

**The Auran Chronicles: Message  
Bearer**

**By**

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## Chapter 1

As usual a strange kind of instinct guided Seb. It always began as a gnawing tingle at the back of his mind, like an internal sat nav that drew him to another seemingly random location. He must've easily covered twenty miles that night, starting at the Pleasure Beach, where the masses knocked back a mixture of cheap rides and greasy food with abandon, right down to the promenade, before finally ending up here, at what had once been a church, but where now stood a ruined shell plastered in rotting boards.

Taking a moment, ignoring the cold rain on his skin, he turned to admire the view. The church stood on the crest of a hill at the bottom of which a road curved up and away from the sea. The buildings that stood on either side of the church were either abandoned - gagged and blindfolded by wooden boards - or inhabited by the kind of folks he had no intention of spending quality time with.

Some might say it was dangerous out here, at this time, and past experience had told him that it wasn't an unwise assertion. But for him, it was home, his haven. He didn't belong in the day, not that he knew why, he'd given up asking that question many years ago. Under the sun he felt dulled, slowed even, but by night, he felt alive.

## Chapter 2

He didn't remember falling asleep, not that it was a surprise at all. His mindless treks always took their toll, and tonight's near marathon was easily up there as a personal best. He never felt it at the time, but god did he feel it in the morning. Often he would sleep it off where he fell, but this time his rest had been interrupted. He woke up with a start, heart thudding in his chest.

It came again. What was it? A scream? Something else? He stood up and stretched tired limbs. He glanced at his watch. Four in the morning. Great. Another shriek came, this time from somewhere near the promenade. It wasn't a happy scream, like those of the drunk zigzagging their way home. He knew those well. This was different. Someone terrified.

It came again. Nearer this time. He pressed himself into the alcove, seeking solace in the shadows. As he watched, a young woman came hurtling round the corner at the bottom of the street. She fell once, knees scraping the pavement. She tried scrambling up but her legs kept slipping underneath her. Her breath puffed out clouds of cold mist as she dragged herself up the hill towards the church.

'Almost there...almost there.'

Her panicked mutterings drifted up the hill. She was

halfway up already, not fifty yards from where he crouched. She fell again, her face hitting the ground with a sick thud. Blood splattered the pavement. Something small and white clattered onto the road.

Screw this.

He dashed out of the alcove and raced across the road. Somehow the woman had managed to stumble to her feet again by the time he reached her. Standing upright, her gait unsteady, she took jerky, random steps forwards. A glazed look crossed her eyes, tiny pupils fixed at something beyond him. He slowed to a halt a few feet in front of her, eyes drawn to the vicious wound that stretched across her stomach, almost the width of her body. One hand covered the seeping lacerations, the other reached out before her, towards him, but focused on somewhere beyond. He swallowed down a hot gush of bile. How the hell was she still standing?

'Wait!'

Seb waved his arms to get her attention. She slowed, her head turning towards him. She blinked once before collapsing into his open arms, the impact making him stagger backwards. Her eyes found his, pupils darting in multiple directions, taking him in. Something seemed to register in her mind and she squirmed, arching her back in an attempt to escape his grasp.

'Let me go!' She hissed, trying to push him away but

collapsing back with a wince.

'No way. You need a paramedic or something. What the hell happened?'

She didn't respond. For a moment her eyes froze like a frightened animal. Then she blinked. Some semblance of awareness returned. Angry eyes locked on him.

'Lemme go!' she screamed, 'Lemme-fucking-go!'

She lashed out, the palm of her hand smashing into the side of his skull. He staggered, stunned, clutching his head as she stumbled past him towards the church.

'What the hell was that?' He followed her up the road, shaking his head, 'Miss, you need...'

If dread could be manifested as a force, he felt it then. A wave of *something* washed over him, as cold as death, stopping him in his tracks. His skin erupted in goose pimples, the air temperature dropping like a stone. Breath condensed in front of his face. The street lamps flickered. The woman obviously felt it too. They both turned to face the base of the hill.

'No. He's found me! He's found me!' she whimpered, her voice barely audible.

It didn't so much as walk out of the gloom, it oozed. Its form coalesced from the gloom, a slight shimmering in the air, a shifting of shadows, before condensing into something resembling a human that now stood, unmoving, just at the periphery of the



streetlight.

Yet this was no human.

Unnaturally tall, easily touching seven foot, the thing wore a pin-striped suit that hung loosely off a pencil-thin frame. Its head was dipped, face hidden beneath a black fedora with a single silver band. As he watched, the creature's head rose. Black eyes met his. Something cold trickled down his spine.

It began to move forwards, its step light, almost a jaunt. Its mouth opened into a wide grin, jaw distending to almost impossible proportions, baring a set of dagger-like incisors.

'You see it, don't you?'

He'd forgotten she was even there. He looked back at the woman, managing the barest of nods. She reached out to him, her hand shaking.

'Come with me.'

'What?' He mumbled, not able to take his eyes off the thing before him.

'Come on!'

She yanked his arm, jerking him back with a strength that belied the extent of her injuries.

'Oh Sarah, why do you run so?' the voice, like steel scraping steel, drifted up the hill.

'You should have known better than to run,' it continued,

the distance closing.

Seb stumbled backwards and fell. He'd never believed it when people said they'd been frozen with fear, but the phrase didn't do it justice. He was beyond paralyzed. His limbs simply absent passengers. The creature's gaze shifted to him then:

'And I see you've brought a friend?'

Shit.

The woman pulled at him again. Adrenalin filled numbed legs and he forced himself off the ground. They staggered towards the church, two strangers bound by fear. She collapsed against the door and slid down, her eyes rolling up in her head.

'No! No!' he said, shaking her by the shoulders. With his eyes off the creature it felt like some of the hold it had on him, like a predator on its prey, had been lifted. He caught her head as it rolled forward, her eyes staring beyond him, unfocused.

'Go...' she slurred, 'He doesn't...want...you.'

'Now, now, Sarah, you know I don't like it when you run.'  
The voice carried around the building, dancing in the air, taunting them.

Seb pushed against the door. It gave a bit but didn't open. The wood was rotten, the building abandoned for years. He stepped back and kicked. Something cracked inside the door frame.

'Just give up, Sarah, you know you can't escape.'

Footsteps scraped against tarmac. It was only feet away. He felt his mind squirming, trying to go somewhere safe, to lock itself away from the encroaching horror. He shook his head and kicked again. The door buckled. The lock shattered and the wooden barrier swung open with a painful creak. Sarah fell, hitting the floor with a thud. A groan escaped her lips.

Seb gripped her under her arms and dragged her inside. Slamming the door shut, he scanned the nave, spotting a handful of upturned pews stacked against the wall. He grabbed at the nearest by the edge but his palms were slick with sweat and the pew slipped free, crashing back onto the stone floor.

Footsteps on the path. A cheery whistle.

Come on! Come on!

He took a better grip this time and dragged it backwards. He manoeuvred it until the end pressed firmly against the flat of the door. He lurched back, arms screaming, flipping the other end so that the base was wedged against the font. It would have to do. He turned and hoisted Sarah up and dragged her towards the back of the church. They collapsed at the altar, her head on his chest. Her breathing was slow, irregular. His own heart crashed against his ribs.

'Knock, Knock'.

He pulled his knees up and buried his head in his hands. He

was going to die here, he knew that. He didn't know what this *thing* was. It looked like a man. Spoke the words of a man, but it was as inhuman as could be. He had never considered himself religious, but at that moment he resorted to the only thing he could think of, which was pretty apt, considering the location.

'Our Father...'

The chuckle from beyond the door sliced through him like blades.

'Your Father...'. The air shimmered again, by the door. The shadows swirled like Chinese dragons, the creature reforming on their side of the door. '...died a long time ago.'

Seb let out a wail and his chest began to heave in stricken sobs.

'No, no. Please, don't be sad.' It said.

It didn't walk. It simply drifted down the aisle towards them. It stopped not six foot away, head cocked to one side.

Sarah stirred. Her eyes flickered open.

The horror drifted closer. It loomed over them now. Seb looked down, staring at a pair of polished black loafers.

'Look at me.'

He didn't move. He forced his gaze towards the floor.

'Look. At. Me.'

Something in that voice compelled him. He tried with all his strength, the tendons in his neck straining. His temple

throbbed, but it was of no use. He felt his chin rising.

Those black eyes grinned down. Its teeth were bared, a sickening smell of rotten meat washing over him. A warm tear trickled down his cheek.

'Oh, is the little protector afraid?' the thing said, cocking its head to one side, a thin, tapered finger pressed against its black lips in mock concern.

'Fuck you,' Seb said.

The thing stopped in its tracks. It blinked, the lids coming from the sides, not top and bottom, causing Seb's stomach to heave. The creature's mouth formed a perfect 'o' as it took a mocking step backwards.

'My, my,' it whispered, the shock only momentary, that grin returning. 'We do have some spunk, don't we?'

Its hand delved into its sleeve, withdrawing a slender dagger. The blade was maroon, caked in dried blood. The creature *flowed* forwards again, fingers outstretched, the blade inverted, pointing down.

Here it comes. He pressed his head hard into his chest, eyes scrunched shut, wishing it would be over quickly. The smell of rot was overpowering, the stench washing over him in waves.

A sudden movement. Sarah. It was between her and himself, out of sight of the fiend. Something, a blade of some kind, glinted as she pulled it from her sleeve. Her eyes met his,

lucid this time. She gave a barely perceptible nod.

He leaned to one side as she lunged past him at speed. Her wrist flicked out, he heard a thunk, followed by a surprised gasp. He dared to open his eyes.

The creature had staggered back. Its black eyes wide, focused on the knife embedded in its chest. A brief feeling of elation flared as the thing gently touched the hilt, its finger tracing the blade up to where the metal vanished into its chest and a thick, viscous ooze had begun to seep out. Soundlessly, the creature toppled over.

'Your name.' Sarah whispered.

She didn't look good. Dark, almost black blood trickled from the side of her mouth.

'Your name!' she gasped.

'Seb.'

'Come closer, there isn't much time. The blade isn't runed. You know what we have to do.'

He shook his head. 'Runed? What? Sorry, I don't know what you mean.'

In the aisle, the thing twitched. A leg jerked.

'You weren't there by accident.' It wasn't a question.

'Yes. No. I mean. I don't know why I was there.'

'You were drawn. I can see it. You are Latent.'

'Listen, I don't -'

She grabbed him by the shirt, pulling him closer. Her breath smelled of copper.

'You must take what I've found,' her eyes rolled, her body sagging, he caught her just before she slumped back onto the stone. Her eyes refocused. 'Look at me.'

He forced himself to look at her. Her eyes were like pools of crystal, drawing him in. He felt the world drifting away.

Movement behind him. He glanced back. The thing's leg jerked again. One foot drew back, a knee rising, leather scraping on the floor.

No way! No fucking way!

It sat upright, the blade still stuck in its chest.

'Seb!'

Trembling, he forced his gaze away from the thing. He found her eyes again. Cold hands rose and gripped the sides of his face.

'See.' She whispered.

A searing light lanced through his mind. His brain burned as energy *poured* from her, a pure white blast of light that enveloped him completely.

As quickly as it started, it was over. He found himself sat on his backside, a jolt in his palms as he hit the floor. His head throbbed. White stars danced in his vision. He glanced down. Sarah stared past him, at peace.

From somewhere distant a siren shrieked, the increase in pitch telling him that help was coming. Never before had he been so relieved to hear the sound of officialdom. He staggered to his feet, unsure of what Sarah had done, but acutely aware that he once again had control of his limbs. He turned and froze.

In the aisle, the thing took hold of the blade in its chest, and with a slick, smooth manoeuvre that made Seb's stomach lurch, pulled it out without so much as a flinch. It wafted the blade under its nose, seemingly lost in the intricacy of the design.

Seb didn't need a second chance. He darted from the altar and vaulted over the upturned pews to the right of the fiend, where it still appeared rapt by the weapon in its grasp.

The door loomed before him. He cracked his knee on a pew and fell sprawling to the ground, his bottom teeth slicing into his top lip. Blood filled his mouth. He scrambled to his feet and threw himself against the door.

It didn't yield. His shoulder throbbed.

Behind him, he felt, rather than heard, the creature as its attention returned to him. Daring a look behind, he saw as it glanced at Sarah then back at him. Confusion passed across its face.

'What did she do?' it hissed, the sound nearly pinning him to the wall.



*Move Seb! Move!* He kicked the door again. Nothing. Then it hit him. The pew! He squatted, took the pew by the base where it was still wedged by the font, and hurled it to one side.

Movement behind him. A gap being closed.

The door opened to an explosion of blue flashing lights. A cacophony of commanding voices ordered him to do something, but they sounded far away, muffled.

He stepped out into the light, into freedom.

The pain that seared his back at that moment was unlike nothing he'd ever felt. A bone-cold presence pressed against him, that smell of death on his neck.

'Give me what is mine!' the voice muttered.

He looked down at his hip, where the tip of the blade now protruded. A growing spread of blood bloomed on his shirt. His knees began to give way.

'Step out of the church!'

The voice pierced the fugue, his conscious mind returning for one last hurrah.

It was a last, desperate action. The fiend pulled him backwards, into the church. The end was nigh, and part of him yearned for the release from this horror, but something, some last reserve he didn't know he had, did not give in so easily. Energy coursed through him, fight or flight, one last act of defiance before succumbing to the void.

Seb bent forwards, the blade slicing upwards further into his side. Fiery pain screamed. He tumbled forwards and fell into the light. He hit the ground and rolled onto his back. He saw the thing then, half merged with the shadows in the doorway. Its face fixed in a look of pure rage, its teeth bared, jaw distended. Then footsteps behind him. Shouts of alarm. Authority. The thing shrieked, but did not follow. It melted back into the shadows, the shriek burning his ears as the world faded into darkness.

The figure stood, watching silently from his vantage point on a nearby roof as the emergency services converged upon the young man that lay collapsed on the floor in the church doorway. He absently noted the shimmering mist that fled out of the back of the church, the daemon's mission failed. Turning back to the frenzy at the church, he cast out his limited *sense*, frowning at what he received.

'What is it?' Another man, clad in the same black attire, appeared at his side.

'I don't know. Maybe nothing.' He glanced up at the night, feeling the stirring of reality. It wasn't a good time to hang around. He nodded downwards, his men obeying without question. With one last look at the church, at the human survivor with the strange aura, Cade turned, and leapt off the building.

### Chapter 3

Sylph bit back a curse as the van hit another speed bump that cracked her head against the roof of the cramped vehicle. The others smirked but didn't dare comment. They knew better than that.

'How long?' She said.

Luchar checked his watch. 'Five minutes.'

She nodded and began checking the weapons hidden about her person for the fifth time.

'You going to tell us then?'

She stopped what she was doing and levelled her gaze at the speaker. Uroc, the biggest of the group, six foot five of muscle, stared back at her. Dumb eyes on a dumb face.

'Tell you what, Uroc?' She noticed and ignored Luchar's attempts to silence the brute. She placed a hand on the commander's arm, silencing him in an instant.

'What we're doin' 'ere, that's what.'

'You're here at the will of Master Marek, surely that's enough?' She said, her voice laced with steel.

'That lunatic? That makes me feel so much better.'

The van fell into a tense silence. The only noise the clatter as the vehicle trundled up the narrow road that led to their destination.

She had to act. Luchar was their commander, but he wouldn't bat an eyelid should one of his men get the wrong idea. *She died bravely, Master*, would be his report, after dumping her body in a layby somewhere. This was the problem with hired help. It was a no win. Either the mindless brutes of the sheol or paid thugs from the street. Neither was up to Balor's standards.

'I suggest, Uroc, that you get your mouth in order. Balor doesn't react kindly to those who disrespect his chosen.'

'Screw Balor! Screw your *cause*! I'm here for the money, nothing else. What's the deal with this Marek, anyway? Who the hell does he think he is? And what the hell is he doing with all those poor bast -'

Uroc's head snapped back as his nose exploded against his face. His eyes watered, wide with surprise as blood poured from the pulpy mess. Sylph stood before him, the torch she'd used to strike him held in one hand above his head.

'What the hell have you do -'

She struck him again, and again. His head cracked back against the inside of the van, bouncing back into another hit. A third and a fourth followed, until all the lights went out. Sylph sat back down and wiped the blood off the torch with a rag, ignoring the eyes that burned into her. When the impromptu weapon was clean, and the sick feeling in her gut had subsided, she raised her head and looked each of the team in the eye.

'Uroc is guilty of blasphemy against the Lord Balor and has paid the price for that.'

Silence. Some of them openly brimmed with fury, but thankfully none dared act. Not yet anyway.

'Luchar, you will be my eyes and ears on the outside. Give me ten minutes. If I'm not out by then you have permission to go back to Haven. Clear?'

'Crystal.'

'Good,' she said, already doubting they'd wait ten seconds after she left the van.

The van began to slow. The slat dividing the front with the passengers slid back and Moss peered through.

'We're here - what the hell!'

'Uroc has had a bit of an accident, Moss,' Sylph said, 'He may need medical attention, if it's not too late already.'

'Yes, Ma'am,' Moss stammered, a mix of confusion and fear on his face.

The van stopped. Paul jumped out of the passenger side and trudged round the back of the vehicle. The lock clicked and the rear door slid open. Sylph hopped out. A welcome breeze washed over her, removing the cloying scent of sweat that had filled the van.

'Test, Luchar.' She said.

Luchar, ever the professional, placed the earpiece in his

ear. 'One two, one two.'

'I hear you.'

She checked her gear one last time. Ideally she would've taken more; the small blades strapped against her wrists the only protection she could conceal in the loose outfit she wore. She checked the iron rods sewn into her sleeves, a last deterrent if a feral sheol made it through. She shook her head. It would have to do. Luchar leaned over and passed her the small rucksack that contained the essential items should things go belly up. He held the grip as she took hold, forcing her to look at him.

'What is it you're going to do, Sylph? Dead people don't talk.'

'You wouldn't understand.' She snapped the bag off him and slung it over her back. 'Remember,' she said.

'Ten minutes.'

'No more.'

They nodded at each other, and for a moment Sylph felt a twinge of guilt at the way she'd acted. Luchar was a good soldier, a loyal vassal. If he stayed strong perhaps he wouldn't even get possessed. Balor knows that they needed stable warriors as well as the mindless rabble that Marek seemed intent on employing. At the end of the day though Luchar was merely a foot soldier, an expendable in the war. She gave him a curt nod,

glanced one last time at the hostile faces in the rest of the group before setting off across the car park.

## Chapter 4

This was the life. Freedom. A chance to stretch her legs under an open sky. Sure, she was on a mission, one of utmost importance, but she was on her own for the first time in what felt like years, and it felt wonderful. She closed her eyes, mentally checking that her defences were up, hiding her from the prying eyes of the Magistracy or their allies. Satisfied, she looked up, ready for duty.

Marek's warnings rang loud in her mind as she approached the target, what the people of this Shard called a morgue. She had let him down once already, letting the traitor deceive her and escape with Balor's secrets. She'd deceived them all, Marek included. But she was Sylph's responsibility. Marek was understanding, but he was not weak. There wouldn't be a third chance.

*For Balor.*

As the distance to the building decreased, she *sensed* out, sending subtle waves through the building, letting them echo through the infrastructure before bouncing back to her. She smiled to herself as the images returned, hours of training paying off. Aside from the police officer at the entrance there were just three others in the building. All of them were fatigued, their minds dim. The officer at the front was more



alert than the rest, his mind, at least on a subconscious level, scanning the area for threats. Not that it mattered. He was no match for her.

She slowed as she walked up the path to the building. Luchar had favoured a more direct approach, overwhelming the building with force, slaying those who got in their way. Luchar was wrong, though, youthful eagerness and the desire to prove himself in front of his peers clouding his judgement. She had no time for the natives either, but they were still sentients, their right to life no less than the Balorans. No, she wouldn't take a life unless she absolutely had to. To hell with what the others thought.

Business time. She sauntered up the path, exaggerating the swing of her hips, giving the police officer a coy glance as she approached. She was attractive to the native males. Another weapon in her arsenal. No point letting any advantage go to waste.

The police officer's mind awoke as she came within a few feet of him. Good looks and a sexy walk weren't going to wash on this one so easily. His eyes didn't betray any alarm, but his mind was fully alert, his aura flaring as he stood to attention.

She *pushed* out, a subtle jab with the Weave, breaking his focus as she slowed to a stop in front of him.

'Hey, I'm just going in to collect some documents, left

them here earlier,' she said, putting on as demure a voice as she could manage without gagging.

The mental jab had disorientated him, just a little, enough to cause him to lose focus. It was an unconscious thing in most sentients, their bodies wired to autopilot for certain actions. It was in these moments, when their minds were blank, that they were most susceptible to influence.

'Sure, sure,' he said. His mind fluttered, trying to regain some composure. 'Where's your ID?'

It was an automatic response, and she flashed a blank card at him, jabbing again at the same time. He looked down. Looked up again. She tensed, a moment of indecision flashing across his face. She felt for one of her blades hidden in her sleeve, the weapon pressed reassuringly against her forearm. After a pause the police officer grunted, returning back to his semi-conscious state. She brushed past, letting out a relieved breath.

She entered into a small lobby. The air smelled of disinfectant. The walls were duck-egg blue. Cheap pictures, their images faded with time, hung all around, no doubt someone's attempt to put some life into this drab place.

The attendant behind the desk looked up in surprise as she approached. Before the woman could speak, Sylph *pushed* hard, her will overriding that of the woman in a heartbeat. There was only a modicum of resistance, with one Observer it was easy, the

Consensus weak. It was only when multiple Observers were involved that her powers were truly dimmed. If she played it right that situation wouldn't arise.

'The woman. Identified by the name Sarah. Homicide from the Roseacre Road killing. Where is she?' Sylph said.

'Downstairs, Room 2.' The woman replied, her eyes blank, staring forwards.

Sylph walked past, letting a fugue settle on the woman. She wouldn't come round for a few minutes, and would have no memory of what had transpired.

Sylph *sensed* again as she pushed open the double doors. Of the two remaining sentients in the building, one was upstairs, barely awake too, judging by the faint echo she received. The other was ahead of her, down the stairs, in the direction she was heading in.

She exited the stairwell and found herself in a long corridor with three doors on either side. She approached the door marked "2", noting that the remaining sentient was in this very room. Her curiosity pricked slightly as she approached. Now she was closer she could sense the person was awake and alert, using her will would be trickier on this one. She opened the door at pace.

'Who the hell are you?'

The man, dressed in a white lab coat, stood up from a

computer terminal as Sylph entered the room.

He was too alert already, too anxious. She had a good contact with the Weave right then but it wasn't sufficient to suppress the man's own reality. She had one option, a desperate action with little chance of success.

'Sorry, wrong room,' she turned about. She would hide, wait this one out. It was already late, experience telling her that even the most committed on this realm had to go home some time.

'Stop right there,' the man said.

She stopped and slowly turned. *Calm. Focus.*

'Who are you? Tell me now, or I'm calling security.'

Small in height, thin of frame. He wouldn't be any challenge. She could take him without having to resort to her blades if she was quick enough.

'You won't call anyone.'

Sylph took a step forward. She channelled; a subtle burst that would give her a split-second head start should she have to act.

'What the hell? You some kind of junkie? You don't scare me you crazy bitch.'

He did something then that caught her off guard. She'd assumed that he'd try and run past her in an attempt to rouse the alarm. What she didn't anticipate was that he'd smash the button on the wall that sent a siren blaring in the night.

Shit.

Sylph lunged forwards. The man had a brief second to recognise the movement before she was on him. One hand struck his throat, crushing his windpipe. Before he even had chance to register the blow a second strike hit him on the side of the temple, striking the vagus nerve. He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

'Shit!'

She pressed the alarm again, relieved when it fell silent. She stopped for a second, *sensing* out. It wasn't good. The police officer was moving through the building at pace.

'What the hell is going on?' Luchar's voice hissed in her earpiece, making her wince.

'Just be ready. I'm almost done.' She replied.

'Fucking hurry, you've stirred up a fricking hornet's nest!'

She muted him. She didn't need his shit right then. She needed focus, clarity.

Footsteps clattered outside the room. She moved to the door in a blur, power focused into her muscles and senses. The door opened and the police officer dashed inside, weapon drawn, some kind of stun gun.

'Steve? You okay? Steph saw something on the cam-'

The police officer saw her and spun on instinct, bringing

the weapon to bear. She ducked as the weapon discharged, sending an electrified dart smacking harmlessly into the wall. She came inside his arm and struck the fleshy inside with the back of her hand, the iron-lined sleeves producing a sickening crack as the officer's wrist broke, sending the weapon clattering to the ground. Before the man could even scream she drove her knee into his stomach. He doubled over. She channelled her strength and hurled him headfirst into the wall with a dull thud, cracking plaster. He collapsed into a heap on the floor.

Sylph hovered over the unconscious officer for a few heartbeats, watching as his unconscious aura settled into a dull blue. Satisfied that nothing could hijack this body, she turned back, ignoring the shrieks in her mind from the hovering sheol, the wraiths drawn by the sudden explosion of fear in the air.

'No, not here you don't.' She said out loud. 'Go back to the void where you came from.'

She *sensed* towards the lockers containing the held bodies. All but one returned a faint residue of the Weave, indicative of an imbued. Of the traitor. She yanked the locker open, drawing out the stretcher that contained a body wrapped in a zipped up bag. She turned on her earpiece as she unzipped the bag. She needed to know what was happening upstairs.

'...police are arriving!'

She shrugged off the growing urgency, what she had to do

next required concentration.

'Hold them, I need five minutes.'

'Shit, Sylph, we don't need this!'

'Five minutes!'

'Shit!'

Luchar looked at the rest of the team. All had heard the exchange with Sylph.

'You heard her, give her five minutes. Any longer and we're gone. Understood?'

The men exchanged knowing looks then nodded back at him. They kicked open the van doors and found themselves bathed in a plethora of red and blue lights.

Sylph unzipped the bag, revealing the traitor's ghostly face, forever locked in a thousand yard stare. The medical staff had done well on her body. She seemed serene, almost at peace.

*I hope wherever you are, you're suffering, Traitor.*

Something crashed to the floor upstairs as more law enforcement officials entered the building. She didn't have much time. Putting bitter memories of Sarah and her betrayal aside, she stood over the body, and gently, ever so gently, placed her thumbs against each open eye. She closed her own eyes then, focusing on the sensation of her chest rising up and down in

slow, measured breaths. She drew on the Weave, easing the subtle energy into her, careful not to overflow her own capabilities. The procedure was tricky, and she'd only done it once before, when Marek had shown her, yet she had to succeed on this occasion, the price of failure was too great.

Shouts from above. Voices coming closer. Gunshots from somewhere outside. Luchar was doing his bit at least.

Her senses tingled, electricity rippling through her, making her hairs stand on end. Her eyeballs twitched underneath the lids. Her muscles tensed like iron cords. The sensation rippled and multiplied, wave after wave of Weave-energy, building more and more each time.

'Down here! Someone came this way!'

Time was almost up. She unleashed the pent up energy within her, directing it through her arms into her hands, into the vessel that had once been her friend.

At first there was nothing. A wall of blackness, infinitely tall and wide. The cells of Sarah's body had been decaying for hours now, the ability to maintain and hold her own reality long gone. Yet, due to her Imbued nature, some vestigial energies would remain. A ghost in the shell. A shade of what she'd been. It was this that Sylph sought now, the last memories of a friend turned enemy.

'Got a contact on the basement floor. One heat signature in



the second room on the left.'

She focused, channelling her energies into a dense wedge. Then, with an exertion that nearly floored her, she *pushed*.

She was in.

'In here, in here! Get ready to breach!' Feet clattered outside. Weapon safety's being removed.

Images rose to her like ashes dancing above a fire. She glanced and discarded each in an instant, scanning hundreds of fleeting memories in the time it took her heart to beat just once.

The door kicked open. People entered the room, fanning out.

She had it. A face. A boy. *Clever bitch!* She took a mental image of the boy's face, memorising every detail, the clarity equal to any camera.

'Put your hands on your head. Drop to your knees. Do it. Do it now!'

Sylph opened her eyes.

Luchar cursed and floored the accelerator. Behind him Paul held the thrashing Moss, the younger man screaming in agony.

'Fuck! Fuck! They shot me!'

'Calm down you stupid shit, you're not going to die, okay?' Paul said, pinning Moss down and ripping open the flailing man's shirt.

'It still fucking hurts. Damn I wanna go back, I wanna stick that bastard for what he did.'

'Shut up, both of you! We're out of here. We've drawn too much attention to ourselves already.' Luchar said, eyeing the rear view mirror. They'd left survivors at the scene. At least eight dead. The response would be immediate. They had to get off-site before reinforcements arrived.

'What about Sylph?' Paul said.

'She can take care of herself.' Luchar said, swallowing down the sick feeling in his stomach. Marek would not be pleased, regardless of the fact they were only following orders.

'We're not waiting for her?'

Luchar whipped the van round a bend at high speed as another car crossed their path. The three men in the back slammed against the door. Paul grunted. Moss screamed.

*Just make it back.*

'Stay still! Don't move!'

Sylph obeyed the order, remaining as still as stone. The nearest police officer circled to one side, aiming a firearm at her head. She sensed another one coming up behind her, reaching for one of her wrists above her head. Behind him were two more, both on edge, both with weapons trained on her. She sensed something else too, a feral sheol, very close, Drawn to death

and violence like sharks to blood.

She had no choice now. She waited until the officer's fingers alighted upon her wrist, and acted.

Using the Weave in full force was not an option; their Consensus would not allow a sudden change in reality, so she used it subtly, as she'd been trained to. She channelled it to her arms and legs, increasing strength and speed. She funnelled it to her mind, enhancing synaptic function to the point that time slowed down compared to those around her.

She gripped the officer's wrist, twisting it hard, breaking bone, forcing him back as he howled in pain. Without looking, she lashed out sideways with her other hand, the one that held the knife in a reverse grip in her sleeve. The weapon flew like a dart, embedding itself to the hilt in the other officer's neck. The man sagged to his knees choking on his own blood.

The other two officers raised their weapons, their minds sending instructions to their muscles to pull the trigger, but they were slow, so slow, compared to her. She ripped the pistol from the still falling officer's holster, flicking off the safety and bringing it to bear in one smooth action. She snapped off two shots, each hitting their targets. The men were dead before they hit the ground.

She rounded on the one remaining officer. He kneeled before her, clutching his broken arm. He stared at her through his

visor, tear-filled eyes begging for mercy.

'Please, don't,' he said.

A shriek. A screech of nightmares. It howled in her ears, making her wince. The wraith coalesced behind the man, black eyes glinting across the Void.

She aimed the gun at the man.

'No. Please, no!'

'I'm sorry. I truly am.' Her hand shook. The pistol wobbled.

Confusion flashed across his eyes. Then the change began, the sheol diving into a mind paralysed by fear. His veins bulged as his hands raked against his helmet, nails breaking, smearing the visor in blood. The man's eyes scrunched shut as he let out a howl that was part human, part daemon. His eye reopened. Pools of black stared back at her.

'Back you go,' she said, and fired.

She shoved the pistol into the back of her pants and retrieved her knife from its last known location in the other officer's throat. She wiped it on his shirt before shoving it back into the sheath on her arm. She took a quick scan of the room, feeling no satisfaction in the kills, trying to seek assurance in the fact that the fate she'd given them was much better than the alternative.

Without a second look, her purpose served, Sylph left the

mortuary, heading for home.

## Chapter 5

Consciousness came slowly to Seb, in random fits and starts. It started with vague noises and half-formed words. Not quite understandable, but there nonetheless. He heard the words *condition* and *chances* several times. They never sounded positive.

One day, he opened his eyes. Only fleetingly. Unconsciousness wasn't quite ready to let him go just yet. A white room. A bed with metal bars at the end. Something large and grey by his side. A mask covered his mouth, pumping his chest with a cold and metallic-tasting gas.

He drifted back into unconsciousness.

Over time, the periods of wakefulness became more frequent. His memory returned, allowing him to add context to the sight before him. The room was in a hospital. Something large, scary and no doubt keeping him alive was hooked into his body at various entry points. The machine beeped and whirred with reassuring frequency.

The memory of that night was never far from his mind. The girl - Sarah, was that her name? That thing. That terrifying horror that killed her and gutted him. How he'd survived was beyond him. Had someone called the police? Someone on the road it must've been, although that was a surprise in itself. The

people of that neighbourhood hated authority in all its guises, the police being the top of the pile. Still, whatever had happened, he owed someone his life, he was grateful for that.

One morning, which he later found out was seven days after he was brought in, bleeding out and barely conscious, he awoke to find the mask had gone. The machine was still there, but most of the sensors and tubes were now detached. A drip hung high to his left, trickling god-knows-what chemicals into his body. He tried to sit up, but yelped and winced when he felt the stabbing pain in his side. He looked down at the thick bandage that covered his abdomen. The dressing had clearly been dressed that day, but already a faint patch of claret was staining the underneath.

'Good, you're awake.'

He looked up. A middle-aged Asian doctor was hovering at the edge of his head. His eyes peered over the tablet he held in his right hand.

'Am I in the Vic?' Seb said. Easing himself upright.

'Good, at least your memory is intact.' The doctor said with a professional smile. 'You had a quite a rough ride there.'

'Will I live?'

The doctor smiled again, an obviously well-practiced manoeuvre designed to put patients at ease. Seb found it was working and he didn't complain.

'I'd hope so, barring a meteorite striking the hospital from the heavens. You've received a deep wound to your side, but luckily it passed right through without hitting anything too valuable, purely tissue damage.'

'Thanks,' he said, and meant it. 'Thanks, Doctor?'

'Khan. And you're welcome. There's too much of these kinds of attacks going on in our streets. I'm just glad I'm able to help, not everyone is as lucky as you were.'

Doctor Khan smiled again, but the warmth had left his face. He seemed to remember himself after a moment. He keyed something into the tablet.

'Now you're awake, I was wondering if we could get some details from you. You had no ID on you, and we haven't been able to inform a next of kin.'

It was then that Seb noticed the two figures just outside the door. Great. Police.

Doctor Khan noticed his change in mood. He glanced at the door before stepping in front of the door, obscuring Seb's view of the two figures.

'The police,' he said. They have their own questions for you.' He looked down at him. 'When you're ready.'

Seb nodded. 'What do you need to know?'

'Let's start with your name, shall we?'

'Seb.'



'Seb?'

He paused. Doctor Khan looked again.

'Seb Wilkinson.'

'Age?'

'Twenty.'

'Address?'

'No fixed abode.'

'Nowhere? Not a hostel or shelter?'

'Nope,' he said, before adding, 'I like the streets.'

Doctor Khan nodded, that sad smile making another appearance.

'Is there someone we can notify that you're here?'

'No. No one.'

Seb gave him his best *no further comment* look. Doctor Khan seemed to get the message. He closed the cover on the tablet.

'That's all I need for now. But listen, Seb,' he said, lowering the tablet and resting his hands at the edge of the bed. *Hear it comes.* 'I don't want to preach. Everyone has the right to live their life the way they want, but there are people you know, people who can listen, who can help. You don't have to do this alone.'

It was the same speech he'd heard time and again. He didn't get angry anymore, what was the point? At least Khan seemed sincere rather than some of the box-ticking do-gooders he'd met

so many times before. He gave him his best, most thankful smile, 'Thanks, appreciate that,' he said.

Khan sighed, not convinced. 'Okay, Seb, a nurse will come to change your dressing shortly.' He looked back at the door.

'How do you feel about the police coming in? I can send them on their way if you want, until you're ready?'

'Thanks, Doctor, but send them in, I'll get it over with.'

'As long as you're sure?'

'I am.'

Doctor Khan opened the door and nodded to the officers outside. The two men stepped in. The first one, a tall man - although not as tall as that *thing* - spoke first.

'Hello...' He looked down at his own phablet. '...Seb. I'm Detective Inspector Woodbridge, this is Detective Sergeant Darnton,' he said, nodding to the younger man behind him.

'Hello, officers,' Seb said.

'I guess you know why we're here. Care to tell us about it?'

He told them pretty much everything. There was no point in holding back. He'd seen movies where people held back the truth, fearing that it made them look crazy, but that wasn't real life. He knew what he saw. He wasn't going to try and explain it away with rationalities. That was their job.

He told them of the thing. The fiend. He told them how it

oozed out of the shadows from nowhere. He told them of the black eyes, the terrifying, distended jaw. He told them of the blade that stuck Sarah stuck in its chest. The one it plucked out like it was nothing more than a toothpick. He told them all of it. He had to. Not for him. He didn't matter, he knew that. He was just another statistic in this town. He did it for her. For Sarah. He didn't know her from Adam, but somehow he just knew that she wasn't just another stray that had fallen through the cracks. She'd died protecting him and she deserved whatever he could give her.

The whole tale took barely ten minutes, but it felt like five times that. When he'd finished he collapsed back into the bed. His back was awash with sweat and a slight tremble had taken his hands.

The officers, to their credit, listened. They asked the right questions at the right time, nodded and murmured at logical pauses. They didn't crack a joke, raise an eyebrow or challenge his testimony. They qualified his description of the thing, right down to the dagger-teeth and massive oval eyes. They took it all down, noting it on their little pads.

'Thank you for this information, you've told us a great deal.'

'What about Sarah?' he asked, pulling the mask back on. The ordeal was taking its toll, sleep wasn't far away.

'What about Sarah?' Darnton said. The officers exchanged a troubled look.

'What is it?'

'Seb, other things have been happening, things that don't make sense at this time. Most of these we don't need to speak to you about, but one thing you should be aware of is that yesterday evening the mortuary where Sarah's body is being held was broken into.'

'What? Why is that relevant?'

'We would say it probably isn't, aside from the fact that whoever broke in seemed to have an interest in Sarah's corpse.'

Darnton shook his head, reading the expression that crossed Seb's face. 'No, not like that, but she was disturbed nonetheless. I know you don't have any prior associations with Sarah, but we feel it is best that a guard is placed by your room, just to be sure.'

Seb nodded. Nothing he'd heard made sense, and why should it? He was just the unlucky sod who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet why did he feel uneasy? There was something else, something he'd forgotten in his recollection that nagged at the back of his mind.

'Something the matter?'

'No. No, sorry, just taking it in.'

Woodbridge nodded, seemingly satisfied. He gave Darnton a

we're-getting-out-of-here look before turning back.

'That will be all for now, Mr Wilkinson. We may have some follow on questions, if that's ok?'

'It's not like I'll be jogging a marathon anytime soon,' he said, putting on his best insincere smile.

Woodbridge glanced at the growing blood patch. 'Quite,' he said, before turning towards the door, Darnton in tow.

Seb stared after them for a while, watching their silhouettes vanish out of sight beyond the window. Another shadow replaced them. Uniformed. His guard, he assumed. The officer took up position outside his room as the detectives' footsteps echoed down the corridor, fading away into silence. A chill took him, and he pulled the sheets up, although he knew it wasn't related to the temperature. The sun was setting, casting long shadows in the room. Previously, he'd welcomed the night. It was his domain, his sanctuary. All that had changed now though. With the night, this first night of awareness since he woke, he was acutely aware that it was out there, that thing of nightmares. He wondered if he would ever sleep again.

## Chapter 6

At some point he fell asleep. It was a restless slumber, his dreams haunted by images of that night. The shame of his inability to act was the worst. He didn't consider himself brave, but never before had he thought himself a coward. Yet, the girl had died, not giving up until the very end. He had whimpered. He had cried, and then he had nearly died himself.

He woke with a jolt, the image of those malice-filled eyes fading from his mind. His heart thumped like a jack hammer. He sat up straight and reached for the water by his bed. His mouth was parched and his head throbbed.

A noise outside caused him to pause, jug in mid pour. Had he imagined it? A trick of an overexcited mind? He forced the feeling down with a shake of his head. It was probably nothing, but he noted the location of the alarm by the bed all the same. He continued to pour.

Another noise. The squeak of trainers on the tiled floor. A voice sounded, first out of curiosity before rising into a shrill, brief scream that ended as quickly as it started.

*Oh God, not again!*

He grasped at the panic button. He pressed it once. Twice. Come on, come on. He pressed it a third time, dropping it to the floor as a shadow appeared at the window. He let out a groan,

barely a whimper, as the shadow shuffled towards the door. The handle turned with a squeak, the door drifting open.

A woman in a nurse's uniform ambled in, her stoop so severe they were almost bent double. That instinct flared again, the same sensation of dread as that night, not that he needed a sixth sense to recognise that this was another inhuman aberration. What the hell did they want with him? The woman ambled to a halt as the door closed shut behind her. She faced him side on, her head suddenly snapping in his direction with a sickening crack.

'Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!' He hammered at the alarm in his hand. Where the hell were they?

'Well, well. Look what we have here,' the woman cackled. Her hands were raised up to her chest, fingers bent forwards, wicked-looking nails curled down towards the ground. She turned to face him fully, her movement jerky, almost as if she were animated by invisible string.

Then he saw the eyes. Black as oil.

'Oh god!' Hot tears stung his cheeks. His mind seemed to retreat, trying to send him somewhere far away.

'Who are you trying to call?' The woman croaked, shuffling forwards. 'The nurse?' She stopped, holding up the badge on her tunic. 'Me?' she said, laughing, the noise like razor blades scraping stone.

He shook his head. This wasn't happening! This wasn't happening! He tried to back up in his bed but the pain screamed through him, pinning him in place. White spots exploded in his vision.

'Please, don't...' he managed to whimper.

'Oh don't worry, Dear,' she said, shuffling ever closer. 'I only need your heart. I don't know what's been given to you, but it will taste divine.'

She was almost on him when he noticed the shimmering in the air behind the woman. Something crackled. The shimmer behind the woman rippled outwards, like a pebble dropping in a pond. Another figure appeared, a shadow with two striking yellow eyes which stared at him from the dark.

The woman didn't seem to feel the arrival behind her, but she noticed the change in Seb's focus. She began to turn just as the shadow leapt, a dark blade flashing in the light as a gloved hand gripped her jaw, forcing it upright. The blade drew a line across her throat, black blood spewing forth. The woman looked simply bemused as she collapsed into a heap.

The shadow stepped forwards, entering the light of the lamp. It was a he, a young man, not far from his own age. The man's skin was pale, almost a translucent shade of grey. His lips were dark, the colour of ruby. It was the eyes that held him transfixed, though. They *stalked* him, taking in the scene



like a wolf stalking its prey.

'Are you okay?' The voice was slight, barely audible, a faint accent it.

Seb nodded, words beyond him.

'We need to go, there will be others.' The man glanced at the bandages covering Seb's stomach, at the ever growing patch of claret.

'I can't move, it's too much. The pain. I just can't.' He slumped back, dejected.

'Lay back. This won't take a moment.'

Before Seb could even react, the man took his blade and sliced up the bandage, cutting cleanly, the material falling to one side. A gauze covered the stitched wound. The man sheathed the dagger somewhere inside his tunic and took off his gloves. He took a small pouch from inside his sleeve and emptied the contents - a thick, black paste - into the palm of one hand. He clasped his hands together, rubbing them vigorously, the paste turning his skin a dull brown colour. He raised his hands up, palms facing downwards.

'This will hurt.'

He placed his hands on the wound.

It wasn't a lie. A scorching heat erupted from Seb's sternum, rippling outwards like waves of fire. He arched his back, trying to stifle a scream but failing, the noise

resounding down the hall beyond. The fire ebbed away quickly, leaving a dull ache at the wound.

'We could've done without that,' the man chastised. He stepped back. 'How does it feel?'

Seb blinked and let out a shaking breath. He looked down at the wound. The bleeding had stopped. An ugly black sludge covered the area now. Thin, dark lines spun away from the area like veins. He gingerly touched the area. Nothing. He touched it again. Still nothing. He dared to sit up right, and, aside from a slight tweak, he felt fine.

'What did you do?'

'You would describe it as a form of algae. It has unique healing and pain-killing properties.'

'You mean it's alive?' Seb said, swallowing something unpleasant that threatened to rush up his gullet.

'Sort of.' The man moved to the door, Seb noting the complete lack of sound he made. He crouched and leaned out into the hall. He scanned both ways before looking back.

'Come, we must hurry. More of them will be drawn to you.'

Seb felt like he was wading in treacle. He willed himself out of the bed and struggled to his feet. His mind, overwhelmed with so much information, much of it contrary to what he knew about the world, was on the brink of close down, of taking him into the same recesses of shock. Something deep down though, a

twinkling spark of resistance, wouldn't allow it. He focused on this, gaining strength from it. He had no idea what was going on, what he'd stumbled into, but he was alive, and on some insane level, following this killer seemed the best way of remaining in that state.

'Who are you?' He said as he joined the man at the door frame. He shot a look down the corridor, noting for the first time that the fluorescent lights were turned off, the only luminescence coming from emergency lights above the fire exits.

'Cade. You are Seb?'

Seb nodded. 'You're not human are you, neither was *that*?' He said, nodding to the still switching corpse on the floor.

'No, I'm not, not anymore, the woman too. She was human though, once. Tonight she was just a vessel for something else. Your people would call it a daemon, but they're known to my kind as the sheol.'

Seb opened his mouth to follow that up. He had so many questions, his mind a tumult of thoughts and emotions. A sharp look from Cade stilled that though.

'I know you have many questions. Answers will come, but for now, we must get you out of here. Something happened to you. Between you and Sarah. We don't know what it was, or why it was you, but something did, and we need to understand why. Now, follow me. We're not safe yet.'

They edged out into the corridor, Seb following Cade as he crept down the hall. The blade was drawn again, held in Cade's right hand, pommel forwards, blade facing back and pressed flat against his forearm. Seb noticed another blade now, a twin to the first, was held in Cade's other hand.

As they walked past the other rooms of the ward, Seb noticed a common feature. All the lights were out and all the beds were empty. They reached the reception. Seb nearly tripped as he saw the nurse sprawled over the counter, his neck twisted at an impossible angle.

'Where is everyone?' he whispered. 'The ward's empty.'

'You were put in here by the police as they thought you'd be safer off a public ward. You were a witness to a murder. The killer is still out there. This ward was re-arranged to accommodate you, and your guard.'

'Where is -' the words died in his throat as they rounded the corner beyond the reception. A mutilated police officer lay sprawled on the floor next to a vending machine. Still steaming coffee bloomed out across the floor.

'She did that?'

'She wasn't a she, she-'

Cade stopped, his head snapping towards the green door marked "Fire Exit". At the same time, Seb became aware of a new sensation, a strange crackling, like static. He rubbed his

fingers in his ears but the noise remained.

'What is that?'

Cade spared him a glance, a look of what appeared to be shock on his face. A noise from beyond the fire exit stole his attention, and he moved towards the door. As he neared the barrier, where whoever was coming up was just behind the door, he did something that caused Seb to freeze on the spot.

He vanished.

The door burst open. Two hospital porters stood there, mouths agape, arms hung low like apes. It was their eyes though that gave their true nature away. That and the fire-axe and knife that each welded.

'We wondered what had kept dear, sweet Mary. Now we know,' the orderly on the left snarled, drool pouring from his mouth. The other grunted, his face one that did not display any real intelligence. They both stepped forwards, lumbering towards him.

The air shimmered behind them. Cade appeared from the shadows. The blades flashed and the dumb one dropped like a stone. The other, the one who'd spoken, was quicker, and he whipped the axe round to face the danger, aiming a wild strike at where he anticipated his attacker's face would be. The axe fizzed but hit nothing but air. Cade dropped to a crouch, the movement preternaturally fast. He moved into the man, one dagger slamming into his stomach with such force that it lifted the

orderly off his feet. Momentum carried him forward and Cade was forced to let go of the dagger as he stumbled forwards. He spun about, putting himself between Seb and the orderly.

'You have no business here, *Brother*,' the orderly grunted, clutching the wound in his abdomen where black blood streamed forth, pooling on the floor by his feet.

Cade didn't respond. He merely maintained a ready pose, squatting close to the floor, the other dagger held forward, business end pointed at the orderly. Seb noticed that his free hand was reaching behind him, taking hold of something hidden in his tunic. His hand whipped, a blur, and something shiny flew out, striking the orderly in the throat. Blood poured freely as he collapsed to the floor.

Cade rose and retrieved the other dagger from the dead porter's stomach. He looked down, studying the man for a moment before taking a phone from his tunic.

'It's me,' he said, motioning for Seb to get up. 'I had to go in. They found him.'

Someone spoke back, their voice loud, animated.

'I don't know, all I do know is that he's lit up like a fucking Christmas tree. I need to get him to Skelwith.'

*Skelwith?*

That voice again, calmer, but still loud. Seb strained to hear with no luck.

'Understood. I'll need support. Anything in the area? Good. Let my father know, too.'

Whoever was on the other end of the line hung up. Cade slid the phone away and moved to the fire exit stairwell.

'Come on!'

They hurried through the door and down the stairs beyond. Cade kept slightly ahead, checking every corner, his yellow eyes scanning the gloom. Seb stayed back, clutching, more out of habit than need, the black mass on his stomach. It didn't hurt, only ached, the knowledge that something was feeding off his injury disconcerting to say the least.

They went through floor after floor, encountering no more of the things that had attacked them earlier. The lights on these levels were on, and Seb could hear the murmur of activity on each floor beyond the doors, the noise of nearby life making him feel more comfortable.

They arrived at the last door. "U1" was marked on the wall beside it. Cade kicked it open and they emerged into an underground car park. It was largely empty, save for a couple of vehicles stationed near to where they emerged. Cade headed towards a black Audi A4 that was parked nearest them. Seb followed.

The car beeped as they approached. Cade opened the back passenger side door and nodded inside.

'In.'

Seb ducked his head and jumped inside. The interior smelled new, fresh from the forecourt.

Cade got in and threw his sheathed weapons into the passenger seat. He dropped a coat over the top of them before gunning the engine. The car whipped round in reverse, the windscreen now facing the exit ramp.

'We're still a long way from safety. Keep your head down. It's not over yet.'

The engine roared and tires screeched as the car rocketed out into the night.



## Chapter 7

Cade frowned as the boy slumped into the back of the car. The salve would be wearing off soon and the mad dash through the hospital would begin to take its toll. In all honesty it was a surprise that he'd made it this far. Most of the Unaware would fall into insanity when exposed to what this one had been through. Many would simply become catatonic, their minds unable to cope with this new reality. Yet this one still held firm.

They reached the car park exit in seconds, a car horn blaring out as he cut someone up. They bounced over the speed bumps, skidding onto the side road that was thankfully devoid of any other traffic. Cade tried to sense as they drove. Nothing came back, but it didn't make him feel less uneasy. More sheol were no doubt on their way, the aura from the boy blazing away for all Aware to see. Like months to a flame they would come, and in greater numbers.

They reached a dual carriageway that forced a turn to the left. He slowed down now, feeding into the near-side lane that funnelled traffic away from the town centre. Blue flashes erupted ahead and two police cars raced in the opposite direction at high speed. Looked like some poor soul had found the bodies in the ward. He resisted the urge to put his foot down. No need to draw attention to them now. The sheol were one

thing but it still wasn't advisable to get the local law enforcement on their backs.

His phone blared to life on the passenger seat. He noted the caller, and then pressed receive on hands free.

'I hope you've got some good news,' he said.

'Depends what you mean by *good*,' Thomaz said, his heavy accent even harder to understand on the phone.

'Break it to me. I've got a passenger. A Latent.'

'Why? That's not your job.'

'No shit. I think they need to see this one. Anyway, what kind of welcome party have you arranged?'

'I've got four on route. They'll be at the exit in thirty minutes.'

'That's not good enough.'

'Tough shit. If you hadn't gone off like that then -'

Cade ended the call. He could do without the told-you-so right about now. With the sirens in the distance he floored the accelerator and slipped into the outside lane.

Screw patience.

They travelled down Newton Drive, towards Stanley Park. The park was a mass of shadowed trees and bushes in the dark, but the Way shone out like a beacon, firing a bright white column of light into the sky.

Almost there.

He *sensed* again as he rounded the bend that turned onto a little used side road that led to the park. Flickers here and there came back, but nothing coherent. He kept his probes gentle; sheol couldn't *sense*, but they could feel it when others scanned them if one wasn't careful.

He parked up at a small car park around the back of Stanley Park. It made the route back to the Way, hidden in the base of the clock tower, further than was ideal, but it gave them less chance of being spotted by any other being, be it human or Sheol.

'Seb, wake up.' He gave Seb a kick, the boy mumbling something that sounded vaguely like a curse. He kicked him again, hard.

'Ow!' Seb sat bolt upright, his face a mask of anger. His memory caught up with him and he visibly sank back into the car.

'Come on, we have to move.'

'Where are we going?'

'Out of here. To safety.'

To his credit, Seb climbed out of the car without further protest. He had to be terrified, worse even. Perhaps shock had kicked in, protecting his mind from what its senses were telling it. Maybe he was hoping it was just a dream, that he'd just wake up in a minute and all of this would be nothing but a nightmare.

*Tough luck, kid.*

They entered the park, keeping off the main road that led into the centre where the clock tower stood. They kept to the trees on the left, the elevated ground providing a vantage point to spy any potential Sheol before they could have chance to act.

They'd come a few hundred yards along the ridge, the trees thinning as the nearest building, a café by day, formed out of the gloom. Cade waved a hand, motioning Seb to keep low. He scanned the surroundings, his eyes providing a green-tinted night vision, the vista before him almost as clear as day. Nothing there. He cast his sense forward, straining it to its limits, but picked up nothing. He made as if to rise when he felt Seb move behind him.

'Hello there, fella, who're you with?' Seb said.

Cade spun round, blades out in a flash. A small dog, a terrier, was nuzzling the boy's hand. The boy returned the affection, stroking the animal into a frenzy.

'Seb,' Cade hissed, 'Come on, before...'

Too late.

'Ruffie? Ruffie?'

An elderly couple emerged from the gloom, their voice tinged with a vague sense of urgency. The woman smiled when she saw the dog rubbing Seb's hands. The man stopped, noticing Seb, before glancing up, seeing Cade as he squatted against the tree.

'Who are -'

Cade's sense flared. The man's aura snuffed out and was instantly replaced by a black cloud. Somewhere, in the gap between realities, he heard a scream. The change was almost instant.

The man froze in mid-sentence. His head twitched, cocking sideways. His arms snapped up, hands drawn up towards his chest as a guttural growl rumbled from his throat. He blinked once, his eyes turning black. He bared his teeth, raising clawed hands as he dropped to a squat.

The dog suddenly stopped its play and turned towards the possessed man. It growled in return before launching itself at the man as the woman began to scream. The sheol caught the animal in one hand, the poor creature wriggling in a futile gesture as razor-sharp talons tore through fur into soft flesh.

'Go.' Cade said.

'What, where?' Seb said, eyes wide, locked on the still twitching animal.

'Towards the tower! Now run!'

Cade didn't turn as the boy scrambled away. Instead he held his gaze on the sheol as it ripped the dog in half. The woman's cries had turned into a mindless babble now as she slumped to the floor.

The possessed man leapt at him without pause, staggering as

one of Cade's daggers found itself embedded in his throat. He spun wildly, clawing at the open wound as black ichor sprayed out in a grotesque fountain that covered the woman.

Without hesitating, Cade pivoted towards the woman, the gurgled growls that had suddenly replaced her terrified babbling telling him all he needed to know. She lunged forwards, leaping over the old man's twitching body. Cade tried to duck and roll, but his foot snagged on a tree root. He dropped to one knee as the sheol reached him, falling forwards and grunting in pain as she leapt over, nails the strength of steel raking his back. Rolling with the impact, he brought himself upright in a crouch, blades at the ready.

The woman was nowhere to be seen. He *sensed*, receiving nothing but scattered, fleeting pulses. She was around still, but not in their immediate vicinity. He staggered forwards, collecting his other blade from the dead possessed, which again resembled that of its host - an old man who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

'You're bleeding.'

Cade spun round. Seb stood at the edge of the clearing, leaning against a tree. His lips were pinched. His face locked in a pain-filled grimace.

'I'll live,' Cade said, telling a half truth. Already he could feel the poison at work in his system, a dull heat that

would only grow in intensity without treatment.

'How are you feeling, you don't look so good.' He said.

'I think that stuff you gave me is wearing off, it's starting to hurt like hell again.'

'It will, you need proper healing.' He wiped the black blood off his blade and sheathed it against his thigh. 'Come on, we're almost there.'

'Where?'

'Sanctuary.'

Seb grunted. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but his eyes glassed over and rolled up in his head. He slumped back, heading hitting the trunk with a thud.

'Shit.' Cade stepped forwards and hefted the kid onto his feet. He was going into shock. Without the treatment he would've been dead already, but it was a risk he had to take.

He doubted his father would see it that way.

Cade shrugged the thought from his mind and hefted Seb up so that his arm was swung over his own shoulder. Together they limped out into the open square.

They were halfway across when Cade's *sense* flared to life. He dropped Seb, catching him at the very last just before he hit the floor, letting him touch the ground gently.

The woman sheol burst out of the undergrowth, galloping towards them at high speed. She'd assumed a more feral form now,

running on all fours, extremities now morphed into wicked looking claws. Drool swung from her open mouth, where teeth, now elongated into sharp fangs, flashed in the moonlight.

Cade rushed forward to meet the charge. He feinted low as the beast barrelled towards him, the creature leaping high and right, straight into the blade in his off hand. The weapon ripped a hole in the beast's gut that sliced along its body in the opposite direction of its momentum. The sheol slid to a motionless heap several feet behind them, entrails spooled out across the floor.

Without pause, Cade hefted Seb up and half dragged, half carried him towards the exit. They were in sight of the Way now, the rune-covered door, invisible to the Unaware, glowing in the dark. The sight spurred him on, and they were near jogging speed when his sense flared again. What now? He cast a look behind them and saw a slight figure, clad all in black, racing towards them across the concrete. He dropped Seb against the door before banging three times.

'Open up for Danu's sake!'

Time was up. He turned back, ignoring the tingling in his shoulders from the poison. The figure was just feet away, their movements agile, almost cat-like. This was no sheol. The figure's right hand moved sharply. He ducked on instinct, pain flaring on his cheek as something sliced his skin and slammed



into the door by his head.

Cade raced to meet his opponent. Damned if he was going to fail now when sanctuary was so close. The shadow leapt up, drawing a short ninja-to sword from their back as they did so. He rolled forwards, under the attack, the shadow striking the ground where he'd stood with a dull clang.

Cade was up and on the attack in an instant. His blades danced before him, attacking high and low, probing for gaps in his opponent's defences. The warrior matched him for speed, but their strength was less than his. With every attack he pushed on, forcing the shadow back. Their blades clashed and clanged in the night, sparks flying as they danced around the open square.

A noise from the exit made him pause. Not another attacker? He glanced, just for a second, just enough to see the door opening and the welcome sight of his Brothers spilling out, just enough time for the shadow to catch him unawares.

His sense flared before his own physical senses made him aware. The sword lunged. He pushed one dagger up in a desperate attempt to parry that succeeded in pushing the tip of the sword away from his chest and into his shoulder. Pain exploded up his side. The shadow followed through but he twisted, ignoring the fire in his shoulder and chopping down with an iron-lined sleeve onto their wrist. Bone gave way and the shadow let out a yelp as they stumbled backwards.

'Cade! Eyes!'

He knew what was coming. Without thinking Cade threw himself to the floor, covering the unconscious Seb with his own body, readying himself for the feel of cold steel in his back.

The strike never came. From somewhere behind him came the familiar sound of a grenade launcher being armed. The shadow cursed just as the grenade launched with a loud *whoompf!*

The world exploded into a searing white light. Cade scrunched his eyes shut, waiting for the effect to pass. Seconds that felt a lifetime drifted by, the smell of the wet earth mixing with that of burning phosphorous.

'Clear!' Came a shout from the door.

Without a second thought, for he knew and trusted the source, Cade forced himself upright and staggered to the open door. He cast a last look at the square, noting with no small respect that no remains lay where the shadow had been seconds earlier. Strong hands grabbed him as stumbled in, dragging him into safety. Others rushed out and collected the boy. The door shut behind him, the air crackling with energy as ancient seals activated.

## Chapter 8

'...have brought him here...' The voice came from far away.

Seb's eyes flickered. He felt himself rising from a timeless void.

'...your father will...'

Images formed in his mind. Wicked, black eyed creatures. Daggers cutting flesh. His flesh.

'Will he live?' The voice was familiar. A face came to mind, pale, almost grey. Yellow eyes.

'Live?' An unfamiliar voice, older, gruffer. 'I'm surprised he's still alive as it is.'

'Me too, he's a tough one.'

'Tough, or just foolish.'

An image flashed across his mind. A terrifying visage, a contorted face of fangs, dripping with drool, the mouth wide open, exposing a bottomless pit of darkness. The dark swelled, encompassing everything.

He heard himself scream. Then silence.

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Seb opened his eyes, the effort painful, as if the lids were muscles atrophied from under use. He sat upright, noticing

straight away the absence of pain from his side. He glanced down, tentatively feeling the bare skin, the flesh now completely unblemished aside from a pale white line, barely an inch across.

'Stone me,' he said, pressing the scar, not quite believing what he saw.

He took a moment to scan the room. It was a simple place, more a dormitory really. Aside from the bed he was in there were several more arranged at regular intervals throughout the room. Next to his stood a chest of drawers with a jug of water and a half full glass on it.

He swung the sheets back and lowered his legs to a cold wooden floor. He stood, relishing the feeling of movement without pain, before striding to the small window.

Outside, dimmed in the fading light of a setting sun, lay a large lawn, expertly maintained, that extended far into the distance. Immediately before him, next to the building, was a gravelled drive which trailed off into a small copse to the far right. Beyond the lawn the grounds of the building became more unruly, with large bushes and shrubs competing with the lawn for dominance. Nature dominated by the farthest reaches, with a massive wall of conifers obscuring the hills that he could just about make out in the distance.

'A bit different to Blackpool, I presume?'

Seb spun round, his stomach knotting. Cade stood a foot inside the door that he now let shut behind him. Bruises covered his face and his right arm hung in a sling.

'Ever so slightly,' Seb said. He nodded towards Cade's arm, 'What happened?'

'It'll heal. It always takes longer when it's sheol poison.'

'Sheol?'

'I'll come to that.' Cade said. 'How about you, you feeling okay?'

Seb absently felt his side, nodding slowly. 'I think so,' he said. 'That black sludge?'

Cade smiled. 'The algae?'

'It's gone?'

Cade nodded. 'When there's no wound to heal it just dries up and drops off.'

'I thought it didn't heal? That it was just a temporary thing?'

Cade nodded. 'Correct. Once we got you here we had help from more *powerful* sources.'

Seb sat down on the bed, his legs suddenly feeling weak. 'You should market that stuff you know, it'd make a fortune.'

'I think we'd have a bit of a problem explaining where we source it from.'

Silence fell. Seb stared at the floor and shook his head, so many questions coming to mind.

'What happened to me, Cade?'

He was suddenly aware of tears filling his eyes, his voice sounding meek, almost child-like. He coughed, shaking his head again as he tried to swallow down the lump in his throat. He let out a long, drawn out breath.

'You okay?' Cade said.

'Yeah, yeah. You know, it's been a bit...stressful.'

'You're not kidding.' Cade nodded back to the door, 'You up for a walk? I'll see what I can fill you in on before you meet the Magister.'

'The who?'

Cade smiled. 'Come on.'

Seb followed in silence as they left the dormitory. They emerged into a wide corridor. A worn carpet filled the centre, leading towards a closed wooden door in the distance. Faded paintings hung on the walls, the kind sold for a tenner at a junk sale. The air smelled of damp.

'Where are we?'

'It's not really a simple answer.'

'Try me.'

'Geographically, we're just at the northern boundaries of the Lake District, not far from Carlisle.'

'Anywhere I've heard of?'

'Not really. You won't find this place on any map.'

'Why am I not surprised to hear that?'

The door at the far end opened as they arrived at it. A young man, probably about his own age, came the opposite way. The man was dressed in similar robes to his own, his face was caked in mud and something redder. Looking at him, their eyes meeting, Seb saw the dried blood caked around the man's eye, the socket puffed up. The man saw Cade and his head dropped instantly. He silently edged past them without saying a word.

'You going to tell me what that was about?' Seb said as they made their way down a wooden staircase that creaked with every step.

'Combat practice,' Cade said, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. 'I didn't think they still taught that to be honest.'

'Who don't?'

'Let's get outside first. This place makes me claustrophobic.'

They reached the bottom of the stairs. A heavy-looking set of large, wooden doors stood before them. Cade pushed them open as if they weighed nothing. They stepped out onto the gravel outside, Seb slowed, savouring the freshness that washed over him, breathing it in.

'Come on, you can get a good view from up here.'

Seb followed as they trudged up a set of slate steps that ascended a grass slope towards a stone gazebo at the top, the structure showing its age, cracked and worn by the elements.

The air was cooler up here, the chill nipped at him, but it was a good sensation that made him feel alert. As he looked at the emerging stars above, an endless blanket of twinkling lights, he suddenly realised he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

'It's amazing!'

'You haven't even looked behind you yet.'

Seb turned. His mouth dropped.

'What the hell, how is that even possible?'

They'd left a building of some kind, he was sure of that. A big one too, at least three floors. But then why, when he looked back down the path where they'd come, where the stone steps had seemingly morphed into rough, uneven rocks, did he now look at a crumbled ruin of stone and foliage?

'What the hell? That's not possible.'

'What do you see?'

He looked at Cade and then back again. 'Is that meant to be some kind of joke? I see a bloody ruin, that's what I see. But I know that can't be true. I just came from there.'

Cade nodded. 'Nope, it's true, that's what's there. At



least, that's what the Unaware see.'

'What?'

'Look again,' Cade said, nodding towards the ruin.

Seb looked, shaking his head. What kind of trip was this?

Yup, there it was. A ruin. A broken, knackered, stone ruin. What was he meant to be looking at? He opened his mouth to speak, 'I don't -'

Then it happened.

The view became smudged at first, like looking through a windscreen during a thunderstorm. He shook his head and blinked, but the distortion only grew. An uneasy feeling sprouted from his spine as pieces of the image began to change, ruined stone being replaced by solid slate, crumbling square holes suddenly making way for gleaming windows. The transformation continued for several seconds, the mirage peeling away, revealing a gothic looking mansion underneath.

'That's just...' Seb couldn't stop shaking his head, 'I don't know what that is.'

'Have a seat, Kid.'

Seb opened his mouth to protest. No way was he going to sit on that rough slab that had once passed as a seat. But the slab was gone. A burnished wooden bench stood in its place.

'Is this whole place just one big illusion?' He said, running his hands along the bench. It was definitely real.

'Like I said, to the Unaware it is. I've not seen the ruins for about seventy years.'

Seb collapsed onto the bench. 'Seventy years?'

Cade sat alongside him. 'Give or take a decade or so. It's hazy before I took the Oath.'

'You must have a damned good surgeon.'

Cade laughed at that. At least he had a sense of humour.

'So, are you going to let me in on what's going on?'

Cade nodded. 'Shortly, but first I need some information from you.'

'I'm not sure what I can tell you, but go ahead.'

'Why were you at the church that night?'

'I don't know really. I wonder about that a lot. The night. I like the night, always have.'

'But why the church?'

'Like I said, I don't know. I seem to get drawn to places. Nothing specific about them. They just seem to appeal, like, you know, on a subconscious level.'

Cade frowned, his eyes looking left and right as if mulling over something.

'Where else do you go? Can you name any other place you've been drawn to?'

'Interesting line of questioning.'

'It's important.' Cade said, the tone of his voice not

inviting any room for sarcasm.

'Okay, I'll play. Another one that always seems to get me is Bleasdale Circle.'

That made Cade sit up. 'The stones in Lancaster?'

'Like I said, I like to wander. Why, how is this relevant to what happened?'

'It just confirms my suspicions. You're drawn to his places as you're a Latent. The first test was testing if you could see Skelwith.'

'Skelwith?'

'The mansion. But those places are special. The church used to have an access point to a Way before it collapsed. Bleasedale's the same, although that one has been sealed for centuries. The Consensus is still weak there though, which is what's been drawing you in.'

Seb blinked and waved both hands up. 'Okay, now it's your turn. All I just heard was some crazy shit followed by a bit more crazy sprinkled on top.'

Cade laughed again. 'Fair enough. You're going to hear a lot more about this soon but let me give you an abridged version for now.'

'That'll do for now, anyway. I doubt my brain can take too much of this Matrix stuff today.'

'That analogy isn't too far off the mark.' Cade said. He

shifted round on the bench, his yellow eyes fixing Seb with a stare that made him uncomfortable.

'Right, Seb. Imagine that the world you know, this world, is just one of many realms that exist in one, massive reality.'

'A bit like the multiverse thing?' He said, smirking inwardly at the one random fact he could add to the discussion.

'Not quite. Take this one *universe*, as you call it. Imagine if that universe was shattered into several pieces. Where once civilisations existed side by side, they are now separated by vast distances of time and space.'

'Wow, this is getting heavy.' He said, pinching the sides of his brow.

'I won't go any further on that for now, brighter people than me will explain it better than I can. Just for now accept the premise that Earth exists in a fragment of an old universe. That this fragment is known as a Shard, and there exist many other fragments out there, also called Shards.'

Seb nodded slowly. Part of his mind, the part that worked with facts, with logic, told him that this was obviously bullshit. How could this guy know? This guy with the ninja skills and the yellow eyes? The same guy that had saved him from possessed people with blood like oil and eyes as black as night? He processed it over and over, and slowly his logical mind began to concede that perhaps this guy was worth listening to. Hell,

how else could he explain the mansion appearing trick?

'Okay, I'll accept that premise. I've heard something sort of similar before, so it's not too Twilight Zone just yet.'

'Give it time. That's just the tip of the iceberg.' Cade continued, 'Finally, imagine that the cause of this Sharding was a great war that ripped apart the very fabric of reality. Imagine that the survivors of this war fled the chaos that remained and found a new home in the Shard that was the furthest, most distant place away from the horror that remained. Imagine these beings lived amongst the natural inhabitants of that realm, hidden in plain sight, masking their true nature.'

'Earth, our universe,' Seb said, his eyes wide as his brain worked at a hundred miles an hour. 'That's the Shard. You, Sarah, those things. You're all part of the lot that came here?'

'You pick things up quick. Although not many of the originals are left. I was born a human, here, on earth, as are most of the other Aware. The sheol were here already, but not in the form or the number we know now.'

'The sheol?'

'Fiends. Daemons. No one knows where they came from. Some say it was one of the Shards, others from the Void itself. They are a lecture on their own, which we don't have time for right now.'

Someone appeared on the path in front of them. Seb jumped.

There was no way he'd just walked up there. The guy was in grey, same as Seb's smock. He stood out a mile against the gloom. How the hell had he not seen him?

'Master Cade, the Three are ready for the arrival.'

Cade nodded and rose as the man turned and began descending the path. 'Come on, it's time.'

'For what?' Seb said, that unease creeping back into his gut.

'To speak to those people brighter than me that I told you about.' Cade spoke in a light tone, but something else had crept into his voice.

'But there's still more. So much more. What about Sarah? Why did that thing kill her? And what the hell did she do to me?'

'In good time. For now rest assured that answers will come. You're safe here; I think you'll find answers to questions that you've had a lot longer than you think.'

Seb pondered those words as he stood. Cade started down the path.

'Thanks, by the way,' Seb said, just before they set off back. Cade stopped and looked back.

'What for?'

'Saving my life. I don't think I said it before. I'll pay you back for it one day, I promise.'

Cade nodded. 'I'll hold you to that.'

## Chapter 9

They moved round the front of the building, every step revealing more as the illusion peeled away piece by piece. Seb's mouth dropped the further they went, his eyes wide, drinking in the place as they moved about the perimeter.

Looking at Skelwith was like seeing the past smashed together with the present. On one side stood a massive church, the same one he'd seen ruined in the illusion. The church's walls were a washed out grey, with lichen and spores spotting the surface. Large cracks scored the brick, filled in and repaired over the centuries.

Attached to the church, where ancient walls met modern Lakeland slate, stood a more modern looking building altogether. Whilst still impressive, this mansion, painted all in pristine white, and easily five stories tall, dulled the romance of the place, as if the modern world were intruding on the area.

They continued along a winding track, stopping at regular intervals as wandering sheep blocked their path, absently chewing grass whilst staring back with dumb eyes. As they left one particular clearing Seb caught sight of a stone marked with strange runes that was almost invisible in the undergrowth. Looking closer, the stone loomed large, easily taller than himself. As he studied the runes he was sure some of them



flickered slightly, as if he should be seeing something else that his mind just couldn't quite process.

'What is this?' he said, reaching out, but not quite touching the stone.

'Wards. It's a construct designed to protect Skelwith from unwanted intruders.'

'What does it do?'

'It varies. At the Croft, where the Brotherhood is based and where there's a permanent garrison on site at all times, the wards are simply alarms designed to alert us if we have any uninvited guests.'

'And here?'

'Here, the wards do a similar thing, mainly alerting the Magistry in times of need. However they don't have the combat presence here, at least not anymore, so they have other protections also.'

'Who are the Magis - Oh.'

They'd rounded a tight bend in the path that angled downwards, twisting between two ancient oaks. Stood right before them, on either side of the path, were the statues of two stone warriors, the imposing structures easily the height of two men.

'What the hell are these?' Seb said, suddenly aware his voice had risen in pitch. He approached the nearest, the statue reminding of him a samurai in appearance.

'Sentinels. Stone statues imbued with the Weave by the first Magi to base here.'

Seb ran his hand over the stone. The warrior felt cold to the touch.

'You mean this actually moves?'

'I've never seen them move, but I do know that they are imbued with a very powerful and ancient magic. In times of need they can be called upon by the Magister to defend Skelwith.'

Seb shook his head, a smile forcing itself onto his face.

'What is it?'

'It all sounds so mad, all of it,' he said, waving a hand at the statue, the mansion and the forest all around. 'I should be trying to get out of here, probably calling the police or someone.'

'And why don't you?'

'I don't know. It's all mad, it really is. Yet, it just seems to make sense to me. As if I already know about this, but had just forgotten. Does that make sense?'

Cade smiled back, almost sadly, Seb thought. He nodded past the sentinels where the path opened out onto the lawn.

'I think it's time you met the Magister.'

## Chapter 10

The sun had set completely by the time they'd descended the steep path down to the gravelled area. Lanterns guided the way now, their flames burning an odd, purple colour.

They eventually arrived at a large archway that led into an equally imposing porch. Two guards, dressed in similar garb to Cade, stood on either side of the door. Both had firearms - automatic weapons - as well as swords strapped to their persons.

'They with you?' Seb whispered.

'There is a permanent contingent of the Brotherhood here. It is part of the Oath.'

Seb let the obvious question hang in the air and ducked past, avoiding those yellow eyes that followed him as he entered the building.

They emerged into a wide hallway. A smell of old mixed with polish hung in the air. The floor was a dark wood, and a thick carpet strip threaded with intricate patterns led straight ahead through a large arch. A broad staircase followed the far wall, curving round onto an interior balcony that looked down upon the entrance.

'Where is everyone?'

'Not many live here. Those that do will be on lights out by now. Aside from those who are waiting to meet the special guest,

of course.'

They moved on, walking through the open arch. A huge kitchen met them here. Empty though, like the rest of Skelwith. Further doors led out of the kitchen, but Cade angled right towards a closed set of double doors. Another Brotherhood warrior stood there, this one almost as wide as he was tall. He stood to attention as Cade approached.

'Brother Swift, I assume all are in attendance?' Cade said.

'Yes, Master Cade. All three.'

'And the mood?'

'Troubled, Sir.'

Cade nodded. 'As expected, then.'

Without a further word Cade pushed open the double doors. Seb gave a sheepish nod to Brother Swift before following inside.

They were in a lounge of sorts. Three sides were covered wall to wall in paintings of various size and shape. At the far side loomed a large open fire. Flames danced, casting shadows across the dimly lit room. A slight figure was stood by the fire. He turned as they entered, a smile breaking out across his face. The family resemblance was recognisable in an instant.

'Cade, my son!' The man raised his hands, beckoning Cade over.

'Stay here until instructed,' Cade whispered out of the

side of his mouth as he stepped away. Seb glanced either way, taking a welcome seat on a small chair located near the door.

Cade skirted a wide leather couch as he moved into the area before the fire. He returned his father's embrace. Inaudible words were exchanged between the two, then Cade turned to address someone sat on the sofa, out of sight to Seb. Eventually Cade looked back across. He beckoned Seb over.

Here we go.

Seb rose from the chair. Shit, why were his legs shaking? Come on, he thought, focus. He clenched and unclenched his fists, forcing out the tension. The walk across the room was like wading through mud.

'So, this is the young man you told us of?' Cade's father said, his yellow eyes glinting with an almost predatory zeal as Seb came to a halt.

'Yes, father. This is Seb. Seb, this is Silas, First Sword of the Brotherhood, and my father.'

Unsure of the correct greeting, Seb played it safe. He held out his hand, Silas gripping it in a blink. They shook, a brief one up, one down action. As their arms feel free, Seb flexed. Silas had a grip of iron.

'Behind you Seb you will also find Grand Magister Kenan and Lore Keeper Brun, leaders of the Magistracy and Lore Orders respectively.

Seb spun around to face the others. Magister Kenan was a woman, an old woman in fact. She was dressed in a simple purple dress that covered her from foot to neck, where a frilly collar flowered. Her face was scored in countless lines. Grey eyes, the colour of morning mist, stared back at him. Something washed through him, a chill that rocked him on his feet.

'Seb, it is good to meet you, we have listened with earnest at Cade's telling of your adventures.' Lore Keeper Brun was much younger, or at least he seemed it. Lightly tanned, his black hair had been swept back, revealing flecks of grey. The Lore Keeper had stood, a warm smile on his face as he held out a hand. Seb took it, grateful to be looking anywhere but the Magister. He winced as that wave hit him again. Could she read his thoughts?

'Good to meet you,' he replied, 'All of you,' he added, eager not to offend.

'Right, now that the pleasantries are out of the way. Let us get to business.'

Magister Kenan's voice had an edge of steel and dissolved any growing comfort in an instant. She looked at Cade first.

'Cade. The apostate. You have not updated me on the search. When will he be located?'

Cade's cheeks flushed a deep red for a second. His jaw tensed, and behind him, where only Seb could see, his hands

clenched into fists.

'He has not been found, Magister. My men are out constantly trying to ascertain his whereabouts.'

'And yet, they find nothing. Why is that, Third Sword, why is it that the Brotherhood seems to fail us once again?'

Cade's knuckles had turned white. Muscles tensed in his jaw as seconds of pure awkwardness passed.

'We are doing all we can, Magister. However the apostate is very skilled. He always seems to be one step ahead of us. Perhaps, if we could have some assistance from the Magistracy -'

'What? Sully our hands with this kind of work?' The Magister leaned forwards, her grey eyes fixed on Cade. The room seemed to shrink in size. 'This *incident* is the responsibility of the Brotherhood to resolve. Now find the apostate and ensure he is purged before he can do any more damage to the Consensus. If you feel this is beyond you I am sure Silas can find a more fitting candidate for Third Sword, son or not.'

Cade simply stared. His hands were clasped behind him, gripping his belt. A vein pulsed in the side of his neck. When he finally opened his mouth as if to reply, Seb flinched, afraid of where this was leading.

Thankfully it was Silas that interjected.

'There is no need to review the current arrangement, Magister,' the First Sword said, a subtle arm raised in Cade's

direction, the warrior's mouth closing into a thin line. 'I will personally review the current activities and ensure the Third Sword gets the resources he requires.'

Silas nodded towards the door. Cade gave a curt nod before turning and marching towards it. Seb tried to catch his eye as he went, but the look of fury there forced him to look down.

'Now, let me see this young Latent,' the Magister said, her mood audibly lifting. 'Come here, boy, don't be afraid.'

Seb shuffled in front of the fire, suddenly feeling like a piece of livestock at a farm auction.

'He *is* a Latent.' Lore Keeper Brun said.

'Of course he is. He's blazing away like a furnace. That needs to stop right away.'

Something happened in the air. He couldn't see nor hear anything, only a sensation of being subtly *pushed*. He closed his eyes as a coldness fell over his mind and sent a shiver down his back. The uncomfortable feeling evaporated away quickly. He shuddered and opened his eyes again. The Magister was smiling at him.

'That's better, much better. Perhaps now I won't get a migraine every time I look at you.'

'So, Cade has told us much about what transpired recently. For what it's worth I would like to apologise what you've been through.'



'I'm just glad to be in once piece.' He said, 'I owe Cade my life.'

The Magister scowled and he was sure he caught sight of a wry smirk on Silas' face.

'What I do want to know is about you, Seb. There is much puzzlement surrounding you.'

'Why? I'm no one special.'

'No, you are not, at least not to the Latent, however the fact you've existed so long amongst the Unaware without our knowledge is astounding.'

Seb shrugged. 'I'm not sure what to say. I've never felt different or anything, aside from what I told Cade, about going to certain places.'

'Perhaps that is why. Perhaps your link to the Weave is very weak, hence it passed our detection.'

The Magister fell silent. The only sound being the crackling from the fire. She nodded to herself, her fingers pressed against her lips. Eventually, she looked back up.

'Your parents. Tell me about them.'

'There's nothing to tell. I've been in foster care from being a baby. When I was old enough I got out. I've been flitting between bed sits, couches and hostels ever since.'

The Magister shook her head, her mouth open in what he was sure was fake dismay. When she spoke again it did nothing to

change his opinion. 'You poor, poor child. No one should have to live such an existence, especially one as rare as you.'

'What can I say, I'm not exactly unique. There are plenty of others like me.'

Those grey eyes glinted. 'No, there are not plenty of others like you. You are Latent. Weak, perhaps, but Latent none the less. I don't know how you slipped through the cracks but you will not do so again. You are a child of Danu, and for that fact at least, you will remain with us.'

'What, you mean you want me to stay?' He searched across the faces of the group, unsure how this was playing out.

'Not want, that implies you have a choice in the matter,' the Magister said. 'You will stay. Latent magi found outside of the Families are rare, most likely the result of some bastard siring many years past but still, you are precious and are to be taken in by the Magistry so that you may develop to your full potential.'

'I'm sorry, this is losing me,' he said. 'A magi?'

'The magi, of which I am one,' the Magister began, 'Are rare Latents who command the ability to change the Consensus.'

Lore Keeper read his blank expression perfectly. His tanned face broke into a warm smile as he burst out laughing.

'Magister Kenan, you are bamboozling the poor boy,' he said. He motioned for Seb to sit in an empty armchair near the

fire.

'This concept is key, Seb. Understand this true, fundamental fact, and the rest is just built upon those foundations.' He said.

Seb nodded. He shut down the rest of his mind, the part that was churning through hundreds of questions a second.

'The world in which you live. This universe, this Shard. All Shards. They are simply energy, manifested in separate forms. You see a chair, or a star. They are vastly different at a macroscopic level, but deep down, at the bottom level, they are all made of the same stuff.'

'Star-stuff?' he said, the word coming from somewhere he couldn't quite remember.

'Exactly! Exactly that!' Lore Keeper Brun said. 'Now, our senses. What we see, hear and touch. What we smell and taste. These are just instruments translating that energy into a form that our minds can understand. Reality is literally what we experience via these senses.'

'Okay,' he said, the word being drawn out into a drawl. His jaw was dropping, and perhaps some drool was seeping out too. He slammed his mouth shut, hoping that he didn't look too much like a complete buffoon.

'Keep with me now. You will learn more of this, much more, but for now you need to understand the one truth.'

'I'm listening.'

'Imagine if there existed a way to interact with the energy that underpinned reality. Imagine that certain races had harnessed this power and could use it for their own gains.'

Seb frowned. 'What, you're saying that you can change reality?'

The Magister nodded. 'It's simplifying it a great deal, but in summary, yes. All Latents are aware of this energy, the Weave, as it's called, at some level, but only the magi have studied it to such a degree that they can actually use and harness its power.'

Seb sat back, the large chair nearly swallowing him whole.

'Wow, just wow.' A tiredness had hit him like a hammer. He tried to blink away the fatigue, his eyelids leaden.

'I think that's probably enough for today, don't you think?' Brun said, putting his mug down on the table. Seb liked him already.

'Wait, what about Sarah? What about what she did to me?'

The Magister rose, her speed belying her frail frame. 'Come here, child. Let me see.'

He stood and edged forwards. An urge churned in his gut, telling him to run, to get out of there whilst he still had his faculties. Yet something deep down, either his own curiosity or his need to belong, compelled him towards her.

'Don't be afraid, child, this won't hurt.'

They stood a foot apart. The Magister raised her hands and placed them on either side of his face. Her skin was almost scorching to the touch. She closed her eyes, her lips making tiny, almost imperceptible movements.

The room vanished. Around him was a darkened street. The sporadic light from a series of decrepit lamp posts illuminated the road at random intervals. Houses lined the far side, their forms shrouded in gloom. He glanced above, knowing what he would see already, his gut churning.

The church.

The sound of running. Panicked breaths. A cheery whistle that chilled him to the core.

No, not again!

'What are you doing?' He said, his voice echoing round the street.

'Don't worry Seb, this isn't real. I am accessing your memories. You can come to no harm here.' The Magister's voice came from all around, resonating as if from a loud speaker.

The image changed. They were running up the hill, him and Sarah together. The fiend loomed close behind. A door exploded inwards. They were in the church now, Seb dragging Sarah to the altar. A scream. He looked down, Sarah lying in his arms, her blue eyes fixed on him. Someone moved behind them. She opened

her mouth. Light exploded, searing his mind.

The image vanished and Seb fell backwards, landing in the armchair. Lingered memories faded away. The Magister loomed over him.

'Are you okay, child?' She said. She reached down and took his arm. She pulled him upright, her strength belying her size.

'I think so,' he said. His legs felt hollow and his arms shook. 'What did you see?'

'It's not clear,' the Magister said after a pause. 'I need to consult with my colleagues here. She passed something to you, a memory of her own, but it is locked somehow, sealed from my sight.'

'So what does it mean?'

'It means, young man that this meeting is over. We will consult again, in time. For now, Don here will escort you back to your lodgings.'

The Magister indicated a heavy-set man that had appeared, unannounced by the door. For a moment Seb was torn between learning more and getting some much needed rest. Physical needs won out almost instantly. He gave the Magister a brief nod before filing out of the lounge.

The group sat in silence for several minutes after Seb had left.

Both men focused on the Magister, concern etched on their faces

for the woman who now seemed to be feeling her eight hundred years.

Eventually, the Magister opened her eyes.

'It is Runic Script of some kind, locked in a pattern I'm not familiar with. It's powered by the boy's own ignorance of the Weave.'

'What, you mean, if he was connected to the Weave more, then you'd be able to read it?' Silas said, his yellow eyes wide. 'Until then it's completely locked away?'

'His own ignorance is the lock that seals it. It is beyond my power to simply remove.'

Brun frowned. 'That's a complex pattern, how would Sarah even know of it?'

'She was a resourceful girl, trained to adapt at will, who knows what skills she'd picked up over there.' Silas said.

'Regardless of that, the question remains. Is it important, and what do we do?' Brun said.

'It is simple, Brun, Silas,' the Magister said, rising again, the two men rushing to help her. 'Is it important? I don't know. I doubt it, in all honesty. Nothing has been communicated to me by the other Families, so I'm assuming it is simply a reconnaissance mission gone wrong.'

'What I do know is that this is an excellent opportunity for us to gain some much needed favour with the Families. If

Sarah had something of value, and now she has passed it to young Seb. It is fortuitous, but we shouldn't let that change our path. We must find out what she'd uncovered, and hence to do that we must train him. Only with mastery of the Weave will the lock on the boy's mind be removed.'

'So he is trained? Here?' Brun said, an eyebrow raised.

'Well, obviously he must not be integrated. He is not of the blood. He cannot mix with the other acolytes. No, we will appoint him a trainer more appropriate to his status. 'And when he is at the required level, we will extract the information we need.'

'What about protection? The sheol seem to be drawn to him. *Marek's* forces seem drawn to him. Is it wise to allow him to be so far from our core?'

'I would not worry about that,' Silas said, suddenly joining the conversation. 'The sheol attention was simply the aura the boy was projecting. We all could see it. The sheol were drawn to him, there is nothing more to it than that.'

'Are you saying he needs no protection at all, Silas?' The Magister said, her tone dripping in disbelief.

Silas raised both hands. 'Of course not. I am merely stating that we should not get carried away here. I will assign some of my forces to keep an eye on him, and his trainer, assuming it is whom I think you will be using for this task.'



The Magister nodded slowly. 'Agreed.'

'And the boy, when this is done, will he remain? Without a Family to take him in?' Lore Keeper Brun said.

'He should not. There is no position for him.'

'No,' Brun said. 'But an exception has been made before.'

'Caleb made himself useful. It made sense to keep him.'

'Caleb won't be around forever.'

The Magister waved a hand. 'I won't make a decision now. If he learns well, makes himself useful, then perhaps we may find a way. But if not, if the only purpose he serves is to be the carrier of a message from one of our dead kin, then he will be purged. The Magistry has no need for any further controversies and I will not waste a moment mourning his passing.'

## Chapter 11

Just over a week after she'd emerged from the mortuary to a scene of carnage, Sylph found herself trudging through a dense wood. Her head hung low and she clutched one arm with the other as she walked, one foot in front of the other, the mud sucking and pulling on her feet, her muscles burning with every step.

Luchar and the team had left a blood bath behind them. Eight casualties had lain strewn across the car park. More of the authorities had turned up as she'd studied the massacre, arriving in a blaze of sirens and blue sights. She had fled the scene, vanishing into the shadows before she was detected.

For days she'd remained, hiding in the day, hunting at night. She should've gone back straight away, to deliver the memories to Marek, but something was different in the air. A disturbance in the Weave had occurred, drawing feral sheol from miles around. Against her better instincts, she had remained.

Drawn by the same disturbance that lured the sheol she'd found herself staring at the enemy, a warrior of the Brotherhood trying to fight his way back to sanctuary. She'd been careless and attacked without thought, and now she carried the result of that recklessness with the fractured arm she now cradled against her chest.

From the park she had fled, only stopping when her lungs

burned and her muscles screamed. Darkness was her guardian, and under its watchful gaze she had travelled many miles on foot, keeping to the shadows, a speedy phantom that blurred past those denizens of the town that called that time of night their home.

Now free from town she marched across an open field towards an isolated house she'd spotted on the horizon. The comforting cloak of night was receding now, and already a veil of pink was creeping across the sky. Birds tweeted as she walked, sensing the arrival of a new day.

No doubt Luchar and the rest of them were back at Haven by now. They hadn't waited for her, not that she had expected them to. The longer they were above ground the greater the risk, the greater the chances of detection by the Brotherhood. This didn't bother her. What did increase her unease was that with the birth of a new day, as the sun began its rise into the sky, she could feel her own strength, her connection with the Weave weakening. By night, when darkness came and imaginations were prone to random wandering, was when Observers were most susceptible. Things could be explained away as something in the shadows or a trick of the mind. At night, her strength was great. By day, it waned.

She risked a *sense* as she approached the farmhouse from the field at the back. She kept it gentle, eager not to attract the attention of any Aware, even though the risk was slight. The

echoes came back instantly. Three. Two adults and one child. She cursed when she turned her attention to the barn that stood near the main house. She couldn't see it, but she felt the keen senses of an animal, some kind of dog.

She crept up to the barn. The progress was slow, almost painful. She never made a sound, measuring each footstep, placing the front of her foot down first, feeling the earth, before pushing on with the rest of her weight. The wind was in her favour, blowing towards her, keeping her scent away from the animal. She made her way round the exterior of the barn, casting quick glances through the plentiful cracks and gaps in the corrugated iron, trying to spot her target.

Peering round the barn door, where hay was piled high in massive bales all the way to the roof, she saw it, an elderly German Shepherd, fast asleep. The opportunity was too good to miss. She didn't relish taking the life of the animal, it was an innocent, unknowing of the cause, but by its existence it was a threat to her, and hence a threat to the mission. She crept up to the sleeping animal, knife held in a killing position.

A sound from inside the barn made her pause. She peered into the gloom, her enhanced vision seeing nothing but the hay bales retreating back into the dark. She became aware then of the sound of her own heart, thudding against her ribs. Her stomach felt light, almost airy, and her palms had grown moist

with sweat. It was a peculiar emotion. She didn't know fear, Marek's teachings had hammered that from her, but the by-product, the sensation of prey or predator, still remained.

The dog snorted and she leapt back, nearly dropping the blade. Her injured arm flared with the sudden movement. A noise came again. Nearer this time. She heard the patter of paw on stone. She glanced down; the other dog was still sleeping.

What had she missed?

They emerged from the gloom, walking out from between two hay bales. Two dogs. German Shepherds like the old one, but younger, fitter. They stopped when they saw her.

She thought of running then, but already the collective oppression of the observers in the area was dampening her abilities. Her sense, her keenest skill, had faded away to almost nothing. Her strength, imbued with all the energy she could muster, did not feel any different, no more enhanced than anyone else in this world. Light was coming, and with it any advantage she had was lost.

The dogs' demeanour changed in an instant. They dropped low, teeth bared and ears flat. In unison they uttered a guttural growl as they edged closer towards her.

Something growled next to her. She stumbled and spun round. The other dog was awake now, a primal instinct uniting the three. She edged backwards, one good arm held forward, holding

her knife.

The two younger dogs leapt at her. They were just yards from her, and would cover the distance in seconds, but first she took care of the threat closest to hand. She plunged the knife down, deep into the older dog's skull, just as it made to lunge at her leg. The beast fell silent, but the knife wouldn't budge.

They were on her in an instant, barking and growling as they launched themselves at her arms and face. She half fell, half rolled backwards, allowing one of the dogs to fly right over her. The other one, quicker, more intelligent than its sibling, skidded to a halt and snapped at her, teeth piercing the flesh in her wrist as she pulled away. The dog lunged again, but this time she was prepared. She took the hit, wincing as teeth sank through the thin tunic she wore and into her flesh, tearing muscle. She twisted inwards, using her own body weight to push the dog towards the ground. Ignoring the fire in her arm and the dog's manic snapping of jaw, she tightened her grip, then, with her free hand, smashed the dog in the side of the head with all she had.

The dog fell away with a whimper and her arm was free. She barely had time to readjust when the other one pounced, jaw wide, aiming straight for her throat. She twisted, rolled, bringing her arms up and round the dog from behind as it flew past her. They crashed to the floor, the dog biting at thin air.

The advantage was with her now, and she kept her body weight on the dog from behind. She tensed her biceps, locking the animal in one position, keeping the lethal teeth at bay. Then, with the immediate danger averted, she squeezed.

'Steve? Steve?' Janice Green elbowed her husband.

'What? Oh sorry,' he mumbled, before turning onto his other side, away from her.

No! You're not snoring you daft sod. I heard something. Outside.'

Steve sat upright in an instant, the fugue of sleep evaporating with a surge of adrenalin. The Green family had been victim to a handful of burglaries over the last year, most of them trying, and failing, to steal some of the equipment he had on the farm. The last time though they'd succeeded, and several grands worth of gear were stolen. The insurance hadn't paid up, saying that the barn was insufficiently protected from thieves, and the Green's had nearly gone bankrupt. The day after Steve had bought two more dogs and a Perazzi over and under shotgun with enough shells to survive a zombie apocalypse.

'The dogs aren't barking.' He said, struggling to put his jeans on from their position on the floor.

'They were for a time. Then they made some horrible noises. Steve, I think someone's done something...' Janice's voice

trailed off into a sob. To Steve, the dogs were tools, cheap security, but to his wife and daughter had taken a shine to the animals, especially Glenda, the eldest of the three.

'Get Annabelle, stay in here and lock the door.'

He unlocked the cabinet that stood at the foot of the bed and took out the Perazzi. He cracked it open, verifying that there were two rounds already in the barrel. He swiped a handful of shells from the box in the cabinet before moving to the door. He looked back at his wife, the door half open in his hand.

'If I'm not back in ten minutes. Call the police.'

Janice nodded through tear-filled eyes.

Steve left and closed the door behind him.

Steve Green didn't consider himself a cowardly man, and in fact in his younger days he'd been the first to charge into a ruck, his mates always backing him up if required. They were the Spartans of their generation, always seeking the bigger group, the harder blokes. Sure they got their share of kickings and loose teeth, but boy didn't they have fun times.

Today's Steve wasn't the Steve of twenty years ago though. He was heavier, slower. He knew how short life could be, how precarious we sit on the precipice, where one wrong move could spell nothing but the void for us and heartache for those who love us. He had a wife. A child. He didn't want to die. Yet as



he left the house, approaching the barn where the dogs had gone ominously silent, he couldn't shake off the dread that the void was near, and he was about to fall.

He circled round the yard, keeping to the comforting glare of the security lamp as he rounded on the open barn. It took him a moment to realise what he was looking at when he took in the sight at Glenda's kennel, and as his brain processed what his eyes had seen, he dropped to his knees, acid vomit shooting up his gullet.

'Glenda, no,' he moaned. He tried to shut his mind to the image he'd seen, the blood pooling from Glenda's motionless body, her eyes empty, far away. He scrunched his eyes shut, trying to force away the memory, of Timon and Pumba, still on the ground, near their mother.

His eyes widened. The barrel of the gun rose.

She was squatted on the ground, a picture of horror. Blood poured down the side of her face. One arm hung limply by her side, the material of her tunic torn and matted with something dark.

*Good girls*, he thought, to whoever had inflicted the damage.

The woman stared at him. She was small, almost elfin. A far away part of his mind thought she'd be attractive if she wasn't covered in gore. Yet another part of him, the part of him that

was connected to the Weave but without his conscious knowledge, told him that this woman not of this world. She was an alien, an abnormality, and utterly lethal.

He raised the gun, sighting down the barrel. The woman brought up something in her free arm, an item half-covered in dark liquid that glinted in the light from the security lamp.

His brain sent a signal to his nerves. The electrical impulse travelled to his muscles, terminating at his fingertips, telling the muscle there to contract, pulling the trigger. The signal was halfway down his arm when the blade, hurled with inhuman accuracy, sliced through his shoulder, cutting through muscle, sinew and nerve endings as if there was nothing even there. Fire exploded in his side as he dropped to his rump on the ground, the shotgun clattering to the floor, out of reach. His arm hung, lifeless by his side, blood pumping out of the open wound.

The woman limped over towards him. He watched her through blurred vision, already his consciousness circling the drain of awareness. The woman kicked the gun away and plucked the knife out of his shoulder, sending a fresh wave of agony through his body.

'I could kill you, you know that don't you?' she said.

Steve didn't answer. Something resembling fear bubbled somewhere at the back of his mind, but it was suppressed,

instincts to protect his family overriding everything else.

'If I don't kill you, you'll probably bleed to death anyway. I don't think you'd like that, will you?'

'What do you want?' He breathed, every breath more laboured than the last one.

'Home. I need to get home. And I need you to get me there.'

'What?'

'I need your vehicle. And I need you to show me how to drive it.'

'What, what the hell are you taking about?'

'Do not toy with me, human, I can make your exit from this world quick, or I can let live, decaying at the rate you do right now, day after day.

*Ten minutes. Then call the police.*

The thought came to his mind unbidden. How long had he been out there? Five, seven minutes? Janice would phone soon. The police would come. Just be cool, be calm.

The woman seemed to sense a shift in him. Her face contorted into a scowl.

'I must praise your kind. You never give up, even when the end is certain, you still cling on to some vague sense of optimism. It is a credit to you, it really is.'

Before Steve could protest, the woman pinned him against the wall with one hand. Her face came close to his, her breath,

misting in the cold, danced between them.

'The keys to your vehicle. Where are they?'

Steve didn't answer. He stared at her, unblinking. *Hold on, it can't be too long now.*

The woman sighed and shook her head.

'Tell me where they are, or I will take your pretty little wife and I will make her watch as I gut your daughter from sternum to throat.'

A numbness fell upon him as all hope died. There were no sirens, no blue lights. He was going to perish, cold and alone. He could only hope that his last action would at least spare the life of his wife and daughter.

'In the hall, by the phone.'

The woman's scow lessened. 'Good. Now, I just need to know how to drive it.'

Without warning, she gripped his face in both hands, pinning his head back against the wall. Her eyes met his, and then his mind was ripped from his body.

Sylph stood and leaned against the wall. She wheezed in breath after breath, gritting her teeth against the agony that burned in her mind, the effects of challenging the Consensus draining the last ounces of energy she had left.

In a situation that had been less time-constrained she

would've applied the procedure more delicately, probing to find the embedded patterns and muscle memory required over several hours. This was not one of those situations, and she'd ripped the knowledge out of his mind with brute force. It would come back, in time, the body and mind anchored together by the Weave. The poor bastard would have a hell of a headache, but he would live.

She pushed open the door with a gently nudge. The hinges creaked as it swung inwards. She caught the edge before it collided with a washing machine that was positioned just behind it.

'Steve? Are you ok?'

The woman came rushing down the stairs. She stumbled at the last step, slumping against the banister as she saw Sylph, silhouetted in the door frame.

'Who are you? Where's Steve?' the woman's voice cracked as Sylph staggered forwards, exposing the caked-on blood on her arms and face, and the curved blade she clutched in her good hand.

'You stupid bitch, why did you have to come down?' Sylph said, moving further into the house.

'I've called the police, they're on their way.' The woman said, her voice shrill.

Sylph paused and scrutinised further. The woman's pupils

were small. Her neck pulsed as her heart raced. She could've been lying, but Sylph's instincts told her that she wasn't. She shook her head and approached.

Why did they always have to be so stupid?

Sylph dumped the car after driving for a couple hours north. It had been a bumpy ride at first, and she'd hopped and juddered the vehicle along as she edged it out of the farmyard, but eventually she'd reached an uneasy compromise with the vehicle. Sticking to the B roads she made her way towards home without any further mishaps.

It was late afternoon as she finally saw the familiar sight of Ledhill, the familiar sight of home going some way to remove the unease that had grown on her since she left the farm house. No doubt the police had arrived there by now, and the husband and wife would've given them a vivid description of the woman who broke into their house and threatened their lives.

Why hadn't she killed them?

The question came again, as it had done on several occasions already on the trip back. Marek would be beyond pissed. The mission was the priority, he would say, anything, or anyone else, was expendable.

Yeah? Well, she didn't agree. She'd made it back, the mission was a success, of sorts. It didn't always have to end in

bloodshed.

She turned down a side street and parked the car in the forecourt of Hayway's Garage. Keith waddled out of his office as she got out and ambled towards to her across the concrete.

'Looks like you're famous, Sylph.'

'Shut it. Dispose of this.' She said, tossing him the keys.

'Master Marek will not be pleased,' Keith said, smirking in that way that always invited a punch.

'I'm sure he will be satisfied when he sees what I have for him.' She nodded down, looking at the stained hooded fleece that stretched over Keith's belly. 'Give me that. Now.'

'What? It's sub-zero out here and the heater's on the blink!'

'I'm sure you've got more than enough insulation to ward off the cold,' she said, before adding, her eyes hardening, 'Unless you want me to remove that for you as well?'

Keith shook his head, his jowls wobbling in a way that made her stomach heave. He tossed it over, Sylph catching it with her good arm. The other had stopped bleeding now, the healing effects finally taking hold. She threw the fleece over her. The garment stunk, but it would do. There was no point getting caught now, so near to home. She pulled up the hood and stalked out of the garage.

## Chapter 12

Luchar looked up briefly as Sylph walked into the dining hall before looking down again.

'You made it then?' He said. He had one of his heavy boots on the table, giving it a polish.

'Just about.' She grabbed a bread roll from a half-empty basket on one of the counters before sitting at the edge of the table. 'You make it out okay?'

'A few got in the way.' He glanced up at her, sniffing the air. 'You look like shit. And you smell the same.'

'I missed you too.' She looked around at the empty hall. 'Where is everyone?'

'Evening prayer?' Luchar said, raising a chastising eyebrow.

'Of course.'

'Marek's pissed with you, you know.'

Here we go.

'Really?'

'You left three alive in that farmhouse. Plus a cop at the morgue.'

'So?'

Luchar slid his boot back on and stood up. 'Don't play clever, Sylph. I don't know what your problem is but you fucked



up. You risk the mission when you leave loose ends.'

'They were innocent,' she said, and meant it.

'No one's innocent.'

Luchar turned and left her alone. Fuck him. They didn't all have to be blind automatons. Balor worshipped individuality, independent thought. Well. Time to get it over with. She devoured half the roll, leaving the rest on the side. She sank a pint of water before leaving by the stairwell that led to Marek's office. Her arm still ached, and she did stink, but the Master would not wait.

'Come in, child.'

Sylph pushed open the large iron door and stepped into Marek's study. The warmth hit her like a wave. A large log fire burned in the hearth. Marek stood there, one hand resting on the mantle. His white eyes stared into the fire. Most people thought he was blind, but even if he was, the other powers he possessed more than negated that impairment. Sylph wasn't sure either way. It wouldn't have surprised her if it was all part of the masquerade, exposing weakness where there was none. When he turned and looked directly at her it did nothing to dispel that suspicion.

'Come, come, my dear.' He beckoned her in, motioning to the other armchair near the fire. Sylph obeyed, welcoming the chance

to finally sit down.

'You are injured.' He said, a concerned frown on his face.

'It'll heal.'

'Perhaps, but you are clumsy. We don't want you to scar.'

He waved a hand. A burning itch crawled all over the scabby, mangled flesh on her forearms. As she watched the skin reformed and moulded, the damaged tissue vanished, young skin replacing old. At the same time the aches in her limbs evaporated away, a weight lifting from her. As the itch subsided, Marek nodded. Satisfied.

'Thank you, Master,' she said.

'Gratitude is not necessary. Now, it sounds like you had an eventful couple of days. Tell me, child. Were you successful?'

She nodded. 'I managed to retrieve the memories from the traitor.'

'Excellent work. Did you happen to see what she saw?'

Was there an edge to his voice? She shook her head, thankful that she had resisted the temptation. 'No, Master.'

'Good, very good. It would be a shame if you were somehow *tainted* by her experiences.'

A silence hung in the air, the veiled threat clear between them.

'I follow your orders, Master. I am loyal to the mission.'

'Of course you are. I had no doubt.' He moved over to her,

drifting like a ghost. He held out two slender, pale hands.

'Come, child. Let me remove the burden of your mission from you.'

She swallowed hard and leaned forwards. She knew this was coming, but it didn't make it any easier.

Cold hands pressed against her temple. She closed her eyes.

'Relax, child. Lower your defences. This won't hurt.'

She did as instructed, lowering the mental shields that she kept up on a near-permanent basis. The process began in an instant. Icy tentacles burrowed into her mind, the cold descending in random slivers that spread throughout her body, numbing her limbs so that they felt almost distant, disconnected.

An image flashed before her, a brief scene, vivid and full of detail. It vanished as quickly as it came.

'That's it, we're done.'

She looked up at the smiling Marek. The tentacles receded from her. Warmth returned to her body as her mind became hers again. Mental barriers rose in an instant.

'Thank you, Master. Did you get all you needed?'

She shoved the image out of mind.

'I believe so. There are a lot of memories in there that aren't your own. It will take time to filter out what I need.'

'I'm sorry, Master, I didn't have much time. I -'

Marek held up a silencing hand. 'It wasn't a rebuke, Sylph. I'm aware of the constraints you were under. Now, take your leave, child. You have served the Lord many times over in the past few days. Take some time off. Mediate. We will resume our training in a few days.'

Sylph stood and nodded. 'Thank you, Master.'

She went to the door.

'Sylph?'

Her hand was resting on the cold handle as she turned back.

'Yes, Master?'

'You made a mistake leaving survivors. In the future, kill them.'

She left without a word.

Marek watched the door close. When Sylph's aura faded out of sight he turned and picked up the phone. The recipient answered almost straight away.

'I have retrieved the last memories of the infiltrator.'

'And?'

'It is confirmed. You were right. The boy now has the pattern. She passed it to him before she died.'

'How much did she get?'

'Everything.'

A pause followed. 'Understood. I'll be in touch.'

## Chapter 13

Seb sat at the edge of his bed, watching the door, willing the knock to come. The clock read 7:56, four minutes before he was due to be summoned and three hours after he'd woken up with his heart fluttering. He'd sat at the window overlooking the lawn, watching the sun crest the horizon and bath the grounds in a warming pink haze.

Last night he'd returned to the quarters with his head

throbbing. By all rights he should have simply walked out of this mad house, if they'd let him. The thought had crossed his mind several times already.

Yet why was he still here?

The Weave. Shards. Mages. How could any of this stuff exist in the real world? It beggared belief. It couldn't be real, but yet his memories didn't lie. He'd seen those things, those *sheol*. Those black eyes. Those poison-tipped talons. And then there was Cade and the Brotherhood. Sure, the yellow eyes could be contacts, but everything else? The super speed? The shadow melding thing? No way. Just no way.

When the door had shut behind him last night he'd decided one thing. If he was there in the morning after a night to think about it he would stay. Maybe they were insane, just some crazy cult with a Matrix fetish, but deep down he knew that wasn't the case. No, if he was there when the sun came up he would give them a crack. It's not like he had anywhere else to go, anyway.

Well, the sun was up, and here he was.

The knock came just as he was drifting away to someplace else. He snapped to, jumping from the bed. He opened it to reveal Don, the guy that had dropped him off the night before.

'You're awake, good,' Don said. He held out a folded up tunic and pants like the ones he wore. 'Come with me.'

Moments later Seb followed Don down the corridor to the

same flight of stairs he knew led to the main hallway. Rather than exiting into the garden this time they turned left, emerging out into a wide hallway that ran the length of the front of the mansion. Massive windows appeared at regular intervals streaming warming rays into the corridor.

No one else joined them as they moved along the hallway, which puzzled him, but he did not comment. They followed the hallway down to the end where another set of double doors loomed. For a moment Seb thought they were heading out into the gardens, but at the last moment they veered right, heading down a narrow corridor that ended in a rusted, iron door. Don stopped and turned back to him.

'This is where I leave you.'

'What is this place?' Seb said, looking over the door. At one time it looked like some kind of ornate markings or designs had been etched into the metal, but a combination of time and lack of maintenance had led to the surface simply looking weathered, with random half-symbols and images appearing here and there without any specific meaning.

'This is where you will study.' Don said. Was that a tone of sadness in his voice?

'In here? Are there other students inside?'

Don sighed and shifted on his feet. He glanced over Seb's shoulder, apparently checking that they were definitely alone.

'There are no other students, at least not in here.'

'What? Where are they?'

'There are only six other acolytes currently based at Skelwith. As you are without a Family they are forbidden from interacting with you and vice versa. As the only Adept on site today it was left to me to deal with the outcast.'

'What? What outcast?' Then it hit him. 'I see.'

'It's not your fault, kid,' Don said. He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. 'Listen, the mages, we're a people of tradition. It's more important than anything to them. You, you're not from a Family, so you literally have no status amongst them.'

'So what are you saying?' Seb said, something hot building behind his eyes, 'I'm just here for that thing in my head?'

Don shrugged. 'I'm sorry, I am. I just...I don't know what to say.'

'Great. Fucking great.' He nodded at the door. 'So what's in there? A set of chains and a bowl of gruel?'

'Someone like you.'

Don edged past him and nearly ran down the corridor. Seb stood, dumbfounded. Stunned didn't cut it. There was an itch on his skin, his stomach crunching in painful spasms. He didn't cry. He wouldn't cry. He hadn't done that since he was a boy, before, well just before. Instead, he pushed the door open,



revealing a set of irregular stone steps that dropped down into darkness. As he stepped into the gloom he did what he'd always done in his life when he'd received his latest knock back. He took the insult, the shame that had been dumped on him, and channelled it. Somewhere, deep inside, where hurt and sadness would normally dwell, a small, hot flicker of anger blossomed.

He weathered the treacherous descent for what felt like several minutes. On more than one occasion his feet slipped from under him. By the time the stairway levelled out into a wide corridor he was nursing several bruises and a cut brow. A narrow channel of water ran down the middle of the passage. Slimy moss covered the curved walls on either sides. Water dripped to the floor from several points in the ceiling, the sound echoing throughout the tunnel. He pressed on ahead, not afraid, but eager to get to the source of the glow that emanated from around a bend up ahead.

The distance to the light source was further than he'd realised and it took a few more seconds of walking before the tunnel opened up into a massive, oval chamber. The channel terminated in the middle, the water trickling through a metal grille into somewhere far below. High above, in the centre of the chamber, he could make out a similar grill through which shafts of sunlight shone, illuminating the room.

Seb took a step into the chamber, almost slipping on a step

that was overgrown with lichen. Around the sides of the room was an assortment of boxes, sheets, racks and other odds and sods. It seemed more like a dumping ground of waste rather than a storage room for anything specific.

What the hell was this place?

A clattering from the shadows made him start. An old man came stumbling out of an alcove, his arms full of rolled up scrolls. One scroll tumbled out of his grasp as he lurched towards the table near the centre. Seb lunged for it, yanking it out of the chilly pool of water.

'Ah, shit! That's going to set me back another day now!'

The man said, snatching the soggy parchment from Seb.

'I'm sorry, I -'

'Why, did you drop it?'

'No.'

'Then why are you sorry?'

'Erm, for your inconvenience?' Seb said eventually, quite unsure how this conversation was going to play out.

'Boy, life's too short to worry about other people's inconveniences,' the man said, rolling the parchment out flat onto a dry section of table, batting a candlestick out of the way to make room. Seb dived to one side as other scrolls threatened to roll off onto the floor. He caught them and placed them on a stack of wooden crates that seemed relatively free of

damp.

'So, you're the outcast they told me about eh?' the man said, stepping back and appraising Seb with narrow eyes.

Seb blinked and swallowed down the heat that rose in his throat. Why the hell was he even stood there and taking this shit. The old man obviously picked up on his sudden tension.

'Now, now, we need to get that out of you sharpish.'

'Get what?'

'The attitude. You won't last five minutes with that massive log on your shoulder weighing you down!'

Seb spun away and flopped into a dust-covered armchair that was only half-covered in junk.

'Oi, stand up.' The man said. His eyes were fixed on Seb, his jaw set. Seb sighed and looked away.

'Up. Now.'

Something in the man's voice gripped his mind, demanding attention. Without even thinking, the idea of resistance somewhere far away, Seb rose to his feet.

'Now, I'm guessing you've heard rumours about why you're here?'

'Sure have. Teach me some stuff then when I've learned enough you'll be able to rip this secret message I've got out of my head and probably cast me aside, use served.'

The man clapped his hands together. 'Good, glad that's out

of the way. For a minute I thought it was going to be awkward!’

What the hell? Was this guy for real? ‘Are you serious? Is this funny to you?’

The man came closer. He smelled of must and garlic. His skin was weathered, like hard leather. His eyes shone a piercing blue that bored right through him.

‘No, not funny, not really. You want to know something, boy? I’m exactly the same as you. I was an outcast. Still am in fact. I’d been kicked out of my Family for reasons I won’t go into. My stay here was only temporary, apparently. That was forty years ago. But you know what I did?’

‘Hid down here?’

The man laughed. Several teeth were missing. ‘Not quite, although sometimes it feels like I did. No, boy. I made myself useful. You think this place just runs itself with those lazy bastards upstairs? No, of course not. There are many things that need doing that they don’t want to get their hands dirty with. I made myself useful by picking those up until I got to the point where they *couldn’t* get rid of me. And soon, you will be the same.’

The man grunted and nodded to himself. Seb stood for a moment, wondering if the man knew he hadn’t actually spoken for a few seconds. When he couldn’t take it any longer he opened his mouth -

'What's your name?' The man said, cutting him off just as the words were forming in his head.

'Erm, Seb. Seb. It's Seb.' He stammered.

'You sure, Seb? You want to think about it for a bit longer?'

He laughed at that. 'No, Seb's right.'

'Your parents lazy, Seb? They only give you one name?'

He sniggered again. He liked this guy. 'Seb Wilkinson.'

'Wilkinson, eh?' the man said, nodding as he scratched the end of his beard. 'And your folks, what happened to them?'

Seb shrugged. 'No idea, I've been in foster care all my life, they could be dead for all I know.'

'Okay,' the man said. Unusual that, most people seemed keen to press on when confronted with this fact, trying their own brand of amateur psychology as to why Seb, this obviously lost soul, ended up the way he had. This man was different though, accepting his answers at face value, not judging, at least not visibly. Seb founding himself warming to him already.

'And I presume you know why you're here?'

'I've got some kind of message in my head. You lot need it out, but can't do that without me being trained, whatever that means.'

'That's pretty much the sum of it,' the man said.

'Are you the one who's going to train me?'

The man nodded. 'Of a fashion. I'm going to steer you in the direction you need. You are going to do the training. At the end of the day only you can do this. No one else.'

The man left the table and gathered the remaining parchments into a large satchel, reminiscent of the packs Seb had seen in art class - when he'd actually bothered to turn up. 'Now, let's not tarry, we've got deliveries to make today and I'm behind already.'

The man shuffled off to a rusted hook in the wall where a thick overcoat hung. Seb winced at the curved metal, wondering what it had been used for in its former life.

'What's your name?' Seb said, his voice trailing off as the man ventured towards the stairs.

'Caleb,' Caleb said, not slowing. 'Now come on, we need to get a move on.'

## Chapter 14

Seb followed Caleb back out of the Drain, as Caleb called his place of work and dwelling, and back onto the ground floor of the mansion. They made their down the corridor towards the reception hall. No one else crossed their paths as they progressed.

'Where is everyone?'

'What do you mean, everyone?'

'Isn't this some kind of academy? I thought other members of this Magistracy came here to be trained in whatever it is you do. Don said there were only six here, which doesn't seem like many for a place this size.'

Caleb laughed then, but it was without humour. 'Look around, kid, take it all in. Does this look like a place that's thriving?'

Seb glanced at the bare walls, the threadbare carpets. Once upon a time he imagined Skelwith might've been something splendid, now it looked like one step away from being claimed by the National Trust.

'Nope.'

'No.'

'No. Once upon a time we'd have fifty here. The finest from all the Families. Now though we have just six, from those who

couldn't afford their own resident trainer. Well, six and one outcast.' Caleb said, ending the sentence with a wink.

They arrived at the front door. Caleb turned to face him, the bag of scrolls clutched against his chest. He backed against the wood, both doors opening out into the drive. It had been raining; the gravel had turned a dark grey and a sweet scent hung in the air. Seb breathed it in as they stepped outside, savouring the freshness as it washed more of the city away from him.

'You not used to the great outdoors?' Caleb said as they trudged across the gravel towards a sea-green van that had obviously seen better days.

'It's great,' Seb replied, surprised at his own honesty. 'I didn't think I'd like it in the countryside. It's not somewhere I've been to before.'

Caleb yanked open the doors of the van and tossed the bag inside. Seb covered his mouth to stifle a cough as a plume of dust billowed out.

'Well,' Caleb said, slamming the doors shut. 'Make the most of this feeling. Once it wears off you'll soon learn what the countryside is really like. It's cold, wet, and stinks.'

Seb smiled as he followed Caleb's indication and got into the passenger seat. Caleb got in the driver's side. The glove box was open and Seb caught a glimpse of some kind of firearm



there, part covered by a dirty rag. Caleb saw him looking and slammed it shut.

'Phosphorous,' he said. 'The sheol hate it.'

An image of the white explosion on the night Cade had saved him sprang to mind. 'It kills them?'

'And then some. If it hits somewhere near the light will blind them at worst, stun them into a coma at best. If you blast one with this at close range you'll incinerate the little shit.'

'You ever had to use it?'

'In the old days, hardly ever. Nowadays, too much.'

The van shuddered into life and Caleb steered over the gravel towards the drive that led out of the grounds. As they moved, Seb stared at the massive stone warriors that loomed over the perimeter, sure that they were watching him with eyes of granite. The sensation made him shudder, and he turned back, eyes on the road.

'Where are we going?' he said as they descended the track that led back down to the B road. Although the sentinels were far behind now, the forest still seemed to watch them go, as if unseen eyes peered out from the gloom. He couldn't feel anything, but recent experiences showed how little that meant.

'Making money. Keeping this place afloat.'

'How we do that with scrolls?'

'We lend them,' Caleb said, steering the vehicle onto a

road that had once seen tarmac. 'There are people, very rich people I should add, in this society that pay dearly to study the secrets that the Magistracy has. It gives them a glimpse of another world, one that doesn't exist in the everyday.'

'And what do they do with this knowledge?'

'Very little. Learn, mainly. None of those we lend our archives to are Latent, but that doesn't stop them wanting to know more. Many of these people have keen and inquisitive minds, and when they want for nothing, what else is there for them?'

Seb shrugged. 'I just thought the rich just wanted to get richer.'

'Most do, it's a human fallacy. Some though, and by this I mean a very, very small minority, manage to rise above it all. They desire knowledge, nothing more. In return we provide it, for a small financial recompense of course.'

'Are you not afraid they'll expose you all? Expose this secret world?'

'They could try, but we have several safe guards in place. Mainly though, it's the Consensus that does that for us.'

'The what?'

Caleb sighed. 'Right,' he said. 'We might as well get started. You listen whilst I drive. We've got an hour before we get to the first drop.'

'I'm listening.'

'Let me give you the history first. The history of the  
Magistry in abridged version.'

'I'd like that.'

'Some of this will sound crazy. It did to me. Hell, some of  
it still does. But bear with me. Understanding the nuances of  
this new world you find yourself in will be key to progressing,  
and it might just keep you alive.'

'Keep me alive. That's good; I'm always about the keeping  
alive thing.'

Caleb snorted.

'Once, many thousands of years ago, the universe we inhabit  
now was much bigger. Many civilisations lived side by side in  
relative peace. Uniting the various factions was a common group  
of people. These individuals were what we now call Latent, and  
they were the first to access the Weave. From these people were  
formed the first mages.

'The strongest amongst these were the brothers, Danu and  
Balor. Although it is lost to the annals of history, these were  
credited with finding the Great Forge, the source of the Weave,  
and hence all of reality.'

Seb whistled. 'Wow, so these two were like God then, if  
they created the Weave?'

'Not *created*, found. They found the Forge, but someone else  
had built that.'

'Who?'

'We never found out.'

Caleb slowed down at a large roundabout that fed onto a main A road. He paused, waiting for a gap in traffic before slotting in. When the van was in lane and back up to speed, he continued:

'The brothers were wise, and they trained others who shared their affinity for the Weave, those who could sense its workings as it rendered the reality we all see. The magi numbered in the thousands, and they existed across many worlds, all bound by a common code of conduct.'

'I'm guessing this took a turn for the worst?'

Caleb sighed. 'As with all great civilisations, even one with individuals as great and as wise as Danu and Balor at their head, there will come times when they are tested. Unfortunately, the test that befell them would prove to be their undoing.'

'Danu and Balor were driven by a thirst for knowledge. Balor perhaps more so than his brother. They pushed the Weave to its limits, increasing their knowledge, seeking to uncover the very secrets of creation. It was during this time that they first encountered Nazgath, and the sheol.'

'Who were they?'

'It was Balor who encountered them first. He succeeded in creating a portal into another realm, the first Way in fact.'

'Way?'

'Later. Balor travelled to this realm, what we now know as Umbra, and met Nazgath, the leader of the sheol. Nazgath possessed abilities that Balor had never seen, and the two became close friends, sharing their immense knowledge of the Weave.'

Seb raised both hands. 'Wait a minute, I've seen these sheol, they weren't nice people. They had black eyes and fangs and claws that rip the flesh from your bones. How could anyone be friends with them?'

Caleb nodded slowly. 'What you are referring is what we now know as the Great Deception. You see the sheol are fiends and tricksters, and Nazgath was the greatest trickster of them all. Umbra was not just another realm. It was a prison, one made for the sheol by others long since gone. Balor was deceived by them, but Danu was not. He saw through their disguise, saw the fiends for what they were. He challenged Balor on this, but by then his brother had become too enthralled in their spell to listen to reason. He turned away from Danu, and it was that break that allowed Nazgath to act.'

'With the knowledge taken from Balor, the sheol and their dark magi were able to rip holes all over Aura.'

'Aura?'

'The one universe.'

'Right.'

'Their hordes poured forwards. Thousands of them, overrunning world after world. The magi fought, but they were too small in number. For every hundred sheol they slew, thousands more poured forwards. They surged towards the Forge in the centre of all reality.'

Something wet dripped off Seb's chin. He slammed his mouth shut, realising he was dripping saliva from a jaw that had well and truly dropped.

'This is some deep shit.'

'The deepest.'

'What happened?'

'Balor could not act. His mind was broken by what had happened, by what he had let happen. Danu tried to rouse him but he could not. Instead, he made a decision that would forever change the entire universe. He destroyed it.'

'He what?'

'He summoned all the Weave energy he could, his body becoming a vessel that channelled directly from the Forge itself. With Nazgath at the gates of Temperos, he unleashed this energy, and cracked the universe into many different pieces. What we now call the Shards.'

Seb sat in silence. A light rain had started to fall. Caleb put the wipers on, the rubber squeaking on the barely wet

windscreen.

'What happened then? What's the deal with the Magistracy, and Earth, where does this all fit in?'

'You are quick, Seb, I'll give you that,' Caleb said. 'Danu had foreseen the fall of Aura. His power was great, his sense the greatest of all Latent. Before the sheol forces made their way to Temperos he summoned to him his most loyal magi, the greatest of his order. He told them of what would happen, that the end was nigh. He gave to them the founding principles of the Magistracy, and with the last vestiges of his energy, he created a Way that sent them to the farthest reaches of Aura. When he cracked the universe, these magi found themselves on a Shard untouched by the sheol. They were on a world like many they had seen before, but one where the connection to the Weave was weak.'

'Earth. Our universe.'

'Bingo.'

'But what about the Brotherhood, and Sarah, they said she'd been on a mission. Where? Another shard?'

'Later, Seb. We're here now.'

'Where's here?'

Seb masked the disappointment at having their conversation cut short as they trundled up a seemingly endless drive that finished at one of the finest houses he'd ever seen. If Skelwith

was a mansion, then this was a palace.

The van slowed as two men in suits with rather ominous looking bulges in their jackets stepped out in front of them. Caleb wound the window down as one of the men came to his side. Seb stared forward, his heart fluttering like a caged canary under the scrutiny of the other man, who watched him with a steady eye.

'You're late, Caleb.' The man said.

'What can I say, the traffic's a bitch. Now, are you going to let me in or am I going to tell the big man that you're holding up the item he's been waiting for the last two years.'

The man's face flickered for a heartbeat. His mouth dropped, his eyebrows raised. The movement was brief, barely an instant, before the blank veneer returned.

'You have it? *The Night Song*?'

Caleb nodded. 'Fully translated.'

The man's professional demeanour nearly melted. The excitement came off him in waves. Without further hesitation he stepped back and waved them on.

'What's the *Night Song*?' Seb said as they drove past.

'An ancient manuscript. One of the few surviving documents that made the Crossing. I've been trying to track it down for years. It's a journal written by a mage - Lasander - who was apparently based at Temperos when Nazgath attacked. Many people



considered it a hoax, where as some thought it one of the most precious historical documents across all of the shards.

'And is it?'

'It is what?'

'A hoax?'

'I don't know. I've never read it.'

They came to a stop in a tarmacked area just to the left of the mansion, parking next to a massive garage where some of the doors were open, displaying a showroom full of various exotic looking sports cars. As they trudged across the ground towards the side door Seb noticed the tennis courts alongside the houses, and beyond that, an estate that stretched on over the horizon. He tutted and shook his head.

'Problem?'

'It's just another world, isn't it?'

'What, this? Boy, this is just eye candy. It's nothing. Nothing of consequence. Come back to me after a few months with us and then tell me if you still feel the same way.'

They stopped by the side door. Another of the goons stood there, eyeing them impassively. Caleb rang an ornate knocker shaped like a lion's mouth, the noise echoing round the inside of the house. A moment later the door swung open, creaking on ancient hinges. Another one of the goons faced them. He nodded them in. They walked past, Caleb leading the way on a route he

obviously knew.

'Do they breed these guys in some kind of vat?'

'Some people are very protective over their security. And considering the things of ours they have, I find the levels of protection quite appropriate.'

Seb fell silent, chastised. Caleb followed the plush carpet to a T-junction before taking a left. They emerged into a large sitting room. A log fire burned, casting shifting shadows on walls covered back to back with books. In the centre was a large, burnished wooden table where more scrolls, similar to those that they carried with them now, lay strewn upon its surface.

At first, as they came to a halt by the table, Seb thought they were alone. Then someone coughed, and an old man, his face lined with age, sat forward in a leather armchair that stood in front of the fire. He had a large glass of some kind of spirit in his shaking hand, which he lowered to a table as he rose. Caleb moved to help him, but the man waved him away.

'No. Thank you, Caleb, but no. I need to move; otherwise I'll just meld into this chair.'

The man hobbled over to the table, his mouth curled into an "o" as he grimaced in pain, the movement obviously an effort. He rested worn hands against the edge of the table and let out a shaky breath. His head rose. Seb found himself looking at eyes

that were still very much alive.

'And who do we have here? Don't tell me you've finally taken on an assistant after all these years?'

Caleb laughed. He tipped his head to the table. Seb took the hint and lowered the satchel containing the *Night Song* onto it.

'Something like that. He's going to be staying with us, and working with me. Seb, this is Mr Kollmorgen, one of our most important customers.'

Seb hesitated for a moment. Did he hold his hand out? Stand there and nod? Hell, was he meant to hug the guy? Thankfully, Mr Kollmorgen seemed happy with a simple nod. The older man smiled at him with white teeth that had no right being in someone that age.

'Seb, eh? Are you from one of the Families?'

'No. At least, I don't think so,' Seb shot a pleading look Caleb's way. *What do I say?*

'Seb is not of the blood. But he is Latent. He had a run in with a mage infiltrator and her pursuers.'

Mr Kollmorgen's raised an eyebrow. 'Oh?'

'Something of nothing I'm sure. However Seb was a witness. We're keeping him close until we know it's safe for him to return.'

'I see,' Kollmorgen replied. His eyes maintained that same

look of concern, but if he sensed that Caleb was holding back he didn't push it. He shook his head, 'There's been a lot of incidents recently, Caleb. A lot indeed. People are starting to talk.'

'We go through times like this.' Caleb's voice had taken on a chill tone.

'Do we, Caleb? Have you looked outside? Have you seen how many men I have here? How many soldiers I employ at my own expense?'

'You seem very well protected.'

Kollmorgen slammed the table, the sudden movement making Seb snap to attention.

'I need to be, Caleb! The artefacts I have, the information I possess. But this many men? In the old days I had one. One bodyguard was all I needed. I had faith in the Brotherhood and the Magistracy to protect me in those days. But where are they now?'

Caleb shuffled in his seat. 'There are many priorities for us, we cannot cover and protect the entire world. There are just not enough of us anymore.'

'Perhaps not, and that I can accept. But I've heard of two of my old friends being butchered in the last six months. Men like me, with resources, with power. It all amounts to nothing when you've got a sheol smashing through your door.'

'I am sorry for your loss.'

Kollmorgen waved a gnarled hand. 'Don't be, don't be. We all know the risks, the price we could pay for the knowledge we have.' He leaned across the table, pressing a long, yellowed fingernail against the wood. 'But this is different, Caleb. The sheol, they are after something, seeking some object or someone,' he said, his voice trailing off as his gaze shifted to Seb. 'I wonder what it is that's so important?'

The silenced lingered. Kollmorgen staring at him, Seb wishing the world would swallow him up as he looked at anywhere but the old man. Caleb simply simmered, his jaw tense as he looked back across the table. A knock at the door displaced the tension, and a young man in a white shirt and black pants entered the room, carrying a tray of drinks. He silently placed the tray on a small table by the fire before vanishing back into the corridor. When Seb looked back, the tension had left Caleb. Kollmorgen let out a deep breath and forced a smile.

'These are conversations for another time, my old friend. However I do have one concern that remains.'

'Yes?'

'You.'

'Me?'

'Come now, don't play games, we've known each other too long. It does me no good favours to see you turning up like

this, alone.'

'I'm not alone.'

Kollmorgen gave a patient smile. 'It's not safe anymore. The sheol, they pour through the cracks like water through a dam. It's like they're queueing at the tears, waiting for a chance, any chance, to come through. People die, normal people, the Unaware, in a war they have no right being involved in. And you. You, my friend. You come here. Alone. Carrying artefacts of value beyond imagining, and where is your escort? For Christ's sake, Caleb. I remember when you'd have an entourage with you. One of those Brotherhood warriors is worth five of my ex-special forces goons and you know it. Where are they, Caleb? Where is everyone?'

Caleb made as if to answer, and then apparently decided against it. His chest deflated as he slumped into the chair.

'I don't know, Brian,' he said, formality dropping. 'The Magi are few in number, far fewer than they would like people to know. The Brotherhood is fractured. Many of them doubting even the Oath now. Unsure if they're still bound by it. I stopped receiving an escort two years ago, and to be honest, I prefer it that way. I'd rather have my own company than some miserable bastard who just stares blindly forward and has all the personality of a rock.'

'It's not their personality that you use them for,'

Kollmorgen pointed out.

'True, but I can look after myself.'

Kollmorgen sighed and sat back. 'I don't suppose you'd led me give you a couple of my men would you? On my payroll?'

Caleb snorted. 'Thanks, but you already know the answer to that. Listen, times are bad, I agree. But we've been through this before; we go through these peaks and troughs. It's nothing new. Now, shall we get back to the matter at hand, it is why we're here after all.'

Kollmorgen surrendered, raising both hands. 'Of course, of course. Leave it over there, with the others.'

'You don't want to see it?' Seb said, the sound of his own voice, mute for much of the meeting, startling the two men who jumped as if they'd forgotten he was there. They both looked at him. Any thoughts that it was just his own internal monologue quickly dismissed. Caleb glowered. Kollmorgen seemed merely amused.

'I know what is there. I've been waiting for the manuscript for close to two years. I very much doubt that a further few minutes will make much of a difference. Do you?'

'I guess not,' Seb said. In his experience you believed something when you saw it, not just because someone said it was so. Obviously not so here. He gently took out the manuscript and laid it on the table before backing away.

'I think that concludes our proceedings here today, does it not, Brian?' Caleb said. He stood and drained his cup.

Kollmorgen rose too and held out his hand.

'I believe so, Caleb. Thank you, once again. And no hard feelings I hope? You know it is only out of concern for an old friend that I speak so boldly.'

'I understand, and no apology required. You're just getting soft in your old age.' Caleb smiled.

'Perhaps, or just more aware of my own mortality. Farewell old friend, and you, Seb. Look after him.'

'Yes, Sir.'

They left, Seb lowering his head as he went. Kollmorgen watched them leave, the smile not leaving his face, but his eyes betraying a lingering sadness. As the door closed, another opened behind him, one of the goons standing to attention.

'You okay, Sir?'

'Yes, fine, Tom, thank you.'

'Yes, Sir,' Tom replied in his south-Texan drawl. He made as if to turn and leave before stopping as Kollmorgen called him back.

'Tom.'

'Sir?'

'Send a team behind them. Don't get too close. Ensure they



get back safely.'

Tom smiled. 'Of course, Sir.'

## Chapter 15

The rest of the day passed without incident. There were only a couple more trips to make. Low value drops, Caleb said. Semi-regular customers who kept the cash coming in. They left the last one when the sun was dancing with the horizon, the shadows long and stretched. The temperature had dropped as the afternoon progressed, and they'd wound the windows up for the journey home. Both noticed but never mentioned the black BMW 4x4 that followed them all the way before vanishing ten miles from Skelwith. They parked the van up in silence and trudged back towards the back of the building where a more direct entrance to the Drain was positioned.

'You okay?' Seb said eventually as they dumped their gear by the door. Caleb hadn't spoken for the best part of an hour, a tenseness following him since the meeting with Kollmorgen.

'What?'

'You've not exactly been stimulating company for the past few hours.'

Caleb took a tankard from a shelf on the wall and blew in it. He put it under the tap of a barrel that lay on its side and poured a long draught of ale. He slumped in a worn-leather chair and took a long swig.

'Put the fire on, Seb, will you? My bones ache to the

core.'

Seb threw some kindling from the pile by the fire onto the glowing embers. A single flame flared to life before quickly summoning its kin, lighting up the rest of the fire. A warmth filled the room and Seb took the remaining seat, suddenly aware of how heavy his eyelids felt.

'He's right, you know.'

Seb didn't respond. He looked across at Caleb, the old man seeming even older under the flickering orange light of the fire. His grey eyes were narrow, focused on the flames. His jaw moved in rough motions as Caleb ground his teeth, the noise sending shivers down Seb's spine.

'Who?' Seb said, although he knew the answer already.

'Kollmorgen. We don't have any protection anymore. In the old days I didn't have to carry that bloody phosphorous flare you saw outside. I had it, sure, it always pays to have a line of last resort, but I didn't ever fear of needing to use it. The Brotherhood were strong then, their numbers plentiful. I'd have two with me and I could have a dozen more if I so much as sneezed.'

'But you're a mage, aren't you? Why do mages need protection?'

Caleb smiled. 'Am I mage? Yes, I suppose so. Am I good one? Not at all. You will learn Seb that knowing of the Weave and its

powers is not sufficient on its own. The Consensus limits our ability to act as we would like. In daylight, or near Observers, anywhere where their collective will is strong, our powers are weak, and we are vulnerable to attack. That's one of the reasons why we had the Oath in the first place. That's why we called upon the Brotherhood.'

'What happened?'

Caleb sighed and shrugged. He sank deeper into the chair, draining the last of the pint in three loud gulps. 'Memories fade. We've lost sight of what we are, what we were. The sacrifices made to bring us here. The Brotherhood no longer sees us as their responsibility. We no longer honour the principles that made us who we are in the first place. Was it even all worthwhile?'

'Was what worthwhile?'

No answer.

'Caleb?'

A low, rumbling snore escaped Caleb's throat. His head had dipped, his bottom lip pressing against his shirt. Seb caught the tankard before it clattered to the floor. He put it back on the table and took a shawl that was folded up on a nearby box. He opened it up and placed it over Caleb, the old man snorting as he shuffled in his chair.

'Nice,' Seb said.

He pulled the door to and left Caleb to his troubled sleep. He found a bed covered in various items of crap in a small chamber that adjoined the main room. He swept the items to the floor and collapsed onto the bed, sleep racing to claim him. He tried to focus his thoughts; he'd seen so much in recent days, his mind flooded with thoughts and images. He imagined that if he focused he could make sense of what had happened, but try as he might, his mind had only one goal. It had been a long few days, and sleep came easily.

## Chapter 16

Seb awoke just before dawn. Through the grille above faint shafts of pink pushed against a receding night. A cool draft filled the chamber, the sensation invigorating on his skin. He lay there for a moment, the sound of Caleb's snoring echoing round the Drain's various nooks and crannies.

From somewhere above, in the grounds of the mansion, a harsh sound drifted down, like metal clashing against metal. Someone shouted. A curse of some kind, then a yell of triumph. The din carried on for minutes, Seb idly listening to the duel with interest. It was then that he noticed only one of the combatants was making a sound. Every shout, every yell was from the same person. The other participant was strangely silent.

Curiosity got the better of him and he leapt from the bed. He smiled at that. Even a week before he was content to wallow in whatever pit he had dropped in, but now he woke with a sense of purpose. He didn't know what he was doing here at all, or where he was heading. He just had *something* now, even if it was just helping Caleb have a slightly easier life. It was a strange sensation, but a good one.

Silence reigned as he stepped out of the stairwell and into the hallway. Sunlight streamed through the windows, tiny particles of dust dancing in the air. He crept along the carpet,

the floor creaking underfoot, the noise amplified in the overwhelming silence. He winced as he moved, certain that Don or one of the other magi would find him and send him packing. Luckily he remained undetected, and he found himself at the rear door, his teeth clenched as he slowly turned the handle. It creaked once, he winced. No shouts of alarm came, and he let out a steady breath as he opened the door.

The sun was healthily over the horizon now, a half-circle of yellow just edging over the tree-line. The air was rich with the smell of flowers he couldn't identify. He sucked it in nonetheless, the scent invigorating. He fell into a half-crouch behind a finely cut hedge that followed the perimeter of the upper lawn. Down below the sounds of metal on metal sang, but the cadence had lessened now, the sounds of heavy breathing prevalent over that of combat. He came to a halt against a cream-coloured stone post at the intersection of two walls and peered over.

A man, no, a giant, easily seven foot tall stood inside a stone circle on the lawn. His bald head gleamed with sweat. His shoulders heaved, white clouds of breath steaming the air in front of him as he edged around the circle's diameter. In one hand he held a long wooden staff with thin metals stems seemingly melded in at each end, extending almost a third down the shaft from each tip. One end of the staff was pointed

forwards, in the giant's line of sight, the other was held under a folded arm.

Opposite the giant, unmoving, stood a much slighter figure. The person wore a grey cloak and hood that obscured their features. In each hand was a curved sword, the steel glinting in the light of the emerging day. The hooded figure crouched low, one sword pointing towards the giant, matching the plane of the other man's staff, the other held high and behind him. Seb watched, transfixed, for the figure didn't seem to be suffering from exertion at all. His position was solid, unmoving. His shoulders steady, no signs of the exertion that was obviously hindering the much larger man. His breath -

*No way.*

He squinted at the figure. Something didn't ring right that he couldn't figure out. Then it clicked.

It was the air around the figure.

Aside from the complete lack of movement, the air was still. No mist, no condensation. Nothing. How could someone be engaged in a duel with a guy the size of *that* and not seem to be suffering from it?

As it on cue, the giant moved with a fluidity that was surely impossible for a man of his size. His form barely visible, a blur of white and grey, the heavy staff spinning in a dazzling display of prowess. Seb fell back, stunned by the sheer



speed. There was no way the other man could defend against such an attack.

Yet he did.

The hooded man responded in kind. The swords lunged and parried, blocking one end of the staff with a loud *clang*, the other striking out, meeting the other business end of the staff. The two combatants twirled and danced. The giant jabbed and swung, controlled strikes that seemed to aim at multiple places at once. The hooded figure was equal to all of them, parrying or dodging, always just in the nick of time.

Seconds later, or was it minutes? The combatants came apart. The giant bent and picked up a towel, wiping it across his face. The other figure simply returned to his fighting position in the centre of the ring. Seb's unease grew at that point. Something didn't sit right about this guy. He didn't tire, he didn't rest. He didn't even seem to breathe.

Seb moved closer to the wall, raising his head higher to get a better look. Something gave against his elbow, a heavy object that grazed his skin. A sudden weight shifted. He shot a look to his left, a yelp of horror forming in his throat as the plant pot fell from its place on the wall. He reached out, the action in vain as the pot crashed to the ground in an explosion of earth and clay.

'Shit!'

A force unlike anything he'd ever experienced smashed into him. It wasn't so much a physical shove, more a mental assault that took the ground from under his legs. He fell into the path in plain view of both combatants, the world spinning around him. Sickness rose in his throat as he rolled onto his hands and knees. He focused on the gravel beneath him in an attempt to keep the world from moving. When the waves had subsided he raised his head. The giant loomed over him.

For a moment, no one spoke. The giant's face dripped with sweat, his eyes on fire, glaring down at Seb with a mixture of anger and something else that he couldn't quite discern. The giant's tunic was drenched and stuck to his torso, the great staff held to one side, where Seb was sure he could make out faint wisps of electricity rippling over the metal rods.

'Sorry about the plant pot,' Seb said.

Something changed in the man's face. The barely restrained fury vanished. He blinked, the anger dissipating from his eyes. His firm expression didn't change, although Seb at least felt secure that he wasn't about to be battered into the earth at that very moment.

'Clean up this mess.' The man said, before walking past Seb towards the house.

He struggled to his feet. The nausea had passed thankfully, but his knees still felt leaden, barely able to support his

weight. He glanced back towards the lawn.

The hooded figure had vanished.

## Chapter 17

'Caleb! You've never guess what I've just seen!'

Seb skipped down the steps into the Drain. Caleb looked up from his desk, an explosion of documents in front of him.

'Where have you been?'

'Outside. The front lawn. I was at that bit with the arches. Where the stone circle is.'

Caleb nodded and lowered the pen to the table. 'Ah, you saw Cian's morning show.'

'Cian?'

'Sit, Seb.'

Seb sat down on a wooden stool on the other side of Caleb's desk. It wobbled, and he shot a hand out against the desk to stop himself toppling over. Caleb watched with one eyebrow raised.

'Finished?'

'For now.'

'The big guy you saw,' Caleb began.

'The bald one?'

'I'd advise you not to mention that in his presence, but yes, that's him,' Caleb said. 'Cain is our Battlemaster, and second in command.'

'Battlemaster? I didn't think the magi were the fighting

type?'

'Were you not listening yesterday? We were the first warriors. The best in all the realms. Since the Crossing, and the Oath, the need to maintain these skills has diminished. Cian is what you'd call a traditionalist. He trains now like they did when Aura was whole.'

'And what about the other guy then? The one he was fighting.'

Caleb rose a little too quickly. 'Nobody, just the mage equivalent of a training dummy.' He shoved the documents into one pile. 'Now come on, it is late already and there is much to get through.'

Seb had more to ask, but Caleb had indicated in a not so subtle way that this conversation was over, at least for now. He followed as Caleb stomped through an archway that lay in near total darkness at the back of the chamber. They walked along one side of a narrow tunnel that opened out into a vast room. One solitary brazier burned next to the entrance, revealing a threadbare rug in the centre.

'What is this place?' Seb said. His voice echoed round the chamber.

'This is where you will learn. Come.'

Caleb led them towards the rug. He lowered himself to his knees and motioned for Seb to do the same. Seb dropped to the

floor and drew his knees up to his chest. The cold seeped through his outfit, his skin rippling with gooseflesh.

'It's freezing here.'

'Don't worry, you'll learn to deal with that in time.'

Caleb took the satchel from his shoulder and put it on the floor. He took out a thick, leather-bound tome and placed it on the floor between them. Strange markings were etched on the cover.

'This, Seb, is the *Fundamentals of Arcana*, what you would call the prime learning source for all magi.'

Seb took the book. It felt heavy in his hands. He ran his forefinger across the dark wording.

'What is this, Latin?'

'No. This particular tome is written in Runic Script, what you would call the language of the Weave.'

'The structure of reality has its own language?'

'No. Well, sort of. The nature of the Weave is pure energy. In its base structure it is formless. Danu and Balor were able to manipulate the Weave directly, such was their natural affinity. However, in order to make it easier to teach, and to be able to document its use for future generations, they created a language that enables the mage to harness the Weave in a structured way, without having to connect directly to its natural form.'

'Can they do that?'

'Do what?'

'Connect directly to the Weave?'

Caleb frowned. 'Technically, yes. But it is forbidden under our rules. Even if a mage could, and I doubt it is even possible on this Shard, the results can be...dangerous.'

'What would happen?'

'Madness. Death. Destruction. Take your pick. It's not an option in any case so let us leave it there. Understood?'

Seb nodded. Caleb didn't invite negotiation on this one.

'Now, you'll need to bear with me on this. Normally the path to Weave-mastery takes six years. Two for each discipline. As of this morning I am under orders to fast track this. I'm told we can skip Novo, as you only need to unlock that block in your head. Still,' Caleb stopped as he rubbed one hand against his stubble, 'It will be a challenge. I might have to improvise along the way.'

'What is Novo?'

'I'm getting ahead of myself already,' Caleb said, shaking his head. 'It's been a long time since I've had to do any teaching.'

Caleb ran weathered hands down the front of his legs. He muttered to himself for a moment before clapping his hands together, a triumphant smile on his face.

'Right. The basics. You know the history of our kind.'

'The abridged version.'

'Quite. There'll be plenty of time to learn more. For now though, we focus on the fundamentals. On being a mage. On the Weave itself.

'Do you know what the Weave is, Seb?'

'Sort of. They mentioned it on my first night but my head was a mess. It's some kind of energy that everything's made from, yes?'

'Let's look at that then shall we. What *is* everything made from, Seb? When you look out of the window, what do you see?'

Seb looked. 'Trees. Grass. Green stuff.'

'So poetic. And what's that made from?'

'Atoms?'

'And what are they made from?'

He knew this; at least he thought he did. He'd accidentally picked up a copy of Focus magazine once due to a rather attention-drawing cover of a nuclear blast. Morbid curiosity had drawn him in. The article was about splitting an atom, the stuff that comes out. Protons and neutrons and other crap. He couldn't remember though, and the days he'd actually made it to science at school were lost in a haze of piss-taking and practical jokes.

'Anything?' Caleb said.



'I'll go for protons, but that's as far as I go.'

Caleb grunted. 'Okay. This is the critical bit. Beyond protons, beyond quarks and neutrinos and all the other crap that humans make up to explain the world they see, there's an underlying force, an energy that makes all reality possible.'

Seb smiled. 'Okay, Obi Wan.'

'Cut the shit, kid, you need to know this.'

Seb slumped, his cheeks aflame.

'This energy, what we call the Weave, is formless. It has no context. It can't be touched, seen, handled in any way. That is, without an Observer.'

'Huh?'

'It's our minds that make our world, Seb. Without the mind of a conscious observer, the universe would be formless, without structure.'

'Okay, now I'm losing it.'

'It's hard to grasp at first I know, but soon you will see that it makes perfect sense. Deep down you already know it, that's why you're Latent, but it will come, have faith in that.'

Seb felt the frown that creased his head, his tongue sticking out from one side as he considered the concept. It wasn't a good look, he'd been told that in the past. Caleb seemed to notice it, a look that was a mix of puzzlement and amusement on his face. He shook his head and tried a different

tact:

'Imagine that you're in a room that's entirely without light. Can you do that?'

'I think I can stretch that far.'

'Good. Now, this darkness is the Weave without Observers. It is there, but there is nothing. Got that?'

'Yes.'

'Now, imagine that when you see, when you observe, that your mind, working with all of your senses, acts as a kind of flashlight, illuminating the reality that's before you, except, and this is the crucial bit, you're not seeing something that was already there, just hidden, you're actually forming the reality from this energy by the very act of observing it.'

They sat in silence, Seb mulling over the concept. It was a head-fuck definitely, but something in his gut couldn't dismiss it. He wasn't a science geek, he had no real knowledge of physics, chemistry or anything that would maybe help him understand better, but something in his mind latched onto the view of the world that Caleb had painted, as if it could be true, he just needed to accept it.

'Ok, say I get this image that basically the world only exists because we observe it, what happens if there's no one around? Does everything just fall into nothingness again?'

'Good question, and although the answer to that, truly, is

that we don't know, we do have theories, based on our own studies of the Weave.

'Like clay, when it's been formed into its required form by the potter, we believe that reality, the Weave, maintains the form it was constructed in when last observed, or at the very least remembers it in some form, able to reconstruct it at will when next required.'

'Wow, now that's a proper head-melter. But, it doesn't make sense? How can everyone think the same thing? How do we all see the same tree? Hear the same noises? We all share in the same experiences. Surely that can't be coincidence?'

Caleb laughed at that, the noise like gravel on gravel.

'You're latching on quick. It took me years to get all the questions out of my system.'

'I like the idea. It makes sense in a twisted sort of way. Not that I'm an expert obviously. But still, how do we all see the same thing?'

'I'll explain this one as best I can. It's a key one too, as your knowledge of this will affect your relationship with the Weave as you progress.

'As consciousness evolved with humans, so did their perceived knowledge of the world around them. As they understood more, they sought to understand even further. What this meant was that the reality formed by the Weave "hardened", as if

cemented by the continual layers of observers contributing to it. As this knowledge progressed, science, as they call it, the veneer of the Weave became deeper. By sheer conscious thought, the atom came into being, the proton. The quark. As the Consensus grew in power, so did the *realness* of reality. The end result, this world we see around us, is a result of this effect. That reality, as agreed by the subconscious and conscious minds that formed it, is known as the Consensus.'

Seb sat in silence, letting the words wash through him. Observers. The Weave. The Consensus. A reality born of perceptions. It sounded too much like science fiction, but that thing, that unshakable *knowing* that he was a part of this other world, clung onto him for dear life. He didn't challenge the idea. He didn't accept it either. Yet. There was more to be learned, his curiosity peaking at the potential possibilities that loomed ahead. Caleb continued:

'So, going back to the analogy of the flashlight? Where the reality only forms when the flashlight is being shined upon it?'

Seb nodded. 'The tree falls in the forest thing.'

'Correct. That's the crux of what the magi are about. Over many centuries, long before there was even life you would call intelligent on this realm, they have studied the Weave. Learned its many nuances. Documented it. Over time, they have learned to master it.'

'Who made it?'

'What?'

'The Weave. Where did it come from?'

'You do go for the big questions, don't you?' Caleb closed the book, keeping the page with one finger.

'It's an obvious one.'

'Perhaps. But it is one that you would be best asking when you are more versed in our ways. For now, the Weave was created from the Forge, which is the source of all creation. The full answer is much more complicated than that, but for now, accept this as your answer.

A mage, or magi if you prefer, in the purest sense, is a Latent who has mastered the ways of the Weave to such a degree that they can bend it, and hence reality, to their own will.'

'That's what I am. Was. A Latent. This is someone who is aware of the Weave?'

'Sort of. There are those who are simply Aware. They have no knowledge of it, but they find themselves more in tune with their surroundings. They know, on some instinctive level, that there is more to what they see, that reality is more than just what they see, hear and feel.'

Seb flexed his legs out and shifted into a different position. 'So, I'm guessing a Latent is one that is Aware, but also has the potential to become a mage?'

'Yes, but there is a big, big leap between the two. About one person in a million is Aware in any given generation. Of that, only one percent are what we would consider Latent.'

Seb thought on that for a moment. 'So, assuming six billion people in the world, gives us about six thousand Aware. That gives about sixty per generation?' He blew out. 'That's rare.'

'It's rarer still when you consider the Magistracy's policy on Latents.'

The tone of Caleb's voice had changed into something dourer.

'How so?'

'They. We. Are an elite group. They were formed of the finest, most noble families in all the Aura. They believed in the purity of the blood line. Latents were born into them, their integrity preserved.'

'So what about those that weren't born into this privileged life? I'm fairly sure I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth.' Seb spoke the words as a joke, but he couldn't help but notice the bitterness that slipped out with them.

'Most are ignored. They drift through life Aware, yet unaware of their potential. Without tuition or guidance they are unable to access the Weave.'

'Most?'

Caleb shuffled and scratched his beard. 'There are some

who, for whatever reason, find a way to access the Weave anyway. How or why we don't understand. Without guidance they are overwhelmed. Many go mad, unable to deal with the knowledge they suddenly possess. Some become possessed by sheol, and hence targets for the Brotherhood. The very rare ones who come through this are often scarred, dangerous individuals. They are known by the Magistracy as apostates, and are hunted down without mercy.'

'What kind of fucked up operation is that?' Seb said, an unexpected anger filling his belly. 'They ignore these people. People who could help them, who could benefit from their knowledge. Yet when they become corrupted by this knowledge, they kill them? Is that I'm hearing?'

'I'm sorry, kid. I have answers. I didn't say you would like them.'

The sorrow in Caleb's expression dampened the growing heat in his belly. He let out a deep, shaking breath, surprised at his own anger.

'So, what would have happened to me? Most likely ignorant? Walking from place to place, drawn by an instinct I didn't understand. Perhaps even learning more about myself, only to be killed by the likes of Cade?'

Caleb gave a rueful smile.

'Wow. I feel so good right now.'

'Shall we call it a day for today? It's been a heavy

conversation, and there's a lot to take in.'

Seb waved a hand. 'No, I'm fine. Really. We've digressed I know. There's just so much that I want to know. It feels like there's this wall in my head. I don't mean that thing that Sarah put in me, I mean there's this whole world that I'm part of. This whole world that I've been looking for all my life, without even knowing it. Now I've got hold of it I don't intend to let go. Screw what the Magistry think. No offense.'

Caleb laughed and put the book down. 'None taken. Okay. Let us end with an overview of what your training will entail. It's what I started with before we went off topic.

'There are three schools of magic that are taught within the Magistry. Each level succeeds the last, and represents a user's growing Mastery of the Weave. You will be learning two of these schools. With me so far?'

'On FM.'

'The first school is called Sentio. The Perception. This focuses on the ability to connect to the Weave. To sense out, detecting life of all types. At a basic level you can merely detect life nearby. At advanced levels you can read people's minds, plucking their thoughts from their brains. You can sense all creatures, anything that participates in the Consensus.'

'Consensus?'

'Like I said earlier. The Consensus is the result of the



collective will of all Observers. It is unique to this realm, created by the First under Danu's instruction to protect the shard from corruption by magic. It is this that limits how overt a mage's actions can be. At night, in front of children, animals or the ill or insane, the Consensus is weak, and our powers are strong. The more Observers there are, the harder reality pushes back against us.'

Seb nodded. It made sense, and explained why mages weren't running round being caught on Sky News turning people into frogs or levitating skyscrapers. Then a question occurred to him.

'The possessed?'

'Yes?'

'I saw them. They are obviously not human. The sheol are the possessed, correct?'

Caleb nodded, his brow furrowed, listening.

'I saw them. I saw them change. I saw those black eyes, those fucking talons. I saw an old woman suddenly morph into one, right in front of me. How?'

'For a start, you're Aware. The Consensus doesn't apply to the Aware, so reality changing effects can be achieved quite easily.'

'Okay. Makes sense. And the sheol themselves, how do they do that? How do they possess people?'

'You're full of questions aren't you?' Caleb said.

'Surely you're not surprised. We'll be here all night with all the questions I have.'

Caleb smiled. 'Well, I'm not as young as I used to be, let's draw a line a tea time.'

Seb laughed. 'Sorry. There's just so much I want to know.'

'And you will learn. Trust me, you're not going anywhere. Tomorrow I will fill in the missing blanks regarding the sheol, and the Brotherhood.'

'The Brotherhood and the sheol? They're related?'

'Very much so. They're almost other sides of the same coin,' Caleb said. 'But,' he continued, silencing Seb before he had chance to interrupt, 'That definitely is tomorrow's lesson.'

'Now. The second school, which you will learn following Sentio, is called Avatari. The Self. This school expands upon the Sentio, and is the first time you will actually tap into the Weave and bend it your will. This school focuses on your avatar, the vessel for your connection. With it you will enhance your own abilities. Speed, strength, senses are the obvious ones. It also covers defence. With this you learn to maintain the shields that prevent your aura being broadcast to any Aware in a thousand miles.'

Seb nodded to himself. 'Sentio. Sense. Avatari. Self. Got it.' He looked back up. 'You said there were three schools?'

'Novo. The change. This is the most difficult and most

powerful school. With it you can affect the Weave around you, hence changing the reality of others.'

Caleb slid the book across the floor to him.

'Take that. That will be your bible from now on. When you're not training, or working for me, I expect you to be eyes down in there. As well as our history it will teach you the fundamentals of the Weave and Weave-mastery. Only by understanding what is in there will you be able truly embrace the Weave.'

## Chapter 18

*There hadn't been a sound for what seemed like hours. Flexing the numbness from her hands and arms, she took a deep breath, and climbed out of the putrid trench that she'd been hiding in for the past twelve hours.*

*As expected, this part of the site was empty. The last of the diggers had left an hour earlier, joining his friends in the tent where weak and warm ale was served in bulk to the tired workers after another day under the whip.*

*She rested against the damp wall, listening for any sign of stragglers. Silence reigned. Satisfied she was alone, she stretched out the knots in sleeping muscles, before feeling her way across the rough stone, following the narrowing circle that led to the main digging area.*

*The twin suns had sailed below the crest of the open cavern hours earlier, and even with her enhanced vision she was still struggling against the growing darkness. It was probably for the best, she told herself, there was an ill feeling in this long forgotten place. The war was long gone, the bloodshed over, but memories still lingered. She could feel them now, ghostly echoes etched into the air, just out of reach of her own awareness but*

*there all the same, calling across the vast distances of the shattered Aura as if they were standing next to her.*

*She reached the bottom level of the site without making as much as a sound. She measured every step, the front of her foot down first, slowly, feeling the ground. The ankle following with the rest of her weight. She was a ghost amongst ghosts, silent, invisible, but still her heart pounded.*

*He was here.*

*He always remained. The one who ran the dig. The one obsessed to the point of living there. He knew what he was looking for. He told no one else, she was certain of that, but there was something there, in the ruins of the House of Balor, that he was after above all else. And today, she thought, he'd found it.*

*She crouched behind a wooden crate, the shadow cast from the dimming embers in a fire pit providing ample cover as she moved across the cavern floor. She paused there, listening.*

*Nothing.*

*She peeked round the side of the box. The familiar archway loomed ahead, the flickering light beyond dancing on the stonework. He was through there, no doubt with his find. She had no idea what it could be, only that the Balorans had invested considerable energy in finding it. She was an infiltrator, not a scholar. The lore-keepers could work out what it was about. For*

now, she simply had to get it.

She ghosted through the remaining shadows, pressing her body against the dark side of the archway. Peering round, another fire burned brightly in a brazier in the smaller chamber. Empty plates and goblets lay strewn across the floor. A sleeping bag was scrunched up in a ball on the other side.

She saw him then, beyond the flame. Sat at a desk, back to her. His rapid mutterings drifted across the chamber, the language alien to her.

Not that it mattered.

She took a steadying breath before skirting the outside of the room, finding sanctuary in the shadows that gathered round the perimeter. She moved quickly, silent steps taking her to one side of a stalagmite that was easily twice her width.

Here she paused, ready for the final part of her plan. Ideally he would've been absent, or even asleep, but weeks of monitoring had told her that wouldn't be the case. He just didn't leave, and apparently, he didn't sleep either. This left only one option, her hand dropping to the small wooden cudgel wrapped in cloth against her hip.

The man whipped round, ancient hands scrabbling for the cane by his side. Black, unblinking eyes stared into the gloom.

'Who's there?'

Shit.

Sylph returned to wakefulness from a fitful sleep. Blinking away the fatigue, she sat upright, holding a hand to her aching head.

What was that? It was like a dream, yet the images were so clear, so vivid. Even now, moments after waking, when dreams would normally be evaporating back into the subconscious, she could still smell the earth of the site, the sound of the burning fires still crackling in her ears. The terror when the man addressed her.

It hit her from nowhere. This wasn't a dream of hers. No dream could be so lucid. It was the memories of the mage infiltrator. The traitor. These were the same memories she'd pulled from the Sarah's corpse days earlier.

The clock caught her attention. Ten thirty. Great. Marek would not be pleased. She'd arrived back late the night before, hours after he would've retired. He would want a report first thing though on progress on the plan.

Marek's study was deserted when she arrived there ten minutes later. Not a good sign. That meant he was down in the Receiving hall with no doubt another bunch of acolytes. With a new burden born of dread, Sylph trudged towards the stairwell.

She entered the Receiving hall from a side door. Already a bunch of new reprobates were gathered in the centre, Marek stood before them. She kept to the shadows, not wishing to draw

attention to herself.

Marek was halfway through his welcoming speech. She'd heard it before, the same call to the weak minded, promising them that they'd finally found the place they belonged in a world that had shunned them. They lapped it up of course, pretty much all of them feeble in soul, ripe for possession. Months before, when Marek had brought together his first group, they were wild, in disarray. His rallying call had brought them together, and Sylph had been the first in the queue. She'd been lost back then. Aware she was different, but not sure why. Marek had spotted something different within her, no doubt her unique heritage, and she'd been kept aside, away from the process that ripped the souls from the weak and replaced them with the sheol.

But now though, as she watched, as the first few were led off by other possessed, the doubt that she'd struggled to suppress in recent weeks bubbled back to the surface.

It wasn't the cause that troubled her. Balor's call was true, and she'd been unable to deny it since she'd discovered her ancestry. When Marek had found her, starving, near mad, his words resonated with her. He knew her pain, he'd been there himself, shunned by his own kind, left to fend for himself. Marek compelled her, and for a time she would've followed him to the depths of Hadros.

But now? This? Is this what Balor would've wanted? Did he



find it honourable to rip the souls from the weak, to implant sheol fiends in the vacant vessels left behind? Marek had assured her of course. Sacrifices had to be made for the greater good. The sheol were as much a victim of Danu's betrayal as Balor, was that not what he'd said?

For a time, she'd believed him. They needed the warriors against the Brotherhood, and they were effective, despite their losses. Now though, months later, as she watched a young woman, eyes wide with fear, stick thin, drifting into the Conversion chamber, she could only think that this wrong. Horribly, obscenely wrong.

## Chapter 19

Seb woke with a mind that felt awash with treacle. He'd been up until well past midnight studying that damned book in the vague hope that staring at the runes like a madman would suddenly yield an almost mystical clarity. It had failed, and now he was tired and grumpy to boot.

'Ah, morning, young Seb,' Caleb said.

Seb grunted and slumped on the bench. He couldn't be bothered walking to the kitchens so instead took a banana and bread from what Caleb had left. He sat, chewing in silence.

'You seem troubled, Seb?' Caleb said as he sat opposite.

'That damned book. How am I supposed to learn anything if I can't read?'

Caleb laughed, snorting coffee onto the table. 'Seb, you only got it yesterday!'

'I know, I just wanted to make a head start.'

'I understand your eagerness. But patience is key with learning the Weave, especially for one who has lived his life ignorant of its influence. Now come with me, we have much to get through today.'

They made their way back into the barren room from the day before. Again they sat in the centre. The temperature was still near freezing. Seb was shivering within seconds of entering the

room.

'Here again?'

'It is the ideal place. To learn the Sentio it is best to have a total absence of all external stimuli. As you become more adept you will be able to call upon your skills in the wider world, but for now, here is where you will learn.'

Caleb reached into his tunic and pulled out a palm-sized object wrapped in cloth. He held it out to Seb.

'Here, take this.'

Seb took the object and took it out of the cloth. A smooth stone, a pebble really, dropped into his hand. He turned it over. The stone was warm to the touch. He held it close to his face. In the gloom he thought he could see some Runic Script etched along the circumference of the stone, but he couldn't quite make them out.

'What is it?'

'A training foci,' Caleb said. 'It's a device used to amplify the holder's affinity to the Weave. We don't as a rule use them anymore. In the past, if not handled correctly, the result could be...inconsistent.'

'Then why now? With me?'

'You remember that fast track I told you about?'

'I do.'

'This is that. It will accelerate your Weave-mastery. As

we'll be teaching you Sentio and Avatari in parallel we -'

'What?'

'Had I not said?'

'You said it's two years for each school, and we'd start with Sentio.'

Caleb smiled and shook his head. 'My mistake. We *normally* do that. No. With you we're making an exception.'

Seb recoiled, one eyebrow raised.

'Now why does that not make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside?'

'I like you, Seb,' Caleb said, ignoring the question. 'You've got a sense of humour. Now. We progress.'

Objecting was obviously pointless, and Seb dropped the stone into his pocket.

'No, not there. Take it out. Hold it in both hands.'

Seb obeyed, resting the pebble in the palm of his hands.

'In order to use the Weave you first need to learn how to *sense*. It is the most fundamental skill that any mage must learn on their journey. With this, you will be attuned to the very fabric of reality. You will sense other Observers. You will feel what they feel, think what they think. Distance has no meaning. Some even have the ability to reach across Shards.'

'Close your eyes, Seb. In order to connect to the Weave you must remove your mind of all clutter, all distractions. Think of

your body as a vessel. Your mind is an antenna. When it is clear then you will be attuned to the Weave, and with it will come Senticio.'

'Empty my mind? That simple?'

'Simple? Try it. See how it goes.'

'How will I know if it works?'

Caleb smiled. 'You'll know.'

Seb closed his eyes. Empty his mind? How hard could that be? Think of nothing. Nothing at all. How does someone do that, then? He conjured up a picture of black, but was that something? It wasn't nothing, that's for sure. He dropped the black. He tried to conjure up emptiness, but the harder he tried, the more images popped into his head. Sarah. Sheol. The mansion. Cade. Nothing specific. Hell, he even wondered fleetingly about what food he'd like for lunch, given the choice. What the hell was wrong with him?

He opened his eyes and let out a long sigh.

'It's not as straightforward as you thought?'

'How do you think of nothing? Nothing is *nothing*? You can't think of it. I tried emptying my head but the harder I tried the more they popped in.'

'Don't be disappointed. People's minds nowadays are so wired, so tuned in to so many distractions that they are constantly buzzing with chatter. We've forgotten how to be

simple, how to tune into the most basic things. Close your eyes again, and listen to my voice.'

Seb tipped his head left and right, loosening his muscles. He closed his eyes.

'This time. Don't try and not think of anything. All I want you to focus on is your breathing. Focus on the sensation as you draw in breathe. How does it feel to expel the air? Listen to the sound of your breathing. Focus on this, and nothing else.'

And so he did. He breathed in through his nose, noting the coolness as the air rushed in through his nostrils. He felt the fullness of his chest as the air was drawn in. His lips cooled as he exhaled. He did it again. And again.

Sarah. Dying on the floor.

'Shit!'

His eyes shot open. Caleb stared back at him, half of his face covered in shadow.

'It's no good, I can't do it!'

'Don't feel bad if something comes into your mind. It is normal. And expected. Allow it to happen. Accept the thought. Dismiss it, and then try again.'

'But -'

'Close your eyes.'

Protesting was futile. Caleb's tone didn't leave any room for compromise. He closed his eyes.

The calmness came quicker this time. The sensation of breathing amplified in his mind. His whole being simply focused on the action of drawing and expelling breath. He found a rhythm, a warming calm seeping into his limbs.

Sarah appeared again. Broken. Bloody.

He dismissed it. The image flickered into nothing.

The sensation returned. Quicker. The calm descended like a blanket. Other images came but they danced at the periphery of his awareness. They faded without acknowledgement.

Something flared in the darkness. A warmth grew in his hands. From all around came the sound of thunder, but low, grumbling, as if far, far away. His heart began to thud, the new sensation causing the alien experience to vanish in an instant.

Focus. Breath.

His heart slowed. The beating faded away. The sensation returned, waves of *something* that lapped over him with each breath.

A flare. A rumble. A bright light seared the darkness. It grew before him, filling the void, a rip of white, tearing wider with every breath. The light exploded filling his entire field of vision.

His *sense* erupted outwards in a wave. He didn't see anything, just the whiteness that filled his mind. Yet at the same time he felt others, other minds, all in this same plane of

energy. He touched them, picking up nothing aside from the fact that they were *there*. Their minds bounced back. Phantom echoes. Observers enforcing the Consensus. Then the light fragmented, and he was thrown back into his body like an elastic band snapping.

Seb opened his eyes. The foci glowed blue in his hands, the warmth fading now. He glanced up. Caleb had gone and the brazier had burned low, just faint embers glowing in the gloom.

Where the hell was Caleb? He looked down at his watch, the face luminescing with a faint azure.

Five hours had passed.



## Chapter 20

The sheol staggered down the narrow alleyway. It growled as it moved, bouncing from wall to wall, cursing in its own guttural drawl, yet still repeating the same movements.

Cade sat on a park bench. His hood was up, his head tilted down. His hands stuck in his pockets. The sheol drew nearer. He didn't look. He didn't need to.

The sheol entered the small park that served as a small oasis of green in the city. It stopped at the exit of the alleyway, sniffing the air like some kind of animal.

*Come on. Come on.*

Satisfied the way was clear, the sheol - in the form of a young woman - drifted into the park. It collided with a tree in its path and fell flat on the ground. Obviously a new born.

The sheol rolled onto its knees just as two young men entered the park from another alley. They clocked the woman immediately. Egging each other on, they approached, the sheol oblivious to their presence.

Shit. He didn't need this. Cade rose from the bench and strode towards the men. They froze as he appeared from the shadows, taking a step back before quickly recovering their courage.

'What the fuck do you want?' The larger of the two said.

Bravery fuelled by alcohol spurred him on, and he took a step closer.

'Leave here. This woman isn't for you.'

The man glanced over his shoulder. The sheol was halfway across the park now, zigzagging across the lawn, soaking its legs in mud.

'Oh, I don't know, she looks fair game to me,' he said with a knowing smirk. The man made as if to move past him. Cade gripped his arm, stopping him dead.

'Leave here. Now.'

It all happened too quickly. He *sensed* a change behind him. The sheol abruptly turned, her attention drawn toward them. To him. She raced across the park, no longer did she have the gait of a new born deer. Her movements were smooth, agile. Dagger-teeth glinted as she leapt onto the path, yards from where they stood.

'Get out of here, now!' Cade said, moving in front of the two men.

They didn't move. The woman drew nearer. Three seconds, tops.

'Didn't you hear me? I said -'

He dared a look behind him. His heart sank. The men were still there, unmoving. They'd taken a step apart. One held a knife, the other a pistol.

What the?

Purely on instinct Cade lashed out with his foot just as the pistol discharged. Pain exploded in his shoulder as his foot connected, sending the pistol flying high and wide into the grass.

The sheol barrelled into the back of him. The wind blasted from his lungs as he fell forwards, the fire in his shoulder swelling in intensity. Fortunately the sheol had built up such pace that her momentum carried her straight over her fallen foe. She tumbled over and over, crashing into an unused wishing well.

Cade vaulted to his feet. He pushed the throbbing pain to one side, boxing it away in his mind. He faced off against the other man, who strangely was still a man, not possessed. He barely had time to process this revelation before the man lunged, aiming a clumsy strike at Cade's neck. Cade caught the man by the wrist and hammered it with his other free hand. A bone broke and the man dropped to his knees, screaming. Cade drove his knee into the man's face, silencing him instantly.

The sheol was already up. She attacked again, attempting the same direct charge as before. Prepared this time, Cade hurled a silver throwing star that lodged in her throat with a wet *thunk*. She slid to a halt by his feet, gurgling on her own blood, the transformation back to human as the sheol left her body almost immediate.

'Looking for something?'

The other man, who had until that moment been flailing in the bushes looking for the lost pistol, looked up. He saw the weapon in Cade's hand. The warrior had it by the barrel end, the handle facing towards the man.

'Go on, take it, if you can.'

The man screamed and launched himself forwards. Cade reversed his grip on the pistol, side-stepping the clumsy lunge and cracking the handle down on the man's head. The fight snapped out of him. Cade didn't stop there. He gripped the man by the collar and lifted him to his feet. He shoved him against a wall, inches of the ground.

'Who are you? Why are you working with the sheol?'

The man's head lolled on his shoulders. His eyes looked everywhere but at Cade.

'Tell me!' Cade roared, pulling him back and then smashing him against the wall. The movement knocked some sense back into the man. He looked down at Cade. A smile broke on his face.

'You cannot win,' the man said.

With that, the man bit down on something. Immediately he began to convulse. Foam bubbled from his mouth and his eyes rolled back in his head. Cade let go and stepped away. The man shook for a few seconds before falling silent.

'What the hell are you?'

Cade knelt next to the dead man. His *sense* revealed nothing. The man wasn't Aware at all, yet why was he working with the sheol? Cade checked his pockets, finding nothing. He rolled him onto his back. The man's head tipped back, face frozen in a rictus of death, and it was then that Cade saw the mark.

What the hell?

He knew some words and runes of Aura, but this was a complete unknown. It was marked in red ink, etched into the side of the man's neck. He took a photo on his phone and slid it away. This was one for the Lore Keepers.

Cade's *sense* flared. He spun about, hand instinctively reaching for the hand crossbow strapped to his thigh.

That figure again. The same one from the park when he'd rescued Seb. They were stood on the roof of an old supermarket on the opposite side of the park, silhouetted against the moon. As he watched, the figure turned and leapt off the building, vanishing from sight.

## Chapter 21

'Hello?'

Seb's voiced echoed back at him from all angles. The brazier had burned out, and all of a sudden the training chamber seemed strangely ominous. It was too easy to imagine all kinds of horrors lurking in the darkness that seemed without end.

*Pull yourself to together.* What did he expect to find down here?

'Caleb?' he said. Caleb hadn't been at breakfast so he'd assumed he'd come straight to training. It wasn't the first time he'd had an early morning errand that took him out before the sun was up.

'Caleb?'

Nothing.

Seb gave one last half-hearted squint into the darkness before turning to leave.

Cade stood right in front of him.

'Shit!'

'I thought Caleb had been teaching you Sentio?' Cade said as he moved past. He held a flaming torch which he dumped into the brazier. At once a warming orange light filled the room, pushing the darkness to its outer reaches.

'What? He had, why?' Seb said, shaking the shock of Cade's

abrupt appearance away and turning back.

'Well, if he had, why did you not know I was there?'

'It takes a lot out of me. I don't keep it active all the time,' Seb said.

'It's not good if you use it sporadically,' Cade said, walking towards the centre of the room. He held something under his other arm, something long, wrapped in a dark cloth.

'What is that?'

'What?'

'Under your arm.'

Cade looked down. He grunted and raised an eyebrow as if he didn't even know the object was there. 'This?'

'Yes,' Seb said. He followed Cade back to the centre, his attention piqued. 'Have you banged your head or something recently?'

'Funny.'

'What is it then?'

Cade threw the bundle to the floor. Something hard clanked as it hit the stone.

'Caleb asked me to do him a favour.'

'Why does this sound ominous?'

Cade smiled. 'You're learning quickly.'

'Go on, put me out of my misery.'

'Training. Specifically, combat training.'

'What? Is this part of Sentio?'

Cade squatted. He took hold of one loose end of the bundle. With one tug the bundle unrolled onto the rug, revealing four short wooden sticks.

'Part of your fast track. Combat training for the magi, *if* they do it, combines both Sentio and Avatari. By utilising both enhanced senses and physical ability, a mage in theory would become an unbeatable warrior.'

'You don't sound convinced.'

'Let us just say that the Magistracy hasn't been particularly stringent with this particular discipline in recent years.'

'Why not? I would've thought now more than ever would they need skills like this, especially with this whole sheol business.'

'You'd think so, wouldn't you?' Cade said. He picked up two of the sticks, one in each hand, and took a step backwards. He nodded downwards, motioning for Seb to do the same. He picked up the remaining sticks and twisted them around in the air.

'What are these?'

'They're called rattan. A weapon used by the martial art Eskrima.'

'These are weapons?' Seb said. It was hard to believe. The sticks were light, their weight almost imperceptible. How were these weapons?



'Very effective ones in the right hands.'

'Why don't you use guns?' Seb said, voicing a question that had been bothering him for days.

'What do you mean?'

'Against the sheol? What's with the daggers and throwing stars? With *these*?' He waved one of the rattan at Cade. 'Why not just shoot them?'

'When a sheol possesses a human they impart certain physical changes to their host.'

Black eyes. Dagger-teeth. Seb shuddered as the images came to mind.

'Yeah, I remember,' he said.

'You do?'

'I remember those freaks when you picked me up from the hospital. And then the old couple of just turned right in front of us. What is that about, Cade? Why don't we see that in the everyday world?'

Cade dropped to the mat on the floor and lowered his rattan to one side. He motioned for Seb to do the same.

'The sheol, at least the sheol here on Earth, exist as wraiths, spirits even. They cannot take a form of their own. The Consensus prevents it.

'Instead, they prey on the weak minded. Those who are fearful, depressed, clouded in negative emotions are most

susceptible to possession.'

'That sounds scary. Everyone has those to some degree. How come these possessed aren't running amok?'

'The Consensus, historically, meant that little if any sheol wraiths could make it into this Shard. Those that did were weak, malformed, and often died with their host. These possessed would appear simply insane, babbling nonsense and with little or no control of their vessels.'

'But now?'

'Now they are more numerous. Possessions were rising already, we knew that, but still it was difficult for a sheol to possess a human, only those at the most extreme depths of despair were susceptible. And most of those were only ferals.'

'Ferals?'

'Sheol come in many forms. The vast majority are wild, uncontrolled. They are driven purely by the need to kill, to spread chaos and fear. Lesser in number are those that manage to retain some degree of intelligence when they possess a host, such as those who attacked you at the hospital. The ones who possessed the old couple were ferals.'

'And they were drawn to me because I am Latent?'

'Like sharks to blood they were drawn. The Weave pulls them in like a beacon. All Latent are at risk from sheol possession, they feed off the Weave-energy these individuals emit.'

Seb nodded. It was all coming together now.

'Hence the need to develop my shield.'

'With it up they cannot detect you, or more importantly, possess you.'

'And what about Clementine?'

'Who?'

'The one who killed Sarah.'

'We're not sure, if I'm honest. I only got a brief look at him before he fled.'

A thought struck him then. He flinched back, frowning.

'What a minute, you were there?'

'Of course. How else do you think I got to you at the hospital?'

'Right. I didn't think about that.'

'Don't worry. It was a traumatic event you went through. It is fortunate you survived.' Cade rose and picked up his weapons.

'Now, back to your question as to why don't we shoot the sheol. The act of possession also increases physical strength, endurance, resistance to injury. Bullets, whilst damaging the host, don't do enough to stop them. Instead we use weapons made of silver or iron. The sheol are vulnerable to these elements.'

'You could use silver bullets?'

Cade frowned. 'We do. Sometimes. Unfortunately the nature of our work requires that discretion is mandatory. Firearms are

loud, clumsy, and attract attention.'

That brought another question to mind.

'Why do you work for them?'

Cade's eyes narrowed to slits.

'What?'

*Oh-oh.* 'I didn't mean anything by that,' Seb stammered. 'I just meant, why do the Brotherhood report to the Magistry? I know you're not magi, even my shitty sense can tell that. You're obviously connected to the Weave in some way. I just don't get why you work for them?'

The silence that followed drifted easily into awkwardness. Cade, jaw clenched, seemed about to respond before seemingly thinking better of it. Instead, he raised his rattans.

'We've done enough talking. Now, show me what you have.'

Before Seb could even draw breath, Cade leapt forwards.

## Chapter 22

'My, my, someone's been working hard,' Caleb said, his glasses dropping as he peered up from the open book in front of him.

Seb limped past him, step after agonising step. He collapsed into the armchair, the soft leather a comforting arm that absorbed his aching muscles.

'I think I'm dying,' Seb said. His muscles throbbed. His bones felt like they'd been broken and reattached.

'Cade put you through his paces, did he?'

Seb sat forward, wincing at the twinge in his back. Did he even have muscles there?

'The guy's a machine.'

'He's one of the finest the Brotherhood have,' Caleb said. He rose and went to the kettle. He clicked it on then half-heartedly rinsed two cups in the sink.

'Oh yeah, that he is. That reminds me. Next time I go anywhere with the Brotherhood remind me that it's not wise to ask them why they report to the Magistry.'

Caleb stopped mid pour. 'You asked that?'

'Yeah,' Seb said, absently rubbing his right forearm which still shook now, an hour after Cade's onslaught.

'Ah.'

'No shit. Ah. What's the deal there?'

Caleb shuffled back over. He placed one cup in front of Seb and retreated with the other. A smell of stewed grass rose from the mug.

'What is this?' Seb said. He lifted the mug, wrinkling his nose as the aroma assailed him.

'Drink it. It will sooth the aches.'

Seb took a sip. It tasted as bad as it smelled. He suppressed a gag reflex as the foul liquid poured down his throat.

'God that's vile.'

'Give it a chance. You'll thank me for it tomorrow.'

'I'll hold you to that,' Seb said. He leaned back in the chair. A warmth had poured into his limbs and the pain had decreased to an ache.

'So you want to know about the Brotherhood?' Caleb closed the book and moved round. He dropped down into the chair opposite Seb.

'I think it might be good to know. At least what it takes to stop me getting a beating in training.'

Caleb smiled, 'I don't think Cade will be any different regardless. He's always fought with that intensity, ever since he was old enough to throw a punch.'

'Who are they, Caleb?'

'You remember what I told you about the Great Crossing?'

'When the mages fled to Earth? During the fall of Temperos? I do indeed,' Seb said, almost smugly.

'Ah yes, I've heard that you've been seen around the library. I assumed you'd just gotten lost.'

'Very funny.'

'During the One War, as this conflict was called. The mages knew that their numbers were too small to defeat the sheol. One thing that Danu noticed was the fact that the sheol had an almost natural affinity for the Weave. They weren't trained, they couldn't read Runic Script, yet they had sense, they had a form of *avatari*. In an attempt to learn about their source of power, Danu captured several sheol. He conducted experiment after experiment, desperate to find something, anything, that would help in the conflict.'

'What did he find?'

'It was the blood. Sheol blood. Something in it literally absorbs the Weave.'

'Where do the Brotherhood come into it?' Seb said, although an uneasy *knowing* was making itself felt.

'Danu wanted to create an army, loyal to humanity, but with powers that would match the sheol. He believed that by combining the blood of the sheol with humans loyal to the magi he could produce a force that could resist the sheol.'

'Let me guess. None volunteered.'

'He appealed to his finest warriors. All refused. The most loyal simply refused to be contaminated, whereas others began to openly question Danu's sanity. Ingesting the blood of fiends? Of their most mortal enemies? What was he thinking?

'No. Instead he was forced to turn to others. He turned to those who perhaps owed Aura a penance, those who had no real future, those who'd perhaps give up their own lives in exchange for freedom.'

The answer came to Seb like a shot.

'Prisoners.'

'You are perceptive,' Caleb said. 'Yes. Danu offered prisoners the chance for freedom. Not just any, of course, some would die in the bowels of Labyron for what they'd done. Others though, they had simply taken a wrong turn in life. Crimes of passion. Smuggling refugees across the Borders. That kind of thing. There were many who were fit, strong and willing to give their all in exchange for freedom.'

'So how did it happen? Did they just drink sheol blood and they came...what's the term?'

'Imbued.'

'Yes. That. Was it that simple?'

Caleb frowned. He drained his mug. 'No. It was not. They quickly found that ingesting sheol blood was a risky process. Many became possessed themselves, others simply turned insane. In either case, the magi were forced to kill those who could not take the Bloodrite.'

'Obviously some took to it though?' Seb thought of Cade and Silas. Those yellow eyes and shadow melding abilities.

'Aye. Eventually. They found that it took individuals of a certain mental and physical disposition to handle the ceremony. These brothers of the blood became Imbued. They combined the abilities of the sheol with their human natures. With that, the Brotherhood was born.'

'What? That's it?' Seb said. Something didn't make sense. 'That just begs more questions. Why did the mages still lose? Why is the Brotherhood still obeying their every order?'



'Alas, the siring of the Brotherhood came too late in the war. By the time the first legion of Brothers were ready for battle the forces of Nazgath were at the gates. No, instead the magi and the Brotherhood made the Crossing together. To here.'

'Why though?'

'Why? It beat staying. To the sheol and humans alike the Brotherhood were the worst kind of abomination, a corruption of their purest forms with their worst enemies. Fleeing Aura was their only really option.'

'Maybe so. But why are they still obeying them now? Once they were here why didn't they just go their own way? Chalk the whole thing up as a bad experience?'

'And that is where we come to the final thing. *This* is what you need to be careful with. It is a source of much tension these days.'

'What is it?'

'The Oath. The oath the Brotherhood made when they swore eternal loyalty to the Magistracy. In exchange for safe passage from the War and the Sharding, the Brotherhood promised their lives to the mages and their descendants.'

'Let me guess. It made perfect sense at the time. But now, hundreds of years later, not so much.'

Caleb nodded, the twinkle fading from his eyes.

'Like many things that made sense in those days, the world we now inhabit isn't exactly viewed as it once was by certain parties.'

'You mean by the Brotherhood.'

'Amongst others.'

The men fell into an easy silence. Seb sank further into the chair. The aching had faded. A heaviness pulled at his eyelids.

'It's working?' Caleb said. A knowing smile on his face.

Seb shuffled onto his side. 'I might just rest my eyes, just for a minute.'

'Of course. You need the rest. After all, you do it all again tomorrow.'

*Great*, the word, his last thought, flickered briefly in his mind before a heavy sleep took him into its arms.

## Chapter 23

'Focus, Sylph. Empty your mind of distraction. Only with a calmness of mind can you implement this effect.'

Sylph stood, eyes locked on the single candle that burned in the corner of the room. She focussed on the candle, emptying her mind of all distraction. It was routine, almost habit. Something she'd done hundreds of times before.

Yet why was she failing now?

'Is something troubling you?' Marek said.

'No.'

Yes.

'Tell me, child. Your welfare is most important to me.'

She shook her head and let out a deep breath. She refocussed on the candle.

'It's nothing.' She said.

Marek nodded, clearly not believing her.

Focus dammit. She connected to the Weave, the subtle change welcome, filling her veins with energy. The room darkened around her, the candle being the only thing that existed, burning away in the distance. She called the Script to mind, the glyphs appearing in her mind's eye before vanishing, their stored energies consumed as she readied the effect. With one last breath she mentally wrapped a snuffing hand around the flame, and -

Sheol. Sheol desecrating a Baloran tomb.

She shook her head. Stop it!

The man in her dream. In Sarah's dream. The Baloran priest.

*But he wasn't, was he?*

No. Don't think of that. Marek would not be pleased.

*He wasn't Baloran. He was sheol.*

*Marek had lied.*

'Sylph!'

The image vanished. Sylph shook it away and turned back to her mentor. The mage stood before her, white eyes boring into her.

'You are distracted. Go and come back when you're in a fit state.'

Marek raised a hand as he walked back to his desk. The candle snuffed out with a whimper of Weave energy. He flicked on the lamp and sat in his chair.

'Something else?' He said, noticing that she hadn't moved.

*Stay calm.*

'Sylph? Say it or go. I don't have time for childish tantrums.'

'What was Sarah doing?'

Marek clasped his hands together and leaned forwards.

'I thought that was obvious. Betraying those who'd taken her in.'

'Tell me.'

'Are you feeling okay? Where has this *dangerous* line of questioning come from?'

Marek's white eyes were fixed on her. Her blood ran cold, the anger evaporating in an instant. All she wanted now was to get out before Marek made a decision that didn't bode well for her future wellbeing.

'I'm sorry, I've just been having trouble sleeping since I returned.' She dropped her head. 'Forgive me.'

'Look at me, Sylph.'

Sylph forced her head up, her instincts screaming against the action.

'Sarah tricked me. She tricked us all. She had my confidence and she used it to steal secrets that I sought. Knowledge that would've allowed us to overthrow the betrayers and bring justice for those who suffered under Danu.'

'She had crossed over?'

'I told her of a site I had located, rumoured to contain powerful magicks secreted away by Balor when he sensed Danu had turned against him.'

She suddenly realised she'd hadn't breathed for several seconds and took in a sharp gulp of air.

'A true site of Balor?'

Marek smiled. 'It had taken many months of searching, but I'd finally found a genuine site. Sarah begged me to let her go. She was trained, skilled in infiltration. She could get there without drawing the attention of the Border Guards.'

The smile dropped.

'That's how she convinced me anyway.'

'She found it, didn't she? But she tried to take it back to the Magistracy?'

'Alas, she did. She would've made it too, if it wasn't for the Hound that found her.'

'So that's why I was sent to retrieve her memories? So you could acquire the knowledge that she'd taken?'

Marek nodded.

'Unfortunately the memories you managed to obtain are fragmented. It will take time to make sense of what she'd taken.'

*They didn't seem that fragmented to me, she thought.*

'Sylph?'

'Yes?'

'You seemed to drift away for a minute.'

'I'm sorry, I am tired, that is all.'

Sylph rose and went to the door. With the handle half turned she stopped and turned.

'The site Sarah found?'

Marek had returned to his favoured place, his white eyes lost in the flames.

'Yes?'

'The sheol weren't there, too, were they?'

'No, of course not, the site is sacred, lost to all. They may be our allies now, but I would not trust them with the location of any of our sacred artefacts. Why?'

'No reason, just curious.'

'Goodnight, Sylph.'

Sylph left without a word. As the door closed the shadow behind it shimmered as a humanoid form coalesced out of the dark.

'You are bold, hiding in plain sight like that,' Marek said as his visitor stepped into the light.

'Your protégé is distracted. She couldn't sense her own nose, let alone me.'

'What brings you here, Silas?'

Silas, First Sword of the Brotherhood, sauntered across the room and slumped into Marek's chair.

'How long?'

'You tell me. It is your spies who are monitoring his progress.'

'He is training with a mage called Caleb. My son is teaching him the ways of the warrior.'

Marek snorted. 'Caleb? I'm surprised that old bastard is still shuffling round. How does the boy fare. Is his Weave-mastery progressing?'

Silas sat. He poured himself a coffee from the pot. Marek slid two fingers across in the air and the bolt on the door locked. Silas took a sip. He murmured in appreciation.

'According to my son he is weak, untrained. But he is keen.'

'You know it takes six years to learn the three schools.'

'Six years? We don't have that long, the borders will have shifted. The sheol will be out of control by then.'

'You do not have to remind *me* of this, Silas. It was I who gave you this opportunity.'

'Of course, Marek, and I appreciate -'

'Then you will appreciate that this will take time. If your Brotherhood had done their job, then the infiltrator would have completed her mission safely and we wouldn't have this particular challenge.'

'How dare you!' Silas' yellow eyes blazed. 'You know what we have to deal with, what the magi have done to us! It was your out-of-control sheol that killed her in the first place!'

'Calm, old friend. I did not mean to rile you. We merely have to be patient. If we get the boy now it is of no use. He would die, and we would lose all we have. Give it some months, let the foundations settle. When he has something we can use, then we will act.'

Silas pursed his lips, nodding slowly. 'And the sheol?'

'What of them?'

'It is obvious that the control we have is tenuous at best. Will it hold until he is ready?'

This time it was Marek's voice that dripped in menace. 'The sheol are my concern, Silas. I will monitor the situation. I



will act accordingly.' Marek rose. 'I believe this meeting is over.'

Silas rose and tipped his head. 'Of course. Let us not fall out over this. We have a common cause after all.'

'Indeed. It would be wise not to forget that.'

Silas slowed as he approached the door. Already his shadow-melding was taking effect, his form fading into darkness.

'The girl.'

'What of her?' Marek said.

'She is asking the wrong kinds of questions. She could be a threat.'

'Sylph is my ward. I will decide how to deal with her. And besides, I believe she has a significant role to play in this yet.'

'But in whose favour?' Silas said. His voice seemingly came out of thin air now, although Marek could see his aura as clear as day. 'If she becomes a danger, let me know. We will deal with her.'

'Goodbye, Silas.'

The bolt slid back. The door opened and the Silas-shadow vanished into the gloom, leaving Marek with troubling thoughts.

## Chapter 24

### 6 Months Later...

Seb stooped, resting his palms against aching knees. His muscles burned. His arms trembled and sweat poured from his brow, stinging his eyes.

Yet he would not give in.

'You want to rest?' Cade said. The warrior circled the chamber. One fist held the other, the knuckles cracking as he flexed.

'What's the matter, you getting tired?'

Cade stopped. 'Seb,' he said, smiling, 'there's no need to do yourself an injury. I -'

Seb dashed forwards. He arrived at Cade in a heartbeat, but his attack was overextended. Cade ducked back, letting him fly past, sliding to a halt on the smooth stone.

'Very good! You're getting better at that!' Cade said. 'You are still letting frustration better you, though. Now, attack. No Sentio, just what I've shown you, muscle memory only.'

Seb didn't need to drop his connection to the Weave. It had vanished already. He could never maintain it for long, and even then it only came in fits and starts. Sometimes it wouldn't come at all. This, though, he could deal with. Straight up skill and

strength, no magic involved.

Seb adopted one of the many combat stances Cade had shown him and launched a ferocious attack. Muscle memory kicked in, weeks of training, hundreds of hours practicing, sparring coming together. His hands moved in a blur, deft actions designed to draw maximum impact with minimum effort. Of course Cade parried or dodged, his hands equal to Seb's attacks, but they weren't as easily deflected as previously. When they'd first started these sessions Cade could have deflected any attack with one hand tied behind his back. Now though it took both, even if the warrior never broke a sweat.

Seconds later they parted. Cade stepped back, his guard dropping. Seb staggered back to his side where a towel and water bottle lay on the rug. He wiped his brow and took several gulps.

'You are doing well.' Cade said, waiting for Seb to get his breath back.

'Yeah?'

'I wouldn't lie. What troubles you?'

'That obvious?'

'You're not as obnoxious as normal.'

'Wow. It must be bad.'

'Tell me.'

Seb scrunched the towel up and threw it on the floor.

'It's the same shit, Cade. This stuff,' he said, gesturing

at their makeshift ring, 'I can do. It's physical, it's normal. I know if I practice hard then I'll get better. It's simple. And I enjoy it.'

'But?'

'Learning the Weave is something else.'

Cade frowned. 'I thought you were doing well?'

'I was. At the start. But, it's like, the more I learn it, the harder it becomes to do anything. It's like I'm overthinking it. I can make the connection, most of the time, but then I try and remember the damned Scripts and it all just fizzles away.'

Cade took off his arm guards and threw them into his sports bag. 'Have you discussed this with Caleb?'

'I haven't, but I know he knows. He can sense my frustration I'm sure.'

'Perhaps he's waiting for you to ask for help?'

'You think?'

Cade shrugged. You never know unless you try.'

The two men stood and walked towards the exit.

'How are things anyway? You know, out there?'

'No better. You heard about the human vassals?'

'Yeah, Caleb said. Now we have humans *and* the sheol working together. How the hell did that happen?'

'It looks like Marek is trying new tactics. They're working too. We've lost ten brothers in six months. I'm sure I've

encountered a mage too. Of sorts.'

'What? Working for Marek?'

Cade nodded. 'First when we rescued you. Then I'm sure I saw them again when I first encountered the human vassal's.'

'How is that possible?'

Cade shrugged. 'I'm suppose it's quite possible with Marek out there. What's to stop him getting hold of a Latent mage before we do?'

'What're we going to do?'

'The mages will do what they normally do; stick their head even further into the sand.' Cade said. 'Sorry, that's not aimed at you.'

'Why don't they do anything? Surely it's in their interests to help?'

'The Oath only works one way. We owe them. Not the other way round.'

'They won't feel that way when there's no Brotherhood left.'

'Perhaps,' Cade, a resigned smile on his face. 'Although if it gets to that stage I'm sure I won't care.'

They walked back through the tunnel towards the main chamber, where Caleb's morning grumbles drifted through the air like clouds.

'You think it will get that bad?' Seb said.

Cade glanced across at Caleb. If the old man was listening, he didn't show it. 'Five years ago, hell, even six months ago, I would've said no. But now?'

Cade let the question hang in the air as he turned and trudged towards the stairs. The world hanging a bit heavier on his shoulders.

'Cade.' Caleb said, as the warrior trudged by.

He received no answer.

## Chapter 25

'Come on. Get your arse out bed.' Caleb said, kicking the side of the mattress.

Seb woke with a start. A jolt of *sense* hit him straight away, a random connection to the Weave that announced Caleb's presence without him needing to open his eyes. The sensation vanished as quickly as it appeared, and Seb let out a drawn out sigh.

'What's happening? We've got no deliveries today.'

'I know. That's why we're making the most of it. We're going to try to get you out of this grump you've been in for the past few weeks.'

'What? Who told you that?' He sighed. 'Cade.'

'He didn't need to say anything. It's written all over you.'

Seb swung his legs out of bed. What now? He didn't need this. He'd tried his bollocks off trying to work with the Weave, but the harder he tried the worse it got. He hadn't even made a connection in a week. Caleb had been fine about it but he could see the frustration in the old man's face.

He was a failure. Everyone knew it.

'You are not a failure.'

'I thought it was considered rude to read someone's mind.'

'You might as well have put it in neon lights and stick them to the walls the way you're carrying on.'

Caleb pulled a stool up as Seb rummaged through his trunk for the least unclean clothes.

'It's not your fault you know.'

'No?' Seb said. He couldn't find the smock he was looking for, the one that itched the least. He slammed the trunk shut and kicked it against the wall. The heavy container hit the stone with a dull thunk.

'At least your lessons with Cade are paying off.'

Seb chuckled on the top from yesterday. 'Yeah they are. It's easy with the combat stuff. It's just practice. Training. I know if I work at the routines that I'll get better, it'll just take time. With the Weave though...' He slumped on the bed. '...I don't know. I just don't get it.'

'You think too much. Has anyone ever told you that?'

Seb laughed. 'No. The opposite.'

'You read those books, thinking that the more you know, the easier it'll be, but in fact it's the opposite. You're trying to do this without context. The Weave is hard enough to learn anyway, but with your rational brain trying to fight against it you're on a hiding to nothing.'

'Great pep talk, Caleb. What're you saying? I can't do it?'

'No, of course I'm not. Although I do think you need a bit of help, just to get you going.'

'What? How?'

'Get dressed. Not that shirt. Look smart.'

'Where are we going?'



'To see the Magister.'

The massive double doors that led down to Skelwith's inner sanctum loomed at the end of a wide corridor that trailed away from the reception hall. Seb stood before them, Caleb by his side, Seb's eyes like plates as they took in their vastness.

'Close your mouth, Seb. I don't want to have to get a mop out.'

'Sorry.' He said. He stepped forwards. The doors, some kind of ancient wood, black in colour, were covered in hundreds if not thousands of runes. Their exact nature eluded him, but they were some kind of defensive wards, that he was sure of.

'You are right, they are. The Script on these doors is hundreds of years old. Nothing, bar the inner most circle, can open them.'

'What's in here?'

'It's easier to show you.'

Caleb nodded at one of the silent mages who stood either side of the door. The hooded man nodded back in response. His head dipped. Seb sensed a slight crackle in the Weave. The door opened a moment later, creaking inwards as if pulled by unseen hands.

'Come on. Let's not keep the Magister waiting.' Caleb said.

The door opened out into a wide stairway made of a polished marble. Strange lanterns hung on the wall on both sides, illuminating the stairway with a soothing violet light. Caleb strode on, Seb followed.

Unlike the rest of the mansion with its tired decor, the passageway that descended into the Magister's sanctum still existed in all its former glory. Massive oil paintings depicting scenes that defied the imagination covered the walls all the way down. Was that the Crossing? Is that one Danu? Or is it Balor? Surely that one must be Temperos. The wonders continued as the stairs levelled out into a wide open area. The room extended on into the distance, a path of gold brick guiding the way between a series of marble pillars that burned atop with a purple flame.

'This is amazing.'

Caleb nodded. 'It is indeed. Soak it in Seb. Not many acolytes - hell - not many mages full stop get to see this place. In this place is the source of Skelwith's power.'

'I don't follow,' Seb said. He stopped in front of two huge stone knights that stood before another double door. The Weave crackled off them in random spurts, as if someone was turning a radio in and out of tune. 'These are sentinels, correct?'

'The last line of defence. In times of trial the sentinels can be called upon to defend Skelwith.' Caleb stopped beside him. 'What don't you follow?'

'The source of Skelwith's power. You said it's up ahead.'

'That's right.'

'I thought the Weave is the source of a mage's power?'

'It is. But this place is, *special*.'

'How so?'

'Come inside. It will be easier to show you.'

As they approached the doors a sound came from somewhere. A clunk of something heavy, followed by the whir and click of moving parts. The door opened inwards, groaning as if in protest.

Beyond loomed another large room. It was angular in structure, plain stone walls glued together at regular angles. This chamber lacked the opulence of the previous corridor, and all focus was drawn towards the simple structure in the middle. A marble podium took pride of place, and mounted atop it, wrapped in curling swirls of bronze, was the largest gem stone Seb had ever seen.

'What is that?' Seb said, wincing as his voice echoed back, amplified by an unseen force.

'The Spoke Stone, young mage.'

The Magister emerged from the gloom, drifting towards them like a ghost. Caleb bowed a head. Seb followed a second later.

'Magister. It is an honour.' Caleb said.

'You owe this to Silas, Caleb. It was our noble brother's idea that we try this approach.'

Seb frowned. Silas? What did he know about the Weave? He kept his head low, eyes on the ground. A question for Cade stored away for later.

'Regardless of the source, I am grateful for your assistance.'

'Quite. Well between you there doesn't seem to be much progress being made, so perhaps it is right we try something more *unorthodox*.'

If Caleb felt aggrieved by the subtle barb he didn't show it. Perhaps it was just the Magister's way of talking? He had no idea, but it made sense to follow suit. The Magister was not one to be trifled with.

'Well, then, Seb. I hear you have been struggling to learn the basics of Weave mastery?'

The Magister's eyes bore into him, it took all his willpower to hold her gaze.

'Speak, boy!' Caleb hissed.

'Yes, Magister. It started well but just petered out.'

'Indeed. No doubt a side effect of your prolonged exposure to the Consensus.'

The silence hung in the air for a moment. A quiet buzzing itched his mind, whether it was from the Magister or the stone he couldn't tell. Abruptly the itching vanished. The Magister nodded to herself.

'Well then. Let us not tarry. Come, sit here.' The Magister motioned towards a series of plain mats that surrounded the Spoke Stone like petals around a flower. Seb obeyed, dropping to a kneeling position facing the Stone. Caleb sat next to him.

'You will have heard of the apostate, Marek?'

'I have, Magister.'

'Good. I would not normally have agreed to Weave-walk this early in one's training, but we believe that the increase in sheol activity is due to the apostate and whatever his overall aim is. We have reasonable intelligence to support the

assumption that whatever Sarah took, she did so to prevent it falling into Marek's hands.

'Now, he does not know that the secret he sought survived Sarah's death and lives in you, which is fortunate. However his failure has made him increasingly desperate. He seeks *something*, and we must find out what it is.'

'You think what I have in my head is tied to the sheol activity?'

'I am growing increasingly certain of it. We know that Sarah took something that he wanted. It was blind luck that she found you when she did, allowing her to pass on what she'd uncovered.'

'I wish I knew what it was.'

'We will find out. In time. You just need a helping hand to get there.'

The Magister adopted a meditating position. Her hands dropped, resting on her knees, palms facing upwards.

'Join me, Seb. I will assist you in connecting to the Weave. The proximity to the Stone will provide you the boost that is required to connect.'

Seb glanced at Caleb. The old man nodded. Seb adopted the position he'd done so many times before, the one which previously had been a source of excitement, only to become one of frustration in recent weeks. He closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath.

The connection came instantly. Amplified by the Spoke Stone his *sense* exploded to life, the auras of the Magister and Caleb appearing as infernos of blue fire in the darkness.

'We are going on a journey Seb. This is called a Weave-walk, a journey undertaken by your astral self. The walk will take us into the River, the Weave in its natural form. Do you understand?'

'I think so,' he said. His voice came to him from far away, as if spoken by someone else.

'The journey will not be long, merely minutes. But it will expose you directly to the Weave. Much more so than the methods you have been using previously. If successful, it will overcome the barriers you currently face, allowing you to proceed with your training.'

'Is it dangerous?'

'I will not lie. Acolytes undertake a single Weave-walk when they are completing their final Novo trials. It is only then that they have the sufficient skills and knowledge to avoid being absorbed into the Weave, and even then they are escorted by two elites in the process.

A sick feeling hit his stomach. 'That can happen? I can be absorbed into the Weave?'

'We are all Weave-stuff, Seb. Ultimately that's where we all return. But yet, if one isn't sufficiently prepared then their pattern, their *soul*, can be simply absorbed into the Weave, their body being left behind. An empty shell.'

'That doesn't sound too great.'

'I will be with you at all times. Just follow my instructions and all will be well. Now, are you ready?'

Seb nodded. It dawned on him that the Magister couldn't see the action. 'Yes, Magister.'

'As I said, the stone before you is what is known as a Spoke Stone. It is attuned to the currents and eddies of the Great River. It acts as a focal point for the Weave, allowing us to draw much greater energies from it.'

'Like the foci stone?'

'Excellent. Exactly like that. This stone is one of several of this type. There are several all over the world, all held and protected by the different mage families. They are interconnected - each spoke part of an overall hub. Together they harness and focus the power of the Consensus. All connect via ancient Ways to the Nexus, the focal point of all mage energy on this realm.'

'I've never heard this before.'

'You won't have. This came after the crossing. The first mages took fragments from the Forge, the only parts of the Weave that exist in physical form. The fragments, the Spoke Stones, acted as insurance to prevent them being disconnected from the Weave forever.'

Seb frowned. 'I thought that was why Danu insisted on the creation of the Consensus? So that the Weave couldn't be corrupted and misused?'

The tone in the Magister's voice shifted. 'That is correct. To a point. However this did not mean he would send his flock to this alien realm with no means of survival. What is a mage without the Weave?'

'A human?'

'Nothing. They are nothing, Seb. They had to survive on this realm. Who knew what horrors lurked here, or if the sheol

would ever return. The Spoke Stones serve as that anchor. They unite the magi here together, and ensure that we retain control of the Weave.'

Seb didn't say anything, but the words didn't sit well. Wasn't part of Danu's covenant to ensure that the Weave couldn't be misused again? That another Shard War could not occur? Who was he though to challenge what went before? He wasn't there. He hadn't been through what they had.

'We have discussed enough. Caleb, are you ready?'

Seb had forgotten he was even there. He looked across. The old man was sat in the same position he was.

'Yes, Magister.'

'Then we travel.'

It came at once. A low rumble. The room faded to black. His feet felt funny, light almost. He dared to look down - shit - he was floating! His body lay beneath him, slumped over. Christ, he needed a shave. And a haircut. The Magister sat beside him. Caleb on the other.

He continued to rise, the scene below vanishing to darkness as he ascended into the recess above. He accelerated, and for a moment he thought he'd crash straight into the ceiling. Then he was free, the roof passing by in a stomach-churning blur of knotted wood and stone.

He couldn't put it into words. Years later, when asked, he still wouldn't be able to articulate fully the sensation of flying for the first time. The sensation of freedom. Of fear.



The world dwindled beneath him, the mansion becoming a grey spec amongst irregular shapes of green and brown. The earth became a dot surrounded by dark. Pin pricks of light twinkled against a midnight canvas. The stars drew together, dots stretching to lines that converged together into an endless tunnel of light. It was exhilarating and terrifying all at once.

*Do not fear, Seb. We are here.*

He looked across. The Magister was there. She no longer resembled her physical form and instead appeared as a shimmering, crackling form of blue lightning. The avatar was vaguely humanoid, two glowing white eyes stared back at him from the entity. Glancing to the other side he saw Caleb, his Weave-form slightly less luminous than the Magister, his tone a muted marine rather than the crackling blue of their master, but the aura was definitely Caleb, moodiness and all.

*This is amazing.* He pulsed, not knowing how, the knowledge coming to him on instinct.

*It is the Weave, in pure form. We all come from this. Everything is formed from this. It is the one energy. The foundation of reality.*

They zoomed down the tunnel. He became aware then of something tugging at him like a breeze, just nudging at first, before the touch became more pronounced. His direction changed, his bearing unknown but different from the others.

*Seb! Where are you going? Do not leave us!* The Magister's voice rang with alarm.

*I don't know! I'm not doing it!*

*Caleb - stop him!*

*Yes, Magister!*

Caleb turned and drifted towards him, but whatever had hold of him had other intentions. The distance between them grew. Seb stretched out to Caleb but the old man's avatar diminished further.

*Caleb!*

He had no form here, no heart, lungs or brain, but the sensation of fear was still very real. The coldness gripped him, an awareness of the distance growing between him and his only links back to his physical form. He was drifting away, dissolving into the Weave itself.

A bright light flashed. Caleb and the Magister vanished and he was instantly out of the tunnel. He glided now over an endless expanse of barren ground the colour of rust. Behind him a swirling vortex of lightning twisted inwards, the hole from which he'd emerged already a tiny glowing disk that reduced with every passing heartbeat.

Ahead, the horizon terminated in a ragged line of jet-black mountains. Plumes of cloud, grey, like floating stone bergs covered the peaks. Rivers of red trailed down the sides,

splitting into narrower channels like the exposed veins of some sleeping beast. Below him the rivers widened into vast lakes of bubbling lava. The air smelled of sulphur and his eyes stung from the brittle breeze.

He didn't notice the tower at first; such was its similarity to the mountains from which it was obviously carved. It loomed out of the cloud, a vague form, coalescing into a jagged structure of wicked edges that pointed at the sky like a finger inside a mail gauntlet. He slowed now, the wind receding to such a degree that he no longer had to squint into the gales of biting dust.

The tower was vast. He hovered near the top, where a huge archway opened out onto a massive stone platform that jutted out into the sky like a landing pad. Down below, the base of the tower vanished out of sight, swallowed by a combination of distance and cloud. Dotted throughout the structure were small apertures. Most were dark, but some glowed with an inner light. A hollow feeling filled his stomach as he descended towards the platform. What the hell was this place?

He alighted onto the platform. The stone, a smooth mineral flecked with white specks, felt cool underfoot. A sudden thought popped into his mind then - if he could feel in this place, then could he be harmed? Could he die? A gust of wind made him wobble. He dropped to his knees, just metres from the edge of

the platform. His heart - was it his heart - rattled in his chest.

A grumbling sound drew his attention to the far end of the hall. A thin sliver of light appeared as two heavy, impossibly thick doors of obsidian opened inwards. A silhouette filled the door, a tall shape that now drifted towards him.

Seb scrambled on hands and feet away from the edge of the platform, the panic only subsiding when he felt the safety of walls around him. He crouched, panting, clinging to the smooth stone for dear life.

'You're here earlier than I thought.' The voice was gentle, almost a whisper. A shadow covered the ground around him.

Seb forced himself to look up, fighting an almost overwhelming fear that seemed to ooze from the shade that covered him. He stifled a cry when he saw the serpentine face looking down. Unblinking eyes, orbs of pure crimson, sat on either side of a red-scaled head, stared at him.

'Who are you?' he heard himself say.

The creature's mouth curled into what he assumed was a smile, but the display of dagger-like teeth sent a shiver of fear down his back.

'You don't remember me? Well I suppose that's not a surprise. Let me look at you.'

The creature squatted, burnished armour creaking as it

lowered itself to his eye level. He tried to raise his mental shield as he'd been shown, but the barrier was swatted away as if it were nothing more than an annoying insect.

'Your skills have improved I can see, but you're not ready. Far from ready.'

'Who are you?' he said again, his voice firmer this time as the creature stood and walked past him, stopping at the very edge of the platform. Seb struggled to his feet and forced himself to turn back into the biting wind.

'Not yet. Not yet. You can't know that yet,' the creature turned, Seb almost collapsed as a powerful *sensing* crashed into him. It made even the Magister's powers seem feeble in comparison.

'The pattern is locked deep. And it's bound to your soul. No one but you can retrieve it.'

'That's what they tell me. But I can't do it. I can't use this damned Weave. It's beyond me!'

'Oh, I don't know. You found your way here didn't you?' The creature said, a hint of amusement creeping into its voice.

'That wasn't me. That was the Magister.'

'An unworthy title if ever I heard one.'

The creature stepped towards him, the gaze unrelenting. Seb gritted his teeth and squeezed every ounce of energy into his limbs, forcing himself to stand.

'The Magistracy. The warriors of Danu. Once it meant something, when they had abilities worth talking about. You know there was once a time when the magi had the power to rip from the Great River the lost souls of the dead. They gazed upon the very pillars of creation. They understood, they *knew*,' the creature's face creased into a frown that resembled a snarl. 'No more, no longer. But you know this already, don't you?'

'I don't know. I'm new to all this. I don't know anything, besides from the fact that I have this thing in me but I need to learn the Weave to get it out.'

'No. You are more than that. You are *different*. You don't know it yet, but you will. Providing you live long enough.'

'I don't understand. Why am I here?' Seb said. Something was changing. The energy was leaving him. He looked at his arms. The blue glow was fading. It was still bright, but slightly dimmer, like a bulb on its last legs. He looked up as the walls of the chamber flickered. For a moment he was back in the sanctum, the Magister and Caleb crouched over him, shouting something that he could not hear. The image flickered again and he was back in the great chamber. He screamed and fell backwards when he saw that lizard-like face not six inches from his own.

'You will go now, your time here is almost up.' The creature knelt down next to him. Seb tried to roll away but his strength was sapped. He could only flop onto his back and await

whatever hardship the creature would throw at him.

'What do you want from me?' he whispered.

'The time is coming, young mage. The time of the sleeping world is over. The Consensus is breaking, and the time will come when you have to make a choice.'

The world began to blur, the walls faded and the wind receded. Above him, behind the creature's head, the oak beams of the sanctum chamber began to form out of the gloom.

'I don't understand. What choice?'

'Not yet, mageling, not yet. Now, take this from me, take this and go.'

'What is it?'

The creature smiled as it held up one finger from a hand that contained only three. At the edge of the sharp talon glowed a small, almost invisible ball of light. As the creature lowered its finger towards his chest it leaned over, its great maw level with Seb's ears.

'What you came for,' it whispered.

The creature touched his chest. His back snapped upwards as a pulse of energy ripped through his core. The world turned white. Something roared in his ears. He opened his mouth to scream.

'Seb!'

Caleb's voice. The whiteness began to fade. Shadowy blobs

moved and twisted, shrunk and grew.

'Seb, can you hear me?' Caleb again. Frantic. Someone shook him by the shoulders.

'Seb. Come back.'

This time it was the Magister. Her voice resounded around his head as if blasted from a megaphone. The whiteness vanished. The stone structures of the Inner Sanctum came into view. Caleb knelt before him, his face a picture of concern.

'Caleb,' he said. His voice sounded slurred.

'Are you okay?'

Seb connected to the Weave. He *sensed* out. Caleb's concern echoed back. The Magister was more intrigued than worried.

Wait a minute.

He sensed again. Farther this time. Nearby Don cursed, angry at letting another jab slip through his mental shield.

He could do it. He could connect to the Weave.

'Seb?'

'I'm good, Caleb. Thanks,' he said, accepting the offered hand and standing. His legs shook. He channelled a simple Script designed to invigorate tired muscles. The shaking vanished instantly.

'I'm really good.'



## Chapter 26

The following few weeks flew by in a blur. With his Weave connection established, Seb threw himself back into training with renewed vigour. Caleb asked once what he'd seen on his Weave-walk. Where had he been? Some images still lingered. A tower. Lightning. Barren landscapes. He couldn't quite remember what had happened. Had he spoken to somebody? Something? He couldn't remember. Something had happened, he was sure of that. Something that had removed the doubt that nearly ended his training before it began. It hadn't removed the block in his mind, the one that hid the message, but it had allowed him to channel the Weave as easily as breathing. Sure, he was behind, way behind, compared to the other acolytes, but he was up and running now, and he wouldn't let it slide. Just one thing lingered from the Weave-walk where he'd been pulled away to places unknown. A phrase burned into his memory.

*A choice. He would have to make a choice.*

The mornings were always focused on Sentio. Quickly he'd discovered he no longer needed the foci. Caleb, impressed, and perhaps a little bit curious, had pushed harder. Seb absorbed Script after Script. When he wasn't calling Scripts he was head down in the Foundations of Arcana. Many, if not most of the Scripts there were beyond his understanding, but he found that

the more he learned the more he came to understand others. A familiar rune here, another script comprised of two known ones added together. His knowledge grew. His library of scripts with it.

Any spare time in the day was spent honing his *sense*. He cast it out, seeing what he could find. All too often it was nothing but confirmation that other life was out there, but in recent days he'd seen a subtle shift in the echoes he received. Where before it had just been a vague indication of life, now he was able to discern individuals amongst the noise.

It was addictive. And he craved more.

The afternoons were focused on joining Caleb on his rounds. He'd met many different individuals on these journeys, all loosely coupled to the new world within which he now existed. His knowledge had grown, but with it so had his doubts. It was not a happy time out there, he'd learned. Attacks by the sheol had been growing at an alarming rate, and there were growing rumours that the Brotherhood were unable to cope with the increase. When questioned, Cade had snapped that perhaps he could ask the Magistracy how they were coping. Seb didn't need to answer that, but from the increased number of meetings of the Three he suspected that the concern wasn't the Brotherhood's alone, although he was hard pressed to see what their contribution had been to the Brotherhood's struggles.

The evenings were his own. He'd tried earlier on to spend time with the other acolytes, but regardless of his new found prowess the orders regarding his segregation still held, the rest shunned him, keeping to themselves, avoiding his eyes whenever he walked past. So instead he spent his time with his head buried in one of the many books that filled the mansion library. Many of them of course were bound the in Runic Script that he was still learning to decipher. Some though were in English, translated from their original language. Their content enthralled him, and he spent many hours reading up on the Sharding, the Great Crossing to Aura and the many tales that preceded it.

His devotion had not gone unnoticed. A couple of times he'd seen Cian in the library too. The giant warrior didn't speak at first. But over time Seb had earned the occasional grunt of acknowledgement. As their meetings increased in number Cian seemed to accept that Seb wasn't going to be getting bored anytime soon, and so began recommending certain reading material - "if he wanted to learn something useful."

But it was the Weave, and the mastery of this mystical force that drove him. The more he used it, the more he connected with it and threw out his *sense*, the more he craved from it. He'd been begging Caleb for weeks to begin learning Avatari, the Self, saying that he was ready. Caleb had denied him, firmly at

first, but less so as the news of increased attacks began to filter through. Seb's argument that he needed to be better equipped to defend himself now held water, and Caleb's refuting of it had grown weaker by the day. Eventually he had relented. And today was the day he would learn the Self for the first time.

Seb paced around the centre of the chamber. He'd been there since before dawn, when an urgency born of desperation to learn had made him pretty much vault out of bed. Caleb was only just stirring as he went, but it didn't matter. Today was the day when he would begin to learn how to harness the Weave for himself.

Eventually, Caleb shuffled into the chamber, clutching a steaming mug of coffee. He groaned and flexed his neck, but Seb only smiled. The show of age was only an act, Caleb's aura as brighter now, if not brighter, than it was when Seb had first seen it.

'Come on, old man, it's not like you to be late.'

'It's not like you to be early.'

'Touché. Although this is no ordinary day.' He looked down at Caleb's attire. 'You don't look particularly ready for training.'

'I'm not.' Caleb said. His face broke out into a wide grin that made Seb feel uneasy.

'But I am!'

Seb stopped, nearly tripping over his own feet as Cian entered the room, stooping to get his giant frame under the door.

'Master Cian,' he heard himself say, his voice having risen in pitch.

'Last time I checked.'

Cian walked into the centre of the chamber. He wore the familiar grey smock that Seb had seen on many occasions watching him spar outside. The sight of his favoured weapon, the staff, strapped to his back conjured a dread feeling in Seb's gut.

Cian stopped and threw his staff to the ground. He turned and looked Seb up and down.

'So, Caleb tells me you're ready for the Self?'

Seb shot a glance back at his mentor. Caleb gave a quick double nod back as if to say "go on!". He looked back. Cian was staring at him with one eyebrow raised.

'Well, boy, unless you're communicating with me via telepathy - and failing - you're going to need to speak up.'

'Yes, Master. I believe I am ready.'

'Why?'

'Sorry?'

'Why, Seb? Why are you ready? The acolytes out there aren't ready. They can barely sense themselves when they look in the

mirror. Why are you ready?’

The question caught him off guard, but he focused quickly, drawing on his training to filter out the growing anger, pushing it to one side. He let out a deep breath.

‘I have not mastered Sentio that is true. However I am more than able to keep pace with the lesson’s Caleb is teaching me. I teach myself often, well into the night. You’ve seen me yourself. Plus I need to learn it, if I’m to defend myself against the sheol.’

Cian stared at him for what seemed like an eternity. The giant warrior cast a look at Caleb, who gave a resigned shrug in response.

‘Interesting. You may find it hard to believe, Seb. But I agree with you.’

Seb’s mouth slammed shut. He’d been ready for a counter argument. Cian’s acceptance was fortunate, as he had nothing else to throw back.

‘Really?’

‘Don’t look so surprised. You are far beyond where you would have been expected to be. We do not know what happened to you in your Weave-walk. The results were successful, perhaps too successful, but that is a conversation for another time. For now though, I do agree. You need to be able to protect yourself. Properly. You don’t have the luxury of a Family’s wealth and

their retinue of bodyguards. A phosphorus gun will only go so far. You are ready. And I will teach you. Understand?’

‘Yes, Master.’

Cian nodded. ‘That will be all, Caleb.’

Caleb left. Seb watched him go before turning back to Cian. He flexed his fingers together and tipped his head to one side and then other as he shook out morning muscles.

‘You should not be so eager.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Your desire to learn is great. A rare thing in fact. But be careful that you do not run before you can walk.’

‘I’m sorry, Master. It’s just that once I connected that first time, it was if something had awoken inside me. For the first time in my life I’d found something that I could actually do, but not just do, but excel at. When I lost it, and I couldn’t connect anymore, I felt lost, disconnected. When it came back I vowed never to take it for granted again. I know I’m a novice, but it just seems so natural to me. Does that make sense?’

Cian studied him in silence for a moment. Something in Seb’s mind tingled, and it suddenly dawned on him what was happening.

‘You’re reading my mind.’

‘Only the surface. I wanted to gauge if your intentions

match your words.'

'And do they?'

'I wouldn't be here if they didn't.' Cian nodded to the mat. 'Sit.'

Seb obeyed. He adopted the usual sitting position, legs crossed. Soles facing inwards, the backs of his hands resting on his knees. Cian kneeled down opposite him.

'You have become proficient in Sentio. You can sense out now, detecting lifeforms. Correct?'

'Yes.'

'Over time, as you practice, that will grow. As your connection with the Weave strengthens you will learn to not only sense life, but also their intentions, their fears. Eventually your reach will grow, crossing even to other Shards. Eventually, you will be able to read the inner most thoughts of any living creature.

'However, with this growth, so increases the risk. You are aware of the Consensus?'

Seb nodded. 'Yes. It's the collective strength of the conscious and unconscious minds of the Unaware.'

Cian laughed. 'Well regurgitated. Correct, of course, but do you know what that actually means?'

'That reality is bound by the rules of the Consensus?'

'Much better. Yes, exactly that. At the time of the



crossing, Woden and his fellow magi decided that this new realm, which was as yet untainted by the power of the Weave, would remain so. In their ultimate sacrifice, they combined their powers, and bound the Weave to the will of the Observers.'

'The Observers? You mean the Unaware?'

'They are one and the same. The basic rule that only a reality that was bound by the Consensus, this *collective perception of reality*, if you will, could actually exist. They bound their abilities into this rule, and then stepped back from the world.'

Seb nodded again, thinking back over the texts he'd read. 'So two things come out of that. One, is that things only exist when they're observed, and two, that only things that are accepted as *normal* can actually happen?'

Cian sat back slightly, a genuine look of surprise on his face. Seb smiled back.

'*The Consensus Explained - Volume One.*' Seb said.

'I think I need to enforce this reading policy across all my students,' Cian said, a grudging smile creeping onto his face. 'But yes, you are right. The former is well known amongst our kind, and even the scientists of this realm are beginning to speculate on it themselves. However it is the latter, that only events that are accepted as the norm by the Consensus, that concerns us.'

'With Sentio, it is not much of an issue. The act of sensing is a subtle effect. No one can tell you're doing it unless you're a Latent yourself. And if you're Latent, then the Consensus doesn't apply in any case.'

That was a new one. 'Really? How does that work?'

'It means that Weave-effects can be done in front of a Latent with no penalties applied from the Consensus. However, when we look at Avatari, and beyond that, Novo, we have to face the restrictions of the Consensus head on.

'Reality is enforced by the Unaware. When someone, or something, attempts to change reality in a way that goes against the Consensus, there is a push back against the changer. For subtle effects that can be passed off as occurring naturally, explained away as a trick of the light, then there is only a minor push back. For things more vulgar, that just *cannot* happen, then the push back is more severe. Sometimes even fatal. Understand?'

'I think so.' He said.

'It's a lot to take in. For now let us act. We can talk later.'

Cian walked to one side of the chamber. He emptied a bundle of short wooden sticks to the floor. He waved his hand. The air crackled with Weave-energy, the hairs on Seb's arm standing on end. The sticks moved, rising from the ground as if on strings.

They came together, hovering in mid-air, settling into a loosely humanoid shape around six feet in height.

'Wow.'

'This,' Cian said, moving in front of the stick man, 'is a mage variant of what is called in fighting circles as a wooden man. Basically it's a training dummy.'

'A training dummy held together by magic? This is not like the one you train with outside?'

Cian's eyes flickered for a second.

'We need our version to be more resistant,' he said after a pause, ignoring Seb's interruption. 'Our methods are more *damaging* than those seen in the martial arts of the Unaware.'

Seb looked the wooden man up and down. It didn't look much. A gust of wind would take it out in an instant.

'You doubt its use?' Cian said.

'It just looks a little - flimsy.'

Cian swung the back of his hand towards the dummy, the air crackling with unseen energy. He connected, the dummy exploded, sending shards of broken wood clattering to the floor.

'Whoa!' Seb said. He bent down to pick up a sliver of wood that landed at his feet. 'I hope you've got plenty more where that came from.'

'No need. Observe.'

Cian didn't move his hands this time. The energy crackled

in the air yet again. The wooden fragment in his hand began to tug as if being pulled by an unseen force. He let it go. The shard floated in the air, drifting back to where the dummy had stood moments earlier. The shard was joined by the rest of the debris, the wooden fragments reforming back into a humanoid shape. The air around the dummy shimmered. The cracks vanished, leaving it whole again.

'Ah.' Seb said.

'You get it now?'

'No matter how hard you hit it, it just gets back up?'

'Exactly. Now, to the lesson at hand. Avatari. The Self. At its most basic level it involves channelling the Weave into your second most important asset. Your vessel. With it you will increase your speed, strength and senses.'

'I thought Sentio did that. The senses, I mean.'

'Sentio is your Weave-sense. It is basically your ability to connect to the Weave and intuit everything else connected to it. Avatari is your physical senses such as hearing and sight.'

'Got it.'

'Good. Now come forwards.'

Seb stepped over to Cian. The wooden man hovered right before him. He resisted the urge to pass his hands through the gaps between components as if he would find some hidden string.

'Hit it.'

'What?'

'Am I speaking a foreign language? Hit it, Seb.'

Seb took up a fighting stance, muscle memory kicking in from months of training with Cade. He took in a deep breath. As he exhaled he struck out with a snap punch. He hit the dummy's head with a dull thunk.

'Shit!' His fist burned. He held it between his legs as he hopped round the room.

'Good effort.'

'Good effort? What the hell does that prove? I think I've just broken my knuckles.'

'You and I both know that's not true. I was just re-enforcing the point. You can testify that this is not simply cardboard. That is a firm, solid structure?'

Seb looked at the back of his hands where his knuckles blazed an angry red.

'Yeah. I think I can testify to that.'

'Good. Now. Are you connected?'

Seb closed his eyes. The hum was there, an almost imperceptible sensation, like a radio being plugged in and turned on but the volume turned down to zero.

'I am.'

'Very well. Open your eyes. This may hurt a little.'

Cian weaved his right hand through the air. A trail of

white light followed this forefinger. He stepped back a moment later, the completed image hovering in the air between them.

'What is that?'

'Runic Script.'

'I know that. I just don't recognise it.'

'You won't find it in *Fundamentals*. This, and certain others for the other schools, are held from the acolyte until they are ready. These are the building blocks from which the other patterns can be built from.'

An image came to mind. The Tower. The stone platform. A door opening. Someone talking to him. A finger touching his chest. The world exploding in white light.

'Problem?' Cian said.

'This didn't happen with Sentio. I don't remember ever receiving a first Script for that?'

'You did. Via the foci. You couldn't read Runic then. Your mind wasn't able to comprehend its meaning. Now you are different. You can see it in its true form. Now, brace yourself.'

'Wait -'

The hovering rune began to glow, the light expanding. Then he realised it wasn't expanding. It was moving towards him. He tried to close his eyes but couldn't. He was held, immobile, as the pattern encompassed his entire view. From somewhere,

something rumbled, then the rune exploded, and burned itself into his mind.

'Are you okay?' Cian said.

Seb blinked. He could still see the pattern in the air, like when someone stares at the sun for too long before looking away. It faded with each passing second, becoming a handful of incoherent blobs that finally vanished completely.

Did he feel okay? There was no pain. None at all. But something was different. The Weave connection was there, that ever present hum, but it had a different tone to it, as if it were sat there, ready to be activated in some way.

'Something's different.'

'It's normal to feel that way. Your mind has just been awoken to further possibilities with the Weave. Already new neurons are forming as a result, the pattern embedding itself within you, readying you for what comes next.'

'What comes next?'

Cian stepped back. He nodded to the dummy. 'Hit it.'

'How did I know you were going to say that?'

'Hit it again. Only this time, draw upon what you have just learned.'

'How do I do that?'

'Channel. Call up your patterns. You will see.'

Right. *Call up your patterns.* Easy enough. He closed his

eyes and accessed the store where all the memorised patterns went. They came easily, a catalogue of runes available on demand. He could tell straight away that the library had been expanded massively. A whole new area was there, listed under an image of the rune he had just absorbed. These runes were different though. They weren't callable, they were just *there*.

'I can see them, but I can't call them,' he said, his eyes remaining closed.

'Indeed. These are known as passive effects. They are always on, so to speak, as long as you are connected. Just remember they are bound by the same rules as everything else. Beware the Consensus, and don't burn yourself out.'

'Understood.' He said. *I think.*

Seb assumed his favoured fighting position once again. He focussed on his connection, willing it towards his limbs. His fists. In his mind's eye he felt, rather than saw, the collection of runes begin to glow with a golden light. His hands tingled. A warmth began to fill his upper body. Absently, he noticed the redness on his knuckles had faded away, the pain vanishing with it.

'Hit it.'

Seb struck out. His fist, imbued with the Weave, struck the dummy with force. The head cracked, splitting out in two directions as his fist emerged out of the back. The broken head



clattered to the floor as he stepped away. He glanced at the fist that showed no sign of damage.

'Well done.'

'My fist. It doesn't hurt.'

'No. You have Avatari now. Your body can take more damage than it could previously. It will heal faster. Many times faster than a normal human.'

'What, just like that?'

'No, unfortunately it isn't just like that. Avatari is like any muscle. It needs work, training. Soon you will see the effect of our little exercise today, and it won't be a pleasant experience. You must keep trying. Keep working at it. Over time you will recover faster and will be able accomplish more before you reserves are spent.'

'What do you mean? I feel fi -'

A wave of weakness crashed into him. The world span. His knees gave way and he dropped to the ground, his open palms stopping him just in time to prevent him hitting the cold stone.

'Here it is. Caleb!'

He heard the door open and Caleb scurry in. He tried to life his head but the energy just wasn't there. His stomach wretched. The world began to fade.

'Easy lad, easy.' Caleb's voice came, full of concern.

Strong arms lifted him. He tried to focus on the blurred

face in front of him but gave up when his stomach heaved.

'I feel sick.'

'Don't worry. It's perfectly normal,' Caleb said. He was being dragged across the room.

'I will return in two days.' Cian said, his voice coming from somewhere far away.

The world faded away.

Caleb lowered the unconscious Seb into bed and pulled over the covers. Already he was breathing deep, exhaustion claiming him. Caleb rose and left him to rest. Cian was waiting in the Drain.

'Two days?' Caleb said, continuing their conversation.

'He'll be lucky if he's awake after two days.'

'He will be. He is unfocused, but he is strong. We must push him.'

'To hell with the message, Cian.' Caleb snapped. 'Push him too hard and it will kill him.'

'I do not particularly care about this message, whatever its contents. The boy is unique. He doesn't come from the Families. He isn't numbed to the Weave in all its wonder. It makes him eager, desperate even, to learn more. He could be powerful.'

Caleb sank a mouthful of ale. He wiped the froth from his beard. 'Powerful? Is this before or after the Magister casts him

out only to be hunted by the Brotherhood?’

‘Watch your words, Caleb.’

‘Why, do I tell a falsehood?’

‘You are still here. Are you not?’

‘I was lucky. I wonder if Seb will be so?’

‘Leave the boy to me. If he progresses as he is, then the  
Magistry, and so the Families, will have a much greater interest  
in him.’

Cian left without a word. He bounded up the stairs, taking  
three steps at a time. After the door clunked shut, Caleb sank  
the rest of his tankard and aimed a weary eye at the sleeping  
Seb.

‘Aye. That’s what I’m afraid of.’

## Chapter 27

The cold nipped at Cade as soon as he stepped out of the Way. The magically maintained atmosphere of the passage vanishing as he emerged into the small wood that stood near his home. He drew his cloak tighter around his body and placed one foot onto the snow.

The wind swirled around him as he followed the treacherous path upwards. The snow numbed his skin and stung his eyes. Down below, partially obscured by cloud, the people of the realm continued their lives, blissfully unaware of the fractures that were opening up in their reality.

Two more men he'd lost on this last patrol. Two more Brothers giving their lives for the Oath. It was a loss that they could do without. The attacks were increasing, at least once a day now, and the sheol were growing in number. Before, they were isolated fiends, clumsy and disorganised. Recent weeks had seen a change in that. Now they worked together in packs. And now they used humans too? It was too much to comprehend.

The two brothers guarding the outer gate snapped to attention when they saw the Third Sword emerge from the blizzard before them. He nodded at both as he marched past.

He passed through the courtyard towards to the front door. It was quiet today. A trio of brothers practiced sword movements

in one corner where the weather hadn't quite reached. The others were no doubt inside, hiding from the elements. Not that there'd be many, of course. Most of them were permanently assigned to other more profitable ventures that didn't involve daemons from another realm.

Inside, Cade swung off his cloak and hood and hung it by the door. A familiar face, aged since the last time he'd been home, waltzed over to greet him.

'Mr Wallen, it is good to see you, sir,' the man said in an airy tone.

'Albert,' Cade said, his voice matching Albert's. 'Is my father around? I need to see him about a matter of utmost urgency.'

'He is anxious to see you too, Sir. He was in the dojo, the new recruits are proving some entertainment for Reuben.' Albert replied, his tone dripping with even more distaste as he uttered the other name.

'My brother?' Cade said, sighing. 'Excellent, just what I needed.'

'Shall I show you through, Sir?'

'I know the way, thanks Albert.'

Cade dumped his bags on the floor by the door and set off through an archway to the right. It had been a long time since he'd been home, and the feelings on his return reminded him why

he rarely came back. The atmosphere still hung like a damp cloth, sucking the warmth out of the place. Between this and the Magistracy it felt like their world was crumbling. The remnants of a dying race, snuffed out like a candle.

Shouts of alarm and grunts of pain came from the end of the corridor, shaking him out of his melancholy. Great. Reuben was indeed busy.

He pushed open the doors, the frame crashing against the wall on the inside. His attention was drawn immediately to the familiar raised platform in the centre of the room. The usual scattered mats were clustered round the platform, a scattering of new recruits resting, staring at the show going on in front of them. Cade glanced upwards with a sigh, already knowing what he would see.

Three people stood on the platform. Two men and one woman. He saw Reuben instantly, his older brother stood between the other two combatants, twirling a pair of rattan sticks in an intricate dance around his body. Reuben's yellow eyes darted between the two that circled him. Both of them were dressed in loose, dark outfits - learner smocks. The man hobbled as he moved, one hand clutching his right knee, the other holding a wooden sword, curved in shape, like a katana, but much shorter. One of his eyes was bruised, his bottom lip puffed up and swollen. Blood trickled down his chin.

The woman seemed to be faring better. Aside from a small welt on her cheek, where no doubt a bruise would swell in the morning, she seemed to be relatively unharmed. She held a staff in both hands, twirling it with a subtle confidence as she edged around the ring.

On some hidden cue, Reuben's opponents attacked him at once. Reuben became a blur, vanishing from in front of them a split second before they clashed together in the centre of the ring. He spun and appeared behind the man, who tried to turn and defend against the inevitable. The man never even got halfway before a kick to the back of the knee sent him crashing to the ground. A second crack on the side of his head saw him crumple to the floor, unmoving.

To her credit, the woman didn't hesitate. She pounced on the sudden pause in proceedings and swung the staff, swinging out at full length, aiming for Reuben's head. She had courage, definitely, but the outcome was inevitable.

The strike was fast, anyone less than a ranking Sword would no doubt have gone out like a light. But Rueben was no ordinary warrior. At the last second he brought up his rattan, taking the full impact on the shaft of the weapon. He took a step backwards, parrying another attack as the woman pressed on, the staff following through towards his legs.

'Stay back,' Cade heard himself whisper.

The woman pushed forwards, over extending herself. He could almost feel her emotions bubbling over, the eagerness to score a hit, the anger over her fallen friend, tainted with the fear of what would happen should she fail.

She found out the latter a second later.

She swept the staff low, aiming for Reuben's legs. He dropped over the weapon, falling into a roll that brought him up behind the woman, who suddenly found herself facing thin air. Without looking behind, Reuben struck with his left hand rattan, catching her at the knee. She fell backwards onto the canvas, the wind driven from her as she fell. Cade winced as Reuben kicked out, hitting her in the ribs. The staff rolled to one side as the woman doubled up, pulling her knees inwards, forming a protective shell.

'Is this the best you can come up with?' Reuben yelled, his voice echoing around the room. 'I thought you lot were meant to be the best that was out there?'

Cade sighed. The other people gathered around the ring looked up. All of them seemed unconcerned, their eyes blank, mouths level. This kind of outburst was nothing new.

At that moment, Reuben squatted next to the woman, gripped her by the hair and forced her heads upwards. Her eyes, streaming tears, stared back at him, hatred in her eyes.

'Looking angry isn't going to save you out there, is it,



you stupid bitch?’

At that, Reuben suddenly stood and kicked the woman hard in the face. Her head snapped back, blood droplets exploding onto the canvas.

‘Now what do you think?’ he shouted again. He kicked her again, and again.

‘Enough!’

Cade’s voice echoed throughout the chamber. All eyes fell on him. Reuben looked up, scowling. Their eyes met and the scowl dropped, turning into the all too familiar sneer.

‘Well, if it isn’t the mage-lover?’

Reuben vaulted out of the ring. Three recruits jumped in, rushing to their fallen comrades.

‘Brother. I see you haven’t lost your zeal for violence.’

Reuben glowered. His hands clenched as he leaned closer. Part of Cade wanted him to attack. It’d been many years since they’d last traded blows. The outcome wouldn’t be as foregone as that time.

‘What is this?’ A new, familiar voice boomed out. Cade dropped to his knees, his brother following a second later.

‘Reuben, speak. What the hell is going on here?’

They rose as one, heads bowed.

‘Father, forgive me. Cade and I were just getting *reacquainted*,’ he said.

Silas, First Sword of the Brotherhood, turned and looked at his second son.

'Cade. God, boy, what's happened to you?'

Cade touched a hand to the fading scar on his cheek. 'This? It will heal.'

'You must be getting slow, brother.'

Cade ignored the barb and focused on his father. 'Father,' he said, 'Forgive me for this unplanned return. However I must speak with you about a matter of great concern.'

'Why of course, my son. You are my Third Sword and I value your counsel.' Silas motioned for them to move. They left the dojo with Reuben and entered Silas' study. Silas poured three cups of his favoured green tea before sitting. Cade followed suit. He took a deep drink of the tea, the hot liquid invigorating.

'So, tell me, Son, what is this grave matter?'

'Yes, tell us, Brother, what excitement comes from our *friends* at the Magistry?'

'It is the sheol, Father. There is something wrong with them.'

Rueben sneered. 'Of course there's something wrong with them. They're a daemonic vermin that are a cancer on all the Shards. Tell us something we don't know.'

'Reuben. You will be silent. Or you will leave.' Silas

said. He looked back at Cade. 'Son, tell me what you have seen.'

Cade recounted the past few weeks. He hadn't been sure at first but after he'd spent the time tracing it back he was convinced that it had been with Marek's betrayal and Seb's emergence that the sheol presence had jumped through the roof. He told his father of their greater numbers, their organisation. Silas pulled a pained expression when he heard how many Brothers had been lost. When Cade mentioned the humans and the symbol he twitched slightly but did not say anything further. He ended the story with a description of the female warrior that he'd seen on several occasions with the sheol.

'This symbol. Can I see it?'

Cade took out his phone and pulled up the photos. He slid it across to Silas who scanned through each of them. After looking through them again he frowned and passed it over to Reuben.

'I do not know this symbol, Reuben. Send them to the Lore Keepers. They will no doubt be able to discover its origins.' Silas looked back at Cade. 'Now, Son, thank you passing this over. Is there anything else you would like to discuss?'

'What?' Cade said, looking back and forth between the two men, 'That's it?'

Silas frowned. 'I'm sorry, was there something more?'

'Are you not concerned about this report? The attacks? Our

losses?'

'Do not take that tone, Cade. Of course the loss of our brothers concerns me. But that is our Oath. We cannot forsake it.'

'I'm not saying that, Father. What I am saying is that we must do something about it.'

'What do you suggest?'

Was this conversation really happening? How could he just be so nonchalant about this whole affair?

'Cade?'

'More men for a start. Give me more men. Let me try and locate the source of this infestation and eradicate it.'

Silas shook his head. 'I am sorry, Son. We have no spare capacity. Aside from the trainers here we are at bare bones.'

'Then call them back! This is not a game, Father. Something is happening, and one of us needs to take this seriously!' Cade's blood was boiling now. Even Reuben had tensed somewhat, although Cade could see a wry smirk on his brother's face. He was no doubt enjoying this exchange.

'Cade. I will not warn you again, Son or not. You will not disrespect your First Sword.' Silas spoke in an icy tone. There were would no negotiation from here.

'Apologies, Father.'

Silas held his gaze for a moment. Something lifted in his

mind and the frown vanished. He turned to Reuben, a decision made.

'Reuben. Take three of your best men from your personal guard. They are to be re-assigned to Cade with immediate effect.'

Now it was Reuben's turn to be incensed. 'What? Father you cannot -'

'Your *best*, Reuben. Understand?'

Reuben's face was stone. 'Yes, Father.'

'I am sorry I cannot give you more, Cade, but it is all I can do.'

'What about the Magistr? Can they not assist?'

'I have asked previously. You were there, Cade. You saw how the Magister was.'

'But the Oath?'

'The Oath is for us to them. Not the other way round.'

'The Oath is a pile of shit, and we all know it,' Reuben said.

'Enough, Reuben. I am well aware of your thoughts on this.' Silas rose from behind the desk. 'Now, I have other matters to attend to. Cade, thank you for bringing this to my attention. Take your extra men and find the source of this infestation. I will try and talk to the Magistr again. Perhaps they can spare someone to assist.'

Silas waved a hand towards the door. Cade rose, nodded and then walked towards the door. He held it as he walked through, waiting for Reuben.

'Reuben,' Silas said, the Second Sword stopping midway across the room. 'A moment if you please.'

Cade let the door shut behind him. With a walk fuelled by anger he headed back to the dojo. It was time for a workout of his own.

## Chapter 28

*Sarah stood by the dead priest, his black eyes gone now, replaced by the human eyes that lurked behind. Dark blood pooled under his head where her cudgel had cracked his skull.*

*She swallowed down the guilt of what she had done. Releasing the priest from possession was a mercy for the poor man. His soul was free now, free to return to the River.*

*She didn't have much time. The first workers would be on site soon, their guards with them. When they found the priest dead they would search every member of the dig, and her sheol disguise, as good as it was, would not hold up to such scrutiny.*

*She had to act, and act fast.*

*With enhanced eyes she scanned the ancient writings that the priest had jotted down. She didn't understand the language; it was an old form of Runic Script that she'd never been shown at the Magistry. Still, it didn't matter. Her mind would not forget. It would absorb every scrap of information her senses took in. When she returned to the Magistry they would extract it from her and decide how much this was worth. Only they had the knowledge to decipher such archaic writings.*

*She scanned page after page. Image after image being burned into memory. A nervousness poked at the edge of her perception, but she kept it bay, her training serving her well.*

*She'd just scanned the last page when she heard the sounds of footsteps up above. The first workers had arrived.*

*Time to go.*

*She dashed into the narrow tunnels at the rear of the site. The route, carefully plotted and rehearsed over the previous weeks, led to the open tundra. From there it was a day's hard running to the Way. To freedom.*

*She was many metres into the tunnels when the first cries of alarm reach her sensitive ears. She didn't slow. She kept moving at pace. The exit loomed ahead. The pink glow of the twin suns welcoming her back to the surface.*

*Sarah emerged onto the tundra. Ahead of her the vast expanse of the Scarros Plains vanished into the distance. The heat was rising already, by noon it would in the high forties.*

*She had to move quickly. There were others out here now more terrifying than the soulless drones at the dig.*

*Sarah had taken one step forwards when the coldness struck her, nearly dropping her to her knees.*

*'Why, this is a plucky one isn't it?'*

*The mental shield evaporated. The fear she'd so efficiently kept at bay exploded to the fore. She turned her head back and looked up towards the source of the chilling voice.*

*Clementine. The Hound. Hunter of souls. He stared down at her, squatted atop a rocky mound that housed the tunnel she'd*



*just emerged from.*

*'Don't run, Sarah. You know I don't like it when they run.'*

*Sarah screamed.*

Sylph woke, her own scream mixing with that of the traitor.

## Chapter 29

'Is anyone there?' Caleb said again, louder this time.

'Sorry?'

'You! You haven't spoken all morning,' Caleb said as they drove down the relatively empty M6. It was just after dawn. Already the sun was high in the sky, the August heatwave not relenting. The inside of the van smelled of sweat and oil.

'Sorry, just tired I guess.' Seb replied. He shifted in his seat, peeling his back off the leather.

'You can have a break you know.'

'What do you mean?'

'You. Pushing it every night. You don't want to burn yourself out.'

'It isn't just about me though, is it?'

'You can't take all of this on your shoulders, Seb. This conflict was going on for many years before you arrived, and will be so long after you've gone.'

'I don't recall the sheol being this much an issue on earth previously?'

Caleb pulled a face and looked away.

'Sorry, Caleb. I didn't mean to snap. I will take a break. Promise.'

Caleb grunted. Conversation over. He acted offended but

he'd be talking again in an hour. The conversation was one they'd repeated over and over in recent days. Caleb would chastise him for working too hard, Seb would throw back the burden he carried in response.

In reality though, and he wouldn't admit this to anyone, it wasn't the pattern locked in his head that drove his efforts. It was the thrill - and the challenge - of learning the endless Runic Script that drove him. He woke up seeing those symbols dancing behind his eyelids. He would recant them mentally throughout the day, hardening them to memory. He would fall asleep with Fundamentals in his arms and Script in his dreams.

This time he'd been thinking of the Script he'd been trying to learn the previous evening. Blurring, or that's as close a translation he could decipher. He'd seen Cian do it before, when he'd been training with the simulcra outside. When doing it the caller seemed to be in two places at once, such was the speed of the movement. In all honesty it belonged in the realm of Novo, but he'd found it in the Avatari patterns. Not that it mattered. He'd been up until way past lights out trying - and failing - to blur across the chamber.

'We're here,' Caleb said, the massive electric gate that marked the entrance to Kollmorgen's estate looming ahead of them.

Seb casually sensed out. An echo came back, feeble, almost

non-existent. He sat up, his stomach knotting.

Kollmorgen. In danger.

'Something's wrong.'

Caleb brought the van to a halt near the usual side door.

The door that now stood ajar. No guard in attendance.

'Kollmorgen. He's injured.'

Seb sensed out, but his heart was pounding, his effort clumsy. Kollmorgen's aura flickered, a fading flame clinging to life. No guards. None that he could see. He kicked the door open and stepped out onto the gravel.

'Seb, wait.'

But he was already out and running. Imbued feet pounded gravel as he raced across to the door. He barged it open and fell inside, Caleb shouting something from behind that was lost beneath the sound of his thudding heart.

He nearly tripped over the body that lay slumped against a doorframe. The guard's throat had been ripped open. Dark arterial blood had spilled out, coating the carpet. The man's right hand still clasped the gun that he'd not quite managed to pull from its holster. Seb forced himself to look at the guard's face.

'Tom.'

'Seb! Don't go in there!' Caleb appeared at the door.

'It's Tom! He's dead! I need to find Kollmorgen.'

'The sheol!'

Caleb's warning died as Seb moved to the next intersection. Dead guards and upturned furniture looked back at him from both sides. 'They did this. They got to him!'

An irrational anger flared to life. The drumming pounded in his head as he marched on, his fists clenched white, energy surging to his limbs.

The open archway to the study came into view. Seb paused, but just for a second. He channelled, readying himself as he turned in.

The sheol squatted on the arms of Kollmorgen's favourite arm chair. The old man was sat beneath him, his skin waxy, glistening in sweat. Wide eyes stared upwards, pupils tiny and fixed on the fiend that had just raked a fresh set of cuts across his chest. The sheol stopped mid-slash and turned its black eyes towards him.

'Mageling. What an unexpected surprise.' The sheol pivoted to face him, hunched and bent over like a bird on a perch. 'Now I will have a true feast.'

'Seb!'

Seb glanced back into the massive hallway. Caleb had skidded to a halt. He was bent over, hands on his thighs, his breath coming in painful wheezes. He raised a shaking hand that pointed above and over Seb's shoulders. Seb followed the action,

turning towards the wide staircase.

Shit.

Sheol. Five of them. Scrambling down the stairway, their distended jaws wide with manic glee. Another two appeared on either side of Caleb, back in the hallway. The air shimmered around the mage as shields rose in an instant.

A sudden movement at the periphery of his vision caused Seb to pivot. The sheol hopped down from the stricken Kollmorgen and leapt towards Seb. He spun away, both arms raised, deflecting the sheol as it barrelled past him into the corridor, crashing into the wall and causing an antique painting to plummet from his mounting. The sheol recovered quickly though, must quicker than Seb. It growled and leapt forwards, smashing his forehead into Seb's nose. Pain erupted from the impact, his mouth and nose filling with coppery liquid as he staggered back into the study, collapsing on to the floor next to Kollmorgen's feet.

From somewhere else, Caleb shouted. The sheol rose into a crouch, ready to pounce. The partition wall exploded inwards as Caleb charged through, the force he'd projected sending plaster flying in all directions. He blurred past Seb's side, launching himself into the sheol that was now in mid-leap. The two collided, Caleb's momentum propelling them into the bookcase, Caleb hoisting the sheol into the air whilst it kicked and thrashed, razor nails raking at Caleb's exposed forearms.

Seb struggled to his feet. Through tear-filled eyes he looked right to Caleb then in front of him, where another sheol came careering into the room.

Seb tried to draw on the Weave, but he couldn't do it. *Come on, dammit!* He called the patterns again but his mind wouldn't focus, the script dancing away like ashes in the wind. His heart raced, adrenalin flowing through him. He couldn't get the required calm to channel effectively. It was like his connection was faulty, dropping in and out at random.

The sheol was only a few feet away now. Two more appeared behind it in the doorway.

'Caleb!' He shouted.

Caleb was sat atop the other sheol. He struck down again and again, his hands clasped together, a fleshy club imbued with the Weave. The sheol snarled, raising its arms in a feeble attempt to block the onslaught, but Caleb's strikes just smashed through, the sheol's face slowly becoming a pulp of black blood.

'I can't believe my luck. A feast of Weave-flesh landing right in our grasp,' the nearest sheol said, one arm, clearly broken, hanging limp at its side.

'Stay away!' Seb shouted. The sheol hesitated, but Seb's voice was stronger than he felt. He couldn't channel. Why? Dammit! What the hell was wrong with him? He scrunched his eyes shut, desperation kicking in, but it was no use. The Weave

seemed a mile away, a distant memory.

'He's afraid.' A new voice said, from beyond the doorway.

Seb looked beyond the sheol. Another appeared, taller than the rest. Unlike the others this one still maintained an exterior that was almost human. His eyes though, black as night, betrayed his heritage. The others parted for him in deference. He was some kind of leader, the others stopping their assault for a moment.

'This one. This is the message-bearer!' The leader-sheol said. It tipped its head to one side, a smug grin on its face. It took a step forwards, the others parting even further, confusion on their faces.

'That means we can't kill it? What about the other one? The old stringy one, over *there*?' One of them said.

They all looked across in unison. Caleb slowly staggered to his feet. His face was a horror, covered in black blood and matter. The sheol lay dead at his feet, a pulpy mess.

'Caleb,' Seb whispered.

Caleb caught his gaze and followed his eyes downwards. His shirt was ripped where sheol claws had gotten through his defences. Already the wounds were turning black. Dark purple veins had sprouted from the site and were spreading across his side.

'Shit.' Caleb said, raising his head back to face the



remaining fiends.

'Oh dear. It looks like you have a slight issue going on there, old man.' The sheol leader said. He advanced forwards, the others following, fanning out into the room.

*On my signal, you run, and don't look back.* Caleb pulsed into his mind.

*What? No, I'm not leaving you here!*

*I'm done. It's you they want, god knows why but it is.*

*I won't go!*

It was too late. Caleb's mind was shut off from him. The air crackled as the old man channelled. Seb sensed the runes as they were called.

'Shit.'

Seb dived to the ground as Caleb unleashed a massive blast of force. The Consensus groaned in Seb's head, but it did not prevent the script being called. The blast ripped outwards, launching furniture and sheol alike into the air. The walls blew out, dust and rubble flying as the building began to crumble.

Moments passed. Seb's ears rang, the noise high-pitched and painful. He staggered to his feet. A sharp pain dug at his side. He looked down and plucked out a sliver of glass that had sliced into his ribs. Passive runes kicked in straight away, the pain receding to a dull ache.

A cream cloud of dust filled what was left of the room. The

four sheol were slumped on the floor. Caleb was nowhere to be seen, but the bookcase had fallen forwards where he'd stood. Could he be under there? Seb sensed out. Nothing. He sensed again, a panic seeping into him. There! A flicker of life from under the book case.

One of the sheol began to stir. It was the youngest one, the one nearest to him. It shook its head and coughed, pulling itself up to its knees. Its head rose. Dazed eyes alighted on Seb.

'You'll be a fine prize for Marek!'

The sheol lunged forwards just as Seb struck out with all he had. The flat of his palm, imbued with passive Avatari, smashed into the sheol's nose, halting it's progress instantly, the impact rippling back up Seb's arm where it settled as a dull throb. The sheol dropped to the floor once again, unmoving.

Already the others were stirring. Seb ran to the bookcase. A dust covered hand stuck out from underneath. He reached down and pulled hard on the bookcase. It groaned, but didn't move. It was made of ancient wood that weighed a ton. He tried again, his muscles screaming with effort. The bookcase shifted again, lifting an inch of Caleb's prone form. Seb gritted his teeth but he just couldn't do it. His muscles burned, the fire proving too much. He dropped the bookcase down. Caleb groaned.

Come on Seb. Come on!

The sheol-leader coughed. His arms reached out, hands pressed against the floor.

He didn't have much time.

Seb took a grip again. He closed his eyes, ignoring the growing sounds of movement from nearby. He blew out a slow, shaking breath.

*Breath. Focus. Please.*

The runes appeared in his mind. He called them, channelling the Weave, filling his upper body with the energy of reality. From somewhere, someone shouted. He ignored it, and lifted with all he had.

The bookcase came up with frightening ease. The Consensus groaned, it pressed on his skull, his mind buzzing. The bookcase crashed against the wall, splintering into pieces.

Seb opened his eyes. He managed to catch sight of Caleb stirring on the floor just before the sheol-leader leapt at him brandishing a jagged blade. Muscle memory kicked in. Seb pivoted inside his attacker's reach, using the sheol's momentum against him. Seb turned his hip, gripping the sheol by the wrist as he flipped him over, throwing him through a set of French doors that led out into the garden.

'Come on old man!' Seb didn't pause for breath. The adrenalin coursed through him as he bent down. He hoisted Caleb up, throwing a limp arm over his shoulder. He hurried them out

of the open doors, ignoring the groans from behind. The sheol-leader, covered in hundreds of red cuts, was rising as they went past. Seb kicked him hard in the jaw, sending him sprawling out cold onto the gravel. Seb stepped past, ploughing on, dragging Caleb with him. The old man was out cold, a dead weight, yet Seb only had sight for the van that stood, door still open, in front of them.

They crashed into the side of the vehicle. Caleb collapsed but Seb caught him on the way down. His muscles screamed, his lungs burned, but he did not let up, he would not give up. He hefted Caleb up and threw him onto the passenger seat.

A cry from behind made him turn. The two remaining sheol were bounding across the gravel towards the van. Behind, another one, teeth bared, scrambled out through the remains of the French doors.

Dismay rattled through Seb. The distance between the van and the sheol had decreased dramatically. He wasn't going to make it. He couldn't jump across Caleb to the driver's seat, and he didn't have time to run across the front of the van to get in from the other side without exposing Caleb.

He had only option.

Seb dived across Caleb's lap, reaching for the glove box. The clatter of displaced stone was terrifyingly near now. He pressed the button. The handle of the phosphorous gun dropped

into view.

A growl behind. The spine-tingling sound of razor-teeth behind gnashed together.

Seb whipped round, gun in hand. The sheol nearest him skidded to a halt, it's black eyes widening in fear. The other carried on, barrelling into the back of its comrade. Behind, the sheol-leader, arisen again and staggering forwards, slowed to a halt, a puzzled expression slowly turning to panic as Seb levelled the weapon in their direction.

'No! We w-' The sheol-leader began.

'Burn you bastards.' Seb replied, pulling the trigger.

The world exploded into white fire.

## Chapter 30

'This is an insult. This is beyond reckoning!' Cian paced across the carpet again, repeating the action he'd done for the past hour. He pointed at the closed door, his hand shaking, drool on his lips. 'If he dies, if he dies! I will hold the Brotherhood responsible. I will have Silas' head!'

Seb stared at the ground, his head resting in his hands. He hadn't changed since he got back, since he'd carried Caleb's barely breathing form back into the mansion, where he'd finally collapsed on the floor as Cian swept Caleb away. The rest of his memories since then were a haze of panicked shouts and orders being barked. His tunic smelled of burned flesh and dried blood, and for the first hour he'd just wretched, emptying his stomach into the open drain.

'Master Cian, if you will be calm, we need level heads at a time like this,' the Magister said then. She was sat on a stone bench opposite the chamber where Caleb was currently receiving urgent ministrations from the Healer.

'Calm? Calm?' Cian bawled. 'This is one of us! Our kin! We have been attacked by what? Sheol? And where were the Brotherhood, where were our *brothers*, eh?'

'They would say the same thing,' Seb said.

'What?' Cian was in his face then, but Seb didn't care. He

stared at his blood-stained hands. The faded red a mix of Caleb's and sheol blood. He had taken a life, perhaps several. He didn't try and rationalise it away by pretending it was a sheol that he had fired at. The person had been a human once, a person with family, friends. Even children. He had taken them away from this world, and he couldn't take it back.

Fuck the Magi.

'Seb, I believe you'd better explain yourself,' the Magister said, a tenseness to her voice.

Seb raised his eyes, meeting, and matching, the fire-filled stare from Cian. 'I said,' he continued, 'that they would say the same thing. They've been facing this for months, and you've not listened. They've lost countless brothers, all of them in the name of the oath, and yet you still let them die. Now, it's our turn, and you blame them? Give me strength.'

Seb sensed the fist moving before his eyes registered the movement. He brought his forearm up just in time to deflect the attack, Cian hitting the brick next to his head. The strike crackled with energy, cracks exploding out from the impact point.

Seb didn't waver. His arm burned from the block. He thrown what energy he could into the parry, and it probably saved him from breaking his arm. His heart thumped, partly from fear - Cian was easily capable of ripping his head clean from his

shoulders - but also from something else. Part of him was itching to strike back, just to see how long he lasted.

The moment lingered. The boy and man held their stance. Then the door next to Seb opened and the Healer stepped out. The energy in the corridor immediately evaporated as all attention was drawn to the pale, blood spattered man.

'Doctor Gulliford, you have news?' The Magister said, her voice still that annoying mix of condescension and *I-don't-give-a-fuck*.

'I have done all I can,' Doctor Gulliford said. 'His wounds are very serious.'

A flicker in Seb's mind. 'Are? He's alive?'

'He is, but only just. In all honesty I'm surprised he made it this far.'

'Will he live?' Cian growled.

'He will,' Doctor Gulliford said, rubbing his bloodied hands on a cloth that had once seen white, 'I have stopped the bleeding and accelerated the healing process. I am hopeful for a full recovery.'

'What of the sheol poison? He was bitten, several times. I saw it.'

All eyes turned to Seb. It wasn't a dumb question, he knew that. Plus he didn't give a shit right then, anger at the apathy that had led to this moment suppressed any fear he might've had



in speaking up.

'Caleb's Avatari will have overrode the toxin before any serious harm could be done.' Doctor Gulliford said, his tone as if talking to a child, which only riled Seb even further.

'Are you sure? I saw what it did to Cade. I've read about -  
,

'It is *purged*, Boy. Do not tell me how to do my job.'

Seb's cheeks burned. He opened his mouth but was intercepted by Cian. The giant stepped into the doorway.

'I will see him. I need information regarding this attack on our kin,' Cian said.

'Of course, but go easy on him, he is very tired.'

Gulliford moved past the two men then and made as if to go down the corridor. He stopped then, just past the Magister, and turned back to them. Tired eyes looked at Seb.

'I am sorry for my outburst. You should be proud young man. I know what you did; I saw it in his memories. Bravery doesn't do it justice. Without you Caleb wouldn't be here at all. Others - he glanced at Cian as he said that - would do well to remember that.'

'He was my friend,' Seb croaked, a hot coal in his throat.

Gulliford gave a curt nod before leaving the three of them.

'Cian, get what you can from Caleb. I must go and attend to our *guests*,' The Magister said. She didn't wait for an

acknowledgement and left the two of them there. Cian looked back at Seb. The anger still simmered there, Seb could see it bright as day, but it had dimmed from what he'd seen moments earlier.

'You. Stay here until I'm done.'

Seb didn't respond. He simply sat. Waited.

As he sat alone in the corridor, his mind replayed the scene from Kollmorgen's mansion over and over. He tried to use the anger, anger at the Magistracy and their apathy. He wanted to blame them for what happened, but could he? He'd run in there without a thought. So fucking cocksure that he could handle himself. Caleb had seen. He'd been shouting all the way. But Seb, no, he'd gone in blind. Now Caleb lay near death.

Because of him.

Hot tears erupted from nowhere. He stifled a sob, wiping his face with the back of a bloodied sleeve. That wouldn't do. Caleb wouldn't stand for self-pity. Not now. Focus. *Focus*.

He cast his mind back to Kollmorgen's. What had they missed? How had they walked straight into a trap like that without any kind of warning? He shoved the fear aside at the lack of Brotherhood support. They'd been out countless times before without complaint so it was no use getting frustrated now. But the sheol, they knew him. How? How did they know who he was? What he had? He shook his head, frustration bubbling to the fore along with a persistent gnawing sensation that they'd been

played, that were still being played.

At least Caleb had survived.

## Chapter 31

Cian emerged an hour later. His face was pale, his eyes almost vacant. He stopped in front of Seb, blinking when he saw him there as if he'd just appeared out of thin air. For a moment Seb's heart seemed to stop. Hot tears welled up in his eyes.

'Caleb?'

'He is badly injured, but he is strong.' Cian said.

'Can I see him?' Seb said, rising.

Cian nodded absently. Seb made to move past before a muscled arm blocked him.

'Tomorrow. Five am. Don't be late.'

It was Seb's turn to blink then. *Tomorrow?* Cian wanted to train after this, after what had happened between them? He wasn't sure but there was something different about Cian at that moment. Whatever had transpired between him and Caleb had altered something in the warrior. Seb didn't know what it was and he didn't care. He'd lost the will to fight that had nearly cost him a broken arm in their last exchange. All he wanted was to get inside and see the only friend he had at this place.

'I'll be there.'

Seb stepped inside the room. It was dark inside, the only light coming from a dimly burning lantern that stood on a dresser by Caleb's bed. He felt a pain in his chest when he saw

his friend. Caleb had aged over the past few hours. Sure he was old, Seb knew that, but there was always a vitality about him, as if the weathered exterior was just a skin worn over a man not much older than himself. Now though his skin was pale, his lips grey. A wide, white gauze covered his chest.

'Caleb?'

Caleb's eyes flickered. His head turned to one side. The eyes opened again, seeing Seb this time. A pained smile appeared.

'Seb? Is that you? Come closer boy, I can barely see over there in the dark.'

Seb edged closer, ashamed of the fear that dragged his feet. He moved into the ambient glow of the lantern, noting then the pleasant warmth that emanated from the burner.

'It's nice isn't it?' Caleb wheezed, noticing Seb's shift in attention.

'What is it?'

'Just a normal lantern, but the Doctor has put a Permanency on it. It transmits waves that we can't see, but provide some kind of healing property.'

'Like some kind of magical life support?'

Caleb smiled, 'something like that.'

'How do you feel?'

'Like someone took a chunk out of me.'

Seb tried to smile, but it wouldn't come. Wetness filled his eyes again, Caleb becoming a blur in his vision. 'I'm sorry,' he whispered.

'Sorry, what the hell for?'

He waved a shaking hand over the bandage on Caleb's chest. 'This,' he said, 'I fucked up. And then, after...I was just so scared.'

'Seb, I will tell you this, and tell you this once. Pay attention as you need to get it in that thick head of yours. Bravery is not the absence of fear. Bravery is being able to act *when* you are afraid. I would never have expected an acolyte to have to deal with what you did today. Yet you did. You were terrified, I know that, I was too. Yet you *acted*, my lad. And it's because of that that I am here now.'

'But I hadn't run in like that.' He let the question hang in the air.

'You are young, Seb. You sensed Kollmorgen in distress and you went in after him.'

'If I'd just stopped and sensed more.'

'Sheol are harder to spot when they've possessed someone. It took me a while, and by then, you were already in. You're too quick for your own good.'

Seb dropped his head. 'I don't know what to say.'

'There's nothing to say, maybe perhaps, *I'll try not to*

*give you a heart attack by running off next time, Caleb. Maybe you can say that?*

They looked at each other for a second, before both broke out into laughter. It was short, but served to lift Seb's spirit. Caleb coughed and groaned, but the smile didn't leave his face.

'What did happen, Caleb? It was a trap wasn't it? A trap for us?'

Caleb nodded, the smile gone. 'A trap? I don't think. I don't think they knew we were going to be there. The scary thing being that never in my forty years of doing this have I ever seen something like that. The sheol, so brazen in daylight, attacking us like that.'

'They knew me. How?'

'I don't know, lad, I just don't know,' Caleb's voice began to drift, his eyes seeing something far away.

'It's okay, I'll come back later. You just get better, okay?'

Caleb nodded, his eyes already closed as fatigue took him.

## Chapter 32

The great hall was in pandemonium as Seb stepped inside, moments after leaving Caleb to rest. On one side sat the Brotherhood, led by Silas and Reuben. Most of their number were silent, but near all were projecting poison-filled stares at the magi across from them. Seb caught Cade's eye. The warrior rolled his eyes at the commotion.

Opposite sat the magi. Many of them were adepts that he'd never even seen, only identified by their distinctive sable outfits. Some were acolytes, wearing same grey smocks that he wore, their eyes locked on the half-daemon warriors opposite them. At the head of the table the Magister, flanked by Cian and two elites, tried to weather the storm that was growing around her.

'Calm, Cian, I'm sure Silas has a reasonable explanation regarding how the sheol were able to infiltrate our network with such ease.'

The Magister's tone dripped with sarcasm, as if she knew the leader of the Brotherhood had no choice but to accept the humiliating fact they had failed in their oath. For his part, Silas didn't flinch, but his sons' faces flushed red, their yellow eyes ablaze.

'Magister, with the greatest of respect, I do not believe



the Brotherhood is to blame for this unfortunate incident. We have been asking for your support for many months with no reply, even as our warriors bled for your cause on a nightly basis. Only now, when one of your own is affected, does it raise your interest. I am sorry, I truly am, but the fact of the matter is that the magi are too distant from the cause now. You are simply not aware of what is happening right under our noses. These are no longer random attacks from the odd fiend that happens to fall through a crack. They are coming, and they are coordinated. Something is happening out there, between the Shards, and I regret to say that the Magistracy should be held accountable for the state we find ourselves in.'

Cian shot out of his seat, sending the chair crashing against the wall. Other magi joined him, their fury venting at the Brotherhood leader. Reuben and Cade rose, their hands reaching for the blades at their sides, but calming hands from their father made them sit. Silas closed his eyes, letting the angry waves wash over him whilst the Magister attempted to calm her followers.

'Silas. Your words come dangerously close to treason,' the Magister continued, 'have you not forgotten your Oath?'

'Oath?' Reuben spat. 'We promised to obey the Magi, that noble race of Weave-warriors that fought to the death at the gates of Temperos. My oath is to them. I do not recognise these

cowards that stand before me!'

'Reuben! That is enough!' Silas said, his voice a rolling thunder that demanded immediate action. Reuben lowered back down, his yellow eyes locked, unblinking on Cian.

'Forgive my son, Magister,' Silas said. 'I do not wish a quarrel. I merely think it is in all our interests that we all be honest. Something terrible *is* happening. We, in the Brotherhood, are simply not able to handle this on our own. It will take all of our resources - Brotherhood, Mage, Lorekeepers - alike to understand what is happening.

'And let us not forget that this all began when the apostate was removed from the Magistracy. And *his* appearance.'

All eyes turned on Seb. The room suddenly seemed to grow in size. His head pounded. It took all his willpower to keep his gaze level. No way was he going to put down by any of these. Not anymore.

'The boy is simply a symptom of Marek's indiscretions,' The Magister said, forcing attention back on her. If we did not have him we would not have any knowledge of what Sarah had discovered.'

'But where has that got us? He might as well have died for all the good he's done.' Reuben said.

'I tire of your backchat, fiendling,' Cian growled.

'I tire of your blustering, mighty Cian, so it appears

we're at an impasse.'

'This is getting us nowhere,' the Magister said, her azure eyes fixing both of the men in turn. 'Silas is right. We must be united if we are going to weather this crisis.'

'So what do we do? Do we demand a communion with all the families?' Cian said.

'Perhaps,' the Magister said, a withered finger pressed to her lips.

'I may have a suggestion,' Silas said.

'You have the room, First Sword.'

'A communion is one option yes, but does it not highlight out failure in keeping one of our own under control?' Silas' yellow eyes scanned the room, seeking challenge. None came back.

'I take the silence as agreement?'

'Get to the point, Silas,' Cian said, 'I don't have time for your posturing. Not today.'

Silas nodded. 'Of course. My suggestion is that we do not involve the other families. Yet. Instead we seek knowledge from one who has much more than we do. From someone who may be able to shed light on what is transpiring.'

The Magister frowned. Silas smiled, the expression reminding Seb of a hunting cat. He was enjoying this, perhaps too much.

'We seek the guidance from one of the First. *The First*.'

Cian's brow furrowed. 'What? What is this nonsense? We cannot ask the First anything. They are dead, merely echoes in the Weave.'

'Not quite so, dear Cian,' Silas said. 'Is it not true that the First created the Consensus? That they are forever bound to its integrity?'

'Yes, but -'

'Then they are not echoes,' Silas interrupted, ignoring the glares shot his way from across the table. 'The Consensus is failing, the wall between realities weakening, allowing the sheol to come through. I propose we simply go to the First, and ask them ourselves.'

Cian's face did not show any change in understanding, but Seb saw as the Magister suddenly broke out into a wide smile.

'Silas, dear fellow, I had no idea you were so knowledgeable of our history.'

Silas raised his hands in mock modesty. 'I try to keep myself informed.'

Cian shot fury-filled looks between the Magister and Silas. It was clear from both his expression and those of most of the others present that they had no knowledge of what was being suggested. Lore Keeper Brun, who had until this point remained silent, coughed, clearing his throat. The room fell silent.

'I believe I follow Master Silas' line of thinking. His

suggestion is that we reopen the Crossing Way. We travel to where the First lay entombed. We Weave-walk from there, following their thread to where their souls exist. We commune with them, seeking their counsel.'

Silas smiled. 'They created the Consensus did they not? They will surely know why it would be failing thus?' He said, before looking directly at the Magister, 'And it would allow us to remove this *problem* without having to bring the shame and ire of the other Families upon us.'

'What? Am I hearing this right?' Cian said. 'Magister, is this insanity even possible?'

'It is possible, yes, although it does not make me happy.' The Magister said.

'It would be of great risk. The Way is free from the Consensus. Should the sheol discover us, they would be at full strength.' Brun said.

'As would we all.' Silas replied.

'And even if we were fortunate enough to find the First, there is no guarantee that we could commune with them, let alone secure their help.' Cian said, his head shaking in disbelief at what he was hearing.

'There is not. But what knowledge would the other Families have that we don't? Surely they would turn to the same direction, but only after they have dragged our names through

the mud for their own amusement.'

'Master Silas makes a convincing argument, even if I am not totally sure of the details.' The Magister said.

'Magister, surely you are not considering this madness?'  
Cian said.

'Master Cian. Do you know why Marek has been able to suppress the Consensus so that he can summon the sheol the way he can?'

'No, Magister.'

'Have you managed to uncover the secret that Sarah hid inside the boy?'

Cian slumped. 'No, Magister.'

'Do you think the Families will provide a solution that we cannot, without bringing shame upon ourselves?'

Cian knew he was lost. He managed to look the Magister in the eye, who'd now turned her gaze towards him.

'No, Magister.'

'Then it is settled. Silas, Cian. The two of you will draw together an expedition into the Crossing Way. You will seek the counsel of the First. Plan to do this as soon as possible. Take the finest we have available.'

Silas nodded. 'As you wish, Magister. We should also take the boy, too.'

Seb's heart turned to ice. Had he heard that right? Judging

by the looks on everyone else's faces they were thinking the same thing.

'The boy? Why? He is but an acolyte.'

'I am aware of this. But is the current issue with the Consensus not linked with the message that Sarah embedded in within him? He may carry information - unknown to himself - that the First would be able to use.'

The Magister sat in silence for a moment. Cian shuffled in his seat, his face a perpetual scowl. Seb found Cade's face amongst the sea of Brothers. The warrior was shaking his head, his eyes wide.

'I cannot force the boy to go, although I do think it would add value to the expedition.' The Magister said. She turned her gaze his way. A shiver rippled up his spine.

'Seb. Step forward so we can see you.'

He moved to the edge of the table. A hundred faces stared back at him. His stomach turned somersaults as he forced himself to look to the head of the table.

'You have heard what has been discussed?'

'I have, Magister.'

'You understand what has transpired?'

'We seek the knowledge of the First. The journey is full of risk, but it seems it is the only logical option we have. You wish to know if I will volunteer.'

The Magister gave him a weary smile. 'You listen well. What do you say, boy? The journey is dangerous, I will not lie. You will have both the Magi's and the Brotherhood's finest with you, but as an acolyte you will be more vulnerable than they.'

He'd made the decision before he'd even been summoned to the table. If they hadn't asked he would've volunteered anyway. Caleb had nearly died. All he cared about now was revenge. Revenge against the sheol. Revenge against those who brought them here.

'I volunteer, Magister. I wish to go on the expedition.'

The Magister nodded. 'Then it is agreed. Let the expedition set out as soon as reasonable preparations are made.'

Seb remained in place as the Brotherhood stood as one and filed out of the room. Silas gave him a warm - too warm - smile as he walked past. Reuben slowed to a stop as he came level with him.

'No doubt I will be on this foolhardy escapade too, boy. Let it be known now that if you falter, I will not slow for you. My brothers are worth ten of you magi, and I do not care if they know this.'

Seb stared forwards without reply as Reuben smirked and slinked out of the door. Cade followed behind.

'What did he say?'

'Nothing I didn't expect.'



'I'll see these off, then we'll talk.'

'Understood.'

## Chapter 33

Seb trudged outside, relishing the feel of the cool air on his face after the heated atmosphere in the great hall. A series of black cars with tinted windows roared out of the grounds as he leant against the wall.

'Don't hurry back,' he whispered as he watched the Brotherhood cavalcade depart.

'That's not a very nice way to talk about my father.'

Seb grinned and turned. Cade sat on the wall opposite him.

'Present company accepted.'

'Of course,' Cade said. Seb joined him.

'I'm guessing that didn't go so well?'

'Well? Actually it went better than I thought. When Father suggested the plan we thought it was as mental as the magi did. Even Reuben, who was normally the number one champion of crazy thought it was too much of a risk.'

'I have to admit, the logical answer would seem to be speak to the Families. At least at first.'

'Ah, but that's assuming logical thinking. The magi are a strange breed. The rival families live for points scoring off each other. If this was made public then I suspect this place would be closed down, and the responsibilities of the Magistracy would go to one of the other Families.'

Seb looked at Cade, puzzled. 'I thought the Magistracy was viewed as a relic anyway. Don't the Families teach their own now?'

'Most, yes. But it's the prestige about it. The Magistracy is nothing like it was. It could be great again, and there'd be no shortage of takers to, how would you put it, assist the Magister in taking over the running whilst they deal with this crisis.'

Seb nodded. 'Makes sense then.'

'What does?'

'Why the Magister took so little time to decide. She didn't have a choice.'

'There's always a choice. Her pride meant she had only one, though.'

'You don't think it was the right one?'

'No, I don't. I think its madness.'

Seb laughed. 'Be careful, that's your father you're dissing.'

Cade smiled. 'It's nothing new.'

A comfortable silence fell between them. Seb watched as the acolytes trudged back outside to resume their physical training. They began a slow, almost leisurely job around the grounds. Strange really, when he'd first joined they seemed so focussed, so dedicated. Now though he saw them for what they were. Lazy didn't do it justice.

'So what will happen now?' Seb said eventually, when he'd tired of watching the acolytes complete laps in twice the time it took him.

Cade shrugged. 'Like the Magister said. We will go into the Crossing Way, seek out the First.'

'You make it sound so simple.'

'I've never been. I'm as in the dark as you are on this one.'

'Well, not quite. You've got about fifty years' experience on me. Plus you can see in the dark.'

They both laughed then, Seb felt the mood lift from him, just slightly.

'So what else have they been teaching you?' Cade said, changing the subject.

'It depends on who's doing the teaching. Caleb was - has - been great, although he's not the best company. He told me the basics, you know the phosphorus, how possession works and so on. He taught me Sentio -' Seb paused, noting Cade's blank expression, 'The telepathic type stuff - sensing, etcetera.' Cade nodded. 'He's got shed loads of books too that the other acolytes don't seem interested in that I read when he's dozed off for the night. I've also been learning Avatari with Cian.'

'Ah, that explains it.' Cade said with a smirk.

'Explains what?'

'How you've been holding your own in our last few sessions. I thought something was different.'

'Really?' Something akin to pride swelled in him. 'Why, what's changed?'

'You hit harder for a start. Before, I could've taken you on with one hand behind my back. Now though I have to actually make an effort.'

'Sarcastic bastard.'

'I don't want you to get cocky.' Cade stood away from the wall and strode to where his Audi remained, the only Brotherhood vehicle left at the mansion. He opened the door at the driver's side. 'I'll be in touch.' He gave Seb a quick nod. Seb returned the gesture. Cade sped off without a further word.

'Look forward to it,' He said towards the vanishing car. The talk with Cade had eased his woes somewhat, but now Caleb came to mind and the heaviness returned. He turned and walked back to the side door.

## Chapter 34

Sylph woke with a start, her mind echoing with the traitor's screams. Sweat-soaked hair stuck to her back, her mouth dry like sand.

She stepped out of bed and went to the open window. She savoured the sensation of cool air on her skin as she looked up at the moon that was only two days from its fullest. As she gazed, her mind drifted to the coming battle, the one that had been in planning for weeks.

The betrayers of Balor had fallen for Marek's plan, exactly how he said they would. They were going into the Way, seeking an answer they would never find. They would die down there. All of them. Bar the one who carried the message that Marek desired so much.

She should've been happy. Ecstatic in fact. But instead she felt only numb. It was almost too easy. How had Marek manipulated them so? He was exiled from the Magistry, his abilities not able to penetrate the defences that had existed since they came to this realm. There was something else, something he hadn't revealed to her. He knew she was suspicious. No longer was she invited to the briefings he gave to the other vassals. They avoided her, even Luchar, her reputation for asking too many questions marking her as a troublemaker.

None of that bothered her. The vassals were merely pawns, fresh recruits to the cause. It was Marek and his practical disowning of her that hurt so much. She had been his first, his most loyal follower. It was she who'd nurtured him back to health when he'd nearly died at the hands of the giant mage. She was his prodigy, his adopted daughter. He preached the ways of Balor with such passion that she knew she'd finally found someone who she could follow, who would bring back the fallen lord and bring justice against those who'd betrayed him.

But would Balor approve of what they were doing now? The sheol? The sheol that he fought so hard to defeat? Marek had convinced her for a time. Necessity ruled, that's what he'd said, the sheol being as much a victim as the Balorans. But now the sheol had possessed hundreds. They ran amok amongst the realm. Marek said he was in control but he wasn't. Too many were slipping through, possessing the weak minded without even needing the benefits of the possession process.

Would Balor approve?

No. He would be disgusted. It was against all he stood for. She knew that now. With Marek leaving her to her own devices the spell had been broken, the chains of blind obedience no longer binding her.

And the dreams. The dreams of the traitor. But she wasn't, was she? At first Sylph was certain she was seeing the theft of

some great artefact from the tomb of Balor, seeing it through the eyes of the thief, the one they were hunting. But as the dreams unfolded, revealing more to her, she saw that Sarah wasn't stealing from the Balorans at all. She was stealing from the sheol, the same sheol that had desecrated the burial site of her Lord.

The same sheol that Marek now stood in allegiance with.



## Chapter 35

Marek dismissed Sylph's anxious bleating from his mind as he pushed upon the heavy oak doors that led into the nave. Candles flickered in the gloom as he marched down the aisle towards the altar. Vassals and sheol alike scurried out of his path, vanishing into the shadows.

He stopped at the altar. The summoning stones he'd set out hours earlier remained in place, forming a pentagon before him. Dark blood, dried now, painted the altar in lines, joining the stones. The Weave energy was almost tangible, following the blood-lines, forming a cylinder of power that rose from the floor, invisible to all but he.

The summoning was a risk, there was no other way of looking at it. But he had to ensure that the plan that he'd so painstakingly put together went as decreed. He couldn't afford to fail now. All the pieces were in place, he just needed a little more insurance.

'Leave me.' He said, his Weave-amplified voice echoing round the nave like a thunderstorm. The room emptied in seconds.

Marek turned his attention back to the altar. He brought up his mental shield, shutting out Sylph. The girl was clumsy, her skills inconsistent. Her doubts broadcast from her like a lighthouse. Of course she put on a loyal face when in his presence, but in reality she was lost to him.

Which was exactly what he was relying on.

With one last flex of tired muscles, Marek dropped to his knees and began the summoning process.



## Chapter 36

The past few weeks had fallen into an easy rhythm. As deliveries had been cancelled due to the attack on Caleb, Seb had more time on his hands that he could deal with. The core of the day was spent learning on his own in the training chamber, the focus split between Sense and Self. In the mornings he focussed on Sentio. His sensing had become honed over the weeks; before he could get only vague echoes from around the mansion, now he could discern individuals from the fog. He still couldn't read minds, but every now and again he picked up the edges of an emotion, usually when the target was particular angry or happy. Cian made a good target; the giant warrior seemed perpetually mad.

The afternoons now were spent on Avatari. He would race around the grounds, lapping the other acolytes at least once. They still didn't speak to him, but every now and again he received a simple nod of acknowledgement. It was progress, of a sort.

He would often train in the melee combat rituals Cade had taught him in the later hours. He brought the training dummy out onto the lawn, where he could practice under the setting sun. It made for a much more comfortable experience than mixing it up in the damp confines of the dungeon.

In recent weeks he'd even attracted a follower. One of the younger acolytes, a boy called Harry, had taken to watching him from the edge of the lawn. They never spoke, but Harry was there every day, without fail.

The evenings were his own. Without Caleb keeping a beady eye on him he devoured tome after tome from the library. Once he'd learned to skim through the fluff that seemed to bloat the massive books, he found the history of the Magi and the Brotherhood beyond fascinating. He lost many a night learning about the One War, the Great Crossing and the sacrifices that were made on all sides. It fascinated him, but at the same time it caused him sadness. If Woden and the others could see what had become of the mighty Magi now they would surely turn in their graves, or wherever they were.

It was coming up late October when Cade next made an appearance at the mansion. The sky had a permanent grey veneer to it, the trees were bare, exposing the ever watchful sentinels, and there was a biting chill in the air. Not that Seb experienced this, his Avatari now at such levels that he could regulate both heat and cold to more comfortable levels as required.

Seb was in the garden, reading *The Battle of Asyphia - A Hundred Night War* when Cade found him.

'It's been a long time,' Cade said, casually scrutinizing

the massive stone warrior that loomed above them.

'Aye, it has,' Seb closed the book and placed it in the satchel that sat next to him. He looked at Cade and frowned.

'You've got another scar. Two, actually.'

Cade nodded. 'It's brutal out there. We're losing brothers as fast as we can recruit them.'

'The sheol are still running amok?'

'The press are either calling it mass hysteria or just a general breakdown in moral order. People are going mad, doing crazy shit. Sometimes we stop them, other times it just looks like the work a lunatic.'

Seb shook his head. 'I can't believe how bad it's got.'

The two men sat in silence for a time. The wind blew, whistling through the bare branches. Dark clouds began to muster over the trees, obscuring the low-hanging sun.

'It's going to rain.' Seb observed.

'It's been raining for a while.'

'There's a reason you're here, isn't there?'

Cade laughed. 'Did your sense tell you that?'

'No, you're just shit at small talk.'

'Fair point. Okay, here it is. My father has finally organised the expedition.'

Seb sat forward. A floaty sensation had filled his gut.

'We're going? We're really going?'

'We are. Tomorrow. You up to it?'

A mixture of fear and excitement fluttered together in Seb's chest. He managed to give a shaky nod in response.

'You scared?' Cade said, a knowing smirk on his face.

'No,' he lied.

'You will be.'

## Chapter 37

'Are you sure you're up to this, Seb?' Caleb said, trying, but failing, to rise from his armchair by the fire. The recovery from the attack at Kollmorgen's had been steady but slow. The wound, aided by the doctor's magic, had healed quickly, nothing showing on Caleb but an angry red welt on his shoulder. The blade had damaged more than flesh though, Seb could tell. The spark had gone from Caleb's eyes, the twinkle of life that drove him now absent. He had an air of being continually afraid, even skittish. He never left the Drain. In fact he never left the chair in front of the fire.

'I'm more than up to this, old man,' Seb said, placing a well-meaning hand on Caleb's shoulder. Caleb tensed at the touch, but didn't flinch away. Progress, Seb thought. A month ago he'd shiver away, as if human contact triggered some kind of repressed traumatic memory.

'I don't know they have to send you, anyway. You're still an acolyte, you shouldn't be out in the field before you're ready.'

Seb gave a tired smile. 'I'm more prepared than any acolyte. You know that, and they know that. Besides, I have no choice,' he said, tapping the side of his head.

'Why is it that you're so much more prepared?'

Seb paused and looked back. Caleb stared at him, his eyes suddenly clear, intent. The question threw him off guard.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, ever since your Weave-walk something's been different about you.'

'Has it?' he said, his voice a pitch louder than he intended. He rushed around now, gathering the barest equipment required for the journey. 'Is it cold in a Way, do you know? Should I take an overcoat?'

'What happened?'

'Caleb, I don't know -'

'What happened?'

Seb sighed and turned. For a moment he felt like he could just blurt out the whole experience, recount the tale of the serpentine figure and the tower in the middle of nowhere. For many weeks the experience had been a blur, but in recent days his memory had returned in fragments. Even now it still made little sense, and for a moment, he had every intention of telling Caleb about it, but when he looked up and saw the dark, penetrating stare from the old man's eyes, something cold touched his heart, and he felt his mouth clam up. He slung the rucksack over one shoulder.

'Another time.'

Seb hurried out of the Drain, leaving Caleb staring in



silence at his back.

## Chapter 38

It was no great surprise that Cian was going along for the ride. The giant warrior stood outside the mansion, clothed in black overalls, as Seb stepped outside. His six foot staff was strapped to his back, the training guards removed from either end. The weapon crackled with Weave-energy. Don and another mage Seb didn't recognise stood with him. They were dressed all in black aside from the silver sash on their arms.

Elites.

'Took your time,' Cian said, getting into the huge Land Rover that had seemingly appeared overnight. Nice to be upgraded, Seb thought to himself as he trudged to the open vehicle. Cian got inside, leaving a bulging holdall on the ground. Seb picked it up and chucked it in the back. The two other magi followed, one driving, one as a passenger.

'You already know Don,' Cian said.

Don grinned back.

'You've been promoted.' Seb said.

'Last month.'

'Well done.'

Don nodded to his left. 'This is Mik.'

'I don't recognise you.'

Cian spoke before Mik could respond. 'Mik is an elite,

although sadly not from the Magistracy. I had to call in some favours.'

'It's not like we were doing anything, anyway, is it Mik?' Don said, driving the car out onto the main road.

'No, nothing. I'm sure the Prime Minister will find some other Imbued bodyguard to take my place, as I'm sure the Vice-President will do for you.'

'Seriously?' Seb said, eyes darting between the two men.

'They're taking the piss.' Cian growled.

'Yeah, that's right, sorry,' Don said.

'Me too,' Mik said. 'It's just the Defence Secretary.'

Both of the men laughed. Cian grimaced. Seb decided he liked both of them already.

The journey took longer than Seb had anticipated. For some reason he thought that the Way would be somewhere nearby that they'd just trundle up to, but two hours in to the trip told him that wouldn't be the case. He attempted small talk early on, but Cian was in a more obtuse mood than always and killed the atmosphere with just a glare.

Although Don and Mik were lesser ranks than Cian, they didn't share the need for silence. They talked infrequently, but it was obvious they were friends of many years. They spoke in hushed tones, discussing the common talk amongst all the Aware

nowadays.

'What's it like out there?' Seb said at one point, a lull in conversation allowing him to break in.

Mikael looked at Don, seemingly for permission. Don gave a quick nod, and Mikael turned back.

'Bad. More than bad. The Consensus seems to be breaking down all around us. At first, weeks ago, it was still there, although weaker. Now though it's like it has just evaporated. The sheol roam free, possessing at will it seems.'

'You think Marek is responsible for it?' Seb said.

Mikael frowned. 'Who?'

'Sorry, no one.' He stammered.

'It's okay, I'm taking the piss. You don't need to play dumb with us. Cian has briefed us. Part of the favours he called in required our discretion.

'And yes, for what it's worth, I'm sure it's down to Marek. I never liked him from the beginning.'

'Can you tell me about him?' Seb said, suddenly realising that no one at the mansion has discussed it at all with him.

'What's to tell? He was an elite, like me, but better. He didn't come from a Family, not one that existed anymore anyway. He had self-taught from an early age, using the books he took from his home before it was destroyed. The Magistracy found him, took him in.'

'Then what happened? Why did he turn?'

'We're here.' Cian said, stopping Mik before he could respond.

The car had turned off the A road minutes before, and had for the past few moments been trundling down a track that was almost an insult to the term. The trees began to thin now as they arrived at their destination.

'Whoa.'

Seb had never been this close to an aircraft before. Hell, he'd never been to an airport before. Now he stood at the end of a short runway, looking at a jet that looked like it had come straight from the factory.

'Come on, get your stuff over to Jack, he'll get it on board.'

As they got out and stretched tired legs, a middle-aged man with little hair and a five day stubble-growth scurried over. He snatched the heavy bag from Seb, plucked up two more and vanished somewhere behind the craft.

'Looks like our friends are here,' Don said, glancing behind them.

There were five Brothers in all, two that Seb recognised. One good, and one far from it. Cade nodded as he approached, Reuben simply glowered.

'Reuben,' Cian said, a taut nod all he would give by way of

greeting. Reuben returned the gesture, eyes on Seb.

'Ah my brother's little charity case. How fares things little whelp, ran out of books to read yet?'

'Plenty to go at, thanks. How about you, ran out of victims to turn into pulp?'

Reuben's eyes flared, more from the sheer audacity of the response than any genuine anger. Seb didn't want to press the point though, he put his head down and hurried past, Don chuckling as he went.

## Chapter 39

After the initial exhilaration of Seb's first take off, where the jet rose rapidly into a reddening sky. Attention quickly turned to the task at hand. There was a meeting area halfway down the craft where the team gathered. The magi, Seb included, took to the table, along with Cade and Reuben. The rest sat to one side watching a movie on a TV screen that was bigger than the entire wall in his room in the Drain.

'As far as I know, only myself has been down this particular Way in living memory, and the world was a lot different then to what it is now,' Cian said. He opened up the holdall and rolled out a large map onto the table. The sketch was yellowed with age, the lines faint, but the sprawling mass of tunnels stood out for all to see. Cade shook his head.

'It's a maze. How are we supposed to make it through to the other side?'

'Follow me,' Cian said.

'Those neurons still there, old man, we don't want you hitting a blank spot that leads us to our doom,' Reuben said.

Cian ignored the comment and continued, 'Now, the Way is what's called Pan-Dimensional, meaning that it exists this way in all Shards, not just Aura. Anyone who gets in, from anywhere, will experience anything that's already there.'

'Why does that not sound so good?' Don said.

'It means if the sheol are there, they will be in their native forms, not forced into a human. Their powers will be theirs, not watered down by the Consensus.' Seb said, not really knowing he was talking until he noticed all eyes on him from around the table.

'The boy's right, but it also means that as their abilities are unhindered, neither are ours. Remember that should we encounter them.'

Cian then pulled out a small item wrapped in a cloth the colour of damp stone. He pulled the material apart, revealing an irregular shaped gem inside. It was emerald in colour, but translucent, with faint white specs inside it. Runic Script was carved on the surface, but the scrawl was too small for Seb to even attempt to translate.

'What is this sorcery?' Reuben said, his yellow eyes wide as he reached a pale hand towards the gem.

'Our escape, should we need it. This is a Home Stone, one of only three we have left at the mansion. It is bound to the Inner Sanctum. To use, smash it on the floor. The portal it produces will only last sixty seconds. Remember though, it's not selective. Just as we can use it, so can anyone else.

'So what's the plan?'

'Simple. We go in, find the Nexus, speak to Woden,' Cian



said, rolling up the map.

'Sounds straight forward enough, what could go wrong?' Don said, the tone of his voice not matching the smile on his face.

## Chapter 40

They flew for another hour. Seb watched out of the window as the rugged mountains of the far north of England gave way to black seas, tufts of white dotting the endless night. The men sat in silence, lost in their own thoughts.

The plane began to descend just past midnight, Seb feeling an uncomfortable popping in his ears as the ground grew nearer at an accelerated rate. He looked out of the window, one hand held over his forehead to shield out the light from the cabin.

'Where are we?' he asked, strapping himself in as the seatbelt light lit up.

'Foula, an island somewhere between Scotland and Iceland,' Mik said.

'That's a nice and specific location,' he said with a smile.

'What can I say, I'm all out of lat and longs.'

Seb grinned and stretched tired legs.

Strong winds buffeted the plane as it descended. For a few heart stopping moments Seb was sure that the pilot had miscalculated. All he could see, aside from a few wispy clouds, was a endless expanse of ocean, only now he could see the giant waves, undulating to some unknown rhythm. The thought of dropping into that void filled his chest with ice, and he forced

himself back into the seat.

'First time in a plane, eh?' Don said.

Seb managed a shaky nod. He gripped the seat arms, staring forward at the wall. *It's going to be fine, it's going to be fine*, he chanted to himself.

His stomach lurched as the plane bounced on invisible bumps of air. He stifled a cry of panic, trying to draw solace from the relative calm of his comrades. He dared another look out of the window, and was about to cry out that they'd missed, that the sea was upon them, when the void was suddenly replaced by material of a different shade, land.

The plane lowered, bouncing once on the landing strip. Something roared at the back of the plane, *what the hell?* But again, no one seemed to panic. He felt the resistance against his seatbelt as the plane slowed, eventually coming to a halt at the end of the runway. Moments later the seatbelt sign dimmed, and Seb managed a breath for what seemed the first time in ages.

It was past 1am as they descended the stairs that led out from the craft. The wind howled, a biting chill numbing his face. Iced rain lashed against them, bouncing off the plane's hull like bullets.

An unmarked van was situated at the base of the stairs. Where the hell were they? He looked around, but aside from one solitary building and a few feeble lights it felt like they'd

landed at an airport in the middle of nowhere. Outside the range of the lights, darkness ruled, surrounding them like a wall of nothing.

The others hurried into the waiting van, ducking as they stepped into the gloomy interior. Seb followed in a hurry, a sudden unease upon him that he couldn't shake off. A man he didn't recognise, and who wasn't imbued, sat at the wheel.

'This all of ye?' he grunted as Don stepped in last.

'Yep. You know where we're going.'

'Yup, Gaada Stack, although if you don't mind me saying, it's probably not the best night to be doing a trip like this,' the driver said.

'You're being paid aren't you?' Cian snapped. The driver nodded at him through the rear view mirror. 'Then drive.'

'Gaada Stack?' Seb said as Cian sat back.

'Shut up. Sit back. This is the last rest you'll get for hours. I suggest you make the most of it.'

Fatigue won over curiosity. The magi were already dozing on their packs. The brothers were in a subdued silence at the back. Seb took the hint and closed his eyes.

Seb woke with a start as the van came to an abrupt stop. He shook the lingering images from his mind and reached for the bag by his feet. His heart pounded from an unknown panic. His *sense*

prickled, the echoes of those around him bouncing back.

'You okay?' Cade said as they got dressed in outdoor gear.

'Sure. Why?'

'You look, I don't know, peaky.'

'Peaky?'

'Yeah.'

'What the hell's peaky?'

'Fuck knows. I heard it used once. I think it means sick as a dog.'

'So you're saying I look like shit?'

'More so than normal. Yeah.'

'If you could save the flirting for later, I believe we need to focus on the task at hand,' Cian said then, marching past them down a track that led between two mounds.

They trekked down a narrow path that curved to one side, the mud slowly turning into sand as they emerged onto a narrow strip of beach. The tide was in, and water lapped not a few feet from where they stood.

'There it is,' Cian said.

Seb didn't need telling what he was looking at. It stood out like a sore thumb, a massive, natural arch of rock that lunged out of the sea. The stone was veined with glowing rivulets of purple energy. The outside edges pulsed in rhythmic bursts, illuminating the bay with every surge. A pillar of

burning lightning, the same bright purple, lanced down from the sky, the clouds rotating round the bolt like water going down a plughole.

'How has this not been discovered yet?' Seb said, opened mouthed at the sight.

'Think about it, lad. You don't think this looks this way to every Joe that comes this way do you?' Don said. 'To the unaware it's just a rock. A pretty rock, but a rock just the same.'

'That's the Crossing Way?' Cade said, standing atop the mound to get a better view.

'Aye, that's the one. The only entrance we know of in Europe.' Cian said. He trudged down the sand, his feet leaving deep imprints where he stepped. A few feet into the sea, with the water sloshing round his ankles, he turned back to them.

'So, are we getting started or what?'

'What do you need?' Seb said.

'Not you, Tweedle Dumb and Tweedle Dee over there. Get your arses down here so we can get this started.'

Mik and Don hurried past, joining Cian in the water.

'Reuben, get your guys to take point. We can't afford this being seen. Seb, give us a wide sensing, just to be sure.'

Reuben scowled, obviously not used to being the one receiving orders. Seb suppressed a smirk. Reuben reluctantly

complied. He nodded to the brothers who vanished without a word. The feat itself was impressive, and if it wasn't for the faint auras that Seb could detect he wouldn't have known they were there. He turned back then, closed his eyes, and sensed.

The burden was light here, the effort almost too easy. He scoured the area, his sense acting like the wide beam from a light house, illuminating the landscape with an invisible energy. Aside from the fluttering auras of the local wildlife, their initial thoughts were confirmed, and not one sentient, awake anyway, lurked nearby.

'It's clear.' He shouted down to the magi in the water.

Cian nodded, then did something that made Seb's blood boil. He looked at Reuben, 'You concur?'

'No other idiot stupid enough to be out here at this time of night.'

Seb scowled as he fell in beside the brothers as they descended onto the beach.

'Right, we're in the clear here, the Consensus is none existent, so it should be straight forward enough,' Cian said.

'Step away, the bridge is already here, we just need to bring it back.'

Seb edged round the side of the group. He wasn't part of this ritual, as far as he could tell, but it didn't stop him enhancing his hearing, the words of the magi drifting to him

over the howling wind. Cian was stood between the two kneeling magi, his face turned towards the massive rock arch. He raised his staff about his head as the air began to crackle. Seb felt that familiar hum in his ears. Cian stepped further into the water, the staff rippling with energy across its length.

'In the name of Woden the First, I command thee to reveal thyself!'

A white fire burst into existence that covered Cian in his entirety. Seb could only watch, stunned as energy filled the air, Cian acting as a conduit for the Weave at a level he'd never conceived before. The world seemed awash with power, flashes of purple lightning forking down, striking the arch, the water, even Cian himself. The wind grew in intensity, the sand lashing them, the waves growing and crashing with a renewed vigour. It was as if the very world itself was reacting to this manipulation of its natural form and was far from pleased.

'In the name of Woden the First, I command thee to reveal thyself!' Cian cried again, his voice amplified by his Avatari, echoing around the bay. A bolt of lightning fired down, striking Cian. His aura bloomed then, the flames engorged, his very form a furnace of Weave-fire. With a final roar, Cian slammed the staff down into the water.

Something cracked, like stone hitting stone. A zigzag of white light erupted the staff, snaking towards the arch. The



water bubbled and frothed as a narrow strip of black stone rose up from its depths. The ground rumbled, the earth growled, but it didn't prevent what Cian was doing. The black stone, a path, that Seb could see, settled a good foot above sea level. The light faded, the lightning subsided. Cian dropped to his knees, Mik and Don rushing to help him.

'Well, now I've seen everything,' Cade said.

'That was amazing,' Seb said, as they re-joined the magi. Cian was rising now, covered in sweat or seawater Seb couldn't tell. The mage's face was drawn, lined with fatigue, but his eyes blazed, the Weave still channelled inside him.

'Right,' Cian said, 'This is the point of no return. Once we go in there, time and space as you know it won't mean anything. Only a mage can navigate the Way without getting lost. It's a vicious, treacherous place, not friendly to life in any form. If you get separated from us, do yourself a favour, and use those blades of yours on yourself. Trust me, there's much worse out there than death.'

'Save the talk, mage,' Reuben said, his yellow eyes glinting in the moonlight. 'Get us there, and we'll do what we need to do. Just ensure you do what's required, as it's due to your kind failing in that very thing that we're here in the first place.'

Seb bristled, his muscles suddenly tense. He felt the Weave

flare briefly in the magi, but none responded. Cian glowered at Reuben, but did not comment further. He turned away from them, walking towards the rippling surface of the Way.

With one last look at the only world he had ever known, Seb took a deep breath, swallowed hard, and followed.

## Chapter 41

The short walk across the narrow bridge was easily the most treacherous part of the journey so far. Although the stone was relatively flat, and its height a good foot higher than the sea itself, the bad weather sent waves crashing against the sides, sending spray and foam splashing across the rock, turning it into a smooth and slippery death-trap. On two occasions Seb felt his feet slip completely from under him, even with his Avatari channelled, and if it wasn't for the preternatural reactions of one of the brothers he would have gone under without a thought. The second time he went, and another strong arm caught his upper arm like a vice, he turned to his rescuer.

'How do you do that without slipping?'

'Skill and practice, mage,' grunted the brother, his eyes unblinking. 'Believe it or not there's more to this world than your precious Weave.'

Seb shook his head and stepped past, taking his time, no way was he going to be helped by these miserable bastards if he could help it.

Before long they were stood in wake of the arch. Up close, Weave-energy rippled across its surface like an electric current pulsing through a pond. The path beyond was obscured, even from sensing. Cian didn't even pause as he reached the aperture. He

stepped in, vanishing with a strange glooping sound, the liquid-like material seemingly dragging him in. Seb glanced around, trying to hide the terror that gripped him. None of the others seemed concerned. Either the other magi were without fear or they were blocking him, either way it didn't help his own assurances.

'After you,' Reuben said, a knowing smile on his face as he gave a mock bow, waving Seb on. Screw you, he thought, not willing to give the brother any ammunition for further mockery, and stepped in without a pause.

The world he knew vanished in an instant. A howling wind screamed in his ears, the world before him turning a blinding white. He raised his hands but they were ineffective, the luminescence burning into his eyes. The ground shifted beneath him, his foot suddenly touching nothing. He tried to scream, but the air filled his lungs with such ferocity that he couldn't draw breath. Panic flared. He flailed madly, his arms and legs kicking into nothing. His chest burned, a pressing fire that expanded from his lungs.

I'm drowning.

The thought, cool and calm, seared his mind with an unshakable clarity. The white light was still there, but it was fading now, fingers of darkness growing from the periphery of his vision. He felt his eyes close, the light now an angry

orange behind the lids. The world began to fade, the wind lessened in his ears.

Then he hit solid rock.

He arched his back, sucking in a lungful of cold air. The dark fingers receded, and a new sensation of pain throbbed into life.

'Fuck me!' Someone shouted from nearby.

'It's never pleasant the first time,' someone else said, a deeper, growlier voice.

'Shit, Seb!'

A familiar face appeared above him. The yellow eyes were furrowed, the face pursed with concern. 'Breathe, fella, come on, slow and steady's the way.'

Cade's advice had come about thirty seconds too late, although thankfully he'd figured it out by then in any case. He bit back the retort that sprung to mind, focussing instead on taking in further breaths of air. The panic was receding now, his heart was down to just an eager rattle in his chest, and sensation was returning to his extremities. His vision cleared further, and he accepted Cade's offered hand, rising to his feet.

He glanced about him, taking in his new surroundings.

'Holy shit.'

Cian turned, a smile on his face for the first time in,

well, ever. Seb felt a flutter in the Weave, and a glowing orb sprung into life in the air above them.

'Welcome, to the Way,' Cian said.

## Chapter 42

Seb didn't know what he'd expected in all honesty, but in all his wildest imaginings he never would've conjured up something like this.

The Way was vast, but that didn't cut it. Compared to the arch in which they'd crossed, the structure beyond defied all reason. The tunnel, if that's what it was, was easily the width of a football pitch, with barely visible walls, constructed from moss-covered bricks each the size of a small car. High above the ceiling vanished out of view, even beyond the range of Cian's orb. Every now and again the jutting point of a stalactite loomed out of the shadows, but this was a rare occurrence. Beyond them, the road extended into the distance, vanishing into dark. The air smelled of earth and something else that he couldn't quite recognise.

'Right, let's go. There shouldn't be anything to worry about this far away from the Hub, but be alert anyway, starting now.'

Seb activated his sense, the reassuring cone of perception extending far, joining with the larger ones cast by the other magi. He felt the rattan sheathed against his back, more for reassurance than for anything else. Either side of him the brothers fanned out forming a fighting line, automatic weapons

drawn, yellow eyes glowing in the gloom.

They walked down the tunnel. At first, after the initial sense of wonder had worn off, Seb thought that this was it, that the monotonous structure would just continue this way to their destination. That thought was quickly shattered when a life form entered the periphery of the sphere, a glowing red shimmer in their minds' eye.

'Contact,' Don whispered.

The brothers vanished into the shadows. The three magi remained, as did Seb, although he drifted to one side, favouring Cade's location to his own.

A noise filled the chamber now, a dull grumble, growing with every passing moment. Something loomed out of the dark, entering the range of Cian's orb. Next to him he felt Cade tense, his gun levelled at the approaching creature.

A rickety cart, drawn by a horse that had clearly seen better days, trundled out of the dark. Barrels were strapped into the back of the cart, partially covered by blankets. An old man, hunched over and gnarled like a tree root, sat at the reins. He looked human, but wasn't, his aura almost inverted. Most humans appeared as a dull blue, this one had an aura of red.

'Hold,' Cian said, raising the staff high, the light expanding, filling the chamber.



The horse whinnied and shied, almost rearing onto its back legs. The man jerked into life on the cart, nearly falling off himself.

'What in the Shards! Who the hell are you?' He said.

'Travellers, seeking passage through the Way. What brings you so far out here?'

'No reason, just like the sights and sounds of the tunnels,' the man said.

'Liar,' Cian said.

'And you are no traveller, Sir.' The man replied, sitting back against the cart. Seb noticed then his hand reaching for something under a blanket by his side. He sent a mental alert to the magi, receiving a sharp *we know* in response.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you,' Cian said.

'Do what?' the man said, his eyes wide in mock innocence.

'I'm not going to do anything st-'

Jesus he moved fast. Before Seb could even blink the man had yanked something, some kind of firearm, from underneath the rags by his side, sighting it at Cian, who simply didn't move. Something flashed in Seb's mind, the source one of the magi. The man yelped, dropping the weapon, gripping the arm that now hung limp by his side.

'By all the!' He said, clutching the arm against his chest.

'Your types don't belong here! You shouldn't be here!'

Without a further word, and leaving his weapon behind, the man yanked the rein with his one free hand, the horse leaping to life. Cian held a halting hand to prevent any further attacks as the cart trundled off into the dark back from where it came.

'What the hell was that?' Cade said, emerging from the shadows.

'Probably a bootlegger of some kind. People pay good money to get something moved between Shards. In the old days it was unthinkable, but I guess times have changed since I was last here.'

They walked for what seemed like miles, encountering no further travellers. Here and there smaller tunnels trailed off on either side into the darkness. They ploughed on ahead, Cian leading the way. As the distance grew, so did the design of the Way. At the entrance, back on Earth, it was simply a massive hole, carved into reality. Here though were more and more signs of life. The ragged rocks became fine bricks, measured to a clean angle. The mud floor was replaced by cobbles. At regular intervals they encountered stone podiums, the statues either no longer present or eroded into shapeless lumps.

'Before the Sharding people used to cross these roads all the time,' Don said, seemingly reading Seb's thoughts.

'How many Shards are there?' he asked, trying to imagine the former splendour this place would've been when it was

properly in use.

Don shrugged. 'I don't know, no one knows I don't think. Mik?'

'Could be ten, could be thousands. So many were lost in the Sharding, and we only know those that definitely exist from the people that made it back. But in reality, it could be a countless number.'

Seb slowed, eyeing a statue that had survived the test of time better than most. It was larger than the rest, carved into the shape of a massive beast with many heads, all serpentine in appearance. Something rang a bell, an itching of his memory, but he couldn't quite place it.

'It must've been amazing.'

'I'm sure it was,' Mik replied.

Seb looked at him. 'You never saw it, I mean when it was, you know, in use?'

Mik laughed. 'Hell no, this was centuries ago, before even Cian was born.'

'Christ, I thought Cian was born before Aura itself!' Don laughed, Seb joining him.

'Enough.' Cian said, putting them to silence.

The road descended, but instead of it getting darker, there now seemed to be a growing luminescence. It was purple in hue, emitting from the lichen that clung to the walls.

'Is that the Weave too?' Seb said, trailing a hand against the lichen.

'No, perfectly natural.' Cian said, 'Some things are native to the Ways. Many of them, like this, are harmless. Some though, are not so friendly.'

They moved on, legs aching now. Seb find himself envying the magi who used their staffs for guidance, leaning on them as they moved further down the Way. The light increased, and up ahead he could see that the tunnel ended in an impossibly large arch. Some kind of giant lantern hung from the roof just prior to the aperture, casting a welcoming pale haze into the chamber beyond.

Seb reached the lip of the road just after Cian, ahead of the others. He stumbled then, his mind unable to process what his eyes were telling him.

It was beautiful, wondrous and terrifying all at once. The chamber was beyond huge, extending into darkness on all sides. In the centre was some kind of dais, raised from the ground on stone pillars. The platform was five-sided. Atop the platform was a circle of interlinked arches, like doorways cut out from church vestibules. Each glowed with some kind of energy, vortices swirling upon the air where a door would be.

They descended the steps down into the chamber, the walk itself taking another ten minutes. It was only as they reached

the base did Seb realise how truly large it was. The pillars that raised the platform were each the size of a multi-storey building, the strange portals on top extending it further, almost like sky scrapers.

'This, gentlemen, is the Nexus, the hub of worlds,' Cian said. His voice echoed round the empty chamber, rebounding back at them a thousand times over.

'I have never conceived of such a place,' Cade said. He paced ahead, spinning as he walked, taking in the sight.

Seb simply didn't have the words. How could such a place be constructed? Shit, he'd seen the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China. Manmade constructs, feats of engineering that had lasted the ages. Yet this, this was something else. How could anyone have built this? Even with the Weave, his mind couldn't wrap itself around the architecture, around the sheer intelligence it would've taken to conceive of such a design, never mind build it.

'This is the oldest known construct known to us on Aura,' Cian said. 'It's used to be a bridge between Realms, built long before the Sharding. It links, or did link I should say, many of those Shards that would otherwise have been lost to the void.'

'So why has it packed up?' Cade said, walking an invisible perimeter around the platform.

'They didn't. They were sealed on purpose.'

'The sheol.' Seb said.

Cian nodded. 'When Danu sent the First away to Aura, he sealed the entrance to the Way from his end. When Woden and the First arrived here, they closed it at the other end.'

'And that's what you did earlier? You reopened our end?' Reuben said.

'I did.'

'So if the sheol are about down here, then they've now got a direct path into Aura?'

'No. The path closed behind us. The Way has been engineered so that only those magi with the required can open and close it.'

'Not Marek?' Seb said, speaking what he was sure was on everyone else's mind.

'No. This is not something that can be learned from a book. It is handed down from the Magister's to their successors.'

'It's a shame,' Seb said, surprised at the hot ball that appeared in his throat, his eyes suddenly moist.

'How so?' Cian said.

'That access to such places is lost to us forever.'

Cian nodded, slower.

'So,' Reuben said, idly twirling around as he sauntered across the massive stone flags. 'If this thing doesn't work, then why the hell are we here?'

'It's not that we're here for,' Cian growled, 'It's that.'

Seb followed everyone's gaze, beyond the central platform to the far side of the chamber. He couldn't see anything at first, but as he channelled his vision the gloom gave way, revealing a massive door, its outline barely visible in the gloom.

They walked across the chamber, the magi together, the brothers fanning out, forming a five pointed front as they moved. The journey itself took another ten minutes, and it was a relief when Cian ordered them to rest. He passed a bottle of water amongst them.

'Should this be open?' Cade said, breaking the silence.

'What?'

'Here.' Cade was stood at the centre of the door, the smooth surface covered with intricate Runic Script that seemed to be part of the stone itself, not etched on the surface. Cade reached his arm in, the limb vanishing into darkness before coming out. Cian rushed over.

'That isn't good news.'

'What? That someone's been here already?' Reuben said. 'Did you just think the Consensus had just stopped doing whatever it is it does just for the sake of it? Come on old man, of course someone's been here. Why else would we be suffering this god awful place if not for that?'

Seb held his breath as Cian snapped a look back at the Second Sword, the veins on his neck bulging, eyes aflame.

'Anymore of your insolence, *Brother*, and I'll cave in your skull. To hell with any blasted Oath.'

Rueben bristled, but did not respond. Instead he took off the safety off his modified Beretta submachine gun, sighting the red laser dot against the wall. He looked back at his men then, 'Come on, let's get this shit over with.'

They emerged into a smaller chamber than the one they left. This one was much more uneven, lacking the fine architecture from the Nexus. It was if this place had been built, and sealed, in a hurry.

In the centre of the chamber stood a loose circle of statues. As they moved further in, Seb saw that these were all humanoid in appearance, wearing similar smocks to the magi.

Cain rolled out a large mat across the floor in the circle before the statues. He nodded to Mik. He rushed over and carefully emptied a series of bound velum scrolls onto the floor. Cian unrolled each and weighted them down before him.

'These were human once, well, most of them were.' He searched the open scrolls with a gloved hand, eventually finding the one he sought. He moved it in front of him, on top of the rest, and weighted it down with rocks.



'These are the First?' Seb stopped in front of one, a familiar figure that he'd seen in tomes back at Skelwith.

'They are. These are the ones who led the way for our kind after the Sharding. They made the ultimate sacrifice. When the Shards were formed out of the remnants of Aura, it was decided that we couldn't allow the risk of another One War to occur. That meant binding magic, in all forms to the will of the observers. Together, they bonded in an eternal link, their collective powers creating the Consensus. They passed the control of reality back into the minds of the unaware. It would be those that decided how reality would evolve, but it would be natural, not wild and free like that which consumed Umbra.'

'That why you can't just make a building disappear, or turn a man into a pig?' Cade said.

'Exactly that. As time moved on, and science with it, the ability of the magi to affect their will on reality diminished. All that remains are the skills we've evolved now. These work with subterfuge, without going against the collective will of the unaware.'

A thought occurred to Seb. 'So that means there's no such thing as the unaware? Not really, anyway.'

Cian's finger stopped in its zigzag trail down the parchment. 'What?'

'Well, they might not know it, but everyone has a say in

it. It is by their will that reality is formed, so if they all decided to say, turn someone into a pig, they could do it?’

Cian thought on that for a moment. Then, something rare happened.

He smiled.

‘Yes, I suppose that’s right.’

‘Can we cut the philosophy and get back to reality. Do your shit mage, then we can get out of here.’ Reuben said.

‘What’s wrong, Reuben? Something scaring you?’ Cian replied.

‘Nothing scares me, mage. I just want this madness over with, then we can get back to the real world.’

Reuben shuffled on his feet, his eyes darting left and right. He checked and rechecked his weapon. Cian was right, the Second Sword was acting odd. The rest of the Brotherhood didn’t seem to share his concern though, if anything they seemed disinterested about the whole thing.

‘Then let me work, fiendling, and we can be done with this place quicker.’

‘What will you do?’ Seb said.

‘I must commune with the First. Their souls may have drifted far from their bodies so I will need to Weave-walk to find them.’

‘What? You mean they’re still alive?’

Seb couldn't believe it. These were stone, petrified people. How could there be anything to commune with?

'Of a form. Their bodies are gone, their minds no longer coherent, but they still persist. That is how they maintain the restrictions on reality. Mages, come here, I will need your help in this.'

Seb did a double take. 'Me?'

'You are an acolyte, yes. However you are still a user of the Weave. Your powers will aid and supplement our own.'

Seb shrugged the doubts from his mind and stepped forwards. What was he meant to do? Focus, he told himself, focus. He followed Mik and Don's cue and sat in the ring near Cian. He closed his eyes and entered a light trance.

The link between them formed instantly. At once he received the combined benefits of the magis' sphere of awareness, and it also became depressingly clear how much he had to learn. His own powers didn't even register, the magis' covering all of the chamber and beyond.

'Now, focus, gently. We just need a prod, nothing more.'

Seb opened the tap, just an inch. The energy trickled into his mind, extending to his limbs. He directed it inwards, towards the focal point that Cian had indicated.

'Release your spirits now, we must travel.' Cian's voice echoed across the link.

Seb let go, the initial tug that he'd felt in his last, and only Weave-walk with the Magister barely noticeable this time. Whether it was from his own growing expertise or the combined will of the stronger magi he did not know, all he did know was that he was free almost instantly, his body kneeling below him.

Floating free, the silvery fire flickered around the dark silhouettes of the brothers, their half-daemon nature emphasising them more against the background. The magis glowed, purest blue, their bodies natural conduits for the Weave. But the statues of the First, they were something else entirely.

If their stone forms were the result of years of decay, of the might of time against their physical bodies, their spirit-forms glowed like they were forged from the Weave itself. They stood, unmoving, in their former splendour. They all shared the same common stance as they did in Aura, with their heads bowed, hands grasping their staffs. Their eyes glowed. Fiery orbs, millennia old.

'They don't seem to be particularly lacking in power,' Don said, his spirit-form stepping right through his own body to stop in front of a figure that Seb had seen many times in the old tomes. Woden, leader of the First.

'Their forms may still be here, but their essence is adrift,' Cian replied. 'I can feel them, even from here.'

'Like the lights are on but no one's home?' Seb said.

'Something like that.'

Cian took up position in front of Woden. He turned back to the others. 'Ready?'

They murmured an affirmative together.

Before Seb could even contemplate what was coming, the world as he knew it vanished, and he found himself adrift in an endless sky of varying shades of pink. Patches of other colours blotted the sky-scape, and intermittent bolts of red lightning scored the panorama, a shuddering thunder echoing across the vast distance.

*Stay together. If you get set adrift then your pattern will be lost. It's not a temporary arrangement.* Cian pulsed.

Seb kept close to Cian. At first he drifted in sharp movements, shooting past to the right, overcompensating, then rocketing past to the left. His heart rattled, the panic at being lost forever in the Weave nibbling at his mind.

*Easy lad, don't think about it, just will yourself,* Cian's voice came quietly, a soothing tone that dampened the panic a small degree.

Seb took a virtual breath, not bothering to ponder if there was such a thing in this world between worlds. He let go of direct control, instead just focussing his attention on Cian's form, the glowing avatar just ahead of him. His confidence grew when his pendulum-like swings lessened, his movements smoother.

He drew nearer to the other magi, the action growing easier by the moment, as if he was awakening a long suppressed muscle memory.

A tiny island, barely a rock, floated out of the distant haze. It brought back a memory of another journey he took, but his mind couldn't focus enough to form it. He shook it away, looking ahead.

A figure was sat on the rock, dressed in the garb of an elite, a hood pulled over their head. Seb followed the others down there, his confidence growing now. He soared above and below his comrades, relishing the freedom that flight gave him. He made a mental note to check the tomes about the feasibility of doing it when they got back to Aura.

They alighted onto the rock, the stone strangely warm underfoot. Seb kept to the rear as Cian approached the kneeling figure.

'My lord,' Cian said, dropping to one knee in front of the figure.

'Who's that?' Seb hissed to Mik.

'Woden, or at least, part of him.'

'No shit?'

'Erm, yes, shit,' Mik replied, confused.

'I can hear you, but I cannot see.' The voice drifted out from under the hood like a breeze.

'My lord, my name is Cian, Battlemaster of the Magistry. We come seeking counsel.'

'Cian? Cian? What an unusual name. What is that, Hardrish? Baloran?' the voice sang, almost melodic.

'No, my lord,' Cian said, a hint of frustration creeping into his voice. 'It's Celtic. We're on Earth.'

'Ah, the realm of Light. Our sanctuary. I would so love to have seen that come to fruition.'

Seb exchanged a glance with Mik, the look returned didn't instil any confidence. The mage shrugged and raised his eyebrows.

'Woden, my lord,' Cian continued, his head rising now. 'Earth exists, you brought us here. You fulfilled the last wishes of Danu. But now it struggles, the Consensus weakens, and the sheol probe and squeeze through the cracks.'

'The sheol? Are they still such a menace, they are such an inconvenience don't you think?'

'An inconvenience?' The growl had crept back into Cian's voice. 'My lord, Aura was overrun, Earth is barely holding. How is it that you do not know any of this?'

'I am sorry,' Woden breathed, the words taking an almost sad tone. 'I do not remember...much...of anything anymore. I am adrift, floating.'

Cian turned and marched back to them. Woden didn't move.

'This isn't good,' he said. 'He's just an essence, barely present. He's been here too long.'

'What do you mean?' Seb said, not taking his eyes off the hooded figure.

'I mean that's the reason why the Consensus is weakening. If he's an example of the rest of them, they are just dispersing out into the Weave. Soon they'll just be like the rest of us, fragments of memory and mind.'

'So that's it, we're fucked?' Don said.

Cian frowned. 'I don't know. I suppose it was inevitable. The Consensus controls the Weave, but it also fed by it. It is its lifeblood.' Cian shook his head, clearing his thoughts, 'Perhaps, without the use of the Weave being so prevalent, that the First have simply lost the taste for it. Like a shark moving onto to other waters when the food dries up.'

Seb moved past the men as they continued their discussion. He dropped to his knees in front of Woden, resisting the urge to peer under the hood.

'My lord, can you hear me?' He spoke the words but pulsed it also, directing towards the entity he saw before him.

'Who is this, is that you, Shimmer?' The voice came, melodic, almost child-like.

'No, not Shimmer,' Seb said, 'my name is Seb, an acolyte under Cian, we came seeking your help.'



'Cian, who is he? Do I know him? It's an unusual name, is it Baloran?'

This wasn't getting him anywhere. This was some kind of astral senility caused by centuries of standing idle. A thought occurred to him from nowhere. He didn't think it through, and he sent a mild mental jab with the Weave.

The resulting force knocked him to the floor. He shook his head, blinking the shock away as the hooded figure suddenly stood, a white light burst from under the hood, hurting his eyes.

'Vulgarity! Who dares channel in my presence?'

Seb staggered back, Cian's strong grip preventing him from tumbling off the rock and into oblivion. The figure spun about, arms flaying, words coming out but to Seb they sounded like nothing but gibberish.

'What the hell did you do?'

'He wasn't responding. You said they fed on magic, so I gave him a nibble.'

The bait that animated Woden was fading already. He stopped, walked a couple of steps, muttering all the time, before dropping back to his knees in the place where he started. Cain shot Seb a '*don't move*' glance before moving back over.

'My lord, can you hear me?'

'I hear you, my Son, who is this?'

'I am Cian, my lord, Battlemaster of the Magistry.'

The figure gave a barely noticeable nod, 'Cian, that's an unusual name, what is it? Hardrish? Baloran?'

Cain cursed and stomped back. 'It's no fucking use, he's lost. We're on our own.'

'Is that it? One setback and you're giving up? I had him then, he responded, he just needs -'

'He needs nothing but being banished into the void. This is no existence for someone of such *greatness*,' Cian marched away, avoiding eye contact.

'So, now what?' Don said.

'We go. This is a dead end.'

At that moment a familiar voice shouted, carried across the wind, surrounding them.

'...Cian! Don! Wake up, we've got company!'

## Chapter 43

Seb roared to consciousness, the experience like rushing to the surface after spending minutes under water. His eyes opened, and he sucked in cold air as the real world appeared around him.

'What is it?' He heard Cian say.

'Something's out there.' Cade said.

Seb stumbled to his feet and staggered out of the chamber housing the First. The Brothers were scattered before him, all but Reuben and Cade on bended knee, weapons trained on the darkness around them.

'What is it? I don't see anything.' Mik took up position next to Cian, his staff rippling with blue lightning.

'I thought you lot were meant to be fucking psychic?' Reuben hissed. 'Listen, dammit!'

Seb closed his eyes and drew in a slow, steady breath. Through ears enhanced by the Weave the sounds drifted to him. Whispers at first, a faint hiss of movement. Then the hiss became a gush, like a leak from a pressurised pipe. Yet it wasn't gas he was hearing. The hissing became a storm, a roaring wind of razor-teeth and black eyes. With his heart rattling like a caged bird, Seb opened his eyes.

The sheol.

'Cian!'

'I know, boy. We all do.' Cian raised his staff. A Weave-fire erupted from his skin, his outline a dazzling azure inferno. 'Gather yourself, this is going to be testing.'

Seb rummaged for the rattan. One of the sticks got stuck in its strap. He gave it a yank and it flew out, clattering on to the floor. He dived for it, grabbing it as it rolled against Reuben's foot. The Second Sword gave him a look of sheer contempt before turning his yellow eyes back to the oncoming threat.

The shadows in the roof began to shift and morph. From tunnels unseen a mass of creatures poured forth, racing down the stone vertical pillars. Black eyes glinted in the gloom, the sheol gibbering and growling as they surged forth.

'Contact, north pillar!' Cade said.

'And the west,' one of the other brothers replied.

'Suppression pattern. Tight bursts. Don't fire until you're sure of a hit.'

Seb fell behind Cian. The light rattans suddenly felt heavy in his hands, his palms slick with sweat. He sensed out, the fear making the effort clumsy, fragmented. Countless echoes fired back at him. Feral minds with only one goal.

'They're going to kill all of us,' he heard himself whisper.

'Shut down that fear, boy. Remember your training.' Cian

said, not looking back at him. 'Cade, can we make it to the exit?'

The mass of sheol were on the ground now. They raced towards the group from two directions. The Brotherhood had not fired a round yet. They remained poised, weapons ready. Cade stood, his enhanced vision looking above and over.

'We need to punch a hole through. If we move quick we'd only encounter a few.'

Cian nodded. 'Make it so. Let me lead. On my signal you give them the P grenades.'

'Understood.'

'Stay with me, boy.'

Cian barrelled forwards. Strengthened limbs propelled him at high speed, his massive frame barely touching the ground as he sped towards the approaching sheol. The magi, Seb at the rear, followed behind. The air crackled and shimmered as a field of force was projected before them. The sheol were only yards away now. They scrabbled and barrelled into each other, any that stumbled quickly being trampled on by those that came behind.

'Now!' Cian's voice rumbled across the chamber.

'Eyes!' Cade shouted.

Seb scrunched his eyes shut. The world became black and panic flared as he raced headlong into certain death. He heard the *whoompf* as the Brotherhood's weapons discharged. Beyond his

closed eyelids the world exploded into a searing white. The sheol shrieked, his nostrils suddenly filled by the scent of scorched flesh. He dared to open his eyes, the fear of falling too much to ignore. He nearly gagged as he saw the sea of molten, bubbling sheol flesh that extended before him, their blood turning the floor black with blood.

The massive arch that led out of the Nexus loomed ahead. He didn't think about their chances. It had taken what felt an age to simply descend the steps into this room. An hour at least to get back to the exit. They had no hope of outrunning the sheol if they chose to pursue. He could only hope Cian had a plan.

They swept forward. Hundreds of sheol had been vaporised in the blast. Many more flailed in agony on the ground, grasping at scorched stumps that had formerly been limbs. Seb kept his head down as they ploughed onwards.

They were almost through. The blast had formed a clear gap through the sheol hordes but already more were streaming forth, the hole narrowing by the heartbeat. A thin line formed before them barring their way. Cian pointed his staff, blasting them with an invisible force, the sheol bouncing away like skittles.

They were through! The gap failed to close. The sheol yowled and screeched as they reformed but for now, the exit beckoned. Seb allowed a flicker of hope to spring to life.

Something changed then. Reality didn't just groan. It

screamed. The magi stopped, exchanging confused looks.

'It's not me!' Cian said.

'What the hell?' Cade said. The Brothers had fallen in behind the mages, inside their protective spheres. They aimed their weapons at the horde, but for some reason they'd stopped, maintaining a perimeter around them.

A sound that made Seb's stomach fill with dread made him turn back, towards the exit. He didn't want to look. It was if his mind knew, on some unconscious level, what he was going to face. Yet he had no choice.

'Danu be merciful,' Mik muttered.

It was if some invisible force had ripped the very fabric of reality. A tear appeared in the air, twenty foot high. The rip moved downwards like an otherworldly zip, exposing a crack of darkness that filled the air with a ragged diamond shape. As they watched, dumbfounded, two massive, black-scaled claws emerged from the crack. They gripped the side of the aperture. A petrifying scream rang out as the crack widened. A daemoniac maw emerged, all teeth and scale. Oval red eyes fixed on the group, the edges turning upwards in a wicked smile.

'Cian!' Seb heard himself yell.

'Back. Behind me. To the First!'

'We can't. There's no way out!' Don screamed.

'The Home Stone. Use it.'

The daemon was half way out now. A heavily muscled leg stepped onto the stone flags. Ebony claws alighted on the flags.

'But the sheol!'

Cian whipped his head round. His eyes blazed blue. Weave-lighting crackled and rippled across his body. 'Go dammit! I will hold!'

Mik and Don exchanged worried glances. The Brotherhood didn't need a second invite. They turned and ran. The sheol roared and converged on them. The warriors emptied rounds into the mass. Silver bullets ripped through daemon flesh like butter. The sheol fell in their droves, but for every one that died, two more took their place. The warriors' weapons clicked empty. Rune Scripted weapons were unsheathed as the sheol came upon them.

And hell erupted.

Seb didn't want to leave Cian. The giant warrior stood before the daemon that was now fully out of the portal. It stood to its full height, easily three times Cian's size. It roared, the sound sending daggers of fear through Seb, paralysing him in place. A dark fire burned on the fiend's skin, and a massive curved blade, wickedly serrated and adorned in strange silver runes that Seb didn't recognise, materialised out of the air inside one of the creatures hands.

'Seb! Come on!' Mik ducked as a sheol leapt over the mass.



He raised a hand and a bolt of fire surged out of his palm, taking the sheol in the face, incinerating it in mid-air. A smoking pulp skidded to a halt at his feet.

Seb hurried after him. Don had burned a hole back the way they'd come. He surged on, the Brothers falling in behind. Cade took up the rear, his twin blades cutting down any sheol that dared come within range.

'We need to get back to the First, we can hold there whilst we summon the portal!' Don shouted.

Seb dared a look behind. The horned daemon swung the massive blade at Cian's head, the speed of the attack belying its size. Cian ducked, a blur. He struck forwards, the staff a rod of blue fire as it lanced out towards the fiend's jaw. It connected with a flash of light, the fiend staggering backwards in a daze. Cian didn't hesitate. He turned and ran, backhanding a sheol that got too close, sending its head clean from its shoulders. Relieved, Seb turned, and fell over a sheol that had died at his feet.

The room span. The fleeing magi vanished, and he was abruptly facing the stalactites that descended from the cavern. His elbow flared in pain, but he shoved it aside, flipping onto his front and rising onto one knee. He raised his head, just in time to see the sheol, one arm missing, the stump pulsing sable blood, as it staggered towards him. He reached for the rattan

that lay near his outstretched palm but it was too far away. The sheol was upon him. He raised his arms and braced for the inevitable.

*No! Not him!*

The feral voice pulsed across the chamber, rippling the Weave. The sheol skidded to a halt, rubbery legs flailing on the floor. It scrabbled to its feet and turned away, only to be obliterated by a blast of blue fire from Cian as he raced past.

'With me, boy!'

'What was that?'

'Fuck knows. Talk later. For now. We run.'

Don and the surviving Brothers had made it to the crypt. Two of the warriors lay dead behind them, mutilated beyond recognition. It was a relief when he saw Cade, drenched in blood but alive, slumped against the stone door. Reuben stood by him, comparatively unscathed. Mik raced just ahead of Cian, nearing the door. Behind, the ground shook as the giant fiend, flanked by hundreds of the sheol, cracked the ancient flags as it closed the gap between them.

'Don, Seb, to me. Lend me your strength.' Cian skidded to a halt and turned back. The air in front of the onrushing sheol shimmered as he erected a wall of force. Seb immediately channelled, lending what reserves he had to the warrior.

'Mik - the stone, now.'

Seb heard the mage reach for his backpack. Someone behind him muttered an expletive.

'Shit. No fucking way.'

'What?' Cian hissed. He stared forwards, teeth gritted.

'The backpack. I don't have it.'

'What? How the hell?' Reuben said.

'I don't know alright! It must've come off back there.'

'Where?'

'By the dais, when that fucker got in my face.'

The first of the sheol smashed in to the barrier. It flared as circles of energy rippled outwards from the impact. The first rows of sheol were instantly incinerated. The second row tried to stop but was forced forwards by the combined weight of those behind. They fell screaming onto the barrier. The remainder slowed to a stop, howling and snarling, but not moving. Seb looked across. He'd felt the massive drain on the shield as the sheol hit. His head pounded. His legs were jelly. God knew what Cian must be feeling. The giant warrior was on one knee now. Sweat poured down his face. His body shook. Tendons jutted out of his neck. The shield was holding, but it wouldn't survive another onslaught. The magi knew that. It was a matter of time before the sheol realised.

'Where the hell is it, Mik?'

Seb shook the sweat from his brow. He wiped a blood-stained

hand across his eyes. He channelled, focussing Avatari. The blurred mass of sheol sharpened into a clarity he didn't know existed. Through countless legs and arms he peered, the world slowing, his senses taken to new levels.

It was then that he saw it. The backpack laid a few feet beyond the sheol. One of the straps peeked out from under a blackened pile of bones.

*There! Under that mass!* He pulsed.

*Cian. When I get there. Focus the shield on me. I only need one second.* Mik pulsed back to the group.

*Mik, wait!*

It was too late. Mik raced off from the group. The sheol shrieked with glee, not quite believing that someone would just throw themselves at their mercy. A handful of them forgot the shield even existed and throw themselves forwards, burning to a crisp as they hit the barrier.

Mik raced towards the perimeter. His staff swung in circles above his head as he moved, leaving a trail of blue energy behind him. When he was within feet of the barrier's edge he threw the staff, the weapon a spinning circle of death that burned into those sheol gathered around the backpack. At the same time he pulsed his last words in this realm.

*Now!*

Cian narrowed the shield, extending it at the point where

Mik dived out of its protection. Seb felt the Weave crackle as the perimeter burned those caught in its new structure. Mik dove for the backpack. He shoved one hand inside and whipped out the glowing emerald gem.

*'Come back! Come back, dammit!'* Seb said.

Mike scrambled to his feet just as the giant daemon turned its attention towards him. He clutched it under both arms as he dashed away back into the shrinking sphere.

*Come on. I...can't...hold it* Cian pulsed.

Mik had a good few feet on the shield's edge when the daemon saw him, and the item he carried. Seb felt the sudden change in its demeanour.

*No! They cannot escape!*

Mindlessly, the sheol dove against the barrier. Scores burned in an instant. The shield flickered, fell, and then reformed. Seb shot a look at Cian. The giant had dropped to both knees. His arms hung by his sides and his jaw dangled listlessly.

Mik was halfway back. The daemon howled in fury, frustration boiling over. It swept a handful of sheol out of the way, and then, with its red eyes focussed on the fleeing mage, smashed its blade two-handed down onto the shield.

It was if the world had screamed.

The shield exploded in a searing flash of light. The

nearest row of sheols were vaporised at the speed of thought.

The daemon staggered back but did not fall. A dense, acrid smoke wrapped round its body. All the scales on its left side had been charred. One eye had melted, leaving a smoking socket, and yet still it did not fall. It took one step forward and encountered no resistance. Its scorched lips curled into a wicked grin. It took a step forward, towards the motionless Mik, who lay on the floor, smoke seeping from his tunic.

'Cian!' Seb yelled.

The giant warrior was spent. He slumped to the floor, Don only catching him before his head cracked against the stone. The mage looked up at Seb through eyes dead with fatigue.

'Shit! What now! This wasn't supposed to happen!'

Reuben screamed and shot back into the chamber, his surviving guards following with him. Cade shuffled over, cradling his wounded arm.

'Any ideas?'

'No,' Seb lied. He knew what he had to do. There was no time for discussion now. Cade simply nodded and slipped a blood-soaked sword into his free hand.

'Then we fight to the end.'

'Indeed.'

Seb didn't hesitate any further. He channelled, rich energy flooding his limbs. His legs felt on fire, and he leapt

forwards, barely touching the ground as he closed the distance to Mik in seconds, Cade's shouts of protest a distant echo. He skidded to a halt, ignoring the encroaching sheol and tumbling over the broken body of a fiend, landing next to the backpack. *There!* The green stone glittered in the pack, specks of light twinkling in the shadows. He didn't look at Mik. The smell of scorched flesh told him all he needed to know about the mage's sacrifice.

Something growled from nearby. He shot a look over his shoulder. The sheol were yards away, some of them coming to their senses after the explosion. A handful turned towards him and howled. Shit! He had to act fast. He grabbed the stone and stumbled upright. The majority of the stunned sheol were recovering now and were moving towards him, a terrifying mass of teeth and claw.

A chill thought struck him. They weren't going to make it. The others were yards away, immobile due to the unconscious Cian. If he ran back with the stone then there wouldn't be any time.

There was only one option.

The growls came again, nearer this time. He spun about. The sheol were circling him, closing ranks, cutting him off. Strangely though they didn't attack. They simply surrounded him, preventing his escape.

Seb didn't think about his next action. The thought came to him, unbidden, and he acted upon it. He took the stone and held it high above his head. He and Cade caught each other's eyes. The thought, Seb's intention, flashed between them in that instant.

*No!*

Seb hurled the stone, guided by his own Avatari, it smashed into the ground five feet from the group. The portal exploded into a fiery, white brilliance.

'Seb!' Cade shouted, ducking and then impaling a sheol that crossed his path as he rushed out towards him.

'Go!'

The daemons converged on him, the mass obscuring all light. He heard the portal flash - they'd made it!

A surge of relief washed through him as he closed his eyes. He willed a shield that wouldn't come, and waited for the end.



## Chapter 44

His smell was the first of his senses to wake up. A sickening stench of burned flesh filled his nostrils. He sat up, retching onto a damp floor of stone.

He blinked once. Twice. Darkness. Total darkness. His heart raced, something akin to panic pricked his mind.

He felt one hand with another. Great, at least he was still in one piece. His muscles ached. His back felt like he'd been pummelled by a cricket bat, but he was alive, and thankfully, relatively uninjured.

A small flicker, barely a pinprick of light, caught his gaze.

*His gaze.*

He could see. But see what? He dropped to his knees, scurrying over to the light. He realised now that he wasn't blind, but the room was almost impossibly black. The light, he saw, was coming from a crack underneath a door. He could just about make it out now, an iron structure covered in bolts and bars. A square panel was about head height on the door, some kind of peephole no doubt. He stood, regretting it instantly, his calves aching.

*He sensed.*

*Nothing.*

No, not nothing. He didn't *sense*, there was nothing there.

Now he panicked.

He tried again, straining, clawing at the Weave, but his efforts were futile, grasping nothing but the void.

He'd been disconnected.

*Calm down.* He moved away from the door, only stopping when his back met resistance in the form of a rough, stone wall that dug into his spine.

Movement. From outside the door.

Seb took a fighting stance, what Cade called the *receiver*, and stood ready. Yet without a weapon and the comfort of the Weave he suddenly felt very vulnerable, the growing confidence of recent months washed away in a blink.

Two sets of footsteps stopped outside the door. Fingers fumbled. A panel slide back. A square of light illuminated the room and Seb was forced to raise his hand to protect himself from the glare.

Two men stepped in, their eyes the oil-colour of the possessed. They grinned, bearing needle-thin teeth.

'We've been waiting for you for a long time,' one of them said, the one on the left. His friend didn't respond, he simply chuckled and danced from one foot to another.

'Where am I?' He tried to put something akin to authority into his voice but the effect fell on deaf ears.

'Hey, it's got some guts this one, hasn't it?' The sheol said again, his companion practically giddy with excitement now. 'Perhaps we should just rip its throat out here and now, to shut its endless bleating? What do you say?'

For a moment Seb thought that the other possessed was about to lunge at him. He probably would've if it wasn't for the voice that spoke then, stilling the two of them in an instant.

'You will do no such thing.'

The man, taller than the possessed, swept in through the doorway, ducking as he came in. He towered about all of them, nearly matching Cian in height. He gazed down at Seb, a mix of curiosity and amusement crossing face.

'You're not possessed,' Seb said, noticing the absence of blackness in the man's eyes.

The man laughed, 'Possessed? Is that what you call it?' He nodded to himself as if musing on some internal monologue. 'I suppose that's a fair assessment. But yes, you are correct, I am not, as you say, *possessed*.'

It hit him like a sledgehammer.

'Marek.' It wasn't a question.

Marek smiled. 'I see my reputation precedes me. I should be flattered.'

'Why have you brought me here? Why am I not dead in the Nexus?'

'Would you rather be?' Marek said, head dipping and white eyes suddenly wide. 'It can be arranged, and no doubt will occur. Unfortunately we need you, or rather, your head.'

'I won't give it to you.'

Even as he said the words he realised how futile they sounded. Marek knew it too, the knowing smile on his face letting Seb know exactly how serious he took that statement. Seb was lost, Weaveless. God knew where he was. For the first time in months, he felt like crying.

'Ah, there, there, little mageling,' Marek said, reading his thoughts, 'No need for tears. I promise you that when the time comes your death will be quick, if not totally painless.' Marek turned to the sheol, who had until that point remained to the side, eyes focused on something interesting on the floor. 'Bring him. We need to get this started.'

'Get what started?' Seb said as the possessed took a painful grip of each arm.

Marek smiled, the expression alien and terrifying at once. 'Why, we're going to rip out your mind of course.'

They dragged Seb into a narrow corridor that was too slim for the three of them to walk side by side. One took the rear, the other stood next to him, holding his arm. They moved forwards, the light from the oil-lanterns easing his eyes back into usefulness. The orbs that had pocked his eyes when the

panel was slid back had almost vanished, his vision nearly back to normal.

As he walked, he tried to focus on himself, not drawing on the Weave, but the mindfulness exercises he'd been taught at Skelwith. He wrapped layers around his fear, slowing his heart, suppressing the adrenalin that pumped through his veins. He turned his attention outside, sight, sound and scent. He needed to learn as much as about his environment as possible. There was no opportunity now, but he was sure one would come. To do what, he didn't know, but come it would.

Low grumbles drifted down from somewhere above in regular patterns. The rumbles grew in pitch before tailing off quickly as something passed overhead.

*A road. A busy road.*

A puddle loomed ahead, water dripping into it from the ceiling. He looked up and saw the grille there, the rain seeping through. As he watched someone walked over it. Then another.

'Enough staring!' The sheol behind him clipped him hard round the ear, fire exploding on the right side of his face.

The corridor widened and curved hard to the left. It ended at another set of doors. These were wooden, not iron, like the one from the cell. The first sheol took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. It creaked open, revealing a further corridor that belonged to an entirely different building

altogether.

They stepped out from the damp stone onto a thick red carpet, Seb's feet sinking into the pile as he walked. The corridor was immaculate, what he'd imagined Skelwith to have been like in its heyday. Sparkling chandeliers hung from the ceiling, gold-painted wood panelling lined the walls, interspersed with paintings of people and places Seb didn't recognise.

They moved on down the corridor, the possessed now flanking him on either side. He risked a sense again but found nothing. He felt it then, something cold, metallic, very thin, and it was wrapped around his neck.

'A Void Ring.' Marek said, once again reading his thoughts like he'd spoken aloud. 'It's used to suppress Weave-abilities.'

'Am I that much of a threat?'

'Don't deceive yourself, yours is a candle to a star, insignificant. But at the same time we cannot risk you attempting to contact your friends, those who so eagerly abandoned you at the Nexus.'

Another door loomed, this one flanked with human vassals dressed in suits and holding automatic weapons.

Marek pushed past him and walked through the double doors, the barrier seemingly opening in his wake. Seb shook his head and followed, encouraged by jabs to his ribs from his escort.

They emerged into a separate hall, this now much vaster than the corridors they'd just left. The interior resembled some kind of church. Braziers burned in the shadows, casting a dim glow to the room. The air smelled of charcoal and something else, something unpleasant that he couldn't remember, or his mind wouldn't let him.

He followed Marek to an altar at the far side of the hall, the platform raised above the pews. The stone floor was darker here than elsewhere, some kind of liquid dried into the surface.

'Kneel,' something struck the back of his knee and he crumbled. He cracked the back of his head against the floor and the world began to swim. He bit his tongue during the fall and blood filled his mouth.

'My lord, we have him, we have the Message-bearer.' Marek's voice echoed throughout the chamber.

Seb rolled himself onto his side and pushed himself upright. The world span and white splodges peppered his vision. He held his position, focusing on a brazier nearest the altar. The room steadied, the light faded. From somewhere, a voice spoke.

'Marek, I was beginning to fear you had failed me.'

Seb twisted his head, fear trying to stay his eyes but something compelling him. Marek stood before him, covered in robes of red and black. His slender, almost skeletal hands were

raised high above his head, the sleeves sliding down to his elbows. Beyond Marek the air shimmered, a form coalescing from swirls of energy inside a large oval portal. The figure that formed was opaque, humanoid in shape but lacking in detail.

'My apologies, my Master, it took us longer to lure the cowards out of their hole than we thought.'

'And, were you successful? Do you have it?' the figure that the Marek referred to as Master said, its voice drawn out as if being called across a chasm.

Marek turned to Seb then, his white eyes twinkling with barely disguised glee. He waved a fragile hand in Seb's direction, it taking immense willpower on Seb's part to resist snapping it at the wrist in that instant.

'Behold, the Message-bearer, the taker of the Pattern.'

The Master stooped, coming closer into the portal. Wide, oval eyes, ash-grey in colour, peered out at Seb. Icy tendrils touched his mind, the chill sending a ripple of nausea that shook his gut. He tried to will something, anything, but he was hopelessly exposed. His vision exploded into a myriad of images and thoughts, the Master tearing through his mind with ease. He tried to think of other things, throwing his own thoughts in the Master's way, trying to hide the locked message that lurked inside.

*'Do not resist, it will only increase your pain,'* the voice



was seductive, almost alluring. He drifted for a moment, his mind slipping. The icy fingers jabbed again, smashing through his flailing defences. The pain seared the backs of his eyes, sending him rolling backwards, clawing at his skin, screaming as the invisible tendrils bubbled through his nerves.

A box appeared in his mind's eye. Golden runes danced across its surface. On some instinctive level he knew this contained the message Sarah had so carefully hidden inside him.

'No,' he croaked. He raised a hand, but his energy was spent, the limb dropping to the floor, a knuckle scraping on stone.

'I have it. It is there.'

The fingers probed again. Seb could only whimper in response. His conscious mind had retreated somewhere else, somewhere safe. He cowered there, hiding in the dark.

The box shook and spun in his mind, invisible hands twisting and turning it. The runes enlarged, becoming clearer, but still no more understandable. The box rattled. Something hit it, but it didn't yield.

'The magic is strong, too strong for me to unlock at this distance.'

'What can we do, Master?' Marek said.

'I require a commune, we must combine our strengths.'

Marek nodded. 'As you wish, my Master.'

The portal flickered then vanished. Nothing existing of its presence besides a thin vertical slit of light that faded within seconds. Seb opened his eyes further as Marek suddenly squatted before him.

'You're going to wish you'd lost your marbles just then, boy.'

From his mental retreat, Seb didn't doubt those words. But as he was hoisted up, his wrists being chained to a wooden pole that had been fixed into the ground, his mind, the part of him that resisted, clung to one thought.

He had seen it. The Master hadn't but he had. In his last desperate attempt on the box the Master had smashed it with all his might and then retreated. As he'd left Seb's mind the box continued to rotate, momentum carrying it around. That was when he saw it.

A crack. A crack of golden light on the surface.

## Chapter 45

Sylph waited until it was almost dawn before she made her move. Most of the sheol that came back from the Nexus - those that had survived at least - had retired to recuperate. Some of them wouldn't make it, the Brotherhood inflicting wounds that wouldn't facilitate a full recovery. Most though would return, their parasites revived, ready to inflict more damage on this suffering world.

They weren't Baloran. Of that much she was certain. It had come to her slowly, but had finally solidified the previous evening. Listening to the Master talking to the prisoner, the mageling, she'd realised then this was no Priest of Balor, no Chosen one. He was a daemon in human form. The enemy.

And he must be stopped.

Unfortunately it wasn't going to be as easy as it would've been even the week before. Marek no longer trusted her, doubting her loyalty to their cause. He tried to hide it but it was obvious; he would no longer consult with her, and she'd been exempt from all but the least important missions in recent months. Even the foray into the Nexus, one that surely demanded the most elite they could muster, had been one that she'd been told to stay away from. She was an outcast now, and strangely it didn't feel so bad. In fact it felt like a weight had been

lifted. Even though she knew what it meant for her. How it would end.

They would make their own move tonight. With the prisoner secured, it was only a matter of time before they acted. They were cutting loose ends, readying for the final move.

They came moments later. Four of them, armed, making no attempt at stealth. Why would they? Why would they think that Marek's most loyal servant would suspect something was awry, or instead did they assume she'd just follow blindly, straight into the abyss?

Let them find out.

She stood stock still, arms behind her back. The sheol stopped outside her door. They didn't knock, which would've been their normal behaviour. Instead a skeleton key, courtesy of Marek no doubt, rattled in the lock. The bolt slipped back, and the door creaked open.

'It's rude to just open someone's door without knocking you know.'

The four sheol, three men and one woman, stepped into the room. They exchanged uncertain glances as they fanned out, two of them taking a point on either side of her. One of them, the leader judging by his demeanour, not visibly cowed by the presence of their prey stood waiting for them, stopped directly in front of her, making no attempt to hide the cudgel that he

clutched in his right hand.

'Sylph, Marek would like to see you.'

She smiled and tilted her head. So this was how they were going to play it? Bring her out under the pretext of a special meeting with their leader. How did they intend to do it? She wondered. Would they simply bludgeon her to death when she turned away, or would they bring her to heel, possess her, casting her soul to the Void?

'At this time?' She cooed, 'What would be so important that I'm required in the middle of the night? Does our illustrious leader not require some rest?' She turned to the leader, 'After all the sheol he's been creating?'

The sheol opened his mouth to speak. No words came out. His eyes dropped down to her side.

To the runed dagger in her hand.

'Sylph -'

The words died in his throat as the dagger struck out, slicing a clean red line across his neck. As he crumpled, choking on his own blood, Sylph slashed out on either side, faster than her opponents could even comprehend. The woman smashed into the wall, skull cracking under the impact. The other was dead before he hit the ground, the dagger's handle sticking out sideways from his ribs.

The last sheol staggered back, black eyes wide and

unblinking. The climbing axe that they'd held hidden behind their backs clattered as it dropped to the ground.

'It's funny isn't it,' Sylph said, advancing on her stricken foe. 'I thought the sheol were fearless, pure evil, but I was wrong wasn't I? Without your masters, without someone to tell you what to do, you're cowards, all of you.'

'Please, I don't want to die!' The sheol babbled. He backed away, tripped over his fallen leader, collapsing on the floor, scrabbling backwards into the corridor.

'Die? Die!' Sylph said, anger swelling in her now. She picked up the axe from the floor. 'You died when you sold your soul!' The axe fell. The man fell silent.

Sylph stepped out into the corridor and set off for the altar.

## Chapter 46

Seb didn't know how long he stood chained to the post at the altar. The candles before him flickered and burned low, but every time he closed his eyes they seemed replenished once again. Was time passing? Was he losing consciousness, missing the sheol as they replaced the candles? He couldn't tell. All he knew he was that his mouth was as dry as sand, and his stomach rumbled so much he was sure he could see his skin move.

At some point someone entered the room. He squinted into the gloom. A shadow moved towards him. As it got near the shadow took the form of a woman. She was pale, her hair black and short. Her eyes though, they weren't black, and she moved normally, like a human. She moved quickly to the altar and leapt up so that she was standing before him. It was then that he saw the bloodied dagger in her hand.

'If you're going to do it, just do it.'

He wasn't scared anymore. He'd given up any hope of escape. The next best option was that he was killed, so at least the message the Master sought so much died with him.

'You're a mage.' The woman said.

'Of sorts. You're not a sheol.'

'No.' The woman shifted on her feet. She frowned and touched a hand to her head. 'Your kind. You hunt the sheol?'

'Some of us do, yes. They are our enemy, if that's what you're asking.'

'The message you carry. That they seek. It will serve Marek and the sheol in some way?'

'That's my understanding. Why?'

The woman took a step closer. 'What are your thoughts on Balor?'

'What? What does he -' the dagger at his throat silenced him instantly.

'Just answer me, mageling.'

'Balor was the brother of Danu. Together they discovered the Weave. In the One War, Balor was lost, unable to live with how the sheol had tricked him. It was Danu who sent us here, so that we might live.'

Seb recounted the abridged version of the betrayal as best he could remember. Was this some kind of test? Whatever it was, his words didn't seem to sit well with the woman. Her brow furrowed and her eyes narrowed. He kept himself frozen in place, the cold iron of the dagger resting on his skin.

'It appears I was misled,' the woman said after what seemed an age.

'I don't understand.'

'You won't.'

'Who are you?'

The woman stared at him a moment longer, her face a picture of indecision. Something clicked in her mind, a choice made. She slid the dagger back into its sheath.

'Sylph. My name is Sylph.'

'You're the one that Cade saw. The warrior.'

'I suspect so.'



'But you know the Weave too?'

'Marek taught me personally.'

'Wow. Tough break.'

The door to the vestibule opened. A score of sheol scurried in, splitting into two groups on either side of the nave. Marek swept in behind them.

'Seb, Sylph, it is good to see the two of you getting acquainted. It saves me on the introductions!' Marek glided inwards, a mock grin on his face.

'Release me! Now!' Seb hissed into Sylph's ear.

Sylph turned her back to Marek and raised her hand to somewhere behind his neck. Marek stopped and tipped his head to one side.

'Sylph, please tell me my eyes deceive me. You are betraying me? Your own father?'

'You are not my father!' Sylph shouted, not turning back. Tears streamed down her face and her hands shook as she fumbled with something on the Void Ring.

'Ignore him. Just focus.'

Sylph leaned closer still, both hands now working on detaching the ring. Seb winced, an involuntary reaction, but then he heard a click, and the universe opened up to him.

Years later, he would describe that single moment as if he'd been given sight when all before he'd been blind. When he'd first awoken to the Weave, he didn't really appreciate it. He

didn't understand the gift he'd been given. This time though, after the enforced absence of the past few hours, the unseen force that bound all reality washed through him, a torrent of energy that illuminated every neuron and filled his body with a tingling energy. At once he was linked to everything, tied to the universe in a way only a mage would know.

He did not intend to let it go again.

'Apprehend them.' Marek said.

The sheol surged forward, the first barrelling onto the altar. Sylph ducked a clumsy swipe then dispatched it with her dagger. Another came, and another. Soon, they were swarming round her, the warrior barely keeping pace with the onslaught. Seb tried to move, then realised that he was still bound to the post. He channelled, sending strength to his arms. Power swelled and then waned. The Wave was with him again, but it was erratic, like flexing a muscle that had lay asleep for hours. He focussed, trying to slow his racing heart, the power imbuing his limbs in piecemeal bursts.

One of the possessed landed before him then. Its jaw half hung from its face, a clean slice from Sylph just falling short of severing its head clean from its shoulders. It drooled blood, not feeling the pain, and then lunged forward with taloned hands.

Seb threw everything he had into his muscles. Raw strength

surged, his arms feeling like they would burst. He pulled with all his might and the bindings around his wrist snapped. His hands flew round and up, catching the sheol by its wrists as it lunged for him. Without thinking, he drove his forehead into the creature's nose, bone and cartilage crumbling under the imbued strike. It dropped to the ground, dazed. Another sheol leapt at him before he had chance to finish his opponent off. It swung at him, but the Weave flowed now, the movement seeming as if in slow motion to his enhanced senses. He ducked under the attack before driving a focussed jab into the creature's ribs, breaking bones. The sheol tumbled off the dais, crashing into the stone flags, its head cracking against the floor with a sickening thud.

'Mage, help!'

He spun round. Sylph was back peddling. Several of the sheol lay dead at her feet, a trail of destruction following her to where she now stood, back against a wall, desperately fending off attack after attack.

He had to move quickly. Two of the possessed climbed onto the dais. He snapped forwards in an instant, smashing his elbow into an exposed nose. He turned on the other without pause, his previous opponent already collapsing to the floor. He spun and brought up his arm as a staff lashed towards his head. He caught the weapon with one hand, just above where the possessed gripped

it and shoved his shoulder into the man's side as he twisted. The staff came free, the sheol flipping over onto the floor. Seb twisted the grip, took the staff in both hands, and brought it down on the man's head. He didn't move any further.

He leapt down and raced towards Sylph. The Weave sung within him, every step seemed so sure, the world in focus, every detail being absorbed, every possible permutation already calculated. Two more came at him, recognising the new threat. They fell within a second of each other, one unconscious, one howling, clutching a shattered elbow.

Sylph, sensing the shift in battle, went back on the offensive. She finished off her last opponent, a human male who was halfway through a total transformation. Black blood pumped over black scales, the floor growing shiny as the ichor pooled beneath them. Seb caught her eyes then, and there was no mistaking the relief she saw at his presence. They met in the middle of the melee just as the door to the hall exploded open, shards of wood flying everywhere like lethal lances as they dove to the floor. Several sheol were impaled by fragments, falling to the floor and howling at their failing bodies. Marek simply stood, the shard bouncing off an invisible field that protected him.

The Weave warped and wailed as a familiar presence entered the room. Tentacle-like probes scanned the room, and Seb

silently cursed himself for being so careless. He slammed up his mental shield just as the searching fingers found him. They crashed against his mind, his will holding, but only just. There wouldn't be a second time.

'Mageling! You will not escape a second time!'

'Who's that?' Sylph whispered as they lay flat on the floor amidst a pile of rubble.

Seb opened one eye. The horned fiend had been compressed and forced into a loosely human form, but it was still grotesquely large. Black scales and skin intertwined under a ragged smock that barely contained the beast underneath. One red eye glared at him, the other half of its face still charred from Cian's magic.

'He's a daemon, and a powerful one at that.' Seb said. He sent out ripples, hoping to distort the searching gaze of the fiend. Other entities were coming now too, more possessed, but also other fiends like this one, their corrupted auras burning his mind.

'We need to get out of here, now.' He said.

Sylph nodded towards the shadowy alcove at the side. 'That way. A passage leads out of here. I barred the other access points to it.'

Seb nodded. 'Good. Now how the hell do we get past these?'

Sylph shoved something across to him. His spirit lifted

slightly at the sight of Mik's satchel.

'They brought it back from the Nexus. I managed to persuade it's keeper to let it go.'

'Yeah? I can imagine that you're quite good at that when required.'

She smiled. 'I can hold my own. Anything useful there?'

He rummaged in the satchel, hands alighting on the familiar handle of the flare gun. He whipped it out, checking it was loaded. It was. He looked back at her.

'Close your eyes.'

Sylph scrunched her eyes shut as Seb stood and pivoted. For a moment his fear nearly overwhelmed him. The room was flooded with sheol from wall to wall. Amongst their number stood several more daemons that had managed to squeeze through the growing cracks between worlds, the Consensus only half forcing them into a more human shape. In the midst of them, stood in the centre, Marek loomed, much smaller than the fiends but yet towering above them in power.

'Ah, our Messenger seems intent on causing himself a little mischief before he's despatched,' Marek said, his gaze then moving to the side and lower, 'And Sylph, my loyal Baloran, how could you have betrayed your kin like this?'

There was a time for talking, and there was a time for action. This was the latter. Seb pulled the trigger, aiming it

squarely at Marek's face. The mage smiled and the air shimmered in front of him, but the rest of the possessed could only howl with fear as they recognised the weapon that made them burn hotter than a thousand suns. Their screams died as the phosphorous projectile exploded, white fire filling the room.

'Go now!'

Seb pulled Sylph up and they ran for the door. The howls of more possessed filled the air, and he cast one last look back before he followed Sylph into the corridor.

Marek still stood, the invisible shield he'd erected crackling as residue melted back down to the earth.

Shit.

They ploughed into a narrow corridor barely wide enough for one person. Seb tried to turn and pull the other door to but he simply couldn't turn in the confined space. Hopefully any following daemons would suffer the same constriction and he left it, following Sylph as she raced off into the shadows.

'Where does this lead?'

'To an old storage cellar. There's a hatch on the outside of the building that opens up in the grounds.'

Seb smiled. She was smart this one. The thought of what Cian would do with a former apprentice of Marek dampened his thoughts. He shrugged them aside. He had the message; at least he thought he did. Without Sylph that wouldn't have happened.

Surely that counted for something?

Most of the possessed that had not been outright killed by the mage's weapon were either badly burned, blinded, or both. Either way they were as useful as fodder now. Marek sent out a faint jolt to all of them, shocking their minds into instant death. He stepped over the charcoaled bodies at the front that had taken the worst of the blast, casually eyeing the narrow passage that the mage and his former apprentice had fled through.

'They escaped.' Farouk growled. He turned his good eye to Marek.

'They did indeed. It appears that our little bird had an abrupt change of allegiance.' Marek ran one delicate finger over the inside of the narrow passageway. The two were far away now, escaping by the hatch at the back of the church. He sensed the sheol nearby, out of sight. He sent a final command to their leader.

*Remember. Let them go. Do not interfere.*

The reply came instantly. *As you wish, My lord.*

'Did it work?' Farouk said.

Marek paused, sensing again. A moment later he turned and nodded.

'I believe it did. I shall call our friend and let him know. The window of opportunity will be narrow. We must be



ready.'

'You have great faith in this plan, and yet it can all go wrong at the last. Such is the fragility of this house of cards you have built.'

Marek levelled a gaze of steel at the daemon. The alliance with the sheol was something he did not enjoy, yet it was a necessity if his plan were to succeed. They felt the same, and now more daemons were coming through, and not just the rambling hordes that possessed the weak minded. Even now he could feel their loyalty to him wavering. The Consensus was almost weakened beyond recovery. If it failed completely, the sheol would be free to return without burden.

Marek smiled. That would not be allowed to happen. He gave his most polite nod before leaving.

## Chapter 47

'Cade, you must sit down, this endless pacing is going to do you no good.' Silas said.

'Sit down? Really, Father? After what's just happened?' Cade turned and resumed walking up and down in front of his father's desk.

How had it gone so wrong? How did they not know that they were walking into a trap? Those magi! Those useless goddamned magi! Four people had died, Seb had been taken. How the hell could he just calm down?

'Father's right, dear brother, the magi were out of their depth. Their losses are regrettable, yes, but really, isn't it just what they deserved?'

'Deserved?' Cade rounded on Reuben, his older brother even more infuriating by the way he slumped, legs over one arm of the chair, gnawing on a ham hock taken from the canteen. 'How the hell is any death deserved?'

'You sympathise too much, brother. The magi brought this on themselves; perhaps now they will reconsider before they embark on such foolhardy missions.'

'Foolhardy?' Was this for real? He looked back at his father, at Reuben, and then back again. Neither of them couldn't give more of a shit if they tried. 'What am I not seeing here?'

Why do you not care? Nothing's changed, the sheol are still coming though, and now we've lost our only point of information.'

Silas sighed, the motion exaggerated, clearly for effect. 'I am sure there will be another way to correct this unfortunate situation.'

'Situation?' Cade was about to explode. The door opened to their private chamber and his father raised a hand, silencing him before his rant continued. Albert had a phone in his hand, he waved it at Silas, nodding him over.

'If you will excuse me, my son,' Silas said, the fake sadness gone as he leapt from his chair.

'You need to let it go, Cade, I mean that.' Reuben said.

'Let it go, or what?'

'You just need to decide whose side you're on, that's all I mean.'

Cade squared up to his brother. His temple pulsed, adrenalin flooding his veins. 'Again, I ask, or what?'

Cade felt the guards at the side of the room - Reuben's men - bristle at the looming confrontation.

'Really, Brother, me now? Is this how far you've fallen?'

There were four guards in total, all of them the best of those ranks that made it through in recent months. He could take them, all of them, but not before Reuben had put a knife in his

back. Reuben knew it too, and the smile on his face only increased the growing fury.

'Reuben,' Silas called over, entering the room with Albert.  
'A word.'

Cade watched as his brother moved past him. He stared at the floor, drawing in deep breaths. Something wasn't right. The Nexus. The ambush. The loss of Seb. Now this crazy behaviour. It just didn't sit right.

'Cade.'

The word, uttered in a tone of ice, made him turn on the spot.

'What is this?'

Silas stood by the door, Reuben next to him. The guards were stood to attention, hands resting on their weapons.

'I am truly sorry, my son,' Silas said, slowly shaking his head.

Something tugged at Cade, a hot pain that got stuck in his throat. A sudden grief swallowed his anger. 'What is it, Father, what're they doing?'

'Don't make this more unpleasant than it already is, Brother.' Reuben said, taking a step forwards, his men mirroring his step.

Cade took a step backwards. He folded his arms, one hand slipping into his other sleeve.

'Don't, Cade, this is not necessary.'

'You tell me what is going on, and then I'll decide what's necessary.'

'The world is changing, Brother. The magi are extinct, a relic of a dying age. We must turn to something more, our roots, our true Brothers, in order to prosper.'

'What are you doing, Father?' Cade backed towards the desk. Two of the guards had detached themselves from the wall. They maintained their distance, matching his movement. Silas stepped forwards, flanked by Reuben and his remaining warriors.

'Cade, you are truly your mother's son, but, like her, you simply don't have the stomach to do what needs to be done.'

It struck him like a sledgehammer. No way. No fucking way.

'The Nexus? You set us up? You're in league with *them*?'

'You see, you simply don't have the vision. You cannot see.'

Cade shook his head. 'Cannot see what? That you've sold yourselves to the devil? You've broken the Oath!'

'That Oath isn't fit to exist anymore!' Silas said. Reuben smiled. The others nodded with earnest. Cade lowered his arm, putting his hands in his pocket. He found what he was looking for. He pressed the touch screen from memory, hoping it would call the right recipient.

'The magi are lost. A relic. They are not what they once

were and we,' Silas said, calm returning to him now, 'Are no longer bound to a memory.'

'And what? So we sign up with the other side instead? What's it all for, Dad? What do you get out of it?'

Silas smiled as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. 'Why, to rule of course.'

'Rule?' Cade passed the desk. The line was dimmer here, away from the glowing ambience of the chandelier. Reuben sensed it too. Cade saw his brother tense, shooting a directing look at the goon nearest him.

'Of course. We are imbued. The sheol are strong, but they cannot thrive here, the Consensus prevents it. The humans are cattle. They are merely shells of blood and water without any connection to the Weave. We would be like kings, and they will be our slaves.'

He was insane. Cade could see that now. The act of benign ruler, loyal servant of the Oath, defender of the Brotherhood, it was all an act. A show to obscure the truth.

'So why take Seb, what does that accomplish?'

'He's stalling for time, Father. Let us end this so we can get to the mansion and finish this.'

Their eyes locked across the room. A mutual understanding grown from years of training. Reuben wasn't intending to let him leave the room alive, but neither did Cade intend to let himself

be taken.

'Take him!'

Cade wasn't a fan of gunplay, but he wasn't averse to using it when required. Before the two warriors nearest him could move he'd put a bullet in their heads, the pistol holstered against his back out in the blink of an eye. The others cartwheeled away as he fired across the room, upholstery exploding in plumes of stuffing, wood splintering as bullets sprayed.

Reuben bundled Silas out of the door, narrowly avoiding a bullet that pinged off the door frame. Reuben shot a look of pure hatred back at him as it shut behind them.

Two brothers had fallen in his surprise attack. Two remained, and now his weapon clicked, the barrel empty.

'Oh dear, oh dear, Cade,' Korban, Reuben's right hand man, said. His voice, laced with a sneer, drifted through the gun smoke. 'It looks like -'

Cade was up and over already. Korban saw him coming but froze, his brain caught between speech and action. Cade was on him, silver garrotte drawn taut between clenched fists.

The other warrior barrelled into him from the side, his reactions better than that of his leader. The wind left Cade as he smashed into a marble pillar. He blocked a follow up kick to the face, but another found the side of his head and he was sent tumbling across the floor, throbbing heat on one side of his

face. He vaulted up, hands up in a receiving stance, the room swaying before him.

Korban had recovered now and bounded over. His face was a rictus of rage, the warrior shamed that he'd almost been killed because of his own arrogance. He gripped a silver-flecked short sword in one hand and a throwing knife in the other. Cade shook his head and tried to focus, the room constantly shifting.

Korban raised the knife. Cade tensed, readying himself, but the knife never came. The other warrior, eager for his own scalp, stepped in front of Korban, the other warrior cursing as he moved round, trying to find another vantage point.

Cade didn't need a second invitation. This was his one opportunity. He darted forward, diving inside the clumsy attack from the first warrior. He came up inside, a punch striking the man's stomach, driving the air from him. He followed through, aiming an elbow at his chin. He glanced against bone, knocking him back, before a searing pain suddenly erupted in his back.

Cade fell away, staggering from his stunned opponent. Korban stood before him, one hand empty of the knife that now protruded from Cade's side. Blood poured from the wound, but it was light, not dark, no major organs injured. He could feel the burning already though, the daemon-killing poison already worming its way through his veins.

'What's the matter, Bossman? Not feeling too good?' Korban



circled round him, smiling. The other warrior came forward at the same time, rubbing one hand over his jaw. Before Cade could even react, the warrior backhanded him, sending him sprawling in a heap against the throne.

'My, oh my, your brother said you'd put up more of a fight than this, I didn't think it would be so easy.'

Korban stepped closer. Cade couldn't see him, but he could sense the movement in the air, the distance only a couple of feet at most. A shadow cast over him, the other warrior taking up position on his other side. Korban moved lightly, his steps not audible, but the other bounced on cold stone. It smacked of overconfidence, of opportunity.

Cade rolled onto his stomach, bringing his knees upwards. The other man stepped closer. A foot away now. *Just a little closer.*

'We should take a picture of -'

*Now.*

Cade whipped the knife out of his side, ignoring the flash of pain, and hurled it sideways. It was a clumsy throw but the distance was next to nothing, almost impossible to miss. He heard the familiar hiss of tearing flesh as the man pivoted, eyes wide, hands clutched against his neck where blood pissed through his fingers.

Cade rolled away, springing to his feet. Korban was

experienced enough not to be phased by the sudden event and he didn't disappoint. The warrior was on him already, sword slashing, the blade clanking against the iron rods in Cade's sleeves. Cade backpedalled, completely on the defensive without a weapon of his own. With every passing second the poison crept that much farther in his veins. Stabbing points of pain stung his legs and black veins cracked over his vision.

Cade parried two more strikes that were aimed at his chest. With the third strike, Korban fainted. Cade saw the move but his leaden limbs couldn't match his mind. Korban kicked him hard in the stomach, sending him flying into the wall, the wind blasted from his lungs.

He was done. Korban rushed forwards, business end of the sword aimed at his heart. His limbs were leaden, the energy wiped from them. He fixed Korban with eyes that saw just shadow, and waited for the inevitable.

The door exploded inwards, sending shards of wood flying through. Someone, a figure, a blur, roared into the room. Korban shouted. A gun fired. Cade winced, expecting the worst. Something grunted and hit the ground next to him with wet thud.

'Cade!'

Someone, a familiar voice, came close. A shadow fogged his vision.

'Shit, he's poisoned! Get me some anti-venom, now!'

'Father...' It was his voice, but distorted, far away.

'Don't worry about him for now. We need to get you safe.'

'They betrayed us. They betrayed us all.'

Darkness came, and he fell into the abyss.

## Chapter 48

'So, what's your story?' Seb said.

The escape from the church had been remarkably incident free since they burst out of the passage. Two sheol had met them there, but they were half-mad, half-starved. Sylph dispatched them before they even realised that she was there. After that they forced themselves through a section of broken links in the fence, before running down a steep, wet hill of grass that ran down the back of the compound. Now they walked down a narrow side street, keeping to the shadows, the only light from a couple of streetlights that flickered intermittently.

'What do you want to know?' Sylph stopped at a corner, pressing herself flat against the wall. She did this a lot, Seb noticed, apparently not trusting his own sense. When she was satisfied they were still in the clear she moved out, keeping again to the shadows.

'Let's start with you. You're not a daemon. You're not possessed. Why are working with them?'

'I was deceived. I believed they were something they are not.'

Seb raised an eyebrow. 'Really, what did you hope they were? They don't exactly try to hide their nature with smiles and a warm demeanour.'

Sylph stopped. She spun around, fixing him with an icy stare.

'We do things we have to do in times of war, even if we don't want to.'

'Are you for real? You agree with what they were doing? Taking the weak, the feeble? Possessing them like they were nothing more than empty vessels?'

Sylph's eyes flared in the dark. 'They were the lost. They were possessed because they *could* be, nothing else. If the sheol hadn't done then they'd be dead anyway, by what means I'll leave that to this wonderful world of yours.'

'It doesn't excuse what they've done. What you've done!'

They were nose to nose now. Energy crackled in Seb's fists, and he could sense Sylph's posture shifting, tensing.

'You have no idea what I've been through. What my people have been through.' Sylph whispered, her voice so sharp it could cut through glass. 'You live here, on Earth, in your safe place. You have no idea what'd gone on before you arrived on the scene. How many lives have been lost because of what your kind did!'

'My kind? The magi?'

'Yes! And you're betraying brotherhood.' Tears streamed down her face now, her arms trembling as she spoke. The aggression drifted away like a breeze, allowing another, rawer, emotion to rise to the fore. He remained silent. She needed to

get this out.

'We claw out an existence, the survivors of Balor, the true followers of the One God, living on rocks like a mollusc, hiding in shadows, living in fear.'

'I'm sorry. I had no idea.' He said, shaking his head.

'You wouldn't would you!' She spat. 'None of you do! History is written by the winners, by those who survived. Great Danu and his followers managed to escape the Sharding, but what about those who followed Balor? We were meant to be both sides of the same coin, that's what the scriptures told us. But no, you survived, and we were left to fend for ourselves.'

'I didn't know there were two factions. The tomes I read only talk of Danu and the Crossing. I'd never heard of Balor's followers.'

'Looks like both of us have been deceived then.'

Sylph turned away without a word. She walked ahead of him, the mood following her like a cloud. She sniffed as she walked, stomping down the middle of the alley, splashing through puddles and knocking debris to one side with a clatter. Every now and again another sniff filled the air.

They stopped twenty minutes later. Sylph paused, scanning the alley for something.

'What is it?' Seb cast his sense forwards. Sylph's aura fluctuated before him. A beam of Weave-energy projected out from

her. He stopped.

'You skills are good.'

Sylph didn't look round. She moved along the wall, her fingers trailing over the uneven stone. 'You sound surprised.'

'Marek has taught you a lot.'

'He was good to me, once.'

'How did you come to be with him? You know he was once one of us?'

'He told me. He was one of them, but became disillusioned with their ways. How much of this is true anymore I don't know, but he told that when he found out about the plight of the Baloran's he begged the Magister for aid, but they rejected him.'

'So you're a Baloran? A native from there?'

Sylph held out her wrist. A red rune, faded with time, was etched into the skin.

'It's a Baloran symbol. I don't remember anything about my childhood. All I know is that I'm not human, and that I've struggled to fit in all my life. That is, until Marek found me.'

'Then why help me? Why now?'

'I saw Sarah's dreams. I realised that Marek had betrayed me too. He'd told me that the sheol were victims of Danu's betrayal too, that they were our kin.'

Sylph let out a rueful laugh and looked to the ground.

'What did you see?'

'The sheol. They were desecrating Balor's holy site.'

Sylph's head rose. Eyes brimming with fury faced him.

'What was Sarah doing there?' Seb said.

'Marek believed she was working for him, obtaining some ancient Runic Script that Balor had created to help him defeat the magi on this realm once and for all.'

'But Sarah was working for them, sorry, us. She saw the risk and fled with it?'

'She betrayed me. But in a way, I can understand why. She was loyal to her cause as I was to mine. She intended to bring it back before that *thing* found her.'

'Clementine? You saw it?'

'It is the last memory of hers I have. She was so near to freedom, yet when she saw the fiend, all hope died.'

'And that's when she ran into me.'

Sylph ignored him. She stopped at a point along the wall.

'Here.'

Seb moved to her side. To the normal world it looked like a rusted metal door covered with rotten wood and sheets, but as Seb shifted his vision, allowing him to perceive beyond the illusion, the wood faded away, the sheets becoming loose cobwebs hanging over a simple wooden door. The Weave echoed from the barrier, a subtle hiss like an out of tune radio. As Sylph



pulled the handle the hiss rose in pitch before vanishing as they entered the narrow tunnel beyond.

'How did you know this was here?'

'Marek found them years ago. We don't know who put them here, but they're scattered all over the place. Most of them have collapsed or have been blocked. Some, like this one, still have their uses.'

Sylph stepped inside, vanishing into shadow. Seb took one last look down both sides of the alley before following.

'How many of these things are there?' The tunnel was near-black, with only the same purple moss that he'd seen in the Nexus illuminating the way ahead.

'What? Ways?'

'Yeah. Like this one.'

She shrugged, 'Dunno, most of them were lost, along with most of the other useful things the Magi once knew. I found this one when I was sleeping with a young acolyte. He tried to impress me.'

'Did it?'

'For a time. A sheol gutted him ten minutes after showing it me, so any chances of reciprocation were lost.'

'You sound really cut up about that,' he said.

Sylph shrugged and continued. They walked in silence for what seemed like hours. Eventually the air began to lose its

musty odour. A freshness came, and the darkness began to recede in favour of faint shafts of light. The angle of the tunnel shifted, and Seb's ears popped as they began to ascend.

The tunnel terminated at a wall of brick, the once vivid red now a faded brown, overgrown with lichen. Seb pressed his hand against the wall, and turned back, shaking his head.

'Great, now what?'

Sylph shot him a look of disbelief as she pushed past him.

'They really didn't teach you anything, did they?' She reached her hand into the darkness that still clung to the outer perimeter of the wall. 'Ah,' something clicked, and before Seb could even comment Sylph stepped *through* the wall.

'Apparently not.'

He followed her through, squinting as he pressed his face into the brick.

## Chapter 49

They emerged into an abandoned warehouse. Several crates stood nearby, stacked on top of each other, easily a few men high. Tarpaulin was draped loosely over some of them, but most were left uncovered, the wood rotten and crumbling. Beyond the crates lurked a wide open area scattered with debris of various shapes and size. The warehouse terminated at one end with a set of two massive doors that were pulled to. Dusty windows allowed fragments of moonlight into the warehouse.

'We have to move quickly, we're out in the open now, and Marek will have people out looking for us,' Sylph scurried over to the nearest of the crates, vanishing into the shadows. Seb followed, his eyes blind to her location but her aura glowing fiercely in the darkness.

'Do you have a phone?'

'Yes, why?'

'I can call someone. He'll get us.'

Sylph took out her mobile. She paused, just for second, before handing it over. Seb tapped in Cade's number, Avatari helping draw it from memory. He dialled. Seconds later Cade answered, but did not speak.

'Cade, it's me, Seb.'

'Seb! Where the hell are you?'

Seb mouthed the question to Sylph.

'The harbour. Warehouse near the Waterside Inn.'

'Did you get that?' Seb said.

'Yes. We're on our way. Don't go anywhere.'

'What's happened?' Seb said. Something about Cade's voice didn't seem right. The warrior had an edge, almost anxious.

'Can't talk now. Something's happened. Just stay put.'

The line went dead. Seb handed over the phone.

'Everything okay?'

'I'm not sure. We have to wait here.'

Sylph sat down on the edge of a crate. 'We have no choice anyway. He just better hurry. There are fiends outside of Marek's control that can sense the use of Ways like a shark sniffs blood.'

They sat in silence for a few moments before Seb suddenly looked up.

'How did you find us? In the Nexus I mean?' He said, voicing a question that had bothered him for hours.

'Marek knew. I don't know how. He just knew you'd be there.'

'I don't get it. We didn't tell anyone. How could he know? And how could he know that I would be there, too?'

Silence.

'Sylph?'

He felt her tense, her senses straining. He felt it then too, another presence, growing nearer. Something familiar ate at his gut, conjuring memories that he'd sought to suppress.

Then the whistling started.

'Clementine.'

He couldn't see him with his eyes, but when he channelled, a humanoid shaped aura glowed from the other side of the warehouse doors. Clementine was walking in that twisted, sickening jerky style that he remembered from the chapel. The monster slowed to a stop. Slender fingers, pencil thin, grey as ash, slipped through the narrow cracks between the doors. The massive barriers creaked and groaned as they started to drift apart.

'That's the one. The one who killed Sarah.' Sylph said.

'He's also the one who gutted me.'

'He is one of those I warned you about. He's what they call a Hound. They hunt those who get lost between shards. They exist outside of Marek's - or anyone's - control. Is he on his own?'

Seb sensed out, 'As far as I can see.'

'What's he after?'

'Probably after what he missed the first time.' Seb stood and stepped out from the shadows. Clementine's head cocked to one side.

'What the hell are you doing?' Sylph said, trying but

failing to grab his sleeve as he walked past.

'He knows we're here.' He stopped a few feet from the crates and begun to channel. 'Besides. We have unfinished business.'

'Seb, this isn't the time to deal with some grudge you have. We have to get out of here!'

He could hear the fear in her voice, but it fell on a shell of calm. He wasn't afraid, not this time. At first the fear that flared to life at that familiar whistle had nearly swallowed him, but he'd nipped it before it grew into anything of harm. Instead he took it, channelled it, and added it to his own potential. Clementine was a bully, and when they met the first time he was blind, weak. Defenceless.

Not this time.

'No. You stay there. This won't take long.'

He started walking forwards as Clementine's silhouette filled the gap between the doors. The full moon loomed behind him, casting a long, distended shadow across the floor, ending just before his feet.

'Ah, my little whelp, it is good to see you again,' Clementine's musical lilt, magically amplified, carried to his ears. 'Tell me, how is the stomach?'

'Healed,' Seb amplified his own voice and sent it back with a jab. He felt a sense of satisfaction as he struck Clementine's

core, the daemon not even bothering to raise a shield. He sensed a brief jolt of surprise before Clementine's own defences came up.

'Someone's been busy,' the musicality dropped like a brick. Instead his voice was coarse, almost angry.

'You have no idea.'

'I see you have brought yourself a friend. Marek's little project.'

Sylph edged out from the shadow in a fighting stance. Her eyes darted between him and Clementine. He could sense her fear of the daemon, but she layered it over with a veneer of ice. Clementine's eyes narrowed at the sight, the crooked smile vanishing.

'Apparently Marek wants you to be brought in alive. I should obey, but it would be a shame if you forced my hand by...resisting.'

'Looks like you're going to get your wish.'

Clementine smiled. 'Come then, mageling, show me what you've brought today.'

Seb surged forwards, anger fuelling his channelling. His legs shook with pent up energy, devouring the distance between them as he dashed towards Clementine, who remained impossibly still, not moving to avoid the attack. He sensed Sylph moving too, cumbersome compared to him. Still Clementine didn't move.

He reached Clementine in what he knew was at most a couple of seconds. He raised the staff and swung it down, the weapon arching towards Clementine's pale head.

The blade struck...nothing.

At the last moment, Clementine *rippled*. The staff sliced through, but it was like striking water, and Clementine's image broke up into several shifting images that fluttered into the air. Seb skidded and rolled, diving through the disintegrating shape, coming up in a defensive stance a few feet beyond.

'So predictable. So *lacking* in imagination.'

The voice echoed from all around with no visible source. Seb and Sylph exchanged glances as they scanned the area. Seb cast out a sense, but it seemed like parts of Clementine were everywhere, tiny shards that absorbed and reflected his own sensing, making identifying a location impossible.

'Ah, the little whelp tries. He tries! He tries!' The voice sang from the roof. 'Fool! You don't think I've survived this long by being bested by a clumsy oaf such as you?'

Seb yelped and stumbled as the voice screeched in his ears. The staff clattered to the ground and he rolled forwards, anticipating Clementine's dagger-nails in his back.

'You too afraid to face me?' Seb shouted. 'Show yourself!' He picked up the staff and met Sylph in an open area away from the crates. They took position back to back, circling clockwise.



'You show your inexperience, whelp!'

Clementine's face formed in front him from a mass of shadow. Black eyes glinted. Teeth bared in the dark. Seb struck out on instinct. The staff sliced through the shadow-face, but the image simply rippled and reformed. A wide grin broke out on Clementine's face.

'See, I *am* showing myself, you simply lack the nous to recognise the fact.'

Seb's mind exploded into a relentless barrage of horrors. Poisoned claws raked him. Horns impaled imaginary flesh. Teeth sank into muscle, ripping sinew and crunching bone. He collapsed to the floor. Somewhere he heard Sylph screaming too, her own weapons clattering to the ground. The attack was purely mental, but what did that mean anymore? The world was nothing but a mental construct imagined by the observers. He knew that if he looked at himself from above he would see nothing but his own body, writhing in agony on the floor, with not a visible sign of injury on him. But that didn't matter.

The images twisted. Other thoughts came through, Clementine's attack probing his mind, an ice finger that impaled memories and plucked them from their sanctuary, forcing them to the fore. He knew what Clementine was looking for, he could almost sense the sickening delight on the creature's mind. He tried to erect a barrier, but it was feeble, his concentration

swayed by the barrage, and Clementine batted it away like a fly.

He felt Clementine's delight before he saw the image. Sarah appeared before him.

'Don't let him kill me!'

Sarah lay on the floor, eyes pleading with him.

'I can't help you,' they were his words, but a younger him, a weaker him. He couldn't move, frozen into immobility once again, forced to watch this scene play out to its fruition.

'Sarah, Sarah, you just won't die, will you?' Clementine stooped over, impossibly long arms extending up and around in a twisted embrace.

Seb watched frozen by fear. He knew what was coming; he'd played it over and over in his head many times over. He tried to close his eyes and look away, but an unknown force held his stare, compelling him to see this through to its inevitable end.

'No one here to protect you, Sarah?' Clementine leaned closer to her, pressing his ear close her to mouth where failing breaths puffed from blueing lips. 'Not even dear Seb over here?'

Clementine looked his way, those black eyes seeing past the crates Seb hid behind. His heart felt like it'd been drenched in ice. His world turned to darkness, the last thing he saw being Clementine glaring down at him. He retreated into himself, a room of darkness, closing off from the outside world. He hunched into a ball, feeling but not fearing the juddering beat of his

heart, the deadening of his limbs. He knew he was dying, that it was the mind attack from Clementine that was convincing his own body to give up, to let loose its own unique hold on reality, yet he simply didn't care. A sweet release beckoned, and even though he could hear Sylph's frantic shouts from some distance away, he simply didn't care.

*'Let it come, mageling, let the void welcome you...'*

Something flickered in the darkness. A faint, amber glow that shone through his eyelids. It compelled him to look, and he gasped when he saw the small fire there, flickering in the void.

*You do not die like this, I have too much resting on you!*  
The voice raged at him across the ether. An image came to mind. A serpentine warrior. A tower in the clouds.

*Leave me. I'm not who you want me to be. I'm afraid.*

*Afraid? Of what? This fiend, this meddler of minds?*

*He has bested me.*

*Boy, you do not succumb to fear. Remember where you come from. You ARE fear!*

*I don't understand.*

*Grow some stones, and then perhaps one day you will.*

*Help me! Don't leave me!*

He knew the voice had gone. That serpentine lilt nothing more than a whisper on the breeze. Yet it awoke something in him, a hot ember that he found, burning away under layers of

fear and doubt. He reached out, touching it, feeling the warmth it offered. At once the darkness fell away, and he was back in the warehouse again, a sea of daemons frothing around him, still assailing him, the many shards of Clementine still ubiquitous, everywhere and nowhere.

'Sylph?'

He found her cowering behind a crate. Her weapons lay by her side. Her hands were clamped over her ears. Tears streamed down her face and she'd bitten down so hard on her lower lip that blood trickled down over her lip.

'Sylph!'

He called upon his Sentio and formed a bubble in her mind. He expanded it, forcing away the nightmares that assaulted her. He entered her mind and found her hiding in a small shack. She'd taken the form of a small girl, secreted inside a crumbling wardrobe under oil-covered rags.

'Sylph?'

The little girl looked up. She was still a child, maybe not even ten, but he could recognise the woman she would become. Those azure eyes shone at him, the anger he knew today a paralysing fear back then. What had happened to her to make her this way?

'Who are you?'

'It's me, Seb,' he said, reaching out a hand.

She shied away from him. 'Go away, he'll find me.'

'I need to get you out of here, Sylph. This is all in your mind. Clementine is using our own fears against us.'

'No, you don't understand. He will find me, I can't leave. I can't.'

Thunder rumbled and the earth shook. He looked outside the shack - *shit* - the world had cracked in half. Her mind was crumbling. Without any kind of magical defences she had no chance against the attack. Her anger had protected her at first, but Clementine had eroded that, and only her raw fear kept her alive now.

'Sylph - please, trust me. Take my hand; in Balor's name I promise that I won't hurt you.'

At his name the little girl fixed him with a new look. Something switched on inside her mind then, he could see it. She reached out a hand. He took it.

'Seb,' the little girl said it, but it was Sylph's voice that spoke.

'I'm here.'

The shack vanished and they were back in the warehouse. The daemons roared, but they kept their distance. Now that he knew they were nothing more than an illusion it seemed to affect them, as if they realised now that their impact was limited.

Now for Clementine.

There were many apparitions, countless in number, of the creature. He sent out wave of wave of sense, feeling them bounce back, each adding another Clementine to the list. Yet as he did it, increasing the frequency of the waves, he felt one of the shards resonate more than the others, as if it had more substance than the rest. He narrowed his sense, focusing on the image. He found Clementine stood atop the tallest crate, staring down at the pair of them.

*Sylph, I know you can receive this, I'm going to send you an image, just do what you do best, okay?*

She didn't respond. Obviously pulsing was something not on Marek's curriculum. He felt a murmur of acknowledgment none the same.

Without pause, Seb concentrated. He pulled in the Weave, reducing his shield, allowing the daemons closer. They screeched and clamoured against it, their noise almost deafening. He gathered a ball of energy, felt it pulsing in his mind. Then, in the same instant, he dropped his shield and sent the bolt of energy out like an arrow towards Clementine. The phantom-daemons leapt for him, but the arrow struck first. Clementine shrieked and staggered, and the phantoms shimmered into nothingness.

*Now!*

He fell and rolled onto his back, his energy spent. He saw Clementine, stood atop the crate, clutching a taloned hand to

his head. The creature shook his head, sighted Seb, and then crouched as if to leap.

The shadow nearest Clementine shifted, and something flashed in the darkness. Clementine twitched, a puzzled look crossing his face. He arched his back, pivoting to one side. He reached one arm up and over, and Seb saw then the iron dagger embedded in his back, runes blazing as they fed on sheol blood. The monster spun and reached again, but the dagger was too low. He overbalanced, falling from the crate, landing with a thud onto the concrete floor. Seb rushed over as Sylph materialised from the shadows, a look of disgust on her face as she approached the daemon.

Clementine twitched and shifted on the floor, the light was fading from his eyes. A pool of jet-black blood pooled underneath him.

'How long?' Seb said.

'The wound should be fatal, but he may linger for a few moments. I thought you might want the final blow...'

'Thanks.' Seb crouched, resting the tip of his staff against Clementine's throat. Clementine started at the touch, and his black eyes found Seb's, a spark of recognition coming back in that moment.

'You've grown strong mageling,' Clementine coughed drops of black blood onto his shirt. 'Perhaps it's not a foregone

conclusion.'

'Why did you do it? Why her?'

Clementine blinked. His breathes became more drawn out, weaker with every gasp. 'We are all pawns in the end, all playing our role in the game. My turn is over. Let's see what you make of it.'

A last breath escaped his chest. His sable eyes rolled up in his head. A rank smell rose from the corpse, causing Seb to step back with a hand clasped over his mouth. As they watched, Clementine's pale skin seemed to thin, becoming like wet paper, collapsing in on him. His flesh bubbled, melting skin running off him like tiny rivers. Before long a skeleton remained, but even that crumbled into a mottle paste.

'Nice,' Sylph said.

'Yeah, not the way I'd want to go.'

An engine sound rumbled from outside and footsteps clattered on stone, heading towards the door. Sylph pivoted, shoulders sagging but weapons ready, always ready.

'Whoa, it's okay, I know who it is,' Seb placed a gentle hand on Sylph's wrist, slowly pushing the weapon down. It would be ridiculous to survive what they'd been through only to die by their own kind now.

Cade ran into the warehouse followed by two of his brothers. They had weapons drawn, and Seb felt their tension



rise at the sight of Sylph brandishing her twin blades. He stepped in front her, arms in the air.

'It's okay, she's with me!'

'Step away from her, Seb,' Cade stood before him, the only one without a gun drawn. The two warriors fanned out, trying to gain a clear shot.

'No! Put the guns away, she's not a threat.'

'Like fuck she isn't. You've not seen what she can do.'

The warriors were parallel to them now. They had no intention of letting Sylph leave without a bullet in her head. Behind him, Sylph sagged further, her own energy reserves depleted.

'Cade, I'm telling you this once, as a friend. Do not harm her. If it wasn't for Sylph I wouldn't be alive now. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't have the Message.'

Cade's eyes grew. He dipped his head, mouth open, a question on his face.

'Seriously,' Seb said. 'I have it. Now she comes with us, or I walk.'

It took barely a second for Cade to make his decision. It wasn't a surprise, Cade was a bright guy and he wouldn't let his own emotions cloud the greater issues at hand. He shrugged and nodded to the warriors, who obeyed without question, pistols returning to holsters without a word being said.

With the tension passed, Seb walked over to Cade. They clasped wrists, Seb suddenly overwhelmed with a vast sense of relief to meet an ally at last. Cade nodded outwards, to the two Audis parked outside, and they turned in that direction.

As they walked, Seb took a look up and down his friend, noting the assorted cuts, scrapes and bruises that covered his body where his tunic had been torn or ripped.

'What the hell happened to you?'

## Chapter 50

The journey back passed without incident. Sylph was asleep before the car had even left the harbour district, her head lolling and bumping into the window as Cade pushed the vehicle to its limits. Several times Seb caught his eyes in the rear view mirror. Questions lurked there, hovering between them, but they would have to wait until later. Something had happened at the Brotherhood, something bad, but Cade wasn't about to open up about it in front of someone who he still regarded as an enemy.

They turned back into the welcoming gates of Skelwith a little after sunrise. He wasn't sure if it was a symptom of a general heightened use of the Weave or if his own powers had grown, but Seb could feel the place before they even sighted the mound of trees that hid the estate. The very forest seemed to crackle with potential energy, and the silent sentinels, warriors of stone, seemed to be the hub of that; magnets drawing his sense in with ease.

The Magister and Cian were already stood outside as the cars drew to a halt outside. Don and another elite flanked them, their penetrating gaze spearing the car, Seb too tired to even attempt a shield.

The car stopped and Cade leapt out. Seb pushed the door open as Sylph woke up with a start. He caught the brief moment

of panic that flashed across her face and placed a hand on her arm. She tensed, but didn't pull away.

Progress.

'It's okay.'

'Where are we?'

'Skelwith. Home of the magi.'

Sylph shook her head and vaulted from the car, straight into the line of sight of Cade's warriors. Their weapons were drawn, sights aimed at Sylph.

'You're going nowhere, sister,' Cade said, Sylph slumping in defeat.

'It's ok, don't worry,' Seb said over the car, 'I vouched for you. You got me out of there. That will count for a lot.'

'Seb, thank Danu!'

The Magister glided over, her face a grim mask of concern. Cian followed, a slight limp to his gait. Red welts still covered his forearms where sheol claws had gotten too close.

'Are you okay, Boy? We thought we'd lost you!'

'I am okay, Magister. Although I have some news to share.' He glanced around before leaning closer. 'About the message.'

The Magister's eyes widened. 'It is unlocked?'

'I believe so. I'm not sure. Something has changed. That much is certain.'

'Then let us retire inside. There is much to discuss.' She

beckoned over Seb's shoulder. 'Cade, you too.'

'Yes, Magister.'

'She comes too.' Seb stepped to one side, revealing Sylph behind. Cian's eyes blazed.

'What in the hells? She is imbued yet she reeks of the sheol!' Cian stepped forwards, his fists scrunched into balls.

'No! She's with me. Without her I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have the Message. We owe her!'

The Magister raised a hand and Cian stopped in an instant, his eyes not once leaving Sylph, who to her credit hadn't flinched an inch.

'Stand down, Cian. The aura is interesting on this one. What is your name, child?'

'Sylph.'

'You are imbued.' The Magister stated.

'I am. Marek taught me.'

'Marek? That man spits on our customs!' Cian spat.

'What? You're disappointed that someone took a chance on me rather than left me to go mad on the streets?' Sylph pushed past Seb, jabbing a finger at Cian.

'Enough! We have too much to discuss to waste time debating what has happened already. Very well, the girl can come. She might be able to add something of value.'

## Chapter 51

The five of them convened in the Magister's study for the next hour whilst stories were exchanged. Seb told them of his time in the custody of Marek and the sheol. He described as best he could what he saw - the Master. Marek. The horned daemon in human form. He told them of the attempt to open the phantom box in his mind, and of the crack he saw that somehow they didn't. They turned to Cade then, listening in horror to the sudden betrayal by Silas and Reuben. From what Cade had heard nearly half of the Brotherhood had been turned. Where they were now was unknown. Cade had mustered those forces he could at Skelwith.

'Do you think they will attack here?' Seb asked, breaking Cade's tale.

'Madness!' Cian barked. 'They would be torn to pieces by the sentinels. An army of sheol could not breach those defences.'

'You think they're working together?'

'They are working together.' Cade said, his yellow eyes lost in the flames of the Magister's hearth. 'My father told me as much. He believes that the Brotherhood and the sheol are of the same blood.'

'And you, young Sylph. What can you add to this sorry story?'

Sylph told her own story. Stilted at first, clearly not comfortable talking so freely in front of those she'd been conditioned to view as enemies for all her imbued life. She skipped over the early years. Whatever she thought of him now, Marek had saved her from a life destined to end in tragedy.

Those were happier times, and it pained her to think of them now, knowing what Marek had done.

Instead she focussed on recent months. Of Marek's growing obsession with the sheol and his hunt for the elusive message. He'd never told Sylph what it contained, but she knew all his plans hinged upon it.

'So Sarah was working under Marek?' Seb said. Certain pieces of the puzzle were coming together now in his mind.

Sylph nodded. 'She was taken in months ago. Marek explained she was like me - lost, but with potential. She was much more advanced than I was. She was a mage, of sorts. Marek liked her, I could tell. She challenged him in many ways and was not intimidated by him. I think that's why he liked her. He gave her a mission of utmost importance. I didn't know what it was, just that it involved going somewhere far away to retrieve something of great importance.

'I never saw her after that, until she was in the morgue. All I know was that she betrayed Marek and he was beyond livid.'

'So the information she took, that she passed to Seb here, was what Marek was after?' Cade said.

'I don't know. She seemed to think so. Maybe she found something else and decided that the Magistry needed to know about it. Regardless, she betrayed Marek. She betrayed all of us.'

The Magister ignored the final statement. Now wasn't the time to go over the rights and wrongs of this conflict. She abruptly stood up and fixed them all with a steely stare.

'I think we have discussed this enough. It is clear to me that whatever we possess is something that Marek is very keen on possessing. It was what Sarah died for, and it is surely tied to the betrayal by the Brotherhood.'

'Not all the Brotherhood, Magister,' Cade said.

'Of course. Forgive me. My point is that we have what they want. We are safe here, for now, but we cannot delay. With the lock removed, we must extract the message, and uncover the source of what drives Marek so.'

'What of the other Families? Surely they should be consulted?'

'Yes, yes. I will commune with them tonight. After we have extracted the message. Let us move to the Great Hall. There we will pool our power and rid this poor boy of his curse.'

They all rose at once and made towards the door. Seb lingered, and Cian turned back.

'What is it, Boy?'

'Caleb?'

The Battlemaster's gaze softened. He waited for the rest to leave before speaking.

'He lives, but he is not well. His wounds heal, but his soul does not. Something was taken from him that day.'

'Can I see him?' Seb said. His sniffed and blinked the sudden tears away.

'Of course. See him now, there will be an hour or so before the Magister is ready.'



## Chapter 52

'Caleb?' Seb took a tentative step into the Drain. The room was in near darkness, the only light source being a solitary candle that had burned almost to extinction on the oak table, casting an amber glow over one corner of the room.

'So, you made it back then?'

Seb started. On instinct he shot a sense towards the shadows where the voice had originated from.

'Caleb?'

Caleb shuffled into the light. Seb suppressed a grimace.

The wounds had healed, but the scars ran deeper. Caleb walked with a pronounced limp, clutching for dear life on a staff that had been reinforced with steel strips. His face was ashen, almost translucent, and the flesh hung loosely from his face. His eyes, once so bright and full of life, were now tiny pinpricks sunk into a hollowed face. Caleb staggered to his favoured chair, wincing as he lowered himself into its depths. Seb swallowed something hot in his throat.

'That's better,' Caleb said. 'Bring me something hot, will you, Boy?'

As if on instinct, Seb shook his gaze away and poured a fresh coffee from the still-hot kettle. After all that had happened, the moment felt natural, almost welcome. For a moment

they were back one year, just the two of them. That hotness filled his throat again as he handed the cup to Caleb, who took it in both hands, inhaling the aroma with a satisfied groan.

'You going to tell me what happened?' Caleb said after a few minutes of comfortable silence had passed.

'They haven't told you?'

Caleb sat the cup down and leaned back in his chair. He looked at Seb again, a new expression on his face as if he were seeing him afresh. His eyes twinkled, something of the old Caleb there again.

'Perhaps they have, perhaps they haven't,' he said. 'I just want to hear it from you.'

Seb smiled. 'You'll need something stronger than that.'

'And you have it? You have the message?' Caleb had listened, entranced, for the best part of an hour. He'd interjected at various places, drawing further details where Seb had glossed over, making him paint a more detailed picture than he otherwise would've done.

'Yup, well, at least I think I do.'

'Have you read it?'

'No. I can see the crack, I know I could try and open it, but as to what comes out, it's not for me to answer that.'

Caleb nodded, his mind elsewhere. 'Of course, you're right.'

It should fall on the Magi to decide what to do.'

'What do I do then?'

'What?'

'You're a magi, aren't you? Or did that knock on the head do more damage than I thought?'

Caleb laughed, the noise echoing around the chamber. 'Of course, sorry. I guess I considered myself taking an early retirement. You know, on medical grounds.'

Seb smiled. 'Sure, I'll have to check my contract to see what the Ts and Cs are concerning that.'

Caleb nodded sagely. A moment later they both burst out into laughter, tears rolling down their faces.

'It's good to see you, Kid,' Caleb said at last, wiping tears from his face.

'You too, old man,' he replied, meaning every word. He put his drink by his bed and lit the candle on the cabinet next to his pillow. The Magister had hinted that he should return to them as soon as possible in the Hall, but fatigue was clawing at him, and the smug bastard could wait in any case. He settled into his bed, drawing the blanket high over his head.

For the first time in what felt like weeks, Seb sank into a sleep free from danger.

He never heard Caleb leave.

## Chapter 53

It looked like every member of the household had gathered in the main hall. The Magister sat on her throne, Cian by her side. Ranks of elites and adepts stood shoulder to shoulder leading away from the throne the full length of the room. Where they came from Seb had no idea. None of them were familiar, save for Don. All wore the loose-fitting white tunics of the Magistracy. All stared forwards, eyes focussed on something far away. Nearest the door stood the other six acolytes. Familiar by face, but still strangers to him even after all these months. Only young Harry, his silent admirer from the gardens, acknowledged him with a furtive glance. All of them gathered here, under the instruction of the Magister.

All for him.

He'd considered not coming up at all. They'd done the decent thing and left him alone for a few hours, but the Magister's summoning in the form of an uninvited visit from two elites told him that their patience was wearing thin.

So up he came. No doubt as soon as he'd read the contents of the message then he'd be cast out. Purpose served. It didn't bother him anymore. He wanted out now as much as they did.

A low murmur had died as he entered the hall, the heavy door clunking shut behind him. No eyes had turned in his

direction, although a collective sense from the gathering had nearly knocked him back a step. He raised his shield to subtly deflect the prying minds.

It was the Magister that broke the silence.

'Seb, so glad of you to turn up.'

'I'm not sure I had much of a choice.'

Cian glowered. The Magister merely sighed.

'You are tired, I imagine, and have been through a lot. I will allow you this transgression,' the Magister said. Her eyes suddenly levelled on him and he felt his shield evaporate in an instant. The Magister didn't push any further, but he felt the power there, brushing his own. A lion to a mouse.

The Magister beckoned him forward. He obeyed, head down as he trudged down the narrow path that led between the rows of magi. He glanced up as he moved, noting with some dismay at Caleb's absence. *I thought I'd have at least one friend here, Old Man*, he thought.

He paused as he cleared the last inhabitants of the human wall. A flicker of something stirred when he saw Cade there, skulking in the shadows by one of the pillars. Sylph stood alongside him, her arms tied behind her back, her face a mask, the only thing betraying the underlying emotion was those eyes that burned into the ranks of those she'd until recently considered her mortal enemies.

He stopped and bowed his head before the Magister.

'Relax, Seb,' she said, an unfamiliar gentleness to her voice.

He dared a look up, every sinew in his being screaming to do the opposite.

'Are you afraid?'

'Yes. No. Should I be?'

The Magister smiled. 'You are right to be wary, but have no fear. All you have is information, hidden inside your mind. Now the door is open, you simple need to push it, and read what you see.'

Seb nodded. What could go wrong?

Jack David hadn't been in the Brotherhood long, but he'd been a serving marine for eight years before that. He'd seen action in places ranging from the Crimea to Iraq. He didn't consider himself easily tricked.

That was why when he saw the young boy ambling up the road that led to Skelwith he didn't so much as bat an eyelid.

'You lost, Kid?' He stepped out from behind the massive oak trunk from where he'd kept watch ever since Cade and those loyal to the Oath had fled here. The kid staggered and fell, his eyes wide, mouth gaping.

'Shit, sorry,' he pushed the Beretta PDW behind his hip and

rushed forwards, cursing inside at his own crudeness. He knew he was an imposing figure at the best of times, but in his Brotherhood garb, armed to the teeth? The poor kid would be having nightmares for months.

The kid was on all fours, face down, as he reached him. He dropped to one knee and offered his free hand out, gently gripping the kids shoulder.

'Kid?'

It all happened so fast. The kid flinched at his touch, but it wasn't that what made Jack stagger back, fumbling the safety on his weapon. It was the way the kids head twisted towards him, sinew cracking, his eyes bulging and black, teeth dripping a viscous ichor.

Jack's mind was caught in a moment of split indecision. He'd fucked up, he knew that. Never lower your guard, no matter how innocent the threat might seem. He was caught between alerting the others and defending himself. Self-preservation won out. He brought the weapon to bear just as the kid launched towards him. His finger tightened on the trigger just as a point of cold iron pierced the base of his skull.

'What do I do?'

Seb stood in the centre of an intricate circle of Runic Script that had been etched into the floor in front of the

throne. Outside the circle stood five Elites, heads bowed and covered. The Magister stood from her throne and glided down the steps to the circle.

'The mages here will channel into you, giving you the necessary focus to prise upon the lock. Runic Script will emerge that you will see in your mind's eye. It is most likely you will not understand what you see, but do not worry about that. I will read and decipher the Script. Do you understand?'

Seb nodded.

'Good. Like I said, there is nothing to fear from all this. Soon it will be over, the burden will be removed.'

'And what of me?'

The Magister stopped and tilted her head. 'Sorry?'

'When you've got what you wanted. When I'm no use anymore. What then? You cast me out? Leave me to fend for myself? Or worse?'

'What do you take us for, Seb? Do you really think we'd let someone with your talents simply vanish?'

Seb shrugged. 'I know what I'd like to think, but in reality, I'm not sure.'

For a moment the Magister looked annoyed, almost angry, but then her face passed back into the familiar placid veneer. She crossed into the circle, the charged air crackling as she approached. She placed a hand on Seb's shoulder.



'I give you my word, Seb. When this is over, should you wish it, you will remain with us.'

Seb didn't sense any deceit at all. He didn't dare sense, lest he offended the Magister. But for all he could read she seemed genuine. Something lifted off his shoulders, at least temporarily, and he forced out a smile.

'Thank you.'

The Magister smiled. 'Now, let us get back to the business at hand, shall we?'

#

All along the perimeter of the mansion guards fell. All of them Brotherhood. All still blind to the truth. Rueben had watched from afar as his men, allied with the sheol, had systematically taken out the various sentries in a combined action lasting no longer than three minutes. They converged now on the outer wall of the mansion. They knew where to stop - where the sentinels range extended. Marek had been clear on that.

Reuben wasn't a fan of working with the sheol. He'd spent the best part of his life hunting them and their kind down, and now he was here, allied with them, purging the world of their common enemy. Still, it was the greater cause that mattered.

They were destined to reunite with their daemon kin, not to be

slaves to an antique oath to a dying race. Every time he saw one of his former Brothers fall he reminded himself of that.

Something rustled in the undergrowth. Rueben didn't flinch, preferring instead to drain the last of the coffee from the flask by his side. His men spun about, weapons ready in a flash.

'Relax, it's one of them,' he said. He'd sensed the horned fiend flitting through the bushes five minutes earlier. He was intrigued to see how far they would come without detection, their movements being slicker, more subtle than the rest. He was impressed to see they made it all the way to their camp without being sighted.

He rose and turned as the daemon, crammed into human form, burst into the clearing. Near seven foot tall now, partially burned and covered almost entirely in black scale. One eye had been burned out, but a malevolence burned in the remaining red orb that told him it was something much darker than the standard feral that he'd come across. It stomped to a halt as it sighted the array of guns aimed in its direction. It snapped looks at each of the warriors in turn, no doubt sizing them up. Its mouth was bared, exposing narrow fangs through which a black forked tongue whipped across.

'Who are you?' Reuben gave a barely perceptible nod and his men lowered their weapons. He stepped before the daemon, noting casually that the air seemed noticeably cooler in its presence.

The daemon slowly lowered its gaze until it fixed on him.

'You are the leader?' it hissed.

Reuben straightened his back, feeling the reassuring presence of the blade on his hip.

'I am,' he replied, keeping his voice level. 'And you are?'

'Farouk. Commander of the Ninth Legion. I was summoned by the mage.' Farouk replied, his grating voice dripping with distaste as it mentioned Marek.

Reuben raised an eyebrow and nodded. 'Then I am grateful indeed that your Master has spared such a formidable ally.'

'The Message. Where is it?'

Reuben bristled, not used to being spoken to in such way, daemon or not.

'Where it's been for the past few hours. The magi are about to begin the ceremony.'

Azeloth cocked his head to one side and sniffed the air. He looked back at Reuben, his scaled face creasing into a grimace.

'The sentinels are still active. I can sense them.'

'You are correct.'

'Why have you failed to accomplish this task? Why are they not sleeping?'

Reuben ignored the shocked look on his men's faces and swallowed down the burgeoning anger. 'The task is at hand, I assure you.'

'It is not me you need to assure, my Master is not as patient as I am.'

'Then why doesn't your Master try her luck for herself?' Reuben waved a gloved hand down towards the valley. She's welcome to have a go!'

Azeloth blurred towards him in an instant. The daemon's teeth snapped at the air inches from his neck. Reuben fumbled for the weapon by his side but the daemon had gripped a taloned claw round his neck, strangling the flow of oxygen. Already white spots were peppering his vision.

'What in the hells is going on here?'

Azeloth dropped Reuben to the floor as Silas and Marek entered the clearing. The daemon turned and two of his men rushed over to help him. He shoved them away, clutching one hand to his neck whilst firing a hate-filled stare at the back of the daemon.

The two leaders took position in the centre of the clearing. A combination of Brothers and sheol warriors fanned out around them.

'Reuben?' Silas said.

Reuben stood upright. His neck burned but he was damned if he were to show weakness. 'Nothing to worry about, Father. I was just welcoming our new guest.'

'Azeloth, is everything okay?'

Azeloth tipped his head slightly. 'I was just asking this warrior who claims to lead this rabble why he hasn't succeeded in the simple task of disabling the sentinels yet. He didn't like the question.'

'If you doubt my words why don't you walk straight on ahead? There's a thirty foot knight on the path that I'm almost certain is no longer functioning.'

'Enough, Reuben!' Silas crossed over to him and lead him away from the group. He glanced back at the gathered sheol and then shot a concerned look his way. 'We cannot afford to look weak in front of the daemons, Son.'

'I'm aware of this. What do you think I was just doing?'

'By the looks of things about to destroy our fledgling alliance before it had even started.'

'I'm not afraid of that,' he made a point of glaring at Azeloth, who simply growled in return, which only served to boil his blood further.

'I don't give a shit if you are or not!' Silas never raised his voice, and this time it got Reuben's attention. 'Azeloth's right, though, why don't we have access yet? The window is narrow enough as it is.'

'You don't have to remind me, Father.' He turned back to Silas, forcing a calm over the tumult in his stomach. 'The ceremony is about to begin. The sentries have been

incapacitated.'

'That's all good, but with the sentinels still there, we don't have a chance.'

'Have faith, Father. Isn't that you always tell me? Marek is certain, is he not?'

Silas sighed. 'Yes, but I'm unfamiliar with not being in total control.'

Reuben smiled, calm now. He put one hand on Silas' shoulder. 'I thought I was meant to be the hot-headed one. The time is at hand. Marek's plan will come to fruition. It's all worked so far, hasn't it?' Reuben looked across at the mage, who at that moment was gazing silently into the forest. 'He seems to have thought of everything.'

'I truly hope so.'

'Where are you taking me?' Sylph had remained in silence for almost the entire journey as Cade led her away from the commune. As they stepped off the last damp step that led out into the Drain she could hold herself no longer.

'Somewhere safe.'

'I'm not afraid.'

'No shit. It's not for your safety I'm putting you here,' Cade smiled as he waved at the open chamber. Sylph sauntered in, taking in her new surroundings with a disdainful sniff.

'Come on, surely this is better than Haven?'

Sylph ran her finger across the table, raising an eyebrow at the accumulated dust on the tip.

'Seb lives down here?'

Cade nodded. 'He prefers it here. Plus, he's not alone.'

'What?'

'Caleb's here, too. His mentor.'

'The guy who nearly died?'

'That's the one. He'll take care of you.'

'Bu-'

'I'll be back,' Cade strode towards the stone staircase, vanishing into the shadows before Sylph could get out another word.

'Great.' Sylph turned and dropped into a leather armchair. She winced as something dug into her back, shuffling to the side into a position of least discomfort.

She felt it before she saw it. A tingling at the edge of her senses, a shimmer in the mind. Without thinking she was out of the chair and on her feet. Her hand shot to her side, mentally cursing at the empty sheath there.

'Who are you? Show yourself!'

The man known as Caleb shuffled out of the dark. Hunched over, white, skeletal hands gripping a staff, Caleb came forwards, head low, breath wheezing.

'Stop there.' Sylph took a step back, palm raised. He looked human, but the *wrongness* just oozed out of him like an ichor, pooling with the shadow that seemed to follow him from the alcove.

Caleb stopped. His head rose in slow, juddering steps. His eyes met hers. Cold. Grey. Lifeless.

'Ah, you must be, Sylph,' Caleb said, his voice coming out as barely a breeze. 'I have heard a lot about you.'

He came forwards again. Sylph stepped back. Her back struck the table behind her. On instinct her hands dropped to the furniture, fingers furtively searching for something, anything. Her eyes told her that this was simply an old man, not far from the Veil, but her innate senses told her much more.

This was no human.

'You're possessed.'

Caleb stopped. His cocked to one side. 'I'm sorry? My dear, I think you've -'

'Don't bullshit me. I'm not one of these magi. I don't know how you're hiding it from them but I can tell. You reek of it. Show yourself.' Her right hand alighted on something cold, smooth. She lifted it, noting the weight.

The illusion vanished in an instant. Caleb blinked. Grey eyes vanished, replaced by orbs of black. He rose suddenly, the stick clattering to the floor. Bones cracked. Muscle stretched.



He grinned at her, pale lips stretching taut across a mouth displaying teeth designed for shredding.

'What are you, little whelp? You're not magi. You don't have the smell. Yet I can tell you're imbued. Tell me your story, before I rip the throat from your pretty little neck.'

Sylph didn't feel fear. At least, not as a conscious emotion. She recognised the release of adrenalin, the light feeling in her stomach, the pounding of her heart. She'd seen enough possessed to know they could range in danger from the merely deranged to those hosting daemons of unimaginable power. She couldn't read this one, but she had a feeling that it wasn't the former.

He leapt forwards, outstretched talons reaching for her throat. It was fast, inhumanly fast, the image of where he'd been standing merging with the one of him right in front her, the distance between them closed in a heartbeat.

She brought the object up and across from her side. Ideally she would've brought it down in an overhead strike, cleaving the sheol's skull, but the sudden speed of the attack prevented that. The weapon, a cobweb-covered candlestick, complete with almost-extinct candle, caught Caleb under the jaw, deflecting his charge just enough to send him barrelling past her, but not before a stray hand raked across her midriff, sending a searing pain through her core.

'My, you are something different aren't you?' The Caleb-fiend rose, turning back to face her as she edged backwards, clutching the candlestick with one hand, the other clasped over the open wound in her side. Already a dull fire was spreading in ever growing waves from the wound.

Poison.

Caleb gripped the table and casually flung it to one side, the object smashing into smithereens under the impact. He advanced forwards, forked tongue dancing between razor teeth.

Sylph scanned the room. As far as she could tell there was only one way out, the stairs that loomed behind Caleb, taunting her from afar. Not that it mattered though, she knew that even if she managed to get past this daemon that the door was no doubt barred from the other side. But maybe there were guards there? Someone she could alert? She didn't have the time to figure out how this fiend had managed to fool all of the magi but she had no doubt that its presence here, now, at the time of the opening, was no mere coincidence. She had to warn them. She made to move but her legs were failing her, energy sapped by the lethal poison. The room blurred as her knees hit the floor.

'Where's the fight? I was hoping for much more sport than this?'

Caleb-fiend crept forwards, fingers splayed, talons primed to end her life there and then.

*Bong.*

The noise reverberated throughout the building, the sounds echoing and amplifying within the Drain.

For a moment, Caleb and Sylph stared at each other. Sylph, mind numbed by poison, recognised nothing more than the fact a painful noise rattled her ears. Caleb-fiend though, knew more, much more.

*Bong.*

The ceremony.

Caleb-fiend snarled and spun, bounding across to the stairs in one gravity defying leap. He melded into the shadows, a black arrow vanishing into the ether.

Seb swallowed, the dryness in his throat making the action difficult, almost painful.

He dared one last look round before closing his eyes. He felt the combined power of the gathered magi. They were unified now, their energies combined, their power focused on him. The energy pulsed through him, his limbs alive, senses tingling. With one last glance at the Magister, her eyes now glowing a fierce gold, he closed his own. The sound of the side door to the Main Hall opening barely registered with him.

Cade saw Caleb enter. He smiled as the old man shuffled

forwards, head bowed, clutching that staff as if his life depended on it. Stubborn old goat. Something stirred in his chest. After all this old man had been through, how close to death he had been, he still forced himself out of the Drain to see his pupil finally shed the burden that had plagued him for the past few months. He moved through the crowd towards Caleb, seeking the companionship of a fellow outsider amongst the silence of the magi.

'Nice of you to join us,' Cade drew alongside the older man. He couldn't help but feel dismay at the sight of the old mage, a shell of his former self.

He turned to look back towards the ceremony. The Magister was in full swing now, her words rising in pitch and fervour, the air tingling with a growing pervasion of Weave energy. Something pulled Cade back, something he noticed as he took his gaze away from Caleb.

'What happened to you?' Cade took the old man's hand in his own. The back of it was nearly black with bruising. Dried blood was caked along his knuckles.

'Huh? This?' Caleb flexed his knuckles, the bones nearly visible underneath waxen skin. 'That friend of yours. She made a break for it thinking I was nothing but a harmless old fool.' He waved the staff under Cade's eyes, his grey eyes twinkling, 'I taught her the error of her ways.'

'You shouldn't have risked yourself. You're too weak. Here, let me take you back to the infirmary.'

'I'm fine!' Caleb snatched his arm away from the offered hand. He noted Cade's shocked expression and the anger melted away. 'I'm sorry, I did not mean to snap. I just don't like being taken for an invalid. Now I must go, I must be close to Seb to give my support.'

Caleb pushed his way forwards and away from Cade, leaving the warrior frozen in shock. Cade blinked and shook the experience away, watching as the old man clumsily made his way to the front of the circle. As he stood he felt his thoughts drifting. Something didn't sit right. He'd placed two warriors at the Drain and yet still Sylph had managed to launch an attack. When he left her the last thing she'd seemed focused on was starting another fight. According to Seb she'd risked her life to bring him back safely, why jeopardise that now? And why hadn't his guard contacted him about the assault?

He cast one last look at the room, his eyes lingering on Caleb. His gut screamed at him. Something was wrong. He turned and marched out of the chamber.

The corridor was quiet. Too quiet. By the time Cade turned onto the last corridor that led to the Drain he was almost at a run. His limited sense screamed at him, not because of what he could

sense, but what he couldn't.

Shit!

Two eviscerated bodies - his warriors - lay strewn in various parts across the corridor. The walls were coated in blood and matter. Cade noted the weapons still in their holsters, safety's still on. Whatever happened had taken them by surprise, the looks of shock on their dead faces confirming that thought. He stepped over the lake of blood, weapon in hand, and ventured downstairs. He sensed a presence there. A faint, lingering presence clinging to life.

'Sylph? Sylph!' He ran across to the woman on the floor and dropped to a crouch next to her. Her skin was the colour of wax, her lips blue and cold. He reached his hand under her neck, wincing at the coldness of her touch. She seemed dead, but something inside flared, a heat that wouldn't give in.

'Sylph? What happened?' A nearby table had been flipped and thrown against a wall. Shards of wood littered the floor. Near one outstretched hand a candlestick lay, one end wet with blood.

Black blood.

'Shit.'

He had to get back. Caleb - whatever he was - he needed to be stopped. But he couldn't leave her like this. Whatever she was, she'd fought too hard get this far, and without her Seb wouldn't be here at all. But what could he do? Come on, think.

He'd seen it once. He lowered her down and raced to the shelves at the far wall, where potions of various colour were lined up. He normally had his own antidote but his had been used when his men found him in his Father's office room. Thankfully, he found a similar potion, a small bottle with a circular base. A thick, black liquid slopped inside. He snatched it from the shelf and ran back. Without pause he tipped back her head and poured the entire contents of the bottle down her throat. She bucked and thrashed as reflex forced her to swallow. He held her close, waiting until the worst of the shudders had passed. When her spasms had ceased and her breathing had returned to something that resembled normality, he lowered her back down and raced back to the chamber.

Seb didn't what he was expecting to happen, but in the end, when it did, it was relatively low key. At least initially.

A perimeter of golden light surrounded him, obscuring the magi behind a glowing haze. In front of him the locked box simply faded into existence, floating in the air right under his nose. It rolled and twisted, seemingly responding to his own mind.

He'd seen Caleb before, standing near the inside of the circle. The sight of the old man, clearly frail but determined to not leave his sole pupil to face this challenge on his own

made his spirits rise. Caleb was gone now, perhaps sitting. It didn't matter. He was there, and that was enough.

The box had stopped rotating now, the cracked underside now facing him, a fierce gold energy emanating from the fissure. Without thinking, he lifted his hands, palms facing the crack. He knew the thought wasn't his own, for he was a puppet now, controlled by the greater powers and wisdom of the combined magi.

The crack seemed to spread, sprouting several smaller cracks that grew outwards, quickly enveloping the box until nothing remained of its former structure, just a glowing cuboid of light.

'It opens!' The Magister's voice echoed in his mind.

The box rippled, then something else happen. Strange Runes began to rise from the inside. The language he knew was Runic Script, some of the symbols even made sense, hours of reading finally paying off.

Rune after Rune appeared in the air then vanished. The Magister muttered under her breath, recanting the magical words as they went. They didn't seem to be much. Simple binding or describing Runes used to hide underlying complexity in powerful magicks. He'd seen them before many times. Nothing special at all.

*Strange. What is this?*



The voice, uttered by the Magister's astral self, echoed in his mind. A Rune hovered before him. It wasn't part of any core library that he'd ever seen. Nor in fact, had the Magister, judging by the way she spun in about in the air without calling it.

*What is it, Magister?*

*Nothing, Boy. Nothing of consequence. Obviously some kind of function designed to ease its understanding. Such bright people were the original magi.*

Of course. Seb replied. Had he noted an air of uncertainty in the Magister's voice? He dismissed it. She knew what she was doing.

The Rune stopped spinning. The Magister called the unknown magic.

Marek appeared. At least an image of him. The room took a collective intake of breath.

'What? What is this?' The Magister's said.

'Thank you for this, Magister. I knew I could rely on your arrogance to aid me in my mission.' The Marek-phantom said.

'What is this abomination?' Cian leapt from the throne and swung his staff through the apparition. It passed through the other side, the image unscathed. The Marek-phantom began to glow. The luminescence growing with each passing second.

The commune abruptly ended. The wall of light evaporated

leaving Seb staring at a wall of shocked faces, principle amongst them was the Magister, who seemed to have visibly shrunk in both stature and size. Between them, the image of Marek glowed so brightly that it had morphed into a large glowing orb hovering in the air before them

'What is this, what is happening?' One mage said, voicing the nervous thoughts that permeated the group.

'Magister! What is going on?'

Seb blinked. He focussed his eyes on the orb. He saw now the tiny Runes dancing within, moving along the lines like ants on a branch. Many of the words he recognised. He never seen them called in this way before, but as he pieced them together, clarity struck him.

'A bomb. It's some kind of bomb!'

'What?' Cian marched over to the Magister who simply stood, slack-jawed, staring at the orb.

'I don't understand, only the magi can use the Weave in the grounds, none would use such a spell.' She muttered.

'What? Seb's right?' Cian said, his eyes widening.

'It can't be. How did we not see?'

It all happened at once. The door to the Hall burst open. Cade appeared, caked in blood, one arm supporting Sylph who clung to his side. Seb heard movement behind. He looked back and saw Caleb appear behind the Magister. Yet it wasn't Caleb. It

was a sheol in Caleb's form, his aura blacker than oil.

Something flashed. The Magister gasped just as Cade yelled across the room:

'Down!'

A gun fired, but the sound was nearly drowned out when the glowing orb burst, and the world exploded in a flash of light brighter than a thousand suns.

Seb dropped to the floor. His eyes burned and his ears roared. Around him the mages screamed and yelled, many of them on the floor with him. Only Cian remained standing. The shield he'd erected crackling as the remaining tendrils from the blast dissipated.

'Is everyone okay?'

Seb rose onto one knee. He dared to open his eyes. Surprisingly, no one seemed injured. The other magi were rising also. Stunned yes, but no one seemed to have suffered anything worse.

'What happened?' Don said.

'Cian.' The Magister whispered. Cian looked down. His mouth fell open and he dropped to his knees. Blood pooled under her where the Caleb-fiend had ripped open her gut. She stared at the giant warrior, but the gaze was sightless, the void beckoning.

'Magister!'

'My vessel is broken. I failed us.'

'No, Magister. We were deceived.'

The Magister shook her head. She grimaced and coughed. Dark blood spat out onto her chin. 'It doesn't matter. Can you feel it? Have you sensed what's occurred?'

'The sentinels.'

'They sleep. Marek's magic did this.'

'He will pay.'

'In time. For now, defend Skelwith. It rests with you now. I will see you in the Great River.'

The Magister passed. Seb watched, dumbstruck as a pattern of energy left her body. It rose into the air before dissipating into the ether. Cian looked up and Seb caught his eye. The Battlemaster's eyes glistened.

'Outside!'

The shout from the magi broke the moment. Cian blinked the tears away and turned towards the windows. Others followed. Several of the magi rushed to the ancient glass as shrill shouts of panic began to erupt from their ranks. Cian bellowed in an attempt to restore order but his voice was drowned out by the combined clamour from the magi. Through it all, Seb simply sat, looking at the motionless body on the floor. Not at the Magister, but at Caleb. His grey eyes stared blankly towards the ceiling.

'Seb?'

He looked up. Cade stood there, gun still in hand, one held out to him. He took it, noting absently the way his own hand shook. Cade hefted him off the ground.

'How did you know?' Seb said, looking back down at Caleb.

'He'd attacked Sylph. Killed two of my men. Even then I wasn't hundred percent until I saw him lunging for the Magister.'

Seb blinked. Reality rushed back to him. He glanced around. The growing tide of panic from those at the window was almost reaching hysterical proportions. From outside, where darkness now blanketed the mansion, a horn sounded.

'What the hell is that?'

'The sheol. And my former Brothers.'

'It was a trap wasn't it? All of it.'

'I don't know. Yes, maybe.'

Seb looked down. A shadow seemed to gather around him. He'd been played. Played like the desperate fool he was. He'd thought himself special, but in reality he was just some dumb sap that had lapped up what he'd been given.

'Don't go there, Seb. None of this is your fault.'

'No? Tell me why? It looks like it pretty much is from where I'm standing.' They walked towards the windows as Cian's bellows began to instil a semblance of order.

'Close the shutters.' Cian yelled. 'Bar them all. I want

men on the roof. Form a link. I need to know everything that's going on.'

Magi obeyed without question. Training kicking in now as the initial shock faded.

'How many?' Cade said as Cian turned and towards them.

'Unknown. Enough to finish us off without the sentinels. Countless sheol, they stand out like sore thumbs out there. A small number of the Brotherhood. Not that they deserve to wear that title anymore.'

'My father? Reuben?'

Cian nodded. 'Oh yes, they're there. At the back, like the heroes they are. Marek is with them. He's blocking but the air is thick with his stench.'

'What's the plan?'

'I'll command from here. Elites will cover all the main access points. One Elite and one adept together. We can't afford to have our best all grouped together. The acolytes will fall in as required. What about you? How many do you have?'

'Twenty four in total. I just lost two to that *thing* over there. I'm assuming all those guarding the outer perimeter are lost too. I'll take some to the roof. We can use ranged weapons from there. The rest will cover the inner building for when they breach.'

Cian nodded. 'Good. Seb - you stay with Cade. You haven't

worked in a coterie before so you won't be any use with any of the mage groups.'

Seb glowered but managed to keep the smart quip that sprang to mind at bay. 'What do they want?' He said.

'What?' Cian said.

'What I said. They've dropped the defences. The Magister is dead. The Consensus is crumbling. Now they're here. What is it they want?'

'Isn't it obvious? To wipe us out.'

It came and went in the blink of an eye, but there was a pause then. Something else, there was something else. Cade noticed it too.

'Cian. What is it? Marek wants something in here. What is it?'

For the briefest of moments it looked like Cian was going to say more. He glanced between them, mouth opening slightly.

That was then the world erupted in flame.

They heard the shouts a split second before two of the barred windows exploded inwards. Blasts of flame struck the nearest mages, engulfing them in terrifying balls of purple fire. Those that took the brunt of the blast were vaporised instantly, those who were further away rolled on the floor in agony, their flesh and bones melting away into charred, sickening stumps. Those not caught could only watch in paralysed

fear. Seb barely suppressed the bile that shot up his throat. It was just like the Nexus, but the tables had been turned.

'Breach!'

Cian's mighty roar shattered the fear-induced paralysis, but not before four sheol leapt through the open windows. With the Consensus weak, they were hybrids now of human and daemon, and bony limbs skittered on the wooden floor as they slid into the centre of the hall.

One came to its feet directly in front of Cian. A young boy, barely a teenager. He brandished a rusted meat cleaver in one hand and grinned a manic smile when he saw Cian. The smile vanished as its head crumbled under a vicious overhead strike.

Other magi rounded on the possessed. The Elites lead the charge, staffs ablaze with Weave-Fire, cutting through the primitive defences of the sheol. During the skirmish one of the possessed rolled out of the melee, Seb noticing with horror that it was grabbling with the young acolyte, Harry. The youngster was unarmed, holding the snapping jaw of the daemon back with all his strength whilst the beast took chunks out of his hands and arms.

'Cade!'

Cade saw the attack. His pistol was out, aiming at the attack, but he didn't fire. The grappling duo were moving too quick to get a clean shot. Seb focussed briefly before hurling



himself onto the daemon's back. The beast howled as he wrapped his legs around its midriff, his arm clamping round its neck. He felt the weight of the youngster vanish as the daemon released its previous victim, the beast recognising where the biggest threat lay. It brought taloned hands up to Seb's unarmoured forearms, and he stifled a yowl of pain when he felt the talons sink into his skin. He channelled, focussing the Weave on the arms that clamped round the soft flesh of the daemon's neck. His strength increased, the tension growing on the beasts neck. He gaped when his skin began glowing blue, and small flames flickered to life on his skin. The smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils. The daemon thrashed and kicked and wailed, but only briefly. Scaly flesh succumbed rapidly to Seb's Weave-Fire, his iron grip melting through bone, tendon and flesh as if it were nothing but air. The daemon's head thudded to the floor as he rolled away, the body still switching where he left it.

'Harry!'

Seb ran over and took Harry's head in the crook of his arm. The boy tried to speak. His mouth opened. His eyes went wide, and then he breathed for the last time.

'No! No!' He stumbled backwards into Cade.

'Seb, not now. Grief can come later. Come with me. I need you upstairs with us.'

Seb didn't complain as he was half-dragged by Cade up the

staircase. Seven magi had died in the attack at the expense of only four daemons. They couldn't hold out. Not without the sentinels. Already from elsewhere in the house he could hear the screams as more sheol attacked, hurling themselves through the wooden shutters without fear for their own safety.

They ran up the rickety metal stairs that led onto the rooftop. The door was already open, and Seb could hear the rat-rat of gunfire as Cade's men sprayed silver bullets into the surrounding gardens. They emerged into a night that was laced with the bite of a rising winter. A faint mist was descending, partly obscuring Cade's men as they hunched low against the wall. Cade forced Seb down against an air vent and squatted in front of him.

'Seb? You okay?'

'He was only fifteen, Cade. Fifteen. He didn't deserve to die here, like that.'

'Seb, you can't dwell on that now. He gave his life for the Magistracy, as will many others. Now, we need you know. Are you to it?'

Seb looked at Cade, his stare unwavering.

'What do you need me to do?'

Cade smiled. 'Good. Then we might have a chance. I need your sense. You can see what we can't. The sheol will have controllers. Senior fiends who control the ferals. They will be

at the rear. Show us where. We'll do the rest.'

Seb nodded. He dropped to his knees, palms open. He cast out his sense far and wide. The Weave came easily and awareness flared, the world beyond the warriors ablaze as his imbued sight saw beyond the limits of his human eyes.

At first all he saw as a sea of black as hordes of possessed humans raced across the lawn. Then beyond, up near the ridge, he saw them. Sheol still, but stationary. They glowed with Weave-energy, and he could feel the subtle pulses they sent to the raging mass below them.

'There!' Seb pointed to the ridge. 'There's two by the old oak, just behind the pair of gargoyle sentinels. There's one more to the other side. Follow the line of site across the roof through the weather vein. He's right there.'

'Excellent. Steve, Dimitar - phosphorous mortar. Set the elevation for a cloud burst at those coordinates. The rest - suppression fire at those locations. If we get them on the first pass then the ferals will fall apart.'

At once Brotherhood weapons opened up, muzzles flashing, the air redolent with cordite. The mortar fired, making a low *whoompf* noise. Seb watched through imbued sight as the foliage protecting the sheol commanders shook under the onslaught. The one on its own staggered and fell almost instantly, its aura vanishing at the same time. The other two managed to reach

cover, but only as the cluster of phosphorous bombs exploded above them. One disintegrated instantly. The other dropped to the ground and rolled back and forth. Seb focussed his sense and winced as the fiend's screeches of pain reached him.

'Got them. They're all down!'

Marek scowled as the last of the commanders fell. He looked to the roof, ignoring the growls from Farouk next to him.

'There is a mage up there. He is guiding their attacks.' The mage said. Another phosphorous bomb exploded above them but his shield held, the explosion causing the barest shimmer on the barrier.

'It has killed the commanders. The ferals are no longer under their control.' Farouk said.

'Farouk, you take command. Lead the assault on the mansion.' Marek turned and looked back up as the giant daemon bounded off into the night. 'I will take care of the whelp.'

'Keep firing. Everyone we take one out here is one less to fight hand to hand.' Cade marched up and down the battlements, barking orders to his men. They sprayed death from above, slicing through the confused ranks of sheol as they ran amok in the gardens. Seb nodded in approval. Perhaps they might have a chance after all.

Something flared in the distance, near the ridge. Seb focussed. His mouth fell open and his heart froze.

'Of the roof! We have to get off the roof!'

'Why? Wh -'

The purple ball of fire sprouted from the darkness on the ridge. It arched towards them at high speed. The sheol in the grounds paused in awe, watching as the fiery ball of death sped towards the mansion.

The shock lasted only momentarily. Seb, Cade and the Brothers ran to the other side of the building. They leapt off just as the fireball struck with a deafening roar. Masonry flew in all directions as they dropped over the lip of the mansion. One warrior wasn't so lucky and a lump of ancient stone struck him face on. He plummeted ahead of them, no longer touching the Weave and victim to gravity in its normal form.

Seb had hesitated before he jumped, but only for a second. He didn't have the luxury of the innate skills of the Brotherhood. He had the Weave, but this was something he'd only read about and never tried. For a moment, panic flared, his lungs suddenly filled to bursting with frozen air. He brought the calm quickly, the action almost pure instinct now. The world raced towards him, but he pushed back. He reached out, feeling the subtle grip of gravity, pulling it off him and passing it over, like a too-warm blanket. His descent began to slow, and he

landed with a dull thump on wet grass, the shockwave of dissipating energy knocking the nearest sheol off their feet.

They rest landed just after him. Cade despatched the two sheol that still lay stunned on the ground. Seb had rolled forwards, his landing not as elegant as the Brothers. He came to his feet facing the building. The Brothers had all landed safely. Seb looked up, and screamed.

'Away! Move away!'

The Brothers didn't waste time looking to see the cause of his concern. They rushed forwards as an avalanche of brick and ancient stone ploughed into the ground, sending plumes of dust into the air.

'We all here?' Cade ran to each of his men, pulling them and checking they were still in the fight. Thanks to Seb, all had survived the storm of stones. Cade walked back to Seb. 'How goes it inside?'

Seb sensed. Half of the magi had fallen. Ten fought on in the hall. Their shields holding as the confused sheol stalled their attack. Six more fought around the ground floor, fighting a running battle with the sheol who tried to break in through the other access points. Through it all Cian blazed around like a man possessed. His aura swallowed all those around him, and everywhere he went sheol fell away in fear.

'We are holding. Perhaps there's a chance.' Seb staggered

as a cold wave of dread suddenly washed over him. Cade caught him before he fell.

'What is it?'

Seb sensed again. All the imbued had felt it. Cade had stopped and was now turned towards the hall. The sheol had even paused their attack, the waiting ten magi exchanging worried glances with each other.

'Seb!'

'The daemon. The one from the Nexus. It's here.'

The horned fiend crashed through the barriers erected by the magi in the hall. Before they could even respond it picked up a fallen piece of wall and hurled it, crushing three magi en route as it smashed through the wall on the other side where Seb and the others stood. They dove to one side, rolling to their feet as the dust cleared. Seb's blood ran cold as the fiend stepped into view. Its one eye scanned the destruction around it. Its gaze eventually settled on its next target.

Him.

The daemon grinned and took a step forward. Cade stepped in front of him, a Runed dagger held, pommel first.

'Take this. You might need it.'

'What?' Seb said, not understanding but taking it nonetheless.

Without a word, Cade and his men turned charged forwards

into the breach.

'Cade, no!'

'Go, Seb! Someone needs to survive this day!'

With that Cade was gone. The Brotherhood warriors attacked the fiend with runed weapons. Two were swatted away like flies. Others were luckier. They got inside the fiend's reach where their agility made up for their lack of strength. Swords and daggers sliced open daemon skin as it howled in rage.

*Seb!*

Sylph! The panic from her unconscious mind struck him like a slap. He reached out, sensing, filtering out the screams of magi and brother. He found her, bloodied, winded but unbowed. Sheol surrounded her, some of them clutching wounds that gushed black ichor, but more piled up behind. She was losing, she knew that, but she would not go easily.

Seb ducked inside the opening and dashed to the right. He avoided a skirmish between two magi and a handful of sheol and raced down the final corridor that led to the Drain. He ignored the mutilated Brothers on the floor outside the door and pelted inside, imbued legs carrying him at breakneck speed down the stairs.

'Seb!'

Her relief washed over him but the moment was short lived. A possessed stepped inside her sagging guard, the claw raking



skin, drawing angry red lines across her cheek. She crumbled against the wall, only instinct keeping her moving as another blow struck the wall, sending cracks running across the plaster. Seb took out the dagger that Cade had given him. Without thinking he threw the blade across the room. It hit the sheol on the back of the head, handle end first. It turned in surprise, but only for a second. Sylph wrapped her arms round its neck and yanked its head to one side with a sickening click. It crashed to the floor as its comrade's turn to face the new threat.

'Mageling!' The largest said, its mouth cracking into a vicious grin. It leapt over an upturned desk towards him. He stepped back, and as it descended upon him he pivoted, gripping the creature by its shirt and hurling it with all his imbued strength into the wall by the stairs.

The others swarmed him as he felt the lights go out on their leader. He let the Weave in completely, channelling speed, awareness, strength. They launched attack after attack, his mind in the now, his limbs blocking and deflecting on pure instinct. A fanged jaw lunged at his face, crumpling as he drove a fist into the side of its head. Something jumped at his back, his elbow snapping upwards and to the right, the creature slumping lifeless at his feet.

Seb was a blur. He'd never felt this way before, so totally in control. His conscious mind was almost a passenger, his body

a tool of the Weave, carving a path through the sheol with abandon. Sylph was in sight. With renewed hope she fought the last of the sheol, picking up Seb's dagger and driving it up and inside the creature's jaw.

'Well, well, what a pleasant surprise.'

Seb scrabbled backwards, the voice shocking him out of his battle trance. He staggered to his feet on legs that now were suddenly devoid of energy. He'd over extended himself with the Weave. His head began to throb. The room swayed. He tried to focus on the figure before him, knowing the voice even if his eyes wouldn't connect.

'Reuben.' He spat blood on the floor. Around him the surviving sheol formed a perimeter.

'Your merry band has put up a worthy fight,' Reuben said. 'Although as I'm sure you can tell, the battle is lost.'

Seb didn't waver in his gaze, but he dared a quick sensing. Dismay clouded his mind. They were lost. Only pockets remained. More had fallen. Sheol had assailed the roof and now Cade, wounded, fought a last stand with his loyal brothers against the horned daemon. Here and there the magi fought, side by side with their allies of old, but every moment another was lost, a light snuffed out into the void. And yet the sheol kept coming.

'See,' Reuben said, that insufferable smile on his face, 'Your moment of resistance is over. Your *time* is over. Was it

worth it? Was it worth this futile crusade that you led?’

‘Are you just going to talk all day, or are you going to stop hiding behind your drones and face me like a man. You coward.’

He spat the last word out with as much venom as he could muster. He couldn’t beat Rueben, even when at full strength. But he was damned if he was just going to roll over and die without a fight.

The challenge seemed to work. A disbelieving silence fell across the possessed. Reuben’s face creased into a snarl.

*Screw this.*

Seb didn’t wait for an invitation. He summoned what he had, channelling the last vestiges of his strength. The Weave seemed so far away now, his link to it tenuous, but he squeezed what he could. He blurred across the room with his fist aimed ahead towards Reuben’s head. For a moment he thought he might connect, but as his hand swung at speeds that would’ve decapitated a normal human, he knew that he had overstretched. Reuben flicked his head to one side, the blow glancing off his jaw. The warrior countered with a jab of iron into his ribs that lifted him off the ground and sent the air from his lungs. He dropped in a heap to the ground as an armoured knee struck him square in the jaw. He felt himself leave the ground - no time to brace for the impact - and smashed into the far wall. He slid to the floor.

Spots of light peppering his vision.

Footsteps approached. The end was coming, but he was spent. Death seemed a relief now. They had failed. All was lost. At least he hadn't died afraid, like he nearly did all the months before.

*Stay down.*

Cian.

Footsteps close. Near. Almost in reach. He winced, closing his eyes. Salvation wouldn't come in time.

That was when the earth cracked.

He dared to look, his eyes meeting with Reuben's for a brief moment. The brother didn't know, he couldn't know, for he wasn't a mage, he couldn't hear their song.

The ceiling exploded with a roar that must've cracked the walls of the Veil itself. The iron drain, masonry, dust and rubble crashed into the room. Reuben vanished under a plume of dust and rubble as Cian dropped into the chamber.

'Are you dead, Boy?' The warrior was covered in a sheen of red. Cuts and wounds of various sizes seemed to cover the entirety of his body, yet he stood, unwavering, the Weave pulsing from him like a beacon.

'Not quite,' Seb mumbled. He tried to stand but the energy simply wasn't there.

'Here,' Cian leapt over a pile of rubble. A hand the size

of his head reached down and gripped his wrist. Energy flooded into him, a pulse that evaporated the fatigue, numbing the pain.

'It won't last long,' Cian said, 'perhaps half an hour, but it will do.'

'For what?'

'To end this.'

'Seb!'

They spun round, arms raised, as Cade and one other Brother raced into the room, stopping and staring at the carnage they saw before them.

'You survived *that*?'

Cade nodded to Cian. 'We had a little help.'

'Cade. Can you fight on?' Cian said.

Cian stepped over a fallen chandelier, idly stamping on a still-twitching sheol as he went.

'Whilst my body still draws breath. The oath demands it.'

Cian laughed, the sound coarse. 'To hell with the oath. It's more than that now.' He turned back to them, steely eyes fixing each of them in turn. 'You fight on? To the end?'

There was no other option as Seb saw it. If he wanted to run, he couldn't. He nodded once, trying to put some conviction in it. Cade's response was more concrete. As was his comrade.

'Count me in.'

'Sylph?'

She staggered against the wall, a wince on her face as she steadied herself with a shaking hand. He rushed over and helped her upright.

'You need to get out of here,' he said.

'Where, out there?' She gently removed his hand and stepped away. 'What do we do? You have a plan?'

'We fight to the end.'

'That's it?'

'It's all we have. We are lost.'

Sylph shook her head. 'No, it can't be. That's not right.'

Cian frowned. 'What do you mean? This isn't the time for debate.'

'I heard Marek say. It didn't make sense at the time. I didn't know what he was planning. But back when he trusted me, he'd said that when the moment came that they wouldn't have long.'

'What does that even mean?'

Sylph shook her head. 'I don't know, but it seemed important.'

Seb paced in a circle. 'Think about it. The message was a trap. Some kind of Weave-bomb. It didn't kill us. What did it do?'

'It disabled the sentinels' Cian said.

'Why?'

'They are almost indestructible. With them Marek had no hope of taking the mansion.'

'Right. But he had to do it quickly. Why?'

'Perhaps the effect is only temporary?'

Seb thought for a minute. He cast his mind to his astral training with the Magister and Caleb. He stopped walking.

'The Spoke Stone. That powers the sentinels?'

Cian shook his head. 'No. It controls them. They are of magic older than this place. Their power cannot be taken away, aside from by the Consensus itself.'

'So why are they not moving then?'

A light went on in Cian's eyes. 'The Spoke Stone. The bomb has corrupted that in some form!'

'Can you undo it?'

'I don't know. Perhaps. We need to get to it.'

'We all need to go.'

Cade shook his head. 'Wait a minute. This is our plan? What then? What if you can't undo the spell? Marek must know we're coming up.'

'If it comes to that,' Cian said. 'We destroy it. The binding spell is severed.'

'But what about the Consensus. Without the hubs in place then it will collapse.'

'Collapse? No. Does a wheel break when one spoke is

missing? No it won't. But if it *is* destroyed then the rule of the observers will be broken. Reality *will* be impacted in some way, although it is beyond my understanding to explain how.'

'So', Cade said, clapping his hands together. 'To sum up, either we stay here, fight to the death and the Magistry is lost. The sheol led by Marek and whoever else run free amongst the Unware. Or we attempt to destroy a foundation stone on which all of reality is built and that could have unimaginable effects on the universe as we know it?'

Seb smiled. 'Pretty much.'



## Chapter 54

Marek surveyed the destruction within the Great Hall in the building he'd formerly known as home. Silas swept in alongside him flanked by two body guards. The bodies of sheol, magi and brother littered the ground around them.

'Has the Spoke Stone survived?' Silas said.

Marek strode towards the double doors that led down to the sanctum. He paused, sensing, before turning back.

'It is intact.'

'That is good. Then we can complete this.'

A noise at the far end of the hall made both men turn. Reuben staggered in, covered head to toe in dust and masonry. The gathered sheol growled and rounded on him, not recognising the warrior. Marek raised a hand and they held their ground as Silas rushed to meet him.

'Son, you are well!'

'I live, but they are coming.'

'Who?'

'Cade, Cian and the others.'

'That is all?'

'All?' Reuben pushed his father's helping hand away. 'Cian is a *formidable* opponent.'

Silas smiled. 'Indeed he is. However I doubt he can do much now.'

'I'll let you tell him that when he arrives.'

'Alas I must decline his entrance. Marek has instructed me to command our forces at the perimeter so that none escape.'

'Lucky you.'

'Keep calm, Reuben. I will see you on the other side.'  
Silas turned and left with his retinue.

'Thanks for the support.' Reuben muttered.

As Silas left, the far entrance to the hall opened.

'Ah, it seems our guests are here right now!' Marek's musical voice carried over the room. Reuben turned as the last survivors of the battle emerged into the remains of the great hall.

'Cian, old friend, it's good to see you!'

Seb stood behind Cian to the left. The influx of Weave-energy that Cian had channelled into him was waning now. He had to preserve what he had for the next few moments. They would only get once chance at this.

'Marek. You have betrayed us all!' Cian moved slowly forwards, his staff extended before him. All around sheol formed a perimeter. Close, but not close enough to risk destruction. They'd seen what damage the giant warrior could inflict.

'There are so many, even now,' Sylph hissed.

Seb nodded. He tried not to think about it, but she was right. They must've slain hundreds of sheol, but another hundred at least remained. Did they ever have a chance?

'Cian, I think you will be find it is you and your fallen friends that have been betrayed for far too long. It is I who has finally seen the light after all these years!'

Cian scoffed. 'Light? Selling your soul to the sheol. You've lost your mind Marek. I feel sorry for you. Before I just thought you were a poor mage, but now I know it wasn't your fault. It is an ailment of your mind that compels you to act this way.'

Marek smiled back. 'My dear, Cian, even now, at the end, you still cling to an ideal that has no place in this world. It was your blindness that led to this. I knew how arrogant you would be, how you fall for this plan I so carefully laid out.'

'You planned this! All of this!' Seb heard himself say.

'Ah, my little mageling. You have done well to endure what has transpired. When Sarah fell I thought my plan's had fallen at the last. It was sheer luck that she found you.'

'Be silent!' Cian roared.

The giant warrior edged forwards. The circle of sheol closed slightly around him.

'Is this how it ends, noble Cian? You falling by my hand, the last of the brain-washed magi dead at my feet?'

'I tire of your bleating, Marek. You were always a good talker, but in the end you are as I found you all those years ago.' Cian stopped his advance. His mouth curled into a rare smile. 'You are weak. Dim-witted and weak. My only shame is that I didn't kill you then, rather than soil my tunic with your tainted blood this day.'

The smile dropped from Marek's face in an instant. His eyes crackled with energy and his fists clenched by his sides.

'Be ready. It comes.' Cian hissed.

'You always were a fool, Cian. Blinded by loyalty. When I gain the power of the Spoke Stone I will make sure you I keep alive for all eternity whilst I strip the flesh from your bones.'

'You talk too much, Marek. Let us end this now.'

Marek scowled. His eyes narrowed. He shot a look to the gathered sheol.

'End them!'

'Now!'

At once they charged. Cian at the front, projecting a concentrated field of force. They rushed behind him. The sheol, startled at first, raced to meet them. They charged headlong into a roaring, snapping mass of daemon.

*Seb!*

Seb didn't hesitate. He called the Runic Script that Cian had taught him moments earlier. It burned through much of his reserves, and for a moment he thought it had failed. But then the mass in front of him vanished. The world blurred by, and he found himself on the other side of the carnage behind Marek, facing the doors to the sanctum. Alongside him Sylph and Cade appeared, carried by the same magic. They skidded to a halt.

'We made it!'

Behind them the sheol piled onto the blazing inferno that Cian had become. Seb ran to the massive doors that bared the way to the sanctum.

'How does this work?' He ran his fingers over the ornate brass work, trying to find some kind of opening mechanism. How had the Magister done it?

'Seb. I think we need to hurry.' Cade said, his attention still facing towards the battle behind them. Seb snatched a look up. Marek was turned their way, his face a rictus of fury.

Shit.

It must be here! Seb ran his hand over the panelling that ran alongside the door frame. He stopped. What was that? He moved his hand back up. The panel tingled with a subtle energy. He placed his hand on the panel. Something passed through him and his skin rippled in gooseflesh. A lock clicked, and the door swung open.

'We're in!'

The three raced down the stairs that led into the Inner Sanctum. Behind them Reuben fell in pursuit along with his father's body guards and several sheol.

Seb emerged first into the familiar chamber. The Spoke Stone stood before him, surrounded by its ornate bronze carvings. He heard the others arrive behind him but didn't slow. He had to do this now whilst he still had strength in his legs. He raced over. He reached the base of the stand and reached out for the Stone.

Marek materialised before him.

No!

Before Seb could even react, the mage struck out with the back of his hand, sending him sliding across the ground, finally coming to a halt when he smacked into the wall.

'Seb!'

Cade looked at Marek, and him, and then back again. He dashed forwards, weapons raised. He struck at Marek but the weapons passed through him like he wasn't even there. Cade stood, confused, before Marek pushed out with his palm. Cade rose into the air and smashed into the wall above the doorway. He slid to the ground in a heap. Only Sylph remained.

But where was she?

Seb scanned the room. He couldn't draw on the Weave. Something was blocking him, preventing him connecting. The impact had knocked out last ounce of energy he had. Through blurred vision he tried to spot the assassin but she'd simply vanished into thin air.

Then the shadows above the Spoke Stone moved. Sylph appeared from the darkness. She took the Stone in her hand and dropped to the ground in between Seb and Marek. For a fleeting moment a glimmer of panic crossed the mage's face before the icy calm returned.

'Sylph. My dear child. I am pleased to see you have survived this long.'

'Don't lie. You betrayed me. You betrayed everything.'

Sylph spoke through gritted teeth. Tears streamed down her face. Behind her Reuben and his small party arrived. A sad thought flickered in Seb's mind as he realised what this meant for Cian. The Second Sword grinned when he saw Cade slumped

unconscious on the floor. Sylph clutched the stone to her chest and took a step backwards.

'My child. It was for your own good.' Marek shook his head, stepping forwards. 'You were such a disappointment. I thought I'd trained you better than that.' He edged closer to Sylph, one hand extended outwards. She swayed on her feet as if under some kind of spell.

'Sylph! Ignore him!' Seb tried to stand but his legs had turned to jelly. He dropped again to his knees.

'My child. I do not want you to suffer. Come to me. Give me the stone. We are victorious, you and I. Together we will restore Balor to his rightful place.'

'No.'

Her words didn't match her actions. She took a step forwards.

'Sylph! No!'

Seb managed to stand and take a step forwards. Beyond, Cade began to stir, but all eyes were on the exchange going on in the middle of the room.

'Come here, my child. Let me release you from your pain.'

Sylph and Marek took a step forward at the same time. They met each other, Marek drawing her into his arms.

Seb's sense returned. He couldn't channel still, but he could cast out. He focussed on Sylph, expecting to see her under Marek's control.

Strange. He could sense the fugue upon her mind, Marek's powers dulling her senses, but at the same time something else

lingered, the same defiance that kept her alive when suffering Clementine's barrage.

That's when her hand dropped into her pocket. Seb froze. Marek lifted Sylph's face by the chin. Her tear-filled eyes stared at him. His eyes began to glow purple.

'I am sorry, Father.' She said.

Marek frowned. 'For what, child?'

'This.'

Sylph snapped the object from her pocket. Seb recognised it instantly. The Void collar! Before Marek could even respond she whipped it round his neck. Marek realised the danger all too late. He pushed out with force, sending Sylph flying away just as the collar clicked shut. Marek howled as the dampening field he emitted abruptly vanished.

Seb stood up.

Reuben looked back and forth, confused. Seb took advantage and dove for the Stone that still lay, cradled in Sylph's arms. Marek screamed and lunged too, but Seb, even with the lightest access to the Weave, was able to beat him there. He took the stone and whipped it away from the mage. He leapt away and hefted it above his head. Marek reached towards him, arms outstretched, pleading.

'No! No!'

Reuben began to move, but something caught him by the arm. He pivoted, finding Cade standing there, weapons at the ready. Reuben lashed out on instinct. Cade ducked and thrust a needle-thin dagger up through his brother's armpit. Reuben's sword clattered to the floor. He swung his other arm in a feeble left



hook but the blow just bounced off Cade's shoulder. Reuben's eyes widened as his younger brother took a step forwards and slid a sword in through his ribs. Reuben let out a surprised gasp as he slumped forwards onto Cade's neck.

'You've been learning well, brother.'

Reuben let out a final breath before he slumped to the floor by Cade's feet. Without pause the warrior looked up, ignoring Reuben's remaining guards that surrounded him. He caught Seb's eye across the room.

*Do it.*

With one final thought about the impact this action would have on the world, Seb smashed the stone into a thousand pieces.

'What have you done? What have you done?' Marek cried. He reached for the collar on his neck but the mechanism, designed to be impossible to open by the wearer, eluded him.

'Stopped you. That's all that mattered.'

'You have undone us. All of us! I would've made us kings!'

The ground began to rumble. It reverberated throughout the chamber; a dull, throbbing growl that grew in volume until the very walls seemed to shake. A pulse of magic surged through Seb the likes he'd never experienced before. Then, from somewhere beyond reality, he heard the sonorous chant of the sentinels.

'They are coming.' Seb said to the prostrate Marek. The mage froze, his eyes showing fear for the first time.

'What? No, they cannot be! They were banished!'

'Who's coming?' one of Reuben's guards said, his yellow eyes scanning the room in a mad panic.

That was then the giant stone knights on either side of the door lifted their heads and stepped off their pedestals.

Rurik, one of Reuben's most trusted warriors, stood leaning against the massive stone gargoyle as he surveyed the burning mansion. Before him rows of sheol lined up across the grassy slope, primed and ready to pick off any escapees that fled from the inferno. He smiled to himself. It had been costly, and the alliance with the sheol wasn't something he was entirely comfortable with, but the battle was won. The magi were gone, the blight removed. The Brotherhood were free to resume their place at the top of the human hierarchy.

He didn't really register the rumble at first. His mind knew, sensing some dull sound that seemed to growl beneath the earth, not quite triggering his auditory nerves but tingling at the edge of his perception.

Even when he was sure he felt *something* in the air around him he just shrugged it off. There was Weave magic in the air, he told himself, god knows what weird effects killing all these magi would do.

Even when the statue began to move, his mind didn't quite cotton on. It was only when he fell to the ground as the giant stone gargoyle stepped off its pedestal did he realise what was happening. The last thing his eyes saw was the massive stone

foot as it smashed down on his head.

Further down the line, away from the screams as a stone giant ran amok, sheol soldiers blinked and squinted as the air shimmered before them. Robed figures stepped out of the gloom, silver eyes glinting in the moonlight. They moved like cats in the night, Weave-forged blades flashed. Blood sprayed. Sheol screams filled the night.

Silas heard the screams. He felt the disturbance in the Weave. He wasn't a mage of course, but he'd been on this earth for over a thousand years and had grown used to the sensation of its subtle workings.

He wasn't scared at first. Silas was never scared. At first he thought it a rogue mage escaping the mansion, perhaps taking a couple of the sheol by surprised, but when the screams continued, the concern rippling through the remainder of his army, it suddenly required his attention.

He'd taken one step when something moved nearby. He stopped and turned, his bodyguards following suit. His mouth dropped slightly. For the briefest moment something akin to fear flickered inside his chest.

A hooded warrior stood on the grass, head dipped.

Silas' weak sense blazed. Something tingled in his memory, the very Weave-signature something he remembered, something from long, long ago. He couldn't place a face. A name. But something

wasn't right about this.

'Guards', he said, 'eliminate *that*.'

His men didn't have his level of sense. Nor did they notice their leader take a step back. They obeyed without question, weapons rising to fire.

The air cracked. The warrior blurred *into* the two men. They didn't even have time to scream as a silver sword flashed once. Twice. One gurgled as he fell. The other dropped with a wet squelch, blood pulsing from his open neck. The warrior stepped over the dying brother, stopping within a foot of Silas.

'Who are you, fiend?' Silas said, 'I know you, I know I do.'

The warrior raised his hood, exposing hidden features in the gaze of the full moon.

Silas sagged, knees hitting the floor, the coldness seeping into his skin.

'No! No! It cannot be!'

The warrior knelt before him, their faces level. Silas remembered now, a buried memory bubbling to the fore.

*It remembers.* A voice, ancient as time, pulsed into his mind.

Silas froze, the voice as ice in his mind.

'You died. I saw you die.'

*Silas, Night Brother. You know better than that.*

Silas opened his mouth to speak, but the words melted into a gurgle as a silver blade slid into his windpipe. The thousand year old leader of the Brotherhood, Night Brother and First Sword, died alone, sightless eyes staring at an unsympathetic moon.

## Epilogue

'Cian?'

Seb gently stepped over the countless sheol bodies. The hooded sentinel warriors had left as quickly as they'd appeared, slaughtering the sheol with a divine fury, only to vanish back into the void when not one remained standing. Seb moved through the carnage now, hoping against hope that they weren't too late.

'Seb!' Cade hissed. Seb ran over and his heart sank. Cian lay before them, half sat up against the wall. Piles of dead sheol around him, all bearing the injuries of Cian's staff. Cian's blue eyes fixed on them as they approached. He managed a pained smile.

'Marek?'

'He's dead, Master. The sentinel's returned. Skelwith has been purged.'

'You did it, boy. You only went and did it.'

Seb dropped to his knees before the warrior. He blinked away tears, not wanting to show weakness. Cian's aura was fading by the second. He didn't have long.

'Don't worry.'

'I'm sorry, Cian. I didn't want it to come to this.'

Cian coughed. Spots of red splattered onto his tunic. 'You have nothing to apologise for, boy. Nothing. Now come closer. I

do not have long.'

Seb leaned in closer. The building rumbled again. Somewhere in the remains of the mansion another wall thundered to the ground. Sylph and Cade exchanged worried looks in silence.

'The Consensus is broken. Do you feel it?' Cian said.

'I do. What does it mean?'

Cian smiled. 'I don't have a clue. All I know is that change is coming. Already I can feel the Weave entering this realm, unchecked. How it affects it, how it impacts the unaware is a mystery to all of us. You will feature in this new world, boy. How you do this is up to you.'

'What do I do? There's so much I don't know.'

Cian's face scrunched as a wave of pain racked his dying body. He let out a shaky breath. 'There are others out there. The mage Families. They will come seeking answers. Some will help you. You will need them in the trials to come.'

A wave of emotion washed over Seb. It dawned on him then, the family he'd discovered, the ones who made him feel like he belonged to something for the first time in his life, were leaving him. First Caleb. Now Cian. Even poor Harry. He stifled a sob and wiped a quick-running tear with the back of his hand.

'No, Seb. Not alone. Not anymore.'

The hairs on the back of his neck rose as a gentle force rippled through the Weave like an astral wind. Seb stood and

turned. His spirit soared and a smile broke out on his face that reached both ears.

Cade and Sylph stood before him, but behind them, manifested in their astral forms, stood all the magi that had fallen in defence of Skelwith. Harry. Mik. Don. The Magister. Dear Caleb. They all stood, proud in their magi tunics, smiling back at him. As he watched he felt the change behind him. Cian materialised amongst the spirits, standing next to the Magister. None of them spoke, but the sentiment was clear.

*You are one of us.*

As one their images shimmered before fading back into the Weave. Only Caleb remained. He materialised before Seb, his grey eyes twinkling, even now.

*'I'll come and see you, old man.'*

Caleb smiled and nodded before fading away into the Weave.

Dawn was breaking as Seb, Sylph and Cade emerged from the rubble of the mansion. In silence they stepped over fallen brothers, magi and possessed. They marched in silence through the ruins, out onto the front lawn, where the sun was just cresting the tops of the conifers. Seb stopped, eyes closed, letting the warming rays bath him.

*'Did we win? If that's the right term.'* Sylph said, her eyes still wide and alert even after all she'd been through.



'I cannot sense any sheol.' Cade said. 'Seb?'

Seb dipped his head, eyes closed. 'There are some, but not many. They are without a leader and are running scared. They won't last long in the sun. The authorities will capture them as lunatics.'

'Silas?' Cade said.

'I do not know. I cannot sense him. Although it is unlikely he would've survived the sentinels.' Seb placed a hand on the warrior's shoulder. 'I am sorry.'

Cade nodded slowly. Seb sensed the pain inside his friend but chose to stay silent. There were no words to be said.

'What now?' Sylph said, breaking the silence.

'We go. Away from here.'

'Where?'

Seb didn't think he had an answer to that question until it was actually asked of him. There were questions he had. The tower. The voice in his mind. The serpentine warrior. Marek's master. There were those out there would have the answers he sought. Perhaps he would share with Sylph and Cade, but not yet. Not just yet. Instead, he simply smiled and nodded.

'The Consensus is broken. I can feel the Weave in this world now, subtle, but there all the same. There will be awakenings across the world. Creatures known and unknown will be drawn here from across the Shards.'

'That doesn't sound too good.' Cade said.

'I suspect it's good and bad, but I'm not qualified to deal with it.'

'So, you're just leaving, going off on your own?'

'Leaving? Yes. There are others out there, other magi. I can feel them. They are different to me, to Cian, to the others. They may not even know themselves as magi, but they are there all the same. I need their advice, their learning, and I will find them.'

Cade nodded. His lips pursed. 'Then we will follow.'

'You don't need to do that.'

'And yet you know we will. It's not like we have anywhere else to go.'

Seb gave a resigned smile. 'That's a good point.'

They set off. Allies of circumstance, the three survivors of Skelwith. Seb didn't really have a direction, but he had thoughts, instincts. He would follow them, and try to abide by the best of what he'd learned. As he stepped up the path towards the gap in the trees that led to the open world, he shrugged off the nagging doubt of being watched, and set off into the unknown.

THE END

