn't know if the wound was serious or even fatal. The thought pleased her, to die at the hands of Kerdred's own soldiers, for them to have killed their master's unborn child! Fingal dropped to his knees and gently lay her on the ground. She sat up using her good arm and looked at him, he met her gaze for a moment, their minds connecting one last time before he closed his eyes. She touched his face her hand staying there as he slowly slid to the ground.

Gadolin jumped down from a tree next to Shade. Shade looked into the emerald green eyes of the 'log' and fainted.

Typical thought Gadolin, although he felt this might actually be easier. Gadolin bent down and snapped the shaft of the arrow off. He ripped part of the hem of her dress and tied it around her arm and the remainder of the arrow. Lifting her up he turned to look at the soldiers and dogs, who were not far away now, turning once more, he ran.

Being a Tree Guardian meant he smelled of trees; a difficult scent to follow in a forest. He hoped that they would all be making so much noise at first that none of the dogs would think of following the noise he was making as he crashed through the forest. Shade's weight wasn't the problem; when he had practised the route before, he had not thought about carrying a body, with legs sticking out at one side and the head at the other. After nearly decapitating Shade at least once, he had to slow down and keep angling his body this way and that to get her safely through the trees. If that wasn't bad enough, Shade began to stir, she might wake up and scream or fight him so much he lost hold of her. Her eyes opened but she did neither, she simply closed them again and let him run with her in his arms.

When he eventually reached the hiding place, Rona was sitting waiting. Probably another dream, he thought. There were six wolves calmly lying around, untroubled by his sudden appearance.

'Take her straight in the hut,' commanded Rona and followed him in. He put Shade on one of the beds and Rona tore off more of her dress. 'Take this back

and leave a false trail,' Rona said. 'And make sure it leads as far from here as possible.'

As if he needed that advice. Gadolin wondered whether Rona had the wolves there in case the soldiers and dogs had managed to follow him.

Gadolin headed back to where Fingal lay, Kerdred had now taken charge. Gadolin watched for a while from his vantage point up a large tree before deciding to start the false trail heading south. He jumped down, making enough noise for the dogs to hear, trailing the torn bit of dress he headed off. What fun he had over the next few days, leaving false trails, back tracking, dropping next to individual soldiers and whispering 'Boo!' Making unearthly noises now and again just to add to his own amusement. He continued until they gave up completely. Kerdred seemed almost bedevilled by Shade's disappearance and raged at the forest, his men and even the dogs. Gadolin returned to the hiding place where he had left Shade. Rona was on a tree stump outside the hut looking quite tired.

'Thank you Gadolin,' she said, 'you are free now to go, if you want'.

'How's Shade?' asked Gadolin.

'Shade and her baby girl are doing fine now. I had to induce the birth so I could give her the medicine she needed for her arm, I'm afraid she doesn't remember much about the last few days,' replied Rona.

'Can I go in and see her?' asked Gadolin.

'She's probably still sleeping, but yes you can,' answered Rona.

Gadolin entered the hut and there lay Shade with a small bundle tucked under her right arm. The other arm was all bandaged and there was a nasty bruise on the side of her head where Gadolin had misjudged the space between some trees. Gadolin looked down at the bundle and gently pulled the cloth from the baby's face, he decided he might stay around for a while longer.

Chapter 3

Kerdred returned to his quarters, dropping his sword on the floor and taking off his breast plate he then fell onto the bed. The last few days had been a nightmare, his emotions in disarray. He did not know what to feel, could not believe what had happened. According to the men on the wall, the Nefkin had, for no apparent reason grabbed Shade and ran into the forest with her. The archers had managed to kill him, but what had happened to Shade? There were many of his men who believed she had been carried off by some sort of ogre or other ghoulish creature as the dogs at first could find no trail of her to follow. They had then been 'played' with, causing dogs and men to be searching in all different directions. Someone, something had Shade and he had to believe she was alive.

Kerdred was surprised by how much his heart hurt at the thought of never seeing her again. She had learned to bow her head, not to speak back to him, give him what he wanted, but he knew he could never break her spirit and he admired that. He had told himself it was a good quality his son would inherit, he had not admitted to himself, until now, that he loved her. His father would have scorned him, women were for men's pleasures and to bear them sons. Love was a weakness, it clouded men's judgement, made them fools. Kerdred had also known that the woman who was killed in the village was Shade's mother. He had heard Shade call out to her, which meant Shade was probably a witch too and he should have had her burned. In Korin and Daranel witches were accepted, they were treated with respect there but in Thantos they burned.

When he stood in front of her all those months ago, he had wanted her, all of her. When later he realised he would never have her mind, her soul, her heart, he had hit her even more. Now she was gone. He lay there thinking about her, doubt filling his mind. Had she managed to arrange all this? Did she wait until his son was due and then take her revenge? Would she have her son and bring him up to hate him? Did witches have sons? He had never heard of a witch having a boy, did they take some kind of potion that ensured the child would be a girl? Kerdred had always made sure Shade had no access to anything she might be able to use against him or anyone else. If she could not ensure having a girl, would it be possible for her to have a boy? Kerdred sat up pushing his thick black hair away from his face, his hazel eyes stared out in horror at what he had just considered. Why do witches only have girls? What would a boy be, born of a witch? The stories of wizards were told to all young children, their powers far

greater than any witch. Frightening stories with dragons and spells that brought the dead from their graves. Kerdred had always loved these stories and had laughed when told they were true. 'Fairy stories to scare us, that's all they are,' he would say.

Ridiculous he thought to himself, just get some sleep, your minds not thinking straight.

'Huh, wizard!' what are you thinking about.

Kerdred lay down again. But if she was to have a son and he was a wizard, she might have needed to escape to protect him, especially while he was a child. Anyone in Thantos young or old who showed 'unusual' abilities was killed, just in case. The fear the people had of going back to those dark ages had always seemed a bit irrational to Kerdred, but maybe there was more truth in those stories than he had believed.

Kerdred's heart began to fill with dread, what had he done? His father was right, love had made him a fool, blind to the obvious. Shade was a witch and the Nefkin, who he had assigned to guard her, had become her 'familiar', the Nefkin of course would die for her, just as the eagle had died trying to help Shade's mother. He could never tell anyone what he now believed, but he must always keep looking for Shade and her son, they both had to die.

Chapter 4

Thirteen years later.....

Eldin sat back in his creaky old oak chair. It was old when he first arrived at the castle, five years ago, he probably should have asked for another one but had never quite got round to it. Anyway he had grown fond of the old chair and it would probably be one of the few things he would miss when he left. Leaving was the only thing on his mind as he reached out for the overly ornate wine goblet, filled with dark red wine. As he drank the aches and pains in his body began to ease, his eyes closing in thought. He was only in his early fifties, but the last few months had been a bit of a strain, he didn't like being away from Riftdale and the Library. He longed for the routine, the peace, the toilets. The capital, Landra, might seem to be a thriving town with people always rushing here, there and any other place they could think of, but to Eldin it was just noisy, overcrowded, rat infested and smelly. At least the wine was good.

It was his own fault that he was sitting in this creaky chair, in a small room, in a large castle. Five years ago he had agreed to come and teach the Prince and Princess. Riftdale could always do with the extra money and at the time he had wanted the prestige associated with the job. Well, lessons taught and lessons learned. Princess Amicia, 'Ami' to her friends, so Princess Amicia to him had been fine to teach. She enjoyed most of her lessons and although she wasn't the brightest student at least she tried. Hylaw on the other hand had become an absolute nightmare. If arrogance equalled intelligence, Hylaw would be the greatest student that had ever existed. Hylaw was naturally smarter than his sister but had recently lost interest in learning anything. He spent the time messing around, disrupting Eldin's carefully worked out lesson plans. Eldin had wished he could just take him to one side and give him a good thrashing, or better still just tell him where to go and never come back. At least now, with the King probably only having a few days left to live, he would soon be able to leave. Prince Hylaw would become King Hylaw and he would become redundant. He liked the King but wished he'd hurry up and die. Prince Hylaw was now eighteen, old enough to take the throne; he would then be Aberrling's problem. Eldin smiled at that thought, Aberrling was probably the only person he considered a friend in Landra. He was the King's advisor, his right hand man, some even dared to say carer, a man who was far cleverer than he appeared. As if on cue there was a knock at his door.

'Come in.'

Aberrling entered and took his usual seat. Unlike Eldin who was tall, thin and still had a reasonable head of black hair, all being it was showing signs of grey, Aberrling was short, plump and completely bald.

'I'll get straight to the point Eldin.'

'Please do.'

'When, oh how do I say this, when our dear King passes, are you leaving?' said Aberrling.

'I think you know the answer to that, my dear friend. I have not made a friend in Prince Hylaw, I made a commitment to the King, which I tried to fulfil; once the King dies I will be free to leave,' replied Eldin.

'I thought as much,' said Aberrling sitting back in his chair, obviously ready to say more, but thinking about how it should be phrased. 'I will miss our chats.'

'As will I.'

'I was wondering if I might have the book? I think I would like another look at it,' Aberrling asked.

The book Aberrling was referring to Eldin had bought from a merchant along with three others. It was well known that anyone from the Scholastic Guild paid good money for books regardless of content or condition. This particular book had fascinated Eldin, who had then lent it to Aberrling. He seemed to be even more taken by the book's contents than Eldin. It was a small book, the first half concerned itself with reading body language. The premise was that you could tell whether a person was lying or telling the truth by how their body reacted. The second half of the book explained how to put someone in a trance like state; so you could then ask them questions which they would answer truthfully or ask them to do things which they would obey. There was more to the book, but that's what interested Eldin and Aberrling the most. So they had practised on people, without them knowing, first on the body language and then the 'trancing' of people, as they put it. 'Trancing' was mainly tried on prisoners with varying degrees of success, but some success they did have, so they kept trying. Aberrling began to spend a lot of time practising on one particular prisoner, a spy called Brandon.

It was some weeks later that Aberrling had come to Eldin's room looking as if he had just seen a ghost.

'I have just nearly had an innocent man hanged,' sighed Aberrling. 'Fool that I am, I missed the obvious flaw in that book.'

Eldin looked at Aberrling, 'What flaw?' he asked.

'One man's truth is another man's lie,' replied Aberrling.

'What do you mean?'

'Think about it, supposing you told Glint something, a lie but he believed it to be true, when he then told other people it would be 'his' truth. He would be unaware that what he was saying was in fact a lie. If he told me, whatever it was, I, reading his body language would also believe it to be true,' said Aberrling looking as if he was confused by his own explanation.

Eldin adjusted his black robe and sat back in thought.

'Oh dear,' he said eventually.

After that Aberrling didn't bother with the book anymore; relying on his own instincts, spies, informers and the occasional bribery to ensure the safety of the kingdom and, not least, himself. Eldin was therefore surprised by Aberrling's request for the book.

'I had Glint make a copy of the book,' said Eldin.

'What! You let your apprentice read it?'

'That is what he does in his apprenticeship, when I was an apprentice you'd be very surprised at some of things I was given to transcribe. One day you will have to come to Riftdale and see our library it is a wonderful sight to behold,' said Eldin. 'So anyway, yes you can have the book. I will ask Glint to bring you the copy.'

'You're probably wondering why I appear to have changed my mind about the book,' said Aberrling thoughtfully.

'I think it might have something to do with Drumlin and his sons?' replied Eldin.

'Kerdred's envoys insist they have no intention of invading Daranel, but who would have thought Kerdred and his brothers would have invaded Korin. I sometimes feel the King has been unwise not to have helped Korin more. Now that Kerdred has made his brother Hawke, King of Korin, I wonder what ambitions Kerdred's youngest brother, Tremlin has. I'm afraid that when our King dies, Kerdred might just see Daranel as an easy target,' said Aberrling.

'Kerdred, King of Thantos, when his father dies, Hawke, King of Korin and Tremlin, King of Daranel,' mused Eldin. 'That I would not like to see,' he added.

'I told the King many years ago, I thought that had always been Drumlin's plan for his sons,' said Aberrling.

'As you know I have no love of Prince Hylaw; will he take this threat seriously?' asked Eldin.

'Unfortunately, when I approached him on the subject, he said there would be no problem as he would have Princess Amicia marry one of them,' sighed Aberrling.

'After the way he's been behaving lately, that's the sort of dumb thing I would expect him to say,' replied Eldin, 'I understand why you want the book.'

'Yes, I need all the help I can get, especially if I can perfect the trancing, I have a few prisoners who I believe know more than they are saying and they are not the sort that would break with a bit of torture,' said Aberrling.

'I sometimes forget how difficult your job must be at times,' said Eldin looking very concerned.

'My friend, do not worry about me, I am at my best in a crisis,' smiled Aberrling, 'I must go now, with the King dying there is a lot I need to attend to'.

When Aberrling left, Eldin's focus returned to his wine. He thought about the King, Prince Hylaw, Aberrling, but soon his thoughts drifted back to his concerns about 'Truth'.

As a scholar, his whole life was supposedly about gaining knowledge and ultimately wisdom. As he was now on his third goblet of wine his thoughts became less coherent or as he thought, being on his third goblet of wine, more coherent. Supposing everything was a lie, nothing was real, he wasn't real, the world wasn't real, time didn't really exist...

Glint came to the door; he could hear Eldin snoring. He quietly pushed the door open and walked over to Eldin, he resisted the urge to shout, 'Boo!' Instead gently tapping Eldin on the shoulder.

'Master,' said Glint

Eldin stirred and opened his eyes.

'Ah Glint, what is it?' said Eldin sleepily.

'It's the King, sir, he's dead,' said Glint.

Over the next few days everyone in the castle was busy preparing for the funeral. Eldin was busy packing, he had been surprised at how quickly a letter had arrived from King Hylaw stating his services were no longer required. Eldin thought the new King would have more important things on his mind, but obviously not. He planned to leave a couple of days after the funeral, this meant he could show his respects to the old King and keep the new King happy by not hanging around.

Glint mooched around looking decidedly fed up, he'd had to give his copy of the book to Aberrling and he was leaving Princess Ami. He had been studying the book, but for different reasons. Reading peoples body language, for him had meant trying to see if Princess Ami was attracted to him or not. He had always known there was no chance someone like him could ever really marry a princess, but emotions outweighed common sense.

A week later Glint was putting the final box in the back of the wagon. If you took out the books there would be hardly anything left, thought Glint, who was still not happy about leaving. It was still very early and quite chilly, Glint turned to wait for Eldin to appear. As he glanced up at the castle he saw Princess Ami's

face looking down at him from one of the windows. She usually wore her mass of auburn hair up in a ponytail but Glint could see it was down, framing her beautiful face. He wanted to run up to her, grab her in his arms and tell her how he really felt, instead he lifted up his hand and gave her a friendly goodbye wave. He didn't even wait to see if she waved back, he turned, climbed onto the front of the wagon and stared ahead. He didn't want anyone to see he was crying. It wasn't long before Eldin was sitting next to him and taking the reins. They began their long journey to Riftdale.

Ami watched as the wagon pulled away. She would miss Glint. Thinking about all their fun times together, watching him grow from a small skinny boy into a tall skinny young man. She had loved to tease him about his lack of muscles, his unruly mop of black hair and his long 'girls' eyelashes. She kept watching from the window, not wanting to turn away, not wanting to believe she would never see him again.

From another window Aberrling was also viewing their departure. He had asked King Hylaw to dismiss Eldin as quickly as possible. He had told the King it was time the princess was 'betrothed', he had used the excuse that he believed the princess had feelings for Eldin's apprentice, which was true. What he hadn't mentioned to the King was that he wanted Eldin in Riftdale. Eldin's misguided sense of his own intellectual superiority had made him easy to 'trance'. Giving Eldin all that important information, he hoped hadn't been a waste of time.

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The Marven Circus was nearly ready to leave Landra. The circus had been named Marven after its founder; he had sadly long since died. He died after a particularly fine performance, he took his bow to rapturous applause, walked back to his wagon and dropped dead with a heart attack. Many considered this a good way to go. His identical twin sons, Ghale and Ebblin, had since taken over the circus. They were not identical now, due a badly aimed knife thrown by Ghale which had left Ebblin with a noticeable scar on his right cheek. Apart from Ebblin, the rest of the circus thought this was very useful and could at last tell them apart.

No longer a big circus, it was still always popular wherever it went. It consisted of Ghale and Ebblin, who were acrobats and knife throwers. Bella the fortune teller and dancer. Breaker the strongman. Mankin, the Mankin. Unlike a Nefkin a Mankin has a much gentler nature, they are not quite as big and covered in a mixture of red and brown hair. A Mankin would be really upset at even being compared to a Nefkin, being, in their opinion, far more intelligent

and certainly not as savage. Mankin had been offered many names by the others in the circus, but he always shook his head, he didn't feel like a 'Tilley' or a 'Fidian' or even a 'Kalon'. Eventually they gave up suggesting names and just called him Mankin, he had just shrugged when they told him. Humans are never happy unless they give a name to everything, he had thought. There was also Snapper, a small scruffy stray terrier, who had joined the troupe one morning a couple of months ago. He had been a liability at the beginning, causing mayhem when the others were doing their acts, but with a bit of training from Breaker he was now earning his keep. They were down to three horses, Hugo the large black Shire horse with white fetlocks and Clover and Echo two pure white performing horses. Lastly there was Lowe. Lowe did not act or perform or do any readings, she preferred to stay with Mankin and the wagons. At nearly fourteen, she was small for her age and unlike Bella who had the most fabulous almost jet black hair, she had mousy lank hair and pale grey eyes. She often had a sad fearful look and on the rare times she was happy she still had a vulnerability about her. Her visions caused her the most disquiet. Frequent nightmares often left her tired and unable to concentrate. The troupe had become very protective of her, none more so than Mankin, who would spend hours with her. When she was younger they had often wondered whether she would survive, so small and fragile was she. The constant crying and sleepless nights had been made easier only by Mankin who used to cradle her in his big hairy arms while she slept. The two of them had developed a special bond ever since. Now she was older, she had managed to control some of her 'abilities', managed to block out some of the visions, her nightmares still came, but with less frequency. She was slowly beginning to master her talents. When she had said to the troupe it was time to leave Landra, they didn't question her, they just began to pack up. So having finished loading up and harnessing the horses, they headed north out of Landra.

Chapter 5

Heading out on the road leading north, Glint and Eldin found themselves following a circus troupe. They had two very decoratively painted wagons, one led by a very large horse and the other by two very pretty white horses. The two nondescript horses that Eldin had bought for the journey had spent most of their lives pulling wagons and happily settled themselves behind the circus.

Eldin paid little attention to the circus in front, he didn't care much for them anyway. He was too lost in his own thoughts. With years of reading and learning he had created a fire in his mind which had to be fed. He worried about the rumours of an invasion, although on this lovely spring morning it seemed impossible that something so horrible could happen. He wondered if Kerdred did invade how much it would affect the Scholastic Guild, surely even someone as barbaric as Kerdred could appreciate the value of learning. Eldin thought of Daranel. The country was almost an island; to the west and south was the Meridian Sea, to the north the seemingly impenetrable Pandean Forest and to the east the Spurin Gulf. Daranel was actually part of a vast continent, areas of which were still to be explored. It was unknown as to whether there were any other great land masses in the world, some explorers had dared to venture out into the great ocean; none had returned. Sunk and eaten by gigantic sea monsters most probably.

His thoughts then wandered back to his long journey, there should be plenty of taverns and inns on the way for them to stay in. He hoped he wouldn't have to sleep under the stars too often, at his age his bones would spend the rest of the next day complaining. Sadly he realised he was bored already and they had only been travelling less than an hour.

Glint, unlike Eldin, was fascinated by the circus in front of them and hoped they would be on the road with them for most of the journey. The idea of spending a couple of weeks just with Eldin for company was mind-numbing. He had not seen the circus perform in Landra despite them being there for the last few years. Eldin didn't approve of anything that involved Glint enjoying himself. Ami though had told him all about it and it sounded wonderful. There were two acrobats, who also threw knives and juggled, a strongman, a dancer, performing horses, a scruffy little dog and a Mankin! Glint had never met a Mankin before, he could see the Mankin up ahead walking alongside the large Shire horse. Ami had described him as a giant. The Mankin admittedly was big, but not as big as Ami made out.

Later that morning another man jumped down from one of the wagons; Glint leaned over to get a better look. It was obviously the strongman, which was funny in a way as the Mankin could have probably lifted him up above his head. Well maybe not, but still in a fight my money would definitely be on the Mankin, Glint thought. If the strongman had been seen without the Mankin next to him, he would have looked very impressive with his black skin, oversized muscles and massive shoulders. Glint felt decidedly weedy when he looked at both of them. The most exercise he usually got, was carrying piles of books for Eldin.

Early in the afternoon the circus pulled off the road to stop for a rest, Glint's horses followed. He probably could have forced the horses to continue on the road, but he really wanted to stay with the troupe. Eldin, who had been dozing on and off for most of the day, didn't object to the stop either. Although he had no particular interest in the circus, it would give him a chance to stretch his legs and there was a 'call of nature' which he needed to attend to.

The troupe gathered together under the shade of a tree to talk and eat. Glint took a deep breath, plucked up his courage and wandered over to them.

'Hello, hope you don't mind if we follow your wagons, we're on our way to Riftdale,' said Glint hopefully.

A small girl came over to him. At first she looked quite serious, as if she was studying him. Her face changed and she gave him a big smile, getting hold of his hand she dragged him over to where she had been sitting.

'What's your name?' she said turning to face him.

'Glint,' he replied.

'Glint,' Lowe repeated slowly as if absorbing the name. Smiling again she turned to the rest.

'He's going to be my friend,' said Lowe.

Rather than finding the statement a bit weird Glint realised this was going to be true. When Lowe had taken his hand, he had felt something, nothing like the way he felt for Ami, more like he imagined he would have felt for a younger sister. He smiled down at her.

'I hope so,' he said sincerely.

Bella patted her hand on the ground, 'Come join us,' she said.

Glint looked across at his wagon, Eldin had his head stuck in the back of it, probably trying to find something he could read on the journey.

'Is it all right if I ask my master over?' asked Glint.

'Of course,' said Bella smiling as she glanced across at the rear half of Eldin that was visible sticking out of the wagon.

When Glint brought Eldin over they all sat together and shared a light meal of rye bread, cheese and some ham. Eldin did not say very much, just a polite 'thank you' and the odd 'how kind'. He felt a bit awkward, not his kind of people, nice people, just not his sort. Glint on the other hand was loving every minute, asking all sorts of questions. It turned out that they had been in the north of Korin, just as Kerdred and his brothers had launched a full scale invasion. They had fled south to Sirenia. They had stayed there until it became obvious Sirenia was going to fall. They sold one of the wagons, two horses, some of Bella's jewellery and managed to pay for passage across to Landra.

'But why Landra?' asked Glint. 'Why didn't you go south around the coast then across east?'

They all looked at Lowe, who lowered her eyes and shrugged. Glint realised he was not going to be told, yet.

Once they had arrived in Landra, they had been making a meagre living with street performing and Bella's fortune telling and dancing. Mankin had rarely gone into the town; only when they were desperately short of money did Mankin agree to join them on the streets. They always made more money when he was there, but just performing on the street made him more vulnerable. Because he was unable to talk people assumed he couldn't understand what they said, that their children's taunts and laughing made him feel humiliated and degraded. Bella had gained a reputation for her fortune telling and had 'read' for many of the rich. She usually told them only what they wanted to hear, if she told some of them what she actually saw, she would probably never work again.

Eldin listened to all this, he was surprised by how interested he became in their stories. He watched Bella's body language, she was telling the truth. He didn't believe in fortune telling and now, because of Aberrling, he understood that although Bella appeared to be telling the truth, it was just 'her truth'. Bella believed she could 'see' people's futures, which as Eldin knew was nonsense.

It was Mankin who fascinated Eldin the most. He had read a book on the evolution of man, the idea that humans were once Apes. He had read other books which totally denounced the idea. What did he think? Being an intelligent individual he decided that more research would be needed before a conclusive answer could be ascertained. Basically he hadn't a clue.

Rest time over they all packed up and carried on their journey. The first evening they arrived at an inn. Eldin left Glint to see to the horses, while he sorted out a room for them. The troupe just pulled their wagons across from the inn, they would be sleeping either in their wagons or under the stars, sleeping in a real bed was a luxury they could not afford.

The inn seemed popular and Eldin and Glint had to settle for a table outside, the evening was chilly but the food was hot and the ale not too watered down. Eldin and Glint heard Bella coming towards them before they saw her, with Breaker close behind. Bella was dressed in dancing clothes; Eldin nearly choked on his rabbit pie. She wore her long black hair down, a short top which showed off ample cleavage above and a perfectly flat stomach below. The skirt was more like a thick belt with lengths of very fine flowing red and pink material attached. On her wrists and ankles were cuffs with small bells. There were sparkly beads on her top and belt, the effect was dazzling. Bella smiled and winked as she passed them. Glint turned bright red. Bella must be in her thirties, maybe even old enough to be his mother, much too old for him to be having the sort of feeling that had just come over him. Eldin managed to swallow his bit of rabbit pie with a gulp and watched her as she entered the inn.

A few moments later Bella returned being followed out by what Glint reckoned was everyone from inside. Forming a semi-circle so that those sitting at outside tables could see, the crowd waited. Bella began to dance. Her arms stretched above her head, finger cymbals began to create a beat. Her hips began to make circular, rolling movements. Her arms began to snake down and out to her sides, the audience was mesmerised. Her hips began seemingly to vibrate, causing all the little bells to dance along with her. Still shaking her hips, she moved around the men. Her dancing became more frenzied, moving back to the centre, soon all her body was alive and no one could take their eyes off her. Eldin, who had always thought himself immune to the wiles of women, was entranced.

All too soon for the men, Bella slowed her movements and then raised her arms back above her head, stopping in the same pose she started. A hush descended on the crowd, then a great cheering, whistling and applause. In the circle appeared Snapper with the handle of a small tin in his mouth, going up to each of the men he sat raising his front paws and begged. Laughing, many of the men threw coins into the tin. Even Eldin went into his purse and drew out a small coin, when Snapper begged in front of him.

That night Glint could not stop thinking about Ami. Bella's dance had created such strong emotions in him and it made his heart ache at the thought of her. Eldin on the other hand could only think about Bella.

The next few days followed a similar pattern. Lowe occasionally sat next to Glint and Eldin on their wagon. Glint couldn't understand why he felt so at ease in her company. When Eldin was sitting next to them they kept any conversation light, but when they were away from everyone else, she told him strange stories.

As long as Lowe could remember she had 'seen' things other people couldn't. Sometimes wonderful, sometimes terrifying. When she had been old enough Bella had told her about the 'Mid World'. Filled with creatures from fairy tales, myths and legends, they occupied the same space as us, but we could not see them, nor them us. Well that wasn't strictly true, Lowe could see them, and other people in the past had claimed to have seen them. Some of the creatures in the Mid World such as fairies had, people claimed, helped them. As a general rule though, each was unaware of the other. Glint loved to listen to Lowe, he had read many tales in the past. He thought the whole idea of a Mid World mind bogglingly exciting.

Lowe could also see the future, well bits of it anyway. That didn't surprise Glint, with Bella being a fortune teller. Lowe however disagreed, Bella could only see bits of other peoples' futures, people she did not know. Lowe only saw bits of her own future and those connected with it. When Glint asked her what she saw in the future for him. Lowe smiled and said, 'I already told you, you're going to be my friend'. Glint told Lowe about his time in Landra and about Riftdale. She asked him lots of questions about the way the library looked and at one point she exclaimed, 'Oh, that's where I'm going'. When Glint asked her what she meant, she told him she had seen herself in a room with long tables with another room at the end filled with books. Lowe couldn't tell him anymore only that she had felt happy being there.

Each evening Glint realised that Ghale and Ebblin decided on who would perform their act, depending on the time they arrived and whether it was an inn or a village. The second night Ghale and Ebblin performed, mainly just juggling and knife throwing, with Breaker joining in at the end. The three of them were brilliant, Breaker was able to support the weight of both of them with the twins balancing very precariously on his shoulders. Glint noticed that Mankin kept well out of the way and was for the most part not seen by anyone on the first two evenings.

On the third night, however the inn they stayed at was very rowdy. Eldin and Glint thought it was better to have their meal sent to their room as it looked like there may be trouble later. Just as they were about to go into their room the whole place went quiet. Looking down from the landing they could see Breaker, followed by Ghale and Ebblin entering the inn.

At the far side a man as big as Breaker stood up. His short scraggy hair, unshaven face and a couple of noticeable scars made him look quite threatening.

'At last I see a man worthy to fight,' said the man.

'Why thank you kind sir,' said Ghale stepping forward and pretending to flex his muscles.

The man roared with laughter.

'Well met, and your name is?' said the man.

'Ghale sir, Ghale the mighty and this is my brother Ebblin the...'

'Ebblin the even mightier,' interrupted Ebblin picking up a spoon and bending it. 'And who do we have the honour of addressing, kind sir,' he asked.

'They call me Haystack,' said Haystack bowing and enjoying the banter.

'Who is your dark friend with you, does he have a tongue?'

Breaker stepped forward and Ghale introduced him.

'This my dear Haystack is Breaker, Breaker by name and Breaker by nature,' said Ghale.

Eldin watching from above could not believe what was happening, were they setting up a fight? As good humoured as it was, that seemed to be the only outcome.

'But he is not a Breaker of men,' Ghale continued, 'were you to fight him you would easily win; there would be no competition. However were you both to compete in a show of strength, my man would easily win; again there would be no competition. So let us just sit quietly and enjoy a drink,' concluded Ghale.

Very clever, thought Eldin. If Haystack now tried to fight Breaker he would lose face, if he simply sat down and carried on drinking, it would be assumed he thought Breaker was indeed the stronger man. Haystack realised this too and rather than being upset, he laughed and slapped the back of one of his companions causing him to spill a fair portion of his ale.

'And what tests of strength do you have lined up, should I accept this challenge?' said Haystack smiling.

Ghale smiled back, 'Outside we have a few bits and pieces you might like to look at'.

The atmosphere in the inn lifted. Despite his appearance Haystack just loved a challenge; because of his size this usually meant fighting. They all began to stream outside, there didn't appear to be anything different. When all those who wanted to watch were there ready and waiting, Ebblin whistled. From behind one of the wagons Mankin appeared with a heavy looking log across his shoulders, attached to each end hung leather straps that someone could sit in.

Mankin made Haystack and Breaker look slightly less big than they actually were. As he approached he lifted the log easily off his shoulders and placed it down on the ground. Haystack stood looking at Mankin.

'What I wouldn't give to have a Mankin as a friend,' said Haystack walking over to him. 'It's a real pleasure to meet you,' Haystack said holding out his hand.

Mankin smiled and took Haystacks hand, he wasn't used to being treated with such respect from strangers. Mankin decided he liked Haystack.

The competition began. Ebblin selected two average sized men. Mankin lifted the log onto Breaker's shoulders. The two men sat in each of the hanging straps, feet still on the ground, at a signal from Ghale they slowly lifted their feet. Ghale turned the sand timer over. Breakers body began to shake under the strain, but he managed to keep standing. When the last grains of sands fell the men stood up and Mankin lifted the log from Breaker's shoulders and carefully put it on the ground.

Haystack moved forward turning his neck from side to side and flexing his shoulders. Mankin lifted the log onto Haystack's shoulders and then walked in front of him. He took the same stance as Haystack and gestured for him to move his feet a little further apart and his arms a little further in.

Ghale stepped forward, 'Mankin, I believe you wish your new friend to win,' he said smiling.

The same men sat in the straps. Haystack struggled a lot more than Breaker, sweat began to pour down his face, and his knees began to buckle. Just as Haystack looked as if he was about to collapse, Ghale called time. To everyone watching the time was about the same, Haystack knew he could not have managed another second and Ghale knew that too. Once the men had stood back up Mankin put the log on the ground and took hold of both Breaker and Haystack's hand, looking at each of them carefully, he then held up both their hands, a draw. Ghale smiled at Haystack, his hand still around the neck of the sand timer. Well entertained, the people headed back into the inn.

Eldin and Glint who had come out to watch were very impressed. Glint had loved the circus people the minute he met them and Eldin found himself gaining more and more respect for them. Eldin's fascination with 'the book' he realised was only his wish to really understand people; to be put in situations he was unused to and cope, no not just cope, be liked.

Over the next few days Eldin made an effort, not just with the troupe but also Glint. He even asked Glint how he was feeling. Glint didn't like the change in Eldin, he had always been used to him being aloof; unless talking to people he thought of as intellectually equal, which Glint wasn't.

Sadly for Glint, the time for the circus to leave them and head for Brinkton came all too soon. He would miss them all. Eldin and Glint continued heading north and just to add to Glint's misery, the heavens opened and it rained, and rained, and rained. They didn't make good time and by the second evening they had to give up any hope of reaching a village or an inn. They ended up huddled in the back of the wagon, trying to sleep on top of packing cases.

Glnt had now been apprenticed to Eldin for nearly six years and lying there that night was the first time he had felt like running away. It was childish he

knew, life wasn't about being happy and with Eldin he had always been fed and clothed, as well as being educated. He was sad that he would never see Ami again, sad he couldn't join the circus, sad because the rest of his life looked sad.

Chapter 6

Eldin had waited for this moment and stopped the horses to take in the breath taking views. The deep green forest canopy continued along its western path, undulating over the hills. In the distance the start of the great hills and mountains of Stormway, stretching south as far as the eye could see. The road ahead descended into the spectacular valley with patchwork fields of green, brown, yellow and gold. Small streams meandered, unhurried. Eldin sighed as he looked down at Riftdale. A wall encircled what had become a small town and at its centre the library. It was home to Eldin; it was isolated to Glint.

As Eldin approached he noticed some changes. In the fields in front there were boys, quite a lot of boys appearing to be training in the art of combat. As the wagon came closer he could see the boys doing archery, sword fighting and wrestling. Eldin stopped the horses and looked around, he had left a place of learning and returned to a place of fighting. This would never do, thought Eldin. Why weren't they boys sitting at table copying manuscripts, books or a least learning how to read? Knowledge was the way forward, fighting was the way back.

Reaching the gates he was met by Bowles and Haber. Eldin looked at them both, Bowles was even fatter and Haber even skinnier and still with that long greasy hair

'Greetings Eldin,' exclaimed Haber.

'Well met,' said Bowles.

'What on earth is going on?' asked Eldin.

'Ah the boys out there are just getting a bit of exercise,' stated Bowles.

'Thomas has been studying the benefits of exercise on brain development and has decided that at least three hours every afternoon must be spent on physical activity,' explained Haber.

'Not us of course,' added Bowles quickly.

'But fighting?' questioned Eldin.

'Ah!' said Haber, 'By incorporating a bit of self-preservation, Thomas believes it will help increase their intelligence'.

Eldin was about to say something uncomplimentary about Thomas's idea but thought better of it. A large explosion caused Eldin and Glint to look to their right. The horses reared up in fright. Bowles and Haber looked at each other.

'Sorry Eldin, we must go and check on Felspar, he has been experimenting with a new powder, unfortunately he keeps blowing things up,' explained Haber.

'Don't worry we keep him well away from the library, sadly though last week he all but destroyed the corn mill,' said Bowles.

'And part of the Brew house,' added Haber.

'Luckily, just damage to the outside of the building,' explained Bowles.

'Yes, that could have been a real disaster,' said Haber.

Eldin looked at the two of them in almost disbelief, what had he returned to?

Bowles and Haber went off to see what Felspar had blown up this time. He had been restricted to a shed in the north corner of the town.

Eldin pulled the wagon in front of the main building, housing the reading room and library and instructed Glint to unload all the boxes of books and take them to Penn, who was in charge of the library. Then see to the horses, then take Eldin's bags to his room, then sort out his own sleeping arrangements, then...

'I'll get something to eat,' cut in Glint before Eldin could go on any more.

'Ah yes,' said Eldin distractedly. 'I must go and see Thomas, most important.'

Eldin hurried off to speak to Thomas, while Glint went into the reading room to find Penn. Glint was surprised at how much smaller the room appeared. It was a very large room but when he had first arrived, having just turned eleven, it had seemed enormous. Looking at the long tables where he had sat, his legs dangling unable to reach the floor, he remembered trying to learn what all those squiggly lines on the pages meant. He had only been here for six months before Eldin had taken him to Landra. A scary journey for one so young, but he was pleased he had gone. He had learned so much more about life than he could have ever done sitting here at these tables with his head stuck in a book. He would be seventeen in a few weeks and standing there, looking around the room he wondered whether he could really spend the rest of his life as a scholar. The longer he stood there the more he wanted to leave.

Penn came in from the library at the back of the reading room. He was tall, slim and carried himself with a calm self-assurance. Always wearing black and nearly always with a book in his hand.

'Can I help you?' he asked obviously not recognising Glint.

'Hello Penn, it's me, Glint. I've been with Eldin in Landra,' said Glint trying to smile.

Penn looked hard at Glint.

'Well, well, you have grown tall. I remember when you first arrived, such a small lad, cried for a week you did. Now look at you. I hope Eldin did not neglect your education,' said Penn seriously.

'Eldin taught me well. He has asked me to bring you the books, they are in the wagon outside,' said Glint.

Penn's eyes lit up, 'Are there many?' He asked eagerly.

'Yes,' said Glint leaving Penn to get excited over just how many Eldin had brought back.

Penn hurried back into the library and when he returned he was followed by a young man about the same age as Glint. He had fair hair and icy blue eyes, very good looking. His relaxed walk and easy smile made Glint feel decidedly awkward and lanky.

'This is Will, Will this is Glint, help him unload the wagon and bring the books straight to the back of the library,' said Penn.

Will followed Glint out to the wagon.

'That's a lot of boxes,' exclaimed Will when he looked in the wagon. 'Where did you get all these books from?'

'Eldin has been collecting them for the last five years, while we've been in Landra,' replied Glint.

'I didn't know Landra had so many,' said Will.

Glint smiled, 'When we first arrived in Landra, Eldin went down to the docks and told everybody he paid good money for books in any condition,' he said.

Will thought for a moment and then laughed.

'What's so funny?' asked Glint.

'I just had this image of thieves plundering from rich homes and stealing not the gold or silver but the books!' laughed Will still smiling.

It had never occurred to Glint that the books might have been stolen, no, the men had been traders; they bought and sold their goods fairly. But who had they bought all these books from?

'Eldin must have a lot of money,' said Will.

'He was in Landra to teach the Prince and Princess, the position I believe was well paid,' said Glint knowing that Eldin would not have put up with Hylaw unless it had been worth it.

'You met the Princess?' asked Will.

'I was taught with Ami and Hylaw,' said Glint trying to casually impress Will. 'We were good friends.'

Something in the way Glint had said 'good friends' made Will look at Glint.

'Just good friends?' asked Will teasingly.

Glint felt his face flush and turned away.

'Know how you feel, I was sent here by my father last year, fell in love with the wrong girl,' said Will sadly.

'You've only been here a year?' Asked Glint. 'You used to have to be no older than twelve.'

'Yes, Thomas changed the rules, anyone willing to pay, regardless of age, can have their son taught here, didn't you know?' said Will.

'No I didn't, when I came there were quotas, some who paid and were here just for an education and others like me who became apprentices,' explained Glint.

'What was wrong with the girl you fell in love with?' queried Glint.

'Rosie, Rosie was my mother's maid,' said Will shrugging his shoulders. 'I think my father hopes I will marry Princess Ami,' added Will smiling mischievously at Glint and raising his arms in defence as if expecting Glint to attack him.

'So you are obviously someone important,' said Glint

'I'm not, but my father is Sir Willmott Bernard.'

Glint looked at Will, he had no idea who Sir Willmott Bernard was.

'You never heard of him?' asked Will.

'Sorry, no.'

'He was the old King's champion, until he lost his right arm in a fight,' said Will.

'Oh,' was all Glint could think of to say.

While they worked Will told him that there were another nine boys like him who had come to Riftdale. There had already been seventeen students and apprentices and including Glint that now made a total of twenty seven. There had also been an increase in laymen, those who worked on the land or were tradesmen. Will didn't know how many of them there were as some stayed in the surrounding farm buildings outside the wall. Then there was the two soldiers Glint had seen when they had arrived. As Glint listened it became obvious what Will thought was going on, if he was right Eldin would be furious.

After all the boxes had been unloaded Glint took the wagon and the horses around to the stables. Leaving his own few possessions in the wagon he headed over to Eldin's room on the other side of the library. Laden with Eldin's bags, tired and hungry, Glint was struggling. When he got to the door he dropped the bags and knocked. After all these years he was not even sure if this was still Eldin's room. When no one answered, he slowly opened the door. The room was in darkness and the air smelled stale and musty, had this door ever been opened in the last five years? Glint wondered. Dragging the bags in behind him, he then opened the shutters to let in some light and fresh air. A layer of dust covered everything and the straw mattress would definitely have to be re-stuffed. He wouldn't be surprised if he found a family of mice living in there as well. He really couldn't be bothered anymore, so just sat at Eldin's desk and stared at the cobwebs on the ceiling.

When Eldin left Glint, he was on a mission, nodding as he passed people; he did not stop to speak. Fighting, this would never do. Obviously it was time

Thomas gave up his position. As Eldin considered this option he realised that he would be the most suitable person to take over the responsibility of running the place. On entering the dormitory Eldin went straight up stairs and stopped outside Thomas's room. Composing himself he gently knocked, then remembering Thomas was nearly deaf, he hammered on the door.

A barely audible, 'Come in,' came from inside the room. As Eldin entered he could see Thomas had not changed a bit. He was still the same wizened, skeletal old man, the only good thing about being in his company was that it made Eldin feel positively youthful. But had his mind changed? Belying his age, Thomas had always held on to his extraordinary intellect.

'Ah Eldin, I wondered how long you would stay in Landra after the King died. Come take a seat you must be tired after your long journey,' said Thomas.

Eldin sat opposite Thomas wondering how to broach the subject of the boys being trained to fight. He coughed slightly and was just about to begin when Thomas raised his hand.

'I can see you have something very important tell me, but if you don't mind I have something I need to discuss with you first,' said Thomas.

Eldin was annoyed at being stopped, but also intrigued.

'Of course, please continue,' said Eldin.

Thomas sat back on his chair and interlinked his bony fingers, bringing them up to his chin in a very thoughtful manner. The letter he'd received from Aberrling had been very clear, but something didn't seem right.

'Before the old King died, Prince Hylaw requested I assist him in some important matters. Then a few days ago a soldier came to ask for further help on behalf of the now King Hylaw,' Thomas paused, Eldin waited patiently.

'I need to appoint someone who has, how should I say this, the right understanding, mental agility, forward thinking attitude to take on such a role. Which may prove to be unnecessary or may prove to be historic. I have always believed knowledge gained in the pursuit of probabilities will also advance the learner in their understanding of possibilities,' continued Thomas.

Eldin looked across at Thomas and tried desperately to look as if he understood what on earth Thomas was talking about. He got the bit about wanting someone, but for what he had no clue.

'So you wish someone to help you with..?' queried Eldin.

'Formulating tactics!' said Thomas.

'Formulating tactics, now that's interesting,' said Eldin sitting back on his chair and interlinking his fingers in a similar way to Thomas. 'Please elaborate,' he said tactically.

'Before we proceed I need your reassurance that whatever decision you might make, nothing of what is discussed here goes beyond these four walls,' said Thomas.

'Of course, of course,' said Eldin impatient to find out exactly what Thomas had in mind.

'King Hylaw believes that should Kerdred and his brothers invade Daranel, the kingdom will fall, unless and this is the important part, unless we gain a tactical advantage. Kerdred has too many trained fighters and he has also very successfully trained Nefkins and dogs to fight alongside him. Kerdred is an astute leader and will infiltrate a country long before he invades. King Hylaw has asked for our most learned scholar to consider all the options available to him, should the unimaginable happen,' said Thomas taking a deep sigh, such a weight of responsibility having been placed upon his shoulders.

'I believe King Hylaw has already taken steps to prevent such an invasion. Aberrling told me before I left Princess Ami was to be betrothed to Kerdred's youngest brother Tremlin,' said Eldin pleased to inform Thomas of his 'insider' knowledge.

'Ah yes, the betrothal was not to stop an invasion, that was a tactic to make Kerdred believe King Hylaw believed it would stop an invasion,' Thomas said, smiling at Eldin. 'Now I need someone I can trust to commit themselves totally. An enormous task I admit, but Penn and I have made a start.'

Just then there was a knock at the door.

'Come in,' called Thomas.

Eldin noted that the knock on the door had not been that loud, nor had Thomas showed any sign of deafness while they had been talking. A tactic? Thought Eldin beginning to enjoy the idea.

Penn came into the room followed by two young boys, one carrying a tray of freshly baked scones and clotted cream and the other a tray with a large jug of mead and three goblets.

'Perfect timing, I think it would be a good idea to resume our discussion tomorrow when you are well rested and then Penn can go over what we have done so far,' said Thomas.

'I have asked for a clean mattress for your room,' said Penn. 'It should be there by the time we have had something to eat, now tell us all about your time in Landra.'

Glint was still staring at the spiders webs on the ceiling, the spiders had long gone, when the door opened and in walked Will with one end of a mattress followed by another younger boy with the other end.

'This room smells,' said the younger boy.

'It's OK, Glint's been travelling for days, he hasn't had time to have a wash,' joked Will.

Glint raised his eyebrows in mock anger and got up to help get the old mattress off the bed. When they were done they all headed for the dining room for something to eat.

'Oh nearly forgot,' said Will, 'Penn told me to tell you that he will be seeing to Eldin's meals and things for now, he'll let you know if he needs anything'.

That evening with a bit of reshuffling in the boys dormitory Glint ended up with a bed next to Will. The long room was filled with beds on either side and personal belongings had to be stored underneath the beds. The older boys were nearest the door and were expected to help out any younger ones who were unwell or missing home. Will was obviously popular and went around the room checking on them before he settled down himself. Tomorrow Glint was to spend the morning with Will helping Penn sort out the books Eldin had brought back and in the afternoon he was going to have his first lesson in swordsmanship.

The following morning they turned up at the library, Penn had two boxes waiting for them to be taken to Eldin. Unable to help themselves they sneaked a look at what was in the boxes before knocking on Eldin's door. They had expected just to find books on whatever Eldin had decided to study next, Glint had thought possibly the Far East as he remembered how fascinated Eldin had been when Bella had told him about her time there. Instead they were shocked to find diagrams, maps, plans as well as a host of other documents all seeming to have a connection with war. They looked at each other, they would talk about what they had just seen later. When they knocked at the door Eldin appeared almost immediately, he must have been waiting.

'Just put those over by the table,' said Eldin. 'Right, thank you,' he added hurrying them out of the room as soon as they had put the boxes down.

As they walked back to the library Glint told Will that he could not believe Eldin would be interested in anything that even had the slightest connection with fighting. He hated that sort of thing, Glint had even expected Eldin to refuse him to train with the other boys in the afternoon. In fact Glint secretly hoped Eldin would stop him. He was not adverse to people fighting, just as long as it did not involve him.

When Eldin closed the door he stood for a moment and looked at the boxes. Did he really want to do this? He had hardly slept, his mind trying to sort out his feelings. In one respect the idea appalled him. Not just his potential involvement but the idea that he could be faced with a sword ready to draw his blood, that the Riftdale might be destroyed and that everything which gave his life meaning

could be lost. On the other hand he saw it as a game, a puzzle requiring knowledge of logistics, statistics, economics, history, geography, so many skills.

He would need to read everything about Thantos, about Drumlin, about his sons. He would read about other battles to understand how they were fought. There was so much that intrigued him. He knew he would not be able to concentrate on anything else now the fire had been lit in his mind.

Later that day a knock at the door brought him out of his world of putrid carcasses being catapulted over battlements, of burning oil raining down on terrified soldiers, the stench of rotting infected flesh of the injured. It was Penn bringing some bread and smelly cheese. Thanking Penn, Eldin who usually loved cheese only ate the bread.

'How are you doing,' asked Penn looking over Eldin's shoulder to see what he was reading.

'There is a lot to get through,' replied Eldin, who had spread the contents of the boxes over every available surface including his bed and part of the floor. 'You and Thomas seem to have done a lot of research,' added Eldin.

'We have been collecting our own information, but a lot of this came from Aberrling in Landra,' said Penn.

'Aberrling and I were good friends, I wonder why he didn't ask for my help while I was there?' said Eldin.

'It was Aberrling who asked that we approach you when you returned, he had not wanted to involve you when you were in Landra, said it was too dangerous,' explained Penn.

Eldin looked back down at what he had been reading. He didn't want to just devise yet another method of killing. He had to find their weaknesses or something Kerdred and his brothers would not anticipate.

Glint stood opposite Will with the wooden sword in his hand. Will had at first laughed at Glint's pathetic attempts to wield a sword, but now he was beginning to get irritated.

'You can't keep closing your eyes every time I get near you,' complained Will.

'I'll never be any good at this, nor do I want to!' exclaimed Glint throwing the sword to the ground and storming off the training area. Will followed him over to the stone wall at the edge of the field. They sat in silence for a while watching the other boys training.

'Why don't you try archery?' asked Will.

'I'm not really cut out for fighting, you can see that,' said Glint, feeling like a coward.

Will wanted to hit Glint, he didn't like people who gave up before they had even tried nor did he like cowards. He left Glint sitting on the wall and went back to train.

Glint started walking with no particular direction in mind. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon and everyone he came across appeared happy and full of purpose. There was always so much to be done, whether it was looking after the sheep, goats, cows, geese and chickens or growing wheat, turnips, leeks, peas, carrots, cabbages, beans, strawberries, grapes, apples, pears, herbs. There were bee keepers, tanners, soap and candle makers, some collected mushrooms, wild edible flowers, others caught pheasants, rabbits, hares, pigeons and deer. Some made clothes, some ale, mead and cider. There were cooks, two stone masons, woodworkers not to mention those that pursued more academic endeavours.

Glint had never developed a passion for anything, well apart from Ami. He had been taught the importance of taking pride in whatever he did, doing everything to the best of his ability. Learning how to kill people, however, was not something he felt comfortable with. He felt betrayed by Eldin, who had always told him that fighting was wrong. What was Eldin now doing? Planning attacks? Eldin wasn't the sort of person who would put a sword in his hand, but he might set his mind to creating a new and horrible weapon, especially if it made him look clever.

Glint didn't like thinking bad thoughts like this about Eldin, but what was he supposed to think? Was he thinking like this because he thought himself a coward? What if Kerdred did invade, would he really do nothing, let other people die while he ran away?

He stopped and looked around, so lost in his thoughts it took him a few seconds to realise where he was. The wooden building in front of him was new and the large door at the front was open. Inside he could see Felspar, his hands and arms bandaged and another was wrapped around his head. Who would be an alchemist? Thought Glint. Seeing Felspar struggling with a jar, Glint went in to help. Felspar was very likeable, although his eyes and mouth sloped downwards giving him a naturally sad looking face.

'Can I help? I don't seem to have anything useful to do for the rest of my life,' sighed Glint.

'That's very kind of you Glint, but as you can see, a lot of what I am experimenting with is quite dangerous; the rest of your life may not be that long if you help,' smiled Felspar.

'And those bandages on your hands are going to make it more dangerous for you,' replied Glint surprising himself at his total lack of concern at his own

mortality. Maybe if he did blow himself up, it would save him having to worry about his future.

Felspar looked down at his hands, it was not only the bandages that made it harder, his hands had been burnt and were still sore. He looked at Glint.

'My last apprentice ended up being blinded in one eye,' said Felspar.

Glint just shrugged his shoulders.

'I now don't usually let anyone in here,' added Felspar sadly.

Glint shrugged his shoulders again.

'So what is it you're doing that's so important you are willing to blow yourself up for?' asked Glint genuinely intrigued.

At that question Felspar smiled shyly and glanced over at the book lying open on the desk. It was old, Glint walked over to it and looked down at the pages. There was a picture on one side and what looked like instructions on the other. The picture resembled a castle turret with a stick poking out of the bottom and underneath was written 'Rocket Firework'.

Chapter 7

Aberrling sat on the creaky old oak chair that Eldin had always complained about, but never changed. He had been secretly using Eldin's old room to formulate his devious plans. There was always problems when making any devious plans which involved other people, especially when those other people were making their own devious plans. So Aberrling not only had to make his own plans, but also contingency plans, back up plans, escape plans and if the worst came to the worst he had a small bottle of poison which he carried with him all the time. He hoped he would not have to use it on himself, but suffering a traitor's execution was definitely not in any of his plans. There seemed to be so much for him to do, so much to organise, so much that could go wrong. He sat back on the chair and the chair seemed to sigh on his behalf. The next few days were crucial, he decided, while he had a couple of hours he would go back down to the dungeons again, he hoped his 'trancing' had worked on Brandon.

Princess Amicia stormed into Hylaws' chambers, she was at that age, a lot of storming and slamming doors. The new King sat relaxed with one leg over the arm of the chair and a wine goblet in his hand. He might be the new king to everyone else but to her, he was just her obstinate, pig-headed, annoying brother. Nathe as usual was also there, his face always reminded Ami of an eagle, with his slanting eyes and hooked nose. The rest of him was normal, for a soldier.

'How dare you!' screamed Ami.

Hylaw looked at his sister, he had known she wouldn't be happy, probably would never speak to him again. She was a pawn in a game he didn't like playing, but the kingdom was at stake. Tremlin's envoy was due to arrive later that day to discuss their betrothal.

'It is time you were married, you're sixteen. Tremlin's family rule all of Thantos and Korin, he IS a suitable match,' said Hylaw.

'Never!' said Ami crossing her arms and glaring at Hylaw.

He put the wine goblet down and stood up. His brown eyes stared hard back at her.

'Ami you always knew your marriage would be arranged, so stop acting like some spoilt child. Go and change, I expect you not only to look like a princess this afternoon but also to act like one!' said Hylaw in a low threatening tone which Ami was not used to.

Ami stormed out of the room and slammed the door.

'That didn't seem to go down too badly,' said Nathe sarcastically. 'She'll make your life hell from now on,' he added.

'No she won't. After the marriage arrangements are agreed I want you to take her to Brinkton to visit uncle Darius, it will do her good to get away for a while,' said Hylaw.

'Is this one of Aberrling's suggestions?' asked Nathe.

'Yes and I think he's right, she needs distracting. Since father died and Eldin's apprentice left, she's been doing nothing but moping around the castle,' said Hylaw.

'Oh thank you, couldn't you think of anyone else to take her?' said Nathe.

'You know the situation, the next few weeks are going to be uncertain, if anything should go wrong, I want someone I can totally trust with her,' said Hylaw solemnly.

Later that afternoon Nathe knocked on the door outside Ami's chambers, one of her maids opened the door.

'Her highness is nearly ready,' said the maid flatly and shut the door.

Nathe waited impatiently, Hylaw wanted Ami sitting next to him when the envoy entered the room. Aberrling was already on his way to meet them at the gates.

Nathe knocked again. The same maid came to the door.

'The more you disturb us, the longer we are going to be!' said the maid trying to control her frustration.

Nathe waited.

Finally the two maids opened the doors and there stood Ami. On her auburn hair was an exquisite gold tiara, her dress a deep green with gold trimmings. Around her eyes and on her lips Ami wore make up, something Nathe had never seen on her until now.

'Your Highness,' he said bowing, overcome by the realisation that Ami was not just Hylaw's annoying little sister, but a beautiful woman who would one day become a queen.

Ami followed Nathe at a slow regal pace mainly because the bodice of the dress, being so tight, meant she could hardly breathe. When they did arrive at the throne room the envoy and his men were already there. Nathe told Ami to wait outside so he could announce her arrival and make an impressive entrance, rather than just rushing in late. Ami waited, she wanted to take a deep breath but had to settle for a few quick pants instead.

As she heard her name the great doors opened and holding her head high, she made her impressive entrance. Taking just a few steps into the room she paused,

glanced around the room and gave a very slight bow of her head in acknowledgement to those present. Then she looked directly at her brother.

'I hope I have not kept you waiting Your Highness,' she said with a very gentle submissive smile. Hylaw, like Nathe, had never seen her quite like this before. He noted the effect she had on every man in the room, well every man except Aberrling who was also looking around at the reaction she had caused. Rising from the throne he walked over to her.

'Ah sister, as beautiful as ever, we were just discussing the sad loss of our father; a great man and a great king,' said Hylaw.

Murmurs of agreement filled the room.

'Come sit next to me,' said Hylaw escorting Ami to sit at his right.

The envoy to Tremlin turned out to be a very smooth, silver tongued man who Ami found rather ingratiating. Although as the proceedings went on she decided Aberrling and Hylaw were just as bad.

She sat there listening to her fate being tactfully haggled over. She felt like some prize horse and nearly lost her composure when she imagined them coming over just to check on her teeth. Ami said very little throughout the whole meeting, just giving the occasional smile, nod and the odd 'Thank you,' or 'Yes your highness,' but in her head she talked. If she was going to be traded, she would have to learn to become everything she hated. Manipulative, sly, cunning, devious. She saw it now as a game, a game powerful men played. When she had first walked into the room and saw the effect she had, she knew if she was to have any chance she would have to play to her greatest strength; which was man's greatest weakness. By the time Ami had walked back to her room, she had convinced herself she was in fact a powerful princess who would one day become an equally powerful queen. Well her own brother had just sold her to the wolves, what was she meant to think?

The following day Ami wouldn't come out of her room. Anger had turned to despondency; she lay around, hardly touching the food that was left for her. Her maids tried to cheer her up, but eventually gave up and left her alone. It was the same the next day and the next.

When all the wedding agreements were completed Kerdred's envoy left. King Hylaw headed for his sister's room. He wanted to tell her what he really thought, that she would never have to marry Tremlin and that he and Aberrling had spies everywhere; but if he was wrong then Ami would marry Tremlin. He didn't want to give her false hope and he didn't want her to be afraid by knowing what that false hope would involve. He had to keep playing the arrogant, pig-headed, thoughtless brother and King.

'Open the door!' he shouted as he banged hard on the door.

The door slowly opened and Ami stood there, not the beautiful Princess she had been only a few days ago, but his little sister. Her hair was a mess, her eyes all puffy and red and her nightdress all crumpled. Hylaw wanted to give her a hug, instead he put his hands on his hips and glared at her.

'You will pull yourself together, get dressed and stop acting like some spoilt brat!' he said threateningly. 'And when you are ready you will come down to dinner, there is a lot that needs to be arranged,' he added.

Ami just stood there looking as if she was about to cry again.

'I have more important things to deal with than a cry baby sister who will not accept her duty,' said Hylaw turning and walking away.

Ami slammed the door.

When Ami came down to dinner she wore a plain grey dress, no make-up and had her hair tied back. All through the meal she just picked at her food and never spoke a word.

King Hylaw lent closer to her and whispered in her ear, 'The wedding is planned for the autumn, but if you are going to act like this until then, I will have it brought forward'.

Ami looked at her brother, she did not understand. They had always got on so well when they were children. Since becoming king he had changed so much. It wasn't as if he was having to marry someone he hadn't even met. Or was he? She had never thought about him possibly having to marry one of Kerdred's sisters. You never really heard about them. Women didn't have any value in Thantos, but if her brother married one and then they had a son? Even if that happened he would still be better off than her, she went back to sulking.

After dinner Hylaw led Ami into one of his private rooms. Nathe, Caleb, Aharen and Tanyon were waiting. Ami was determined not to smile at them, but it was hard. Caleb and Tanyon were both about twenty. Caleb had all the women chasing after him. He had long wavy black hair, dark brown eyes a strong jaw covered in stubble and a toned muscular body. Tanyon on the other hand was blond, looked much younger than Caleb and was shy among women. His forehead overshadowed his eyes, which disappeared when he smiled. They both had always had time for her and had patiently taught her to use a sword. She really liked them, it was not their fault her brother was such an ogre. She returned their smiles. Aharen was the oldest, probably in his early thirties, and the toughest. He was stocky, muscular and hairy. He loved fighting, food, ale and women in that order. Nathe, well Nathe was Nathe, along with Aberling he was always hanging around her brother.

She took a seat at the table, opposite Hylaw, the rest stood in various places around the room. It was obvious to Ami they already knew what her brother was

going to say.

'As I said during dinner, you will be married to Tremlin in the autumn. However I cannot have you here taking a tantrum every time things don't go your way.' Hylaw paused.

He was insulting her in front of his men. The humiliation was unbearable. Was he trying to coax her into storming out of the room, proving how right he was? She just sat and looked back at him, seething. If she was going to be married to Tremlin she would have to get used to being treated like this.

Satisfied she wasn't going to argue, Hylaw continued wondering how far he dare go.

'You will be going to stay with Lord Darius in Brinkton, let's hope you can learn from him how to conduct yourself properly.'

Ami took this new insult the same as she did the last, the only difference being she now had a thread of hope. Lord Darius was her uncle and she loved him, having no children himself he had always indulged her. When she was there she would slowly start to talk about the marriage, how unhappy she was, how unhappy she would be. She would persuade Darius to talk some sense into her brother. For now she would shut up.

'Nathe, Aharen, Caleb and Tanyon will go with you,' said Hylaw.

Now that did surprise her. Realising Hylaw had no more to say she asked for permission to go and prepare. Leaving the room she felt a bit better, Darius would help her.

Once Ami had gone Nathe looked across at Hylaw. 'I know it's important she doesn't know what's going on, but do you really have to make her hate you that much?'

Chapter 8

A few miles outside Brinkton a tent was set up so Ami could change into something more suitable for a princess. Tanyon was sent ahead to announce Princess Amicia's imminent arrival and her entourage did their best to clean themselves up a bit. Everyone ready, they headed smartly down the hill and through the gates into Brinkton. They were met suitably by a line of soldiers who escorted them to the steps of Brinkton castle. Waiting at the top of the steps stood Ami's uncle, Lord Darius. It had been a few years since Ami had seen her uncle, she remembered him as a 'beautiful' man; a term she had been told was an unsuitable description to use for her uncle. But he had been and she could see, still was. There was something about the way he moved, elegant, almost flowing, his dark hair, large brown eyes and cheek bones that would look fabulous on any woman. He had been a lot younger than her father, but still must be easily in his mid-forties, though you would hardly guess.

Lord Darius extended his arm in a welcoming gesture revealing long slim fingers and perfectly manicured nails. Ami got down from her horse, picked up her skirt and in a very un-princess like way, ran up the steps straight into his arms. Lord Darius laughed and swung her round.

'Oh Ami, it's so good to see you again,' beamed Darius ignoring the strange looks he was getting from his men who were unused to anyone treating Darius with such familiarity.

'You're still beautiful,' she whispered in his ear.

Darius moved back slightly from Ami and took hold of both her hands. Looking at her, he smiled, 'And so are you, my dear. But you must be tired after your long journey, I have everything arranged,' he said turning to an aide just behind him. 'Please take the Princess to her quarters.' He turned back to Ami and smiled, 'I will meet with you later; I wish to hear all the news from the capital'.

The quarters Ami was taken to were far more sumptuous than anything in Landra Castle. Majestic tapestries hung on the wall, the huge four poster bed was draped in fine cloth and the chairs were gold with red cushions. In an adjoining room an ornate bath waited for her with a roaring fire in the hearth. She had always been used to a fair amount of luxury, but her uncle's castle positively dripped in it. Her maids were equally impressed, even their rooms were well decorated.

A couple of hours later Ami felt well rested and after admiring herself in the mirror headed down to the great hall. On her way down she noticed Nathe

leaving a side room further down the corridor, he looked sad and shook his head as he walked away. Stepping back into a small recess she watched as her uncle came out of the room, followed by a younger man who had his hand on her uncle's shoulder, as if to comfort him. Darius stopped took a deep breath as if to compose himself and then continued down the corridor. Ami wondered what news Nathe could have given him that had caused her uncle to appear so upset. She decided not to say anything and waited until the corridor was empty, then headed for the great hall.

The great hall was buzzing with excitement. Ami took her seat next to her uncle, on his other side sat the young man who had comforted Darius as he had exited the room. The man looked down at the table, concern etched across his face. Darius patted his hand.

'Now, no long faces tonight, my niece is here to enjoy herself, not look at your miserable face.'

Darius laughed but Ami could see something had changed since this afternoon. She would have to find out what Nathe had told them, she was annoyed that whatever it was she had not been included.

'Ami this is Lewin, my dearest friend, Lewin this is her Royal Highness Princess Amicia,' Darius said introducing them.

'Please, as my uncle's dearest friend call me Ami,' she replied in greeting.

'I am greatly honoured Ami, I am sorry for my long face, Darius is right let us enjoy this very special evening he has prepared for you,' said Lewin.

And special it was, the food was not just food, it was art. Arriving on big platters there was whole suckling pigs, pheasants, partridges, geese, pies, sweet jellies, sweet breads, fruit soaked in an array of delicious sauces and all presented in a way Ami had never seen before. Everything was delicious.

Darius turned to her, 'Well what do you think?' he enquired.

'I'm thinking, when I do marry I will ask for your cooks as a wedding present,' said Ami.

Glancing across the room she could see Nathe and the others obviously enjoying the food as well, she would however have to have a word with Aharen about his table manners.

When the meal was finished and more wine and ale brought to the tables Darius called for the evening entertainment to begin. The first act was a bard, singing extremely risky songs about various people in the hall, including herself and her four guards. Aharen and his love of food, Caleb and his love of women, Tanyon and his love of animals, Nathe and his love of King Hylaw, and Princess Amicia and her love of herself. She should have been offended but it seemed the bard, by offending everyone, managed to offend no one. People were roaring

with laughter as the bard continued to pick people out for his songs. One man stood up and shouted, 'What about me?' to which the bard stopped and turned to the man, 'Sir I am probably the greatest bard that has ever lived, but even I was unable to find anything interesting to say about you'. The man in question was the Court Jester. Just when you thought there was no one left for the bard to pick on, he turned to her uncle.

*'Now my Lord I turn to you
And what could a humble Bard say
Your wisdom, your kindness
Your fellow feeling
Your Highness
Your servant I'll always be.'*

The Bard bowed low and there were shouts and banging on the tables in appreciation. Ami thought the bard had been right not to say anything against her uncle and hadn't really minded what had been said about her. She began to feel tired after such a long day, Darius had told her tomorrow they were going to watch a circus, she hoped it was the same circus she had seen in Landra. Excusing herself she headed back to her quarters for what she hoped would be a long and restful sleep.

The following morning Ami was excited to see the circus, she had found out it was indeed Bella's troupe. They were performing in a large field close to the town so that many of the town's folk could attend. Benches had been set out in a horse shoe shape, with more suitable seating provided for Lord Darius and herself. She was surprised that Lewin was not there or for that matter any of her guards, although she did think she could see Caleb chatting to some women in the distance. Maybe they just didn't like the circus, or more likely she thought, too hung over from the night before.

The performance began and turned out to be even better than when Ami had watched it the last time. When Bella the fortune teller danced, even the women in the audience were entranced. The scruffy dog certainly had improved but the strongman and the Mankin stole the show. When Ami watched the horses, she wondered if she could train her horse to perform some of those moves. When the show was over Ami was exhausted from all the excitement and tension. She sat back in her chair feeling very happy and content.

A young girl skipped over to Darius, a guard went to stop her, but Darius gestured for her to come over. She whispered something to him but Ami could not hear and felt it would be impolite to try, so she turned to a lady on her right and joined her in conversation.

'You know where he will put you,' whispered Lowe to Darius, 'it will be pitch black,' she added.

Darius was taken totally by surprise and looked at the girl, her grey eyes looked straight at him. He felt his heart jump, she knew.

'When you return, have your most trusted warder sort it out,' she continued.

Understanding slowly dawned on Darius and he gently nodded his head, too shocked to speak. Lowe then gave him a huge childish grin and turned to go.

'How do you know these things?' he managed to say before she left.

Lowe turned back and quietly said, 'Because I can bear them'.

Darius thought he understood, but surely no child should have to carry such a burden.

The rest of the day Ami spent shopping in the markets with her maids and Aharen lurking never far away. She couldn't get the sense of unease out of her mind. She was having a lovely time, the sun was shining, she was pleased with the clothes and jewellery she'd bought. She was looking forward to dinner this evening, it would be a more quiet affair, a chance to really talk to her uncle, so why the unease?

As she browsed over some necklaces hanging in a stall, she caught sight of Caleb talking animatedly to Aharen. They looked as if they were arguing, then Caleb stormed off. Leaving the stall she marched over to Aharen.

'Right! What's going on?' Ami demanded

'You're shopping and I'm lurking?' grinned Aharen sheepishly.

Ami was surprised at how angry she was, she felt like slapping him across the face. She turned and headed back to the castle with her maids, laden with her purchases, hurrying behind her. When she arrived at the castle she told the maids to wait for her in her quarters, then headed off to see her uncle and bumped straight into Nathe and Tanyon.

Still furious she told them to get out of her way as she wanted to talk to Darius. Nathe stood in front of her. Nathe and Tanyon looked at each other as if unsure as to what to do with her.

'Well?' said Ami in the most authoritative voice she could muster.

'Actually, your uncle is not feeling very well, probably too much sun this morning, he is taking a rest,' said Nathe looking around the corridor as he spoke. 'Come let us take a stroll in the gardens, I hear they are beautiful,' he added.

If Ami had been furious before, she was livid now. It was obviously a lie and how dare Nathe talk to her as if she was some ordinary woman! Turning she headed back to her quarters and nearly took the hinges off the door when she slammed it. She dismissed the maids and flung herself on the bed.

Hammering her fists into the pillows she began to cry uncontrollably.

'It's not fair, it's not fair!' She sobbed.

Her whole life suddenly seemed empty. She had hardly cried for her father after his death, she had never known her mother, her brother just wanted her married off to whoever was politically advantageous to him; no one really cared. She had been taught to be a princess but she just wanted to be a girl with a loving family and be able to choose who she married. Her thoughts immediately went to Glint. She had deliberately kept her emotions in check with him, but she longed for him now. It would never work; her brother would never allow it. Glint was a commoner, she was a Princess. She deserved better, what was worse, she deserved a man she would hardly know, who probably would never love her. She would be there just to have his children and act like the perfect wife and mother. She hammered the pillows again. She was not real, just an image in other peoples' minds, a performer, she was other women's fantasy. To be a Princess was to be a slave in fancy clothes she thought bitterly. There had to be more, but at that moment Ami could not see anything, so lost was she in self-pity.

A few hours later Ami awoke to find food had been placed on the table beside her bed, a cover had been placed over her and candles had been lit giving the room a warm cosy feel. She sat up and ate some of the bread, cheese and fruit that had been left. She felt emotionally drained and very much a spoilt brat. Could her maids marry when they were in her service? She had never thought to ask. Did they get to eat the same food as her? How much were they paid? When she told them they were accompanying her, she hadn't even considered they may have loved ones who needed them. Ami lay back on the bed wondering what time it was. It seemed late, the candles had burned quite far down, how long did a candle burn for? Without knowing when it was lit that was a stupid question to ask herself anyway. Lost in her own thoughts, at first she did not register the noises coming from the town. Slowly her head turned towards the window, her mind becoming less self-absorbed as she realised what was happening. Then the screams started. Ami ran to the window, fires were burning; the town was on fire!

Chapter 9

After watching the circus perform Haystack had tried to contact some of his old friends in Brinkton; none of them seemed to be left alive. Some appeared to have died of 'natural' causes, as if it was natural for so many people to suddenly die from heart attacks. Others had a variety of accidents, including falling off a roof, which Haystack knew was odd as the dear chap in question hated heights.

Haystack wandered the streets of Brinkton and felt a sense of unease amongst its town's folk. He had arranged to meet Caleb close to the market place and headed there early in the afternoon. Caleb's news was not good, he was escorting Princess Amicia on strict instructions to head to Riftdale if Kerdred's promise of an alliance proved to be false. Haystack told Caleb of his worries over the disappearance of many of his contacts, even in the castle many men he trusted were nowhere to be found. Later Haystack met up with Nathe; Nathe had just been told a large ship was heading to the port. Although that in itself should not have caused concern, Nathe just felt that there was something wrong, something about to happen. Nathe told Haystack what he knew about Hylaw's plans and should Brinkton be invaded the princess's safety was paramount, not trying to resist an invasion.

Haystack listened, how could the King, knowing the real possibility of an invasion just leave Brinkton to fall? Nathe had tried to reason with him, with large parts of Brinkton now being controlled by Kerdred's men, what hope did Hylaw have? The rot started before Hylaw became King. The old King should have made a stand, should have helped Korin. Hylaw was now having to handle a situation that Kerdred had spent years planning and Hylaw didn't know exactly what he had to face. Aberrling the King's advisor had told Nathe that it may have been too late even before the old King died. Nathe advised Haystack to leave Brinkton with any men he trusted. Haystack never ran from a fight, he would rather die fighting than run like a coward to the hills.

Later that evening Haystack sat with his own men on a hill to the north overlooking the town. From his vantage point he had watched the circus leave late that afternoon, he had hoped to meet up with them but obviously nothing was going the way he had planned. His party consisted of seventeen men including himself, not good odds if that ship was heralding an invasion. His men were all tried and tested fighters who had been loyal to the old King. They considered Daranel their country and even though King Hylaw had not yet proved himself, they were not going to let Drumlin's sons take over without a

fight. Even the mention of Kerdred and his brothers brought out fighting talk. As they were discussing what they would do, all hell broke loose down on the docks. At first the idea that anyone would attack so late in the evening made them doubt what they were seeing. Haystack had told his men that many in Brinkton were already Kerdred's men and that if they decided to join the fight they were as likely to get a sword in their backs as easily as their chests. Looking down at the docks they realised this was going to be the least of their problems.

Large creatures emerged from the ship and onto the docks. Haystack stared in horror, Nefkins. They walked upright, towering above Kerdred's soldiers. Their huge bodies protected by armour. Lit up in the flaming torch light their silver armour and white fur made them look like monstrous ghosts. The screaming started. Slowly, menacingly they began to walk into the town. Nothing stopped them; people, carts, stalls simply thrown to one side by massive Nefkin arms. Kerdred's soldiers followed killing anyone the Nefkins missed.

Haystack watched as people came out of their homes to see what was going on, only to be met with death. Others took to side streets, running with babies and children. Two men on a wall began firing arrows, one of the Nefkin broke ranks, dropped onto all fours and bounded effortlessly up the wall, disappearing with the two men over the other side. It returned seconds later and took its place back in line. Fires were beginning to take hold of houses, trapping those inside. At that moment a huge explosion lit up the sky. Everyone stopped and stared, even the Nefkins. The shock didn't last long. Haystack thought about the circus and how Ghale had cleverly manipulated him into a contest of strength. Maybe running down into the town, sword in hand and facing those Nefkins wasn't the brightest idea. Kerdred wasn't playing fair. Haystack looked to the castle, surely the archers would soon rain down arrows upon those creatures. They could see fighting on the battlements. Kerdred's men, who were already concealed in the town, were not there to fight in the streets, they had gone straight for the castle. Darius had never had a great number of soldiers, never needed them. Darius wouldn't stand a chance, nor would the princess. His mind made up, Haystack drew his sword and hurried down from the hill towards the castle, followed closely by his men.

Nathe burst into Ami's room. Ami looked across at Nathe and then at the doorway where Aharen and Tanyon were standing, their backs to her, swords drawn. She rushed into the side room where all her clothes were kept, her maids appearing from the other door across the room.

'Quick, help the Princess,' Nathe shouted.

They rushed into the dressing room to help Ami. It did not take them long, one of the maids grabbed her travelling clothes, while the other was pulling off

Ami's nightgown. Ami realising the danger everyone was in, told the maids to stop and get themselves ready to leave. They took no notice.

'Now don't you go worrying about us,' said one of the maids in a very motherly way.

'We will be fine, they won't be bothering the likes of us,' the other added.

Ami wanted to believe that, but she had been told about what happens to the women after the fighting has stopped. She didn't want to think about it and didn't want to delay whatever Nathe had planned. As soon as she was changed, Nathe told her to put on her cloak and stay close to him. Caleb had now joined the others just outside the door, looking very angry.

'I can't believe how many of Kerdred's men were already here in Brinkton,' he fumed.

Keeping in close formation they ran down the corridor, heading for the stables.

As he passed through the castle gates, Haystack could see a problem straight away. Darius's men were well trained, fit and agile. Their smooth overconfident movements showed their years of coaching. They were good to watch and admire on a practice ground but Kerdred's men were fighters, killers. They would soon spot their opponents weaknesses, use devious counter attacks, anything to kill their man and move on to the next. Haystack noted that Kerdred's men not only fought with shorter heavier swords but many also held a weapon in their other hand.

He stepped forward, ready, and was immediately met by a man equally big, hairy and scarred. He had a sword in his right hand and a spiked club in his left. By the amount of blood and bits of flesh on his clothes and weapons, he must have already been responsible for killing a number of Darius's men.

Haystack smiled, 'Good, I like to start with an easy fight first,' he said watching for any reaction on the man's face. The man smiled back but said nothing. Weighing each other up, they moved almost in unison around each other, neither wishing to strike the first blow. Eyes locked in their dance of death.

'I think you're very graceful,' remarked Haystack.

The flicker in his foe's eyes was all Haystack wanted. His sword was already swinging round at the spiked club. It was a dangerous tactic but was the only weakness he could see. As he expected his sword was deflected by the club, his opponent's sword was already heading towards his left shoulder. Haystack's swordbreaker dagger caught the blade, he had been ready for the force of the impact. The other man wasn't, having put all his energy into the blow he now found his sword trapped in the notched dagger blade. Holding on tight to his

sword was his downfall. Haystack gave a sharp twist of his wrist, the dagger wrenched hard at the sword. His own sword was exactly where he wanted it, having been deflected, he now brought it round and down burying deep into his enemy's left leg. The fight was not over, the spiked club swung down, rather than backing away Haystack charged into his opponent. As they both fell to the ground he felt the blow from the club on his back. The fall had taken most of the power out of the swing, but it hurt none the less. Raising his head he brought his forehead down hard, breaking the other's nose. Rolling over Haystack slid his dagger off the sword and rolled again, the spiked club hit the ground just next to him. Rolling back, he thrust the dagger into the man's neck.

Haystack's next fight was straightforward, he soon forgot about everything else except his next opponent, then the next and the next. The fighting took him to the side of the castle where he saw Nathe and his men with the Princess racing for the stables. That slight distraction nearly cost him his life. Despite his thick leather tunic his attacker's sword buried itself deep into his side. Haystack swung his sword wildly and watched as his attacker's head fell to the ground.

With Aharen leading the way the group safely made their way out of the castle. They did encounter some people running frantically in different directions, unsure of where to head, but didn't meet any threat until they got to the stables. In front of them stood three men blocking their way.

'Told you they would come straight here,' said one of them.

'Aye that you did,' said the oldest and by the looks of him, the meanest.

Aharen stepped forward, sword ready.

'Are you going to let us pass or am I going to have to go through you,' he scowled.

'Leave one for me,' added Tanyon.

The three men just stood, they were going to be paid well for this and thought the odds were reasonable. One would probably stay back with the Princess, three against three, they'd had worse odds. Who was going to make the first move? The three men knew it would not be them, they were in no hurry.

Aharen, Caleb and Tanyon positioned themselves and then as one began the fight. The small courtyard gave just enough room for all six men to fight. Nathe kept in front of the Princess ready to jump in should one of his men fall. Nathe weighed up their opponents. Aharen was fighting a man as large as himself, but a lot less skilled. Caleb's man was quick, but so was Caleb. Tanyon's man was the older mean looking one. Tanyon was young, far stronger and quicker, but Nathe worried that the older man had more experience. Nathe was torn between going to help Tanyon or staying next to the Princess. The decision was taken away from him as Tanyon staggered back with a knife in his neck. When Tanyon

had thrust his sword forward, the man feigned a stagger and at speed which belied his age, spun round and buried the knife deep into Tanyon's neck.

Nathe jumped forward and took over from him. Ami looked down at Tanyon, anger raging through her. All the emotions she had felt earlier came flooding back and more. No one seemed to be taking any notice of her, so locked in to their own fighting. She stepped forward and picked up Tanyon's sword, hiding it under her cloak, she edged around the wall of the courtyard and towards the horses, as if to make her escape. This distracted their attackers, but only slightly. Their backs to her, they carried on, buoyed by having already managed to kill one. They only needed one more down, then it would be easy, three against two.

Ami reached up with one hand and pulled the tie on her cloak allowing it to fall from her shoulders. She stepped forward and in one move knelt and swung the sword expertly in an arc which sliced the backs of the older man's legs. Realising what had just happened Aharen's attacker raised his arms, turned and ran. Caleb never gave his opponent a chance to flee. The older man lay on the ground with blood pouring from the wounds in his thighs. Nathe took his sword and walked away from him. He would die, but for killing Tanyon, Nathe left him to die slowly.

There was no time to mourn over Tanyon, Nathe hurried them to the stable. Ami hastily put her cloak back on and followed behind. The horses that Caleb had saddled earlier were at the far end of the stable. Quickly mounting the horses they set off north. Hardly a couple of hundred yards from the stables, Aharen's opponent, who had fled, stepped out from behind a wall and sliced at Ami's horse. The horse reared up; Aharen grabbed hold of the Princess just in time, pulling her up onto his horse as he galloped further along the road. Once away from the danger, they slowed down and Aharen transferred Ami to the back of Caleb's horse as he was the lightest.

Garth cursed as he watched his reward money ride away. He made his way to a small coppice and plonked himself against a tree. He would not get involved in any of the fighting for the town. When it was over he would see Kerdred, he had information Kerdred would need; he could still make a profit out of this. Besides those Nefkins that came off the ships seemed to be killing anyone in their paths, friend or foe. He didn't fancy being anywhere near them, it didn't seem right using beasts like them. Despite Garth's unsavoury past, to him there was still a sense of honour in meeting your enemy face to face. A good fight that's what he liked, tactics, even underhandedness. But big apes that had no real skill, just brute force, no he would sit here and wait until it was over and then make his move.

Haystack looked around taking in the scene. Darius's soldiers were being beaten, he had lost sight of his own men and many parts of the town were now on fire or destroyed. The situation was hopeless. He could feel a sharp searing pain in his side from the sword wound and knew he was losing a lot of blood. His fight was over; injured Haystack staggered towards the stables. Inside he found a horse already saddled, mounting the horse he headed out of the stables and took the road heading west.

Chapter 10

It was after midnight when Kerdred walked into the large hall. Dead bodies were still being cleared away. Down at the bottom of the hall were some prisoners all sitting with their heads bowed, mostly women and children; Ami's maids were amongst them. Kerdred was not interested in them yet, he called for Darius to be brought to him and took a seat at the head of a large table.

Darius's face bore the signs of a beating. Good, thought Kerdred, he had told his men not to kill him or the Princess as both would prove valuable if Hylaw tried to reclaim Brinkton.

'Where is the Princess?' asked Kerdred to the men at his side. A man at the far side of the room approached the table.

'If I may speak, my Lord?' asked Garth.

Kerdred nodded and then listened to Garth's tale of heroism against the princess's guards. He recounted his failed, but nevertheless courageous plan to take down her horse, trying of course not to kill her. He had, he felt done the best he could have given the circumstances. Plus by making one of their horses carry two riders, he hoped this would slow their progress until a party could be despatched to follow them.

When Garth had finished Kerdred looked at Darius, everything about Darius repulsed him; even with his battered face he still looked 'girlish'. Men were meant to be strong, tough, if it had been him facing an invasion he would have fought to the death.

'Take him away and put him in the deepest, darkest dungeon there is here,' said Kerdred. 'And stay guard,' he added.

Kerdred turned to Garth, 'Take some men and dogs and bring me back the princess, alive'.

Garth nodded and made a hasty retreat. Garth had heard a lot about Kerdred, his scarred face, wild eyes and malicious grin, but seeing him up close was a different matter. Superstitious people would say he was 'Devil crazed' and Garth after meeting him wouldn't disagree. Apparently when he was younger he had been quite handsome and possessed a good sense of humour, now, however, he just came across as possessed.

Kerdred sat back on the chair, for more years than he cared to remember he had been following his father's wishes and fighting so his brothers could have their own lands. As he got older he wondered the wisdom of this. He would still only have Thantos when his father died, which given his age wouldn't be that

long. Thantos was large enough for him, maybe he shouldn't have listened to his father. Killing both his brothers would have been a lot easier. Maybe he was just getting tired of killing. Looking down the hall at the people sitting he spoke quietly to the tall, straight man with piercing dark brown eyes who was standing next to him, Cain.

'Those willing to swear loyalty to me, let them go. Kill the rest,' said Kerdred disinterestedly. 'And bring some of the women over,' he added.

One of Ami's maids was chosen for Kerdred's inspection.

'You two, come with me,' said Kerdred rising from the chair. 'Don't disturb me for the next couple of hours,' he said to Cain.

Cain nodded, taking the rejected women back down the room. Ami's maid sighed in relief at her narrow escape. Sadly she had not realised that very soon Kerdred's men would have the same idea.

Cain had been with Kerdred since childhood, once friends now it was Cain's job to sort out the aftermath Kerdred created after every attack, whether that be a village, a town or a country. There was always so much to do, the quicker Cain got this town back up and running under Kerdred's control the easier it would be to face King Hylaw and his men in the coming weeks. He would probably get very little sleep over the next few days.

The two men escorting Darius banged on the dungeons outer door. Dull sounds were heard from the other side as the door was unlocked. As the door opened the most revolting, stomach churning stench assaulted them. Then appeared a man, he would probably have been quite tall but for his bent back. Half of his face drooped and from the slackened part of his mouth he was drooling. The grotesque figure in front of them looked first at the men and then at Darius. Igmy was used to the men's look of horror.

'My lord, how kind of you to join me, I gathered from all the noise there was something afoot,' Igmy said having difficulty manoeuvring his tongue around the words.

'Lord Kerdred is now in control of Brinkton, do you swear allegiance to him?' said the taller man on the left of Darius.

'Will this new lord let me keep my position here in the dungeons?' asked Igmy.

No one in their right mind would want to work down here, thought the man, trying desperately not to gag.

'I assure you, your position will be secure,' said the taller man.

'OK then, but can you tell this Kerdred not to send any more prisoners down here until he does something about this lot.'

Igmy lifted the lantern to show the man that the dungeon was already well patronised. It was so dark that they could hardly see and didn't want to come in any further.

'You two stay there until I have Lord Darius safely locked up,' said Igmy.

'Kerdred wants him in the deepest, darkest cell,' said the smaller man on the right of Darius.

'Ah shoot, that's way down there, here I'll give you the key and you can take him,' said Igmy pointing into the darkness.

'No, it's your job, unless you want me to report to Lord Kerdred that he should have you replaced,' he replied.

Grumbling Igmy led Darius slowly down the passage, his awkward gait causing the lantern to swing creating eerie shadows on the stone walls. The men watched as the lantern disappeared around a corner. A few minutes later Igmy returned.

'Is Micka still alive?' asked Igmy.

'Who's Micka?' said the taller man.

'The other guard, he does the days and I do the nights. What do I do if he doesn't come in the morning?' asked Igmy.

The men looked at each other, if this 'Micka' fellow was dead they would be hard pushed to find anyone else to work down here.

'We're on guard outside the door tonight, let's just wait and find out in the morning,' said the taller one sounding tired.

Igmy closed the heavy door and replaced the bolts. Waiting a few minutes he then whispered, 'All clear'.

Lanterns lit up all through the dungeon. Soldiers threw off old sacks they had been lying under and came out of the cells into the passage. Lewin hurried down to get Darius, telling the men behind him to get rid of the buckets. The soldiers quickly emptied the pails of warmed human waste down the stink hole and covered it up. They sat Darius down in the guards area, Lewin began fussing over him, cleaning some of the cuts on his face.

'Thank you Lewin, maybe we could see to my cuts a little later,' said Darius kindly. 'Please tell me what happened after I spoke with you.'

Lewin sat down looking quite tired.

'We came down to see Igmy, there was only one prisoner here who was due to be executed anyway,' started Lewin.

'You killed him?' interrupted Darius.

'Not me personally, I had one of your soldiers sort it out, anyway, Igmy thought the plan might work and made some useful suggestions of his own,' said

Lewin smiling over at Igmy. 'It all went very smoothly. What was it like up there?'

Darius looked down at the table. Even if he had been better prepared, they would have taken the town. Those armoured Nefkins destroyed just about everything in their path. Darius had also not realised how many of Kerdred's men were in the town. How long had this been in the planning? Darius didn't even like to guess. It was only when Nathe had told him everything he knew that Darius had realised the danger.

'It was bad,' he said.

They waited for him to say more but Darius could not bring himself to talk of it, he clenched his fists trying to hold himself together.

'Darius, we need to plan your escape. Tomorrow Kerdred will start organising his men, but tonight they will all be celebrating their victory, I think we should take our chances now,' said Lewin his heart breaking as he watched Darius struggle.

'I cannot leave yet, my niece escaped but they are sending men after her, if she is captured she will need our help,' said Darius sadly.

Lewin needed time to think. When Darius had told him about the girl from the circus, he had pleaded with him to make plans for an immediate escape from Brinkton at the first sign of an invasion. Darius had argued that he could not been seen to desert the town, he would not be seen as a coward. Lewin had gone along with the dungeon idea only because Darius would then not be seen as a coward and when he did escape, it would make Kerdred look a fool. But now...

'I think you are wrong,' said Lewin beginning to pace as he got his thoughts in order. 'You need to escape, it will give hope to the people of Brinkton and will upset some of Kerdred's plans. However I agree with you about helping Ami, why though should we wait here for her to be brought back?' said Lewin leaving the idea to formulate in Darius's mind.

Now Darius needed time to think.

Darius looked around, there were eight soldiers, Lewin, Igmy and himself.

'Are any of you archers?' he asked the soldiers. Three men stepped forward. Darius nodded and thought again.

'What supplies do we have?' he asked Lewin after a few minutes.

'Food, water, bows, swords and a couple of spears,' said Lewin. Darius nodded and then went quiet again.

'Well if we are going to do this we had better get started,' he decided after a while.

Igmy came to Darius's side. 'I will stay, I can't run or fight, I will just hold you back,' said Igmy.

Darius looked at Igmy, it was true. Even if Igmy made it, he hated being seen by people, when Lewin had found him years ago in a gutter he had been sorely beaten and not for the first time.

'What will you do?' he asked.

'Oh, I have a few ideas,' said Igmy with a lopsided grin. 'When you kill the men at the door, can you just knock them out first, then kill them away from here, it would help with any story I make up,' added Igmy.

The dungeons were located deep in the castle along a narrow corridor, nicknamed 'dead end' that led out to a secluded execution yard. It was not long before Darius and his men were through the arch at the far end. It was now very early in the morning and just beginning to get light, this next bit was probably the most dangerous; crossing open ground at the back of the castle to a small coppice a couple of hundred yards away. With a bit of alteration to their attire and a cloak for Darius, they ran across the courtyard. They had thought about trying to get horses but decided the risks were too great. Once they reached the roads they headed east.

When Micka didn't turn up that morning, Igmy left the dungeon, suitably smelly and went to his room in the servants' quarters. He was lucky, Lewin had made sure he had a room to himself and although it was very small, it was his. That evening he went back down to the dungeons, obviously no one had thought to check on them. Trying to look as annoyed as he could, he went and found someone who looked vaguely important and began babbling about being told his job was safe.

'They promised me, they did, they said Kerdred would let me keep my job and now there's no one there. I know I said he had to sort the prisoners out but I hadn't meant kill them all. How can I be a prison guard with no prisoners?' rambled Igmy and began walking away shaking his head.

'What?' said Cain sharply, hoping he had misunderstood the gist of this idiot's complaint.

'Hard to be a guard, with no one to guard, suppose I'll just go and sit down there by myself. Wish they would let me know though, had become quite attached to some of those men. Would've liked to have said goodbye and stuff before they got their heads cut off,' mumbled Igmy trying to look at a loss at what to do next.

Cain stared at Igmy.

'Follow me and on the way tell me exactly what happened this morning,' said Cain.

Igmy, in a long winded and not always coherent way, explained how in the morning a man with two soldiers had taken over from him, Micka having been

found dead. When they reached the dungeons Cain went into each cell looking for any clues. Igmy had asked a couple of Darius's soldiers before escaping to relieve themselves in the buckets provided for such necessities. Cain looked at Igmy suspiciously, Igmy was used to being looked at and had over the years developed a totally blank, if wonky, expression. Hurrying out Cain told him to remain there as Kerdred would probably want to talk to him later.

'Ask him if I've still got a job,' Igmy shouted innocently behind him.

Cain knew Kerdred would be livid, he had to divert blame from himself. Even though it was Kerdred who sent those guards with Darius, he should have had other men relieve them this morning and check who was actually in charge of the dungeons. He hadn't had this problem in Sirenia or any of the other towns they had taken in Korin. Kerdred sometimes expected him to sort out too much.

Later that night Igmy was called before Kerdred, as he walked in he winced when he saw all the other people there. They had found the dead guards, but nothing of Darius or, as they believed, the other prisoners. Kerdred watched Igmy walk into the room, if he had been born like that his mother would have suffocated him and told his father it was a still birth. In Thantos such aberrations of nature were not tolerated. Igmy recounted what he had told Cain, and Cain nodded saying he had in fact sent men down to take over. Igmy realised Cain was having to cover his back and therefore made no attempt to correct him. Cain had obviously told Kerdred that unbeknown to him the men he had sent down were Darius's men, but stating he didn't understand why they had also released the other prisoners. Giving Kerdred a question which would hopefully distract his mind. Cain wanted all this over with, he was, he admitted to himself, sick of clearing up the mess.

Kerdred knew losing Darius was not brilliant but he was only planning to use him to taunt Hylaw. Sending him the odd body part, some of those white teeth or a few of Darius's perfectly manicured fingers. He felt more annoyed that he had been cheated out of his fun, he had wanted to watch the horror on Darius's face as the torturer got to work. Did that make him evil? Kerdred lost in his thoughts did not even realise a malicious smile had crossed his face.

Igmy watched; this man was mad.

Cain watched; he wondered how long it would be before Kerdred became totally deranged. It had begun many years ago when Kerdred had lost Shade and his unborn child. It had become his obsession to try and find her. Kerdred had once and only once confided in him about his dreams. In them an old hag would appear in his room, she would prod him with her stick and give a cackling laugh. Sometimes she would talk about Shade, one day Shade would have her revenge, 'She'll be the death of you,' the hag would mock. So real did these dreams seem

that to him, he had tried to hit the old woman; but she would just laugh and disappear. Cain wondered whether the old hag still came into his dreams and whether that was slowly driving him crazy.

Kerdred came out of his thoughts and gesturing to Igmy said in a low, overly calm voice, 'Take him to his dungeons, this time make sure he doesn't escape and tomorrow have him questioned more effectively.'

Torture, thought Igmy, oh dear.

Igmy was taken back to the dungeons and thrown into one of the cells. It was late and dark. There were two men posted outside and one inside. Igmy sat in the corner of his cell and felt in his breeches, he had taken the precaution of hiding the skeleton key just in case. He had no intention of escaping, not that there was much chance of that anyway even with the key. He didn't want to kill the guard, he didn't particularly want to die either, but he would not be tortured. Igmy waited, the man had looked tired, he probably had had very little sleep the night before and having only one prisoner safely locked up, Igmy knew it wouldn't be long before he would be asleep. It wasn't long, soon Igmy could hear him snoring. It wasn't long before Igmy killed him with a sharp blow to the neck and it wasn't long before Igmy had packed sacks and straw in and around the table. Taking the lantern he set the whole thing on fire and walked back to his cell with the man's dagger. He hoped it wouldn't hurt too much. He looked down at the blood running from his wrists it was a strange feeling, he hoped when he got to that 'other place' he didn't look the same. Glancing up he found a very old woman smiling at him, was that a dead ancestor he wondered.

With the help of her stick she bent down in front of him, 'Do you want to know how this all ends?' she asked.

Igmy felt like giggling, 'Now that would be fun,' he said.

'Take my hand,' said the old woman.

Igmy reached out and took the old woman's hand. Funny, he thought, the cut on my wrist has gone.

Chapter 11

As soon as they had finished their act, the troupe hitched up the horses and left Brinkton. None of them questioned Lowe. She had said they had to leave, so they left. They travelled all afternoon and well into the night. The following morning they started early and kept going most of the day, to help the horses most of the troupe walked. It was hard going but Lowe wanted to reach the forest by the following evening.

When they did finally reach the forest it was quite late and already dark. They unhitched the horses and let them have a well-earned rest. A fire was made and food prepared, soon they were all sitting around a blazing camp fire.

When they had finished eating Bella turned to Lowe, 'It's time you told us what you can see,' she began.

Lowe nodded and stared into the fire.

No one said anything.

'Brinkton has fallen,' she said still staring into the fire.

'Princess Ami has escaped and is riding in this direction, which is why we have stopped here. We need to be up early in the morning, what happens tomorrow...,' Lowe let her voice trail off.

Bella gave Lowe a big hug, she wished, at times that she could take Lowe's 'gift' away from her. They all sat quietly for a while. It was Ebblin who broke the silence.

'How many escaped with her?' he asked.

'Three, but they have only three horses,' Lowe replied staring back into the fire.

'Are they being pursued?' enquired Ghale.

'Eleven soldiers and four hounds,' answered Lowe. 'You all must do as I ask tomorrow, if we are to have a chance.'

*

Glint opened his eyes and was surprised to see an old woman standing at the bottom of his bed looking curiously at him.

'I really don't know what she sees in you,' said Rona

'What?' said Glint.

'Never mind, your services are required, get ready, take the fastest horse there is, although having looked at your stables already you don't have a lot of

choice. Ride east, take the road that follows the line of the forest until you meet Bella,' ordered Rona.

Glint blinked his eyes a couple of times and looked around the room. All the other boys were asleep, was he dreaming?

'For goodness sake, move it,' exclaimed Rona.

Glint still lay there, the way she had just shouted would have woken everyone up and they were all still asleep, he must be having a nightmare.

'Well if you don't want to help Princess Amicia,' Rona said in one final bid to get him out of bed.

'Ami?' said Glint.

'Yes Ami, she was in Brinkton when Kerdred invaded, she escaped and is now riding for her life, but if you can't be bothered to help,' said Rona.

'Kerdred invaded Brinkton?' said Glint.

'Look I'll tell you what I will do, I'll go and make us a nice cup of herbal tea and then we can have a nice long chat, by which time...?' said Rona sarcastically.

'It will be too late,' said Glint.

'Possibly, put it this way, if you get yourself moving now, it will definitely not be too early,' said Rona and promptly disappeared. Why Lowe thought this idiot would be helpful was beyond Rona.

Glint wasn't really sure what had just happened. Was the old woman just a dream or was she 'real' in his dream? Was Ami really in danger? That possibility alone got him moving. Within half an hour he was riding east. The best horse in the stable was only marginally better than the rest, he dared not push it too hard. How embarrassing that would be, him riding in to save the day, Ami looking at him full of admiration and his horse dropping down dead with exhaustion. The more he rode the more it dawned on him that he was not really well prepared for this 'saving the princess' business. He had no sword, not that that would have made a difference as he didn't have any sword fighting experience. He had no fighting experience what so ever, Ami was better trained. Slowing down, he began to feel a fool, the further from the town he was the more he thought he had simply dreamt the old woman. His desire to see Ami had caused the dream. He should really turn back.

*

The following morning the troupe were up early and by mid-morning they were just trying to fill in time. Ebblin and Ghale had already sorted out their knives, some of them were in their belts, the others hidden on them. Breaker was playing

with Lowe and Snapper just away from the wagons. Bella was pacing, unable to decide what to do and Mankin was scratching himself and yawning.

From the west a lone rider appeared on what looked like a farm horse. Although they all probably saw him at the same time, it was Lowe who stood up and ran towards him. Reassured they all relaxed and waited for him to get closer. Glint jumped off his horse as soon as he got next to Lowe and swept her into his arms, swinging her around. Once he stopped he took her hand and walked over to greet the rest. Surprised by his sudden arrival they were full of questions. He explained about his dream and the old woman and what she had told him.

'Has Brinkton really been invaded?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Ghale.

Glint's elation at having met them suddenly turned to dread.

'Princess Ami?' he asked.

'That's what we're waiting to find out,' said Ebblin.

'Lowe told us she has escaped from Brinkton and is coming in this direction, but she is being pursued by a number of soldiers and dogs,' said Bella.

'Big, black, vicious, hunting dogs,' added Ghale helpfully.

Glint, still holding Lowe's hand looked down at her, he couldn't think of anything to say, he was dying to see Ami but did not want to die in the process. Tiredness came over him, he had been riding most of the night, unsure of what he was going to face. Daranel had been invaded, many people would have been killed and all he could think about was Ami. He dropped to his knees and Lowe put her arms around his neck.

'You're here because I need you,' she whispered.

Glint looked at her. Lowe who he knew was probably the most special human being alive, and she needed him. All his fears disappeared, he was someone, he was important, at this moment he was needed. He did not know what he could do to help, but she believed he could, would, do something that made a difference. Looking into her eyes he realised, stunned by this realisation, he would actually die for her. Raising his head he looked around. They would all sacrifice themselves for her, he thought, then smiled and looked down, even that scruffy dog. He stood up, feeling part of the troupe, part of something meaningful, he had never felt something like this before.

Lowe turned and stared to the south. 'They will be here soon,' she said. 'Breaker, Ebblin, Ghale and Bella, you must lead as many of Kerdred's soldiers away from here as you can. Glint, Mankin, you will come with Ami and me into the forest,' Lowe added.

This did not go down well, but it was snapper who seemed to protest the most. Lowe bent down to snapper, 'And you my important little friend are

definitely coming with me'.

Snapper satisfied he hadn't been missed out, wagged his tail then sat down, trying to look knowledgeable about what was going on.

'What about the soldiers who are bringing Ami,' asked Bella who had decided to drop the 'princess' bit as everybody else seemed to be doing.

'They go with you,' said Lowe.

'They'll not be happy about that,' said Bella.

Lowe shrugged and gave a big smile, Bella smiled back. Lowe was back to being a young girl again, Bella knew that was all she was going to get from Lowe for a while.

They all stood around waiting, not sure what to do next, how long would they have to wait? It wasn't long.

In the distance they could see three horses riding at speed. How long had they been pushing their horses like that? Ghale wondered. When the horses came to a stop in front of them, Ghale could see they had pushed their horses to almost breaking point by the amount of sweat on them. Glint could see Ami hanging on to one of the soldiers, he ran up to help her off the horse; she slid down into his arms and tiredly looked up.

'Glint?' she muttered then fell asleep.

The other riders dismounted and Bella walked up to them.

'You don't need to tell us anything,' said Bella.

'Ah yes, of course, you're the fortune teller. You were in Landra and then in Brinkton, naturally you know everything,' said Nathe as sarcastically as his tiredness would allow him.

'There are eleven men and four dogs after you. You only just managed to escape Brinkton when Kerdred invaded, the way you have pushed your horses' means they will not last much longer and with so many men at your heels, not even you could guarantee the Princess's safety. So shut up and listen,' said Bella hands on hips.

Nathe just stared at her.

'We have had time to plan, you are not going to like what I am going to say but given your options and our 'abilities', we have the advantage, let's not lose it,' Bella continued.

Aharen stood stroking the neck of his horse.

'Nathe, I'm not usually the one to take the lead in decisions like this, but my horse only has a few miles left in her, it would do no good to turn and fight there are too many of them. I'd like to hear what they have to say,' said Aharen.

Caleb stretched his aching back. 'Can you not just magic them away,' he joked. 'Just go puff or something and make them disappear.'

Bella looked at them and then at Ami who was collapsed in Glint's arms.

'She cannot go on,' said Bella.

Nathe looked at Ami, soldiers like him did not admit defeat until defeated.

'Heavens above,' said Caleb casting an annoyed glance at Nathe. 'Nathe, admit it, we need help, sorry my lady we could do with all the help we can get.'

Nathe thought about Tanyon, he hadn't been able to save him, should he trust a circus? What did they know about fighting real soldiers, they are just a bunch of weird novelty acts. Their horses though were exhausted as was the princess, three men against twelve plus dogs. Nathe looked back at Bella.

'I don't like this,' stated Nathe. 'But OK then, what's the plan?' he relented.

Bella smiled.

By the time Bella had finished briefing them on the plan Nathe could hear horses and dogs fast approaching. Mounting his horse along with Aharen and Caleb, they waited for Bella, Ebblin, Ghale and Breaker. Nathe shook his head, their horses were all but finished and Glint's horse, which Bella took, looked decidedly scraggy. Breaker took Hugo, which made him look like a giant, and Ebblin and Ghale rode the two performing horses, Clover and Echo. Bella wore a cloak covering her dark hair, they hoped from a distance Kerdred's soldiers would think she was the Princess.

Mankin started carrying the exhausted Princess, but Ami was having none of it and insisted on running with the rest of them into the forest. So Mankin picked up Lowe and overtook Glint and Ami with snapper happily running along beside. Well that blew the first detail of the plan, not to have Ami's scent leading the dogs into the forest. Nathe resisted shaking his head again. They waited, timing was everything. Glint had told them about an old derelict building just a few miles west, which might make a good place for them to defend from as the horses wouldn't make it very far. Nathe signalled and off they hurried.

Kerdred's men arrived at the wagons a few minutes later. Bella had hoped they would all follow them, but they stopped. The dogs had picked up a scent and ran towards the forest. Garth quickly ordered three of his men to follow the dogs into the forest, the rest were to follow him.

'Don't forget if you find her, we want her alive, don't let your dogs' rip her apart,' he called back to the men who had dismounted and were now heading towards the forest.

Chapter 12

Riding as fast as they could, which wasn't that fast considering the state of the horses, Nathe and the others headed west. After a few miles Nathe spotted the stone building Glint had described. A small cluster of trees and a large boulder caught his attention. Signalling to the rest, his mind worked frantically as he headed for the ruin.

Garth saw them veer off the road. When they reached the same spot he halted his men. The last riders on the two white horses were going through the archway. Despite there being no roof and some of the upper walls missing, it would provide them with a good defence. That same defence could also be used against them.

'Let's take this slowly men, remember only three of them are soldiers, the rest are just circus performers,' said Garth confident in his leadership qualities.

Trotting their horses forward they stopped a safe distance in front of the archway through which Garth could see the two white horses grazing. He needed to make a plan, he had eight men; maybe he could sacrifice a couple or should he just wait and let them make the first move. Two of his men were archers, he would start by killing those two horses, then play the waiting game.

He turned around to his archers, 'You two come forward, I want you to shoot those horses, the rest of you watch those walls,' he commanded.

As he turned back the men on either side of him fell to the ground, knives embedded in their necks. Clover and Echo raised their heads and gave a snickering sound as if they were laughing, then bowed in unison.

'What the....?' Furious Garth turned back to the archers. 'Shoot those horses, then follow me!'

The two archers moved forward readying their bows, two more knives found their targets. Garth cursed as he retreated with the others to the cluster of trees. He couldn't believe he had just lost four men. Soldiers could not have thrown those knives with such accuracy. He had totally misjudged the situation. Cursing again at his own stupidity, he needed to think quickly.

He didn't have time. Emerging from behind the large boulder, Breaker and Nathe charged at them. Breaker and Hugo's size was unnerving. Wrestling with his horse Garth managed to turn, only to be faced by Aharen and Caleb approaching fast.

'Good day to you sirs, I fear we have the advantage here,' shouted Caleb.

'Nice to see you again,' said Aharen to Garth, 'this time I don't think I'll let you go so easily'.

Garth smiled, 'We seem to be back to four against four,' he said.

'Um, yes, what can we do about that?' Nathe replied.

As if on cue Ghale and Ebblin arrived on Clover and Echo closely followed by Bella. The twins had picked up the bows from the two fallen archers and had arrows aimed straight at Garth. Garth had a very strong suspicion that their archery skills would be just as impressive as their knife throwing.

'Is that better?' asked Nathe looking directly at Garth, 'will you now surrender or do we have to continue with this?'

Garth looked at his men who looked nervously back at him. Sighing, he dropped his sword and raised his hands.

'Not again,' complained Aharen, 'come on Nathe, can't I kill him?'

'Tie their hands up and then tie them together they are going to have a long walk,' commanded Nathe.

As soon as the men were tied up and out of the way Bella walked over to Nathe and began to argue about what should happen next.

'Nathe you're not looking at the bigger picture,' she said.

'It's my job to protect the Princess,' replied Nathe knowing he had really needed their help.

'I think we have proved our worth concerning our ability to help her, you need to take these men to Riftdale,' said Bella.

The rest looked on, Nathe knew he would lose this argument, but couldn't help himself.

'Look I know Lowe is some sort of special kid and if she said jump you would all jump, but is she right all the time?' argued Nathe.

'No, most of the time she is just a normal kid, but she sees things, sometimes she doesn't understand what she is seeing, but lately, lately she's being seeing..,' Bella dropped her head and stared at the ground.

Ebblin stepped forward, 'Lowe said Eldin at Riftdale can 'trance' people so that they will tell him anything he wants to know. She also believes he can change what they believe'.

'Are you telling me that Eldin could make them believe they were, say, a bird and then they would happily jump from a tower believing they could fly?' said Nathe shaking his head; he realised he had been doing a lot of that lately.

'Actually, yes,' said Bella.

'Maybe Eldin can put the idea into their heads that they are really spies for King Hylaw and their mission is to kill Kerdred, now that would be really clever,' said Caleb.

'Talking of the king do we even know if he is alive?' asked Ghale.

The soldiers looked at each other, not sure what to say.

'I'll take that as a yes then, don't worry, I'll not ask you to divulge your little secrets,' laughed Ghale.

'We need to get moving, are you going to take the men to Eldin, while we go back for the princess?' asked Bella.

Nathe looked at his horse, none of the horses that Garth's men had been riding looked much better. He would have to rest them, at least if Bella went back they could make good time. He knew the princess would be in good hands after seeing the way Ebblin and Ghale were with their knives and Breaker looked like could probably just snap someone with his bare hands if it came to it. Reluctantly he decided to agree.

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Glint, Ami, Lowe and Mankin crashed through the forest. Snapper had no problem because of his size. In their haste they did not see anything unusual in a tall tree they passed, did not see the emerald green eyes watching them or the other strange creature next to him. Igmy had just become a tree guardian, just like Gadolin, but sadly for Igmy he didn't look like a tree trunk covered in vines. Instead he looked like a dead, decaying, misshapen tree trunk covered in Hairy Stereum fungus, not the best look even for a tree sprite. Especially when, like Gadolin's 'vines', the big fungus looking blobs covering Igmy's body pulsed when he ran and on occasion burst like some huge acne spot covering Gadolin in a gooey residue. Igmy's face was lop sided and unlike Gadolin's emerald green eyes, Igmy's were more of a milky yellow. Luckily for Igmy there were no mirrors in the forest. Gadolin had been teaching Igmy to walk, run and climb trees, he was doing really well considering he was only two days old, well a two day old tree guardian, he had been a lot older than that in his human life.

Adrenalin gave Ami the energy to keep up with rest. Mankin had had to put Lowe down as his size made it difficult getting through the trees. Although they went as fast as they could, it was obvious by the sound of barking it would not be long before they were caught. Mankin knew what he would do, when the time came, he could not take on the hounds and the men together and hope to survive, but he could do them a lot of damage and give the rest a chance.

Eventually they came to a small clearing, with a large mound in the centre. They stopped for a moment deciding which direction to take. To the left the ground seemed to slope down, possibly leading to a stream. Snapper started

sniffing the ground and wagging his tail. He then sat on the mound. When the rest started heading out of the clearing Snapper just sat there.

'Come on Snapper,' said Glint, 'come on there's a good boy, COME ON!'

Snapper stood up and lowered his head facing the way they had just come and growled.

'Come on Snapper, you can't take on those hounds, they will rip you apart,' shouted Glint losing his patience, but Snapper wouldn't budge. Unable to wait any longer Glint ran after the others.

The ease at which Gadolin moved through the trees meant he could keep stopping to check on the pursuers and then easily catch up to the others again, Igmy was doing his best to keep up behind him. They were just about to carry on after Glint but stopped when they saw Snapper sitting on the mound. Looking back they could see the four hounds approaching, their large sleek black bodies, long pointed faces and ears. They looked vicious and Snapper looked doomed. As the hounds came into the small clearing Snapper lowered his head and growled. Taken by surprise the hounds stopped, looking at Snapper they in turn lowered their heads and began to growl. The pack leader moved slowly forward never taking his eyes off his prey, the others followed close behind. This would not take long. The leader crouched ready, with one leap he sprang at Snapper, who promptly disappeared down a rabbit hole. Confused by the sudden disappearance of his prey the hound looked down at the mound, at that same instance rabbits began to emerge dashing in all directions from different holes in the mound. Unable to stop themselves the hounds began to frantically chase the rabbits.

The scene was chaos and funny to Gadolin and Igmy. From his vantage point Gadolin could see Snapper slowly emerge from one of the rabbit holes and tentatively look around, seeing his chance he darted out and into the under bush. Unfortunately one of the hounds saw him and giving a howl to the others they abandoned the rabbits and chased after him.

Heading back out of the forest Snapper passed the men. The men stood still and looked as their hounds, nearly knocking them down in their haste, ran past them heading back the way they had just come. Shouting and cursing the men turned and tried to get them to come back. The hounds, however, had only one thing on their minds and nothing was going to stop them. On open ground the hounds would have easily caught him, but here in the forest Snapper, being small managed to keep ahead. When he ran out of forest, the hounds sensed their opportunity. Snapper, his heart ready to burst, bolted for one of the wagons, up the steps and through the little dog flap in the door.

Back in the forest the three men started arguing. Without the dogs they were uncertain of which way to go. How many were with the Princess? Jed had seen the circus act in Brinkton, the acrobats were also knife throwers and there had been a strongman and a Mankin. The other two, Burrell and Decker, had bows, if they could just catch sight of them, they might be able to take them down. The acrobats had knives though, what if they had doubled back in a bid to ambush them. Jed suggested they went back and got the dogs, but what if Garth came back?

Just then there was a noise from a tree not far from them, then the sound of a branch breaking. Decker raised his bow and sent an arrow into the branches. Something fell and made a loud 'thud' as it hit the ground. Jed ran, sword in hand to where it fell. Lying on the ground was a hideous demon all twisted and mouldy looking, despite an arrow sticking out of it, it was still alive. Jed raised his sword ready to hack it to pieces. Something grabbed his wrist and with inhuman strength lifted him off the ground. By the time Burrell and Decker reached him, Jed was frantically trying to wriggle his whole body so whatever had a hold of him would lose their grip. The other two stared opened mouthed at the thing in the tree; and then when the demon on the ground got up, arrow still sticking out of him, they were off. Jed stopped struggling and tilted his head back to see what had a hold of him. It was the tree itself, with two green eyes looking down at him. Jed dropped his sword, Gadolin dropped him. Jed ran in terror.

'Sorry Gad,' said Igmy trying to dig out the arrow.

Gadolin jumped down from the tree.

'It's OK. They will probably agree not to tell anyone, won't want people thinking they are mad, here let me give you a hand with that,' said Gadolin.

They both tried to pull out the arrow. Eventually Gadolin had Igmy lying on the ground with him standing on top, legs either side of the arrow pulling for all he was worth but it still wouldn't come out.

'How about we just snap the shaft off, the head will work its way out eventually,' suggested Gadolin.

It did not take long for the three terrorised men to make it back to the wagons and their horses. Burrell collapsed on the ground holding his chest, he was getting too old for this. Decker went to his horse and took off the saddle bags, inside one was a small skin of brandy, taking a swig he went and sat next to Jed and Burrell.

'Well what are we going to do now? There's no way I'm going back into that forest,' said Decker glancing across at the dogs who were now just sitting staring at the back of one of the wagons.

Jed sat up, 'What are we going to tell Garth?' he said.

'A little terrier out witted the dogs and we fled the forest from a demon that looked like a dead tree!' said Burrell.

'Two demons,' corrected Jed.

'OK. One demon that looked like a dead tree and one live tree that looked like a demon, still doesn't sound that good,' said Burrell standing up. 'I think I'll get those stupid hounds tied up,' he added.

With the dogs tied up, Snapper's head appeared out of the door flap seeing his chance he ran back to the forest. The men searched the wagons for food, ending up settling for some dry biscuits, cheese and fruit.

'If we go back to Kerdred without the Princess, he'll give us to the Nefkins for sport,' said Burrell.

'That's if he is in a good mood,' said Jed with a mouthful of cheese.

'Oh demons spawn, here comes Garth now,' said Decker.

The three men stood and looked towards the approaching riders.

'That's not Garth,' said Burrell.

'I feel a sudden change of loyalties coming on,' said Jed. 'But let's just be cautious, they may think we have killed the Princess and not give us a chance to explain.'

'Let's sit down, harder to kill a man when he's sitting down,' added Decker.

'Is that so? Never found it a problem myself,' replied Burrell.

'There's only four of them, you two could probably take them down,' said Jed hopefully, feeling a bit nervous without his sword.

Burrell and Decker lifted their bows and aimed.

The oncoming riders stopped, they were still a little far away for an accurate shot. Two of the riders turned their horse's side on lifting their own bows ready to return fire.

'What do we do now?' whispered Burrell to Jed.

'Guess we do what Decker suggested,' Jed whispered back.

Ghale and Ebblin, controlling their horses with their legs, slowly approached the sitting men, arrows aimed steadily at them. The three men raised their hands. Breaker slid down from Hugo and casually walked past the snarling dogs. Picking up the two bows off the ground he wandered over to one of the wagons and brought back a length of rope. Knowing what was coming the men obediently positioned themselves so Breaker could tie them up. Once that was done everyone began to relax a bit, except the dogs. Snarling and barking they pulled on their restraints. Breaker looked across at them and nodded to Ghale and Ebblin.

'Don't kill the dogs, they're just doing what they were trained to do, if you let me loose I'll calm them down,' begged Burrell misunderstanding Breaker's intention.

Breaker looked down at Burrell and then walked over to the dogs, standing in front of them, just out of reach of their snapping jaws, he stared at them. They were still snarling and lunging at him, but he didn't flinch. Ghale and Ebblin had lowered their bows and were watching intently. The dogs began to tire, realising they couldn't intimidate this man and being unable to reach him, they began to quieten. Breaker still didn't move. Bella got down from Glint's horse and tethered it to one of the wagons, their own horses would not stray, so she left them to graze. She then joined Ghale and Ebblin who were sitting quietly waiting for Breaker to finish with the dogs. The dogs finally stopped growling, but were still visibly nervous and unsettled. Breaker turned his back on them and sat down. The pack leader, feeling less threatened sniffed at Breaker's back, a few minutes later all the dogs were either sitting or lying down. Breaker then very slowly lay down on his back so that his head was within reach of the dogs, none of them reacted.

'Now,' said Bella addressing the men, 'start talking'.

Jed told her everything, even about the demons, he didn't expect her to believe him, but she just nodded now and again.

'Where's the little dog now,' asked Bella.

'When I tied up the hounds he bolted back into the forest,' said Burrell.

Ghale, Ebblin and Bella walked away from the men.

'Lowe and the Princess will be fine, Glint will get them through the forest, we should get going now,' said Ghale.

Bella nodded her head. 'I know, it's just hard to leave them. Lowe said she had been unable to see anything past her going into the forest, I just worry what she meant by that.'

Glint, Lowe, Ami and Mankin, unaware of the chaos Snapper had caused, carried on their relentless pace. As they descended a steep slope, Lowe lost her footing and fell, rolling down she only stopped when a tree stump caught her full in her back. Mankin, able to run on all fours, reached her first. Afraid to pick her up, he gently stroked her face with his huge hand. Glint and Ami scrambled down trying not to slip themselves.

Lowe groaned and reached for her back, 'Oh that hurt,' she said winded.

Glint and Ami helped her to her feet.

'Anything broken?' asked Glint.

Lowe stretched her back and felt around her ribs.

'Don't think so,' she replied, sitting back down again, 'give me just a minute,' she added.

'Listen,' said Ami.

They all listened, then looked at each other, no sound of dogs.

'Snapper?' Lowe said, 'Where's Snapper?' Only just realising he wasn't there.

Glint looked down at the ground, not sure how to tell Lowe, especially the bit where he left him to face the dogs by himself.

'When we were in the clearing, Snapper wouldn't follow us, I called him, shouted at him, but he wouldn't come,' said Glint feeling somehow responsible.

'He intended to take on the hounds?' asked Ami in disbelief.

Glint shrugged sadly, the image of Snapper being torn apart, came into his mind.

'He was probably trying to give us more time, I did try and get him to follow,' said Glint.

'It's all right Glint, whatever happened seems to have worked, no one appears to be following us now,' said Lowe.

'I wonder what has happened. Do you think the others have come back?' asked Ami.

'I don't think we should go back to find out, just in case. The plan was to try and get to Riftdale, wasn't it?' said Glint.

'The plan was to save the Princess, there was no real plan for us after that,' said Lowe.

'Please just call me Ami,' said Ami.

They were quiet for a moment, what had happened to the rest? In their haste to follow the 'plan', reality was only now beginning to sink in.

'Can you 'see' anything,' asked Glint hopefully to Lowe.

'It's strange the moment I entered the forest, I knew I would not be able to 'see' anything. When I'm out there,' she said gesturing with her hand, 'the forest appears like a shadow in my mind, not evil or bad, just nothing'.

'What does it feel like now?' asked Ami.

Lowe paused and looked around, 'Now I'm here, it feels beautiful, full of life, it's nice,' she said.

Mankin grunted. When they turned to look at him he gestured that he would go and look for somewhere to rest. Without waiting for an answer he bounded off down the slope. Taking it slowly and with the help of Glint and Ami, Lowe edged her way down after Mankin, wincing now and again at the pain in her ribs. Mankin returned in a matter of minutes, he gently lifted Lowe and carried her down to a small stream. On the other side there was a grassy bank, carrying her over the stream he laid her down carefully. Glint and Ami took off their

boots and waded across, it was not very deep, but icy cold. Once they were settled on the other side, Glint shared out some of the biscuits Bella had given him. They would not last them long. Lowe and Ami lay down on the grass and Glint put his cloak over them. It would be good if they could both get some rest, the journey to the Riftdale was going to be a long walk.

Ami and Lowe were woken by a wet tongue licking their faces.

'Snapper!' cried Lowe as she tried to sit up quickly, pain shot through her chest.

Ami saw Lowe flinch.

'Bad?' questioned Ami.

Lowe took some gentle breaths and the pain began to ease.

'I'll be all right as long I don't have to move for the next few weeks and don't have to breathe much,' she said smiling and scratching Snapper behind the ears.

A few minutes later Glint and Mankin appeared, they were walking up the stream, Glint had his breaches rolled up and his boots were tied across his neck. They were looking very pleased with themselves. Mankin was carrying a pointed stick which held four good sized fish. When he saw Snapper he grunted and Snapper ran and leapt off the bank straight at Mankin. He caught him with his free arm and was rewarded with slobbery wet kisses all over his face. Climbing out of the stream Glint could see Lowe holding her side.

'How are your ribs?' he asked.

'Sore,' Lowe replied.

'Why don't we stay here tonight, we have plenty of fish to eat and biscuits and then we can see how you are in the morning,' said Glint.

Gadolin and Igmy watched as they ate their meal and then settled down for the night. Gadolin worried about Lowe and knew what he needed to do. Leaving Igmy to watch over them, he headed into the forest to talk to Rona.

The following morning when they awoke, Ami saw a flask with a note attached. Picking up the flask she showed the rest and read the note.

Lowe, use the cap as a measure

Two caps three times a day.

Opening up the flask Ami sniffed the contents.

'It smells sweet,' she said.

Glint looked around, 'How? Who?' he said scratching his head, trying to work out where the flask had come from.

'Do you think it's safe?' asked Ami.

'If they had wanted to kill her, they could have easily done that while we were sleeping,' said Glint.

Lowe was sitting, she was not only sore but stiff as well. Unless she did take something to help her, she would not make it very far. Even if Mankin carried her, the thought of being jostled about made her cringe. Ami poured out a cap of the syrupy sweet smelling liquid and passed it to Lowe. Tentatively she took a sip, it tasted of rose hips, but sweeter. It was really nice. When she had finished the two caps she lay back, her whole body began to feel warm; she could feel the pain gently easing. Taking a deep breath she sighed and then smiled up at the rest. Mankin sat beside her and stroked her hair, making 'chuff' 'chuff' noises. Lowe got up and sitting on his lap, cuddled into him. His huge arms enveloped her and he began to rock gently backwards and forwards. Glint and Ami looked at each other and then gave each other a hug.

High up in a tree Gadolin looked at Igmy sitting next to him. Igmy had little happy tears in his eyes.

'You big soft lump,' said Gadolin and gave Igmy a hug.

Later that morning, with everyone suitably cuddled, Gadolin and Igmy watched the group gather up their things and set off at a gentle pace in the direction of Riftdale. Once they had gone Gadolin helped Igmy down from the tree. A lot of trees in Pandean were very tall, this had never bothered Gadolin; he would think nothing of climbing a hundred and thirty foot tree just for fun. Igmy though, wasn't enjoying the tree climbing, he didn't like heights and his misshapen body was not as light and agile as Gadolin's. Gadolin looked across at his new friend, who was now sitting on a log picking at his lumps of fungus.

'It will take a while for you to get used to your new body, so don't worry about the trees, we'll just follow on foot,' said Gadolin.

Igmy stood up and stretched his arms, then did a little lop sided dance.

'It's really strange not feeling any pain, when I was up in the tree I was afraid in case I fell, don't know why as it doesn't hurt,' said Igmy.

'Come on, we had better get going, I promised Rona we'd keep an eye on them while they are in the forest,' said Gadolin.

'What happens when they leave the forest, can we follow them?' asked Igmy.

'Well apart from it looking very strange, a tree trunk and a piece of deadwood wandering around the countryside, there is another problem. We would not survive very long outside the forest, few hours, a day if we didn't move much,' said Gadolin.

'That's fine with me, I like it here,' said Igmy looking around for something to eat.

Chapter 13

The explosion in the sky could be heard for miles around, which was just as well as the soldier waiting for the signal was fast asleep. He had been posted to this little nondescript hill two weeks ago and apart from having someone in the nearby village bring him food and drink, he had not spoken to anyone or done anything in particular. He had taken his horse for the odd trot around, whittled a few bits of wood into various creatures, exercised, thrown lots of small stones at a big rock, talked to himself and talked to his horse. He had no idea as to how long he was to wait for the signal, another week? A month? He had been told if he heard a 'big bang' coming from Brinkton he was to ride just as fast as he could to another poor bored soldier twenty odd miles south west of him. The other soldier was apparently guarding a beacon, which he would then light, which would then be seen by another soldier who would then light his beacon and so on all the way to Landra. He had wondered just how many soldiers were sitting around bored on hill tops, talking to their horses or throwing stones at rocks. Going to sleep that night he wished Brinkton would hurry up and get invaded, just to give him something to do.

The 'big bang' brought him instantly out of his sleep and looking across at Brinkton he could see what appeared to be stars floating down from the sky. Trying to saddle a totally freaked out horse, while he himself believed the sky was about to fall on him was not easy; but soon they were heading south west probably a lot faster than he had originally thought.

The following day Aberrling and Hylaw sat opposite each other. For the last twenty minutes they had neither spoken nor looked at each other. They had both known this was going to happen, never exactly sure when or where, it could have been Landra, it could have been anywhere along the coast. It could even have been both Landra and Brinkton. Aberrling had thought Brinkton, hoped with all his hard work he had convinced Kerdred. It meant a better chance of winning, as remote as that still was, it was the best chance they had.

Hylaw was thinking about Darius and Ami. He had told Nathe to warn Darius of the danger, to tell him to leave at the first sign of trouble. Hylaw didn't think Darius would go, he wondered if he was still alive. Kerdred would want Darius alive, Hylaw winced inside as he thought of what Kerdred might do to him. Ami on the other hand, would have escaped, he had to believe that. Nathe and his men knew the dangers, knew what they had to do, they should be well on their way to Riftdale. He and Aberrling had tried to come up with a different

plan for Ami, but in the end this was the only real option. At least she would be safe at Riftdale, for now.

Finally Aberrling turned to Hylaw. 'Your Highness, it's time to call all the able bodied men to arms. You need to be riding out of here within the week, Kerdred will be preparing for your arrival.'

'And Tremlin and Hawke will be preparing for my departure,' said Hylaw.

'As will I,' said Aberrling smiling slyly at Hylaw.

Chapter 14

It could have taken less than a day for them to reach Riftdale. But Nathe knew none of them had slept much over the last few days and they were all exhausted. Plus they had the four captives to consider. Once the men had been suitably restrained and tethered to one of the horses they began a slow walk westwards.

By early evening Nathe called a halt, not only were his feet tired, but also his ears from the constant moaning of Aharen and Garth, who seemed to be trying to out whinge each other. Making camp Aharen went to hunt for food. He made an excellent shot at a tree and another at a rock, scaring off the deer and rabbit he had been aiming at. Caleb who was aware of Aharen's hunting skills had headed in a different direction and returned an hour later with a young wild boar. Aharen quickly volunteered to prepare the animal for cooking and quickly set about hacking the carcass up and hanging large chunks over the fire. Being in charge of the cooking Aharen felt he had to keep cutting off slices to test to see when it was ready. By the time Aharen announced the meat was cooked he had probably already eaten his share. No one complained; there was enough to go round. Nathe watched his men and his captives as they talked around the fire. Garth had been there when Tanyon had been killed, but neither Caleb nor Aharen mentioned him. Garth had also taken Princess Ami's horse down, again there seemed to be no animosity between them. Equally they had killed four of Garth's men, deeds done, soldiers move on. It was the nature of their work, killing wasn't personal.

After they had all eaten, it was not long before they were all asleep. Nathe felt a darkness creep into his soul, opening his eyes there were men all around him, covered in blood. Screams filled his ears, a huge monster came out of the forest killing everything in its path. It was coming straight for him. Nathe jumped up, drawing his sword, across the dying fire he saw Caleb looking similarly panicked, everyone else was asleep.

'Nightmare?' whispered Nathe feeling slightly foolish standing there with his sword drawn.

'Yes, you too?' asked Caleb still keeping his eyes on the forest.

Nathe nodded. They both settled down again, it was a long time before either of them went back to sleep.

Bella did not want to head straight back to Riftdale. Despite persuading Nathe to do exactly that, she felt as if she had to wait at least one night in case Lowe returned. The troupe talked for a while, if they left in the morning and made good time they would not be that far behind Nathe. Ebblin and Ghale were as worried about Lowe as Bella. Breaker wanted to spend a bit of time with the dogs and Burrell, Decker and Jed had no opinions on the matter.

It was late the following morning when they set off. Ghale took one of the wagons with Decker and Burrell tied up beside him. Breaker took the other with Jed, looking very small and timid sitting next to him. Breaker didn't bother to tie up Jed. Bella and Ebblin rode and the other two horses followed behind. Ebblin and Ghale had spent a fruitless evening in the forest looking for any signs of Lowe and the others. Bella had unnerved Jed, Burrell and Decker by sitting in front of them and laying out tarot cards, her face becoming more unreadable as she went on. Only Breaker seemed to be in a good mood, he loved Snapper, but had always wanted a big strong dog, now he had four.

Later that day they crested the brow of a hill, Bella gestured to the rest to stop. Climbing down from her horse, she slowly began to walk ahead. Her steps began to falter and then she dropped to her hands and knees. Ebblin was first to get to her, but she pushed him away. Rising to her knees she focused on the valley before her, she didn't move for quite a while. Suddenly she dropped forward back onto her hands.

'This is where it all starts,' she said almost choking on the words.

Ebblin helped her to her feet. Bella was a fortune teller, a tarot card reader she had, up until now only ever seen glimpses of an individual's future and that person had to be there in front of her. What she had just seen and felt made her feel physically sick. If this was the sort of thing Lowe experienced, no wonder she was so often afraid and haunted by nightmares.

'What did you see?' asked Ebblin gently.

'Death,' said Bella.

Remounting her horse they carried on down the valley. It did not take long for the dogs to discover the bones and remains Nathe's party had eaten the night before. Bella did not want to stop.

Jed, Burrell and Decker had been brought up in Thantos, where anything to do with witches, wizards, and unearthly creepy stuff was met with the sword, the noose or burning, or all three. Because of this they had learned a disproportionate fear of such things. After seeing those wood demons and then now with Bella confirming their suspicions that she was indeed a witch, the three were beginning to feel very uncomfortable. Jed was beginning to view Breaker differently, was he a demon? The way he had power over his dogs. Burrell and

Decker were having similar fears, Ghale and Ebblin were identical apart from Ebblin's scar on his right cheek, were they ghouls sworn to serve Bella?

Bella and the troupe arrived at Riftdale only a few hours after Nathe. They were met by two rather flustered men. One was well rounded and despite the cool evening, had beads of sweat across his brow. The other looked like a long haired skeleton. Bella couldn't help but picture them eating together, every time the skinny one turned his head the large one pinched his food. The image made her smile at both of them, which seemed to fluster them even more.

'Good evening, you must be Bella,' said the large one. 'I am Bowles and this is Haber,' he added.

'I'm sorry, but we are all in a bit of shock with the news Nathe brought us,' said Haber. 'Nathe said you would probably want to stay with your wagons but told us to get him as soon as you arrived,' continued Haber, looking nervously at the dogs.

Bella looked around. 'We'll camp over there, close to the forest,' said Bella and watched as relief crossed over their faces.

The men were obviously not used to all these strangers arriving and really didn't know what to do with them.

'Oh good, I'll have someone bring you out some food,' said Bowles.

It was Aharen and Caleb who arrived first, Ebblin and Ghale were still busy seeing to the horses. As they approached the dogs began to growl. Breaker, who had tied them to one of the wagons told them to shut up.

'Wow! That was impressive,' said Caleb as he saw the dogs instantly obey Breaker.

'It's a gift,' smiled Breaker.

'We can assume by the dogs and the three tied up over there you had no problems, but what about the Princess?' asked Caleb.

'Now that's a story that should definitely be told over a drink, if you believe those three,' said Breaker looking across at Jed, Burrell and Decker.

'We'll take them off your hands and put them with the others. Nathe and Eldin want to talk to you anyway,' said Aharen.

Bella walked up beside them. 'How are they taking the news?' she asked.

'Depends on who you talk to,' said Aharen shrugging his shoulders.

After Caleb and Aharen left with the captives, they finished making camp. Two boys arrived, each carrying a tray of food, followed by an older boy bringing a jug of mead.

'Thank you,' said Bella. 'Just put them down there,' she added pointing to a low table.

The older boy hovered, obviously wanting to talk to her.

'Well, what is it?' Bella asked kindly.

'When Glint went missing the other night, I thought it was because he was a coward and had run away,' began Will.

'And now you've been told he rode through the night to help rescue Princess Ami,' said Bella.

'Yeh, but what I don't understand is how did he know?' asked Will.

'You'll have to ask him when he gets back,' said Bella. 'There are those in life whose bravery is not judged by how many people they kill, but how many people they save. Glint would put his own life in danger to save others, he may not be a great fighter but no one should question his bravery.'

Will put down the jug and headed back.

'You were a bit hard on the lad,' said Ghale.

'I know, but when I think of Glint, I worry about him,' said Bella.

'Have you seen something in his future?' asked Ghale.

'No, but Lowe has, when she said he would be her friend, that was reason enough to worry!' laughed Bella.

The troupe settled down to eat and just as they were finishing Nathe and Eldin arrived. Bella was genuinely pleased to see Eldin but noticed he looked tired and distracted. When he sat with them he told them of the task Aberrling had set him, a task he increasingly felt was impossible. Bella told Eldin what had happened since they had left Nathe and the others. When she told Eldin about her 'vision', Nathe enquired as to where exactly it had happened.

'We camped overnight in that same valley, Caleb and I both had the same nightmare, which sounds very similar to your vision,' he said.

Everyone went quiet. Eldin had just told them he thought it was impossible to win a head on battle with Kerdred and now Bella and Nathe claimed to have 'seen' just that. Worse still Bella had described her vision as 'dire' and Nathe had called his dream a nightmare.

Eldin broke the silence. 'It's getting late, you must be tired. I would like to come and talk with you again tomorrow.'

They all agreed to meet again mid-morning.

Eldin lay back on his bed, a large book resting on his chest. He had been reading a story about Thantos, long, long ago, when wizards ruled and magic reigned. It had been a time when anything had seemed possible. That was until the wizards in their arrogance tampered with the very fabric of nature and the Mid World was let loose on the land. Eldin loved stories like this, as a child his mother would tell him scary bedtime stories and tell him if he wasn't a good boy the Mid World creatures would come and get him. Some nights he would lie in bed with the covers over his head, too frightened even to let his elbow stick out.

He was sure one lived under the bed, he could often hear it; his mother had said it was probably a mouse, but she wasn't certain. Eldin smiled to himself, he hadn't thought about his mother for many years. Her sudden death had changed everything. He had loved her so much, it had been an unbearable time, but now, now the memory of her gave him comfort. He realised that he had never let himself love anyone else since.

He already knew the end of the story of the wizards, everyone in Daranel did. Mothers told the stories, bards told the stories, puppeteers told the stories and actors performed both tragic and comedy versions. Over time the stories had taken on a life of their own, in Thantos they were banned. In fact in Thantos anyone even talking about wizards and witches could be thrown in the dungeon. Anyone thought to be actually dabbling in the 'black arts' could expect a variety of punishments, all involving a great deal of pain and eventual death. This was what interested Eldin most.

Eldin's thoughts wandered back to the battle plans he was supposed to be devising. The bottom line was that despite his best efforts, some of which had proved useful, he knew King Hylaw could not beat Kerdred. Kerdred could raise a far bigger and better trained army. No one actually knew exactly how many were waiting in Korin to sail over, but the numbers were thought to be huge. Kerdred also had the Nefkins. King Hylaw's army numbered only a few thousand and many of them were untrained men and boys from towns and villages around Daranel, it would be a massacre if they came face to face. But the alternative was just as bad with Kerdred in Brinkton and according to Nathe, Tremlin expected to arrive in Landra any day soon, it would only be a matter of time before they took over the rest of the country. Aberrling's plans had been good and had given King Hylaw time, but as it stood at the moment, the end would still be the same. Eldin needed to think; he began snoring.

'Eldin,' said Rona quietly, trying not to give him a fright.

Eldin opened his eyes and was surprised to see a very old woman sitting on his chair facing him. She gave him a smile, revealing somewhat less than a full set of teeth.

'I'm here to help you with some of your problems,' Rona said quite seriously.

'And you are? And my problems are?' asked Eldin.

'I am Rona and your main problem is Kerdred,' replied Rona simply.

Eldin looked down at his book he had been reading then across at Rona.

'Are you some sort of creation from my imagination, a dream?' asked Eldin trying to find a logical explanation as to why an old woman would be sitting in his room after dark. He glanced at the candles, still burning brightly. He could only have dozed off for a few minutes, although if this was a dream, those might

be 'dream candles' and it could be the middle of the night and pitch black in his room.

Rona cackled and shook her head. 'I definitely haven't been created by you, what an idea!'

Rona looked down; her expression changed.

'I am a witch, a very old witch who should have died a long time ago. What you are looking at now is my spirit, my body lies hidden in the ancient forest,' Rona stopped, her shoulders sagged. 'My body will not last much longer, each time I return to it, it gets more difficult, I rely on others to bring me food and water,' sighed Rona.

'Why do you keep living? You're a witch, give yourself some potion or something,' said Eldin confused as to why anyone would want to live past their natural death day.

'My daughter was killed by Drumlin, my granddaughter was killed by Kerdred and my great granddaughter was taken by Kerdred as his wife,' said Rona almost hissing as she spoke.

Eldin was taken aback by the hate he felt from her, her anger filled the room with a malevolent energy.

Recovering, Rona calmed herself, 'I'm sorry, I've carried too much hate for too long'.

Eldin looked at Rona, he had been telling himself for weeks now he had to think differently if he was to come up with anything that would tip the scales in King Hylaw's favour.

'You said you would help me?' questioned Eldin.

At that Rona smiled, a wicked smile.

'Oh yes, I can help, but you will have to totally trust me,' said Rona.

'The best I can do at the moment is try,' said Eldin honestly.

'Good,' said Rona, 'Let's talk about fear'.

They spent most of the night talking, arguing, agreeing, thinking and even occasionally laughing. When Rona told him about what she had been doing to Kerdred over the years, he nearly felt sorry for him. Kerdred was terrified of her. Eldin wanted to know why she hadn't just killed him. She explained that when she was out of her body, she couldn't really hurt anyone and demonstrated the fact by coming over to him and giving him the hardest punch she could. He felt it, thought about it, and asked her to do it again. This time he closed his eyes, after the next punch he understood. Looking at her carefully he realised she was not actually sitting on the chair. He had always understood the idea of a ghost being the spirit of someone who had died, but it had never occurred to him that that also meant he was just a ghost still in a live body.

Their discussions got really weird after that and by the time Rona left, promising to return soon, Eldin was totally spooked out. Well at least he was thinking differently.

Chapter 15

It wasn't until midday that Eldin arrived back at the camp. Nathe was not with him.

'Sorry I'm late, I have been talking to the prisoners, in particular Jed, Burrell and Decker, very interesting,' said Eldin taking a seat next to Ebblin.

Bella, Ghale, Ebblin and Breaker had just been discussing the Tree Guardians. Bella had told Eldin last night that the prisoners must have eaten something in the forest that had made them hallucinate. It was always difficult to know what people in Daranel would and would not accept. Fortune telling, visions, dreams, nightmares didn't seem to faze most people. Ghouls, ghosts, demons, walking trees were told about to children, but adults had a strange relationship with them. Some believed, some managed to believe and disbelieve at the same time and some thought all spooky stuff was absolute rubbish. Those who thought it was rubbish tended to consider anyone claiming to have seen 'something' a bit of a nut case. The troupe had decided Eldin was in the 'rubbish' category and had agreed not to mention certain things to him. They were in for a surprise.

'I would like to hear everything you can tell me about Lowe and what she can 'see'. Everything about Rona and last but not least the Tree Guardians,' added Eldin looking hopefully at each one of them.

'Rona?' asked Bella.

'Ah yes, she came to see me late last night, most enlightening, she had some very interesting ideas. Not the sought of thing I would normally have considered, but may be just what's needed,' said Eldin.

'Well I have to say I never expected this from you, thought you were in the non-believer camp,' said Ghale.

'It doesn't matter what I believe, what matters is what Kerdred believes. Rona and I spent a long time discussing terror and playing on a person's fears. I have spent weeks trying to find Kerdred's weakness and it was staring at me all the time,' said Eldin sounding quite excited by the discovery.

'Did you realise your three prisoners have convinced themselves you are really demons and such like?' added Eldin.

'I did notice they were very quiet after Bella had her vision,' said Ghale.

'Jed seemed to be a bit taken aback by how easy you took control of his dogs,' said Ebblin to Breaker. 'And all that just adds to their encounter in the forest,' he added.

'It would not take much to nudge their minds a little further,' said Eldin intriguingly.

They all looked at each other, ideas forming, some slightly absurd, others comical. Bella came out of her thoughts.

'Just how much of a little nudge were you thinking about?' she asked.

'Enough so when they escape and tell Kerdred, they will believe Riftdale harbours all manner of strange and magical creatures,' said Eldin grinning broadly. 'Rona has been tormenting Kerdred for years, she has agreed to appear in Jed, Decker and Burrell's dreams. They will believe she also lives here in Riftdale. This will make their story more real to Kerdred. Kerdred hates anything to do with the supernatural and detests Rona with a passion,' said Eldin.

'I want to be a wizard,' said Ebblin.

'Actually I was hoping to be the wizard,' said Eldin.

'This could be quite fun, must not get too carried away though,' said Bella.

'Why not? I'm sure we could come up with all sorts of ideas,' said Ebblin beginning to think he would make a good tree guardian.

'Because if we take it too far we could actually make them insane. It wouldn't be any good if they ended up gibbering wrecks,' said Bella.

Breaker had been listening quietly. 'Why do you want Kerdred to believe Riftdale is full of witchcraft?' he asked.

They all looked at Eldin.

'Let's just say for the moment, the more we tip him mentally over the edge, the more we tip the scales in our favour,' said Eldin.

'You have other ideas?' questioned Breaker.

'I am willing to consider anything and everything even if that includes taking advice from an apparition that appeared in my bedroom last night,' said Eldin.

Just then the dogs began to growl and pull on their restraints. Snapper bounded past them, jumped onto Breaker's lap and began smothering him in wet kisses, wagging his tail frantically. The rest stood up and waited for Lowe, Glint, Mankin and Princess Ami to appear. They didn't have to wait long. Soon everyone was hugging each other and all talking at the same time, except for Eldin.

'I'll go and organise some food and drink,' he said to no one in particular.

Glint heard and walked over to him. Standing awkwardly in front of him, he didn't know whether to give him a hug, shake his hand or what? Eldin surprised him by grabbing hold of him.

'I've missed you lad, let me know the next time you decide to run off to rescue some Princess,' said Eldin.

When Eldin let go, Glint was so stunned he just stood there.

'Right food, you look like you haven't had a proper meal in days,' said Eldin. 'I'll have some sent out to you,' he added and headed back into the town.

When the initial excitement died down they sat in a circle and told each other of their adventures over the last few days. The journey through the forest hadn't been that eventful and therefore didn't take long to tell. Bella said, from what Jed, Decker and Burrell had told them, Snapper must have disturbed a rabbit burrow, sending the dogs into a frenzy chasing rabbits everywhere. The story about the Tree Guardians had Lowe clapping her hands with delight.

'They must have been the ones that got the medicine for me!' she exclaimed.

Eldin returned with the same boys that had brought the food the night before. As they approached Ami stood up staring at them.

'Will? Will!' she shouted and ran over to him. He put down the jug and swung her around in his arms laughing. Glint wasn't laughing. Bella, Ghale and Ebblin looked at Glint questioningly, Glint just shrugged his shoulders.

Grabbing Will by the hand, Ami dragged him over to the rest.

'Why didn't you tell me Will was here?' asked Ami.

'I didn't know you knew him,' said Glint trying not to sound as annoyed as he felt.

'Our fathers were friends, we used to play together when we were young,' said Ami still holding on to Will's hand, Glint noted.

'Will did say his father wanted him to marry you, but I thought he was just joking,' said Glint wanting to tell her about Will's affair with his mother's maid.

'Come let's get this food,' said Ghale noticing the anger building in Glint's eyes. 'And I hope that jug you were carrying has something stronger than water in it,' he added.

Will went back and picked up the jug of mead and then sat next to Ami.

After everyone had finished eating the conversation returned to Jed, Burrell and Decker. It took the rest of the afternoon to decide exactly what to do and exactly who would do what. They would need the next three days to prepare.

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The auditorium was ideal for the show. It was normally used to give lectures outside and encircled a reasonable size arena. A small platform had been built to one side for Eldin, and at the entrance the two wagons had been set with a screen between them for the performers to hide behind.

Eldin loved his wizard costume, a bright red cloak and cone shaped hat both with lots of yellow suns and moons sewn on them. He stood on the platform, a little way back from the 'cauldron'. He hoped Felspar had got his quantities right

this time as during rehearsal Eldin had nearly been blown off the platform. The audience were settled. Jed, Burrell and Decker were at the front squeezed between Aharen and Caleb. There was a buzz of excitement as everyone waited for the show to begin.

Eldin raised his arms to the sky, in his right hand he held a wand and his left was clenched. He waited for silence.

'Once upon a time to come,' he began. 'There was a lord who sought to conquer our lands, only a fool would dare such a thing, only a fool would dare to take on the WIZARDS!'

Eldin threw the powder from his left hand into the cauldron, a large red plume of smoke erupted from the cauldron, perfect.

From behind the screen Will appeared dressed all in black with a black wig. His face was painted, a macabre clown face. He walked to the centre of the circle brandishing his wooden sword.

'Who dares to mock ME, the mighty, great and powerful Cur,' said Will.

'We all do,' said the wizard gesturing to the whole audience.

'Do not underestimate me, wizard,' Cur retreated behind the screen to boos and hisses from the audience.

Clover and Echo trotted into the ring and stopped in front of the audience and bowed. Moving in opposite directions they began to canter around the circle, stopping at the same time to turn on the spot. Bella entered the circle dressed as an old witch walking with the aid of a staff.

'Ah my beauties, what troubles you?' said the witch in a very witchy voice.

Clover and Echo moved to take positions on either side of her.

'Is it the wolves?'

The horses shook their heads.

'Is it a man?'

The horses nodded their heads and stamped on the ground with their front legs.

'A man so despicable even his own brothers want him dead?'

The horses nodded their heads again.

'CUR!'

As one both horses rose onto their hind legs and kicked their front legs in the air.

'Ha, do not fret my beauties I have plans for that one, in his dreams,' the witch cackled as she directed that last comment at the three men sitting uncomfortably between Aharen and Caleb.

Jed, Burrell and Decker were not happy. They had all had a very strange dream last night involving a witch, they had been separated from the others and

now were being made to watch something that would have had them hanged in Thantos.

The witch lifted her staff in the air and turning she aimed at the wagons. A firework shot in the sky and exploded into stars. Huge applause came from the audience as they walked from the circle.

Glint and Ami stealthily walked into the circle, wooden swords at the ready, looking left and right.

'Keep your eyes peeled, I fear Cur's men are close at hand,' said Ami.

'Do not worry Princess, I am the fearless Glint, the greatest swordsman in the land!' Glint did a few dramatic sword thrusts the last of which sent his sword flying in the air.

'You are right Glint with you by my side, what in the world would I have to worry about?' said Ami picking up Glint's sword for him.

From behind the wagons Garth and his three men appeared, each with a wooden sword in one hand and a leafy branch in the other. Their faces were painted white with black circles around their eyes. Snapper came out with them. They began to creep up behind Glint and Ami.

Glint lifted up his hand, 'Wait, I hear something,' he said.

They both turned slowly around. Garth and his men were standing stock still with the tree branches in front of their faces pretending to be trees. Snapper sat with his front paws covering his eyes.

'I can't hear anything, do you think they are close?' asked Ami.

'I don't know, lets hurry,' replied Glint.

Glint and Ami started walking around slowly, with the four men and Snapper behind tracing every step. Every now and again Glint would raise his arm and stop. Each time when they turned around the 'trees' had halted and Snapper was sitting with his eyes covered. After the fourth time Glint did not raise his hand before turning. The men held up their swords, Glint heroically jumped in front of the nearest man and pretended to stab him in the stomach.

'Die,' he shouted.

The man fell to the ground. The other three followed a similar fate, although the last one did have to wait awhile before being touched and told to die as Glint got a bit theatrical. Finally Glint turned to Snapper, touching him with the end of his sword.

'Die!'

Snapper rolled over on to his back and began kicking his legs, got back up, staggered a few more steps, then dropped again, back up he staggered again, dropped, back up, staggered, dropped, up, down, up. Glint stood with his hands

on his hips, on one of Snapper's 'ups' he looked at Glint, snarled and then lay down.

Applause and cheering filled Glint's ears. Before the cheers had subsided Breaker entered and began playing the fiddle, the soldiers rose from the ground and began swaying to the music. Glint and Ami began clapping, urging the audience to join in. Next the soldiers began to dance, swishing their branches in time to the music. Eventually they all followed Breaker back behind the screen to more rapturous applause.

Aharen nudged Jed, 'Great dancers'.

Jed didn't react, in fact he didn't even appear to be breathing. Aharen grinned across at Caleb, the plan was definitely working.

Eldin stood back on the platform.

'The great forest of Pandean lies behind you, such magic, such wonder, so much mystery, let us glimpse into that world,' he announced with as much authority as he could muster.

Ebblin and Ghale rose from behind the screen, towering above everyone else they walked into the circle.

'TREE GUARDIANS!' Eldin shouted.

It had taken Bella, Ebblin and Ghale, plus two woodcrafters to make the costumes and stilts but it was worth it. Even Gadolin and Igmy who were watching from the trees behind the wall were impressed.

'Hehe,' laughed Igmy, 'they think we look like that, I wish I could join them'.

'No Igmy, now don't give me that sad look,' said Gadolin.

The 'Tree Guardians' stood slightly apart in the circle not moving.

The witch, bent and limping with her staff for support, walked past them up to the audience. Her face partially hidden by the hood of her cloak.

'Haha! You think you are all awake,' the witch crowed. 'Wrong my pretties, you are in a dream world, my dream world. Here, I control your souls!'

With that she hid behind Ebblin's stilts.

Cur entered looking confused and lost. Beautiful flute music began to play, Bella reappeared no longer in her witch costume, moving seductively to the music. Will was pleased he had his face painted to hide his blushes for what was about to happen.

Bella's arms and hips had Cur mesmerised. She approached slowly, tantalisingly swaying her body. Just as she was in Cur's reach the trees came to life, taking a hand each they swung Bella gently in the air, over the top of Cur and placed her down close to the screen. The music stopped.

'What trickery is this?' shouted Cur.

The 'Tree Guardians' turned menacingly towards Cur, long spears now in their hands. Cur began to back away, they followed. Cur stumbled and fell backwards to the ground. They raised their spears ready to strike but Bella ran over positioning herself in between them.

'No don't hurt him,' pleaded Bella lowering her head to kiss him. At the last second she rolled over onto her cloak and stood up, staff in hand. Her head covered, bent and leaning on her staff she cackled hysterically.

Cur stood and starred in horror, then dropped to his knees, his head bowed. The 'Tree Guardians' grabbed hold of him and rather unceremoniously began to drag him out of the ring.

The wizard raised his hand and everyone stopped.

'Once upon a time to come,' he started seriously. 'There was a lord who sought to conquer our lands, only a fool would dare such a thing.'

On his last word Eldin shot his hands into the air and the sky exploded with fireworks. The effect was awesome, the initial fright the audience got was followed by clapping and shouting.

Once Cur was behind the screen the rest of the actors came to take their bows. Glint and Ami rode Clover and Echo. Ebblin and Ghale came out juggling wooden swords. Snapper came out with Will and stood next to Bella. Bella took off her witches cloak and Will his wig. Taking it in turns they all bowed to the audience and then left the circle.

'Are you alright?' asked Gadolin.

Igmy sat up, he had been clapping excitedly, but when the fireworks went off he'd got such a fright he'd fallen out of the tree.

'Wow!' was all Igmy could think of to say.

Chapter 16

Tremelin and Hawke stood on the docks waiting for the horses to be brought off the ship. Despite Aberrling's assurances that King Hylaw had left Landra totally undefended, they had brought with them a small army and six Nefkins. As they stood next to each other it was obvious they were brothers, both in their twenties, both with striking red hair, both formidable fighters. They were also both united in their purpose, the downfall of their half-brother, Kerdred. Their plan was simple, let Kerdred take on King Hylaw, hopefully they would kill each other. It didn't really matter though, the brothers would be patient and when the time was right, would finish off whoever was left. Once Daranel was theirs, they would cut a track through the old forest joining Daranel and Thantos. So far with the help of Aberrling everything was going to plan.

Aberrling sat on the creaky old chair; why he had come into Eldin's old room he did not know. He wasn't quite sure what to do for the next few hours. He patted the hidden pocket in his tunic, the phial of poison gave him comfort. The ships were probably in the harbour by now. People would be panicking, stall holders hurriedly packing up, children herded indoors, doors and windows barred. When Hawke and Tremelin finally stood on the dock would there be anyone left on the streets? Aberrling tried to picture the scene, how many men had they brought? How many Nefkins? How many horses? It had been his plan to leave Landra undefended, to let Hawke and Tremelin just take over the city.

After King Hylaw had left, Aberrling had called a council meeting where he had told them he was going to resign, as yet again his advice had not been heeded. King Hylaw had left him in an impossible position. Should Kerdred's brothers decide to invade the city, Aberrling would have no choice but to allow them to take over. Aberrling felt his performance that day had been impressive, ranging from extreme anger and frustration to despondency and misery. The council at first were horrified by the idea of allowing an invader just to come and take over, but the more they discussed their options the more they realised there were no options. As Aberrling had expected the conversation became more about their own safety, rather than the safety of the inhabitants of the city. Aberrling had said he did not know what would happen, he hoped King Hylaw would defeat Kerdred on the battle field and then return to liberate Landra. His plan was to do whatever it took to remain alive so he would be able to help the King on his return. After some more arguing from the council, it was agreed.

They also agreed the situation Aberrling had presented them with was highly unlikely to happen anyway, so it was all really just hypothetical.

The sound of people shouting in the distance brought Aberrling out of his thoughts. It had begun, they would be looking for him; the council would be looking for him. Staring at the wall, deep in thought, Aberrling decided to hide in Eldin's room for a little while longer.

When he finally did emerge from Eldin's room and started walking through the corridors, men began to surround him, demanding to know what they should do. Ignoring them he went into the main hall where the rest of the council were waiting, surrounded by a large number of frantic people. Raising his hands to quieten them, he looked around at the frightened faces.

'When King Hylaw left for Brinkton I offered the council my resignation. Unable to dissuade our beloved King from leaving Landra unprotected, I failed as his advisor,' he began. 'Now we are faced with an impossible choice, to die, for surely we will if we resist Tremlin and his army or to submit to a known enemy of the King,' Aberrling lowered his head again and sighed. 'Each person must make their own choice.'

An old man stepped forward.

'What is the council's decision?' he asked.

Aberrling looked kindly at the old man, 'We would be no good to the King dead,' said Aberrling.

The old man nodded, he agreed, he had spent most of his life bowing his head to pompous asses who he would have quite happily throttled.

'I must go now and prepare, the next few weeks will be difficult, let us hope we can all get through this,' said Aberrling, really meaning, let's hope I can get through this.

Aberrling walked through the crowd of people, many nodded as he passed, others touched his shoulder; he had their support.

By the time Hawke and Tremlin rode up to the castle gates it was beginning to get dark, the council was there to meet them. No one in all of Landra had tried to oppose them, not even a rotting potato thrown in their direction, nor had there been any cheering. It was Aberrling who stepped forward.

'Greetings my Lord Hawke, Lord Tremlin, we have had little time to prepare a suitable welcome, I hope our efforts will meet with your approval,' Aberrling said stepping back and gesturing them to enter the castle.

Hawke and Tremlin dismounted their horses and along with thirty of their best soldiers walked up the steps, through the massive doors and into the great hall. Tables had been all set out and servants were busy bringing out a whole host of delicious smelling food. Others stood holding large jugs of ale. Tremlin

had planned to sit on the throne and make some big speech about what he expected of 'his' subjects, a bit of loyalty pledging, the odd beheading of those still loyal to King Hylaw, but he supposed that could wait until tomorrow. He noticed Hawke, always keen to add more wives to his collection, was already heading over to a rather pretty girl. Accepting a tankard of ale Tremlin made his way to the table.

The following morning Aberrling sat back, going over in his mind everything he had observed from the previous evening. The night had proved useful for many reasons, but for Aberrling it had given him the chance to weigh up his enemy. Hawke was obviously used to being in charge. Sitting himself at the head of the table the servants hovered around him, serving him first and ensuring his tankard was never empty. Tremlin, on the other hand came across as a man who lacked natural authority, which in Aberrling's opinion was bad news. There was an awkward arrogance about him, the more he drank the louder he became. Hawke was only expected to stay a few days. Advisors would start to arrive, Tremlin would then start testing loyalties.

Aberrling wondered how Selina's night had gone. She was being well paid and judging by her performance during the evening, was worth every penny. Tremlin should be waking up this morning feeling like a king. Aberrling smiled to himself, he loved women, but for different reasons than most men. He would speak with her later. It was time now to ingratiate himself with his unwanted guests.

Having made a little detour to the dungeons Aberrling entered the council room to find Hawke and Tremlin arguing about something.

'Oh, I'm terribly sorry to interrupt, I'll come back later, just thought you might like to know I have Brandon with me,' said Aberrling looking suitably humble.

Brandon popped his head around the door and gave them both a huge grin.

'Bet you never expected to see me again.'

'Brandon? How?' Asked Tremlin, delighted to see his old friend.

'Been in the dungeons, nearly a year,' said Brandon looking at Aberrling for confirmation.

'Nearly,' confirmed Aberrling nodding.

'You don't look like you've been in a dungeon for that long,' said Hawke.

'Aberrling here made sure I was all right, decent food and stuff, good to be out though,' said Brandon.

Tremlin looked at Brandon then his brother, 'Hawke thinks he needs to stay, that I am not ready to rule Landra'.

'That's not what I said,' snapped Hawke. It wasn't what he had said, but it had been what he meant. 'I said I would stay until things had been sorted out.'

'Don't worry Hawke, Aberrling will be able to advise Tremlin on what needs to be done and I'll watch his back, he'll do just fine,' said Brandon.

Hawke did want to get back to Korin, but was not about to leave his brother until he was sure it was safe.

'I'll stay until the end of the week,' said Hawke, 'Aberrling come with me'.

As they walked Aberrling looked at Hawke's back and thought about what Brandon had said to Tremlin. If only they all knew what I really have planned for them, thought Aberrling.

Chapter 17

A few days after the circus performance Jed, Burrell and Decker had been tied between two posts just outside the wall. The wizard had come to talk to them, again. The previous night they had again dreamed of the witch. It was all a bit vague in their minds now as they rode back to Brinkton. Burrell said he had pulled on the ropes, which had then come loose from the post. They sort of remembered creeping past Aharen and then taking the horses. It didn't really matter though, the important thing was that they had escaped.

*

Darius was anxious, it had been two weeks since Brinkton had been invaded. They had made their camp in a copse on a hill about ten miles from the town. From their vantage point they could see the main road. Sadly they could also see some of the villages which Kerdred's men had ransacked. They had wanted to help, Darius and Lewin had never argued so much. If Kerdred's men could come and go freely from the town, where was King Hylaw? Had Landra also been taken? Nathe had told Darius to leave Brinkton at the first sign of trouble, Hylaw had a plan. Darius just hoped it wasn't to let Brinkton rot in Kerdred's hands.

One of his soldiers came and told him three riders had been spotted heading south. Were they the ones who had pursued Princess Ami? Darius was being driven to distraction by not knowing what was going on.

Watching from the cover of the trees, the riders passed.

'Did anyone recognise them?' asked Lewin hopefully.

'They did not appear to have any swords,' said one of his men.

'Look there are another two men coming,' said Darius pointing in the distance. 'They appear to be chasing the others.'

As the two riders got closer it was Lewin who broke cover and began running down the hill, shouting back at the others, 'It's Aharen and Caleb!'

Aharen and Caleb pulled up their horses when they saw a man running, frantically waving his arms. 'Is that Lewin?' asked Caleb.

'Looks a bit like him, never seen him like that though,' replied Aharen.

'Never known a man who cares so much about his appearance,' joked Caleb.

'Well if that is Lewin, seems he's had other things on his mind recently,' laughed Aharen.

All of a sudden, movement from the side of the road caught Caleb's attention.

'No!! Lewin!' Caleb tried to warn him, gesturing equally frantically with his arms.

An arrow caught Lewin in the side, sending him crashing to the ground. From a thicket an archer stood, an arrow aimed at them. Aharen and Caleb turned, the sound of horses alerting them to a new danger, a dozen or so riders were heading straight for them from the other side of the road. Kicking their horses furiously, Aharen and Caleb raced past their attackers and further along the road towards where Lewin lay, narrowly avoiding the arrows fired in their direction. The road then swung right, up the hill towards a coppice. As they approached the trees they were met by Darius' onrushing soldiers charging down the hill at the enemy on foot with swords and spears. Turning their horses back round Aharen and Caleb joined Darius and his men in the attack. Surprised by the sudden onslaught, some of Kerdred's soldiers panicked, horses reared up dismounting their riders, those still mounted faced spears and arrows. Those on the ground faced swords and fury. One of the riders broke from the fighting, trying to escape. Aharen caught up with him halfway down the hill. Leaping from his horse, Aharen unseated the man and they both went crashing to the ground. Aharen was back on his knees first, his rage at the death of Lewin getting the better of him, he clenched his fists together and brought them down hard onto his opponent's chest. He was still kneeling there, blood dripping from his hands, when Caleb touched him on the shoulder.

'We need to get moving,' Caleb said quietly.

A combination of Darius and an archer had taken care of Lewin's killer. By the amount of blood on Darius, Aharen knew Lewin had not been killed instantly. Darius had lost Lewin and four other men, another was badly injured and would not be able to ride. All the bodies, except Lewin's killer were brought into the coppice and buried in two separate graves. One of the soldiers agreed to stay with the injured man, he had been stitched and bandaged and if he made it through the night he might have a chance. Heading out, the two remaining soldiers followed behind Aharen, Caleb and Darius, leading the spare horses. Darius had hardly spoken, his face showed no emotion, his eyes blank. Aharen and Caleb rode silently next to him.

Chapter 18

Shade had arrived in Wilmayne over twelve years ago, tired and hungry. Wilmayne was a small village in Daranel, about forty miles west of Brinkton. Its hillside location meant it had the most fabulous views, Shade would often sit for hours on a rocky outcrop just staring into the distance. She sometimes 'mind merged' with the kestrels that flew overhead, but now rather than feeling elated as she had as a child, it seemed to increase her sense of loneliness. It is always one of the strange things in life, that you can be surrounded by many friends and still feel desperately lonely. The one thing that had kept her going over the years was the promise her great grandmother had made to her, that one day she would be reunited with her daughter, and that she would have her revenge against Kerdred. She could still remember it now as if it were yesterday, waking up in a bed in a little wooden hut....

....it took her a while to realise where she was and what had happened. Fingal, she thought with great sadness, he had given up his life to save her and believed he had failed. She turned her head and looked at the baby cradled in her arm beside her. Forgetting her injury she tried to move her left arm, it was stiff and sore but bearable. She tried gently to sit up and not wake the baby.

'Now, now you just lie there,' said the old woman coming into the hut. 'It's a girl,' she added.

Shade looked down at her daughter, she had so many questions to ask the old woman.

The old woman knew and took a seat on the opposite bed.

'My name is Rona and I am your great grandmother,' Rona began raising her hand to stop Shade speaking, 'Drumlin killed your grandmother and Kerdred killed your mother. I think a little revenge is in order but we will speak of that later,' smiled Rona. 'You were delirious when Gadolin brought you here and had gone into labour. I needed to work fast and could not have you screaming or thrashing around, I had to leave your arm and head wound until after you gave birth.'

'My mother never mentioned you, I didn't know,' said Shade.

'There is a lot you do not know Shade and I cannot tell you everything yet, you must trust me,' said Rona sadly. 'And I'm very sorry but once your daughter is weaned, I have arranged for your cousin, Bella to take her, Kerdred will never stop looking for you and your child.' Rona's face went very serious. 'But I can

promise you this much, you will see your daughter again and you will have your revenge.'

Shade had named her daughter Lowe and cried her heart out when Rona took her away. She knew Rona was right, it didn't make it any easier though. After Rona left, Shade had headed south through the forest with Gadolin. The journey had taken them six weeks, Shade had wondered sometimes whether it had taken them that long because the forest was that big or because Gadolin kept getting lost. Either way, she remembered how sad she had been when they had reached the south edge of the forest and she had said goodbye to him. His patient emerald green eyes, his crooked smile, his understanding of her sorrow. She missed him. When she arrived in Wilmayne they had asked no questions and she had offered no explanation. The fact she was a wise woman, a healer was enough. She had introduced herself to the villagers as 'Sadie'. Over time she had proved herself very capable and they had taken her into their hearts. She was thankful of their kindness.

Shade sat on her favourite rock on the edge of the village staring out at the horizon deep in thought. It had not taken long for the news of the invasion to reach them. People who had managed to flee Brinkton began arriving, they didn't stay long. A few arrived injured and Shade did her best for them. A huge man, barely alive with a sword wound to his side came. Shade did not think she could save him but after only a few days he was sitting up and flirting with her, and any woman who came into his room. Daranel soldiers arrived, taking all the able bodied men and the horses, except Haystack's. Some of the soldiers knew him and told Shade to get him on his feet as soon as possible. It didn't matter if he wasn't fully recovered, even an injured Haystack would still be worth three men. Most of the other villagers soon packed up and left. When Haystack left after only six days, promising to take it easy, the village felt deserted.

Ben Adhem the village elder approached her and sat down on the rock next to her. He said nothing but Shade knew he had come to ask what she planned to do now the village had emptied. She decided the time was finally right and told Ben Adhem her story which had led her to the village. There was a lot she had to miss out, not even to an elder as kind and wise as Ben Adhem could she tell everything.

Ben Adhem took her hand, 'My dear I always thought you carried a great sadness with you. I will tell the few that are left that you will be leaving. Kerdred's men will soon come to the village and you cannot be discovered here,' he said kindly.

'I am not leaving you behind or any of the others,' Shade said.

'But those left cannot travel because of their age nor will their loved ones abandon them,' said Ben Adhem.

'There is a wagon and a small cart,' said Shade.

'But no horses,' he replied.

'Not yet,' smiled Shade.

Ben Adhem smiled back, 'I see you have a plan, am I going to like it?'

'Probably not,' laughed Shade.

Ben Adhem looked sideways at Shade, 'What you told me before, about how you came here, did you miss a few things out? Of course you did and as a wise elder I'm not going to ask,' said Ben Adhem leaning back against the rock behind him. 'All right tell me this plan I'm not going to like.'

Ben Adhem listened carefully to what Shade said occasionally nodding, at other times shaking his head. When Shade had finished Ben Adhem was quiet for a long time, just staring at the hills in the distance. Eventually Ben Adhem stood up slowly, stretching out his back.

'Come with me, we need to tell the others, if this is going to work we need everyone to agree,' he said.

Shade took his arm and helped him back down to the village. It did not take long for him to get those who were left in the village gathered together. There were five old women, four old men, including Ben Adhem, six younger women, including Shade, one of whom was pregnant, four young children and two babies. They were all waiting in the village square when 'Sadie' took her place in the centre, Ben Adhem limped up beside her and called the four young children over to him.

'I need a hand to get some juice and biscuits for everyone,' said Ben Adhem.

The children's faces lit up, and eagerly followed him to his store room.

Shade wasted no time in telling those left about her plan, it sounded dangerous, but doing nothing was probably just as dangerous. They were afraid, afraid to do something, afraid to do nothing, they argued back and forth. Ben Adhem returned with the children, the apple juice and oatmeal biscuits were shared out. Because of the children's excitement at this unexpected treat the adults conversation became less fearful and more about planning. Discussing what they needed to do and how much time they had to do it. By the evening it was decided they were going to follow 'Sadie's' plan.

The following morning the villagers started to prepare, they occasionally glanced in 'Sadie's' direction. She was sitting on the outcrop with two Kestrels, it looked like she was talking to them. Every so often they would take to the skies flying high then return to her. One of the young boys ran up to her and grinning happily presented her with a couple of mice. Shade gave him a big smile and

took the mice. She gestured for the boy to stand back, when he did, she held up one of the mice and a Kestrel swooped down, at the last second Shade threw the mouse in the air, the Kestrel caught it with ease. Shade did the same again with the second mouse and the other Kestrel. Shade spoke to the boy again and the villagers could see his head nodding enthusiastically. When he came down from the outcrop he announced to everyone that his job was to find the Kestrels food as they were now working for us and would not have time to hunt themselves. He sounded so proud, his mother told him how important that job was, which made him fit to burst.

The village itself, being on a hill, had many of its buildings spread far apart but at its centre was the village square and six cottages where villagers would gather to talk, do business and hold celebrations. It was here that most of the preparations were being done. The cottages were now all occupied by those who were left. The few animals remaining were now in the closest field, cows sharing with sheep and goats. The hens and geese wandered around freely. A large shed behind one of the cottages was used for storage. The square itself already had a thatched covered area with tables and seats, this was where those left were going to be eating together every day from now on. It was important for the children to get used to this arrangement.

Shade spent a lot of time just sitting with her eyes closed. No one disturbed her as they now understood she was 'flying' with the kestrels, seeing what was happening in the surrounding countryside. Some of what she saw surprised her, she had hoped her plan was unnecessary, that King Hylaw would come riding with a huge army and send Kerdred and his men packing. She did see soldiers now and again but they seemed to be heading west all the time away from Brinkton. Kerdred's men on the other hand she watched raiding villages, their brutality shocking. A raiding party seemed usually to be about twelve to fifteen men, heavily armed and merciless. They killed, raped, took the animals, food, anything they wanted.

With the preparations completed as much as they could, life settled down to a routine. They nervously waited each day for 'Sadie' to come down off the outcrop. Each day she came down and shook her head, she never told them of the horrors she witnessed through the eyes of her birds.

The children accepted the changes, they actually liked the way they now all lived, close together, eating their meals together; it felt like having one big family. Shade fed her birds and off they flew across the land, she usually alternated between the birds depending on what she needed to see.

Eventually one day she saw what she had been looking out for. In the distance there were a group of men heading from a village and rather than going

back in the direction of Brinkton they had taken the road that would ultimately lead them here. She knew there were other roads they could decide to take on their way, so she watched and waited. She used both kestrels, letting them take turns so that they could return to feed and rest. As the hours went by she felt she had learnt enough about the men who were coming and was grateful they had no Nefkins with them.

It was late afternoon when she walked down and called all the adults into the square.

'If they keep on their same route and same pace, they will be here by tomorrow afternoon, make sure everything is ready. I'm going to sleep now, please wake me at dawn,' said Shade.

Ben Adhem awoke the next morning and found Shade already sitting in her usual place, eyes closed. He watched her, she could have easily left all of them; she was still young and strong. Sensing Ben Adhem close by Shade opened her eyes.

'Are you still all right to go through with this?' Shade asked.

'I think there is still a lot you have not been telling me, you have watched Kerdred's soldiers and what they have done to other villages, do you think you should go ahead with the plan?' he replied.

'I think my plan is too kind for them,' answered Shade bitterly.

'I am therefore, not only all right about it, but pleased and if I do not get to live another day at least we will have tried,' smiled Ben Adhem.

Shade went to prepare herself, everything else seemed to be ready. She strapped her leg up from calf to thigh giving her a quite convincing limp. She then tied her hair back and wrapped it in a scarf. One of the women came in and began applying make-up that made Shade look quite sickly, a few red 'spot' marks and a bit extra shadow under the eyes and she was done. The children had been told 'Sadie' was going to be dressed up for their afternoon meal as later she was going to tell everyone stories about witches and wizards. When the children saw her they thought she looked great, just like an old hag.

They all sat around the big table, the adults trying hard to keep the conversation light. Shade stood at the far end behind Ben Adhem stirring the huge pot of game stew. They all raised their cups, including the children and drank a toast to 'Sadie'. Shade then began filling plates with the delicious stew. The thundering of horses hooves became louder and louder. When the eleven soldiers arrived everybody reacted as expected. Some of the women grabbed hold of their children, one old woman gave a very convincing screech. Two of the older men made a gallant attempt at standing up quickly. Ben Adhem gestured for the two men to sit down.

'Welcome friends, would you care to join us, we would be happy to share our meal with you,' said Ben Adhem.

The leader of the soldiers laughed and spat on the ground, 'I've got some bad news for you old man, we do not share, we only take,' he said.

Shade realised the leader was a man named Cayan, she had met him in Kerdred's castle all those years ago. Cayan slid down from his horse followed by all the other men. He walked over to the table and grabbed a plate, taking a mouthful of the food.

Turning to his men he laughed, 'Well the women might be ugly but the food is good'. He turned back to the table, 'Well?'

The villagers looked at each other and began to get up and move away from the table, one of the old men was a bit too slow for Cayan's liking and he sent him sprawling to the ground with a kick. Cayan's men laughed as they took over the seats.

'You!' One of the soldiers said, after tasting what was in the cups and spitting it out, 'bring us some ale'.

The men began eating what was left on the plates, soon they were shouting at Shade to fill them back up again. Cayan sat at the top of the table with his back to Shade, she managed to keep her face down when she refilled his plate. The ale arrived quickly and it was not long before they were thoroughly enjoying themselves. Their attention began to turn to the women, especially the younger ones, they were shouted over, pushed from one soldier to another, groped. There was a few arguments starting as to who was going to have first go with the women. Cayan laughed and grabbed hold of Shade pulling her to his side.

'Who wants this hag?'

Shade turned and bent so her face was right in front of his.

'Hello Cayan,' she said drawing a knife from under her apron.

She slit his throat before he realised what was happening. His eyes stared in shock, not only from realising what had just happened, but recognising Shade smiling back at him. She turned and faced the other soldiers, there was a couple of seconds of disbelief at an old hag standing there with a knife covered in blood. The spell was broken when Cayan's head went thump into the remains of the stew. Almost as one they stood up and reached for their swords, Shade just smiled.

'I hope you enjoyed your food, I added a little something; it should start working about now.'

The men looked at each other, a couple began to hold their stomachs. The one closest to Shade made an attempt to reach her, but fell across the table, dead. The old man who had been kicked stood behind him, a plank of wood with nails

sticking out was in his hands. Around the table the men began to scream in agony, it didn't take long. When it was over Shade walked over to Ben Adhem and spoke so everyone could hear.

'Sorry about that slight change of plan, it wasn't that he called me a hag, I just don't like being grabbed like that.'

Ben Adhem roared with laughter, the tension was broken. Two of the children were asleep on the grass, the other two were just sitting with vacant looks on their faces.

'We had better get all this tidied up before the drug the children had in their drinks wears off,' said Shade.

One of the babies strapped to the back of her mother began to cry.

'You look after your little one, it will not take us long to get ready,' said Ben Adhem.

What he said was true, the large grave had already been dug. They stripped the bodies of anything they thought might be useful, hauled them into the back of a cart, attached a couple of horses and went down to the small coppice not far away. The pot and plates were taken to the stream and washed out thoroughly.

With the cart needing two horses and the wagon needing four horses, there were five horses left. Shade and four of the other women took the horses, Ben Adhem and the pregnant woman took the reins of the wagon and one of the men took the cart. That left five women, two men, four children and two babies to ride inside the wagon. That wasn't going to work, so two of the children would have to go on top of the supplies in the cart and the babies were strapped to the back of two of the women who were riding, that was better. Apart from that, everything else went like clockwork. They were ready to leave by nightfall and were just deciding which animals they should tie to the back of the wagon, a couple of goats and a cow or just the goats, when Shade turned to address them all.

'My name is not Sadie, but Shade and I am Kerdred's wife,' she said.

There was not a lot any of them could think of to say.

'Guess you two didn't get along then,' said one of the old ladies. 'Think we should just take the goats,' she added turning to Ben Adhem.

Shade smiled and walked over to the table where the men had died, taking out her knife she carved SHADE into the table in giant letters. Looking back she checked none of the children could see, she opened the sack she was carrying and placed Cayan's severed head onto the table next to her name. She closed her eyes and an owl which had been in a nearby tree took to the skies. Their path west was clear, it was time to go.

Chapter 19

Kerdred sat half listening to the usual moans and groans of the town's people. He was sitting to the side of the large hall; it was Cain who dealt with the day to day running of Brinkton. Kerdred was bored, agitated and worried all at the same time. What was Hylaw doing? Word had arrived over a week ago that he'd left Landra with an army. Kerdred had sent men to watch their progress, why was he heading North West? At least that meant he could stay in contact with Tremlin. Something didn't feel right, even the witch hadn't made an appearance in his dreams lately. What was he missing?

A kerfuffle at the hall entrance caught his attention. Two soldiers, one carrying a large sack, strode past the others waiting and up to Cain.

'We need to talk to you and Kerdred, alone,' said the one carrying the sack.

Kerdred stood up and walked over to the men, he could see by their faces this was important.

'Come with me, Cain dismiss everyone else,' he said, pleased at having something to do.

From the hall entrance another argument erupted, this time three bedraggled men made their way to Kerdred.

'We need to talk to you,' said Jed earnestly.

Kerdred and Cain looked at each other, at the two soldiers with the sack and then at the three men, who looked dirty, tired and wild eyed.

'All of you follow me,' said Kerdred.

They entered a room just off the main hall and Kerdred and Cain sat down at a small table.

'You two first,' said Kerdred.

The one carrying the sack took a step forward. He didn't quite know where to begin, so he put his hand in the sack and pulled out Cayan's head.

Kerdred asked calmly, 'What about the rest of his men?'

The soldier cleared his throat, 'All dead,' he said.

Kerdred nodded again, 'Do you know who was responsible?'

The soldier nodded his head slowly, 'Shade'.

'WHAT!' Kerdred nearly knocked over the table as he abruptly got to his feet. His expression turned dark and menacing. 'And what makes you believe that it was Shade?'

'The name Shade was carved in large letters next to Cayan's head.' Feeling awkward under Kerdred's gaze, the soldier began fumbling with the sack,

dumping Cayan's head back in.

Cain reached out for Kerdred's arm, he snatched it away. He wanted to kill Shade; he wanted to hold Shade. He didn't know how to cope with the different emotions racing through his mind. Clenching his fists he forced himself to sit down again.

Cain forced himself not to look at Kerdred, this news was the last thing he wanted to hear. Turning to the other three men, he asked them to tell him their news. He hoped it was concerning something Kerdred could handle, something to distract him, a skirmish, a run in with Hylaw's soldiers, even a bit of rebellion from some villagers would be fine. Jed, Burrell and Decker began to tell of their ordeal. Cain noticed Kerdred's hands on the table, he was clenching and unclenching his fists as their story progressed. When the witch in their dreams was mentioned Kerdred's fists tightened and didn't move, then began to shake. When Jed was halfway through telling how Kerdred had been mocked in the circus performance Cain stood up, stopping Jed mid-sentence.

'You two men can go,' he said to the two soldiers with the head.

When they had left, Cain sat down again. Jed, Burrell and Decker stood not knowing quite what to do.

'I think we should have a little break, get yourselves down to the kitchens for something to eat. I will send for you later,' said Cain.

Once Cain was alone with Kerdred, he waited. Cain was probably one of the few people who was not afraid of Kerdred. Cain was older than him by three years, they had first met when he was eight and Kerdred was five. Over the years they had developed a strong bond between them. Cain the much calmer, logical one, Kerdred the more excitable and volatile. When Shade was brought to the castle, Cain witnessed a change in Kerdred, a jealous dark possessiveness, a cruelty which was out of character. Kerdred had always played the tough guy and had thought nothing of having someone flogged or put to death, if he thought that's what they deserved. With women he took his pleasures, treating them largely with indifference. Cain knew exactly what had happened, Kerdred had fallen in love with Shade and Shade detested him. Kerdred handled it the only way he was capable of, badly. Cain had been informed by some of the soldiers they believed Shade to be the daughter of a witch and therefore should be burnt. Cain had wisely not suggested this to Kerdred. When Kerdred had confided in him about his dreams, Cain wondered whether this was a manifestation of his fears over Shade and her ancestry. Since Shade's disappearance Cain had watched Kerdred change, none of what he saw did he like.

Sitting quietly next to Kerdred, Cain wanted to slap him across the face and shout some sense into that deranged mind of his. He also wanted to walk away; leave Kerdred to his own imagined horrors. It hadn't helped that those men had started on about wizards and witches at Riftdale. If King Hylaw was heading there, if Shade was heading there, he knew Kerdred would follow. It wouldn't be a disastrous decision, but Cain thought it wouldn't be wise either. In order to get Kerdred focused on something else, Cain made a decision of his own.

'It's time we called those men back and found out as much as we can,' started Cain. As he expected Kerdred just sat there.

'If we are going to take this fight to them, we'll have to have Tremlin and Hawke send more men.' Still no response from Kerdred.

'Shade will probably have gone to Riftdale, especially if the old hag is there.'

At last a response. Cain wondered whether these were to be the last moments of his life, as Kerdred's hands tightened around his neck. Slowly he slipped into unconsciousness.

He awoke to find himself in bed, Kerdred was dozing in a chair close by. He had a terrible headache and his neck was sore. There was a moment just before he lost consciousness that he had resigned himself to his own death. The thought had been surprisingly agreeable. The problems of the world were no longer his concern, none of it mattered. Looking across at Kerdred he sighed. Kerdred needed him and to be needed by a mad man had its pitfalls.

Chapter 20

With the help of her birds, they made good time. The roads going northwest across the country were often no more than dirt tracks. Some forked and headed back on themselves, others winded up steep hillsides, which weren't suitable for the wagon and cart. Through the eyes of her kestrels, Shade was able to find the best routes, they were taking her further north than she intended and straight to King Hylaw and his army, which she hadn't intended either. Ben Adhem believed Shade should talk to the King. Shade wasn't sure, after she had got the villagers to safety, she planned to go to Brinkton and kill Kerdred. The exact details of how she was going to achieve this had not yet formulated in her mind, but kill him she would. By the time they reached the valley where King Hylaw and his army were camped Ben Adhem had persuaded Shade to at least see what the King had planned.

It was obvious which tent was King Hylaw's, larger than the rest, surrounded by guards and a flag on the top. Shade looked at Ben Adhem and rolled her eyes.

'Now Shade, you have never met King Hylaw,' said Ben Adhem.

'Neither have you, but from what we've heard I'm not expecting to be impressed,' said Shade.

Shade and Ben Adhem walked towards the tent, leading one of the horses. The soldier guarding the entrance stepped forward and after a derisory glance at them, looked over at the wagons and the cart.

'There is an area further down the valley for the women, children and the old,' he said and stepped back.

'I wish to speak with the King,' said Shade flatly.

'Whatever your problem is, I am sure the man in charge of your area will be able to sort it out, now please be on your way,' said the soldier.

Shade looked at Ben Adhem. Ben Adhem looked at the soldier, poor man, he thought knowing what was coming.

'I am Kerdred's first wife, this is one of his horses I have another ten, along with swords and armour. The men who rode these horses are buried in a large grave next to our village, apart from one head which I left on a table with my name etched in the wood next to it. That makes my count in this war eleven, may I enquire as to how many of Kerdred's men you and your beloved King have killed so far?' Shade was about to go on, but someone spoke behind her.

'Sadie?'

Shade turned.

'Hello Haystack, I was just explaining to this young man here, that I wished to speak to the King, and my real name is Shade,' said Shade.

Haystack had heard what 'Sadie' had said about the horses and the men, he looked at her for a few moments.

'You really are Shade,' said Haystack, stunned.

'Move aside boy!' said Haystack.

'But...,' started the soldier.

'Move aside now, do you not realise who you are talking to?' interrupted Haystack.

'Look Haystack, my orders are...,' the soldier tried to say.

'Your orders! Hylaw! Get yourself out here now, before your guest is totally insulted,' shouted Haystack angrily.

Shade hadn't expected Haystack to even know her, never mind react this way.

'I am sorry Shade, had I realised who you were, I would never have tried to..., well you know,' said Haystack apologetically.

Shade remembered how Haystack had flirted unashamedly with her when she had been looking after him. It had been in good humour and had not been offensive, actually she had quite enjoyed his attention.

'Nothing you did caused any offence,' said Shade, still unsure as to why he was treating her with such reverence.

King Hylaw emerged from the tent.

'Haystack, you no good bellow squawker, what is it now?' demanded King Hylaw.

Haystack looked at Hylaw.

'Well?' asked the King looking at the woman and the old man in front of him and not seeing anything that would justify Haystack's outburst.

Haystack had travelled far and wide, across Daranel, Korin and even for a time in Thantos and nearly everywhere he had listened to bards and minstrels in taverns, inns and around camp fires. The one song he never tired of hearing was the one about the beautiful young woman who was taken from her village, forced to marry a tyrant and rather than let her unborn child suffer at his hands, had thrown herself off his castle wall. The rest of the tale varied, some said a Nefkin tried to save her, others an angel, some even say the forest itself came to her rescue. But the end was always the same, the mysterious end, no trace had ever been found of either her or her child, despite the tyrant's desperate searches. She had not known how much he loved her, he had not known himself until it was too late.

As Haystack stood next to Shade, his heart pounding, he wanted to ask so many questions, wanted to say so many things. Instead he simply said, 'My Lord,

allow me to introduce Shade'.

'Shade?' asked King Hylaw, not wanting to appear stupid, but not sure why he should know her. Then realisation struck him.

'Not Shade as in Kerdred's Shade?' he said.

Ben Adhem prepared himself. Shade glared at the King. King Hylaw realised by Shade's reaction he had probably said the wrong thing.

'My Lady, your presence has caught me unprepared, I have heard the songs, so harrowing, grown men have cried,' King Hylaw glanced over at Haystack.

'No one knew what really happened after you entered the forest, most including myself thought you must have died. Please, will you do me the honour of joining me for some refreshments, I have many questions I would like to ask you,' said King Hylaw gesturing towards the tent.

Shade still felt annoyed, she didn't know what was sung about her, didn't want to relive what had happened to her all those years ago by answering King Hylaw's questions.

'I am not here to answer your questions. By now Kerdred will probably have received the head of Cayan and will know that I am alive and responsible for killing his men. Now your guard here has kindly informed me that the old, the young and the women have to go to an area at the back of your army. We will accept that hospitality for tonight, but tomorrow we will be leaving. I have no interest in your war, only in killing Kerdred,' said Shade and turned to go.

King Hylaw stood, not knowing quite what to say. Ben Adhem wasn't full of ideas either. Haystack however wasn't the least bit daunted by Shade's anger.

'Killing Kerdred has now become my number one priority, not that I wish to deny you the pleasure of course. But as long as Kerdred lives, it would be inappropriate for me to swear my undying love for you,' said Haystack bending down on one knee before Shade.

'Is it your normal practice to kill the husbands of any married woman you fall in love with?' asked Ben Adhem.

'Shade is not any married woman,' said Haystack smiling wickedly up at Shade.

'Does this mean that the undying love you had for Bella, the dancer from the circus has died,' laughed King Hylaw.

'Bella?' Shade blurted out.

'I haven't said the wrong thing again have I?' sighed King Hylaw.

'Oh don't be jealous my love, I have only watched her from a distance...Shade are you alright?' said Haystack.

'Did she have a young girl with her?' asked Shade.

'I think it would be a good idea if we accepted King Hylaw's offer of refreshments, we seem to have a lot to talk about and I can't wait to hear about Cayan's demise,' said Haystack standing up and taking Shade's arm.

Shade made it clear that she was only going to tell them what she thought they needed to know. No questions would be answered about her time in the forest. Before she began she insisted Haystack told her everything about Bella and the circus. Haystack recounted everything he could remember about the time he competed against Breaker in a show of strength and when he had watched the circus in Brinkton. He rightly suspected that she was mainly interested in the young girl with them, but he had only seen her talking to Darius and then skipping happily away. This seemed to satisfy Shade and she relaxed a bit. Shade then started her account the day after Kerdred invaded Brinkton. She had to reveal her ability to connect with birds and how through their eyes she had watched villages being torn apart. King Hylaw lowered his head as he listened, he was the King and so far he had done nothing to help them. Anger crept into Shade's voice on a number of occasions and the King knew she felt him unworthy of his title. When she told them how she had poisoned the soldiers and slit Cayan's throat when he insulted her, Hylaw was suitably impressed. Haystack just sat there, totally and utterly in love. Hylaw explained as much as he could about trying to get Kerdred to leave Brinkton and fight on open ground. Many of her questions he couldn't or wouldn't answer but by the time the talking was done she did understand better the position King Hylaw had found himself in. She agreed to go to Riftdale with them.

Chapter 21

Aberrling sat in the creaky old chair, this wasn't Eldin's old room anymore; it was his. Hawke had sent across new advisors for Tremlin, the council had been dismissed, some on a more permanent basis than others. Hawke's men had been thorough, outside the castle hung the bodies of those the new council deemed disloyal to Tremlin. Aberrling was not in any immediate danger from the council, Brandon had vouched for him and Tremlin, bless his soul, had publically announced Aberrling's treason to King Hylaw. Tremlin was proving to be very inept in his new position. Aberrling wasn't sure if it was because he lacked experience or was just a dolt. As Tremlin became more inflated by his own importance a mean, cruel streak was beginning to show itself. Aberrling really disliked Tremlin, which was just as well considering what he had planned for him. A knock at the door brought him out of his thoughts.

'Come in,' he shouted, it was Brandon.

'Tremlin would like your opinion on something, Kerdred has sent a message saying he is going north to Riftdale. Appears there are wizards and stuff there. Hylaw's army is also heading there,' said Brandon.

'What does Tremlin want my opinion on exactly?' asked Aberrling, pleased with the news he had just been told.

'Kerdred says he has to join him.'

'What does the council say?'

'They say he shouldn't go.'

'But if Tremlin does not support Kerdred, Kerdred might defeat King Hylaw, then come back for Tremlin's head,' said Aberrling.

'Yep, that's what he wants to talk to you about.'

'Is he with the council now?' asked Aberrling.

'Yeh, they've been arguing all afternoon,' said Brandon.

'I might have a solution to this particular problem, it was something I had planned to happen a lot later but 'seize the moment' as my mother used to say,' said Aberrling smiling.

Brandon smiled back, he knew Aberrling would sort something out for Tremlin. Aberrling was one of those really nice guys.

'You had a mother?' laughed Brandon and ducked as a half-eaten chicken leg came flying in his direction.

'Are they in the council chambers?' asked Aberrling as they were walking down the corridor.

'Where else would they be?'

Aberrling could think of a lot of rooms but the council chamber was exactly where he wanted them.

The door was guarded by two burly soldiers who immediately opened the doors for them. Inside sat Tremlin at the head of the table with six advisers sitting on either side. Tremlin gestured to the seat at the far end.

'Please take a seat Aberrling, I trust Brandon has informed you of the situation,' said Tremlin.

'Yes, I believe Brandon has explained your dilemma perfectly. As to what assistance I can offer, above and beyond your esteemed council remains to be seen,' said Aberrling glancing around at the stony faced men who obviously felt it an insult to have him there.

'Well what is your opinion?' asked the skinny old one, Aberrling tried hard to remember his name.

'As yet I have no opinion, I understand the dilemma, but there are many things I do not understand. For example, why would Kerdred believe there are wizards and witches in Riftdale? Eldin taught the Prince and Princess here for five years. There was no mention of any sorcery, certainly not wizards,' said Aberrling.

'We believe Kerdred to be....,' began another of the advisors.

'Mad,' interjected another.

'He is not only convinced about these wizards but also that Shade is alive. He received the severed head of one of his best soldiers and next to where it was found was the name Shade carved into a table,' said the first advisor.

They all began talking again, telling Aberrling everything they knew, they thought Kerdred was being fooled by King Hylaw to leave Brinkton. Tremlin would be wrong to follow him on this doomed quest. Hawke had no love for Kerdred. After a while Tremlin held up his hand and everyone stopped talking.

'Do you agree that I should refuse Kerdred my support?' asked Tremlin.

'If you refuse and Kerdred returns to take his revenge, would I have been right to agree? If King Hylaw wins and returns to take your head, would I have been right? If you do not go and people believe you a coward, would I be right?' Aberrling sat back. 'But to join Kerdred? I can think of many reasons, as the council has said, to dissuade you from that choice,' Aberrling paused. 'But there is one more option,' standing Aberrling began to pace the room. 'It is a bit drastic however.'

They all looked at him. Aberrling went up to Brandon and whispered something in his ear.

'Do you think that will work?' he said. Brandon nodded his head, not in response to the question but to the words that had just been whispered to him. He stepped forward, Aberrling barred the doors.

'Brandon?' asked Tremlin, seeing something unnerving in Brandon's eyes.

Brandon drew his sword and the blood bath commenced. Screams and shouts alerted the guards outside, they hammered on the doors. Aberrling hadn't been sure how, after all these months of trancing, Brandon would actually react to the words he had whispered. The effect was shocking. Brandon was not just killing everyone in the room, he was butchering them as well. Aberrling hoped he would continue to take out more of Tremlin's men when they finally got the doors open. With his back to the wall he edged over to the large tapestry. He paused and watched as Brandon pinned Tremlin in a corner and put his sword through his chest. Satisfied Aberrling was quickly through the hidden door, locking it behind him. He hadn't intended to use Brandon until the King had defeated Kerdred. Had the King failed he may never have used Brandon at all. Switching loyalties to save his own neck was not a problem for Aberrling. As King Hylaw's advisor he had done his best, but necks are necks and he hoped to keep his attached to his head.

Walking down the winding stairs in the walls of the castle, Aberrling wondered if he had made the right decision. Probably not, but Tremlin was getting on his nerves. He sat on a stone slab in a long dark corridor and waited. He was no fool; unlike everyone he seemed to work for. Trancing had been the icing on the cake for him, he could keep checking that his spies were still loyal to him. Those that were not, still proved useful by spreading false information.

It wasn't long before a small door opened in front of him, lighting up the corridor. A man crawled through, one of Tremlin's soldiers and one of Aberrling's best spies. Tosha stood up as best he could in the tunnel. With his messy shoulder length brown hair, unshaven chin and dishevelled clothes he looked like he had just got out of bed.

'Well I'm pleased I've got it right this time,' he said.

Aberrling looked puzzled.

'It's the third time I've thought you'd 'done the deed',' laughed Tosha.

Aberrling smiled back, he hadn't been able to tell Tosha exactly when he was going to kill Tremlin, hadn't known himself. With all the recent arrests and hangings, he could understand Tosha's predicament.

'Thank you for your persistence, the deed is done; let's get out of here.'

'What do you think will happen now?' asked Tosha.

'Depends on whether your men deal with the Nefkins or not,' replied Aberrling matter of fact.

Tosha thought about the Nefkins. He admired their brute strength, he would have loved to have seen them free, hunting in their own lands. His two men would probably be aiming their arrows about now, now that word of Tremlin's murder was spreading through Landra. How many citizens would join the 'rebels'? How many people would die?

As if reading Tosha's thoughts Aberrling said, 'It's no longer our problem, we have to get to the King'.

*

'Hello Eldin,' said Rona.

Eldin looked across at Rona, he had been hoping she would come, it had been nearly two weeks since they met.

'I was beginning to get worried that something had happened to you,' said Eldin.

Rona sat back and sighed, 'I've been here a few times, but you've either been awake or in too deep a sleep for me to talk to you,' she said.

Eldin thought for a while, he could really do with being able to talk to Rona regularly. He seemed to have so much to do recently that he wasn't getting enough sleep, this would only get worse over the coming weeks.

'Is there any other way we can talk?' he asked.

'I could talk to someone else and they could pass messages on to you,' replied Rona.

'Someone else or anyone else?' asked Eldin.

'Anyone really, preferably someone who is already aware of me though, people have a habit of being too afraid to listen to me the first time,' said Rona. 'Of course we could use Lowe. I had thought about that before, but she's still young and some of the things I need to tell you are a bit gruesome. She has no love of her father, but still.'

'Her father?' asked Eldin.

'Did I not mention it before? I'm sure I did. Oh well, Kerdred is Lowe's father,' said Rona.

'Bella and Kerdred?' asked Eldin surprised.

'No, no Bella's not Lowe's mother,' laughed Rona.

'But...?'

'No Shade is Lowe's mother.'

'Shade?'

'Yes, my great granddaughter,' Rona said as if it should all be clear to Eldin.

Eldin sat and thought for a while, trying to place people in relation to each other.

'Bella?' asked Eldin looking questioningly at Rona.

'She's Shade's distant cousin, quite a bit distant actually,' said Rona.

'Right, now that's cleared everything up, I think Glint would be the best choice,' decided Eldin.

'Yes and no, Glint sleeps in a dorm with lots of other boys, which means I have to concentrate on him alone otherwise some of the others might hear. Takes a lot of effort. If he could be moved to his own room, that would help,' said Rona.

'I have an idea, as I understand it, a person needs to be in a light sleep. Best for you just after they've fallen asleep or just before they wake up, is that right?' Queried Eldin.

'There are other times...'

'Yes, yes,' interrupted Eldin smiling. 'But do you think it would work if I put Glint in a light trance, a light sleep?'

'I don't know, I don't see why not,' said Rona considering the idea.

'Could you come back tomorrow evening about dusk,' asked Eldin.

'Yes, now do you want to hear my news or not?' said Rona.

The atmosphere in the room changed. Eldin was again surprised at how any emotion Rona was feeling, he could also feel.

'You're dying to tell me aren't you?' said Eldin laughing. 'The men we tranced, did it work as well as we expected?'

Rona lent forward, her hands clasped together, hardly able to contain herself.

'Oh I wish you could have seen it! Probably the most fun I've had in years, there's so much to tell you.'

Rona began to tell Eldin about Jed, Burrell and Decker, about Cayan's head and of course about Shade. There was pride in her voice when she mentioned her great granddaughter.

'I have over the years looked for Shade, never been able to find her. Now, just when we need all the help we can get against Kerdred, she shows up. Not only that, she manages to do in an instant what I've been trying to do for years!'

When Rona mentioned Kerdred nearly killing Cain, her joy was infectious and Eldin was finding it hard not to laugh. But it didn't end there. Kerdred was going to find out some even more disturbing news soon.

'Guess what Aberrling has done?' she asked.

Eldin shook his head, as far as he was aware Aberrling was now just acting as a spy for the King. When Rona told him about Brandon, Tremlin and his council, Eldin was speechless.

'When did this happen?' he asked when he had recovered from the shock.

'Yesterday and that's why I've sat here for hours waiting for you to go to sleep.'

'Where's Aberrling now?' asked Eldin.

'Oh, he's fine, traveling to the Stormway mountains on his way here. Although at the speed he's traveling don't expect him anytime soon.'

Chapter 22

It was late afternoon the following day when Hylaw's army halted a couple of miles away from Riftdale. King Hylaw, Haystack and Shade along with half a dozen soldiers made their way to the main gate. They were met there by Bowles and Haber, who immediately sent a boy to fetch Eldin. Bowles and Haber didn't know quite what to do in front of the King and in the awkward moments that followed, kept bowing and apologising for not being suitably prepared.

They should have sent someone to announce their arrival, but Shade couldn't wait. One of her kestrels had flown over Riftdale the day before and through its eyes she had seen not only the wagons belonging to the circus but a girl, just about the right age, sitting next to Bella. Shade's emotions were in disarray. Haystack edged his horse closer to hers.

'You must be feeling very nervous,' he said kindly.

Shade nodded.

'Do you want me to go over with you?' he asked.

Shade shook her head, but didn't move. Changing her mind she looked directly at Haystack, 'Alright'.

Suddenly a big smile spread across Haystack's face.

'I think you should look behind you,' he said, gesturing with his head.

Shade turned her horse and there about twenty feet away from her stood Lowe, looking directly at her.

'Lowe,' Shade said in almost a whisper.

'Hello mum.'

Shade jumped down from her horse and ran into Lowe's arms. The years of repressed emotion finally released as Shade held her daughter in a tight embrace once more.

Hylaw was less optimistic about the welcome he would receive from Ami. He had deceived her and put her life in danger. It was for her own ultimate safety, but he doubted whether she would see it that way. He was right. Ami came to the gate with Will following close behind. Haber and Bowles took the opportunity to hurry away.

'Your Highness, sorry I cannot stay to greet you properly, but I have already made arrangements for the day. Unless of course, as my King, you command me to wait around while you plan my next humiliation or life threatening journey.' Ami bowed and waited for her brother to speak, for almost three seconds.

'Good, come on Will,' Ami said without even looking back at him.

If she had looked back she would have been furious. Will knew King Hylaw quite well from his visits to the palace and was making apologetic gestures to Hylaw behind Ami's back. Hylaw was just about to shout something to Ami when Eldin arrived at the gate.

'Welcome Your Highness, I had been expecting you to arrive sometime today. It is important we speak as soon as possible,' said Eldin. 'There is much to talk about,' he added.

King Hylaw watched as Ami and Will walked away.

'Yes, but I would like to talk to Nathe first, is he here?' said Hylaw. He really didn't want to spend hours listening to his old teacher waffling on about war tactics. Why Aberrling thought he would be any use was beyond him.

Eldin felt the slight like a slap across the face. He had never had a high opinion of Hylaw. He could see someone with Lowe and he knew it would be Shade. Rona had told him she would arrive with Hylaw.

'Nathe is on the practise field, I could have someone fetch him or would you like to go over there yourself?' asked Eldin pointing in the direction Ami had just gone.

'We'll ride over, be nice to see how the training is going,' replied Hylaw. It had been Aberrling's idea to ask Thomas to take in the extra boys and begin their training.

'Very good,' said Eldin and turned to go. 'Oh and when you do have a minute, I'll tell you about what else happened the day Kerdred received Cayan's head from Shade and if you have enough time, you might want to hear about how Aberrling killed Tremlin.' With that Eldin disappeared behind the gate and was gone.

'You do seem to have a special way with people,' said Haystack in a deliberately patronising tone.

Hylaw sighed and went after Eldin. Haystack lifted up his arm to stop the other soldiers following.

'I think the King can handle this on his own,' he said.

As Hylaw hurried through the gate his horse nearly knocked over Bowles and Haber. He had the urge to tell them to get out of the way but instead apologised and continued after Eldin.

'Eldin, wait,' he shouted.

Eldin turned and resisted putting his hands on his hips and resisted the sarcastic reply that entered his head.

'Yes Your Highness?' was all he trusted himself to say.

Hylaw got down from his horse and stood in front of Eldin.

'Aberrling asked me to play the part of a wilful, self-indulgent prince,' started Hylaw.

Eldin didn't think that would have tested Hylaw's acting skills greatly.

'I'm not saying that otherwise I would have been perfect, but Aberrling wanted me to appear unsuitable as a King, particularly when I was talking to Kerdred's spies.'

'You knew exactly who these people were?' Eldin asked, realising he may have misjudged Hylaw, slightly.

'Yes, Aberrling recruited them himself,' said Hylaw laughing. 'I'm sorry Eldin but when Aberrling told me he had arranged for you to become my advisor when I reached Riftdale, well I didn't think Aberrling was right. In fact I assumed you would just read up on a lot of stuff and lecture me on it for weeks, I appear to have been totally wrong.'

Without the help of Rona, Bella, Lowe and Felspar he would have been totally right, thought Eldin.

'Maybe we have both misjudged each other,' concluded Eldin.

'How do you know about Tremlin?' asked Hylaw and then almost to himself, 'Why did Aberrling kill him so soon, I wonder what went wrong?'

'I think it would be a good idea if we all met in the library. I want to introduce you to someone you might find interesting and it will also explain how I know about a lot of things,' smiled Eldin.

'Who's we?' asked Hylaw.

'You bring your commanders and I'll bring the rest,' replied Eldin.

The rest, thought Hylaw, this should be interesting.

When Eldin approached the wagons, he wondered whether he should disturb them. Lowe was holding on to both Shade and Bella's hands, the rest were standing around talking and laughing. It was Lowe who spotted Eldin. Freeing her hands she ran to him.

'Come and meet my mother,' she said, hardly able to contain her happiness. 'Mum this is Eldin, he talks to Rona.'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Shade. 'How is Rona?'

'Actually that's why I'm here,' said Eldin.

Hylaw, Nathe and Haystack entered the library. Everyone, even Ami stood respectfully when the King walked in. Hylaw looked around at who Eldin had termed 'the rest'. Glint was seated at the head of the table, interesting. Then to his right there was Eldin, Shade, Bella, he presumed, Ami and lastly a rather sad faced and timid looking young man. Hierarchy and seating arrangements were obviously not something Eldin seemed to understand, thought Hylaw as he took his seat opposite Eldin. Once the King was seated everyone else sat, Nathe took

his seat to Hylaw's left and Haystack filled in beside him. Hylaw could not help but wonder how Glint, three women and a timid looking man could possibly contribute to the very serious matter of how to defeat Kerdred that needed to be discussed. But he was beginning to learn to listen first before he judged people.

'We are expecting Darius soon,' started Eldin raising his hand to stop anyone speaking. 'He will be met at the gate by Lowe, she wishes to speak to him before he comes here.'

Hylaw really didn't feel like a King, everyone appeared to know what was going on except him. Why would it be more important for Darius to speak to Shade's daughter before him? Nathe's nod to Eldin indicated he understood.

Eldin smiled across at Hylaw, 'Now where to begin?'

When Darius reached the main gate he saw the girl who had spoken to him at the circus, she was standing next to the strongman. Dismounting his horse he walked over to her. Aharen, Caleb and the other men watched as the girl silently took Darius's hand and led him over to the wagons.

'Nathe is in the library with the King. Eldin said you were to join them when you arrived,' said Breaker addressing Aharen and Caleb.

'What about Darius?' Asked Aharen.

'I'll fetch him when they are finished talking,' said Breaker.

Sitting next to her in front of the fire, Darius was finding it hard not to break down and cry. He had hardly spoken over the last week, hardly eaten, hardly slept. Aharen and Caleb had been very patient, some days not travelling at all, allowing Darius time, time to try and come to terms with his loss.

Lowe stared into the fire.

'Lewin says he was right,' she said quietly.

Darius could not hold the pain in any longer, tears rolled down his face, he put his head down into his hands and cried. Lowe waited.

'He often said I would go to pieces if he ever left,' said Darius trying to calm himself.

'He says he hasn't left yet, but will if you keep moping around,' Lowe laughed. 'I'm sorry, but he wants me to tell you what he looks like.'

Darius looked at Lowe, 'Well?'

'He looks beautiful, which is more than can be said for you!' She smiled.

Darius ran a hand through his greasy hair and felt the stubble on his chin. Then he looked at his hands and dirty broken fingernails. He couldn't remember the last time he had washed.

'Don't worry he's still proud of you.'

Tears again started rolling down Darius's cheeks, down onto his lips; which were smiling.

Glint had only agreed to be tranced because he thought it might impress Ami. She had been spending a lot of time with Will on the practise field. He knew Will was a much better choice for a Princess, but his heart just couldn't give up hope. Eldin had had no problems putting him into a 'sleep' that morning. Eldin had told him when he saw Rona, just to repeat everything she said. He liked Rona, after all she had been the one to send him to help Ami and Lowe. So he sat there, saying nothing, listening to everyone tell their stories. He was surprised when even Nathe admitted to having a vision. When Aharen and Caleb arrived everyone was up, greeting them, asking lots of questions. Glint remained seated, waiting for the tap on his shoulder from Eldin. The news of Lewin's death brought a sad silence to the room. Aharen told them how distraught Darius had been on the journey back.

When they were all seated again, Eldin told them about Kerdred and what happened when Jed, Burrell, Decker and the head arrived at Brinkton. He then told them what he knew about Aberrling, Tremlin and Brandon. A mixture of laughter, shock and surprise greeted his news.

Eldin then turned to the King, 'I would like you to meet Rona'.

Eldin whispered into Glint's ear and touched him on the shoulder. He hoped this would work otherwise he would look a fool. Nothing happened, Glint just sat there. Everyone looked around at each other, waiting for something to happen. Eldin began to feel a bit foolish.

'OK,' said Glint. 'Rona wants to wait, for Darius.'

It wasn't long before Darius entered the library. Aharen and Caleb both smiled at the change in him, whatever Lowe had said had obviously helped. He was wearing clean clothes, his hair was wet, he was still unshaven but he looked so much better. Hylaw was the first to embrace his uncle.

'I hope you can come to understand why I did not come to your aid,' said Hylaw sadly.

'Aharen and Caleb have told me what they could, it must have been difficult for you,' replied Darius.

Ami was next, 'Oh uncle, I was so worried about you'.

'As I was you,' he said enfolding her in his arms. 'Now let's see who we have here,' he said releasing Ami from his arms.

Eldin, Shade, Haystack, Bella and Felspar briefly introduced themselves. Glint just sat there looking blank. Darius looked at Glint, then questioningly at Hylaw, who looked at Eldin.

'Please take a seat,' said Eldin. With a bit of shuffling down, Darius took his place next to Hylaw.

Glint turned his head and faced Darius. 'Hello Darius, I was just telling Lewin about Igmy,' said Rona.

Chapter 23

Cain still found it difficult to talk, even sipping warm broth was a slow painful affair. Kerdred's guilt was etched across his face every time he visited. Cain had spent the last week recovering in his bed chambers but had been following the whirlwind of events and developments that had happened very closely.

A week ago, having talked again to Jed, Burrell and Decker, Kerdred had sent messages to Tremlin and Hawke to send every man and Nefkin they could. Kerdred had become increasingly annoyed at the lack of response from either Tremlin or Hawke, until the news of Tremlin's demise had arrived one afternoon. Not even Cain, who thought through most possible scenarios, anticipating 'best outcomes' verses 'worst outcomes' had considered Tremlin being murdered by Brandon. Even he would have trusted Brandon with his life. If he'd had children, he would have trusted Brandon with them as well. That was a pointless route to go down, but so shocked was Cain, he was still finding the news hard to believe. Kerdred had lost it. Luckily for everyone he made it to his own quarters before he exploded.

Over the days that followed more information had come to light. Aberrling was missing; it had been Cain who had encouraged Kerdred to trust him. The rebellion had not amounted to much. Two Nefkins had been injured, but not badly. Their trainers had been out with them and they still had on their full armour when two archers had begun firing at them. One of the Nefkins had easily bounded up the wall onto the roof where the archers were hiding. They were killed within minutes. The army commander was now in control of Landra and was awaiting new orders from either Kerdred or Hawke.

An envoy arrived from Korin; Hawke was sending an army. Kerdred had refocused, his army commanders now never far away. Maps, plans, numbers, timings, battle strategies all permanently laid out in the council chambers. Autumn was fast approaching, they would leave Brinkton at the earliest possible moment. The docks were a hive of activity with ships coming back and forth from Korin. Cain was having sleepless nights trying to coordinate everything. He had been horrified at the idea that Aberrling had somehow been involved in Tremlin's death. Now, however, he believed Aberrling had unwittingly changed everything, in Kerdred's favour. Hawke's anger was evident in the sheer number of men and supplies arriving every day. They should easily be able to crush Hylaw and his army.

'We need to get this over with,' announced Kerdred to Cain, 'smash Hylaw and his army; then back to Thantos!'

Cain just nodded and carried on sipping his broth.

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Aberrling couldn't remember a time when he had felt so miserable. His butt hurt, his body wasn't designed for horse riding. He had tried walking but his short plump body wasn't designed for that either. Sleeping out under the stars might sound idyllic but the reality was much different. Hard ground, spiders, beetles, cold, rain, misery. Nearly as bad as having a riding companion who loved this outdoor life; no sympathy and a lot of whistling. He had told Tosha to take this much longer route, safety had been Aberrling's thinking. Tosha knew this area well and as they travelled through valleys and over hills, he kept pointing out various wildlife and spectacular views. In Aberrling's mind he pictured the various wildlife, slow roasted with garlic and herbs. Rather than looking at yet another view he imagined a soft bed, hot bath and glass of something to ease his joints.

Aberrling was sitting on a flat rock, in front of a fire which Tosha had made, eating food Tosha had caught, skinned and cooked, feeling very sorry for himself. He wished he was sitting on his creaky old chair in his room. It had seemed not so much a good idea to kill Tremlin, but more an easy option to get him out of the way. Had he realised just what he was going to have to endure on this journey he probably would have waited, a lot longer. There were also other questions he would have to think about. What effect killing Tremlin would have on Kerdred and Hawke? Aberrling knew it would probably unite them and Kerdred would end up with a much larger army. That didn't really matter though, even if King Hylaw had been able to defeat Kerdred, Hawke and Tremlin would have been there to finish him off. No, all of these thoughts were not what was worrying him; by killing Tremlin, Aberrling had put his own life in greater danger. If he came out of this alive Aberrling decided he would live in Riftdale. This journey had made him realise for a man like him, all that was needed in life was good food, good drink and a soft bed. Forget power, power meant risk, danger, peril, excitement, status, OK maybe he would consider his options when he had more options to consider.

He didn't know what was worse, the long painful days or the long painful, sleepless nights. He always seemed to fall into a sound sleep just as it was time to get up. Tonight he was exhausted, he hoped just to crash out. Where is Tosha? He thought. Aberrling looked around, it was getting dark. Tosha had disappeared

shortly after eating, offering no explanation as to where he was going and Aberrling had been too tired and too consumed by his own thoughts to question it. Hunkering down under his cloak, Aberrling lay still. First he heard the horses, then the footsteps getting gradually nearer. He remained motionless under his cloak. A not too delicate kick in his ribs made him slowly pull the cloak down from over his face. A sword was inches away from his nose.

The man holding the sword smiled down at Aberrling. Aberrling didn't know whether to be pleased at what he saw or not. At least he wouldn't be dragged all the way back to Landra.

'Kesh!' it was Tosha's voice.

Kesh lifted his sword, 'Hunter wants to speak to both of you,' Kesh said.

'We haven't done anything wrong. Why does Hunter need to speak to us?' asked Tosha.

'He'll tell you when we get there,' replied Kesh, walking back to his horse.

'Now wait a minute, we need to reach the King; we came this way to avoid being followed by Tremlin's soldiers. If we go to your village it will delay us even more,' pleaded Tosha.

The clansman mounted his horse.

'Hunter wants to talk to you, so you will come with us.'

By this time Aberrling had sat up and was looking at the six clansmen surrounding him.

'You're not expecting me to ride through the night?' asked Aberrling horrified at the idea of getting back on his horse so soon after he had just got off the thing. Kesh just sat there waiting.

By the time they reached the village the following morning Aberrling was beyond caring. He had covered about every negative emotion there was and now just wanted to curl up somewhere and die. That's if he could manage to get off this darn horse. It took both Tosha and Kesh to help him, his legs seemed to have stopped working. Once down, he used Tosha for support to reach a nearby seat, covered in furs. A woman brought him over a warm sweet drink and some food. At that moment he felt as if he had never sat in a more comfortable chair or tasted better food. He closed his eyes not wanting this feeling of pleasure to stop. He could hear people talking around him, any moment now they would come and disturb him. Couldn't they just leave him alone, in peace, just for a while?

He woke up, he must have slept for a couple of hours. Now to add to his aches and pains, his neck was stiff. Looking around he wondered how people could possibly love this outdoor rugged life. He had never met the mountain people before, but the accounts he had been told fitted exactly with what he was seeing now. Primitive, rough, unwashed and smelly. They wore the skins of

animals, in places, not that many places. From what he could see they all had dark hair, brown eyes and the men, hairy chests. It was like going back in time, some supposedly still lived in caves. No King had ever successfully ruled over them and in recent times they didn't even bother trying. There were reported to be six main clans in these mountains, all interrelated. Tosha had told him his great grandfather had been a clansman which is why, he believed, he loved this area so much. Aberrling wondered why Hunter wanted to speak with him. Usually they kept themselves to themselves and as long as you left them alone they left you alone.

'Ah, Aberrling I see you're finally awake,' it was Tosha being his usual annoyingly happy self.

'Hunter better have a very good reason for dragging me, through the night, to this place miles away from anywhere,' scowled Aberrling.

'He wants to see us now, so you'll find out soon,' replied Tosha walking over to help Aberrling out of his seat.

'No, no, I can manage,' said Aberrling slowly rising. He hobbled around a bit, back bent, trying to loosen up. When he was at least standing straight, they headed off to meet Hunter.

In a circle of stone slabs sat Hunter and four other Clansmen. Aberrling and Tosha took a seat to the left of Hunter. For some reason, probably his name, Aberrling expected to be sitting next to a strong powerful man, who led the clan because of his physical prowess and daring deeds. Instead Hunter was a small desperately thin old man. His eyes looked glazed and Aberrling realised he was blind.

'Yes Aberrling, I am blind,' said Hunter in a thin rasping voice. 'But then maybe not so blind, tell me what is going on in Daranel.'

Aberrling didn't know where to start and how much of his own involvement to include.

'Start anywhere you like, we have all day. I have arranged for food to be brought later, please take your time,' said Hunter.

Aberrling sat quietly thinking, how much should he tell Hunter? How much did he already know? Was he a seer, if so how much could he see?

'Do not worry Aberrling, only tell me what you are comfortable with. My mind is not normally drawn away from these mountains, but over the last few months I have had glimpses which have been greatly disturbing. I would usually pay no heed to such things, all I really need to know is how they may affect us here in the mountains.'

'I do not know the answer to that question,' said Aberrling.

'That question is for me to answer. Which is why I need you to tell me everything you can,' replied Hunter.

Aberrling had never considered the clans people in any of his plans. Would they help if they thought they might be threatened? One of Aberrling's greatest skills was lying to get what he wanted, that skill had also taught him when the truth held more power, or at least his version of the truth.

'Well I think the best place to start is....,' Aberrling began.

Chapter 24

Rona sat next to a Tree Guardian, he didn't speak much. He had never talked when he was a Nefkin, apart from the odd gruff and grunt. Now that he was able to talk, he found it difficult and usually settled for one word answers. Apart from that Fingal made a magnificent Tree Guardian. Much taller and stronger than Gadolin, with long thin branches covered in small green leaves and white flowers cascading from the top of his head and down his back. Over the years he and Rona had become good friends. She often spoke to him about Shade and her daughter, about Kerdred and of course about the enslaved Nefkins.

Today Rona was leaving her shack in the middle of the forest and heading south to be closer to Riftdale. Gadolin and Igmy were packing her few belongings. When they were done Fingal gently picked up Rona's frail body. Fingal began to set an even steady pace in order to make the journey as smooth as possible for Rona. They should reach the south side of the forest in just less than two days. Gadolin was finding the journey quite slow and boring. He could have completed the journey in a few hours. Over the years his confidence at swinging through trees and racing across uneven ground made him the fastest Tree Guardian in the forest, something he was very proud of. Today however he was walking behind Fingal and beside Igmy, sacks on both their backs, trying not to think about Rona dying. To distract his mind he and Igmy started 'sprite spotting'.

'There's one, look there's a yellow one,' Igmy cried in excitement.

Fingal tried to ignore them, but despite himself Fingal started trying to spot them as well, but he kept that to himself.

When they finally reached the south side of the forest, Fingal and Gadolin made a makeshift shelter for Rona. Stretching her aching bones, Rona walked unsteadily around.

'Don't know how much longer I can keep this body going,' she said to Igmy.

'Why don't you become a Tree Guardian like us,' said Igmy, only just thinking of the idea.

'That's a nice thought, Igmy,' said Rona smiling kindly.

Igmy looked sadly down at the ground, 'But you're not going to become a Tree Guardian are you?'

'No, Igmy I'm afraid not,' replied Rona.

Once Rona was settled, Gadolin and Fingal scouted the perimeter of the forest to see what was happening. Igmy stayed next to Rona, not wanting to

leave her.

Rona let herself drift away, over hills, valleys and streams. Approaching Brinkton she could see that Kerdred's vast army was nearly ready to leave. That only gave them a couple of weeks at most.

That evening, through Glint, Rona told Hylaw what she had seen. No one at the table spoke, they had spent weeks planning, preparing, each knew their role.

'Rona says this is the last time she will come here, she needs to keep what little strength she has left for the battle,' said Glint.

'She is not intending to fight is she?' laughed Haystack.

'No but she wants to see Kerdred die with her own eyes,' replied Glint.

'Let's hope we can make that happen,' said Hylaw.

'Not we,' said Glint, 'Shade'.

Glint looked at Shade, 'Rona's gone now, but she said she'll see you soon'.

Shade nodded, 'We will have to send out scouts to watch Kerdred's progress; this is where my kestrels will prove their worth'.

When everyone else had gone, Hylaw and Nathe sat in the library looking at the plans laid out on the table. Now that Kerdred was on his way, Hylaw was beginning to have doubts. The plans seemed foolish, naïve, inadequate. They relied heavily on guesswork and assumptions. Kerdred was a seasoned fighter, Nathe's advice had been based on that fact. Battles were fought in a certain way, followed tried and tested courses of action. What they were planning wasn't. Each stage had to work, one failure and everything would fall apart. If that happened the battle would be over within a matter of hours. Why had his father not helped Korin when it was attacked? Had Kerdred been defeated then, he would not have to face this now.

'Tell me about my father, before his illness,' asked Hylaw.

'What do you want to know?' Nathe replied.

'When I was young I always thought of my father as being a great man. I would watch him stride down corridors, give inspiring speeches, watch people bowing respectfully in front of him. He was my hero, he always made time for me.' Hylaw paused. 'I was his son, I am bound to think he was a great King before his illness.'

Nathe knew exactly what was troubling Hylaw.

'Your father was not a coward, before he took ill he had already sent some of his best fighters across to Korin and was preparing to send more.'

Hylaw looked questioningly at Nathe.

'It was all done in secret, your father had his reasons,' said Nathe.

'What reasons?' demanded Hylaw more forcefully than he had intended.

'He believed there was a traitor in the castle, who would think nothing of killing him, you and Ami; someone who held power.' Nathe stood up and began pacing the floor. 'I have no proof of what I am about to say, but I believe your father was poisoned, a poison designed to destroy his mind,' said Nathe remembering the sad, mumbling shell of a man the King became.

'Why didn't he have that person seized?' asked Hylaw.

'He may have been intending to do just that when he became ill,' said Nathe.

'Aberrling,' said Hylaw quietly.

'At first I thought that too, but it was Aberrling who first suggested poisoning to me. He blamed himself and set about throwing any man who could have possibly been involved into the dungeon. Many of whom later disappeared,' said Nathe.

'A good way to get rid of anyone who suspected him,' said Hylaw beginning to be convinced by Aberrling's guilt.

'But he was the one who spent years trying to cure your father, there were wise women, men with potions and strange remedies, he tried everything,' said Nathe.

'To keep him alive until I became of age?' questioned Hylaw.

'It still doesn't make any sense, why would Aberrling have Tremlin killed if he was a traitor?' asked Nathe.

'It has often been said that Kerdred had no love for his brothers. In a few years Kerdred's own sons will be old enough, maybe Aberrling is working directly for Kerdred,' said Hylaw.

'That would not bode well, for it being Aberrling's idea to leave Landra, not fight for Brinkton and have us fight Kerdred from here,' said Nathe. 'But it still doesn't add up,' he added.

'Aberrling knows nothing about Rona, but he may have learned about Kerdred's spells of madness, maybe he is covering all options, sitting back at this late stage and seeing who wins?' said Hylaw.

'Your Highness, I believe we may be getting carried away with our own reasoning, we have no proof of any of this,' said Nathe.

Hylaw sat quietly thinking. 'You're right, I guess I'm just tired, this sort of talk will do nothing to help us beat Kerdred.'

Chapter 25

On the table in the library Hylaw, Darius, Nathe and Haystack looked over the battle plans which were starting to take shape. They had visited the valley where both Bella and Nathe had had their visions that morning. There was logic in facing Kerdred's army there first. The valley stretched about three miles along the road. The forest was to the north and to the south the land dropped gently away. Nathe had slowly taken his horse down the slope on the south side at various points. The stony uneven ground was manageable only with care. It was agreed, work would begin there as soon as Felspar was ready. Felspar was proving to be quite inventive and they had taken on his ideas with a few minor adjustments suggested by the women. Hylaw had been surprised by these suggestions, Haystack had laughed and Nathe had pictured them in his mind; shocking but effective was his conclusion. Their plans were good, but they all knew the odds were against them. Outnumbered by better trained soldiers and at least a couple of dozen Nefkins.

Hylaw sat on one of the benches, putting his head in his hands and closing his eyes. Surrender had been an option, not a very good one for either himself or Ami, but an option none the less. Because Tremlin had been killed and more importantly the way he had been killed, Hylaw knew Kerdred and Hawke would not stop until he and his army were totally destroyed. Offering to surrender now would not save his men.

The door to the library opened, Shade stood at the entrance. She looked tired. Haystack immediately went up to her.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

'It's Lowe, Bella is packing some things, Mankin is going to take her deep into the forest,' she said.

It was Darius who wrapped his arms around Shade.

'She needs to be away from us, from this war. I have seen her looking at people hardly able to move with the images she's seeing. If the forest will stop that then she must go.'

Shade nodded, she had only just been reunited with her daughter, would she see her again? So many would die in battle, would she be one of them? What would happen to Lowe if they were defeated, if everyone she knew was killed?

Darius walked with her back to the wagons. Mankin was standing ready to leave. A large sack on his back and in his huge arms, Lowe wrapped in a blanket. Her face hidden against Mankin's chest.

Bella and Shade hugged each other, Darius realised this was more serious than he'd thought. Walking up to Mankin, he gently touched the back of Lowe's head, she didn't move.

He whispered quietly, 'I owe you my life,' then even quieter, 'Lewin if there is anything you can do to help her, then stay with her'.

Bella and Shade said their final goodbyes to Lowe and Mankin turned and headed into the forest. Snapper ran back and forth not knowing whether to follow Mankin or not, finally he made his choice and headed into the forest. Darius decided to stay a while to find out exactly what had been happening to Lowe.

'Her nightmares have been getting worse, many people are going to die soon and she sees their deaths,' explained Bella.

'Some of us, maybe all of us,' Shade said including Ebblin, Ghale and Breaker in her glance, 'are not going to make it, last night I think Lowe saw who'.

'This morning she couldn't look at us, she just curled herself up and wouldn't move,' said Bella.

Darius couldn't imagine what it must be like for Lowe, even in peaceful times it would have been hard. He looked around, Shade, Bella, Breaker, Ghale and Ebblin, he was just getting to know them. Was Shade right, had Lowe 'seen' some of their deaths?

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Over the days that followed Gadolin watched from the trees as Hylaw's soldiers dug a small long channel across the road at the bottom of the valley. They then placed wooden crisscross stakes over the top, forming a blockade that would stop both men and horses. Gadolin noticed that they left gaps which their horses could easily jump through, he assumed they would return to finish the barrier later. He watched Ebblin and Ghale tying ropes to trees, leading from the edge of the barrier and into the forest. They then spent the next few days swinging from tree to tree, making adjustments and swinging again. They were good, Gadolin would have loved to have given them a race; of course he would have given them the advantage by not using the ropes. Shade, Haystack, Caleb and Aharen regularly passed going to check on Kerdred's progress. Shade was using her kestrels, the rest were there just for her protection. Breaker had spent a lot of time moving large slabs of stone further down in the valley where it sloped off to the south. He then led the huge horse down the hill, telling him exactly where the slabs were, as if it could understand. Obviously he could, as when Breaker

shouted 'Go', with great leaps the horse leapt down the hill, landing on each one in turn. As the days passed it became clear why the horse had to land on the slabs; stakes with metal spikes were being buried all along the drop on the side of the valley.

Back in Riftdale the main work was going on. The curtain wall now had an inner parapet with raised wooden sections to protect the archers. Some sort of catapult was being tested, firing bags filled with soil over the wall, or, as when Gadolin was watching, firing bags into the wall. Everywhere he looked something was happening. Each day Gadolin reported back to Rona telling her everything he had seen, even odd things he wasn't sure were relevant. Gadolin also watched Fingal, he seemed to know whenever Shade was passing. How he did this Gadolin didn't know. Once when Fingal was watching Shade pass, she stopped her horse and looked into the forest. Fingal didn't move, after a few moments Shade shook her head as if to bring herself out of her thoughts and carried on riding. A few paces further on she stopped and looked back, then finally hurried to catch up with the others. Fingal, Gadolin noted, had unusually for him, a smile on his wooden face. He knew how Fingal felt, every time he saw Shade his 'heart' raced. He had watched the big hairy man who rode with Shade, he had the same problem; they all loved her.

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Shade sat on the ground with her back against a tree. This was the hardest time, the waiting. Bella, Ghale and Ebblin had just taken the wagons inside the walls. Bella had been upset when she had brought out Clover and Echo to be handed over, but took some comfort when Darius asked if he might take Clover for himself and Will asked for Echo. Shade watched as Breaker and Aharen prepared to leave.

'Remember, he knows what to do, just say 'Go',' said Breaker.

'Yes, you don't need to keep telling me,' answered Aharen.

After saying their goodbyes they headed off towards the valley, Aharen on Hugo and Breaker walking along side with his dogs.

Closing her eyes Shade fell asleep. She saw herself walking into the forest. Everything was quiet and still except she was being followed, by Kerdred. She saw Rona in a clearing up ahead of her who put a finger to her lips, then gestured for Shade to hide. Kerdred was getting nearer. She woke up with a start. The dream hadn't lasted long but Shade smiled to herself, Rona had always promised her revenge and now it was only a day or two away. She was pleased to have this time to rest. Some of Hylaw's soldiers were now scouting, they were making

sure none of Kerdred's scouts saw anything they weren't meant to, any that did, never made it back. Despite being told not to, Shade leaned back against the tree and let her mind find one of her kestrels. She flew over the valley, high in the sky, she could see for miles around. In the distance, movement caught her eye. She had no intention of going as far as Kerdred's army but couldn't resist investigating further. As she got closer she saw two of Kerdred's soldiers, a rope tied to each of their saddles and at the end of each rope, one of Hylaw's scouts. The rope was tied around their wrists and they were having difficulty keeping up. By the looks of their bodies it was obvious they had both fallen many times. Shade knew Kerdred's men would not kill them, Kerdred would do that after he had got whatever information he needed from them. Returning to her own mind, she opened her eyes to find Haystack standing in front of her, looking concerned and annoyed.

'You were flying with your kestrels, weren't you?' he asked accusingly.

Shade wasn't about to let Haystack talk to her like that.

'I'm not a child, so don't treat me like one, I need to talk to Hylaw,' she said getting up and ready to storm off.

'About the captured scouts?' Asked Haystack.

'How do you know?' said Shade acidly, realising that she was not supposed to have found out about them.

'They volunteered,' said Haystack, resigned to having to explain something that even he felt hard to justify.

'What!' Exclaimed Shade in disbelief.

'They volunteered,' he repeated. 'They weren't the only ones; I even volunteered. Nathe and Darius had to choose.'

'Why?' asked Shade.

'You know the plans, the first part relies on Kerdred sending men, but not his whole army, to the valley,' said Haystack.

Shade used the tree to steady herself, 'But they will be...'

'Tortured, yes,' said Haystack gently.

Glint was sitting on the wall next to the practice ground, feeling sick. He wasn't the only one, many of the boys in the field looked terrified. It was their last training session and mistakes were being made. Glint watched as yet another boy was being led off to have a wound treated. Will came over and lent on the wall next to him. Beyond the field they could both see Hylaw's army, it looked impressive.

'Are you fighting with the main army?' Asked Glint.

'Yeh, I think I'm going to the valley,' said Will folding his arms and looking down at his feet.

Glint just nodded. Both lost in their own thoughts, not talking. The boys on the field began to disperse, one of the soldiers came up to Will.

'It's time,' he said.

Will turned to Glint, he wanted to say something; instead he just gave a half smile and followed the soldier.

As Glint wandered back to help Felspar, he could see many people leaving. Garth and his men were walking with Ghale and Ebblin, who were dressed like trees. Ami and Bella were just finishing saying goodbye to Shade. Ami had wanted to go as well, it was Nathe who had shocked her by bluntly saying, 'When the time comes I expect you to be well away from here. If your uncle and brother are killed you will be our last hope'.

Glint felt sorry for Ami, she wanted something important to do. Ami saw Glint approaching and ran over to him.

'I need you to help me, I'm working with Bella to set up the boys' dormitory for the wounded to be treated,' she said importantly.

'You'll have to ask some of the boys coming back from the practice field to help,' said Glint.

For a second Glint could see anger in Ami's eyes, her arms went up towards her hips, she stopped herself. Looking at Glint, tears came to her eyes, taking a deep breath she smiled.

'I'm sorry Glint.'

'It's alright,' he said and surprised himself by stepping forward and taking her in his arms.

Chapter 26

Everyone was ready and in position. It was nearly time. The only road through the valley ran parallel to the edge of the forest for about three miles. Kerdred's men were approaching from the east. Shade, Haystack, Nathe and Caleb were standing next to their horses in the middle of the road halfway down the slope. The barrier was at the base of the valley; behind which Garth and his men were waiting. Further back behind the barrier, Aharen was sitting waiting on Hugo. Off the road further down that bank were soldiers lying flat on the ground out of sight. In addition another fifty men, including Will, were waiting on horseback at the top far end. Ghale and Ebblin were up in the trees. Breaker was also in the forest with his dogs and half a dozen soldiers.

Shade had her eyes closed, she was watching. Kerdred had sent less than two hundred men and only five Nefkin to spring the 'trap'. With all the effort they had put into this first part of the plan, they had hoped for more.

'They are coming,' she said and raised her arm to signal to the others.

Trying not to look back up the valley, they kept their backs turned but held on to the reins of their horses. Garth and his men picked up the large 'missing' stakes from the road, ready to complete the barrier as soon as Shade and the others were through. Minutes seemed to be taking hours, sweat was running down Garth's face.

'Come on, come on,' he whispered.

Aharen saw the first of Kerdred's men cresting over the top of the valley, counting to five, he then blew the horn with everything he had. Garth and his men stood staring at the oncoming soldiers, it was hard but they had to look as if they weren't expecting them. Haystack, Nathe and Caleb quickly mounted their horses. Shade's had been spooked by the sound of the horn and pulled away from her. They had agreed no one waited for anyone else. Nathe and Caleb went straight for the barrier. Haystack grabbed the reins of Shade's horse. Seconds were lost. Shade jumped onto her horse and followed Haystack through the barrier. Garth and his men quickly added the missing stakes and disappeared into the forest. Kerdred's men and Nefkins were now streaming into the valley. Shade was pushing the inexperienced horse as hard as she could, until an arrow caught the horse in the flank. It reared up, sending Shade crashing to the ground. Haystack looked back, turning his horse, the enemy were nearly at the barrier. Nathe and Caleb turned their horses back too. Now they were in range of the mounted archers, it was suicide.

Hylaw's soldiers on top of the hill at the far end of the valley watched, unable to help, they were following strict orders. Aharen was not far from Shade, he too had his orders. Raising the horn to his mouth he sounded the second signal, earlier than planned. Down off the side of the road the hidden soldiers stood up.

'Go,' shouted Aharen to Hugo.

Hugo leapt off the road and down the bank landing perfectly on each stone slab avoiding the hidden spikes. Kerdred's men and the Nefkins were starting to jump the barrier. Some headed for Shade, Haystack, Nathe and Caleb, others, seeing Aharen and the soldiers down the bank, veered left towards them. Shade was crouched behind her fallen horse, using her shield to block the arrows being fired in her direction.

'You weren't meant to come back for me,' she screamed up at the others.

The first riders and Nefkins were now only yards away from them. They prepared themselves for their final fight. Terrible sounds filled the valley as those who had followed Aharen rode down a bank of metal spiked stakes. Any that survived the spikes were met by the soldiers. At the same time Ghale and Ebblin shot burning arrows into the barrier, the oil caught light immediately. It was enough to halt those riders still on the far side, but not for long, they could still make it across before the flames became too dangerous.

'I love you,' shouted Haystack to Shade.

Despite their dire situation, they all smiled, even Nathe. There were worse ways to die.

From the forest a huge 'tree' thundered out in front of them, Nefkins and riders were sent sprawling across the road. The 'tree' turned its head towards them.

'Go!' shouted Fingal.

They didn't need to be told twice. Haystack grabbed Shade's arm and hauled her up onto his horse. They were not out of danger, but at least they had a chance.

Gadolin hadn't known where to look. Everything seemed to be happening at once. He could hear men in the forest. Ghale and Ebblin had disappeared through the trees as soon as they had set fire to the barrier. Kerdred's men were still jumping the barrier despite the fire. The scene on the other side of the road was horrific, with men and horses impaled on spikes and any getting through being killed by Hylaw's waiting men. But it was Fingal who now had his full attention. He understood why Fingal had left the forest to help Shade, but that didn't make it right. He would not last long, Tree Guardians depended on the forest for their lives. Gadolin didn't know how long Fingal would last, but by the amount of energy he was using, he didn't think very long. Nefkins were all over

Fingal now, he still looked strong as he fought with them. Staggering forward Fingal crashed down on his side and rolled onto his back crushing two of them, as he got back up his great arms hit out at the soldiers in front of him. All of a sudden the biggest explosion Gadolin had ever seen filled the valley, the force of which knocked him out of the tree.

Nathe, Haystack and Shade made it back to Will and the other soldiers waiting at the top of the valley in time. Caleb did not. Unnoticed by the others his horse had been hit during their retreat and had fallen. They looked back in horror as Caleb was caught up in the blast which sent shock waves surging up the side of the valley. Felspar hadn't been sure how much powder to use, so he had packed the three barrels full of the stuff as well as shards of metal and small stones. The result was devastating. Hylaw's soldiers at the top of the valley had been told no matter what, they had to wait and not enter the valley. They were only to engage with any soldier or Nefkin who made it that far. Now they saw why. The valley was a mass of the dead and dying. Those not killed outright had terrible injuries, burnt skin peppered with metal and stones, missing limbs or impaled by bits of wooden stakes.

Nathe looked back at his men, a few of the less experienced were in shock. The rest awaited his orders.

'Get ready,' he said.

There were still about forty men ahead of them, relatively uninjured. Would they drop their swords and surrender or fight? If they decided to fight, Nathe knew it would be fuelled by anger, hate and outright desperation.

Haystack didn't wait, Kerdred wasn't here and Shade had been through enough, seen enough. As he made his way through the soldiers all he could think about was Shade's arms around him and her head pressed against his back. All Shade could think about was Fingal. She had known the moment he had faced her, their minds touching for a split second. After the explosions she looked only for him; all she made out was a tangled broken tree covered in the remains of what had once been people, horses and Nefkins. If she had been allowed to look longer, she might have had hope that Fingal was still alive, but the movement was a Nefkin emerging from beneath Fingal's arm. The Nefkin looked around, then up at Hylaw's men, pulling his top lip back into a snarl he dropped to all fours and bounded up the side of the valley. Kerdred's men turned to face their enemy, the standoff might have lasted longer, but for the Nefkin. Nathe moved over to allow those with death stars to take their places. Another idea from the women, just like the metal shards in the barrels. The death star, a spiked metal ball on the end of a long chain attached to a long metal handle, was to be their

primary weapon against the Nefkin. They had expected to be dealing with more Nefkins. Will was relieved it was only one.

After leaving the barrier, Garth and his men ran into the forest. They deliberately made a lot of noise and waved their swordless hands in the air. It was Jed who saw them first.

'Garth! Over here,' he shouted rather louder than he had intended.

'Thank goodness, we've managed to escape but were worried you might take us for Hylaw's men and shoot us before we reached you,' said Garth between pants. 'How many are you?' he asked.

'Twelve, plus four dogs, Kerdred thought Hylaw might be planning a trap so we are here to see and then report back,' replied Jed.

'He was right,' said Garth seriously. 'Better get your men further into the forest, it's going to be a blood bath out there.'

'What do you mean?' started Jed.

Just then the explosions hit the valley, shaking the ground under their feet.

'We need to get to Kerdred,' said Garth, 'the wizards and witches have got some pretty nasty surprises waiting and I need to let him know'.

Jed's face became so pale at the mention of wizards and witches, if he had been lying down you would have thought him dead.

'Look, I can't go back,' said Jed wishing he could. 'Not until I've seen for myself.'

'Fine, but could you spare me a couple of men to escort us back, it would look better if we turned up with some of your men,' said Garth.

Jed looked doubtful.

'Please yourself, we'll just go ourselves,' said Garth.

'No, wait.'

'What? I'm not hanging around here,' said Garth sounding exasperated.

Burrell and Decker held up their hands and looked at each other.

'Don't expect one of us to go with them, after the last news we told Kerdred, I thought we were goners,' said Decker.

'You two,' said Jed to two men standing behind Burrell, 'escort Garth and his men back to Kerdred'.

They were happy to oblige, under orders they could not be blamed for anything and it meant at least they would live another day. Garth didn't hang around and went straight off with his men and the two soldiers. Jed was now left to wonder what had happened to the men in the valley.

'Well?' asked Burrell.

'Well what?' said Jed knowing fine well they were waiting for him to make a decision.

'What do we do now?'

'We do what we came to do, do a quick scout of this area of the forest, then the valley, then high tail it back,' answered Jed.

'Forest looks pretty clear to me,' said Decker hopefully.

Two arrows whizzed past their heads and two soldiers fell to the ground. Everyone else was down on the ground within seconds.

'Did anyone see where those arrows came from?' whispered Jed.

Murmurs went through the men with a bit of pointing. 'Over there' was the most detailed information that came back to Jed. Jed ordered arrows to be fired in the general direction of 'over there', no one screamed and nothing fell out of any trees. The dogs though started growling and pulling on their leashes.

'Let them go,' said Jed hoping they'd flush out any hidden men.

The dogs now free of their restraints raced into the trees.

'I'm not questioning your leadership or anything, but not long ago there were twelve of us, and four dogs, now we are down to eight and no dogs,' said Burrell.

'Do you have any better ideas?' asked Jed.

'Yeh, do what we normally do in situations like this,' interrupted Decker laughing.

Unwilling to surrender, but not sure what to do, Jed sat thinking. There might be only two archers in those trees and the dogs will probably be back any minute. It was Garth's fault, running through the forest like that, making so much noise, he had given their position away. Maybe that was what Garth intended. What had been Garth's first question? How many are you? And he, like a fool, had told him. Then he had let two of his men go with Garth.

'We've been tricked!' said Jed to his men, explaining what he now thought.

'Great,' said Decker who had only been kidding about surrendering.

'They have probably surrounded us by now, ready for the kill,' said Burrell, half-jokingly and half seriously.

Burrell was right. Ghale and Ebblin had arrows aimed at them, six of Hylaw's soldiers were only yards away and Breaker was further in the forest tying up the four new dogs he had just acquired. None of that had anything to do with what happened next.

Garth crashed back through the forest straight into Jed. Burrell moved quickly out of the way to avoid being trampled on by the others trying to hide with them.

'What!' Started Jed, his hand hovering over his knife.

'Shush!' warned Garth.

Nobody moved, everyone waited friend and foe alike. The sound became louder; six Nefkins bounded past. Ghale and Ebblin looked at each other, now

they had a problem. Garth and his men had returned without the two escorts, how were they going to explain that to Jed? If they attacked now, they might accidentally kill some of their own. Then there was the Nefkins that had just passed, was it important to follow them and help Nathe? Ghale raised the bird whistle to his mouth, the sound indicated a change of plan and told Hylaw's waiting six men to back off. It also told Garth sorry, but you're on your own.

Garth stood up, Jed tried to pull him back down.

'Your two men were darn stupid,' said Garth thinking fast. 'When we saw the Nefkins they just stood there, what were they expecting a hand shake?'

Jed was now uncertain, should he trust Garth? A noise from behind made him turn quickly, what he saw made him turn back just as quick.

'Sorry Jed,' were the last words he heard.

Aharen watched from his position at the bottom of the bank as the last of Kerdred's men and one Nefkin charged up the slope out of the valley. Aharen hadn't been too concerned, there were some of Hylaw's best fighters at the top of the valley with Nathe; that was until Nathe and his men were attacked from the side. Nefkins bounded out of the forest, Aharen couldn't see how many. Then from the far end of the valley more appeared, leaping on and over the dead bodies and down the slope straight for him and the few men he had left. There was no way out. Hugo may stand a chance, he thought. If the rest of us manage to hold back the Nefkins for a while. Jumping down from the huge horse, he grabbed the three youngest lads and helped them onto the back of Hugo.

Holding Hugo's head he whispered, 'Take them back'.

As if understanding, Hugo nudged against Aharen's shoulder, turned and headed down and across the fields. The other men took their places next to Aharen.

Ebblin and Ghale swung through the trees followed by the other six soldiers on foot. By the time they reached the spot where the Nefkins had left the forest, they could see they may already be too late. The foot soldiers ran out to engage Kerdred's men. Ebblin and Ghale began firing arrow after arrow at the Nefkins. On the ground death stars were being used to good effect on the faces and hind quarters of the Nefkins. Howls filled the air as eight hunting dogs joined the attack. It was savage, desperate, it was all or nothing.

Nathe had not only seen the Nefkins head down towards Aharen, he had also seen Kerdred's full army begin to enter the valley. The dead bodies of men and horses being cleared ahead of them. Their progress was slow, but relentless. Kerdred would not spend time honouring the fallen or burning the bodies. He was on his way to the town, once through the valley he could be there in half a day. Nathe pulled back from the fighting and ordered three men to head back and

warn Hylaw. Will could hardly see through the blood running down his face, but headed off with the others, pushing Echo to the limit.

Nathe fought valiantly until the end; but even with his best efforts they never stood a chance. The Nefkins were too strong, too powerful, too well trained. Ghale and Ebblin kept shooting until their quivers were empty, then were forced to watch as one by one Nathe and his men fell, until they were the only ones left. One of the Nefkins spotted them in the trees and bounded in their direction. Turning they swung back through the trees and into the forest the Nefkin in pursuit.

Haystack stopped his horse, they had been riding steadily for over an hour. Something was bothering him.

'Something's wrong,' he said to Shade.

Shade instinctively looked back along the road, it was clear, no one was following them. Turning the horse, Haystack stared into the distance. Shade realised what Haystack meant, by now some soldiers should have caught up with them. Once the last of Kerdred's men had been killed, Nathe would have at least sent some men to report back to Hylaw.

'There,' pointed Haystack after several minutes.

Shade could just see the three riders. As they watched, they realised they were racing for their lives. Haystack turned back his horse and did the same. Whatever had happened he would find out later.

Chapter 27

When Gadolin got up after the explosion, he looked out into the valley, not knowing what else to do, he ran back to Rona and Igmy. Rona let him sit quietly for a while.

'Do you blame Kerdred for all this?' she asked gently.

'Yes,' replied Gadolin, not looking at her.

Rona sighed, what she was about to say, Gadolin may misunderstand, but if he could see things as she did, it may help him cope.

'You're wrong, all of this is not just Kerdred's fault,' emphasising the 'all'. 'I am to blame, as is Shade, Kerdred's father and many others.'

Gadolin looked over at Rona, he knew better than to protest at her suggestion, before she had explained what she meant.

'Once upon a time,' Rona started, putting on her best story teller voice. 'There was a father, possessed with greed and ambition for his children. All through their young lives he taught them the meaning of power and fear. To please him they had to be like him, to be like him they would never learn love or compassion. The oldest grew into a handsome young man, whose burden was great. His father had tasked him to conquer two great lands. One day when raiding a small village, one of his soldiers killed a woman, she had been a brave fighter. The tragedy was that it was the mother of the most enchanting girl he had ever met. Taking her to his castle, he tried everything he could to win her heart. Sadly he knew so little of love, he was always going to fail,' Rona stopped and looked over at Igmy. 'Are you crying?'

Igmy's forlorn face looked back at Rona, biting his bottom lip he shook his head.

'I'm talking about Kerdred.'

'Oh!' said Igmy, surprised.

'Now this is where I come in,' she continued. 'I chose to torment him, for years, trying to drive him slowly mad. I could have talked to Shade instead, helped her understand Kerdred; well at least showed her how to manipulate him. Shade, for her part in all this, could have been slightly less bull headed. Her hatred of him, even now, eats deep into his heart.'

'Then none of this would have happened?' questioned Gadolin.

'Possibly,' replied Rona.

'If you could go back, would you do it differently?' asked Gadolin.

'Not a chance,' laughed Rona. 'Even if it means I have to spend my next twenty lives working on my 'vengeance' issues.'

Gadolin shook his head, Rona's 'words of wisdom' sometimes didn't feel that enlightening.

'What I am trying to say, is no one person can be blamed for all the bad things in the world, just as no one person can be accredited with all the good. We all play our parts.'

'I still blame Kerdred,' said Gadolin.

Gadolin was still staring down at the ground when Rona spoke, she had been sitting with her eyes closed for some time.

'I need you to save someone for me,' she said quietly.

'You said I wasn't to intervene in this battle,' said Gadolin surprised.

'I know, but in the future he will do something very important, if he lives,' said Rona. 'Kerdred is on his way, sooner than even I thought.'

Gadolin hared through the forest, why Breaker? The man was massive, there's no way he could just pick him up and run back with him. Igmy followed more slowly, thinking he might be of some help.

Gadolin saw Ebblin and Ghale first, running. Breaker was a good way behind and behind him a Nefkin. The two dogs snapping at its sides were not slowing it down. Swinging through the branches Gadolin was nearly on top of the Nefkin in seconds. The last branch he reached for one-handed and swung himself round and down onto the Nefkin's neck. The speed and weight of the impact sent the Nefkin staggering sideways. Ghale and Ebblin started running back towards the Nefkin. Daggers whizzed through the air, finding their mark on the now exposed belly. The dogs seized their chance, biting deep into the Nefkin's back legs. Gadolin looked up to see Breaker raise his spiked club, bringing it down hard on the Nefkin's armoured head. Again and again the spiked club came down, even after it had ceased moving. Breaker dropped to his knees, pouring with sweat. He was not built for running. His two remaining dogs stood next to him, their muzzles covered in blood and fur.

Gadolin pulled his trapped leg away from under the Nefkin, Breaker wasn't looking at him, but Ebblin and Ghale were. They said nothing, just inclined their heads once towards him. With one leap Gadolin was in the trees, heading back to Rona.

Igmy arrived just in time to see Gadolin heading back. Breaker and the dogs were heading straight for him. Dropping to the ground he lay still, Breaker walked straight past. One of the dogs stopped, inches away from his head and began sniffing around, raising one of its back legs, it peed on Igmy.

Kerdred rode Darius's prized horse, a chestnut stallion, he had named Mace. He was the result of years of selective breeding, big, powerful, fast and headstrong. Over the last few weeks it had become Kerdred's, no one else had been allowed near. The stallion became his obsession and it soon learned who was in charge. Stopping at the edge of the valley Kerdred watched as the last of Hylaw's men were killed, watched as his own dead were piled over to one side. He watched a kestrel flying overhead and remembered the eagle from so long ago, he had an archer shoot the kestrel, just in case. When he approached the 'tree' he looked at it with curiosity rather than fear. It bore no resemblance to the creature some of his men had described, just a mass of dead wood. He felt unnaturally calm, dispassionate and indifferent. Soon he would have Hylaw's head on a long spike and the old witch slowly burning on a pyre. He had not yet decided what to do with Shade and her child, but when the time came he knew he would think of something, interesting. Kerdred had different plans for Princess Ami. Back in Thantos he had two sons by his second wife, Andrass and Rogue. Now that Tremlin was dead, Andrass would have Daranel. He would marry Princess Ami.

*

Hylaw paced the floor, Darius said nothing. They needed to get some rest, tomorrow was going to be long and hard. Just before one of Shade's kestrels was killed she had seen Nathe, Aharen and the others fall, there was no sign of Breaker, Ghale and Ebblin. Hylaw felt it had been a disaster. Haystack came back into the library.

'How is she?' asked Darius.

'You know Shade, she's tough,' said Haystack, taking a seat next to him. 'Will you quit pacing!'

Hylaw stopped and glared at Haystack.

'Sorry, will you quit pacing, Your Highness,' snarled Haystack.

'How dare you!' started Hylaw.

Haystack was on his feet.

'I'll tell you how I dare, today there have been many brave men give their lives for you. Many I considered friends and you have done nothing since we got back but pace the floor, muttering how it was a disaster. Your saying those men died for nothing. Think about it! There's at least two hundred less men and quite a few less Nefkins to face tomorrow. You should be outside now inspiring your army, telling them...'

A knock at the door halted Haystack mid rant.

'Come in,' shouted Darius.

Penn entered his library respectfully.

'Your Highness, Lord Darius, sorry to disturb you but three of our boys have returned on the back of that large circus horse. They say Aharen sent them back when he realised they had no chance. The poor boys are quite distressed, Haber and Bowles have taken them to the kitchens for something to eat. Would you like to question them later?' said Penn in his usual calm quiet manner.

'No, let them rest after they have eaten,' said Darius.

Hylaw was picturing Aharen in his mind, saving the boys was just the sort of thing he would do.

Penn bowed and was just about to leave when a disturbance from outside stopped him. Looking out of the door, he pushed it open further.

'I believe some others have just returned, there are seven of them and two dogs.'

Haystack inappropriately was out of the door first. There stood Ebblin, Ghale, Breaker and Garth with his three men. Garth and his men took the dogs and went to find something to drink. Once back in the library Hylaw listened as Ghale and Ebblin recounted their ordeal. They told the same story regarding the 'tree' that saved Shade, they then talked of another 'tree' that had intervened to save Breaker.

'I sort of understand why a Tree Guardian might help Shade, as she's well, she's sort of a witch, you know what I mean?' said Darius looking awkwardly at Haystack.

'No, what do you mean?' asked Haystack mockingly.

'You do know what I mean, my point is, why would one help Breaker?'

'Because he's a tree sprite in disguise?' suggested Haystack.

Everyone looked at Breaker, Ebblin grunted and turned his head away trying not to laugh. Breaker raised his eyebrows and with an overly serious face, looked at each of them in turn. Hylaw scratched the side of his head trying to resist the smile creeping onto his mouth. The more each of them tried not to laugh the more it became funnier. Haystack sat back, pleased. Having fought many battles he understood the need for Hylaw to appear strong and in control, whether he felt like it or not. If making him laugh did the trick that was fine by him. When the laughter died down, Hylaw took a deep breath.

'Darius, let's take a walk.'

For the next couple of hours Darius and Hylaw walked around Riftdale, then out into the fields where the main army was camped. They stayed there a while, laughing and joking with men who would probably die tomorrow.

When everyone had left the library, Penn went into the back room and from behind the bookcase he retrieved his staff. Placing the tip on the floor he waited. Silently a large stone slab effortlessly floated upwards, revealing a well-worn stairway. Penn walked down, darkness enveloped him as the stone slab closed the entrance above.

'Light,' said Penn.

The end of the staff lit up, filling the stairway with light. When Penn reached the bottom there was a long passage in front of him. Ahead there were six large solid oak doors, three on each side. To his right was another passage which went under the forest, the door at the end could not be seen from where Penn was standing. Over the last few weeks Penn had been bringing down the most valuable books and manuscripts for safety. Tonight it was time to take something out of one of the rooms. Approaching the third door on the right, Penn took the ancient ring of keys hanging from his belt. Putting one of the keys in the lock he touched the door with the staff. The key began to turn and the door opened. In the centre of the room stood a small table, against every wall, from floor to ceiling, were boxes and crates. Each was marked with numbers and symbols. Walking to the far end, he touched one of the crates with his staff. The crate began to wiggle itself free from the others. Once free, it floated onto a small table in the centre of the room. Penn carefully lifted the lid and took out the black pouch. Tying it to his belt, he walked back out of the room. The crate did not return to its place against the wall. What it had held for centuries would not be returned. Shrinking down, it began to glow, then in a bright flash of light and whiff of smoke, it disappeared.

After locking the door the same way he had opened it, Penn walked back to the bottom of the stone stairs. A low, hardly audible noise came from the corridor which was now to his left. He stopped and listened, nothing. He waited and waited, satisfied there was no immediate danger he headed back up into the library.

Penn was not a wizard, he was a shape shifter. He could not turn himself into anything as exciting as a dragon or a wolf. He could however change his own appearance when it had been necessary in the past. He had never been that adventurous, usually a change in age, hair colour, different shaped face and nose was enough. When Medrick, in Penn's opinion the greatest wizard that had ever lived, had asked him to become the 'Guardian of Knowledge' he had willingly accepted. Unfortunately he hadn't realised the wizards were about to tear a great hole in the fabric of nature and he was going to be left guarding loads of valuable stuff for centuries. There had been many times he felt like just walking away. The staff which Medrick had given him, kept him alive. It also performed

any tasks Penn required to carry out his duties, other than that it remained unresponsive. Penn had long since given up trying to get it to change copper into gold or water into wine.

With the entrance to the stairway safely closed, he sat in the library and waited for morning. Apart from Eldin, no one else knew Penn's plans in the coming battle. Penn had spent so many years lying to cover his identity, he hadn't even noticed Eldin watching him. When Eldin confronted him, he had been fascinated to realise Eldin could just about detect every lie he spoke.

'I'm thirty seven.'

'No you're not.'

'Thirty eight?'

'No.'

'Forty?'

'No.'

'Much older?' smiled Penn.

Eldin smiled back.

Penn told Eldin everything, it hadn't really been a risk as the staff had always been willing to make people forget. He hadn't made Eldin forget. Eldin was initially disappointed that the staff would not or could not simply destroy Kerdred's army. They had, however, come up with a plan, eventually.

Aharen tried to open his eyes. His eyelashes were caked in blood and he could only manage to see slightly through one of them. It was dark. As he became more conscious he tried to move. Pain engulfed him, his head threatened to explode. He could not feel every inch of his body but what he could feel screamed back at him. Lying still he calmed his mind, accepting the pain. Slowly he began to move his left arm, it was under at least one dead body. Edging it closer, he felt his own thigh. As he moved it up, he felt fur. The Nefkin, he remembered. It had been young, inexperienced and Aharen hadn't made any attempt to protect himself when he lunged straight at its chest. He remembered nothing after that. He wished he had died then, so much less painful than the way he was going to die now. He didn't like the thought of dying amongst all these dead bodies. Aharen smiled to himself, no matter what, he was going to make it to the large oak tree he had seen further down the hill and die there.

Chapter 28

The morning was cold. There was a certain psychological advantage to attacking, the predator verses the prey. Haystack was to the south side of the town, on Hugo. Darius was next to him on Clover. The largest horses were in the front lines ready to lead the charge directly into the enemy. Garth had been given Echo and was in charge of the rest. Archers lined the walls, Glint and Felspar were with them, the last of their fire rockets still in the boxes of straw to keep out the damp. The catapult was ready, a mound of large stones waiting next to it and next to that stood Will and Breaker. Hylaw was walking the parapet checking everyone and everything was ready. Ebblin and Ghale were in the trees with some of the other archers. Bella was in the library, medicines and bandages all laid out. Many of the townsfolk unable to fight had left the night before, those who had stayed armed themselves with anything they could find. Eldin, despite the early hour, was with Thomas heading south, drinking the last bottle of red wine he had brought from Landra. Ben Adhem and the others in the wagon had declined.

'Has anyone seen Princess Amicia this morning?' asked Eldin.

'She's probably riding with the women,' suggested Ben Adhem.

Eldin sat back and was just about to take another sip of wine when he had a terrible thought.

'We need to check, if she's gone back she could ruin everything.'

Hylaw watched as Kerdred's army came into view. He had expected them to come thundering down towards the town in one mass deadly attack. A signal was sent to Darius. They waited. Kerdred's army marched ever closer and closer. Where the road opened out the advancing army began to spread out. Darius could see them clearly now, he could see Kerdred on his prize horse. Haystack also had his attention fixed on Kerdred, he knew Shade would be watching him too. Haystack hadn't seen her since last night, but imagined her on the wall with an arrow just waiting for Kerdred to come in range.

He was wrong, she was not even in Riftdale; she was helping Rona reach a hiding place near the edge of the forest. Gadolin was following Rona's instructions, to remain hidden and protect her from anyone except Kerdred. From his position he could see the backs of the archers hidden in the trees, but very little of the open ground ahead of them.

Kerdred halted the advance and surveyed his enemy, casually leaning forward and stroking the neck of his horse. Next to him was his General, Kilgor;

a more ugly man would be hard to find. A scar went from his forehead, under a patch where his left eye had once been and down across his cheek. Another scar on the right had healed badly, the skin was taught around it, pulling the side of his mouth down. He had few teeth and most of them were broken. There were many more unseen scars on his body and his left hand was missing two fingers. Kilgor had been good looking in his youth, it was his years of loyalty to Kerdred that had left him like this.

'How many men are in the forest?' asked Kerdred.

'Forty.'

Kilgor's mouth twitched as he replied. There were very few things that frightened him; tree demons was one of them. He had sent the men into the forest with dogs and more importantly torches. They were under strict instructions, anything that moved that was not made of flesh and blood was to be set on fire. Kilgor had wanted the torches already lit, but eventually conceded that would probably be a bit hazardous.

Kerdred smiled across at him.

'I think I'm going to enjoy this.'

Kilgor half smiled back. He still thought Kerdred was wrong not to use the Nefkins to get into Riftdale. His obsession to have Shade and the old hag captured alive was affecting his judgement. It was true that once over the walls the Nefkins would kill anyone and everyone regardless of whether they were old, young, male, female, armed, unarmed, but it would be so much quicker. To be on the safe side Kilgor had told his men not to kill any women.

Haystack sat looking relaxed on Hugo. Hugo had his head down and was munching on some grass.

'I wish he'd hurry up,' said Darius who's nerves were beginning to get the better of him.

A single arrow rose into the sky landing harmlessly in front of the gates. Kerdred's men attacked.

Hylaw watched as hundreds of mounted soldiers charged down towards the town. Turning to Glint and Felspar he held his hand up.

'Wait.'

Arrows began reaching the walls. They would soon be in range of Darius.

'Now!' shouted Hylaw.

Glint and Felspar lit the three fire rockets. The rockets shot across over the heads of the oncoming riders and exploded into the second wave of mounted riders waiting to charge. Will and Breaker began loading and firing the catapult as quickly as they could, the rocks crashing into the panicked men and horses below. Without looking to see how much damage they had caused Hylaw

signalled to the archers on the wall. Ghale and Ebblin and the other archers hidden in the trees did the same.

'Knock. Aim. Loose,' screamed Hylaw.

Arrows filled the sky raining down on the first wave of Kerdred's men.

Darius and Haystack led the charge of three hundred men. Curving around and cutting behind the now doomed soldiers. Garth's men, on the smaller faster horses held their ground, killing any who made it that far. The shock from the explosions had given them an advantage. Many of the second wave of fighters had been killed or badly injured. But that advantage wouldn't last long. Darius and half of the men were now hacking their way through any of those that had survived the explosions. Haystack and the other half of the men focused on those corralled in front of the wall.

It was not long before Haystack joined forces again with Darius. More of Kerdred's men were now pushing forward in a third wave, Kerdred was amongst them. Haystack noticed Darius was desperately trying to reach Kerdred. Kerdred could see what was happening, personally removing Darius's head from his shoulders would give him great pleasure. Kicking Mace into action, he headed directly for the white horse. Haystack saw Darius reach Kerdred, their horses dancing around each other as they fought. Darius's sword skills were superb. The horse he was riding had strength, agility and confidence. They worked well together. But Kerdred and Mace were equal to everything Darius threw at him. Neither was able to get a clean blow at the other. Kerdred began to use Mace to intimidate Darius's horse. Manoeuvring round, the horses were now head to head and biting. Mace reared up, kicking out. Clover did the same. Haystack was still too far away to help. He didn't see the man on the ground, neither did Darius. A sword plunged into Clover's side. Screaming in pain she staggered and fell. Darius landed badly, but was back on his feet in seconds. His sword now in his left hand, the right hanging uselessly from a broken arm. Raising his sword Darius tried to defend himself. Kerdred toyed with him, mocked him and then thrust his sword straight through Darius's heart. Kerdred slowly pulled his bloodied sword from Darius's chest then watched with delight as Darius slumped into the cold, hard ground.

Haystack and his men were being driven further back, he could no longer see Kerdred. He guessed he had lost at least fifty men. The archers on the wall were doing their best, but there were just too many of them. It was time to retreat. Hugo snorted as he caught sight of a soldier behind him, sword ready to swing. His hind legs shot backwards, great hooves smashed Clover's killer in the face. Then he was on the move, racing away with the others.

Three short sharp blasts of a horn told Hylaw's army that Eldin had been right. The Nefkins were coming across the fields. Garth turned his five hundred men to face them. Those who didn't have death stars carried long handled, single blade axes. Garth waited, Haystack and his men were now close behind him. The Nefkins were approaching fast from the east. Timing was everything. At the last possible moment Garth signalled to his men. As one, Garth's men and Haystack's men rode west, taking with them all the Nefkins and probably a third of Kerdred's remaining army. Which left a mere fifteen hundred plus. It had always been impossible odds. They had all known; Darius, Nathe, Aharen, Caleb, Haystack. None of them had liked Eldin's plan but neither could any of them come up with anything better. A battle plan that involved sacrificing your King was not something anyone but Eldin would have come up with.

Hylaw hoped one day Ami would forgive him and understand. One of them had to live and this was the only way to ensue her safety. Hylaw looked around at the men, all of them had volunteered to die for their future Queen. Even Bella had stayed to help the wounded, believing naively there was still a chance. She hadn't been there when Eldin had said, 'It is better to lose one battle in order to win a war'.

Ghale, Ebblin and the other archers in the trees retreated into the forest as soon as Haystack and Garth headed west. Gadolin remained still as he watched men with dogs working their way perilously close to Rona. They were quite spread out but Gadolin knew it wouldn't be long before they picked up on Rona's scent. A couple of dogs started barking and pulling on their leashes. The rest picking up a scent joined in.

'There!' One of the men was pointing into the forest, 'Something's moving'.

'And there,' said another.

The dogs were now frantic, barking and snapping.

'Quick light the torches!'

'Wolves!'

'Light the torches! They are afraid of fire!'

'They're everywhere!'

'They don't seem that afraid of fire,' said another backing away.

Slowly the men began back pacing, the wolves herding them away from Rona. Gadolin smiled he knew exactly who would have sent the wolves to protect her.

The chase was on, every man was pushing his horse to its limits. Thundering behind them over seven hundred riders and at least forty Nefkins. Ahead of them the first obstacle, a stone wall. Hugo's heart was straining, he was getting too old for this and wasn't built for speed. At least being a circus horse the wall wouldn't

be a problem. Slightly ahead of them Haystack saw Echo and Garth jump clear, but a grey horse refused the jump, sending its rider head first over the wall. Hugo swerved the grey horse and cleared the wall with ease. The horse behind him was not so fortunate, crashing straight into the grey. Most made it. Now they were on flatter more open ground. Swinging left they headed south towards a craggy outcrop in the distance. Some of the back riders had been caught and were now having to ride and fight. Haystack could tell Hugo was struggling; they were dropping further back through the pack. The gap between Haystack and the nearest enemy riders was no more than thirty feet when a figure appeared on the top of the crag. Raising his spear he pointed the tip at the oncoming riders. The signal for them to separate, creating a moving corridor. From behind the outcrop they came. The Mountain People. Haystack stared when he saw what some of them were riding. Mountain bears, at least thirty. Many of the rest were riding the hairiest horses he had ever seen and were the size of Hugo. As they reached the gap between the riders Haystack and all the others looped around. Now they were the predators.

Shielded foot soldiers took their positions and began a steady march towards the town. Behind them, men with grappling hooks and ladders. Behind them the battering ram. Glint was shaking, he was no good with a sword or a bow. The walls were not that high, soon he'd be face to face with the enemy with nothing more than a knife in his hand. A knife he was more likely to cut himself with than anyone else. Everyone waited for Hylaw's command.

'Glint!', 'Felspar!'

Men on the wall turned to see who was doing the shouting. It was Penn.

'I need you two down here.'

Glint and Felspar looked towards Hylaw, who nodded.

As soon as they were down, which didn't take them long, Penn headed off with them towards the library. Even before they reached its doors, Hylaw had given the signal. The archers were firing again and the catapult was sending rocks high in the sky.

Glint realised Felspar was fairing little better than him. Penn on the other hand was his usual calm self. Once inside the library Penn told them to light some candles and then shutter and bar the windows. Bella was busy with the wounded, bits of arrow still sticking out of a few.

'There is a trap door in the back room, Felspar and I will help Bella get the wounded down into the tunnels,' said Penn.

'Tunnels?' both Glint and Felspar said together.

'Yes, well they were secret tunnels until now.'

'But?' said Felspar.

'But why didn't I tell other people before now?' said Penn with a gentle smile on his face.

They both nodded.

'People who know they are going to be saved don't fight with the same urgency, the same desperation, I'll explain everything later,' said Penn. 'Glint get everybody back here. NOW GO!'

The command ended in a voice that had Glint out of the door and running as if his life depended on it, which it did.

He aimed for the dorms first, where half a dozen older laymen waited terrified.

'Spread the word, tell everyone there's tunnels under the library!' shouted Glint.

The men looked at each other and rather hastily headed for the library. Thanks for the help, thought Glint. He had better luck with the next three he came across. Word started getting around.

The wall was being breached Glint could see Hylaw and the rest desperately trying to fight them back. He had to make a decision, tell those on the wall first or those guarding the gates. Running up the ramp he was nearly sent toppling over the side by a body falling from the parapet. Regaining his balance, he continued up more cautiously. Hylaw was battling with two men at once. Adrenalin pumping through him, Glint didn't think and just ran into the back of one of the men. The impact nearly dislocated his shoulder. Fortunately Hylaw had seen him and side stepped just in time. The man staggered forward and Hylaw brought his sword down hard on to the attacker's head. The other saw his chance and lunged, stopping literally dead in his tracks, an arrow impaled in his neck.

'The library, you must get to the library, there's tunnels,' panted Glint.

Hylaw looked questioningly at Glint.

'Sorry I've got to tell the rest,' Glint turned and was running down the ramp, clutching his arm before Hylaw could ask him anything.

By the time he reached those guarding the gates, the battering ram had nearly completed its task. Breaker and Will appeared next to him.

'There's tunnels under the library, we need to get everyone there,' said Glint, now exhausted.

Breaker's body remained still, only his head moved back and forth calculating the situation. Decision made, he pushed through the guards and took charge. None questioned his authority and slowly began backing away from their positions, swords ready for the imminent assault. Hylaw's men were now

retreating down the ramps, having to fight every step of the way. Glint still clutching his shoulder headed back to the library.

Haystack was flanked by Tosha. Tosha had sneaked into the town early the previous morning. He had told Haystack everything. Aberrling persuading Hunter to help, meeting up with Eldin, the plan. Haystack wondered what else Eldin was keeping secret. With the plan in place Haystack had taken the sword from his throat and Tosha had returned to the Mountain People. Darius and Nathe were the only other ones who knew.

As they rode Tosha joined in with the war cries of the clansmen, along with most of the other men. Even Hugo, who had been struggling with the pace, seemed to find renewed energy. Further in front the first soldiers engaged, on mass. The war cries continued but they were now joined by mind numbing screams, clashing of swords and roars from the bears. Ahead the clansmen were driving their huge horses through the oncoming riders, splitting them apart. They rode bareback, once in the fray they dropped the reins. Their swords arcing down, around and across in effortless sweeps. Limbs, heads, torsos were being sheared, lopped and hacked. The bears went for the horses, ripping their necks, lacerating their sides.

Tosha pulled away from Haystack and joined a group off to the side, riding down those who were attempting to flee the onslaught. Haystack readied himself, two men were charging at him, seeing a spear sticking out of a slain horse he pulled it free and threw it into the chest of the man to the right. The point struck the soldier's armour but the force of the impact was enough to throw him backwards off his horse. The other man came at him, it was a tired attack and Haystack parried it easily. Pulling on the reins he swung Hugo round sharply, the man lunged again, Haystack dodged and brought his blade down hard on the man's outstretched arm. He wasn't sure if the man was dead or had fainted, either way he fell sideways from his horse. His next opponent wouldn't have lived that much longer anyway. Thrusting his sword into the man's already bleeding body, he moved on. The next man he reached fell dead, before he even had time to swing. Haystack slowed Hugo to a trot.

Garth was surveying the scene from the edge of the battle. Smiling he couldn't help but raise his hand to pat the inside pocket of his jerkin. The satisfying feel of the gold coins made his existence worthwhile. He was a mercenary and always would be, loyalty cost. Eldin had known exactly what made him tick. Drawing his sword he kicked Echo forwards and joined the battle.

By now some of those brandishing death stars and on the lighter horses, were skirting around the edge of the fighting. Their sights were on the Nefkins trailing

behind. Kesh, who had given the signal from the top of the crag, was catching up with them. His horse suddenly pulled sharply to one side as one of Kerdred's men darted in front. The rider less bear pounding behind would not be able to catch up to the fleeing rider. Kesh realised that was not his intention. All the back riders were turning. They were trying to lead the bears straight into the path of the Nefkins. This was a dangerous and desperate move. Nefkins were known to have an unfortunate habit of killing anything heading towards them. Kerdred's riders knew this, but Kesh could see the men had no choice, death was waiting for them in either direction.

Those with death stars had now reached the Nefkins. Spiked metal balls swung in the air and crashed down on the Nefkins' protective armour. The agile horses manoeuvred expertly but even so their losses were brutal. Kesh wanted to reach the Nefkins, but found himself battling with two retreating soldiers. Having placed themselves on either side of him, he stood little chance. Jumping from his horse he leapt across onto the outside rider, sending them both to the ground. The soldier landed first with Kesh on top. He pulled out his dagger and quickly killed the man. Rolling over onto his side, Kesh gripped his dislocated left shoulder. The other soldier had kept on riding and Kesh could see no one was paying him much attention. He stood up and began backing away from the fighting. Those that had been riding the bears had dismounted, leaving the bears unhindered in their assault. He watched as the bears charged into the onrushing Nefkins. Many leapt into the air at the last moment, smashing into the Nefkins with monumental force. As they began fighting the ferocity and sheer animal savagery was overwhelming. Despite the bears power and size the Nefkins had the advantage with their longer arms and gripping hands. Those men wielding death stars tried desperately hard to hold the other Nefkins away from the bears. The clansmen on the ground darted around the Nefkins, slicing at their legs and under bellies. Kesh dropped to his knees unable to tear his eyes away from scene.

Kerdred's men were now on the run. Haystack signalled, shouting orders. Those that could, followed him to the Nefkins. Dismounting from Hugo, Haystack organised the men into small groups. Following the example of the clansmen each group targeted a Nefkin. Haystack had five men with him, their Nefkin was surrounded by dead men and horses. The last two riders valiantly maintained their assault, their horses struggling and injured. Tosha nudged Haystack in the arm.

'Mean looking beast, probably better if you let us younger ones tackle him,' joked Tosha.

Haystack looked across at Tosha and laughed. Without waiting Haystack ran at the legs of the Nefkin, Tosha matched him step for step.

By the time they reached their target only one rider remained. The Nefkin saw their approach and lashed out. Tosha threw himself to the ground rolling forwards just in time, the blow struck the man behind him instead. Haystack heard several bones crack as the soldier went flying backwards. Tosha was already back on his feet now directly in front of the Nefkin who twisted swinging both arms round together. The left caught the last rider square in the jaw breaking his neck and sending him sideways off his horse, the right sent the sword spinning out of Tosha's hand. Haystack and the three remaining men had now encircled the Nefkin as planned, they all dodged as it lashed out again. Tosha rolled again and in one movement picked up the fallen rider's death star, coming out of his roll he swung it round catching the Nefkin on the right ankle. Seeing his chance Haystack ran straight for the Nefkin's left leg, leaping into the air he buried the blade of his dagger deep into the Nefkin's thigh and clung onto the leg with all his strength. The Nefkin writhed in agony hitting out then dropping to all fours. Haystack hung on. Tosha and the other three men all rushed forwards aiming for its neck. One man took a blow to the arm and Tosha's death star struck armour. Haystack jumped down and quickly drew his sword slicing across the same leg. The leg gave way and the Nefkin rolled onto its side. Tosha swung again, this time he had a clear shot and the death star found its mark. The other soldiers made sure of the kill.

Haystack paused to pull his dagger free and looked around, with so many assailants attacking at once the Nefkins were beginning to go down.

Chapter 29

Felspar, as instructed, had told everyone that the passage to the right of the stone steps was not to be entered. Despite the corridor they were standing in being a more than ample size, some were beginning to panic. There didn't appear to be any way out other than the way they had come in. A couple of them were trying to force one of the ancient oak doors, while another at a different door was trying to pick the lock. Bella lost her temper.

'Will you lot calm down? I understand you thought you'd be escaping through this tunnel and out somewhere miles away from danger, but Penn would not have got us down here just to die.'

'It feels like that, a tomb, that's what it feels like,' moaned Haber from the back.

'Oh shut up,' said Bella.

Glint ran into the library. Penn was standing to one side, his eyes closed a staff in his right hand.

'Ah, there you are,' said Penn opening his eyes and walking towards him.

Reaching into his cloak Penn brought out a ring of ancient keys. Carefully selecting one he handed it over to Glint.

'Go down and open the second door on the left, no matter what happens do not attempt to open any other doors with this key. There are torches just inside the door, light them before going any further, the steps are steep. When everyone is down wait for me in the tunnel.'

Felspar came in from the back room, the library doors crashed open, two injured soldiers staggered in. Felspar and Glint went to help them. Penn let them past and then walked out of the library.

Kerdred's men were now through the gates and spilling over the wall. Penn watched for a second, Hylaw's men had formed tight defensive rows. They were edging closer to the library, but their progress was painfully slow and costly. Another smaller group of ten men were trying to make their way over, without help they weren't going to make it. Penn strode across, the staff now his weapon. Whether it liked it or not, the staff was bound to protect him. After being swung rather ineptly at a couple of opponents, it took over. Taking over part of Penn's mind, it focused his senses. Everything around him seemed to slow down. The two swordsmen who had only backed off, moved in slow motion towards him. This time when Penn swung the staff, he was visualising the exact point of contact. The staff smashed into the head of one, skin, hair, blood and other bits

floated from the wound. The man's eyes held Penn's gaze in disbelief as he went sideways into the other. Seconds passed for Penn before they were both on the ground. Time then returned to normal, until he faced his next assailant.

By the time he reached the men, only seven were still alive. Those left were exhausted. Penn lashed out mercilessly. The speed and extra reach giving Penn a huge advantage. They lost only one more man before joining up with Hylaw and Breaker. Unlike the swordsmen whose fighting displayed a certain amount of skill, Breaker's oversized, two handed spiked club was wielded with pure brute strength. He might have been a lot slower than Penn, but the body count was about the same. Those in the back lines were now at the library doors. Will was one of the first through with the dogs.

'Get to the tunnels, we'll get the doors,' shouted one of the men who had been protecting him from the worst of the action.

The scream was unmistakeable. Hylaw looked across, two men were dragging a hysterical auburn haired woman towards Kerdred. It would be suicidal to try and help her, but how could he not? Breaker saw Ami as well, he knew Hylaw would feel compelled to try and save her. Grabbing his collar he heaved Hylaw backwards through the closing doors. Penn went diving in with them. The men standing behind the doors pushed with every ounce of strength they had left. Breaker, back on his feet, brought his club down hard on a shoulder visible between the doors. Penn stabbed at it with the end of the staff managing to drive the smashed limb back out of the doorway. With the doors now closed, Breaker pulled down the solid wood crosspiece. Exhausted they slid to the floor. Flickering candle light cast eerie shadows around the room. Hylaw stood hunched staring angrily at the barred door. Breaker looked at Penn, he also looked angry.

'These doors will not hold them forever, get down to the tunnels,' commanded Penn in a voice that wasn't to be questioned.

'Except you.'

Hylaw narrowed his eyes and raised his sword. Penn's eyes seemed to change colour.

'Don't even think about it,' Penn snarled, his voice sending the rest hurrying to the back room.

Breaker paused wondering whether to stay or not, he felt sorry for Hylaw. Looking at both of them he realised this needed to be sorted out now, between the two of them, alone.

'Eldin persuaded me to risk revealing secrets that have been kept for hundreds of years. Made me believe that what was happening now was

important enough, that you were important enough. You can't even command your own sister,' Penn said in disgust.

'I...she...,' stammered Hylaw realising the truth in Penn's words.

The blackness in Penn's eyes faded, dropping his shoulders he looked back at Hylaw.

'Kerdred will not kill her. She will be taken back to Brinkton to marry one of his sons. Eldin's plans for you to take back Landra have just been ruined. They will use her against you. And because of her I cannot risk...'

'Risk what?' questioned Hylaw.

'Just go down to the tunnels, I will follow shortly,' said Penn heavily.

Kerdred turned his horse so he could get a better look at Ami. Despite her bedraggled appearance he could see she had potential. Not that it really mattered Andrass didn't have to find her attractive, just make sure she bore him sons. There were eight other prisoners and like Ami they had their heads down.

'They've barred themselves in, probably tunnels underneath,' reported Kilgor. 'Not take long.'

Kerdred watched as the battering ram was being hurriedly carried to the library.

'I want the Princess guarded at all times, she is not to be harmed,' said Kerdred.

Ami was relieved to hear his words.

'Kill the others.'

'Lord Kerdred!'

Kerdred turned his horse to face the oncoming rider.

'It's the old hag!' The rider pulled his horse up just in front of him. 'She's in the forest.'

Kerdred didn't wait to find out more. Outside the wall the ground was strewn with dead bodies. Working his way through, he reached the three men standing at the edge of the forest. One of the men stepped forward.

'We were going to go in after her but thought you might want to hunt her down yourself.'

The look on Kerdred's face made him grin, a malicious, sneering grin. He had known Kerdred would want this pleasure all to himself. Kerdred dismounted his horse.

'Follow me, there might be a few of Hylaw's men around,' said Kerdred heading into the forest.

Penn was the only one left in the library. Standing in the centre he reached for the pouch hanging from his belt. Inside were three smaller pouches and inside each of these were three small orbs. He had intended to use them all but

because of Ami he only took out one of the small pouches. Emptying its contents into the palm of his hand, he stretched out his arm. Each orb began to pulsate. Penn lowered his arm and the three orbs gently drifted upwards. They stopped a couple of feet above his head. Penn ran to the back room and down the stone stairs, the entrance sealing itself behind him. The orbs began to spin in a tight circle, faster and faster. The battering ram finished its task, soldiers began spilling into the room. Some saw the ring of light, it made no difference. The orbs imploded into each other. For a split second nothing happened. The power of the explosion blew out all the shuttered windows. Those entering the library were blown back out through the doors. The force was such that those waiting just outside were killed by the dead bodies hurtling out of the building.

Kilgor watched the library begin to collapse. The roof first, then the stone walls started toppling.

'Let's get out of here,' Kilgor said to those around him. 'We'll make camp outside in the fields. Have some men check the surrounding area, if they've used tunnels they shouldn't be hard to find.'

The explosion had unnerved Kilgor. He hated anything he considered 'unnatural' and exploding buildings came well within 'unnatural'. He had a bad feeling in his guts. They should feel like victors but something was wrong and where were the riders and the Nefkins?

Kerdred heard the explosion, but having just caught a glimpse of Rona up ahead, had other things on his mind. How could he have been so afraid of such an old decrepit crone? Signalling silently to his men, they halted. It was easy to catch up to her.

'Hag, face me!' snarled Kerdred.

He wanted to see fear in her eyes, he would enjoy killing her slowly, taking pleasure in each agonising torture. Rona stopped and turned to face Kerdred. There was no fear, she looked straight at him, a smile crossing her face. Noise from behind made Kerdred turn quickly, sword ready. His men were slumped on the ground. Annoyed that he would not be able to risk taking his time he stepped forward and sank his sword into Rona's stomach.

'No!' came a shout from deeper in the forest.

Kerdred looked past Rona and saw a boy about fourteen years old. He was tall with long matted unruly hair and wearing animal skins. There was no doubting whose son he was; an abomination, a boy born of a witch. He would deal with the boy next. Leaning over Rona, Kerdred wanted to see the pain in her face, he was surprised to see her smiling.

'You had twins,' she said.

Shade stared at her from behind Kerdred. Using both hands Shade brought the thin blade down hard, just below his armour, straight into his spine. Confused by the sudden pain, Kerdred tried to react, to stand up. As the top part of his body moved his legs gave way. Falling sideways he just had time to see Shade bringing a club down onto the side of his head.

Rona reached a hand up to Shade, 'I'm sorry I couldn't tell you,' she whispered.

Shade took Rona's hand and knelt next to her. Rona's hand relaxed, Shade closed her eyes, tears running down her face.

Killing Kerdred had been all Shade had thought about for so long, now it didn't seem enough. She looked across at Kerdred, he was still alive. She had known exactly where to strike. Having paralysed his lower body she had intended to make him watch while she drove his own sword through his heart. Shade's anger began to subside. A tired, desolate emptiness crept over her. Rona's words began to sink in; twins. She gazed over at the boy, who was staring back at her. Her son, her son who looked like Kerdred.

Gadolin watched Shade, Kerdred's sword in her hand. Slumping her shoulders and dropping the sword she began to walk towards her son. Looking down at Kerdred he wondered at Shade's decision to let him live. The man would never walk again. Rona had told him of the years she had tormented Kerdred, how Shade had hardened his heart. Gadolin didn't agree with Shade, vengeance would have been served by his death. By letting him live she risked destroying his very soul and that Gadolin thought was wrong. The problem Gadolin had was that he couldn't show mercy either. Gadolin had never killed anyone or at least he didn't think so. He had rendered many unconscious and scared many half to death, but never knowingly took a life.

Jumping down from the tree he gently lifted Rona's body. Igmy came and stood next to him, his face etched with sadness.

'What do we do now?' asked Igmy as he watched Shade walk with her son deeper into the forest.

'I guess we are not needed anymore,' said Gadolin looking kindly at Igmy. 'I was thinking of going to talk to Olesia, maybe time to move on.'

'Rona asked me if I wanted to see how things ended. It's not exactly happy ever after, but it never is, is it,' said Igmy. 'Can I come with you, when you 'move on', I'd like that,' added Igmy feeling slightly better when he realised it would mean he would see Rona again soon.

Gadolin smiled, 'Let's find somewhere nice to bury Rona's body first and then we'll both go to see Olesia'.

'Olesia,' Igmy repeated. 'What's she like, is she really a thousand years old?'

'Yes and very wise. I know, we should visit some of the others on the way.'

'Others?'

'Olesia isn't the only ancient oak tree in the forest,' laughed Gadolin. 'I think the closest one is Brindle, he's even older than Olesia. He's a bit forgetful but funny, well he thinks he's funny!'

Gadolin and Igmy continued their conversation as they started walking.

Kerdred opened his eyes. Unable to move himself from his position lying helplessly on the ground he watched them leave; his expression blank.

Chapter 30

Kilgor was angry. Less than one hundred men and only eight Nefkins had returned from the chase. It had been a trap. Many of the men were injured, some wouldn't make it through the night. His men couldn't find any signs of tunnels in the town or in the surrounding fields. They had cleared all the rubble from the library away and all they had found underneath was solid rock. To top it all Kerdred had been discovered lying in the forest badly injured. It was getting late and he had to decide what to do next. Securing the area he decided to wait a couple of days, giving Kerdred a chance to either improve or die.

After a couple of days Kerdred had not died nor had he improved, nor had he asked for mercy. Kilgor was quite concerned, there was an unnatural calmness about him, a darkness especially in his eyes. It was as if he had become devoid of any emotion. When the three men who had accompanied Kerdred into the forest were questioned, two remembered nothing, the third had reluctantly stated a tree had struck him round the head. Kerdred just nodded and carried on staring at the sky. Kilgor had soldiers and dogs sent into the forest to track down Shade.

'If she is found, kill her and anyone else she is with,' Kerdred had said bluntly.

A dispatch was prepared by Kilgor to be sent ahead to Cain. He reluctantly added Kerdred's instructions at the end.

The morning of their departure was cold and the smell of burnt flesh still hung in the air. Just outside the town fires were still smouldering. Kilgor rode at the front. Ami was seated in the back of a wagon in between two vicious looking guards. Strapped to a stretcher Kerdred was lifted into the back of a cart, next to the barrels of ale, his eyes never leaving the forest as the convoy pulled away and began its journey back to Brinkton.

*

Cain sat at his desk and reread the dispatch. It was not what he wanted to hear. The only good news was they had Princess Amicia. He would send word to Andrass, the sooner they were betrothed the better. The last two instructions had Cain rhythmically tapping his fingers on the desk. He could see Kerdred's thinking in having the Commander in Landra destroy the capital. Hylaw would probably head back there. If most of the buildings were ruined and most of the inhabitants killed, it would leave Hylaw and what was left of his army very vulnerable. Cain could see Kerdred's thinking, he just wasn't sure if he agreed

with it. The last instruction had Cain baffled and questioning yet again Kerdred's mental state. Why on earth would he want all the ancient oak trees in the great forest cut down and burnt?

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