

Books One to Three
of the
Sons
of
ODIN
Collector's Edition



L.A. Hammer

Copyright 2016 L.A. Hammer.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover artwork by Minh Nguyen – flare3103

To my Father, for always reading my stories.

Book Two is for all my friends, who have ever shared the dream.

I dedicate Book Three to my good friend, Nathan.

He showed me that faith can be a virtue to be respected.

Contents

Book One

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1—Shared Visions and Dreams](#)

[Chapter 2—Jean Fairsythe](#)

[Chapter 3—The Immortals](#)

[Chapter 4—The Travelling Gates](#)

[Chapter 5—The Nordics](#)

[Chapter 6—The Heroes of Will](#)

[Chapter 7—The Daughter of Thor](#)

[Chapter 8—The Green Men](#)

[Chapter 9—The Bellatanus Festival](#)

[Chapter 10—The Challenge](#)

[Chapter 11—The Saviours Reborn](#)

[Chapter 12—The Shadow Men](#)

[Chapter 13—The Honour Code](#)

[Chapter 14—The Holy Cross](#)

[Chapter 15—In the Word](#)

[Chapter 16—Rivers of Sorrow](#)

[Chapter 17—A Spear of Fire](#)

[Chapter 18—A Dark Princess](#)

[Chapter 19—To Avoid Destruction](#)

[Chapter 20—A Place of Refuge](#)

Book Two

[Prologue To Stage a Rescue](#)

[Chapter 1 Out of Darkness](#)

[Chapter 2 Into the Light](#)

[Chapter 3 The Death of Two Kings](#)

[Chapter 4 To Find the Source](#)

Chapter 5 Hayley's Curse

Chapter 6 To Forge Leadership
Chapter 7 The Immortal Prince
Chapter 8 To Hunt a Vampireking
Chapter 9 To Find a Cure
Chapter 10 Watcher in the Dark
Chapter 11 Crossing the Ravine
Chapter 12 The Ruhalden King
Chapter 13 The Vampire Coven
Chapter 14 To Gain a Hero
Chapter 15 To Escape Defeat
Chapter 16 Odin Quest
Chapter 17 Shadow Swarm
Chapter 18 Dark Titans
Chapter 19 The Dragon Rises
Chapter 20 Falling Back
Chapter 21 To Stand and Fight
Chapter 22 Hero Chain
Chapter 23 The Angel of Death

Chapter 24 To Save a Hero

Epilogue

Book Three

Prologue – Calliach

Chapter 1 – Handling Isabelle

Chapter 2 – Taming the Dragon

Chapter 3 – To Earn a Following

Chapter 4 – The Dragon’s Need

Chapter 5 – The Gambit of War

Chapter 6 – A Demonic Heart

Chapter 7 – Shienden

Chapter 8 – Dragon Sword

Chapter 9 – Negotiating with Tarz

Chapter 10 – The Path Alone

Chapter 11 – Evidence of Evil

Chapter 12 – The Bait is Set
Chapter 13 – The Shadow’s Grip
Chapter 14 – An Ancient Evil
Chapter 15 – The Honds
Chapter 16 – Designs of the Shadow
Chapter 17 – Battle Angels
Chapter 18 – The Martyr Coven
Chapter 19 – Return of the Dark One
Chapter 20 – Heroes Old and New
Chapter 21 – Elemental Lore
Epilogue –

Book One of the Sons

of

Odin

Odin's Awakening

Collector's Edition

Prologue

Lady Gwyndel climbed the dark stone at the foot of the tower that loomed above her like the Dark One's Spear. Her Guardian, Lord Farrigan led the climb, though the rest of their party had remained at the mountain pass between the Free Lands and the barren wastelands that were home to the Resting Point of the Dark One, known as Kerak'Otozi.

The tower was only several hours ride from the Green Border however. A long distance from the dreaded mountain where the Lord of Chaos resided and built his strength, drawing from the Elemental Magic of the Great Angels to fuel his preparation for the day of the Return.

Gwyndel was not without hope however, as the day of the First Arrival was nearing—when the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor would come to the rescue of Kismeria—according to words spoken by the immortal kings to both her and Farrigan. The two kings had appointed the Blademaiden and Guardian Lord for a special mission to gain intelligence from the enemy at their lair, here in the Eastlands at the Tower of Orgroth Koehar.

Orgroth Koehar was obsidian rising as a shaft of defiance against the light of the moon that shone occasionally amidst dark thunderclouds, forked lighting of crimson evil pulsing and flaring in sideward bursts throughout the darkness. Other bolts blasted the earth below where hot magma flowed through deep caverns and cracked soil.

Despite the foul heat of these lands during daylight hours, the nights were near to freezing temperatures, cooling much of the lava that flowed from a number of volcanoes in this region, including Kerak'Otozi. That was the main source, however much of the burning rivers still glowed bright hot in the darkness below.

Gwyndel's hands were cut a number of times during the climb, though the presence of her Battle Angel brought a fast healing to her flesh; it was painful and gruelling to endure none the less. Despite being immortal blood, her bones were weary and her muscles ached during the climb, as it took over two hours of climbing to reach the foot of the tower.

She wished for nothing more than to be home in a warm blanket listening to the wind through the trees of her nest, high in the branches of the Great Trees of the Kingarin Forest, the Silver Twins, the Crimson Leaf, Iron Oaks, Golden Towers, Faun-Hoof Leaf, Starlight Elms, Moon-Branch and other enchanted trees of the forest that glowed with the ancient light of the Great Angels that created the first seeds of their kind during the Dawn of Ages.

It was a burden and a curse to be enlisted in the Wood Kin Clans at times like these, when she was forced to forsake her own safety and risk life and limb to gather intelligence for the immortal kings. She *tsked* to herself in irritation when she thought over the countless missions just like this one she had taken part in during her hundred and thirty four years as a full grown, after taking the oaths before the Dremelden King and Queen. Her fealty was sworn to her people, but also to the realm.

Their *altherin* horses had taken them to the stone cliffs that formed the base of the tower; and the climb had been steep and deadly as the winds howled like and thunder roared through the heavens. But the immortal blood of the ancients flowed through the veins of Gwyndel and Farrigan, and they were both swift and sure as they clung to crevices and craggy paths to heave their bodies to higher perches. Their keen eyes and ears ever alert for the sight of any threat, some Shadowspawn spy; demon or perhaps even the Dark Generals they sought to spy upon.

Gwyndel was fair of hair with large emerald eyes, of the Dremelden Wood Kin Clans, as was Lord Farrigan—a tall handsome figure, dark of hair with eyes that often stared at her in ways that was unnerving, but it also often brought emotions of excitement, though he had never spoken the words that declared such feelings for her in return—and they both wore the *torin'sidhe* of greys, greens and browns on their coats and boots, with matching cuirass and breastplates under cloaks of the Guardian, that blended with the night and the dark stone itself to hide them from the view of sharp-eyed enemies.

Each was equipped with a bow and blade, though the enemy they sought out would destroy them with little effort, if not for the Battle Angel, Druantia—Wife to the Green Man, Queen of Forests and Mother of the Children of the Woods—that resided in her emerald bow as Resting Point, for Druantia would give these Shadow Men and their second in command a swift hiding if it became necessary.

They reached the highest window of the tower—their immortal sight could see even in the shadows that it was unguarded—by each one of them being lifted over one hundred feet up through the air, carried by the wings of Druantia. After the Battle Angel was summoned—and appeared as a slender young looking woman with hair and eyes of burning shadows; flesh and rune marked dress glowing aqua, emerald and crimson—wings of jade light fanned from her shoulders, and she lifted first Farrigan, placing him sitting on the windowsill high upon the tower's flat facing side, then returned to scoop up Gwyndel and carry her to the same place. They slipped into the darkness within—as Druantia returned to the enchanted bow—neither of them wielding the Power to light their way in fear of being

discovered, moving with stealth up the winding stairway with elven eyes searching for signs of an ambush.

They had not wasted Druantia's strength at the beginning of the climb as the Angel relied on precious stores of demon souls to aid her Elemental Magic, and even that small amount of assistance would have depleted some of those stores. The presence of a Battle Angel released from their Resting Point was also a risk of being detected by these high ranking Darksouled, and then, even with Druantia to beat the enemy into submission, Gwyndel and Farrigan would have to flee. Even then it was not a guarantee that they would survive.

During their ascension Farrigan waved a fist to halt her in her tracks. He drew his blade and moved on ahead without her, his cloak blending with the stone walls and the darkness to hide him. The glowing sword concealed beneath the folds.

A fierce grunt was heard as the light of the blade flared in the distance—the sound of a demon dying in shock—as a dark ram's skull thudded as it fell down the staircase in plain sight, lit by the pale blue of Farrigan's blade. Dark blood flowed from the fat dark corpse that lay sprawled upon the steps further ahead—the magic of the blade melting away its shadow flesh as cracks of blue spread like tiny crackling lightning bolts; even disintegrating the network of bones—after Farrigan returned to signal her to follow.

That had been a Jacoulra guard, a foul demon of dark magic, though fortunately it had been alone—and Farrigan was also a formidable warrior—so the pair continued on their mission to seek out the precious information required by the immortal kings. *'What plotting and scheming do our enemies have in store, in preparation for the First Arrival?'*

It was for an answer to that very question; that Gwyndel and Farrigan were marching into the Lion's den. She felt part fool for her willingness to follow orders without question, especially when it concerned her own neck, yet the fate of the world hung in the balance, and according to ancient prophecies, only the Sons and Daughter could ever hope to save them.

There is a rooftop entrance where you will be able to overlook the Meeting Hall, Druantia explained to Gwyndel's mind in chiming tones. I sense a large gathering, perhaps even all of the Accursed and most of the Anointed are present.

Gwyndel signalled this information to Farrigan with hand gestures, a complex system created by the immortal kin over the span of Ages. Farrigan nodded, and continued on with greater caution, creeping like a panther on the hunt. His expression revealed the fear they both felt to be so close to a gathering of men and women that could extinguish their lives as easily as two wet fingers closing about a burning wick. *It must mean they have something very important to discuss, Gwyndel replied to Druantia. Why else would they all be gathered in one place?*

That is plain truth, Gwyndel. The Accursed generally do not like to work together, let alone communicate with their second in command. The rooftop entrance is a small trapdoor located in the ceiling outside the entrance to the Meeting Hall. I have disabled its locks and magic wards, though you must hurry. I will try to disguise the trapdoor after you enter, to make it appear that it has not been tampered with. You must be quiet as a mouse, Lady Gwyndel, your footfalls must not make a sound, and your breathing must be as calm as still waters.

It was all well and good for her Battle Angel to give such instructions on calm silence, but the trembling that was taking over Gwyndel was near impossible to control.

Calliestra, known by her enemies as Shadowheart, stood in the meeting hall of the highest chamber of Orgroth Koehar, surrounded by the assembled Generals of the Shadow.

Nodomi kept her distance from Calliestra, the snooty nosed beauty running a delicate hand across her golden locks that fell past her shoulders every so often. A sure sign of her discomfort at being so close to so many of the higher ranking Generals, known as the Appointed by Darksouled, but their enemies referred to them as Dark Angels or the Shadow Men. Perhaps it was because they were a unit of twelve formed only of males, all immortal blood. Men who had betrayed the Light to serve the Dark One in hope of an immortality that would allow them to escape even Death himself, if they were to ever meet their doom at the hands of a courageous Blademaster—though the warrior would require a fine blade and perhaps a few Battle Angels to achieve the task. Orion and Tobin were perhaps the only warriors left in Kismeria who stood any such chance. Those two were the greatest threat.

Tairark Vampireking seemed the most confident from his stance and the radiance of evil that permeated from his dark cloak that seemed to merge with the shadows of the room. Shockingly, all twelve of the Appointed had removed their rune marked masks to reveal their rarely seen faces, skin that had the texture and colour of ashes and rot, each one glaring about the chamber with eyes that burned like hot magma. This was a fusion of the Power and the Dark One's Glory, known commonly as the Dark Trail. Those caverns of golden flames were unnerving when being caught by their gaze, but Calliestra would not let her fear show to men she would one day supplant, to take her rightful place as the Right Fist of the Shadow.

The other Appointed hovered inches above the floor about the room—that a blending of space and time, as well as the chamber itself, as a physical location was required, but the room itself was an illusion of the Dark Trail, hiding them from the eyes and ears of spies. Unless that spy had an artefact of magic or a Battle Angel to unravel the weaves—and every one of them was radiating that ominous force of the Trail to dominate over the Anointed, the lower ranking twelve generals of which Calliestra was a member, though it irked her painfully to admit even to herself.

There was a level of unity between the abilities gifted to both the Appointed and Anointed via the Trail, though that particular ability to radiate an evil force was applicable only to Shadow Men, Souljhin and lesser demons, at least to any degree of creating fear in your enemies. This was also a point of great displeasure for her.

The other Anointed were all showing signs of feeling oppressed in the presence of the entire host of Appointed, as they sat or paced about the room waiting for the meeting to commence. Why Tairark had not already started was perplexing for her, as it made her begin to worry that perhaps another had been given an even higher station of command.

She glanced across at Fearen, dark haired with large blue eyes that so often shifted from a clear focus to that of a madwoman. She was mad before she betrayed the Light, and the Dark One had never cleansed that illness entirely. For which reason Calliestra had always treated her as the closest ally, though always believing she was the last of their kind that

should be trusted or given command. ‘Why is it *always* such a *long* wait?’ The fool woman asked with a focused gaze, before she began picking at her face with dark fingernails—a habit that had left her grossly scarred—before she began to whine with that look of madness returning.

‘I certainly have better things to be doing than standing around with my arms crossed,’ Nodomi chimed in, and as the woman brushed a hand over her locks once again. Calliestra almost bit her tongue to avoid blurting out that the slut was probably referring to the three slaver men she had waiting back in her bedchamber, in a bed that was large enough to fit a half dozen more. Nodomi’s use of mind control was a deplorable past time, though the woman had an insatiable appetite for passion—even if it was with men so stoned by the Power they probably wouldn’t know if they were giving it to a goat.

She held her tongue more for the fact that it would reveal to Nodomi that Calliestra knew such things about her—as Calliestra had worked long and hard for centuries to retrace the Old Lore of the ancients and the Old Ways Magic, to discover precious knowledge of the Power and how to use these abilities to both spy upon and manipulate her peers—as this would spark intrigue in every other figure gathered that Calliestra knew such intimate secrets about another of their kind—much more so than for the fact that it may embarrass the poor girl.

Nodomi cringed moments after as her tender pale bosom—exposed by the low cut neckline of her golden lace gown—rose and fell in anxious breaths, perhaps more so for the waiting than her desperation to return to her shameless acts of debauchery.

Calliestra returned her focus to the hall, it was lit by a translucent glow of crimson and amber, with shadows cast off each figure that flickered and morphed into shapes suggestive of Nymloc and Jacoulra. The light was a working of the Shadow, rather than some metaphorical reflection of the nature of the souls of each man and woman. The walls of the chamber were glossy black panels that shone like silk shadows, lined with hard crimson timbers against the obsidian walls.

Apparitions of pale skulls danced across the surface of the shadowy panels, the tortured souls of Servants of the Shadow who had not received the blessing of reincarnation. It was either for failure of the Great Lord, or simply because the Dark One saw no greater use for them after their demise. Darksouled served their purposes in the name of evil in the hope of immortality, but not all were so fortunate. Calliestra often wondered if the Great Lord chose such surrounds as a warning against failure of those he placed highest in command, and the more often the thought came to mind, the more likely it seemed. She resisted the urge to shiver, again hiding her growing discomfort as time seemed to slide into puddles at her feet.

Her fears up until that moment could not have matched the moment a flare of crimson and golden fires blossomed in a shadowed corner of the chamber, to reveal the shadow cloaked form of a Souljhin standing taller than seven feet. An impossible tower of pure sin bleeding its corruptive forces through the air as its form slid towards Tairark, the Vampireking actually giving way for the creature as it glanced about the room. Large black eyes shaped like burning seeds of pure malevolence on a puckered pasty white face revealed beneath the heavy drooping cowl.

‘What madness is this?’ Another of the Anointed asked as if scandalized by the presence of one of the Swordsmen of the Shadow arriving without summons, but again

Calliestra held her tongue, as did the rest of the gathering. They all knew well enough not to question any man that held sway over Tairark. It was Baidel who had asked the question, though his fear and doubt of his own words became readily apparent as he gave a slight tilt of his head with a cautious gaze directed at the Souljhin.

When the creature spoke, it seemed a shrill scream tore the air with every hissed phrase, though its deep crushing tones reminded her of bones being crushed under foot, blood flowing through endless chasms, rotting corpses and the Flames of Hell.

‘The Great Lord has appointed me as Right Fist of the Shadow.’ Those words brought immediate shock and revulsion from all who stood glaring in disbelief. It was abhorrent for any of them to be forced to even consider accepting such a decision, though a raging torrent of fierce wickedness permeated Calliestra’s soul as the Souljhin released the full force of his might against them. Each man who might think to oppose this being suddenly relented like tame wolves receiving a slap on the nose by their new master.

‘You will soon learn that I will not accept insolence any more than failure from my subjects.’ Calliestra began to fear she may faint in pure shock of the level of corruption that battered against her senses; the Souljhin was a raging volcano of pure sin. ‘I am named Baegelmeer; you will address me as so. I demand absolute respect and subservience.

‘As you all know, the Great Lord is plotting to ambush the Sons and Daughter on the day of the First Arrival.’ Baegelmeer pointed a dark nailed finger at Baidel and Torkhan as he said, ‘You will receive further orders on when and where we shall strike. The Dark Lord will gain new control over the elements soon after the Sons have delivered the promised curse to the Power of *teron*. Although the Great Lord and his servants have never discovered the exact location of the Arrival, we know the hour is nigh. We must be vigilant in our preparations to annihilate them, or to drive them into submission. Ultimately we must form their alliance with the Great Lord, whether as living men, or cursed wraiths.’

Baegelmeer then pointed at Calliestra as he spoke, ‘You, Shadowheart, will have a short introduction with one of the Sons, this very night. You shall visit him in his dreams, travelling to the Earth realm in spirit to tell him of his fate to serve the Shadow in life or death.’

‘How will I achieve this?’ Calliestra asked with tremendous fear crushing her chest.

‘Do you take me for a fool?’ The Souljhin asked. ‘You have the ability to do so, and so, you shall do exactly as I command.’ The creature then turned to move back to the shadowed corner from which it had emerged, and as Baegelmeer began to vanish in substance Calliestra called to him, asking, ‘What else does the Dark One command of us?’

The voice of Baegelmeer carried in the air even after his form had vanished, ‘The Great Lord has endless plans for you all, though those that disappoint me, shall suffer due punishments from him directly.’

Moments later Calliestra felt all eyes upon her, before Nodomi asked with scorn, ‘What did he mean by that, saying you have the ability to enter dreams in the Earth Realm? What other secrets have you kept from us all this time?’

‘It was a recent discovery,’ Calliestra lied quickly to avoid further suspicion, and she hoped she succeeded. ‘I have never tested the theory, though I will try, of course. I will do as Baegelmeer commands me. I would like some time alone to attempt it however.’

‘I would very much like to see you make the attempt,’ Nodomi almost cried.

‘Silence!’ roared Tairark. ‘I will remain here to monitor Shadowheart while she works the spell, the rest of you can leave.’

‘Do we still take orders from you?’ Baidel asked uncertainly.

‘I am still second in command,’ Tairark replied in irritated rage, expelling a degree of corruption with enough force to make his point. ‘Leave, all of you, now. That is *my* command.’

Calliestra waited until the gathering had departed, before creating the weaves to enter the dreams of the Son of Odin. Tairark stood watching with keen interest as his eyes detected even the female weaves that were made using a combination of *terael* and the Trail. He would instruct her to provide further instructions on how to use this ability, to track and also appear before any of the three Sons of Odin, when she returned. For now he waited silently, until her form began to shimmer and burn into a translucent quality. Her figure was surrounded by light and shadows that coursed through the air in a tunnel like a school of brightly coloured fish, until she faded from view entirely. Golden light flared before she vanished in a weave that appeared similar to creating portals through space.

Entering dreams was a part of the Old Ways Magic. It was still known by all of the Appointed and Anointed, and was known by many Alit’aren and Ael Trael throughout the Ages. However none except the Great Angels had ever been known to have the ability to travel to and from the alternate dimension known as Earth. This ability to even enter the dreams of someone from that realm was a precious gem. One that Calliestra had obviously kept secret for her own purposes.

The meeting had not been a complete shock however. He had been well informed by the Great Lord that Baegelmeer was appointed Right Fist, well before the time he arrived here. He had kept the others waiting—rather than admit to such damned humiliation openly—until the Souljhin appeared to make his claim.

There was nothing more to be done about it. Even Tairark knew he did not have the ability to destroy the creature. Baegelmeer was given sources of the Great Lord’s Glory that surpassed any other. Even with an alliance of his Brothers, defeating such an opponent would take more than just good luck.

Gwyndel was near to sweating in fear of the presence of the last Shadow Man in the Meeting Chamber, the room viewable via the abilities gifted to her by Druantia. She saw the meeting take place through a warp in space. It allowed her to see straight through the roof of the Tower, through wrappings of Air and Fire that would keep the meeting from the prying eyes of lesser spies in the same location.

Farrigan remained silent at her side, until he gave the signal that it was time to attempt a retreat. They both began to shift across the stone paved ceiling of the Chamber with the

skill of Elven Guardians. The gift attributed from earth and sky gave them heightened senses, but also expert abilities at Wood Lore and remaining silent when hunting or spying.

They were exiting the trapdoor and making their way down the ladder swiftly, but cautiously to avoid sound. Gwyndel saw a blade ever so close to being pressed against her throat, a beam of hot corrosion glowing crimson below her vision told her it was the blade of a Souljhin or Shadow Man. The level of evil force that was being generated suggested it was the latter. If the blade gave her the slightest cut, she would die a horrible death in a very short time. Druantia would not be able to cure the dark magic curse that would infect her flesh and blood. The fact that the blade had not cut her yet, meant the assassin wanted answers from her first.

She breathed the name of her Battle Angel, 'Druantia,' and a moment later noticed an emerald light added to the crimson bar held close to her throat. Druantia's hand grasped the blade hilt to carefully force the weapon forwards, and then drag it away from Gwyndel's throat, while obviously holding the Shadow Man in a powerful grip with her other hand.

Gwyndel touched ground a moment later, to look back and see Tairark struggling against Druantia's grasp, before the Battle Angel hurled the Shadow Man flying back through the door of the Meeting Chamber—that remained closed—as Tairark's form simply melted through the solid stone to vanish from sight. The door to the Meeting Chamber burst open, and there again stood Tairark Vampireking, wearing his mask of gold worked with dark runes—a human skull mask with long blood soaked canines—his golden eyes glaring within the eye sockets as his evil force radiated in the air like a beacon of lost hope.

Druantia appeared before him, in an emerald gown—holding up a shield of green light to deflect a blast of Elemental Magic hurled by Tairark—the two forces colliding in a flare of brilliance. Farrigan also leapt to the solid stone flooring, drawing his blade with fluid movements as the two then began to race down the staircase with the fleet footed swiftness only attributed to Aelfin.

They were nearing the highest window when Druantia appeared again at Gwyndel's side. Farrigan turned to face a Jacoulra lurching up the stairway—thick bulging body like black tar reflecting the light of the blue blade, its seed shaped eyes glowing bright amber—as it raised a scimitar that glowed like dark blood. A spattering of hot magma flying towards the Guardian as both he and Druantia formed shields to deflect the demon's magic.

Druantia appeared a moment later behind the demon, driving a spear of emerald light through the back of its torso. The shaft burning like cold fusion as it protruded from the front of its chest, as Farrigan stepped in to lop off the demon's ram shaped skull. The body collapsing as Gwyndel and Farrigan leapt over the fallen beast to make their way to the window.

Farrigan turned to Druantia to say, 'Catch her.' Then he pushed Gwyndel straight out the window—just as Gwyndel spotted more Nymloc demons charging up the staircase—and she was hurtling to her death before she was swept up on Angel's wings and carried over the bleeding dark landscape, landing next to her horse as Druantia said, 'I will rescue Farrigan, you must ride and not look back.'

'I will wait for him,' replied Gwyndel, before the Battle Angel groaned in avid frustration and then conceded by saying, 'Very well, but be ready to ride when I return.'

Farrigan switched to his Lukrorian Bow in a swift sheathing of the blade. Drawing the bow in fluid motion he unleashed three powerful arrows of burning emerald. Each hit a target with adequate force, blasting the three charging Nymloc in the skulls; tumbling back down the staircase in pillars of flame.

He had focused enough of *teron* to flow into each arrow before unleashing, though he did not have the necessary time to create arrows powerful enough to destroy any of the three demons. So he drew again, this time pouring a greater source of the Power into a single shaft of light; aimed at the three burning demons. The impact was a blast of magic that caused the stone walls to shudder. The Nymloc screamed while being blasted into burning pieces.

A Souljhin was next to appear, sliding up the staircase in its cloak of darkness, wielding a wicked crimson blade burning with inner shadows. The corrupt taint forged at Kerak'Otozi would turn his flesh to congealed blackness at the slightest cut. He switched to the blade again, and began a slow retreat back up the staircase, knowing that Tairark was waiting up there. But he was not skilled enough to best even one of the Swordsmen of the Shadow, as Souljhin were infamous for their skill with the blade. Even though Farrigan was a Blademaster, he knew his training was lacking what was required to take on this demon on his own.

His one hope lay in the chance that Druantia would return to protect him. So he delayed the Souljhin's approach by using his left hand to send blasts of blue energy flying at its skull and chest. Each sphere of light striking the creature to slightly irritate it and send it off balance, but Farrigan was not particularly strong in the Power either. He was no Alit'aren, although he was considered strong for a Guardian, and the gift gave him a slight advantage. The Power was less draining for him than it would be for most Alit'aren, even immortals, as the gift provided extra stores of endurance and stamina, spiking even more when he should be close to exhaustion. For now he used all he could muster to distract the Souljhin before he was forced into close combat.

The creature was closing the gap between them; each sliding step gained forced greater fear into Farrigan's soul. His Guardian senses searched the staircase above to try to detect whether more Souljhin were waiting there. His blood froze when he realised it was Tairark he could sense making a swift descent. Farrigan roared as he leapt at the Souljhin with his blade raised for a strike.

A blast of energies filled his vision when he was inches from clashing blades with the Souljhin—that had raised its sword to easily deflect that attack—as Druantia appeared between them in an emerald haze. The light pushed Farrigan backwards but he managed to land on his feet in a defensive stance. The Battle Angel placed both hands around the Souljhin's hooded skull, its crimson blade swiped uselessly through Druantia's form. Electric energies burst from her fingertips, emerald flames surrounded the dark cloaked figure like a small bonfire; its skull exploded in a dark spray.

Druantia turned to him to shout, 'Get to the window and jump!'

Farrigan did as he was commanded, fleeing just as Tairark began to float into view at the top of the staircase. He looked back once at a sound like the fabric of space being torn. Druantia and the Shadow Man facing off in a cataclysm of sparkling emerald and crimson energies, the two bolts entwined between them, making the walls reverberate with the Power and the Trail. He leapt from the window just as a massive *boom* filled the Tower above, and he watched the dark cliff face below as he hurtled towards his death.

Better catch me, pretty Lady.

Tairark hovered outside the Tower walls, after recovering from that near fatal blast of energies unleashed by the Queen of Forests. His vision was still blurry, but he still made out the winged Angel carrying the young Wood Kin male off into the distance.

His rage was surging now, but he would not follow. Instead he summoned the Demonwolf pack that were patrolling nearby, his mind connecting with the pack leader to set them on the hunt. He grinned as he heard their deathly howls fill the night sky. His immortal vision made out a number of the enormous dark bodies lumbering after their prey with speed that would outpace even the *altherin* in short order.

He would prefer to have his questions answered by the two spying elves, but Demonwolves did not take prisoners. They would devour their prey in a few savage gulps, so at least that way; the spies would not live to deliver their intelligence to their commanders. The Wolves were the last remaining pack in Kismeria, and if they were somehow defeated, he would pay a hefty price under the wrath of the Great Lord. But that was unlikely; however, he was rather impressed at the skill of these two Wood Kin to have evaded the pack on their ascent of the Tower. Demonwolves were extremely adept at detecting sound and scent.

No matter, he thought, the hounds will have their trail by now; there will be no chance of escape.

Gwyndel heard the howls of the Demonwolf pack before Druantia returned, to set Farrigan down beside his mount. When both were in their saddles, Druantia returned to Gwyndel's bow. Farrigan drew his short dagger to cut a slice from his palm that dripped fresh blood onto the dark soil. 'They will follow my trail,' he said, while roughly bandaging the wound with a torn strip of his shirt cut from beneath his coat sleeve, 'you must get to the Nordic King and report what you have discovered.' The man spoke as if he were stating that he preferred freshly baked bread to burnt toast, Guardians rarely showed their fear.

Gwyndel did not waste time arguing, setting off at a great pace to try to gain some distance from the approaching Wolves. She rode in a blur of darkness and red cracked soil,

her white *altherin* mare was swift even for immortal blood. But she would not escape unless she reached the Green Border and met with reinforcements, preferably strong Alit'aren and Ael Tarael behind high stone walls if the pack did not want to give up the hunt.

The chances of that were very slim, and any patrol would be shattered by even one Demonwolf, regardless of whether there were a few strong wielders amongst them or not. Druantia would not be able to take down the entire pack, and her Battle Angel cautioned Gwyndel not to summon her again until a moment of great urgency, as her *ki'mera* was nearly spent in those flights from the Tower.

The last howls of the Wolves were headed southwest however, so she believed she still had a chance to survive, despite how low her beloved Farrigan's chances now seemed. His bravery brought tears to her eyes, and the thought of now losing him seared her core as if it were dipped in flames.

She changed course at Druantia's instruction, hoping now on making it to a Portal that stood here in the Eastlands. It was made long ago when that region was still defended by immortals against the demon plagues. Stone fortifications once stood there that were now demolished ruins. If she could reach the Travelling Gate and get through it in time, it should take her directly to Nordhel.

Her companions would know to flee when they heard the Demonwolves, and she would only endanger them further by making her way towards them.

She was approaching the Portal that was still some miles ahead when the chilling howl of a giant wolf filled the air, not far off to the northeast. A second howl was then heard chasing up the rear, this one much closer, as she realised that not all of the pack had followed Farrigan, booting her heels to drive Paquaila into a faster gallop.

The pair of Wolves then began to herd her in a different direction, as she moved now southwest without a clear notion of where she was headed. She pulled hard on the reins to bring the mare to a sliding halt, Paquaila standing on her hind legs and screaming in terror only inches from the edge of a dark cliff.

The Wolves were seen now to the east, charging on all fours, the beasts stood over twelve feet tall, hides like thick tar that glowed with flares of magma dancing across their skin. Their maws dripping saliva from fangs like steel as their eyes glowed hot crimson in the moonlight.

Gwyndel summoned her Battle Angel, and as she cried her name, Druantia appeared in a flare of emerald. The Angel shouted the name of the Lightninglord, crying 'Odin!'

A bolt of tangled blue clutched Druantia to drag her up into the clouds. Gwyndel looked there to see her Battle Angel grow in size as lightning surged around her form, and there beside her appeared Odin Lightninglord. A part of his Great Spirit roused from deep slumber by the call of one of the female Great Angels of the Second Born—beard of white flame and eyes of burning light, a Nordic face with a crown of glowing gold, armour of burning golden and crimson plates on a chest as wide as an elephant—as Odin assisted Druantia to draw back her heavy bow, that gleamed like a jade crescent moon, an arrow of brilliant emerald glowed like a burning star, the shaft of light becoming fused with the Odin Spear before it was unleashed.

Gwyndel spun to see the shaft of fire split to become two giant arrows that thudded down into the skulls of the charging Wolves, splicing with their skulls to drive them down

into the earth only a few feet on either side from Gwyndel and her horse; jaws fused shut as sniffing snouts and gnashing teeth missed horse and rider by only inches. The two massive beasts slid through the stony soil as electric emerald and aqua bolts shuddered around their forms, until one collapsed and melted into a dark bloody mass—Paquaila bucking again in panic as the ooze flowed around her hooves—and the other tumbled straight over the cliff face, howling as it fell, to land with a heavy *thud!*

Elarja RinHannen smashed his fists against the walls of his golden prison, sending flares and vibrations up through the walls of darkness. His Immortal knuckles were stronger than diamond, though they had never made a dent in these walls fortified by the magic of the Leaf Guardians. Those were the strange little beings that had locked him away here, and he hated them for it.

I'll melt their bones in boiling acid if I ever get the chance again! ‘Every last one of you will pay! Do you hear me? I will have my revenge!’

He slumped back against the coolness of the wall to ease his raging temper. Being imprisoned in darkness was hell after the first hour, but he had been here in this place for more than a thousand lifetimes of Men. *It's suffocating me. I have to get out.* ‘Let me out of this damn hole you bastard little fools!’ His voice bounced off the walls and rang in his own ears like the rage of a wild beast. His was the blood of the ancient immortals, born the son of the First Nordic King, Rodin Cloudwalker, and so he was known as the Second Born amongst the immortals of his Age. ‘You don't know what you have done. Let me out! Let me out! God damn it let me out of this forsaken hole!’

A type of madness was taking over his mind. Soon he would be lost completely, and the fate of the world would rest in the hands of the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor. *If I don't escape I will never be there to guide them. They could not know how desperately they will need my aid.*

He did not bother to wield enough to light the cramped chamber as he sat clenching his jaw. The darkness had been a horror to him at first, and he had wielded a flame for every waking moment, sometimes even leaving a ball of flame alight while he slept. That was to avoid waking in the darkness that for millennia had made this place seem like a tomb. These days the darkness was like a cold blanket, he drank it in and it kept him hidden from himself. Only his waning sanity kept him afloat in those shadows as his mind drifted in and out of consciousness. ‘I will never get out of here.’

A part of him knew that couldn't be plain truth. A part of him still believed in miracles, and a second chance. The Kjia'hyenti had punished him for toying with the timelines. Ever since Elarja used his expert skill in magic crafting to create the Time Stones, the Leaf Guardians were ever envious and filled with spite. They say it is a dangerous thing, to play with time. ‘But they are jealous leeches! Trolls, hobs and vermin! Let me out of here!’ *Get me out, before I do something I can't reverse.*

Anything other than taking his own life Elarja could reverse, as he was Master of Time, some had called him Father Time. For the Stones he had crafted could move not only through space and dimensions, but also from past to present and the reverse. This was why the Sons and Daughter so desperately needed him. Without him, the fate of Kismeria was held within the clutches of Doom.

Chapter

1



Shared Visions and Dreams

Adem was not prepared to face the day after the nightmare he had received the previous evening, after waking drenched in sweat—a sure sign of how terrified he must be as he almost never sweated any other time—panting and gasping for breath as the images flashed through his mind again, a beautiful woman, dark hair and eyes that burnt like dark fire, as he hovered in a tunnel of flames that scorched his flesh and melted his bones. The woman told him of his fate, that he was to meet his death at the hands of Corruption, and that he would be turned to become a willing servant of the Lord of Chaos!

The woman had called him a Son of Odin, a name she repeated each time he was addressed by her as he screamed in agony in the tunnel of flames, and high at the peak of the burning vortex he had seen the face of this Dark Lord, menacing and cruel, eyes of golden orange flames like wicked fangs that stared from a skull like some bison formed of shadowed-tar, burning twisted horns and a maw filled with dark fangs!

Adem looked into those eyes and felt the terror of meeting a being of such pure corruption it was matched only by his previous experience, that night, years ago, at Bright, when he first had learnt that ghosts were not imagined, not a mythology. Not some false religious fantasy cooked up to inspire hope or fear in the hearts of mankind so that they could follow some sort of faith to rob them of their riches, but that ghosts were in fact real. As true to life as your next door neighbour, who waves to you over the fence and asks, 'How was your day?'

Ever since that night at Bright the world had been a very different place for Adem Highlander, and he had known since that night that he and his two closest friends all became Witnesses—in the truest form—that life for him and for his friends was never going to be the same again. But he had never in his wildest dreams imagined that even his worst nightmares could inspire such terror, such agony, such horrors to believe that there could be even more to reality than the world he had come to know. That was until that nightmare he had experienced the night before, waking in a cold sweat, despite the burning across his skin that gave him an unshakable sense of certainty that in some way his dream was also quite real.

That morning he had remained awake from the early hours following the nightmare, and had spent most of that time thinking back over the ordeal, catching sudden glimpses of things he had not quite remembered when first waking. The woman's face, the tunnel of flames, but there was more. He had seen a land, beautiful beyond imagining. A land filled with people of incredible magic powers like something from his favourite fantasy novels. So vivid and detailed he did not see how his mind could have created them, and it seemed when he saw the faces of some of those men and women, that he also knew them. As if he were seeing glimpses of an impossible future he would someday live to see, and if the woman spoke truthfully, perhaps he would meet these strange beings from a distant land. After all, with what he already knew about reality, anything was possible.

He had seen other creatures, demons and vampires, werewolves and shadow cloaked assassins that wielded tainted crimson blades that glowed like hot blood. They could teleport through shadows and their faces were that of pale monsters with eyes like menacing black seeds. But it was the evil force they radiated that turned his heart to stone, his blood to ice, as it reminded him of that terrible magic he had experienced that night at Bright. Though that part at least was not unlike so many other nightmares he had become accustomed to since that night also.

That evening he still made it to the city by train: as he would not let even this shocking a revelation spoil his chances of meeting with his new agent. Anna was on time and looked radiant in a sparkling black evening dress. It was summertime, the weather was cool despite the daylight-savings sun still clear in the sky at a quarter to seven, and the older woman beamed when she laid eyes on him in his black suit and tie.

'I was beginning to wonder if you would make it,' she said in tones that suggested she would have been most displeased if he had not. Batting her long eyelashes with dark eyes burning, Anna had not a wrinkle on her face despite the apparent wisdom to her gaze. There was something odd about it in fact, as if she were apart from the world, eyes that saw beyond day and night. The eyes of Mother Time, or a Sorceress from his imagined worlds with the power to drag down the stars and turn rivers to crystalline snow, it was unnerving in a way.

But she also made him feel relaxed, quite comfortable. More himself than he had felt for a very long time, and it was for that reason if for no other that he had agreed to take her up on her offer.

They waited in line with the other fancily dressed people, as Anna handed him a large white cardboard ticket she produced from her purse, women wearing silks and leathers, women that would make his jaw drop and their partners clean cut in their finest attire, spread across red carpet with ropes and bollards shining in the evening sunlight.

Anna was telling him how handsome he looked, saying, 'I can see your name up in lights,' and other positive things to boost his confidence, as she obviously saw and detected how much that was lacking. It was during this time that they waited and talked casually that Adem noticed a very tall man striding through the crowd, perhaps the oddest sight he had ever laid eyes upon anywhere in the world of men!— other than the night he witnessed an apparition of a man burning blue at Bright.

He had the look of a wizard, a wide brimmed hat with a conical top, a robe and cloak and he carried a very large twisted staff that he was using as a walking stick, although the gait of the bushy bearded fellow showed he had no need for it. Suddenly the man stopped, looked directly at Adem, and asked in a deep almost echoing tone, 'What will be the hour of your arrival, Son of Odin?'

It was the name he used that struck Adem like a lightning bolt, as he suddenly dropped the ticket, and bent down instinctively to catch it before hitting the ground. But when he looked up again, the man had vanished from the crowd. There was more to it as well, the man's eyes had glowed like silver orbs when he spoke, and at least in Adem's mind he had seen a flashback of the images from his nightmare. The woman and the vortex of flames, the Dark Lord and those people he knew but was yet to know, and he knew in that moment of subliminal flashes that this man was somehow connected.

'Did you see that man?' he asked Anna in complete shock.

'What man?' Anna asked with a blank expression.

'The one who called me: Son of Odin!'

'Odin?' Anna said wearing a perplexed expression. 'I saw no such man, Adem. Are you feeling all right?' She put a hand to his head as if to take his temperature like a caring mother.

'I feel fine,' he said. 'Just my imagination playing tricks on me. I had a strange nightmare last night, and what the man said to me . . . it was just like in my dream . . . only a woman said it to me in my dream, a woman who . . .'

'Are you on any sort of medication?' Anna asked with a probing glare.

'Yes, I do . . . I mean, yes, I am. It's a long story. I'll tell you all about it some time. I will go and speak with my psychiatrist about it in the morning. I hope this does not affect my chances of your becoming my agent?' Anna smiled warmly; there was a seductive way about her. Just then, his mobile phone rang in his pocket. He checked the caller ID and saw it was his fellow Witness, Carl Wilder. 'Forgive me while I take this call. It might be important.' He then quickly flipped the phone to answer the call.

'Carl, my old mate, how have you been?'

'I had a strange dream last night, Adem,' Carl said, his voice sounded urgent and shaken. 'I'd call it a nightmare. I have had others like it before, since that night at Bright. But

this one was different. There was a woman, a very beautiful woman. She called me ‘Son of Odin’. She said other things to me. She said that I was ‘marked by the Dark One!’ I woke in a drenching sweat. Then today I saw a man, who looked like a wizard, and he called me ‘Son of Odin!’ He asked, ‘What will be the hour of your arrival?’”

‘When did you see the man?’ Adem asked. He was surprised the shock of his friend’s words had not made him drop the phone, though his hand was shaking; he was shivering all over with a mixture of amazement and pure fear. ‘I saw him about an hour ago,’ Carl said. ‘He was standing out the front of my house. So I went outside to talk to him, and then he said it, ‘Son of Odin!’ I nearly fell down in shock! Then I turned back to the house for a moment . . . Rosa called my name . . . and when I looked back . . . he had vanished. I thought you should be the first one I told. You know more about this sort of thing than most people.’

‘You know more than most people too, my old friend,’ Adem said, fighting to control his nerves. ‘I saw the same man, and last night, I had the same dream. They both said those words, ‘Son of Odin’. Listen, I want you to come and see me tomorrow. We have to stay together and ride this thing out. Call William and ask if he has had the same visions and dreams. Bring him with you. We need to stay together. I have to end the call now though, mate. I’ll text you when I’m ready. Bye mate.’

‘I’ll come right over, mate,’ Carl said in a surprisingly calm voice. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow, with William. I’ll make sure he comes.’

‘OK, mate. Speak soon.’ He flipped the phone back together and put it in his pocket.

‘You are shaking, Adem,’ Anna said. ‘Your friend saw the same man . . . the one you said you saw just now?’

Adem said, ‘My friend is not on any medication, he has a great career, a wife, and a baby daughter. He’s not nuts. If he saw the same man, something important is about to take place. It could mean any number of things.’

‘It is a very strange coincidence to say the least,’ Anna said with a puzzled frown. ‘Are you certain you still want to see the orchestra play?’

‘Yes, I want to,’ Adem said. ‘I want to very much, Anna.’

‘And tomorrow, you can come for a photo shoot. Your friends can come too, Carl and William, is it? If they are handsome, I will include them in the shoot. Perhaps I will see the same aura around them, or a similar one. It sounds as if you are all connected, perhaps that has something to do with the aura. I have a gorgeous model to pose with you too – young, blonde, blue eyes, slim, and tall with perfect curves. Jean is her name. Jean Fairsythe. She is American from Los Angeles, a model and a potential actress. You two will have much to talk about.’

‘Sounds perfect,’ he said. It gave him the perfect excuse to keep his friends close to him for the rest of the day at least.

‘Wonderful,’ Anna said with sigh, ‘I will have my crew ready at dawn. You said early afternoon though, right?’

‘Around midday should be fine. I’ll text you the address.’ They were at the front of the line by now, and the door man took their tickets and waved them towards the gold-framed glass double doorway. Adem linked arms with her again, and they made their way inside.

The stairs were red carpeted with gold railings, and they had to climb two levels to get to their seats. As they were approaching the red-painted doorway to the entrance to where

their seats were waiting, Anna unlinked arms and said, 'I have to go, powder my nose. See you in there, sweetheart.' Adem gave a short bow and smiled as she slipped away down the red carpeted floor. Chandeliers hung from the high white plastered ceiling that was worked with gold cornices in sculptures of cherub angels.

A doorman was there to open the door, dressed in a red coat with gold and silver scrollwork on the shoulders and cuffs, dark trousers, and knee-high black leather boots. A short stocky man of middling years with a grey moustache, close cropped beard, and grey-blue eyes.

As the door swung open and Adem stepped into the darkness, he heard the man say, 'Now is the time of your arrival, Son of Odin.' It was the same deep voice of the wizard-looking man in the street! Adem spun to face the man; the man's eyes glowed with white fire. The doorway and the light beyond was swallowed by a vortex of shadows. The shadows swirled to become clouds of fire—strands of glowing dust burst from the clouds stretching off into infinity within the darkness, the glowing dust became a flock of doves burning silver, diving and flowing in and out of focus as a great sea swept upon his vision, as they suddenly swooped to lift him up into the clouds above, and when they took flight once more he felt an amazing rush of energies enter his heart and soul, his mind was alive with Power, as he spun in circles while climbing higher into the sky as if carried by wings, as lightning fell from the clouds to surround his form in glowing aqua bolts that increased his sense of pure magic filling his mind and body, he laughed in the ecstasy of its incandescence, feeling that he might control the very waves as they crashed against the shores of a white cliff coastline, and he was flying above it all, the seas churning beneath him where he saw Neptune commanding the waves as the King of the Sea.

He saw that incredible land of his dreams the night before, the parts of his nightmare that could be called a dream, and again he saw the faces of those remarkable people that he seemed to know although he had never met them—particularly the faces of two couples, both looking almost identical except for small details in both the males and females of each pair, the men dark of hair and eyes and tall as Vikings, with pointed ears of elf-kin, high brows and close cropped moustaches and goatees, the women beautiful beyond comparison with milk white skin and eyes of blue flame, the wives to the two men, each wearing a golden crown of jewels, and these four commanded a vast portion of Power of this land, and they were among its rulers, as he saw them leading their armies in battles against the demons of this world—and he could never know such people as they were magicians and sorceresses, warriors, kings and queens, yet he knew them, or he knew at least that he would come to know them, in this vast land of magic and wonders.

He saw the way they lived in enormous cities and castles, or palaces of high stone walls, to keep the demons at bay, and he saw the southern regions beyond the mountains where bloodsucking vampires—with eyes like dark seeds and pale faces, fangs and other strange features—and werewolves—massive wolf skulled heads and maws filled with razor sharp fangs that dripped the fresh bright red blood of their victims in the moonlight, formed like muscular male humans though usually covered in a thick shag of grey or dark fur, or covered in a thick hide of dark skin, fists like bear claws and dark eyes that stared upon their victims like some stalking demonic—ruled the peoples of those lands through fear and dominance, and the Eastlands where the demons—of dark skin and scaled hides, skulls of

rams or bulls with dark horns and blazing red eyes—and other creatures and foul beasts of the Shadow held dominion, turning plant and animal life to horrid despicable life forms, or devouring and burning everything in their path with a corruptive vengeance.

Then he also saw more powerful beings like the Sea God he had named Neptune, Gods of Earth and Sky, of Forests and Rivers, demigods with incredible powers of lightning and fire, that they wielded—along with enchanted weapons that glowed with pure magic as they unleashed powerful energies against their enemies—and aided the people of these lands to battle the servants of Corruption, tall and mighty and unrelenting in their paths of destruction, and he felt that he knew these beings also, as if their history and their names were just beneath the surface of his memory, but it was a barrier he could not yet pass through to gain that precious knowledge, yet he knew them, and he felt that they were the keepers of justice and the true protectors of the realm.

Thunder like the roar of a thousand king lions boomed in his ears as the winds sucked him down a swirling grey vortex to land on bended knee against the dark soil and stone of the Eastlands with a heavy thud that sent shockwaves flying from his form and seemed to make the earth tremble. Adem stood on solid ground once more, and he turned in the direction the orchestra should have been—as the place he had stood only moments before was still a part of his memory, though the majesty of this place was pulling apart his perceptions of reality, like a tangled dream that weaves itself around consciousness, fooling you to believe it is real—and before his eyes was a wall of grey stone, rising sixty feet or more into a grey sky of dark clouds and forked lightning!

A fierce storm of wind and rain belted against his skin and bones, as the thunder echoed again like a God of Chaos, and he felt great evil from this place, suddenly so different from the invigorating and revitalising emotions he had felt moments before when seeing those people and their demigods, he felt this place was crushing down upon his soul, like dark gravity that sucks upon the life threads of happiness and calm, bringing a deep sense of fear, sorrow, pain and heartache, as he suddenly thought of his beloved parents, apparently now so far away from him, and he perhaps only seconds away from that promised death, where he would meet the Dark Lord and become his servant!

The grey stone wall was ruined to the point that it appeared divided in the centre, and a grey stone path was paved stretching into the distance. A grey tower over a hundred feet high rose into the raging clouds that seemed to radiate an ominous threat of disaster, as he sensed that it was at least part of the overwhelming force of chaos within this place, a source of evil penetrating the very fibres of human existence to the point that he only wished to fall down there and then, give up and die if it would only bring his suffering to an end.

The tower was perfectly rectangular and over thirty paces wide though larger at the base than the tip, for some reason he was suddenly fixated on such details, perhaps to draw his mind away from the spiritual torment by focusing on abstract physical features of the landscape. The front of the tower was facing him flatly; the dark pock marked stone seemed to glow like polished tar lit with dark fires. A large rectangular wooden door stood at its centre base, a much smaller door within the door swung open, and a dwarf-sized creature stepped from the doorway.

Adem's mouth was hanging open in shock at the vision. He would have been certain he was having a relapse if Carl had not called him about the dream and the vision. But

common sense told him all that he had just witnessed was far beyond any simple hallucination, it was real, it was as solid a reality as walking into a bar and picking up a pint of beer.

The creature that strolled towards him through the rain was short and stocky with dark olive-green skin. Its eyes were large yellow ovals that glowed like lanterns. The first word that sprang to mind was Goblin. He focused on the physical features of the creature again to distract his mind from that ominous force. The creature wore a dark green hooded robe of wool with a matching long sleeved vest, dark leather trousers, and knee-high brown leather boots. A short blade that looked the right size for a sword for the creature hung from a brown belt balanced by a small quiver. A short horn bow stuck up above its shoulder with a leather strap for the case stretched across its chest. Its nose was long and pointed like some giant malformed gherkin.

The creature stood a few paces away from him when it said, 'My master has been waiting for you according to the Prophecies of the Arrival.' Its voice was harsh and almost squeaky like a toad. He noted the capital in the word 'Arrival.' 'Come this way, Son of Odin. You have much to learn. We will show you the Old Ways, the ways of the Shadow.' His last word was enough to tell him he was in the wrong place with the wrong people, but he had known he was in the wrong place long before he met this odd little talking thing. Then he heard horse hooves clipping across the paved stone.

From beyond the tower, a dark horse and dark-cloaked rider appeared. The rider stopped in front of the tower, and Adem felt great evil radiating from this cloaked figure. It was the same as the evil force he had felt from the ghosts at Bright; only this one was much stronger than the male ghost of Bright, this figure of shadows was many times stronger. At that moment he also knew this being was the main source of evil that had permeated the very air he breathed when first arriving at this location, a kind of demigod of malevolence. The force was a crushing claw gripping inside his chest and choking out his every desperate gasp for breath. Adem nearly fell to his knees in fear, despite a kind of resilience within his soul that was forged to become something apart from the average mortal man, and this was perhaps the only thing that was still keeping him on his feet. He was trembling and his teeth chattered. He fought for courage, the way he had that night at Bright.

He had to remind himself that he was an immortal soul also, and that these cursed spirits may be stronger in some ways, but they were weaker in others. That was his philosophy with ghosts at least. He had learnt that night that ghosts carry a powerful taint of corruption upon their souls that they may radiate within the location they are haunting—that much was plainly evident and also linked to this experience here and now. But he had also told his friends that night that living human souls had to be protected in some ways by the human body as a physical barrier, that should make a living soul in some ways stronger in terms of spirit than a cursed ghost—however this evil spirit had a physical body, so he was not sure what to think right at this moment about who was stronger, but he was guessing it was the dark cloaked figure. It drew a long sword of darkness that glowed with a blood red fire. 'Son of Odin,' it spoke in a voice like rotting flesh and bones being crushed under stone, the wail of tortured souls seemed to pierce the air; darkness seemed to close in all around him with its tones that reminded him of death, agony, malevolence and hatred. 'We have been waiting for you, in accordance with the Prophecies of the Arrival. Where are your Brothers?

The Prophecies always spoke of three Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor. Speak now, or I shall have your tongue.'

In a blur of thought, Adem had his phone out in an instant. He flipped the lid open and held it out threateningly like it was a gun or a bomb. The phone glowed brightly, and the Goblin creature stared at it with a curious frown. The Shadow Rider – that was the name he gave it – appeared to hesitate a moment, his horse seeming ready to charge but faltering for a moment. Then the horse began to bolt towards him, the beast screamed in a way that spoke volumes of the dark magic wrapped upon its soul, and why else would a horse serve a creature so foul and terrifying.

The next moments were a blur as Adem turned to run into the darkness behind him . . . the darkness became swirls of molten fire like a whirlpool doorway of lava in shadows, he saw the demigods swooping down to his rescue; angel winged male and female spirits of burning gold, crimson or aqua. Some tall as giants wielded axes or swords that glowed with bright energy, while female angels carried blazing red spears or branches of burning white; they appeared out of the clouded sky above in a beam of pure light. He heard the angels singing, the voices joining with the beam of light to produce a feeling of freedom, elation and ecstasy within, warming his core with a bright glow that washed away the ice of horrors he had faced, the claw of Corruption that had threatened to take his life, and that evil horsemen from his worst nightmares.

All he could do was run, but as the light touched down upon him he found that he was lifted while running, up into the sky, until each footstep touched down on invisible steps that lifted him higher like a glass escalator. Lightning filled the sky and plummeted all around him, as he looked back to see the bolts causing ruin to the Rider and Goblin and their kin that swarmed around the tower, but still he ran. With the warm fires in his chest, fear washing away, the songs of angels in his ears . . . the burning beam became a rectangular doorway opening into a room of light . . . the hallway where the doorman had called him 'Son of Odin.' Anna stood in the doorway with the grey moustached man holding the door for her. The man chuckled and looked at Adem with a glint of mirth in his eyes.

'Are you all right, Adem?' Anna asked. 'You still look quite frightened. You are trembling with terror. What was it?' Adem noticed more lights reflecting off the dark walls within the doorway. He turned to see red and green lights glowing in the distance, red seats formed a raked staircase leading down to a large stage where the grey stone tower had stood moments before. The orchestra began to play.

'You're all wet!' Anna exclaimed as she ran a finger down his cheek. 'Is that sweat?'

'It must be,' Adem said, fighting to control his shivering and clenching his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering. But it was not sweat. He never sweated. It was rain. And he was standing inside a theatre with a closed ceiling! He clutched the phone in a white-knuckled grip before putting it back in his pocket slowly. Taking the phone out his pocket had been real at least. He knew however that everything he had just experienced *had* to be real.

But that's impossible! He thought frantically. *Ghosts are real, God is real, even the Devil is real, but there is only one reality! There is only one real world! The rest is imagined! It must be! But it was real! The Goblin, the Shadow Rider, it was all too real!*

The orchestra resonated in his ears, including harp strings, violins, and cellos. It reminded him of the guitar strings. It reminded him of Bright.

‘You look terrified, duckling,’ Anna said soothingly. ‘Here, take a seat and rest. Breathe deeply. What was it you saw? Tell me. You can tell me anything, and I will believe you. You have the aura, remember.’

Considering doing further damage to his relationship with his potential agent, Adem sat and began to take deep slow breaths. He was not going to tell Anna what he saw, but tomorrow, he was certainly going to tell Carl and William. If they had had similar visions by tomorrow when he saw them, he would know he was not losing the plot.

When he arrived home, his father was seated on the couch in front of the widescreen television. Commercials were playing, and the almost bizarre nature of their jargon appeared dazing to Adem in his current state of mind. His father was snoring with his head tilted against his chest, his large square-shaped spectacles still on his face. Adem thought his father was always sleep deprived – the reason he nearly always fell asleep in front of the television – though he always stayed up late and got up early. Six hours or so was enough sleep for him, or so he thought.

It was after midnight. Adem shook his father gently and called his name until the old man opened his eyes and dazedly nodded and raised his head.

‘Falling asleep on the couch again: Dad? Go to bed,’ Adem said softly.

‘I will,’ his father replied, and then he closed his eyes and went back to sleep as he always did before the third or fourth attempt to wake him. This time it only took three attempts, and as his father stood and stumbled towards the bedroom, Adem turned off the television and moved to turn off the lamp. Before he did, he glanced around the large sitting room that was joined to a kitchen with black marble benches. The ceilings were over twenty feet high of white plaster with thick dark wooden beams sloping down from a red and brown brick wall. Sliding glass double doors served as a divider to the pool table room. The house was on two acres with a long red gravel driveway and beautiful gardens. There was a view of the lake from the front of the house, they had a pool and a tennis court, and the real lounge room was a large sunken area with a similar high roof. The bedrooms and bathrooms were down the long hallway that stretched off the pool room at the opposite end of the house.

He turned off the lamp and turned his head as if to walk to his bedroom . . . A red light began to glow in the distance . . . so far off he knew it was beyond the material walls of his living room. The glow released a blast of energy as it floated towards him, surrounding a tall, hooded figure cloaked in shadows as a rumble of thunder shook the atmosphere. Caverns of endless flame glowed within the cowl of the figure, two burning eyes of orange-gold. An evil voice boomed in his ears like the thunder, ‘Son of Odin! It is time for you to kneel at the feet of my master! The Dark One calls!’

Immense waves of evil force radiated from this shadow being, waves ten times stronger than the Shadow Rider! Any mortal man would have fallen to his knees and begged for mercy, begged and pleaded and promised anything just to be released from those punishing waves! But Adem’s spirit was made of stronger mettle than any mortal man. He stood proudly before the Shadow Man, gritting his teeth and glaring defiantly as he said, ‘I call upon the Power of the Holy Trinity. I call on their Power to cast you out, demon.’

The words were all his own – though when he said, ‘I call upon their Power to cast you out, demon,’ – the voice was something not of this world; it boomed even louder than the voice of the Shadow Man, like the roar of ten thousand lions. It seemed that those last words had come from someone else’s mind also, a mind within his own mind, and in that instant, he saw the face of a tanned skinned man with a black beard and moustache and long dark waves of hair falling to his shoulders. The figure wore a pale brown woollen robe that was soaked in blood, a crown of thorns upon his brow dug into his skull drawing more blood. The first thought that came to mind was Jesus Christ!

Blinding light filled his vision, enveloping the Shadow Man and fanning outwards in an explosive blast like an atomic bomb. Suddenly there were at least two dozen dark cloaked figures hovering in the surrounding shadows, and as the light touched their crimson glowing forms each was surrounded by a series of dark crosses that burned white hot, as each figure began to wail in anger, both male and female voices as the light of the crosses tore shreds off their dark cloaked figures. The shadows becoming burning white light as their voices became screams of fear expressing agony. The sound he heard next was like all matter in the universe being consumed in a single heartbeat. In that instant, the light was consumed by shadows, like a giant star-sized vacuum sucking in the atomic blast and making it shrink back to a single point the size of a pea. The tiny ball of light hovered in front of Adem within endless shadows. Then darkness except for the pale blue moonlight that poured through the large glass windows of his living room. He gasped for breath and stumbled towards the light switch.

He stood there shivering in the light of the living room for some time until his mother appeared in the hallway in her pink silk dressing gown. His mother was chest height on him, slim with blue eyes, and dark hair in a long tail. ‘What are you still doing up?’ she asked. ‘Is your father in bed?’ She looked weary as if she had just woken. ‘You’re shaking! What is wrong with you? Have you taken your medication?’ Adem steadied himself, took a deep breath, and replied, ‘Yes, but I think I will take more to get a good night’s sleep.’ He quickly thought up a lie to cover as he said, ‘I must have fallen asleep on the couch, I had a nightmare . . . about Bright.’ His mother shook her head and sighed before she said, ‘Did you have a good night?’

‘I did,’ he lied, though the orchestra was enjoyable when he could soothe his nerves. ‘It’s rare to get a bit of culture,’ he said, and then he managed a smirk. His mother smiled sadly and said, ‘Yes, well, you will be getting more of that when you are a big movie star. Did Anna have a good time?’

‘She is hooking me up with a hot American model,’ he said with an even broader grin. ‘Jean Fairsythe, blonde hair, blue eyes, gorgeous she says. We’re doing a photo shoot tomorrow afternoon. Carl and William are gonna join us.’ Adem was just over six feet tall, blue eyed with long dark brown hair that he always tied back in a ponytail. He had a thick ginger moustache that curved down his face like horns and a triangle of hair from below his bottom lip that currently extended lower than his chin.

‘Well, I hope this Jean girl is closer to your own age. It’s not right, a woman as old as Anna taking a handsome young man out to the orchestra. It’s very strange.’

‘She’s my agent,’ Adem said shyly. ‘Did you hear anything just now?’

‘Something woke me,’ his mother said as she rubbed her head, ‘like a loud crash, a boom, like thunder. Is it raining?’

‘Not sure, but I thought I heard thunder too,’ Adem said calmly.

He followed his mother down the hall after turning off the living room light but not before turning on the hallway light, then his bedroom light. He changed out of the suit and into his tracksuit; then sat in front of the computer, checking emails, looking on the internet, and then meditating on his recent experiences to try to gain a sense of calm. He stayed up long into the night after a double dose of his medication. He did not want to take any sleeping tablets as he feared being trapped in another one of those insane dreams. Normally, a nightmare would not bother him, but when nightmares started walking in the waking world, you had to stand up and take note.

He decided against visiting his psychiatrist the next morning. He could speak with his friends first and see what they had to say. It was three in the morning when he was about to go to bed when he received a text message.

It was from Carl Wilder. It read . . . ‘Had another nightmare! *Frowny-face*. This one was about a man made of shadows with eyes of flame! He said he had come to take me! William just called me about an hour ago, and he had the exact same nightmare! *Frowny-face*.’

He sent a reply text to Carl. It read, ‘Call you in the morning . . . *Three frowny-faces!!!*’ The third frowny face and subsequent triple exclamation marks was as far as he was willing to go to try to explain by text that Adem had also had the same nightmare – only he was certain he had been awake at the time! He was seriously concerned that one of the three Sons of Odin was not going to wake in the morning.

Chapter

2



Jean Fairsythe

The next morning Adem woke at nine. He was relieved that he had had no nightmares that he could remember. He could not remember any of his dreams in fact. He checked his phone, and there were no messages from Carl. He sent him a text that read, 'Come over straight away. Bring William.' A few minutes later, he got a text back from Carl that read, 'On my way. We will be there in less than an hour. *Smiley-face.*' Adem sent a text back with three smiley faces.

He stood off the side of his bed, walked to the bathroom, and got ready for a shower. He checked his reflection; he had dimples, something he didn't think of often as he rarely smiled when he looked in the mirror. He rarely smiled properly in photos either. That was something he would need to work on for the photo shoot. He practiced smiling a few times till it looked natural, then stripped and turned on the hot water. He hoped he did not have any visions while in the shower!

Please, no more visions, he thought, as he stepped under the shower head after turning the cold tap on slightly. He was glad when he finished, dried, and dressed without seeing any goblins, Shadow Men, or Shadow Riders!

His mother asked him when his friends were arriving, and he said, 'Soon.' He just then remembered to text his address to Anna. She sent a text back immediately saying, 'Me and my crew will be there in an hour! *Smiley-face.*'

He told his father about the plans for the day, and his father said, 'That's good! Do you know if you will get paid?' The man would still insist on work every day even if there was *no* pay. His father was a little shorter than him though easily six feet tall. He had a full head of grey-streaked dark black hair, short and neatly cut. His close cropped black beard and moustache was also getting closer to a total grey-white every day now. Mostly he was calm and well-mannered, a kind and proper gentleman. He was a rare breed of man, disciplined and civilized, very knowledgeable about all manner of things that never ceased to amaze Adem.

Jason's skill with machinery was his greatest form of knowledge, at least the most useful. Cars, televisions, vacuum cleaners, you name it, he should be able to fix it once he pulled it apart and saw how it was made. And he was an all-round handy man with a large shed full of tools. Today he wore blue jeans and a dark blue polo shirt that were his knock-around-the-house clothes with grey socks. 'No, I don't think I get paid for the photo shoot,' Adem explained. 'They are very expensive, and it sounds like Anna has offered to do it for free.' He did his best to manage a confident smile. Inside, however, he was still a complete nervous wreck.

Ten minutes later, Carl rang his mobile to say he was out the front. Adem raced from his bedroom to the front door where he saw Carl standing in the large glass windows beside the lacquered wooden door. Carl was almost as tall as Adem. Carl was fair-skinned, grey-blue eyes with short, spiked blond hair. Adem was slightly anxious to see for sure that Wil was there also. Then he opened the door to see that Wil *was* there. They both smiled though

he could see the terror in the eyes of both of his friends. The last time he saw that look was when they were getting haunted on a loft in the middle of the night near Bright.

‘So, the three Sons of Odin are together once more!’ Adem said in a strong voice that he tried to fill with courage. They grinned at that, though, they looked only a little less terrified. They went out to the tennis court to have a quick discussion before Anna arrived. He told them about the photo shoot first, and they looked thrilled at the idea. ‘Jean Fairsythe is all mine though,’ Adem said to Wil.

‘I only want to know what the hell is going on,’ Wil said through clenched teeth. ‘Dark-cloaked riders on dark horses, men with eyes of fire and voices like thunder.’

‘And a wizard was standing outside my house!’ Carl cried and then looked around nervously. The neighbours were close but not that close. Still, Adem thought better of it and said, ‘I don’t want Anna and her crew hearing us talking about this insanity and especially not Jean Fairsythe. We will stay together for the whole day, and if Carl can arrange with Rosa to spend the night here, I say that you should stay too, Wil. If we are all together . . . and we have another one of these visions . . . maybe it will be a shared vision . . . just like at Bright.’

Carl and Wil agreed it was a good plan. They then went inside to wait for Anna, and Adem made them all coffees and offered some jam scones with cream his mother had baked the day before. As he took his first sip of coffee, he had a craving for a cigarette, but he knew Carl disapproved of his smoking. Then Wil asked him, ‘Ciggie?’ and produced a pack of his favourite brand of smokes. The result was another quick rehash of the events at Bright – out the backyard on the concrete paving in front of his lazy chairs – with Carl and Wil both confirming they remembered the event the same as Adem did.

Adem did not bother to rehash on the details of their recent dreams or visions, despite the similarities, such as the name ‘Son of Odin,’ because they were not shared experiences, so it could never be proved to be more than coincidentally similar hallucinations or dreams.

They then sat on the three canvas chairs and smoked and drank their coffees, Adem asking Wil about his work situation and Carl telling Adem he had recently been promoted. Wil looked the spitting image of his father – tall, long rectangular face, dark eyes, and short-spiked brown hair.

About a half hour later, Anna rang his phone to tell him they were out the front. He made his way to the front door after stepping inside to tell his parents they were leaving. Carl and Wil said goodbye to Jason and Marion, then stepped out the front door. Anna was waiting on the front red brick-tile paved porch. She wore blue jeans and a bulky white blouse today with a red kerchief tying back her hair.

She smiled brightly at the three boys, then said, ‘You all have a great aura about you, and there is a connection between the auras I can see it. Yours is much brighter today than it was last night, Adem. And you are all *so* handsome. I will make film stars out of all three of you if I have my way. Come, meet the crew, and most importantly, Adem meet Jean.’ This time Adem really did stumble when he looked up to set eyes on Jean Fairsythe.

‘You must be Adem, I have heard so much about you,’ she smiled, and it sent rockets exploding in his soul. Her crystal blue eyes were like big shining pools you could drown in. Her hair was long golden silk and tied back in a tail with a red hair tie. Her skin was pale white, smooth like butter and cream, and her cheeks were slightly rounded when she smiled

though she had a strong muscular jaw and cheekbones. She wore a skimpy blue plaid tennis skirt and a white blouse that gleamed in the sunlight with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows.

‘You are more beautiful than I could have prepared myself for,’ Adem said attempting to sound immediately charming. ‘These are my best friends, Carl and William. We call him Wil for short.’ Jean shook each of their hands in introduction and her wide red-lipped smile was stunning with gleaming pearl white teeth. His two friends appeared equally stunned over Jean and her outfit. She was simply breathtaking. She was about of equal height with Adem.

Adem wore dark navy blue jeans with orange stitching; his black sneakers with the fluorescent green soles, a black T-shirt with a white lion’s face symbol, and his black leather jacket. His hair was brushed and tied back in a tail with a black hair tie, and he wore his navy blue baseball cap.

Anna had told him to dress neat and casual, and although he forgot to mention it to the boys in his text to Carl last night, the other two Sons of Odin also looked fit for adventure in blue jeans and sneakers. Carl wearing a clean white-collared shirt under a navy blue finely cut thin woollen sweater. Wil wore a pale grey T-shirt with a black outline of an Asian dragon on it, under a brown waist-length stylish leather jacket. They looked the part. The rest of the crew who were two male photographers and a female assistant all said quick greetings and waved, and then they were all climbing into the minibus.

They drove to the countryside in the same direction as the town where the three boys had gone to high school together. Adem was not sure where they were exactly when they finally arrived at about two o’clock, but they drove through the town and stopped for a pint at the local brewery on the way there. Adem tried the stout which is a mixture of coffee, caramel, chocolate, and other hints of various flavours. He normally did not drink stouts, but Wil recommended it. Adem ate a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich served in a sourdough roll with a rich golden mayonnaise. He kept wiping his face as the mayo got stuck on his moustache, and he did not want Jean to think he was a pig.

He still always opened a door for any lady, and he made sure he held it open for Jean while everyone made their way inside. Jean was last, and she smiled warmly and gave him a light tap on the nose as she said, ‘You are a fine gentleman, Adem. Thank you. There are not enough young men in this day and age who uphold the old values and customs, particularly how to treat a lady.’

‘My father always told me to open and hold the door for a lady,’ Adem said. ‘And you my darling are such a Lady.’ He made sure he held the door open for everyone when they left too, but that time, Jean only smiled in gratitude and climbed in the minibus without a word. He hoped it was not his table manners. During the remaining journey, he was horrified when Jean started to chat up Carl.

He was relieved when Carl admitted he had a wife and daughter however, as that was when she gave up interest. If she made a move on Wil, he thought he might burst into tears right there in the van. He was falling hopelessly in love with Jean every second that he gazed into her big blue eyes.

They arrived at the location and unpacked the gear; Adem, Carl, and Wil helped while Anna and Jean picked out the views. They eventually decided they would shoot with the brown river flowing in the background, on the grass by the riverbank. Forest-covered mountains stood high in the background on the far side of the river, and Scottish thistles

sprouted up out of the long dry grasses. Rabbits hopped along on the hillsides, and magpies swooped over the river to pick for grubs in the soil. They heard a kookaburra in a tree close to the river and eventually saw it swoop down into the tall grasses. Adem guessed it must have been after a king brown snake, so he warned Anna and Jean not to go near that area.

Where they were setting up to shoot was short grass for miles all around the hillside as a result of controlled burn offs with some green sprouting in a thin carpet-like layer.

To Adem's delight, Anna set him up for the first hour of photos, posing with just him and Jean. Sometimes Anna told him to take off his cap and jacket, then to wear the jacket, then the hat, and then both.

Jean was amazing in the way she posed and presented herself with her comical or sexy expressions; she was a true star in the making. Adem thought she had the potential to be the biggest film star ever. He forgot his fears, the visions, and the nightmares, forgot all his bad memories while he posed with her, played in front of the camera and held her in his arms. For the first time he could remember, he was more than just content, more than happy.

When Anna called for a quick break, Jean wound her long skinny arms around Adem's neck and laid a soft kiss right on his lips. 'Nice working with you, Adem Highlander.'

Anna told Carl and Wil to jump in for the next series of shots as she said, 'I want you all in it together. I hope to capture your shared auras. Yours is very bright when you stand with Adem too, Jean. Now crowd together, like a family portrait, big smiles.'

Adem heard harp strings strummed. He thought at first he had imagined it, but then the sound came again, three distinctly plucked strings, then another three. He was standing behind Jean, holding his arms around her waist, staring at the camera with Carl and Wil on either side of him. 'Does anyone else hear harp strings?' he asked. The first few had been faint, though they had grown louder each time.

'I heard them!' Jean cried. 'I thought I was imagining things.'

'I heard them too,' Carl said, sounding a little uneasy.

'Me too,' Wil said.

Adem held on to Jean with one arm as he turned to face the water . . . the water had turned sparkling blue. The sky that was mostly covered with grey skies before he turned his head was clear bright blue skies behind him with a scattering of fluffy white clouds that glowed incandescent in the sunlight. The sun was also directly overhead, suggesting it was midday! It must have been past three o'clock by now!

But that was not what stunned him completely; it was the strange grey stone tower rising from an island in the centre of the water that was now a huge lake rather than a wide river!—A lake that stretched off into the horizon with massive blue stone mountains and snow-capped peaks piercing the clouds rising in the distance. The mountains were also much taller than the ones that had been there a moment before.

Then the sounds came again, three strings plucked one after the other. The sound of each reverberated through the air like a siren song, growing louder and more distinct each time. Then a flute began to play, clear and harmonious, loud, and strong. It was a tune unfamiliar to Adem's ears, but it was beautiful, deep and mysterious, and pure and wise. He turned back to see Anna standing in front of the photographers. She looked at Adem and smiled; that glint of mirth in her dark eyes.

Then Anna, the crew, the bushland were all swallowed by a vortex of light and shadows like a whirlpool doorway—the light exploded into tiny filaments of burning gold and white energies that broke off in different directions to take the forms of birds flying in the distance. A void of shadows with incredible depths subverted the image of Anna and the photographers until they vanished within the burning tunnel that opened before them, as more light spiralled through the darkness as if boring a massive hole through space and time. The coils of energy began to flare and crackle like lightning bolts as a soft rumbling like thunder filled the darkness and the light. A burning brilliance began to dominate over the shadows, burning away the void as a bright ball of light appeared high above. It was the sun shining in a sky of blue.

As the new dimension behind Adem forged with the vision that opened up before them, all in a matter of a few seconds, it seemed the four of them stood paralysed, while a sensation of a great shift took over Adem. It was as if he were being moved through space at a hurtling speed, crossing over to another dimension that stood next door or possibly in the next galaxy—to reveal more bright blue skies, miles of lush bright green pasture – with hundreds of deer and a king stag grazing – stretching off into more rows of jagged blue mountains with gleaming white peaks. A warm breeze swept over his face when the wind had been blowing opposite and chilly a moment before. In his stunned amazement and fascination, he hardly registered the voices around him. It took him a moment to realise he still had an arm around Jean’s waist, and she was gripping his wrist and digging in her long sharp pink fingernails till he thought she might draw blood.

‘Where are we?’ she asked slowly. ‘What just happened?’

‘This is real!’ Wil shouted, and Adem turned to see his friends were there also! Wil was picking tufts of the soft green grass and letting it fall through his fingers to float on the breeze. Carl bent to pick a small flower with pink and blue petals. He sniffed deeply, drawing in the scent; then he said, ‘It *is* real.’

‘Someone please tell me what the *hell* is going on?’ Jean asked. ‘I mean, I don’t mean to freak out or anything but look at this place! Where did the *crew* go? Where did *Anna* go?’

She still gripped his wrist but was no longer digging in her nails. Then she turned to him with shock and wonder in her eyes as she asked, ‘Adem, did you do this? Did you bring us here? Or was it all three of you? The three Sons of Odin? This is gonna sound weird but now is a time for *crazy*. I had a dream last night, and all three of your faces were in it, even though I have never seen any of you three in my life until I met you today!

‘There was a woman, a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman. She was very pretty, but I knew there was something not right about her. She told me you three were the Sons of Odin . . . she called me the Daughter of Thor . . . she said the Dark One wanted us all . . . and then . . . I feel dizzy.’ Adem caught her in his arms as she suddenly closed her eyes and fainted.

‘What the hell is going on?’ Wil asked. ‘She had the same dream too? What does she have to do with any of this? She’s not a . . . a Witness.’

The harp and flute were growing louder now, alluring in its tune, drawing them towards its source, the island was the source. A drum began, then a voice was heard, a female voice, Adem thought he might shed tears when he heard how beautiful it was, the voice of an angel. Then more female voices began; the words were in another language a language that sounded like the songs of the elves. He looked to the water again, and he saw a boat of

golden light floating from the island towards the shore that was white sandy beaches. ‘Look there,’ Carl said, pointing at the boat.

‘It’s a boat,’ Wil said. ‘Do we trust them?’

‘They sound like my kind of people,’ Carl said with one of his wide grins of faith; arms crossed over his chest. ‘Let’s go find out exactly who they are.’

‘Wait till Jean recovers first,’ Adem said. ‘We can’t leave her alone for a second in this place. You saw that Shadow Man with your own eyes, and the Shadow Rider? We can’t leave her alone for a second the entire time we are in this . . . wherever we are. We will have to sleep with one eye open until we can find some people we are certain we can trust.’

‘We can trust them,’ Carl said facing the tower and the source of the angelic singing.

Adem asked his old friend, ‘How do you know that? You sense something to confirm that we can trust them?’

‘God is sending me a message about these voices,’ Carl agreed. ‘The message is that we can trust them before we dare trust anyone else in this world.’ Adem was fanning Jean with his hat for some time until she opened her eyes and sighed before she asked timidly, ‘Was it all just a bad dream?’

‘You want the long answer or the short one?’ Wil asked with a bland expression. Jean tried to sit up, so the three boys rushed to help her to her feet, and Adem continued to lend support as she looked around and finally said, ‘Oh my *God*.’

Adem pointed to the boat and said to Jean softly, ‘We can get across to the island, and Carl is certain we can trust these . . . angels. Anyway, we all agreed we won’t take our eyes off you for a second until we know they are people we can trust. You are safe with the three Sons of Odin, Jean Fairsythe.’ He tried to give her a confident smile to ease her nerves.

‘Can’t you call someone to get us out of here,’ Jean asked in a light tone, ‘like the police; search and rescue; or anyone?’

‘I don’t know if the police can reach us here,’ Carl said with the same bright-eyed grin. Adem pulled out his phone and flipped it.

‘My battery’s flat,’ he said, just now realising he did not charge it overnight like he usually always did, as he wanted his phone switched on beside his bed, in case Carl tried to text or call him again during the night. Carl pulled out his phone and said, ‘I’ve got battery, but no signal.’

‘I’ve got battery!’ Wil cried nervously, and then he held his phone up high for a few moments, moving it left and right through the air before he said, ‘Yep, same as always, no reception.’ Adem, Jean, and Carl began to laugh softly, but Wil just frowned and looked disappointedly at his phone, shaking it from time to time.

Jean sighed, ‘Jesus Christ.’

Finally, Carl began to sing in a loud masculine voice, ‘Let’s go, the boat, the boat! – The angels are calling! Let’s get in the boat!’ Suddenly, at least a dozen male voices joined in the chorus, deep and rhythmic with a strong rumbling bass sound, in the same hypnotic angelic language. Their voices dragged the song in new directions, darkness and danger, and courage and strength. ‘Oh yes, we are in the right place, at the right time, this time.’ Carl said, as he began to take quicker strides towards the sand where the boat was now waiting, with a tall figure in a dark blue silk robe and a gold crown encrusted with emeralds and rubies.

As they came closer to the boat, they saw the man was taller than any of the three boys; he looked six feet six inches at least, long dark hair tied back in a tail, large dark eyes filled with a warm kindness and a deep wisdom, tanned skin, and a thin muscular physique. The first word to spring to Adem's mind was Angel.

Adem realised in amazement that this was one of the rulers he had seen in visions of this world, both in his dream and before meeting the goblin and Shadow Rider. It was the first real evidence that these visions and dreams were somehow connected with this world that was now seemingly as real as sitting down for a meal with family or friends.

He gazed in wonder at the figure as they moved closer, while a strange sensation took over him, as if the very earth and skies were bleeding a kind of raw energy that was fed into his soul, but at the same time he felt a ghastly presence overlapping that Power, a dark energy that he was certain was related to the evil presence of those Ghosts of Bright. It was the Power of the Shadow, the force of the Dark One.

Chapter

3



The Immortals

Carl was first to approach the tall man in the boat while Adem, Jean, and Wil stood a few paces back on the sand. 'Welcome, Sons of Odin, Daughter of Thor,' the man said in a voice that was deep and powerful like the male singing voices. 'You have come at the Hour of Arrival, in accordance with the Great Prophecy. The Prophecies of your Arrival have been past down amongst the Immortal Kings and Queens since the Age of Immortals. The

Prophecy was first spoken to Rodin Cloudwalker, the first Immortal King, by Odin, Lord of Lightning.

‘Odin was the first of the male Great Angels to be created by the Lord God. *Teron*, the male half of the Lord’s Power was forged and passed down into Odin at the Dawn of Ages. Odin used the Power to assist the Lord in the creation of all the male Great Angels, and Odin’s Power flows through them. That Power is *teron*.’

Carl asked, ‘So Odin and Thor and the gods of mythology are real? I was taught by my father that there is only the One God.’

The immortal man smiled broadly as he explained, ‘They are the Great Angels, as I explained. They were made by the Lord your God. Your God exists also in our world, Kisseria, as do the Great Angels, who were once a part of your world, Earth.

‘In our world, Kisseria, the Nordics were the first of the immortals, and all immortal races stem from this root. They are the most wise and powerful of our race. I understand that my appearance may seem somewhat strange to you, my pointed ears and large eyes, my height, and my clothing may also seem unusual.’ When he mentioned clothing, his eyes scanned the clothing of Adem and his friends as if he thought *they* were quite strange in appearance. ‘My name is Orion Demonslayer. I am King of the Torvellen. We are usually light brown-skinned with dark hair and eyes, and we are all very tall. We mostly live in stone kingdoms like the Nordics though some of our race live in the Great Forests like our cousins the Dremelden, who are also known as the Wood Kin.

‘You will be meeting all of us in time. The immortals have prayed to the Lord for your arrival since the First Age, for the Prophecies say that you will break us, but that you will also save us. It is your fate to face the Dark One in the Battle of Hordroth’Kilainen. However, the Prophecies say that the Great Battle is still a long way off. Over a thousand years in fact. So the next thousand years shall be known as the Age of Chaos.

‘We know it has something to do with the taint you have brought with you, you three Sons of Odin. This taint will infect *teron* corrupting the Power with the Dark One’s taint. This will in turn corrupt the minds and souls of all male wielders, both mortal and immortal. I sense the taint on *teron* now, like a delicious fruit riddled with worms and fungus.’

‘What is the source of this evil taint we have brought with us?’ Adem knew the ghosts of Bright had been tainted with an evil force. He had known that since that night. He had always felt and believed that some part of that taint had been embedded in his flesh and bones as it seeped into his soul during the haunting.

‘You were marked with the taint in your world at the age of seventeen,’ Orion said in his deep tones. ‘You three Sons of Odin were visited by five spirits, ghosts is what you call them in your world. We most often use terms like phantom, wraith, or spectre. These ghosts of Earth were corrupted by the Power of the Dark One, and they passed that taint on to you during that haunting.

‘To be haunted is not so uncommon in our world, though, in Kisseria, the Dark One has no power over the spirits who walk in the Middle Realm. The High Realm and the Low Realm are connected between Kisseria and Earth, though the Middle Realm is separate.

‘The Great Angels left your world over two thousand years ago. You three Brothers are connected to Odin by God, who saved you from those ghosts. The Lord passed down to

you the Power of the Great Angel Odin. Therefore, the taint shall flow from Odin into *teron* and infect us all.

‘We will not harm you for this. We will in fact be your protectors. The immortals have prepared for this day since the First Age. As for the Prophecies; I only hope the saving comes after the breaking.’

‘I summoned the Power of Jesus that night we were haunted,’ Carl said almost in protest. ‘I did not summon Odin. It is the Power of Christ that flows through our veins, the Son of God.’

‘Yes, the Prophecies speak of this man also,’ Orion replied. ‘He is believed to be the one who allowed the Dark One to create the taint on purgatory in your world. It was at the time of his death, the Crucifixion, over two thousand years ago in your world.’

Adem considered these things as he listened to Orion continue, ‘You must understand that time moves much faster here in Kiseria compared to your world. It is my understanding that if you are here in Kiseria for a month or a year, then you return to Earth, only a short time will have passed in your home world.

‘So if you stayed here in Kiseria for five years, then returned to Earth, you still might find your family and friends have only just begun to search for you. Does this put your minds at ease about your loved ones?’

‘Do you know how to send us back?’ Carl asked. ‘I have no powers other than a mortal man’s flesh and my faith. I cannot oppose your Dark One. He would crush us.

‘I am sorry, but we cannot save you.’

Orion looked at their faces with his probing stare and seemed to be weighing each of their souls before he said, ‘You are the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor. You are the Chosen of the Great Prophecy known as the Karaedhal Cycle. You are the Blue Water Dragon, the Red Fire Lion, the Black Shadow Wolf, and the White Snow Fox.’

‘Which one of us is the Dragon?’ Wil asked, puffing out his chest.

‘That shall be revealed by your actions,’ Orion said. ‘I can tell you that the Daughter of Thor is the White Fox. The Dragon is Prophesised to be the strongest of the Sons, though your Powers are connected and all three of you must be there to face the Dark One in the Great Battle.’

‘You say the Great Battle is at least a thousand years away,’ Adem said. ‘We will not survive beyond eighty to a hundred years, and we will be very weak and feeble by then. We are mortal.’ Orion rubbed his chin, and his dark eyes rolled around to each of their faces again before he said, ‘That part has always been understood. There will be a Second Arrival. You will return to Earth in good time and you may spend five to ten years there getting back to your old lives, though you will never be the same.

‘Your ability to wield shall return when you return to Kiseria. You shall also have greater protection from evil spirits that visit you in dreams or visions, or in the flesh, when you return to Earth.’

‘You shall return to a very different world to this one. The taint on *teron* will have turned thousands of male wielders mad or evil, perhaps tens of thousands. Perhaps I will be one of them.’

‘I need a cigarette,’ Wil said as he took out his pack and lit up. Orion looked slightly startled when Wil produced his lighter and flame sprouted to light the cigarette. Orion shook

his head and said, 'Smoking, yes, even some of the immortals are susceptible to its allure. Though we have learnt that too much of it can even destroy the innards of an immortal and bring about death over time.' Wil began to cough and bent down to extinguish the cigarette properly; putting it back in the packet. Adem wished he had his nicotine tablets.

And my medication.

'I have to get home today,' he said urgently. 'I have a mental illness, and I take medicine to control its effects. If I stay here, I will lose my mind.' Jean took his hand and looked into his eyes with sympathy.

'Yes, the Sickness, it flows in all three of the Sons of Odin,' Orion said. 'In time you will begin to fall into madness and possibly become evil. This could be a part of the Prophecy that you shall break us. For the short term, we have Healers who are equipped at keeping your condition stable.'

'I usually take my healing at about four o'clock,' Adem said. Orion smiled broadly as he said, 'Climb aboard, and we shall travel to the keep on the island. My people are waiting for you, and from there, we shall travel to the heart of the Free Lands.'

Carl was first to climb into the large glowing golden craft that sat half in the water, half on the white sandy shore. There were no oars or paddles, but once they were all aboard and seated comfortably, the boat slid back into the water; made a turn and began to float towards the island.

The music and angelic voices continued, the male and female voices harmonizing and combating, hope and courage, pain and bliss, sun and moon, thunder and lightning, wind and rain, fire and ice, and the Shadow and the Light.

When they were halfway across the water, Adem turned to see two more immortals standing in the back of the boat. Both were as tall as Orion with sun-darkened skin, long dark hair, and large dark eyes. One had dark blue eyes, though the pupils were so large; they appeared black at first glance. They wore cloaks dark as shadows with large hoods falling around their shoulders, woollen coats of olive-green and brown camouflage that hung below the waist under thick brown leather belts. Their belt buckle sigils were of a sinuous Blue Dragon. They wore leather trousers of the same camouflage colours with lace up knee-high leather boots.

'Do not be alarmed,' Orion said. 'They are my bodyguards, my Guardians. Talegon and Kelflax are their names. Talegon is the one with the dark blue eyes. Their cloaks are enchanted and can turn the same colours as their immediate environment to hide them from the eyes of demons. They are visible now because they have allowed themselves to be seen by choice. The magic connects with the mind of the wearer, so they may control when they wish to hide.

'The cloaks are best suited for night or shade when they return to the dark shadow colours.' Adem turned to look over his shoulder at Talegon and Kelflax again and the golden hilts of their long swords rising above their waist belts and balanced by a quiver on the other hip. Long bows that looked to be made of marble on either side of the handle grips – one white-veined blue and the other black-veined red – stuck up above their right shoulders now that they were visible, with leather straps across their chests for the bow cases.

Orion continued to face the island as he spoke though his voice was loud and deep as he explained, 'Lukrorian Bows. They are wood encased at the grip in a layer of stone similar

to the marble of your world. The stone is flexible when crafted into an enchanted bow. They are used by male wielders to unleash arrows of Fire by harnessing the Power of *teron*.

‘*Terael* can be used by female wielders to the same effect.’

‘How many . . . Lukrorian Bows do you have in Kisseria?’ Adem asked. Orion began to laugh, a deep throaty chuckle of mirth as he replied, ‘We have many, Son of Odin. Why do you ask?’

Adem sat in deep thought for a time before he replied, ‘I’m trying to get an idea of what kind of army we have on our side. What kind of weapons we have to face the goblins and Shadow Men and the Shadow Riders.’

‘You have seen all of these things?’ Orion asked with a slight turn of his head. ‘You have been here before?’

‘We had dreams and visions,’ Adem explained. ‘Only I think I did enter Kisseria for a short time in one of the visions. That is where I saw the goblin and the Shadow Rider. That night in my home when I turned out the light, I saw the Shadow Man.’

‘He said he had come for me to take me to the Dark One. I called on the Power of Christ, and the Shadow Man vanished in a blast of light and shadows. But before that there were many more of them that appeared, though they were defeated. Who are these Shadow Men? The evil force I felt from the first one was many times stronger than the taint we felt from the ghosts of our world.’

‘I will tell you more of the Shadow Riders and the Shadow Men when we arrive at the Nordic Kingdom. It is unwise to even speak of such beings with so few warriors to protect us from the potential threat that they may appear out of the shadows and ambush us at any moment,’ Orion sounded concerned.

Moments later, the boat lurched on to the white sandy shore of the island with thick bright green grassland flowing up the rising hillside to the feet of the dark grey stone tower. The singing continued as more immortals, both male and female, began to march down to the shore. Some carried flutes, harps or drums that they played while the others sang in their deep rich chants. ‘My people are weaving an enchantment on the air to ward against evil following us to this place,’ Orion explained.

They climbed out of the boat after King Orion stepped on to the shore. Adem made sure he helped Jean out of the boat before the tall handsome Talegon and Kelflax could offer her any assistance. ‘Meet my wife, Queen Elmira Goldenbraid,’ Orion said proudly, as a very beautiful fair-skinned woman approached, with large clear blue eyes and shining golden hair, tied in a long thick braid that fell halfway down her tall slender figure. The braid was pulled down over her shoulder and nestled between her generous bosom as she reached out to Jean with jewelled fingers of rubies, diamonds, and emeralds on golden bands.

A gold necklace with snowflake-style patterns sparkled with more gems, above her dress of pale blue silk; low cut around the cleavage exposing a generous portion of her bosom. She wore a snow white-hooded cloak of silk; silver and gold scrollwork worked around the edges.

‘Welcome, Daughter of Thor,’ Elmira said in clear crisp harmonious tones. ‘Welcome also, Sons of Odin.’ Elmira said that last with a touch of animosity in her tone. Her big eyes seemed to stab holes in Adem’s heart. Adem understood immediately that it must have been the taint he and his Brothers had brought to Kisseria that had the Queen of the Torvellen

looking at him as if he were a cursed rat. A rat that had sunk its teeth into her freshly baked apple tarts.

He bowed very low to her as he said, 'My humblest apologies, Queen Elmira. We knew not what we would bring to your world. If I had known, I would have done everything in my power avoid entering this world.'

Elmira smiled, almost warmly though the smile did not touch her eyes that seemed sympathetic and at the same time filled with loathing as she said, 'It is all a part of the Great Prophecy. We are all chained and shackled to the Hero Chains of the Great Cycle and the Shield of Fire. There are none who can escape its grasp and its driving force.'

Adem knew nothing of this Hero Chain or the Great Cycle or the Shield of Fire, though, it all sounded very important. He did not want to appear ignorant of their world, so he simply bowed deeply again and hoped his friends did the same. He took a quick peek over his shoulder to see them both rising from bowing deeply. He hoped Orion would explain these Chain and Cycle and Shield concepts to him at a later date also. It sounded very important.

The music continued as they made their way up the hillside and entered the doorway to the stone tower. Within the first room, the cool shade washed over Adem's skin and brought a tingling sensation after the warm sunlight had baked his skin. He had taken his cap off to bow to Queen Elmira and he held it swinging off his right index finger and thumb as they made their way up one of the stone staircases; climbing to higher levels with Orion and Elmira leading the way.

A dozen or more male and female immortals followed behind Adem and his friends. The remaining two dozen stood outside to finish the chant that was fading as they made their way up the staircase with a waist-high stone railing. Tapestries of warriors doing battle with strange-looking monsters and demons decorated some of the walls on levels where the staircase levelled out briefly before they continued to climb.

Finally, they arrived at a large level with a floor that must have stretched from wall to wall with another staircase leading to higher levels. On this floor stood a rectangular grey stone slab divided down the centre into two doors of stone. Carvings of angels flying through clouds covered the top half of the stone doors and demons writhed in pits of fire at the base. The carvings rose out of the stone and were the work of a master sculptor, though Adem suspected the doors had been crafted using the Power.

'That is the portal,' Orion explained when he noticed Adem and his friends staring at the strange doors that stood against the centre of one of the walls. 'When it opens, it looks something like a mirror. It is called a Travelling Gate or the Portal Gates.'

'Now, it is time for your gifts.' Immortal men and women then began opening many of the large brass bound dark wooden chests that were spread around the large room, some using golden keys to unlock the chests.

The room was lit by rectangular lanterns attached to the stone walls; light appearing to be a ball of fire within the glass without candle or wick. Next the immortals began dragging out cloaks, clothing, armour, and weapons. 'Guardian cloaks and *toramor* armour for the Sons of Odin,' Orion said. '*Toramor* cuirass and breastplates are enchanted with Fire and Earth, and can withstand strikes from regular steel blades, including large demon weapons. It will never weaken, but some enchanted weapons will be able to penetrate the armour.'

The immortals then handed Adem and his friends each a large hooded cloak that seemed to be made of shadows, while others held gleaming cuirass and breastplates of bright colours.

‘I’ll take the crimson armour,’ Adem said. All three sets of breastplate armour had serpentine dragons scrawled across both sides of the chest. The armour had backplates also, and before they tried it on, other immortals provided them with clothing, long woollen coats, dark leather trousers, and knee-high brown leather boots. Adem was handed a red coat with gold and silver dragons wound about the sleeves.

The yellow and blue coats his friends were given also had dragons of the same coloured stitching. Carl took the blue coat and dark blue shining armour with black dragons across the chest. Wil took the yellow coat and golden armour with white dragons.

When they were dressed with thick brown leather belts and sword belts over their buttoned-up coats that hung beneath their armour, they were provided weapons. A golden glowing axe with a double half-moon blade was gifted to Wil. A pure gold spear that glowed incandescent red—and was light as a wooden staff and well balanced—was gifted to Carl and a long sword with a golden hilt was gifted to Adem in a black polished scabbard. A serpentine dragon was scrawled in silver and gold upon both the scabbard and the blade itself, which was a double-edged straight sword. He was also gifted a buckler that looked steel plated in rings of red and blue, though was lighter than leather and wood and also said to be forged of *toramor*.

‘These three weapons have been chosen for the three Sons of Odin by three of the four Immortal Kings. They are enchanted not only with a mixture of *teron* and *terael*, but they are also the Resting Points for three Great Angels.

‘These Great Angels reside in your weapons as we speak. There they wait and recharge their spirits, drawing from a combination of three sources. The first is the combined energies of *teron* and *terael* that enchant the weapons. The second is the energies that flow through each of you. Your life forces feed their Power. The third source of their Power is fed through the energy source known as *ki’mera*.

‘*Ki’mera* is the life force of all demons within Kismeria. When a demon is defeated using the Power or these weapons, the defeated demon spirit will rise as a floating energy source that will be drawn to, and consumed by, your enchanted weapons.

‘That energy source will feed and enhance the Power of those Angels who reside in your Resting Points. The more *ki’mera* you obtain, the stronger your Great Angels will become and the stronger their attacks shall be, providing you with even more *ki’mera*.

‘Be warned that you should only summon these Angels in time of great need. They will consume *ki’mera* quickly, and they will require rest even after obtaining fresh stores of *ki’mera*.

‘In time your *ki’mera* levels stored will also increase your own strengths in wielding *teron*. This will also allow you to enhance the power of your weapons with assistance from your Battle Angels.’

Three more male immortals—in darkly coloured silk robes with the dark hair and dark eyes of the Torvellen—brought forward three of the wooden bows with a marble looking panel on either side of the handle-grips. Adem was gifted a blue bow with black

veins. The bows came with large leather cases that could be slung over their backs, under their cloaks, with leather straps across their chests.

Adem and his friends were equipped with the bows after they put on their Guardian cloaks that Adem noticed blending with the grey stone walls. Carl was gifted a red bow with black veins, and Wil's was golden-yellow with white. In the centre of the strings was a small gem-stone encased within a golden band.

Adem's gem-stone was blue, and when he tested the bow by drawing back the string—as suddenly again the pure magnificence of the Power burned within his soul, along with the foulness of corruption corroding his bones—he saw that an arrow of blinding blue light appeared in the darkness of the room. He gasped in elation and disgust conflicting his senses and emotions from the raw energies of darkness and light pulsing through his being. Carl's produced a shaft of red flame and Wil's was a golden arrow. They allowed the strings to retract slowly to avoid letting the arrows loose in the room, though they had aimed the bows pointed to the floor. Adem turned to see Jean was being gifted a jade-green bow with blue veins that she used to wield an emerald arrow. He could see the state of ecstasy felt by Jean when she touched *terael*, it was clearly pure and nothing like the taint now felt by all male wielders.

Female immortals helped her dress, and she wore a dark green silk skirt with lace up knee-high emerald boots, dark blue leather trousers beneath the skirt, and an emerald-green woollen coat with white foxes on the sleeves, embroidered with silver and gold edging along the cuffs and hem of her skirt.

They had tied her hair in a long golden braid with an emerald hair tie, and she wore a gold-hilted long sword in an emerald scabbard. The blade was very thin and apparently quite light due to enchantment, despite it being very long, almost touching the ground when she walked.

Adem overheard Elmira explaining to Jean that her bow was a Resting Point for the Battle Angel, Tanriel; a powerful female Great Angel. Carl's spear was the Resting Point for Math Mathonwy. Wil's golden axe was a Resting Point for Eledisren, a powerful male Battle Angel. Adem was told that *he* carried the spirit of Arawn in his sword, a Battle Angel of the Underworld. Carl's Battle Angel was also from the Underworld and was said to wield the Hellfire Spear that he used to unleash the Hounds of Hell. They were warned not to summon the Angels as it may deplete their stored *ki'mera* levels that had been built up by immortals wielding the weapons for many years.

Orion explained that Battle Angels of the Underworld were no more harmful than if they were assigned male Angels of the High Realm as, 'Once the Power has been tainted, it shall flow through all male men and spirits.'

Orion explained that Underworld Angels have never been tainted with the Power of the Dark One, only connected to it like a bridge connects two separate pieces of land across air or water, though the two pieces of land remain separate. 'Only now that the three Sons have arrived does the taint truly flow through Arawn, Eledisren, and Math Mathonwy.'

They were all also dressed in a mail coif of silver rings forged or toramor, light as a feather, to protect their heads and shoulders, and each wore a *toramor* hauberk under their body armour that was also weightless. Each were also gifted a helmet of *toramor* to match their body armour; dragon wings rising at the temples.

Chapter

4



The Travelling Gates

When they were suited up and equipped, Orion said to Adem, ‘Now you are ready for your Healing, Adem Highlander.’ A slender immortal woman with long silken dark hair falling to her waist in a crimson silk gown and red cloak, made her way to stand in front of Adem to lay her hands on either side of his head around the temples with her fingers almost touching over his skull.

‘Hold still, Adem Highlander,’ the woman said in musical tones. Her large dark Torvellen eyes seeming to drink in a part of his soul during the time she described as the Seeking, where she searched for his illnesses and how best to Heal him. She made note of his groin injury.

The immortal woman, Lira Tolnock was her name, said she could do a little to ease the pain of that injury though it was too old for her to Heal completely. His mental illness; that she described as the Darkness, or the Sickness, she explained was also something she could do little about in terms of repair or cure. She explained that she could relieve some of his symptoms, though this was something that would need to be done daily to ensure the Sickness did not spread through his mind too quickly.

Lira finally began the Healing – a bolt of lightning cold as ice surged through his flesh and bones, filling his soul, drenching his mind; he shivered, then trembled, then convulsed, and had to fight to resist flailing his arms that shook silently at his sides with his fists

clenched. His eyes were fluttering and rolling up into his skull before she released him, and the Power ceased to flow through his veins.

The feeling was similar to when he had drawn the arrow of flame, rivers of lava and avalanches of ice flowing through his veins; only the healing was just ice without the fire. The sense of *teron* flowing through him had heightened his senses for those brief moments, the shaft of flame glowing as if it contained the power of the sun, though when he released the Power, he felt both relief at being spared another moment with the taint flowing through him and despair at being severed from the sweet bliss of feeling the Light in his soul.

Teron was like the sensation of praying or meditating and being close to the Creator in those prayers and feeling a warm glow enter your heart and fill you with peace, contentment, and bliss, only the Power flowing through you was a hundred times stronger, even wielding such a small amount.

When he reached for the bow, Orion began to explain, ‘You must not draw too much of the Power. There is a danger you will burn out your ability to wield and you shall be severed from *teron*.

‘This would greatly alter the Great Cycle and the fate of Kismeria. Our Alit’aren and Ael Trael shall teach you to draw from the Power without burning out your ability. Your Battle Angels also increase the amount you can draw from *teron*.

‘So long as you carry your Resting Point weapons, your ability to wield will increase the more you obtain *ki’mera* from defeated demons. When you acquire new Battle Angels, you may create new Resting Points. Your Lukrorian Bows are potential Resting Points.

‘We must use the Travelling Gate to journey to Nordhel.’ Orion then made his way to the stone doors of the Travelling Gate, wielding a ball of blue fire that glowed above his open hand. The light reflected off the stone carvings until the light began to glow within the stone as if the Power flowed through it. With a loud crackling groan, the doors swung outwards to reveal a blue-white glow within.

When the doors were half open, Adem could see his reflection in the mirror-like surface that glowed within, though he could see no other reflection, not even the reflection of the stone room and chests. He stood some distance from the doors and the mirror of light, though he could see his entire reflection despite Orion and Elmira standing in front of him, and they should have blocked the path of his image to the mirror surface.

A dozen of the Guardian Immortals leapt through the thick glistening gel that formed the surface of the Gate. As they passed through the thick membrane, their images faded into the bright light that glowed within. Next many female immortals, some of who Adem guessed were Ael Trael, walked into the gel, with over a dozen black-coated male immortals who Orion explained were Alit’aren, men who could wield.

Orion and Elmira followed next after the two dozen or more male and female immortals; those that ascended to their level after finishing their chanting wards. Finally, all that remained in the room were Adem, Carl, Wil, and Jean with Talegon and Kelflax waiting to enter last.

‘Do not fear the Portal,’ Talegon said in deep courageous tones. ‘The taint is newly made and will not bring harm to those that pass through.’ Adem stepped through first, the gel-like liquid cold against his skin, like sliding through thick water that left no stain or wetness on his clothing or skin—darkness surrounded him like an ominous cloud, until light

exploded outwards all around him, first as glowing filaments of energy moving out in a cosmic spray, then the darkness itself was enveloped in brightness as he experienced the sensation of a great shift, as if he were suddenly moving very fast through space without taking a single step—and the next moment he was stepping out on to a field of dark cracked clay with some lava forming rivers through the soil. He gazed upon his surroundings with some caution, for although he did not fear that these people had betrayed him, he immediately knew the Portal had not taken them to their desired location, suggesting further destructive forces at work, and the new arrival of the taint on *teron* seemed the first and most likely explanation.

What he saw before him was a barren wasteland for miles in every direction, of mostly flatlands of dark cracked soil with rivers of lava flowing and bubbling in small pools of orange magma, and the sky above was a cataclysm of wild magic with dark crimson lightning forks falling from the brooding dark clouds that swirled through the heavens as if in eternal torment from the manipulations of the Dark One. Thunder echoed now and then, as he looked about hesitantly in fear of the presence of demons or goblins or other foul creatures that he already knew inhabited these regions.

The other immortals, over sixty men and women in total, were gathered around the doorway to the Travelling Gate he had exited. When he turned back to the glowing surface that was now mixed with shadows, he saw Jean sliding outwards from the gel surface. Carl and Wil followed after, exiting together with the two Immortal Guardians following.

Adem looked to the sky to see the dark storm clouds surging with sideways blasting crimson bolts for miles in every direction, as if the presence of the Sons and Daughter had invoked a dark magic upon the earth and sky. Lava pools also sprayed and erupted with greater vehemence. Forked lightning bolts began to fall more frequently, as a strong wind howled spraying a light rain across his face.

‘Something is very wrong,’ Orion said in a loud voice, as he turned to face Adem. ‘The Travelling Gate has taken us to the East Lands. These lands are swarming with enemies. We tried to pass back through the Gate, but it was firm against our flesh and no longer a yielding gel.’

‘We must find wild *altherin* horses to take us to Nordhel. *Altherin* are immortal horses. They often run wild in these lands to taunt the Rahkwel and Shadow Riders. I could not have foreseen this Adem Highlander . . . forgive my mistake.’

‘It is not your fault but my own,’ Adem replied in attempts to be heard over the roaring wind. ‘What are Rahkwel?’

‘Goblins,’ Orion said. ‘You will see for yourself soon enough. Was the one you saw tall or short?’

‘Short!’ Adem replied. ‘Like a dwarf?’

‘That is a Grimwel,’ Orion said. ‘Rahkwel can stand up to seven feet tall.’ Adem resisted the urge to curse. Wil must have overheard because he did not resist the urge to curse, loudly. ‘The Ael Tarael are doing their best to summon the *altherin* horses,’ Orion said; pointing to strands of light shooting up into the clouds from the fingertips of three immortal women standing some distance ahead.

Three huge black stone mountains capped with white peaks stood in the distance, and large boulders were scattered across the dark land. The only trees he saw were stunted black leafless things that looked to be twisted by the Power of the Dark One.

There were occasional tufts of fresh green growth that he assumed was all the *altherin* horses would have to eat in these East Lands. The strands of light were touching a group of the dark clouds above, turning them to a silvery incandescent glow. ‘The light will guide the *altherin* to us. The Guardians will use their horns to signal our position. The clouds of light and the horns will also draw any Rahkwel and other demons nearby.

‘Rest assured we shall protect you, Sons of Odin and Daughter of Thor.’

Moments later, Talegon and Kelflax raised curved red and gold horns that released a deep echoing call. Jean stood beside Adem and looked in his eyes with real fear. He tried to smile as he took her hand and squeezed lightly before letting go.

Jean pulled her Lukrorian Bow from her shoulder case and pulled back gently on the string to produce a bright arrow of emerald Fire as she said, ‘It will be an honour to fight at your side, Adem Highlander.’

‘The honour is all mine, Jean Fairsythe,’ he said. He then reached over his shoulder to draw his blue bow, and he eased back the string to draw an arrow of bright blue flames.

Teron flooded his veins, lightning and snow, lava, and ice, he shivered at the rush of heat and cold that flowed through him. The Power was a well spring of light, the taint bursting through that spring, like maggot-infested shadows. He wanted to laugh with the glow of the Power.

He wanted to vomit from the corruption of the taint. As he drew the bow string back further, the arrow of flame shone more brightly, and he felt himself drawing more of the Power that flowed into the enchanted weapon. He could sense his connection with his Battle Angel also; the Great Spirit seemed to be dreaming within the Resting Point of the sword that hung at his hip, like a child in the womb, only the Battle Angel’s mind was a part of Adem’s awareness, now that he held on to the Power.

He sensed great knowledge and great power in that connection, a connection to a being similar to the male ghost of Bright, only infinitely stronger in the Power and the taint that radiated from its spirit. He felt that the Battle Angel was giving him greeting with that connection.

He was certain Jean’s Battle Angel would be giving her a similar greeting as she held on to the arrow of flame. The horns sounded again and again as the light in the clouds above grew brighter. Ten minutes or more passed, and then another horn sounded in the distance, over the rise to the east.

‘It is a Rahkwel horn,’ Orion spoke with grave concern. ‘I will tell you when to summon your Battle Angels.’

‘How do we summon them?’ Adem asked.

‘They will tell you in your mind,’ Orion shouted.

‘I know!’ Jean cried. ‘Tamriel has told me; a message from her mind to mine. It requires the Power. You will understand when you hold your enchanted blade, Adem.’

‘Do not draw it yet.’ Orion said. ‘Use the Lukrorian Bow for long-range attacks. Hold the fully drawn arrows longer for increased power in your attacks. Control the amount of *teron* you allow to flow into each arrow.’

Adem turned to see Carl and Wil were holding their enchanted bows; drawing back gently on the strings to wield arrows of red and gold flames. The Rahkwel horns sounded again, a mile or two to the east. Bloodthirsty cries of evil humanoids filled the air as Adem saw hundreds of the seven-foot-tall goblin creatures topping the rise a half mile off.

The Rahkwel were olive-green-skinned with large oval eyes that glowed like lanterns. Their ears were pointed like the immortals, and their noses were long and pointed. Most wore dark leathers and brown boots; grey or black armour of overlapping plates down the chest and abdomen. Some wore greaves and leather or metal gauntlets of black, brown, or green. Most had large dark green coats and hoods of wool and many wore conical steel helmets of black, green, or silver with batwing-metal-ears rising from the sides of the helmets.

They carried large wooden bows over their shoulders of black or brown in leather cases with straps across their chests; a sword and quiver balanced at their waist belts. Some carried long swords of curved black metal, others wielded dark axes of half-moon blades balanced by a spike; some carried long black metal spears.

Hundreds poured over the rise and sprinted down towards Adem and the immortals. Adem drew back the strings of the bow till the shaft of fire glowed blinding-blue, then released. The arrow rocketed upwards towards the top of the hillside. When it landed in the thick of the Rahkwel ranks, earth and stone exploded in a crash-like thunder. Over a dozen of the tall-armoured demons were thrown left and right, some with arms or legs torn off and bleeding from the stumps.

He saw that clearly even at such a distance while he held on to *teron*. Blistering fire and ice flowed through him, warming his soul and freezing his flesh and bones, the filth of the taint flowing on that river of light. Jean released an arrow of emerald fire that lanced into the Rahkwel ranks, spraying demons and dirt into the air to similar effect. Carl and Wil stood flanking either side of Adem and Jean, and they unleashed their arrows to create more explosions amongst the Rahkwel ranks.

A dozen or more Guardians joined the onslaught with their bows firing with the lightning speed of immortal kin, their movements a blur as they drew back the string and released. Waves of energy bolts launched upon the goblin ranks to shatter flesh and bone, burning bodies to cinders and stripping flesh from skeletons that collapsed into smoking husks. The force of their Elemental Attacks was much stronger than the Sons and Daughter also, each blast smashing an entire line of enemies on impact that sent body parts flying in spurts of dark blood.

Then Orion shouted, ‘Alit’aren! – Unleash Fire Serpents!’ Lightning bolts thick as gigantic blue pythons launched down from the sky to plummet into the front ranks of Rahkwel that were now only several hundred feet away from Adem and his friends. Adem looked closely at the blue lightning as it crashed to earth and spread outwards through the demon ranks like live serpents, and he saw clearly that the bolts of blue fire were indeed the spirits of giant snakes.

Elmira shouted in her clear high tones, ‘Ael Trael! – Unleash Fire Leopards!’ Rings of golden-orange flames exploded into the air surrounding the charging ranks of Rahkwel. The initial blast sent demons flying into the air in torn and broken pieces. Then the fire became the forms of large golden-orange cats that charged through the Rahkwel ranks setting demon flesh to flame. The Leopards pushed Rahkwel to the earth to bite off skulls and shred

through torsos. Dark blood flowed as limbs were torn free in the jaws of the massive beasts. They moved like lightning as they ploughed through enemy ranks to tear down screaming victims in a bloodbath of anarchy, roaring amidst the thunder that boomed through the heavens with a sudden increase in the lightning storm of pythons.

Within seconds, the first three hundred Rahkwel were halted in their tracks and died in balls of orange and blue fire. No sooner had the first ranks fallen down and died did more horns sound, and over a thousand of the goblin creatures appeared in a line over the hilltop. The first thousand Rahkwel charged forwards while another three hundred appeared at the top of the rise with bows raised and arrows drawn. As they drew back tightly on their bowstrings, Orion shouted to Adem and Jean, ‘Summon your Battle Angels!’

The first waves of arrows were released and flying towards Adem and his friends before he could draw his sword. In his state of panic, he drew the blade with his right hand while still holding his bow with his left. Jean’s Resting Point was the Lukrorian Bow she held however, and her instincts must have told her instantly how to summon her Battle Angel as she looked skyward and cried, ‘Tanriel!’

A wave of emerald light like a great shield of fire exploded outwards from Jean’s form towards the falling arrows. The arrows flashed and flared in golden-green light before each was vanquished by the shield of flames. Above Jean’s form a swirling force of colourful light traced the form of a six-foot-tall woman that morphed into being; wings of blue light fanning from her shoulders. At that astonishing sight, Adem also sensed a raw emanation of energy flowing from the female figure, though it was foreign to him, supposedly because it was the female Power, *terael*. Yet he could detect its presence along with a great thrill of elation that swept over him. It was overwhelming; gifting a sudden spurt of energy and new found courage.

The figure – Tanriel – wore armour of crimson plates; glowing incandescent over a blue burning robe that shone like pale silk, with golden-silver scrollwork upon the hem and sleeves, red horizontal panels glowed across her thighs. Her gauntlets were crimson gold; her skin had the quality of pure transparent blue-white light. Incandescent golden hair was tied back in a braid, and when the Battle Angel turned for a brief moment to look down at Adem, he saw Tanriel had large blue eyes that shone with an inner light. She was beautiful too, for a creature made of fire, and from that glance Adem also sensed great love from this supernatural being, love for *him*, but also for Jean, Carl and Wil, a shared emotion that filled his heart with joy like a wellspring of burning brilliance.

The Battle Angel hovered ten feet above Jean for that brief moment; then launched over twenty feet higher into the sky like a rocket, as a spear of red lightning appeared in her grasp, though, when she unleashed the spear—that crackled with crimson bolts in her fist—a dozen of the incandescent shafts fell and struck the earth within the demon ranks.

Fire exploded outwards in sheets – yellow-orange fire that roared with fury – blasting Rahkwel into dust and smoke, torn flesh and large spurts of dark blood. The Rahkwel screamed in terror. The flames were a form of destruction beyond imagining, it seemed that flesh, bone and armour were turned to vapour where the fire was most concentrated and strongest. Bodies were blasted, melted and obliterated in a massacre of incinerating might. The sound of those flames reminded Adem of a dragon’s roar.

As the demons were vanquished, Adem noticed the balls of coloured flames – some small as a fist though others as large as a pumpkin – of red, yellow, blue, and green floating upwards through the air from the vanquished bodies of the Rahkwel.

The first wave of floating lights had been consumed by the immortals as they were the ones to defeat most of the demons in the first attack. There had been so much fire thrown around he had not noticed it properly until now. The balls of light flew towards Jean, so fast it almost blurred in his vision, and the light was consumed by Jean's Lukrorian Bow. Adem realised this must have been the *ki'mera* energy the defeated demon spirits released.

As a wave of the *ki'mera* was absorbed by Jean, Adem saw Tanriel throw twenty of those crimson spears. Unleashing fire that shot out twice the length and ferocity turning Rahkwel flesh to vapour or blasting bodies into smoking piles of ash. This time it was the Rahkwel archers at the top of the rise she had unleashed her attacks upon, and the enemies there were destroyed in one swift stroke.

In these brief moments, Adem had also understood how to summon Arawn, his Battle Angel. Arawn explained to his mind exactly how the summoning was performed using *teron* to release them from their Resting Points. Instinct told him the rest as he faced charging Rahkwel and shouted, 'Arawn!'

A burst of red fire filled Adem's vision—swirls of crimson energy that rose and flowed into being before his eyes as they began to take the shape of four legged beasts—becoming twelve charging Fire Lions! The beasts filled the air with a deafening roar as they crashed into the front lines of Rahkwel setting flesh and armour to flames. The Lions also chose their victims with a bloodthirsty vengeance. Pushing bodies to the ground to shred through flesh and bone with burning teeth and claws. When those teeth or claws tore through flesh and bone, they left a wave of burning red that melted flesh from their dying enemies that screamed in terrified anguish.

Then out of the spreading yellow-orange flames a flowing, floating unnatural source of darkness took shape, to morph into a spectre of shadows standing ten-feet-tall, the male figure's dark cloak seemed to drink in the light with hungry fervour—as Adem sensed great woe and disharmony from this spirit. Carnage and vehemence, and perhaps also a part of that horrid corruption upon the Power, yet again he sensed deep emotion transferred from this Battle Angel to Adem's soul. A feeling of Brotherhood, from a mighty companion who would serve willingly as his protector—a silver sword hilt of two feet of steel rising from its shoulders as the shadow form stood like a small tower of dominance. Ready to inflict the force of his will over the threat that lay before them, radiating a force similar to the Shadow Men. It seemed this force was less intimidating to Adem and his friends—although felt—as if that force was being aimed at the Rahkwel hordes, evil to frighten evil.

The Battle Angel, Arawn, drew the seven-foot-long steel broadsword from its ebony scabbard in a flare of brilliance; the blade burning blood red like the Fires of the Dark One's Soul! Arawn's sword swung wildly; severing Rahkwel skulls from their shoulders, tearing off arms and legs, cutting whole demons in two. As the blade tore through demon flesh, more Fire Lions launched outwards from the fire of the blade, biting off skulls in dark sprays; their roars filled the air amidst a stronger rumble of thunder in the skies.

As the Lions crashed through enemy lines, the flames from their bodies exploded outwards in circular sheets to blast demon bodies into charred chunks and piles. A rupture of

energy to tear through flesh and bone that took down dozens of goblins with every pounce, their paws pounding against the earth leaving prints of burning light.

Ki'mera orbs began flying towards Adem also to be absorbed by his sword. As they were absorbed, he felt them recharge Arawn's attacks. He also felt the taint of evil from those demon souls. He wondered how this had never infected their Great Angels with the taint in all their tens of thousands of years of history, or however long they had existed.

He also felt something wonderful happen then; Arawn and Tanriel became linked in their attacks. When this happened, Adem could sense Jean; he could sense her mind, her fear, and her excitement. Being joined to her in that way was beyond his imaginings, though he knew part of her fear was that she could sense the taint on the male half of the Power that flowed through his veins.

Adem saw that Arawn wore a silver human skull mask worked with black runes; his eyes were large caverns of endless yellow-orange flames. The Battle Angel's hair was shadows tied back with a silver ring worked with black runes, gauntlets of black runes on steel. His armour was black overlapping plates down the chest and abdomen, like the scales of a snake; a large silver human skull embossed upon the chest.

Adem thought he was terrifying and magnificent!

The Link between the two Battle Angels increased the strength of their attacks. Lightning bolts thick as pythons blasted out sideways in all directions from the spears to mix with the fire; lightning also exploded from the forms of the Fire Lions. The scale of their massacre was suddenly increased tenfold; energies unleashed by the Battle Angels built to a crescendo, Elemental Magic exploding with extreme force as demons screamed in terror.

Ki'mera orbs flowed like a river of light through the air from the dark sea of bodies that were piled high as hundreds more Rahkwel continued to charge down the hillside. The immortals appeared to be resting at this point, and they also appeared to be watching in awe of the display.

Finally, Adem heard the call of dozens of horses, followed by the cheers of the immortals, as white, black, and dark brown horses charged towards them from the west, moving with such speed they appeared blurred like phantoms. Some had the look of Mustangs; others were built like Clydesdales and some even looked similar to a Caspian or even Mongolian horse, though most had the sleek muscular builds more attributed to Thoroughbreds, large eyes filled with kindness. No matter how they looked, all moved with a speed that was supernatural, charging across the landscape in a gliding, flowing manner. Adem breathed a sigh of relief, but he was also spellbound by the grand nature of these beings, their rescuers. They were a sign of hope in this desolate place.

The dozen or more Guardians were still picking off the outside straggler Rahkwel with their bows, sending explosive arrows of coloured flames flying into their dark-armoured packs. Skulls and limbs were blasted through the air as ruined corpses collapsed or were torn apart in bursts of dark flowing blood. Carl and Wil still stood to either side of Adem and Jean using their bows, their attacks growing stronger each time they released an arrow of flame, an explosion that took out ten Rahkwel, then fifteen, and then twenty. The last two must have taken out fifty each before Orion shouted, 'Carl Wilder! Wil Martyr! Summon your Battle Angels!'

Carl and Wil flipped their bows back over their shoulders to slide them into the cases as if they were born to it. Then Wil drew his golden axe from his belt loop, and Carl lifted his spear from the sliding harness that held it to the back of his bow case.

Wil shouted, ‘Eledisren!’ A murder of black crows swarmed out of the air above Wil’s head; they seemed to be born from the air only inches above his skull, over fifty of them. The crows appeared to be made of shadows; red-gold fire wreathed the tips of their wings and their eyes glowed blood red.

The birds flocked together as they dived to the earth with a shuddering force of impact, to take the form of a ten-foot-tall figure in a long hooded cloak of shadows, long thick shadow locks of hair falling around a wide muscular face with large dark eyes that looked to be filled with either sadness or hate. That same force as Arawn’s emanated from the massive figure, a purely unnatural sense of foreboding and ill will permeated the very air. Strangely this again seemed to boost the courage of Adem and his friends.

The same black scale-like armour covered his chest with shadow sleeves, trousers, and boots; a necklace of silver monkey skulls hung against his wide chest. He saw these features in the brief moment the huge figure turned to regard Wil and his friends. With a black gauntleted fist, Eledisren – or Dis Pater – drew a massive double half-moon bladed axe of golden light that he used to hack into the front lines of the charging Rahkwel bodies.

Dis Pater was a wrecking force as he tore through demon bodies with mad vehemence, blood and bones flying in his wake as he roared like some demigod Viking, a deep booming war cry that sent shockwaves through the enemy ranks, demons halting with eyes wide in terror before they were cut into pieces.

Seven-foot-tall goblins went flying through the air wherever Dis Pater’s swinging battleaxe was seen glowing with electric light. Limbs and skulls flying with sprays of dark blood—as the blade sliced through armoured bodies as if they were made of tinfoil and butter—with a golden orange flame spreading from every swipe that melted demon bodies; falling as smoking skeletons.

The Flame Crows moved to the air again to swoop upon the demons with another earth shuddering force, crushing demon flesh and bones; flames burning bodies to smoking corpses. The caws of the Crows joined with the roar of Lions. The birds swooped again to peck at eyes and faces in a feeding frenzy, tearing down victims, plucking out eyeballs to devour them in snapping blood filled beaks.

Almost at the same moment that Wil had summoned Eledisren, Carl shouted, ‘Math Mathonwy!’ Twelve Shadow Hounds, all the size of large ponies with dark shadow skin, charged out of Carl’s form to race towards the front lines of Rahkwel. The black beasts had teeth and claws that looked to be made from steel and yellow-orange flames occasionally danced across their shadow flesh. Hellhounds gave ferocious snarls and barks as they ploughed into the Rahkwel forces, biting heads clean off and cutting bodies in half with their massive razor-sharp claws. Their savage war cry was almost deafening, the howls of creatures of shadows and death.

From the bodies of the Shadow Hounds rose an eight-foot-tall figure in a blood red cape of fire, the cape appeared first as if some crimson demon wraith had swept onto the field; shadows and light that traced the rest of the Battle Angel’s form into being. The figure wielded a massive red spear that was used like a quarterstaff to swing left and right, slicing

through demon flesh, splitting or decapitating demon skulls; releasing a brilliant red fire that spread through the demon ranks.

Adem saw that Math Mathonwy wore glowing golden armour in overlapping plates; shadows formed his trousers, boots, and coat with gauntlets of burning gold. His face was that of a bearded man with blazing white eyes, his skin made of a blue-white glow. A conical helmet formed of golden light with eagles' wings on both sides; his long flowing beard was golden flame, and this third male spirit added his force of dominance to the environment. A promise of deadly carnage bleeding through space and time that was both unsettling and invigorating to behold.

Math Mathonwy soon joined his Brothers on the battlefield, three enormous figures bathing the earth in blood; hacking through flesh and bone with unrelenting skill and speed. The sense of terror amongst their victims began to build in shrieks and screams, bodies falling like burst sacks of grain, spilling out flows of dark blood with limbs and skulls flying through the air. The crimson sword, and spear, and axe of gold, began to emanate an ominous force of energies that sprayed upon their enemies in shockwaves, blasting through armour to tear gaping wounds of burning light the size of cannon balls.

Then suddenly, Adem felt the four Battle Angels begin to link together for one final attack. The *altherin* horses were close now, which Adem guessed was the first reason Orion had told Carl and Wil to summon their Battle Angels. The second reason he guessed was what appeared at the top of the rise to the east. More than three thousand Rahkwel began charging down the hillside with other creatures that seemed to be formed completely of shadows. With sharp fang-shaped eyes of red flames—demons Adem recognized from his first visions of this world—the creatures had dark bull's or ram's horns on black ram skulls, and their fangs and claws were razor sharp.

There were hundreds of the creatures within the ranks; some wore glowing crimson armour and carried dark spears and shields. They were also as tall as the Rahkwel. There was that now familiar force of evil radiating from the demons also, though not as strong as a single Shadow Rider. Their bulk created an overwhelming sense of dread amongst the Saviours and the immortal kin, as Orion held his glowing amber blade high and roared in defiance against the Power of the Shadow.

Adem sensed a link between Orion and his wife, Elmira, as the immortal king and queen began to wield a vast source of the Power, detectable only in *teron* for Adem. But he also guessed Elmira was involved. A swarm of blazing blue bolts fell to strike the demon horde like desperate claws of light. From these claws spread burning orange Leopards that gorged on goblin flesh and blood as shockwaves of energy blasted the enemy twelve ranks deep.

A second swarm of Elemental Magic began to fly from Elmira's fingertips, first in the shape of pure blue burning spheres; that took the form of winged fairies of light as they took flight. The sprites moving with lightning speed to hammer into the enemy ranks, blasting bodies apart in a bloody massacre.

At the same time the earth heaved under the goblin and demon horde, as great chasms split under their feet and bodies fell into their gaping depths. Walls of crimson flame sprayed in fountains that raced across the soil to vaporize flesh and bone, leaving smoking piles of ash.

As the remaining demon army approached, the *altherin* horses charged and flowed into their view – over ninety horses in the herd – between Adem and his friends and the Rahkwel forces. The horses skidded to a halt, their phantom images becoming flesh as they slowed enough for his eyes to rest upon their forms. Up close they were unique compared to any other horse he had ever seen. With a deep cut to their muscles, a pride to their eyes and a grace of movement that spoke of an enchanted species.

They had no saddles or harness, nothing to grab on to but their manes. Still, a horse moved to each potential rider and bowed their heads as if to offer Adem and his friends to climb on to their backs. This all happened in the few seconds while the four Battle Angels began to Link. Adem grasped the mane of a tall muscular black stallion and pulled himself up on to its back.

Jean mounted a white mare, and Carl and Wil climbed on to dark brown stallions. The horses halted for a few brief moments. Whether it was to watch the display by the Battle Angels or whether they were taunting the Rahkwel as they neighed in proud horse chant as they rose up on their hind legs, Adem did not know. Though, Adem and his friends were watching the Battle Angels.

Adem felt the fire of the three male Battle Angels in his mind, three Brothers of the Underworld combining their Dark Powers with the Power of an Angel of the High Realm. They were four Old Friends, old as the wind and rain, old as Father Time, a hundred thousand years old – No! A million years! No! A hundred million years! No! They were older than the Age of the Great Dragons!

Ancient beings forged of the Five Powers – Fire, Water, Earth, Air, and Spirit! Ancient beyond imagining! Since the Dawn of Ages, these Great Angels had worked together to fight the Demon Armies of the Dark One that had plagued Kismeria.

Visions flashed through his mind of these Great Angels in those ancient days. They were ten times as large, and they walked on the clouds, throwing down fire and lightning to destroy the demons that walked the earth. He sensed his friends' minds also, their fears, their anticipation; he knew they saw the same visions through the Link. His mind fought the visions to return to the present.

Clouds swirled over the demon army, dark grey clouds that became a whirlpool vortex strong enough to lift some of the demons high into the sky as the vortex became a tornado. Tanriel hovered at the peak of that storm where blue lightning bolts fell a dozen at a time. The finger of the tornado reached down to the earth as massive wings formed on the backs of the three male Battle Angels. Math Mathonwy's wings were red flames, Arawn's were black shadows, and Dis Pater's were golden light.

The three male Battle Angels were swept up into the tornado. The cloud vortex growing wider until it hovered above the swarming demon army that again must have numbered over three thousand. Lightning fell from the clouds, red lightning, blue lightning, and golden, crimson, emerald lightning; then in a flickering magnificence—that turned the darkness of this land into the light of a bright sunlit day—it seemed that perhaps more lightning bolts fell than there were demons on the field below as a crack of thunder filled the heavens that sounded like the roar of Odin's Awakening!

In the next instant, the three male Battle Angels swept back down on to the earth breaking off in three directions through the heart of the demon army – the clouds of the

tornado sweeping down with them to spread across the earth in the wake of the Great Angels – Math Mathonwy unleashing a hundred Shadow Hounds, Dis Pater releasing a murder of Crows that must have numbered over three hundred, and Arawn releasing over fifty Fire Lions!

Rahkwel and other demons continued to pour down the hillside, but they seemed to freeze in terror of this attack when they witnessed its might. The three male Battle Angels in the thick of the battle wielding their massive enchanted weapons to drive the demons into retreat. Tanriel threw down a hundred of her red spears that released blasts of fire and lighting; spreading sideways as long and as deep as the demon army itself.

Flame Crows smashed into the earth with a deafening shudder, demolishing demon bodies in blasts of fire and ashes. They soared high again to crash land against another demon horde as their forms mixed with the magic of charging Lions and Hounds. The forms and light of the three kinds of Spirit Warden seeming to morph and meld to create glowing monstrosities that turned everything in their path to blood and fire—and in some cases Adem saw these unified lines of energies took a form similar to sinuous glowing dragons that devoured their prey in ravenous jaws—armour melting to slag as bodies exploded in their paths, Crow, Hound and Lion filling the air with cries of bloodthirsty rage.

Ki'mera orbs filled the sky, flying towards Adem, Jean, Carl, and Wil as their *altherin* horses cried out once more. Standing on their hind legs before they began to bolt into the distance at such speeds that the dark lava cracked land moved towards Adem's vision in a blur of burning shadows. The immortals had all found mounts within that time, and they were all riding alongside Adem and his friends. They crossed a great distance from the Rahkwel army in a matter of moments before Adem looked back to see the four Battle Angels flying towards the Sons of Odin and Daughter of Thor, with thousands of *ki'mera* orbs flowing behind them.

The Battle Angels and the *ki'mera* orbs were absorbed by the Resting Points of Adem's and his friends' enchanted weapons. Though this time Adem noticed the *ki'mera* orbs being absorbed by his flesh also, the balls of light flying into his chest and filling his spirit with a recharge despite the sense of evil that came with the energy force.

The next three days passed without much rest and with little sleep. It took over fourteen hours to reach the edges of the East Lands when Orion and the immortals decided it was safe to rest the horses and allow Adem and his friends to get some rest. The immortals had some dried beef and flat bread and cheese in small belt pouches that they shared with Adem and his friends. There was no game to hunt this far to the east as the land was still barren and cracked with lava with stunted black trees.

The next day the horses moved at breakneck speeds, Orion explained that *altherin* horses could easily run at three times the speed of mortal horses, and Adem knew a mortal horse could travel up to one hundred miles in a day with some rest and water if pushed to limits that were detrimental to the animal. These *altherin* breed horses were pushed to their limits at the speeds they travelled across the East Lands that day, and the next though Orion assured Adem the horses could recover with a few weeks rest.

They travelled west and north-west on the third day until the horses slowed at Orion's command as the white stone walls of Nordhel were gleaming in the bright early afternoon light on wide green fields that stretched for miles in all directions with enormous snow-

capped blue stone mountains rising in the distance. The land had shifted and transformed in a blurring of the eyes during that three days of riding. Farms, villages, mountains, and rivers had taken shape only to vanish moments after as the horses moved swiftly and with ease across the open plains.

They had stopped to rest for four hours on the second night also, and by this time, they had crossed the Borderlands that were protected by the Seven Borderland Kingdoms of the Green Border. Orion had explained that although three of the Borderland Kingdoms were Immortal Kingdoms, there were no Immortal Kings residing in any of them and that they were under the supervision of the three immortal sons of the Nordic King, Tobin Fireheart.

They moved into a slow trot to make the remainder of the journey to the rising walls of Nordhel. Deer and stags covered the lands surrounding the city – sprawling for over ten miles in a large diamond shape – and rabbits scurried through the long flowered grasses chased by ferrets and foxes who followed them into their burrows. Tall trees of pine, oak, and redwood were scattered across the fields, some rising over a hundred feet with thick trunks and wide leafy foliage.

Birds of many colours perched in the branches and their song put Adem's mind at ease after the episode with the Rahkwel and Nymloc – they were the dark-skinned demons with the fang-shaped eyes of flame – where they had also had their first chance to witness the powers of their Battle Angels.

Talegon and Kelflax sounded their horns as they approached the raised portcullis of the outer wall main gate.

An escort of immortal Guardians on horseback rode out of the gateway to flank them on both sides as they crossed the last mile to the gate. A tall fair-skinned immortal man – with large dark blue eyes and golden hair tied back in a long tail – greeted them at the entrance to the gate on a tall dark horse. The man's name was Captain Nem Odellin; he wore the Guardian cloak over a polished black breastplate with gold serpentine dragons, dark leather trousers, and knee-high brown leather boots.

A Lukrorian Bow of green-and-gold hung from his saddle case, and a golden sword hilt stuck up above his right shoulder. 'Greetings, King Orion, Queen Elmira,' Nem said in deep tones similar to Orion. His blond moustache and pointed goatee was fashioned similarly to Orion's dark moustache and downward-pointed tuft of hair falling from his lower lip to below his chin.

Talegon and Kelflax were identical in their dark facial hair also, as were most of the Guardians he had seen so far. 'Are these the Children of Prophecy?' Nem asked with a look of wonder in his eyes. 'The three Sons of Odin?—And the Daughter of Thor?'

'They are the Four Children of Salvation,' Orion said boldly. 'They have already proven their worth, though they came to the foretold place at the foretold hour of the First Arrival.'

'They are the Blue Water Dragon, the Red Fire Lion, the Black Shadow Wolf, and the White Snow Fox, of Prophecy and Legend. This I declare as King of the Torvellen.' Nem bowed low to Adem and his friends before he straightened and said to Orion, 'King Tobin has been expecting you for three days now. He became very concerned when you did not return on the first day of the Arrival. My heart is gladdened that you have all returned here safely. What delayed you, may I ask?'

‘The taint has already infected the Travelling Gates,’ Orion explained. ‘We were transported to the East Lands where we had to do battle with Rahkwel and Nymloc. It was a bloodthirsty battle though a good first lesson for our Saviours.’

‘Yes, the taint,’ Nem agreed. ‘Already it seeps through *teron* to flood my flesh and bones, my very spirit recoils at the vileness of it. I will waste no more of your time, Your Majesties.’ Nem then waved them towards the tunnel that led to the inner wall.

Orion and Elmira travelled through first with Adem and his friends following after. Guardians on horseback and on foot moved about the courtyard between the outer wall and inner wall. The ground was white paved-stone triangular blocks so large Adem did not know how they would have lifted them without use of the Power. The Guardians seemed to know who they were seeing when they set eyes on Adem and his friends, and they bowed or got down on one knee with fists pressed to hearts.

‘Are they bowing to their king and queen?’ Jean asked Elmira. Elmira smiled warmly at Jean as she explained, ‘We are not their king and queen. They are Nordics. They bow and salute to the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor.’

Chapter

5

The Nordics

The ride towards the Palace was a strange experience. The city within the inner wall was formed of grey stone pavement with stone fountains; statues of strange mythical creatures and some that he guessed were sculptures of Great Angels.

The inns were mostly large sprawling buildings with tile or slate roofs of bright blues, reds, yellows, or greens. Every roof was either slate or tile, some worked with an assortment of colours.

Thousands of Guardians walked the streets with Lukrorian Bows across their backs and long swords at their hips, all wearing the Guardian cloaks that blended with the grey stone streets and buildings.

Some bowed down at their passing – both men and women, Alit’aren and Ael Trael – when they realised it was the Children of Prophecy who rode with King Orion and Queen Elmira.

The Palace of Nordhel rose before them as they climbed the steps and streets that were built over hillsides – a gleaming white system of rectangular slabs layered in a pyramid fashion with enormous white towers, bridges, and walkways rising and extended off its sides.

Flags and banners blew atop the towers in the warm evening breeze; the blue sky above filled with fluffy white clouds. Eagles, hawks, and falcons flew through the skies though they must have been hunting the rabbits and smaller prey that moved through the surrounding fields as Orion explained the city, and Palace was sealed off by invisible wards that kept all manner of vermin outside the outer walls.

‘Rats are spies of the Dark One,’ Orion explained, ‘though they have to report back to the Shadow Riders and Shadow Men. However, Shadow Riders can teleport through shadows to report directly to the Shadow Men or the Dark One.’

They crossed through the gateway to the Palace Courtyard where they passed more dark coated men, though Orion explained, ‘These men are Devoted – or Apprentice Alit’aren,’ who bowed or got down on their knees to pay tribute to the Arrival. ‘Gai’den is the name given to the second-level Apprentices who are in training to become Alit’aren.’

As they made their way to the Royal Stables where stablemen took their horses, Adem asked Jean about her knowledge of Anna.

‘She is my agent’ was really all Jean could tell him besides, ‘she approached me during a photo shoot in Los Angeles. She told me she would make me a big star, and she told me I had the aura for it. She bought me the ticket to Australia.’

‘She said I should make a name for myself in Australian television or films. Why do you ask, Adem?’ Adem did not tell her at this stage that Orion had explained that Anna was actually a part of the spirit of the wife of Odin, or the whole of the Great Angel in mind and spirit, whatever the case was.

The Alit’aren he later noticed wore not only the pins of the Wolf, Lion, and Dragon on their collars but also on their belt buckles. The Alit’aren belt buckles were a circular disc of a sinuous line dividing a half-white, half-black circle – only these sigils had the red lion over the white half and the blue dragon over the black.

‘What is that symbol?’ Adem asked, to which Orion replied, ‘The Krielden sigil is the symbol of the Power of the Saviours. The Black Wolf half of the disc represents the Shadow and the taint, and the White Fox half represents the Power of the Light. The Lion and the Dragon are mediators between the Light and the Shadow, as both Powers flow through them.’

After climbing a flight of wide stone stairs they entered the main doors of the Palace through high red-and-golden double doors. Their journey through the Palace was one of mixed feelings of nervousness and awe at the wonders that lay sprawled wall to wall—statues formed of pure gold-and-silver were displayed in shapes of dragons and other animals, including one of three stags which was said to be symbolic of the Sons. Servants in black livery slashed with red, white, or blue, moving busily about the hallways where guards, soldiers, and Guardians also stood at every corner and staircase.

During their walk through the palace up the many levels towards the room where King Tobin and his wife, Queen Lydia, awaited them, Orion explained ‘The Four Rohjors were also formed under the same symbols of power – the Fox Rohjor, the Wolf Rohjor, the Lion Rohjor, and the Dragon Rohjor. Rohjors are four separate governing bodies through which the Alit’aren and Ael Trael work their schemes and politics to organize armies,

societies, even rulers, and they are essentially like Covens with their own set of rules and laws, however any immoral king or queen can overrule any decision made by each Rohjor Council.'

'So who will have dominion over the immortal kings and queens, then?' Jean asked in almost mischievous but self-important tones, 'As the Sons of Odin bring a toxic trouble to the male half of the Power, and even the immortal kings are at risk of turning mad from its corruption, holding sway over the decisions of their wives.'

'So surely then, only the White Snow Fox could be supreme ruler with the right to command immortal kings and queens, and to overrule even *their* decisions, for the leader of Kismertia must also be pure of heart and mind.'

Orion raised a pointed brow perhaps in shock at the sudden rise in confidence of the Daughter of Thor, and her words seemed to penetrate his wards against revealing emotion, though Adem saw the man was troubled by them as he continued his tour. Her burst in confidence even made Adem a little nervous.

After climbing seven levels, they reached large double doors of polished oak worked with golden lions. Guards greeted them and allowed entrance to a large study; high ceilings with golden cherub cornices. The roof was painted blue skies and white clouds with colourful birds flying through the air; falcons, eagles, and hawks with brightly coloured wing tips.

King Tobin and Queen Lydia sat on tall rectangular-backed thrones of carved oak, large red-and-gold lions forming the armrests on either side. Tobin was similar looking to Orion – light skinned with large dark eyes and dark silken hair tied back in a tail. This king and his queen were the other half of the two pairs of immortal rulers Adem had first seen in his dreams and visions of this world, those incredible warriors that fought against the Shadow for an Age or more, and there was evidence in the eyes of the two men in particular, that they were perhaps older than the tallest trees that stood in the nearby forest, for the experience and wisdom of hundreds of years could be seen and understood when gazing into those eyes, and the women also had eyes that saw beyond the years of experience of the life span of any mortal, at least any mortal not able to wield the Power.

Tobin had the same thick dark moustache and goatee as Orion also. He wore a gold crown worked with lions standing with their front paws outstretched with ruby eyes. His gown was dark blue silk with gold-and-silver lions across the shoulders, cuffs, and hem, as well as down the dividing halves of the robe; a belt of golden medallions with ruby-eyed lion faces embossed on each.

'Welcome, King Orion, Queen Elmira,' Tobin said in deep tones. 'I see you have brought the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor. I am gladdened by their Arrival. Already I sense the taint on the male half of the Power, as I have for three days now, though it is the first part of the Prophecy, the first stage of our fate.'

Adem considered his brief visit to Kismertia with the tower and goblin and the Shadow Rider. That must have been years ago in the history of Kismertia though the taint was not felt from this time to the time he arrived with his friends. He decided it was either that he was not fully within the world of Kismertia in that first short visit, or that it required all three of the Sons of Odin to bring the taint to *teron*.

Queen Lydia was tall and slender with firm muscles and glowing pale skin. Her eyes were large blue fire, and her hair was like golden silk tied in a thick braid similar to Queen

Elmira. She wore a gown of white silk with a hooded silk cloak of pale blue worked with silver scrollwork and white foxes around the edges. A diamond tiara sat on her brow, threaded into her hair and diamond rings sat upon gold bands on both hands. A belt of gold-and-silver medallions hung from her slender waist; a gold necklace with a large diamond nestled between her ample bosoms.

She was strikingly beautiful like Queen Elmira, despite their large eyes and pointed ears that took some time to get used to. Their eyebrows were pointed too, all the immortals; they looked like elves basically. *They are elves!* Adem thought excitedly.

‘Welcome, Daughter of Thor,’ Lydia said as she rose to make her way down the red-carpeted floor towards Jean with her hands outstretched in greeting. ‘You have the proud face of a great warrior woman. You are everything the Prophecies have foretold and more than we could have expected. I look forward to training you to wield *terael*.

‘We will make you the most powerful Ael Trael ever. I sense the potential for great power flowing through you. We will see what we can yield of this potential. Come, we will leave the men to drink and feast and you shall talk with Elmira and me about your home world and its wonders.’

Elmira and Lydia then led Jean out through a side door with their arms linked to hers. They talked softly as they went, and four Ael Trael who had stood in front of the doors followed the women out of the room. Adem noticed four Guardians following the women down the hallway before they vanished from sight.

‘They will be well guarded,’ Tobin said to Adem. ‘Now, we will drink and feast to celebrate the First Arrival. We have much to discuss though it can wait for you to eat and refresh yourselves. Follow me, to the Royal Dining Hall.’

Eight Guardians with swords at their hips strode along in front of them as they exited the room. They had been standing guard when Adem and his friends first entered, all tall with fair skin – some dark haired and dark eyed, while others had golden hair with blue or green eyes.

Orion explained that the Nordics formed the base of the entire immortal race. Some had tanned skin, and others had skin as dark as coal – like the Ruhalden, who were the Sea Immortals. Orion explained that some Ruhalden had light brown skin with dark hair and eyes though most were very dark skinned; however, some still had blue or green eyes.

The dining hall was very large with a huge polished oak table with over fifty high-backed cushioned chairs surrounding it. Ambassadors of the four immortal clans – the Nordics, the Torvellen, the Dremelden, and the Ruhalden – were present at the banquet, and they were all very tall with large eyes, pointed ears, and brows. They held themselves with confidence, and their eyes were filled with wisdom and strength.

Wil found himself surrounded by half a dozen Ruhalden, and Carl became engrossed in conversation with four of the Dremelden while Adem sat with Tobin and Orion while they picked at plates of bread and cheese, duck, and turkey.

The long dining table was covered with dishes of roasted meats and vegetables, fruits, breads, and cheeses. They drank pints of ale or spiced red wines from ornate goblets. Guardians of the four clans were stationed around the room in their native garb, the Torvellen in the camouflage-style *torin’sidhe*, the Nordics in bright coats and armour, the Dremelden also wore the *torin’sidhe* under their cloaks, and the Ruhalden wore bright silks – baggy

trousers and short coats over colourful silk shirts – their coats and trousers usually worked with silver-and-gold scrollwork, or square or triangular patterns; the colours never matched and were garish to the eye. Ruhalden also wore large curved blades at their belts in ornately coloured scabbards, gold rings in their ears, and jewelled rings upon their fingers.

They look like pirates! Adem thought to himself.

‘Do you have many ships,’ Wil was asking, to which a dark skinned Ruhalden replied with serious nodding, ‘Big ships, small ships, fast ships, long-ships, junks, row boats. Yes, Wil Martyr, we have a generous fleet of sailing vessels mostly, for transport of goods, going to war, but mostly we love to sail.’

‘I should like to see some of these vessels,’ Wil replied in earnest, though he appeared a little short of conversation. ‘I like motorboats.’ This brought on an odd series of furious nodding and confounded facial expressions, and much gesturing and chin rubbing from the immortal men, before the same man asked, ‘What manner of vessel is this?’

The hours rolled by, and the conversation grew louder as the men consumed ale and wine and ate to their hearts’ content. Orion and Tobin seemed most concerned with training Adem and his friends to wield the Power and use their weapons. They explained that this would increase the strength of their Battle Angels, and this would encourage other Great Angels to join their cause. Tobin explained that not all Great Angels would wish serve the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor as Battle Angels. ‘It will take some time for them to trust you,’ Tobin remarked. ‘Your good deeds and your success in battles will bring fame to your names, and this will attract the interest of other Great Angels. You will need more Battle Angels to win this war.’

The next three months were spent in training. By day, the three Sons of Odin practiced with their weapons against Nordic Guardians within the Palace Courtyard. In the evenings, they were trained to wield the Lord’s Power – the Power – by Alit’aren of the four immortal clans. Adem’s Battle Angel assisted him with knowledge of weapons, the Power, and strategies of war.

This knowledge was passed to Adem’s mind through the *kigare* although Adem never summoned Arawn to obtain this information. *Ki’mera* levels were low for the Battle Angels after the encounter with the Rahkwel and Nymloc. So the Battle Angels were allowed to rest and gain strength from the growing abilities of the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor.

They held enough *ki’mera* orbs to withstand another attack similar to the first battle, though the immortals warned that it would be unwise to go seeking out demons to battle with to try to obtain more *ki’mera* when they felt that the Saviours were still in need of many years of training.

Sword training was perhaps the most gruelling for Adem, physically, and draining also. He started off with a number of Blademasters teaching him the forms of weaponry, but particularly the sword in Adem’s case. Forms of the sword and other weaponry had particular names also, starting with the Four Stances, of the Wolf, Lion, Dragon or Fox. Then forms were given elaborate names to describe the style of each move, names like Red Tiger Dances,

Silver Swan, Sickle Moon and Right Stirrup. There were possibly thousands of names like these, with some attributed only to a particular weapon.

Blademaster's preferred the Wolf Stance to begin most forms, though the Lion and Dragon were also popular for Guardians and other male warriors, while the Fox Stance was most commonly only taught to women as a starting point to all female named forms.

Within the first week of sword training Adem's muscles and bones had begun to ache to extremes, and Carl and Wil complained of the same. They did not see Jean much during those early days of training, as the Ael Trael and Blademaidens that were teaching her preferred to keep her separate from the men, and Adem suspected, and hoped, it had something to do with their noticing Jean's feelings for Adem.

They used wooden weapons in the early stages of training, at least when fighting against well trained opponents, but they always wielded their steel to practice the forms without a combatant, to learn to become fluid in their movements with the weight and balance of each weapon. This part of their training was more meditative, a kind of dance of rhythms and flows from one form to the next, Bear Claw with a downward swipe of the blade from up high, changing into White Ram Charges, a kind of spearing of the sword to drive into the chest of the opponent if contact was made—which left a nasty bruise and scratches whenever Adem failed to deflect such a move against a wooden sword—and perhaps finishing with Crimson Sun, which was a skull splitting swipe from up high again, though the aim was to swing the sword up through the abdomen and chest of your opponent first, to open them up before bringing the blade down in a spray of blood. It was therefore needless to say that your opponent would be well massacred if any or all of those moves made contact.

Adem's lack of skill at deflecting these kinds of moves early on was the main reason he preferred to practice alone, moving through the forms without an opponent to potentially wound him, for which they often received special forms of Healing to repair physical damage to their flesh and bones. Bruises were apparently quite simple to repair with the Power, though forcing bone fractures to knit back together in a few minutes required more skill and concentration, and exertion. Lira usually saw to these wound Healings, and Adem began to feel somewhat comfortable around the woman, as she began to symbolise the caring aunt that sought to nurse him back to health every time he suffered serious pain or injury, as well as her other daily Healings to keep the taint removed from his psyche.

During these three months, Adem's ability to wield also increased dramatically. He learnt to lift and move objects or even people with the Power of Air. This was an early form of magic, used by the First Immortal Kin in the First Age—that was in fact hundreds of millions of years after the Dawn of Ages when the Great Angels were first made and began to craft the world—and it was a magic that was taught to the Immortals by various Battle Angels during those first days following the arrival of elves. This practice of magic required some focus on the object or materials you wished to levitate, as he harnessed the Power and felt its electric glow filling his every fibre, then *teron* was formed into weaves—microfilaments of energy that were visible in patterns of various colours to the eyes of the wielder, making it easier to understand the style of weaving for each form of magic spell—and these weaves were also visible to other male wielders present, which is partly how Adem was first instructed on how to create each weave, the other method was through

communication with Arawn via the *kigare*, through which spells and various other talents were often explained.

Air was a difficult element to master, though these weaves were taught early for this very reason, as it increased the ability to harness *teron* and create easier weaves wielding the elements of Fire and Earth, which were a strength for Alit'aren in particular, while Ael Tarael were more often stronger in Water and Air, although again Air was difficult for even Ael Tarael to wield to create extremely powerful shields on a vast scale without being linked with a number of other wielders.

When making an object levitate, Adem felt somewhat connected with the object once it began to move, like an extension of his physical form, particularly his arms, similar to the sensation of holding a sword as an extension of his physical self. Smaller objects were obviously much easier to move or lift than a boulder or a human body, as the increased weight of an object required a significant increase in the amount of *teron* that was harnessed to achieve the feat. It actually took the better part of the first two months before he could even shift one of the heavy set Guardians he was attempting to levitate, and when he managed to make them float it would be only a few inches off the ground for a short time. He thought he could do better if linked with Carl and Wil however, though that was mostly forbidden during the early stages of training.

He learnt to make walls of flame with Fire, and he learnt to throw lightning from his bare hands. This was perhaps his favourite aspect of all the training he had learnt so far, as it showed him his own potential for destructive forces against his enemies. Fire and lightning was easier to acquire, and although the weaves were still quite complex to master in the beginning, once practiced for a number of weeks, he was able to hurl a blazing blue bolt of flame from either hand almost instinctively. He did not fully understand the nature of how the body and brain were working so quickly to form the weaves, after harnessing *teron*, and then unleashing each attack as fast as he could gesture, but it seemed this complex arrangement of thought, spiritual channelling and finally the release of the energies through action, were achieved in a matter of microseconds once the weaves were learnt to the degree of being called mastered.

He loved the feeling of lightning in his veins also, it was an ecstatic sensation; he felt so alive from the Power he thought he might explode before he unleashed each attack upon the stuffed dummies that burst into flames on impact. The force of the blasts was also considerable, as sometimes even stone boulders could be split by the impact of a bolt of lightning or bar of burning brilliance, suggesting it would also make a mess of any physical body it came into contact with, before burning the creature to a ball of cinders.

'Good, Adem Highlander, you are getting better already,' his magic instructor would tell him approvingly. 'Remember to focus on your breathing, at times in a relaxed state of little control of each gentle breath, though you must also concentrate on the techniques to increase circulation of air in the blood when you are under heavy exertion via continued wielding.'

'Yes, Alit'aren Torin,' Adem would reply, 'I always strive to do as you command.'

'That is good also, Adem, you are a fine pupil. I see great potential in you, and perhaps the skills necessary to become a leader. Though Carl Wilder is swifter when it comes to learning weaves, you are second and Wil Martyr needs to do some catching up.'

‘Your strength in wielding Fire is exceptional amongst the three of you however; it is quite remarkable in fact to see you draw so much so quickly. You unleash your attacks with such skill and efficiency.’

‘Thank you, Alit’aren Torin.’

‘Just call me Torin,’ the dark eyed immortal replied, ‘and I shall try to remember to call you just by your fist name also, Adem, for we have become friends, have we not?’

Adem was stunned and elated to receive such praise and such kind words from his teacher, he was baffled for thinking of how to reply before he simply said, ‘Friends we are.’

‘That is well then,’ the man said with arms crossed in his dark Alit’aren coat. ‘But tell me more of your emotions, for these can cloud your focus and judgement at crucial moments in battle. You have strong feelings for the Daughter of Thor, is this not true?’

‘Admittedly, Jean is very beautiful,’ Adem said as he felt he might be beginning to blush with heat rising to his cheeks.

‘Yes; and the Daughter of Thor is also kind and wise and quick in her words and actions. But I wonder, would you go so far as to admit that you even *love* her?’

‘I admit that,’ Adem said timidly, his feelings for Jean were well known throughout the kingdom by now, but he was always shy about expressing those emotions, and guarded, as if he wished to keep it a secret all to himself, despite everyone already knowing how he felt.

‘That is a splendid thing.’ Torin remarked. ‘Love is all powerful, and if she feels the same way as you, and I believe from what I observe of her that she does also have strong feelings for you, then the two of you will form a special bond beyond even the magic of the *kigare*. It will unite you, make you both stronger at times of doubt and self pity, more courageous in battle as love fans the fires of your hearts, but beware, there is a flip side to this wonderful emotion, that you may become too attached to Jean Fairsythe. You may feel completely responsible for her protection and well being, perhaps to the point that you or she both forsake your own caution for safety and self preservation. This could be your worst mistake, quite deadly indeed.’

‘That is sound advice, Teacher.’

‘Please, just Torin, as I have already told you to call me.’

‘Yes, you must focus and meditate on this overwhelming attraction you have for the Daughter of Thor, although focusing on the object of your desires is not normally a practiced form of rational thought towards achieving enlightenment. Yet in your case I believe it is crucial for you to understand the need for you to control your emotions. Do not let them rule your decisions to a potentially fatal end.’

‘I do however consider you to be perhaps one of the only men I would call fitting as a suitor to our female Saviour, the White Snow Fox, for you are not only a Son of Odin—which perhaps gives you the right in itself—but you are also a formidable character, strong of mind and thought and feeling, you are compassionate and a shrewd thinker, you are also quick to action but you command a presence of calm when your symptoms are under sufficient treatment.’

‘For this reason, and because you are such a fine student of war and Lore, I give you my blessing, to love Jean Fairsythe and to pursue her until she is finally yours and yours alone. Take pride in such well wishes, for I do not pronounce my approval of such match’

making with frivolous abandon. You deserve to love her, Adem, for despite the illness I see and sense in you, I also know the pure intentions of your heart.'

'You confound me with kind words, Master, Torin.' Adem said the man's name with some nervousness, still finding it difficult not to address the man with some other title to reflect his rank and role as tutor.

'Very well, let us return to your training. Now Earth, I want you to wield a weave of Earth that will obliterate *that* statue over there.'

Adem stared across the courtyard with raised brows at the taller than life statue of a man standing proudly in a crown and thick cloak with an ornamental sceptre in one hand and a perfect stone sphere in the other. The figure had been an immortal by the pointed ears, that much was certain, and likely a King.

'But it is such a fine statue, and of a royal too. Why would you want me to destroy it? Wouldn't it bring me shame amongst these people to destroy a statue of one of their ancient rulers?'

'He was not just any ruler,' Torin remarked with some hint of disdain for the man. 'He was in fact the Second Nordic King to ever rule. His name was Lenk, younger brother of the famed Elarja RinHannen, who was in fact the true heir to the Nordic throne after the death of their father, the First Nordic King, Rodin Cloudwalker.'

'Elarja refused to accept his place as the new Nordic King, for as you know, by that Age Elarja had already begun to wield the Four Time Stones, to travel to the distant future Ages. Teaching Lore to the First Men, he discovered facts about the potential future timelines, and eventually began his doomed quest to attempt to rescue dead heroes from many battles, only moments before their demise. It was for this last quest that Elarja is truly famous, and he would have made a fine King, if he had not vanished throughout space and time for far longer back through the Ages than any man that still lives can remember.'

'So why destroy the statue of his brother Lenk?'

'Lenk was a catastrophe to the Elder Days of Immortal Kin. The man was a plain fool to begin with, but when he took his place as Nordic King, so began the downfall of the might, and majesty of Nordic ambition and accomplishments. The Seven Hundred Years of Darkness was a name they later gave to that Age, when the precious knowledge and hard work of their forefathers was wasted on countless marches into the Forbidden Realms of alternate worlds. Lenk sought to rule and hold dominion over the other races and clans of those dimensions. Endless wars ensued between the Immortals and the Kjia'hyenti, or Leaf Guardians, whom before that Age were close friends of Rodin Cloudwalker. They had walked amongst the immortals of those days sharing precious gems of Lore and Elemental Magic.'

'Lenk was responsible for destroying that sacred bond between the two races, and the Leaf Guardians placed many restrictive wards upon the land of Kiseria during the Seven Hundred Years, limiting the potential of the elf kin for growth and new learning of magic that was forged in the world during the Crafting of the Old Ways, by Odin and Daiyon and their descendants.'

'It is considered therefore the fault of Lenk's entirely, that much of the Old Ways Magic has been forever lost to our people, and for that reason alone I wish very much for you to destroy his statue. Only a fool would've ever commissioned the work—a fool that

commissioned a statue of another great fool—and I have stood in this practice yard many times and grit my teeth in ire as I stared upon this grossly arrogant carving of a rabid dog, that should've been put down long before he had the chance to rule.'

Adem breathed a sigh of relief that his teacher's tirade was appearing to be completed. He had heard of the Legends of Elarja RinHannen, and had studied a number of books based on his ancient adventures, but he had never heard of his brother Lenk, and now he thought he understood why that part of history had been buried for so long.

'If you say so, Torin, I will do it. But it makes me quite nervous to do so.'

'Do not be nervous, Adem Highlander,' Torin said with controlled vitriol aimed towards the target. 'Blast that *damn* fool's face and form into a pile of rubble and dust.' Immortals nearly always addressed mortals by their first and last names, and Torin must have also been having trouble adapting to just calling him Adem. The fact that he had used his full name this time however, suggested to Adem that the man was absolutely genuine in his commands, and he also sensed the slightest hint of amusement in those tones.

Adem began to form the weaves necessary for wielding Earth in the spell he would require, and the feeling of locking his mind around the weave from previous times he had learnt them was similar to the first time he had learnt to wield Chi, many years ago back home. Like that time, when he had first sensed energy being released through the palms of his hands, his mind had to lock around the spiritual mechanisms required to achieve the ability, and this was very similar to the technique of learning weaves, whether copying from another Alit'aren teacher's example, or learning through the *kigare* via Arawn.

There was a relationship between the word chi, and its representation of a kind of energy force, with the names of firstly *ki'mera* in this world, the 'ki' part of the word resembling the Japanese name for the same force, and here Adem saw a definite link in the histories of the two worlds. *Ki'mera* being the name for demon souls that fuelled the magic of Battle Angels and also wielders, so again there was that connection, and the name was so similar to the name for this planet, Kismeria, which was named deliberately to correlate with the energy force, though according to Arawn the two names were as old as each other, along with *kigare*, that had existed even before the Great Angels in the mind and spirit of the Lord.

He used this knowledge and ability to harness flows of Earth while *teron* filled his flesh and bones, the purity of the Lord's Power a blessing to his heart, though at the same time he was sickened by the foulness of the corruption that also flowed through his veins, a slick of leprous bile that made *teron* feel vile and corrosive to a point that he could barely stand the agony of it. This corruption seemed to fuel his rage as he unleashed the weaves upon the statue—with strands of coloured light flowing around his fists that could only be seen by male wielders though the force itself was hidden to anyone except perhaps the eyes or minds of Battle Angels, as was the case with weaves of Air—first with a force that made the statue's head explode into a cloud of dust; then he gestured again as the form of the stone split up through the base in vast cracks until the entire statue began to crumble into pieces.

'Impressive!' Torin remarked with a slight grin. 'You will soon be strong enough to take on a battle more serious than the one you faced in the Eastlands. Relax now, and release your hold on *teron*.'

Adem did as he was commanded, though although it was a great relief to let go of that horrid taint, the bliss of the Power always left him longing to hold it once more, and to draw more from its brilliance that seemed to make his soul shine with every breath.

Though the act of destroying the statue also brought a new overwhelming sense of fear and dread, as if again some ominous force—perhaps Lenk himself reaching out from beyond the grave to take his revenge—made him regret being so willing to demolish a statue of the Second Nordic King, but it was more than just shameful, as his fear that even Lenk himself may seek out his vengeance as a wailing ghost that haunted his dreams, was perhaps not impossible, and in fact with his knowledge of his own world, and the miraculous nature of this one, these thoughts began to gather in his mind as a very plausible possibility, and for that reason he was truly unnerved.

Adem's love for Jean grew in those autumn months, and he spent as much time alone with her as he was allowed by his trainers. Mostly it was after dinner as Jean also ate alone with the Ael Trael and Lydia and Elmira.

Adem and Jean would often sneak up to the balcony of one of the high towers and look out over the city in the moonlight. On one of those nights Adem looked over the rooftops of the surrounding city of Nordhel with a searing pain in his heart, for he had longed to spend the night with Jean ever since that first kiss, and as they stood there holding one another, and he gazed at the moonlight tracing her golden locks and the city itself lit up like some wonderland that emanated magic from stone and tile, and he felt that the magic was a part of his love for Jean, as if that love could alter the very environment, but he knew in truth it was what people back home often called seeing the world through 'rose coloured glasses'.

His love for Jean was the most powerful intoxicant he had ever experienced, in some ways it set his soul aflame even more than wielding *teron*, for it made him feel invigorated, refreshed and more alive than he had felt for many years before first visiting this world, and before he met the woman he wished to marry and start a family with. He adored her, it was beyond an obsessive infatuation—though perhaps that is how it began—and when she declared her love for him in return, he was beyond ecstatic, the elation that flowed through his veins was a coursing electric vibe that made his skin tingle and his soul glow.

They kissed many times and often held each other for long embraces while they promised their love to one another, over and over again.

'Do you love me, Adem Highlander?' Jean would ask, to which he would always reply in earnest, 'I adore you, Jean Fairsythe.'

'How much do you love me?'

'I love you more than life itself, my soul is enlightened by your presence, my heart yearns for your kisses and your embrace.'

'What would you do if you lost me?' Jean asked with large blue eyes shining in a way that suggested her own heart felt the same yearning.

'I would lose myself, if that day ever came to pass. I would lose all hope, and I would never recover.'

‘What would you do, if you could have me?’ Jean wore a playful smile after those words, as she pressed her form up close against his own.

‘I would be the happiest man alive, Jean. I would be so bold I would gain the strength to lead these people, to show them that victory was achievable. I would *give* them hope.’

Jean sighed and moved her form away from his, as she gazed into his eyes once more and said with some concern to her tones, ‘You talk in such absolutes, Adem! You so easily go from one extreme to the other, it even sounds a little bipolar. That’s not your condition, is it?’

Adem smiled and shook his head, though he knew there was real sadness in his eyes.

‘You just frighten me when you talk about the possibility that I might lose you, Jean. I can’t even bear to imagine it. I won’t ever let that happen, I promise.’

‘But that is exactly my point,’ Jean said with a slightly higher pitch. ‘You must be willing to accept that I could die in one of these battles we are yet to face. You must be able to face that, to know that you cannot protect me all the time.’

‘Don’t say such things!’ Adem said with pain gripping his heart.

‘It’s a simple truth, Adem. I also must face that I could lose you, too. There will be many dangers for all of us, when we go out into the world to face the minions of the Shadow. We cannot let the fact that one of us might very likely die; put a blemish on our obligations to lead these people to victory and salvation.’

‘Those are wise words, Jean.’

‘You must promise me that if that day ever comes, you will not give up hope. You must promise that you will fight even harder, to avenge me and to be the hero you were destined to be. Do you *promise*?’ Jean asked the final question with a change of tone that suggested it was very important that he do as she asked.

Adem sighed deeply before he pulled her close again, kissing her forehead and staring into her eyes as he replied, ‘I promise that if I ever lose you, Jean Fairsythe, I will tear down the moon and the stars, and hold up the sun to turn night into day, if that is what is required to avenge you.’

Jean laughed softly as tears began to well in her eyes, staining her cheeks as she smiled warmly and kissed his lips with passion. When she pulled away again she replied, ‘Absolutes, again, Adem! But that was a good one. I won’t forget your promise.’

An Ael Trael would always appear at the doorway to the tower whenever they planned to go somewhere else together. Adem had wanted to get Jean alone in his bedchamber since their first night spent in Nordhel, though the Ael Trael always managed to put a stop to this idea whenever he planned to make an attempt. He guessed that the Ael Trael feared that love would interfere with their training. Still, he yearned to spend one night alone with Jean, to lie with her, and feel her soft skin and firm body pressed against his own.

One night, as Adem lay in his bedchamber with his sword propped against the side of the bed, the lantern light on the dresser beside his four posted bed went out, as did the glowbulbs

that were positioned around the room to keep the room lit at all times, a necessity to keep Souljhin from entering through the shadows. A blast of red flames blossomed in the darkness, wrapping around a man of cloaked shadows with eyes of yellow-orange flames within the cowl. The crimson light glowed around the form of the Shadow Man—a malevolent heat that seemed to draw upon the darkness like some form of energy that fed the power of the cloaked form, as that radiance of evil filled the room and weighed heavily upon Adem’s soul—and when he spoke, his voice was like thunder. ‘The hour has come for you to face your fate! The Dark One has ordered your death!’

In those few moments, Adem threw his legs over the side while drawing his blade that glowed bright blue. The Shadow Man raised a dark blade that glowed with blood red runes; striking downwards at Adem’s skull, as Adem brought up his blade in defence. A flash of red and blue light seemed to make the walls tremble, and it seemed this vibration also caused some kind of shield surrounding the walls to shatter, which may have been the reason his guards had not yet sensed or heard the intruder.

Two Nordic Guardians burst into the chamber with arrows of green and blue aimed at the Shadow Man. Rior and Aedlen drew deeply from *teron* with each arrow they unleashed—their fluid movements firing the arrows in a blur of repeated motions, as the bolts of light flew to strike a wall of red flames in rapid blasts that sent shockwaves reverberating through the room, even blasting some of the bricks within the stone walls loose. The Shadow Man then gestured with a black gauntleted fist, and the two immortals were thrown across the room, their skulls hitting the stone walls with a heavy *thud!*

During those moments, Adem felt a surge of the Power seep into his blood and bones. *Teron* filled him with incredible heat and impossible cold, the corruption of the taint floating on that river of light like dark acid. Light sprang from the sword forming a shield of thick blue lightning. The bolts had the faces of blue serpents that snapped at the dark armour of the Shadow Man. Adem didn’t know if that was his use of the Power or some magic unleashed by Arawn.

His first instinct was to summon Arawn, though the words he shouted were, ‘*Shei’heildorth Alfodr!*’ He’d learnt some of the Immortal Tongue during those three months of training. He didn’t remember when he’d learnt that name though he understood its meaning when he said it. *Fire Spear of the All Father!*

A simpler version of the name would have been *Odin’s Spear*.

A white hot bolt of blue light shot forth from the shield of blue fire serpents, lancing in a straight line as thick as Adem’s forearm. The Shadow Man roared as the bolt of fire tore through his heart. A moment later, the shadow figure vanished in a twisting of light and shadows, and the dim amber light of the glowbulbs returned to the room. Two more dark-haired Guardians entered the room followed by a golden-haired Ael Trael with bright blue eyes – Eleil Tancroft was her name – who made her way to the two fallen Guardians to rest her hands on their heads.

‘Nordhel is under attack,’ Daedlen said flatly as if he were describing a chilly evening. The green-eyed Guardian wore an emerald coat and breastplate; dark leather trousers and leather boots, as did Norin, the dark-eyed Guardian, in a red coat and armour; wielding an arrow of burning crimson. Their cloaks mingled with the shadows of the room as

if they were seeking to remain hidden from enemy eyes. Daedlen's breastplate was emblazoned with the sigil of the Wolf Rohjor and Norin's was of the Lion.

'There are Souljhin moving throughout the castle,' Daedlen said. Souljhin was one of the names for the Shadow Riders. They were also known as the Swordsmen of the Shadow. 'Guardians also fight them on the streets of Nordhel. There may be over three hundred of them inside the walls of Nordhel – a considerable force. We expect many casualties as there is no fast or easy way to cure the taint of Souljhin blades.

'We must fight our way to King Tobin and King Orion. They've moved to one of the higher chambers.' Just then, Carl and Wil strode into the chamber behind two more Guardians.

'Where is Jean?' Adem asked urgently.

'I am here,' Jean said as she entered behind Carl and Wil with two Ael Trael behind her. The chamber was twelve paces by twelve with a large marble fireplace, table, chairs, dressers, and a large wardrobe. A chest at the foot of the bed held the clothing, armour, belt, and bow that Adem changed into and equipped. He also took the *toramor* shield strapped to his left arm.

He took out the red woollen coat and crimson armour; dark trousers and black leather boots turned-down at the knee. Carl, Wil, and Jean wore the same clothing and armour they'd been gifted on the first day of their Arrival. Carl and Wil drew back on their bow strings to create arrows of flame. Adem sensed the elation and revulsion that filled the spirits of his Brothers when they began to wield the corrupted Power. It was a delicate balance between love and hatred for the bliss that was often overwhelmed by the vileness of the taint.

'Stay behind us, and use your bows to distract the Souljhin,' Daedlen ordered. 'Do not attempt hand-to-hand combat with any of them. They are highly skilled with their swords, and you will meet a swift death if you try to face one alone. If you're trapped by one, you must summon your Battle Angels.'

They left the bedchamber and moved through the hallways with Guardians and Ael Trael forming a guard around Adem and his friends. Guardians, guards, and soldiers moved about the hallways with the look of panic written clearly on their faces. Screams were also heard in the distance, along with men roaring in defiance amidst the clash of steel blades, or the heavier repetitious *thud* that suggested Souljhin were battering soldiers holding shields of crafted metals.

They moved with haste up a flight of stairs that took them to one of the highest main floors, where a dozen more Guardians stood in alert stances, their weapons drawn and their faces and eyes darting left and right as if to see everything at once. The entire guard were moving with stealth through a hallway crossing when Adem turned—at the sound of clashing steel—to see a warrior lock blades with a Souljhin that stood taller than any immortal he had ever seen!—as the crimson blade slid along one side of the defender's, sliding back beneath to whip the weapon aside and lop off the man's skull in a red fountain.

Adem was frozen stiff as he gazed on the event, while Daedlen stood crouched by his side with a hand resting on his shoulder, and Adem looked back to see Rior holding a hand over Jean's mouth to muffle her attempts to scream. Everyone had frozen still by some Guardian instinct that led the others, and Adem had heard that Guardians could sense the presence of demons and other Shadowspawn, so perhaps that it explained it.

For Adem it was not so acute, just a daunting sense of evil bleeding from the very walls with so many Souljhin skulking about the palace, and he would not have detected the location of the tall one if he had not heard the blades clash first.

Adem's position was also drenched in darkness as the lanterns had been extinguished before they reached the crossing, most likely by Souljhin to increase their ability to infiltrate in greater numbers, as a rule of the kingdom was that 'no place should be darkened by night even when it is a place of sleeping', and this suggested a Darksouled or another Shadow Man had taken part in allowing the Souljhin to first enter the kingdom, perhaps by snuffing out the lights in a certain hallway, like this one.

Flames and shadows danced around the massive cloaked monster as it stood in the distant crossing of another division of halls, those eyes of malevolence staring from beneath the cowl like dark seeds, filled with a hatred for mankind, though not seeing Adem and the others where they crouched, the terrifying force of pure sin radiating throughout the atmosphere as the screams of men fighting and dying echoed from that location and beyond, until the figure stalked ahead and out of sight.

Daedlen held a finger up to his own lips to signal silence when Adem had first glanced upon the Guardian, and he continued to do so for a time after the Souljhin vanished from view, until the entire host began to creep onwards with even greater stealth.

Adem offered his hand to Jean, but she refused, and he knew, or at least hoped, it was because she was just too focused, and perhaps too proud to accept his help, though perhaps she also knew the quick thinking of Guardians like Rior was the most likely thing to keep her alive at this point in time.

They moved on with caution, though with an agile step to try to reach the kings and queens to lend aid, but also in the hope that Orion and Tobin and their wives could provide the protection *they* desperately needed. Daedlen led the party, often halting with a fist raised as his Guardian senses detected Souljhin skulking in the distance. This resulted in a slow journey for the remainder of hallways they needed to cross, until they were nearing the library, when just as they rounded a corner, three of the deadly assassins slithered into view, morphing from the shadows at the end of the hall, they stood like tall shadows, wielding swords of dark grey steel that glowed with hot crimson runes.

The tallest of the three Souljhin pointed a black gauntleted finger with a pointed black nail—like a claw—at Adem as it hissed, 'We have come for the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor. Any who stand in our way shall meet their deaths.'

Adem was about to summon Arawn when he heard three strings strummed, the strings of a harp; the sound was strong and pure and reverberated through the stone walls as if the strings were made with the Power. A strange illuminating force seemed to take over their surroundings, not only visually, but also as a presence that reminded him of growing old and accepting your fate to pass over to the next realm, or falling in battle while defending your ground and your people, dying with courage and never giving up until the last drop of blood was spilt on the thirsty soil, as a great cry was heard, the shouts of many voices, both male and female – courageous yet haunting voices from beyond the grave!

The Harp of Souls! Adem thought in stunned wonder.

Clouds billowed down the hallway around the feet of the three Souljhin, a wicked grey fog that seemed to move with a hungry vigour as it covered the entire hallway in brief moments.

A figure of light appeared behind the Souljhin; a tall man with large blue eyes and pointed ears, a silver crown upon his hair of shadows, sword of golden light and armour of blue fire. Adem knew his name instantly – information passed to him from Arawn through the *kigare* – it was Taebrel Goldensabre! His coat and trousers were dark silk with bright blue boots and gauntlets, and although the figure was transparent and formed of glowing fire, there was a real substance to his stance, as if he occupied the space with a physical presence that was stronger than any of the living men that stood nearby and watched.

The Souljhin hissed in agitation, seeming to sense the presence of the ghost without gazing upon him, and Adem guessed they also sensed the force of these Heroes opposing their wicked might even before the clouds had flowed about their feet like an omen of death.

Orion and Tobin appeared in the hallway behind the figure of light as more ghostly figures flowed around them. A woman with dark hair tied in a thick braid like burning shadows, her sword of silver glowed like a small star. It was Terese Silverblade – armour and gauntlets of shining crimson; a dark coat and trousers with red boots of pure flame. She danced about in front of Adem's view, morphing from one side of the hall to the other to move around Tobin and Orion like some fairy phantom, her blade of white light leaving a glow mark in Adem's vision whenever she moved from one place to another. Her eyes looked sad, filled with sorrow, though there was a fierceness to them also, dark fires burned there that spoke of centuries of life experiences, wisdom and pride expressed brightly in the beautiful pale face of a Hero of Legend.

Two tall male figures wielded double-edged axes; the Battleaxe Brothers, their armour and gauntlets shone with the same bright colours as their weapons, shadow trousers, and coats with eyes of green and blue fire. The brothers were built like a pair of oxen standing upright on hind legs, dark locks tied back in tails around wide but rectangular jaws. They gave Adem the impression of Stones that can Never be Moved, as they shimmered between a phantom glow and a substance that seemed more solid than the stone walls surrounding them, impenetrable muscle and might that would not shift if they were hit by a cannon ball, their massive double bladed axes glowing pale green and aqua as if exuding cold menace. Guardian cloaks flowed around their muscular bulks that seemed to bond with darkness, changing in colours to blend with the fog covered floor, or fading to near invisible with the rise and fall of their chests.

Arig Flamebow stood in a cloak of blue silken flames—worked with red-and-golden runes upon the cuffs and hem and glowing sigils of dragons, lions and wolves—wearing a crimson mask worked with black runes similar to Arawn. Already this figure appeared somewhat cursed by the taint on *teron*, as his form seemed to emanate shadows as it flickered between apparition and substance, his dark braided pony tail drinking in the light as his bow of crimson fire released a blurring wave of burning arrows—glowing like flying shafts of hot magma—that thudded into the black-plated armour of the three Souljhin who had turned at the sound of Orion's threatening cry.

The *racinthen* armour of the Souljhin absorbed the arrows though all three were pushed off balance by the attack, blasts of bright light and a shuddering echo surrounded each

demon as they huddled together and retreated, now slinking slowly towards Adem and his friends.

A woman appeared with bright blue eyes and two golden sword hilts above her dark blue breastplate, she drew the blades and roared like a Guardian as a man appeared beside her with a crimson shield and burning blade, and another morphed into view in golden armour, and he held a spear of bright flames.

The illuminated figures flowed along the clouds as spectres of light and shadows, to surround the demon men, launching into a blurring attack that encased the Souljhin in warps of burning energies, their crimson blades flickering desperately as the Heroes began a fierce battle cry, seemingly punishing their enemies with fear itself, and it seemed then that the Souljhin were afraid, at facing warriors that had cheated Death.

There was no hope for the Souljhin; defending themselves for brief moments—for although the Souljhin were known as the Swordsmen of the Shadow, the speed and strength of those glowing ghost blades outpaced and outnumbered them—before they were cut to pieces, bloody chunks of armour and flesh falling into the clouds below that glowed with images of skulls traced in shadows upon the grey light. *Ki'mera* orbs rose from the Souljhin that were consumed by the souls of the Heroes of Will.

Taebrel Goldensabre then spoke to Terese Silverblade and the Battleaxe Brothers, saying, 'Guard the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor.'

'As you command, King Taebrel,' Terese replied, with fist to breastplate, as Taebrel and Arig Flamebow continued down the hallway, moving as if floating along the clouds, with more Heroes of Will appearing behind them – Taren Lightsblood; golden haired with her blue flaming spear, emerald armour, and red gauntlets, Jarien Stonespear; dark of hair and eyes with a spear of grey stone that shone with white light—the spear was said to have been light as a feather, perfectly balanced and that it never required sharpening, as it was crafted of ancient magic—his armour and gauntlets were crimson fire over a robe of silk shadows, then dozens more of the ancient Heroes—Kobahl Eagleblade, Breeanna Goldenarrow, Rocard Flamefist, Elizel Lightshield, Vohn Redhawk, each figure shining with the light of Elemental Magic, and each one a ghost that had marched back from across the grave, summoned by the calling of the Harp of Souls, an ancient enchanted relic made by Odin during an early Age, and gifted to the First Bloods of immortal kin, for them to safeguard, but also to protect them, as warriors fell in countless battles against the Shadow, and those that were considered most worthy were shackled to the Hero Chains of the Shield of Fire, to be called upon in hours of direst need—as they took form and substance from beams and waves of glowing light, and they moved so fast Adem's eyes had trouble seeing and naming them all as they swept down the hallway and out of sight.

Adem felt a deep sorrow in the presence of these Heroes, knowing they had lived and died as a great sacrifice for this world he was also beginning to know and love, and he felt the honour and bravery of that sacrifice, though their presence also brought emanations of a great sense of woe, to bear witness to living ghosts, who would fight here and now, and then return to the spirit world, chained to the Shield until they were called forth again, and Adem had learnt enough to know that each of these warriors had lived such a fate countless times as they were churned out by the Great Cycle time and again, to be reborn and to live another life of good deeds and to die young, or old, in battle or betrayed by their enemies, but always for

a great sacrifice, for the people of Kismeria, that remembered them as Heroes of Will, for which their names became Legend.

Chapter

6

The Heroes of Will

‘Do not fear, Son of Odin,’ Terese said in posh tones that were filled with a surprising amount of warmth. ‘We will protect you.’

‘Queen Elmira and Queen Lydia are safely protected within the Hall of Scriptures,’ Tobin explained in urgent tones. It was the entrance to one of the Royal Libraries. ‘We have warriors there also.’

‘I feared you were in danger,’ Orion said, ‘so I used the Harp of Odin to summon the Heroes. They don’t like to be summoned unless there is a great battle to be won, though: we urged them to assist us as we feared for your lives. We also would have needed them to rid Nordhel of the Souljhin. In this bold a move; it is clear our enemies have become desperate.’

They made their way back to the Hall of Scriptures; the room was an entrance hall over fifty paces wide and twice as deep, oak bookshelves as high as the ceilings lined the walls with large rolling ladders to reach higher shelves. The colourful spines of books filled every shelf, some with gold lettering on black leather bound volumes. The roof was white plaster with gold cornices, and the floor was pale red-and-green marble.

Heroes of Will – both mortal and immortal – stood within the room; they were figures of glowing light, enchanted beings that radiated both purity of spirit but also a kind of wrongness felt in the air, a conflict of the laws of space and time.

Duron Stoneskull stood like a thick muscled giant, dark of hair with eyes burning emerald, a mace marked with runes of light in his massive fists.

Raeleene Redguard was strikingly beautiful, large blue eyes like burning crystal and waves of golden curls flowing around her pale oval face, her crimson cloak burned like flames as she gripped a crimson shield and silver blade marked by runes glowing bright red.

Egron Bluefox stood like an unmovable mountain, two golden sword hilts above his dark blue-armoured shoulders, his beard was white flame with thick fluffy spikes across his scalp, his eyes were rings of blue light around dark orbs that crackled with the menace of the

walking dead, and many more, wielding weapons and wearing armour that shone like the moon and starlight, they were an enigma to behold, beings traced in form by pure energies that gave their hollow flesh a temporary solidity.

They were spread throughout the room amongst the Alit'aren and Ael Trael who guarded Elmira and Lydia, along with Guardians. They were a small company, other than the Heroes there were only a handful of defenders, as if the rulers were caught completely unawares, and up till now their reinforcements were still delayed with the battles elsewhere.

'The Souljhin will make one last attempt to strike at us here.' Tobin said. 'They'll come at us through the library and also from the hallway.'

'Get to the centre of the room.' Terese ordered Adem and his friends. 'We'll form a shield.'

They made their way to the centre of the room with Ael Trael, Alit'aren, and Guardians surrounding them. The two kings and two queens stood flanking them within the protective barrier, Tobin wielding his sword Stonebreaker that glowed bright emerald, and Orion wielding his golden blade Tigerclaw. In his other arm, Orion held the Harp of Souls, a golden instrument that fit neatly in the crook of his arm; an angel spreading its wings for the structure of the Harp.

Elmira and Lydia held balls of blue flame above their palms; they reminded him of anxious felines as they stood poised for action. Adem considered that it would be unwise for anyone to bring lightning from above or fire from the floor as the room would fall in around them. This would be a battle for the Heroes of Will to prove themselves. Clouds still flowed along the marble floor around the feet of the ghosts, and he saw again skulls within the grey fog traced by silver light, as if other souls dwelt there, and he sensed a raw energy emanating from that source also.

A tall male figure stood wielding a broadsword of burning mauve – Ruin Tamigol was encased in armour of shadows; coat and boots of shimmering dark blue silk and leather, the sword was known as Hawkblade, and it was said the man had slain a thousand vampires in one night at the Battle of Kahmel Durthrok, when he fought at the head of the Wolf Guard protecting Queen Elsalos. Ruin emanated an emerald fire as the blade hovered at an angle, the ghost fading into transparency with one breath, then standing solid as stone the next.

A green eyed female apparition with red-tinged golden hair tied back in a thick braid wielded a rapier blade of amber light. Tamira Goldeneagle! – holding a shield of blue and red with a spread winged eagle emblazoned on the burning steel surface. A white halo surrounded Tamira's form, as the Golden Eagle sigil burned bright amber with the rise and fall of her breast. She was short, and slender, but there was extreme strength emanating from the Hero of Will, as if she contained a torrent of the Power within her soul.

The clash of blades was heard in the hallway outside followed by the roar of men being cut down by Souljhin blades. The locked and barred double doors were kicked three times from the outside until the iron hinges gave way and the doors collapsed with a heavy *thud!*

'They will never take the Saviours!' Tamira roared with fierce courage, as a dark-cloaked figure glided into the room—the cloak itself made from shadows as Adem detected that foul radiance of blight in the room, pure evil flowing from the body of the Souljhin—followed by two more that moved with a serpentine sway, they hissed like snakes ready to

strike as their jet black eyes stared from within dark cowls, seed shaped eyes reflecting the light of burning blades. The Souljhin each wielded a dark long sword; glowing as if coated in burning blood.

The presence of the creatures seemed to wash over the entire host of defenders like some invisible plague infected their very souls, evil incarnate that filled the air with a foulness similar to being afflicted by a swarm of wasps with deadly stings, only this was an invisible swarm, that soaked their bones in a vilest that corroded courage and defiance.

Riol Darkbane stood in armour of white light and a cloak of burning shadows as he roared, 'They shall never have the Silver Stags!' Riol gripped a broadsword of dark steel. He hovered to Adem's left like some shadow phantom, eyes of deep blue that glowed like the runes of his blade; it seemed the ghost would not accept the draining force of fear exuding from these demons.

Guardians drew heavy flows of *teron*; then released arrows of flame from their bows, blasts of the Power impacting with a vibration in the air, stunning and delaying the Souljhin as the creatures hissed with cold menace. The Guardian arrows were released with fluid motion, as three men fired a half dozen each at the Souljhin in a blur of light, when suddenly the four Alit'aren and three Ael Trael wielded balls burning blue, that they hurled at the chests of the creatures, each blast absorbed by the dark-plated armour, as electric light encased their shadowed forms, yet the Souljhin shook off the attacks as if they were barely disturbed.

A female ghost shouted, 'Protect the White Snow Fox!'

Another male roared, 'The Sons must be preserved!'

Cinderlin cried at the top of her lungs, 'We shall bathe this ground in Souljhin blood!' The female spirit had hair that glimmered like snow, her eyes burning blue, and her words filled the air with a force to dominate over the evil radiance of the Souljhin.

Adem held on to the Power, the river of light flooding his veins with the slick of rancid oil that made him want to empty his stomach. His vision was heightened by *teron*; colours were brighter, shadows darker, and time moved as if in slow motion. He drew back on the string of his Lukrorian Bow, allowing a surge of the Power to flow into the arrow of blue. The arrow struck a tall Souljhin in a blast that was swallowed by the dark armour though the creature stumbled as a dark-coated Alit'aren threw a bolt of lightning at its skull.

The bolt sent the Souljhin slinking back a step; as Riol rushed in to grasp the creature by the throat, driving his blade through its chest armour, after Cinderlin had hacked off its sword arm. Riol drew the blade from its chest to swing high as he left the Souljhin bent forwards, bringing the sword down to decapitate the creature in a spray of dark blood! The Souljhin thrashed wildly even after Riol cut its head from its shoulders, the skull rolling amongst the grey fog that seemed to hungrily absorb flesh and bones. This move greatly angered the other Souljhin standing in the chamber, as their evil forces doubled in magnitude, exuding corruption that would leave most men dribbling in a puddle of their own waste.

Adem could see that the Heroes of Will were impervious to the Souljhin blades, though they held back as if their priority was to form a defensive shield around the Saviours. Riol and Cinderlin quickly morphed back into position to guard Adem's flank, with a host of other Heroes forming a strong perimeter around all other warriors of flesh and blood that hoped to defend Adem and his friends.

—A loud crash filled the air behind Adem, who turned after shouts of warning. The doors lay cleaved in two as four dark-cloaked figures fanned out into a line, crimson burning blades dangling from black gauntleted claws. The tallest drew back the dark cowl that covered its face to reveal pasty white skin, warts and boils, and a long beak-shaped nose. Its pointed ears were similar to the immortals only larger, and its eyes were large black seeds filled with menacing hatred. A wave of corruption radiated from the six Souljhin standing within the room that was overwhelming to say the least! It felt as if a claw of ice was reaching into his chest to crush his beating heart, and his heart was beating rapidly under the force of such evil.

Even with *teron* flooding his veins, Adem felt greatly weakened under that force, as he harnessed the Power to release another arrow, the shaft of light smashing into the skull of the Souljhin with its face bared. The blast seemed barely felt by the creature, as it hissed in irritation before flowing towards him with its sword raised. Riol and Cinderlin rushed in to cross swords with the creature, as the other Souljhin also moved to infiltrate the heart of the defences. Terese stood guard on Jean's right flank, though her burning white blade was soon engaged against a swift moving enemy, as Tamira and a ghost wielding a pale green staff struck at the creature on its flanks, battering it into submission before Terese hacked off its skull.

Tobin was soon defending Carl and Wil, his blade of emerald light swiping with fluid speed to hack off Souljhin limbs and skulls as more began to flow in through the library doorway and front entrance. Lydia and Elmira unleashed waves of Pixie Wardens that moved like lightning bolts to strike Souljhin in the chests and skulls, blasting the creatures with an electric glow of the Power, and sometimes to devastating effect, as Souljhin fell to their knees with gaping holes in their breastplates, burned right through! Orion seemed less skilled, defending with one hand to protect his wife—though Adem sensed when Tobin and Orion formed a link, as Emerald Lions and Golden Tigers morphed into view within the chamber, dragging Souljhin to their knees to bite off skulls or shred through armour with burning claws; the hall suddenly filled with their deafening roars—as chaos reigned with lightning and fire flying from the fists of every Alit'aren and Ael Trael. Guardians unleashed a blur of flaming arrows as more Souljhin flowed in from both sides – there were sixteen of them still standing – their red swords clashing with the blades of the Heroes of Will as bright energies battered their dark armour and set their shadow cloaks alight.

Adem cased his bow and drew his sword, as he heard Jean cry, 'Tanriel!'

Red-glowing spears flew outwards in all directions to skewer the dark armour of the Souljhin; red lightning erupted and spider webbed across their flesh to reduce the creatures to skeletons of red flames. *Ki'mera* orbs floated towards Jean as the burning skeletons collapsed to their knees and exploded.

Adem cried, 'Arawn!'

Eight fully grown male lions appeared in a circle around the defences, pushing Souljhin to the floor and biting off their skulls. Adem was half in shock at the size of the roaring beasts with their golden brown coats of fur and thick dark manes. Arawn's cloak of shadows rose from the forms of two lions, his broadsword of red flames slicing Souljhin heads from shoulders.

More Souljhin rushed into the room from both doorways; twenty-five, then thirty, then a swarm of dark-cloaked figures that threatened to draw the light from the room. Lions roared, and Flame Spears flew around the room as the two Battle Angels began to Link. Wil shouted, 'Eledisren,' as Carl cried, 'Math Mathonwy!'

Crows filled the room, squawking and pecking at large dark Souljhin eyes. Hounds with dark-furred coats like giant wolves appeared, forcing Souljhin to the ground, biting off skulls, and tearing through armour with their claws. It was a sizable force of Lions, Hounds and Tigers flowing through the enemy ranks, filling the chamber with deafening roars and howls as they took down Souljhin like helpless victims, razor sharp claws shredding through armour; Elemental Fires incinerating flesh and bone in bright burning colours.

The dark form of Dis Pater and Math Mathonwy's figure of light took shape as the four Battle Angels formed a Link. There was no lightning or tornado this time; only an increase in the speed and ferocity of attacks from the Crows, Lions, and Hounds with Tanriel hovering above the battle, throwing dozens more Flame Spears that stripped flesh from Souljhin bones. The presence of so many huge Spirit Wardens was intimidating even for those they were protecting, as the beasts of magic seemed to inspire true fear in the hearts of their enemies, though they did not relent in their aims to bring harm to the Sons and Daughter, as they continued to pour into the chamber in waves, despite so many being ripped apart or melted into slag and burnt to ashes.

The three male Battle Angels secured the defences on three sides, the swing of golden axe, crimson spear and flaming blade almost spanned the width of each section of the triangle of their defences, hacking through Souljhin in sprays of dark blood, severing limbs, slicing torsos in half and sending skulls flying as Math, Arawn and Eledisren seemed to revel in the madness of their unrelenting carnage.

Dis Pater split a Souljhin skull, slicing down in the form of Crescent Moon, before swinging sideways to cut straight through the chest of two more, as Math swung to decapitate three Souljhin in a dark spray, Arawn hacked off the sword arms of two, with the form known as Double Crescent, then swung through to cleave off their skulls before cutting down three more with a savage hack and slash through chests and torsos, and this is what Adem saw in the seconds he managed to look around while Flame Spears continued to fly, burning flesh from bone as bodies collapsed; exploding into dust!

Yet the flow of Souljhin continued to pour into the chamber with a dominant vehemence to overwhelm their defences, and Hounds and Lions moved through their ranks in a wild display of bloodthirsty slaughter, shredding through breastplates like tinfoil, black blood spurting from the wounds before the beasts chewed faces off or just ate entire skulls in savage horrid gulps!

A murder of Crows punched at individual Souljhin like some giant black fist to smash the creatures into the shelved walls, blasting bodies apart on impact. Others pecked out eyeballs in bloodied snapping beaks or clawed at faces to distract the overwhelming flow of enemies, but despite this, Adem could see they would not have survived if not for the Heroes of Will; still holding off the remaining Souljhin that slunk through the paths of the Battle Angels' attacks.

The burning blades of Heroes surrounded Adem and his companions in a blurring of rapid slashes, clashing with Souljhin blades while other Heroes used that moment to sever

skulls and cut off sword arms, or hands or even cut them down at the knees, or ankle slashes, followed by frantic downwards stabbing motions when the creatures finally fell, anything to defeat the surging masses, hacking with such speed and force that the fog below was fed a hundred times over with congealed chunks of pale demon flesh.

Orion held the Harp of Souls to pluck the three strings again . . . the sound seemed to shake the walls, clear, sharp notes that resonated over the barking of Hounds and the roaring of Lions. A great roar was heard – the Souljhin cringing at the sound – the cries of dead souls, though it was filled with valour.

Dozens more figures of light began to appear around Adem and his friends, fifty, eighty, over a hundred Heroes of Will! Taebrel Goldensabre was there with Arig Flamebow – the strings of the Harp calling them back to its source – along with other Heroes of Legend.

Tron Ironfist was there in his crimson cloak wielding an axe of blue flames, along with Abigail Tormeidhellin – with large blue eyes and a thick dark braid – in glowing white plated armour with a bow of burning aqua.

Rodin Cloudwalker wore a silver crown, and a gown of emerald light worked with golden runes; wielding bolts of lightning hurled from a spear of blue fire; tearing gaping holes through Souljhin armour. Dark of hair and eyes with a true Nordic face and hooked nose like an eagle's beak, the First King roared with outrage as he unleashed his fury upon the demon scourge. Adem knew them all, their names and their histories, the battles they won, how they lived, and how they had died.

Arawn told him everything in a flood of images – some that formed names and words – as his gaze passed over their ghostly forms, emerald eyed Imogen Herochain, her blue rune marked blade slashing at Souljhin with impossible speeds, Maerian Snowstorm; silver spear slicing through demon armour and flesh, Rihon Redhawk, cloak of blood red with a black mask worked with silver, a blurring of silver arrows flying from his bow of white fire.

Then suddenly something else changed, as arms and hands formed of the grey fog began to rise up out of the floating haze below, dragging Souljhin victims down to feed the hungry souls of countless other dead, as a wailing moan filled the air, like some zombie apocalypse, as the fog began to rise and the screams of Souljhin being ripped apart filled the air, and even the Lions, Tigers, Crows and Hounds seemed confused in those clouds that seemed to block out anything from view even a few feet ahead.

Dis Pater reached behind to grasp a slinking Souljhin that had slipped past his defences, hurling the creature to the floor as he placed his double bladed axe head against its neck, pushing down on the back of the blade with one foot—as if digging with a shovel—as the Souljhin skull was cut free after a crunching sound, dark blood feeding the grey mist that rose up around the fallen body like the jaws of a famished beast.

Math Mathonwy skewered two assassins with the Hellfire Spear—right through the chest—then whipped the crimson blade across to decapitate another three with Corn Harvest, as Arawn brought his blade down on an angle to hack through chest and torso of three more Souljhin that collapsed with burning wounds through their armour and flesh, as Hounds and Lions picked off the outsiders, pouncing to crush the demon-men under heavy paws, dragging their claws to shred flesh and bone as waves of burning crust appeared within the wounds.

Egron Bluefox and the Battleaxe Brothers had also guarded Carl and Wil on their left flank, and the warriors were unrelenting in their displays of magic and mastery of weapons, cutting down dozens of Souljhin in a matter of seconds as it seemed as if their swarming masses would never cease. Rune marked blades, shining armour and cloaks of shadow surrounded the Sons and Daughter and their small band of defenders, as the Heroes held off the remaining assault with blades whirling to create a glowing halo of light and energy, Elemental Magic forming a shield out of the exertion of long dead warriors that would not give up the lives of Adem, Jean, Carl and Wil.

It seemed the hungry mist had also slowed down the attack, as the flow of Souljhin steadily decreased—yet for a time Adem watched in awe as Riol and Cinderlin morphed through the fog, their blades of light burning like viperous steel to hack down enemies in rapid motion, as Breeanna fired her golden arrows with fluid speed, blasting skulls apart in dark sprays as other Heroes moved through the daunted enemy ranks to cut them down with phantom blades; *ki'mera* orbs flickered in the haze, feeding the Heroes and their deadly fog—until it was declared safe within the chamber, after the remaining skulking creatures were ripped apart by Angels and Heroes. Many times Adem had watched those dark cloaked shadows approaching through the rising grey mist, only to be pulled down by Hound or Lion and torn to shreds and bleeding chunks, or taken victim by a floating apparition that slit their throats with glowing steel, as Tanriel's Spears punched through breastplates to set shadowed figures alight with crackling red bolts of energy; vaporizing flesh and blood!

The battle was still not over however, and after a short rest, the defenders became hunters, as they moved through the halls in search of any Souljhin remaining and causing havoc within the palace walls.

The Battle Angels returned to their Resting Points, and Adem, Jean, Carl, and Wil joined the search with Alit'aren, Ael Trael and Guardians joining their ranks as they progressed throughout the palace. Only a dozen or more Souljhin were found and those retreated into the shadows in fear of the Heroes of Will.

Adem did not come face to face with that very tall Souljhin during their search, and he was more than glad of it, but he would need to find out what that particular one was named, if it was known. The image of the creature seen in his mind and the memory of evil radiance he had felt was enough to bring shivers to his bones.

There were heavy casualties however – over a hundred Guardians, two hundred soldiers, and eighty guards poisoned by the Souljhin blades that brought a swift death. The bodies became swollen and black – like an entire body bruise – as the poison flowed through the veins of those cut by the tainted blades. Adem felt sickened by those sights, and his heart bled to know that such noble, wise and kind warriors of immortal blood had given their souls to protect three men and one woman, who up till now still had no idea how they were expected to win this battle of good versus evil.

The immortal kings and queens were also there, and they viewed every fatality with the sorrow that only a ruler could feel the full burden of, as Orion and Tobin often knelt to close the eyelids of those that still had faces glaring in defiance, while Lydia and Elmira walked with palms in prayer position, or made other holy signs as if to ward off evil and give credence for their sacrifice.

'So many brave souls, lost.' Elmira said when close to tears.

‘They died for a great cause,’ Tobin boomed in reply, though there was deep sorrow to his tones also.

‘We will sing songs of praise at their funeral pyres,’ Lydia said, raising a handkerchief to blot a tear falling from her left eye. ‘Their sacrifice shall not be forgotten.’

‘I will arrange sufficient compensation for their families,’ Tobin said, ‘to ensure their loved ones will not starve, though their sorrow will last an eternity.’

The Heroes of Will returned to the Harp when Tobin decided the attack had ended. Rodin Cloudwalker assured them they were gladdened to fight to protect the lives of the Saviours, before their forms were consumed by the golden Harp in a swirl of clouds and fire.

All except for two, Terese Silverblade and Arig Flamebow remained.

Terese’s armour and Arig’s silk robe had lost most of its shine, simply reflecting light now rather than emanating it; however, their enchanted weapons still glowed brightly.

‘What has happened to us?’ Terese asked bluntly, her mouth hanging open.

The two kings and queens looked at each other with concerned expressions before Elmira suggested, ‘Perhaps you have been released from the Hero Chain . . . to serve as bodyguards to the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor. It would be a great honour, would it not?’

‘Released?’ Terese said in confusion. ‘We have always been bound to the Hero Chain, for every life we have lived. What will become of us now that we are free?’

‘It may have been the work of the Battle Angels,’ Tobin said musingly. ‘Perhaps their Link in the Power has severed you from the Shield of Fire. Perhaps it is a new Chain that was forged to return you both to living flesh.’

‘But if we are now flesh and bone,’ Arig said doubtfully, ‘then surely we would have served a greater purpose being bound to the Harp of Souls.’

‘Perhaps the Great Angels saw greater use for you here, with us,’ Lydia said soothingly. ‘We have need of great battle strategists, you were known as a great general in your lifetime, Arig Reidenhold. You are also known as a great battle tactician, Terese Marheildon. You will be of great value to us.’

The bodies of the dead were placed on wood piles—the following evening—that filled the centre of the Courtyard to the Royal Stables, with the palace walls of Nordhel rising to the west side, and castle walls surrounding the courtyard that was well lit with lanterns all around. The dead were set alight via the Power, harnessed by Alit’aren and Ael Trael—that was said to purify the infected flesh and reduce the noxious stench normal flames would allow—with a large gathering of wielders, Guardians and other soldiers and palace guards paying tribute to their sacrifice, and a feeling of great woe was felt by all who were present, at the tragic loss of such worthy warriors.

Carl’s heart was burning with pain at the beautiful Elven Songs that filled the night air, in ancient Nordic, Torvellen, Dremelden and Ruhalden Tongue, each of the Four Clans took their turn to sing their songs of praise, and some songs were sung together, with a mixture of male and female voices, as well as a combination of the different languages, while

an orchestra of over one hundred played instruments to guide and control their rhythm and melody.

Carl had felt quite hopeless in that battle, perhaps too afraid to wield the Power in an attempt to do more, though he knew it was also because he was certain he still lacked enough strength in *teron* to have lent any real assistance against an army of Souljhin, and he had known during those desperate moments that his Battle Angel was the only real help he could provide.

He stood in Alit'aren black with a straight back and eyes gazing at the burning pyres with a deep sorrow and mourning, as he believed he felt the loss of these lives more severely than Adem, who stood at his right side with a confused expression, as if his daily Healing had not been enough to rid him of his symptoms of latent madness.

Jean also wept, as did Lydia and Elmira by her side, as the Queen of Nordhel and Tarvel joined in the singing, as did their husbands, though the Sons and Daughter simply listened, as if fearing their voices may stain the grandeur and divinity of such pure and dignified songs, despite their capacity to know the words if only requested from their Battle Angels, who also provided many interpretations of the ancient Tongues.

The songs were derived from various Ages, some from the Age of Heroes, also known as the Age of Legends, and these were chosen to honour the sacrifice of these men that had given their lives, by singing of the days of the Great Heroes of Old, including the Starborn Alliance of the Age of Heroes, of whom many of the ghosts that had been summoned from the Harp of Odin were once members, Ruin, Riol, Cinderlin, even Terese and Arig in one of their many reincarnations had been counted amongst the Alliance, warriors of extraordinary abilities, responsible for the many wonders of that Age.

The two former ghosts also stood close by, though Arig still had not revealed his face beneath that shining rune marked mask, and Terese's face was controlled to hide any emotion, although Carl believed the woman was capable of true compassion, and that she too must have felt the tragedy of this event. They also joined in for many of the songs, though when the Songs of the Starborn Alliance were sung, they remained silent, and Carl believed it was because these songs brought memories that would reveal their emotions too deeply, if they allowed their voices to be heard.

Other songs were meant to be a guiding force to light the way to the High Realm, so that no souls would remain lost in the Middle Realm, or suffer the fate of being consumed by the Underworld, and Carl felt these songs were the most moving, heartbreaking laments that stirred the soul into moments of woe or bliss, but also great compassion for the loss of such brave warriors. These songs were sung by each of the Four Clans, but each clan taking part in different stages of the tribute, and a harmonizing of male and female singers that brought colourful images to his mind, reminding him of his own mortality, and the duty he was yet to fulfil.

Despite the courtyard being well lit, there was a definite tension amongst all who were gathered also, as if everyone was on edge about the possibility of a second strike by the Shadow, especially now while they were deep in mourning. Guardians and Alit'aren eyes darted left and right as if expecting Souljhin to appear at any moment, and Ael Trael wore faces of sorrow mixed with evident concern over the same fears, for this attack had seemed so unlike anything these people had ever experienced before.

Rooms were kept well lit even when sleeping in the case of immortals, although mortals usually found it impossible to sleep this way, and so rooms had been darkened at night within the palace of Nordhel and all the major cities since the Age of the First Men, also known as the Age of Mortals, yet there were few events on record like the previous night, when the Shadow had thrown such a powerful fist against them, and Carl feared it was because the Dark One had never been more motivated, until the arrival of the Sons and Daughter, who he evidently had chosen to destroy rather than turn.

If in death Carl and his Brothers were forced to serve the Dark Lord, he could see from witnessing the spirits of the Heroes of Will, that the souls of the Sons could still bring great harm to these people and their world. It was perhaps for this reason that the Dark One had decided the Sons would still adequately serve him, as ghosts.

Carl and Wil grew in their abilities, practicing and learning many of the same magic techniques as Adem. Tohver Silgurd taught Carl most often, but also Wil much of the time also. Today both Carl and Wil were learning the weaves to increase the enchantment of their weapons, seated in a sort of small library chamber with an open fireplace of black marble worked into shapes like sea horses and fish writhing in tumultuous seas at the base and dark clouds with sea birds flying at the top, yet, where the marble was closest to the flames, the fish took forms of demons, and the birds morphed into angels.

Tohver spoke in the deep tones typical of all Nordic males, his grey tinged moustache and fluffy spiked white beard fit well on his muscular jaw and neckline, dressed in Alit'aren black today as he was most days, with the Lion, Wolf and Dragon pins on his high black collar. 'You must allow *teron* to bleed into your spear, Carl Wilder,' the man said in instructing tones, a dutiful teacher with open warmth to his tones for his pupils, 'likewise for you, Wil Martyr,' the man always addressing them by their full names, an immortal habit that Carl was not yet certain whether he found endearing or ridiculous. But they all did it! 'Harness the Power like a flood of water soaking into your bones, as you siphon that energy from your spirit to weave the tiny flows into the spear and axe, like my old nanna would do with her knitting needles to create a fine sweater for my younglings, you must craft the weaves to guide and shape your desired outcome within the enchantment!' He finished with extremely optimistic and perhaps boisterous tones, as if this were a very important matter; that also brought him some state of personal delight to witness.

'I'm having some difficulty, Master Tohver,' Carl admitted, as he fumbled with the weaves without a significant understanding of how he was supposed to craft them, despite several instructions from both Tohver and also Math Mathonwy via the *kigare*.

'I am also having a bit of trouble,' Wil admitted, and Carl glanced at the weaves his friend was creating to note that Carl at least had a more substantial grip on the concept. Yet they both lacked true insight into what they were expected to achieve. When he voiced these thoughts, Tohver said, 'There are many options open to you both, as I have already explained. You may wish to increase the capacity for destruction via *teron*, making the spear a more powerful weapon, or you could choose to increase the relationship between yourself and the spear to the benefit of greater endurance and dexterity when wielding for long periods of time, and this would provide similar abilities to the gift harnessed by all disciplined Guardians.'

‘Another option would be to increase the potential for creating Healing spells and other rejuvenation magic via your spear or axe, and this would be achieved with the third variation of weaves I demonstrated earlier.

‘So which of these three do you wish to achieve first and foremost, Carl Wilder?’

Carl thought about that for some time before he replied, ‘It would seem most important to be better equipped to cause damage to our enemies, I suppose, but would it not also be just as vital to increase my ability to perform Healing upon my fellow wielders and warriors via *teron*?’

Tohver’s bushy grey eyebrows rose in surprise as he gazed at Carl with wonder and apparent fondness as he said, ‘Wise words, my pupil, for you speak of the conundrum all wielders face when they must choose which ways to craft their enchanted weaponry. Do we make ourselves better warriors, capable of destruction and might, or do we focus on Healing spells, or rejuvenation? But remember, there are a myriad of other spells and incantations that can be improved with different weapon enchantments, and it is up to you to choose the most vital, and beneficial, not just for you but for all you hope to protect, if you are noble enough to see that as your responsibility!’ Again he finished in heightened tones of restrained excitement.

‘So what *do* we choose?’ Wil asked in some state of confusion and bewilderment.

At this question Tohver did not appear so fond or appreciative, but he lowered his brows to speak with some sympathy as he replied, ‘Wil Martyr, you are perhaps my least favourite pupil, for you have just now failed to even understand what I have told you quite clearly.

‘The choice is yours entirely, Wil Martyr; but choose with careful consideration of the benefits and the disadvantages, for *ki’mera* is a precious source of magic, and difficult to procure, for it is only obtained when defeating demons.

‘So I ask you again, which of these three that I have instructed you to focus on today do *you* choose, with the hope that it will be of greatest benefit for the future?’

‘I choose to improve Healing capacity,’ Carl said, as Wil stared at his axe and then at his teacher again with greater apprehension.

‘Well done, Carl Wilder,’ Tohver practically beamed with pleasure. ‘You are a much faster learner, and I say that this choice suits what I have learnt of your personality, and your beliefs.’ Carl felt a little awkward from all the praise, as he saw it was doing no good for Wil.

‘I will choose to improve the Power of Destruction,’ Wil said finally. ‘It best suits my personality.’ He continued the weaves with a somewhat satisfied grin.

‘If you say so, Wil Martyr, so long as you have learnt to make the decision for yourself, and for that I give you praise also. Well done.’

Carl began to wonder whether his over enthusiastic finishes were a sign that Tohver was also becoming susceptible to the taint on *teron*. Madness appeared in many forms, though he did not know the man before the Power became tainted, so he did not have that knowledge to compare it with the man’s current behaviour.

As a trained scientist, Carl had some basic knowledge of psychology, and he used this as a daily focus of meditating upon the behaviours of all male wielders he met, but his primary focus was always upon Adem, and how long he could remain reasonably sane without his daily medication.

Carl and Wil shared emotions of joy and pain while holding *teron* in their veins, revitalizing lightning and corrupt viscous filth flowed through each of them while they worked the weaves into their desired patterns, each one working in very different forms, yet the required hold on the Power brought equal sensations of pure pleasure and sheer revulsion.

Carl saw a beam of light like an aura around his friend while working the weaves, as well as the colourful filaments of energy that flowed from Wil's hands and body to enter the enchanted axe, that glowed bright amber with a halo of resonance of its own that was beyond its normal shine. Wil would see the same aura of blue-white light around Carl, as Carl returned his focus to his own weaves of *teron* that flowed from his fingers, arms and chest in swirling waves of colour shining with vast intensity as they entered the spear, that also shone bright crimson, as he felt the bond between himself and the weapon increasing, and at the same time he sensed his own capacity for Healing spells improving by a significant margin.

The assembly of the weaves were mostly guided by Math Mathonwy now, though his Battle Angel admitted he was never known for being exceptional with Healing spells. Math was a Spirit Warden of Chaos and Bloodshed, his Hellfire Spear and his Hounds of Hell were unrelenting destruction, savage but disciplined in the Art of War. This had been a great advantage to Carl in the two battles he had already faced, yet Carl felt assured that his own real purpose here was to learn to become a great Magician of Healing.

His ultimate desire and aim would be to learn a fast and effective way to reverse the effects of being cut by those tainted Souljhin and Shadow Men blades, though up till now the search for such cures had never been considered worth the risk of losing more lives in the heat of battle.

The fact that Elemental Fire could be used to purify the dead was a vital clue he thought, and he felt that if he could discover a cure, and teach it to others, it would bring hope and courage at times when these people so often faced terrible fear and doubt.

Adem fell more deeply in love with Jean though she seemed distant and focused on her training as the winter months progressed.

During the first week of heavy snow, Adem waited for Jean on the balcony each night, but she never came. When he passed her in the hallways the following week, she told him, 'I was busy,' quite flatly; then proceeded past him with her nose in the air. Adem tried to tell himself that it was nothing to be concerned about, but those moments he shared with Jean were the few times each day that he was able to see her.

His heart began to ache for her soft touch and warm kisses; her big blue eyes staring into his, that feeling of belonging to someone, a life with meaning. She was younger than him, four years younger to be exact, but he was certain that was not what had changed her attitude. He wondered if it was Terese Silverblade filling her mind with stories about great warrior women who forgot to ward off a man's affections and subsequently found themselves with child. That seemed the most likely once he had the idea in his mind, though he was not certain it *was* the reason she had removed herself from his life.

Elmira and Lydia were concerned about their relationship, though they did not ban them from seeing one another. This was different, someone had changed her thoughts; her altered behaviour was the result.

Later that week as he became desperate, he confronted her when they were alone in a corridor with red-coated guards standing at either end of the hall. He pulled her to an alcove between two polished oak tables with bright flowers in porcelain vases as he asked, 'What has changed between us? Don't you love me anymore?' Jean glared at him with her ocean blue eyes before she replied, 'I still love you, Adem. I just . . . don't know that we should be spending so much time together. Terese says it will interfere with my training, my concentration is lacking, and she says it's your fault.' Adem sighed at her confession before calmly saying, 'So it *is* Terese who has changed your thinking.'

I knew it!

'Terese wants me to be the greatest Blademaide in the history of Kismeria,' Jean said sullenly. 'I can't think straight when I'm thinking of you, Adem. It's too much emotion. I'm just a young woman too! Terese says I'm too young for a serious relationship.'

She started to pout at the end with arms crossed under her breasts. She wore a red silk blouse and short skirt with golden silk trousers and crimson leather boots. With her golden braid shining in the lantern light, she looked enchanted.

'We come from a very different time and place to these people, Jean,' Adem said in an almost lecturing tone. 'Especially Terese, she's older than . . . Queen Cleopatra! Please just tell me you will meet me on the balcony tonight. I have to see you. I need you, Jean.' He leaned forward to kiss her lips, but she pushed him away as she began to take strides down the hall towards one of the guards, the green-eyed immortal raising a pointed brow at Adem's failed attempt.

'If you want to see me, you will have to wait for me, Adem Highlander!' Jean said smartly over her shoulder. 'I have so much on my mind right now. I just don't have the time. I'm sorry.' Then she was taking great strides to reach the protective barrier of the armed guard. Tallis Rogrothar was his name; the way he eyed Jean in her tight trousers made Adem wonder if immortals sometimes mated with mortals. That was something he would need to discuss with Tobin in their next meeting.

'I understand, Jean,' he said softly as she passed out of sight. 'I'm sorry too for confusing you.' She stepped back into the hallway to peer at him around the sleeve of the immortal guard.

'Frustrating me is how I would put it,' she said with a sly grin with her fingers wound around the guard's elbow. Tallis wore an expression that suggested he wished he were somewhere else at that moment – he actually began to blush! Immortals were modest creatures. 'Time should be no burden to you, Adem,' Jean said in soft but lecturing tones. 'After all, we have all the time in the world.' With that, she smiled and ducked behind Tallis again to disappear down the hall.

Adem stood there feeling alone with his thoughts until Tallis offered, 'Perhaps flowers before kisses next time, Adem Highlander.' This was Adem's turn to blush, with guilt and shame. Though, he grinned at the tall golden-haired immortal before he replied, 'Thank you, Tallis. That is sound advice. Forgive my ignorance. It has been many years since I last tried to kiss a woman.' Then he realised how stupid he would sound saying that to an

immortal. He had had it explained to him that immortals usually only ever found one partner in their lifetime, and Tallis probably had not even found his future wife yet, though the man still had the sense to recommend flowers.

As if the guard had read his thoughts, Tallis said, 'My mother always told me, 'Make a pathway of rose petals to lead your lady love to your heart.' That was her advice in regard to taming a woman with fire in her heart. Jean Fairsythe has a heart that burns like the sun.' He gave a sheepish grin at the last. Adem was beginning to be more than a little concerned about Tallis's apparent admiration of Jean.

I really must speak with King Tobin!

Later that day, he sat at lunch with Carl and Wil with Guardians and Alit'aren standing along the walls to guard the room. Meals were always provided with just a little more than they would be willing to eat. Adem had been disgusted at the extravagance of the feasts provided to them in their first weeks at Nordhel, and he had insisted that the cooks cater for a much smaller stomach. The result was plates of sliced meat, breads, and cheeses that satisfied their hunger with little going to waste.

King Tobin insisted anything they did not eat during a feast was shared among the servants and that 'the servants looked forward to eating what was left over.' Adem would not have it however. He felt that if they prepared less, there would be more leftover for the servants, though Tobin always disagreed with his logic.

'What are you worried over?' Carl asked Adem sullenly. 'I have not seen my wife in over three months! If she had perceived those three months as more than a few nanoseconds, she would be worried out of her wits for me by now. I sincerely hope this time difference theory of King Orion's is accurate. Otherwise, there will be a search party out for us, you mark my words.' Adem sat brooding over the fact that Jean was avoiding him; he had related this fact to his friends more often than he cared to think.

'Stop worrying about the time differences,' Adem said finally. 'If Orion is anywhere near accurate in his theory, there will be no search party. We need to concentrate on our training. Tohver says you are both improving in your ability to wield, though he fears something is blocking your true potentials.'

Adem still obtained his Healing every day from Lira Tolnock or one of the other Ael Tarael to reduce his symptoms. The Sickness, they said, was growing stronger in his mind as a result of wielding the tainted Power. Adem suspected it was also the fact that he had not had his medication in over three months. Carl and Wil still refused any Healing though Lira insisted they would require it in the months and years that followed. 'The taint *will* drive you into madness,' she would tell them, 'and there is no way to guard against it.'

Adem had begun to notice slight changes in his own behaviour, mood swings, nervousness, anxiety, and stress. Each morning he checked his eyes in the washstand mirror to see if the Darkness was returning to his mind. He noticed slight changes in his friends also; they often seemed distracted in their thoughts, brooding or discontent. He began to worry for them all.

Arig Flamebow told them he feared the taint would infect them *all* sooner than later, and he referred to the entire male population of wielders.

‘Perhaps I was sent here to monitor these changes,’ Arig mused. ‘There has never been anything like the taint in any of my memories though there may be information I hold that could help us find a way to avoid its affects.’

‘What about a cure?’ Carl asked.

‘That is possible.’ Arig considered. ‘Though the trick would be finding out whether it is you three who must be cured to cleanse the Power, or whether the Power itself must be cured. I will need more time to work on this theory. I will dedicate my spare hours to researching the Royal Libraries.’

Adem was certain the former ghost went for days without sleep; though he already spent those hours busily researching the Royal Libraries. Adem wondered how that man would *find* ‘spare hours.’ Arig had worn the mask for days before revealing his handsome face of large dark eyes, tanned skin, and dark hair tied with a crimson ring. He was of the Torvellen clan of immortals in his former life as Arig Reidenhold. He revealed to Adem that in another life he was of the Nordic clan. Kierel Redbow was his name in that Age; his wife had died at the hands of a Souljhin during the Rokhal Wars. Rokhal were ten-foot-tall beasts with skulls of rams or bulls, muscular humanoid arms and torsos with thick shaggy legs and hoofed feet, usually in dark spiked armour and wielding axes, tridents or scythe-shaped black blades.

Arig explained that, ‘A Rokhal would have just slain my wife, but Souljhin like to force themselves upon a woman, before they pass them to the Rokhal cook pots.’ Adem gasped in shock and horror, and he felt a deep sorrow for Arig’s memories of past lives. It must have been a terribly heavy burden to remember so much pain, from such devastating horrors.

The day after seeing Jean in the hallway, Adem was confronted by Terese Silverblade. He heard her high heels clipping the marble floor as she stalked towards him with fire in her eyes.

‘Adem Highlander!’ she said in tones that reminded him of his childhood when his mother would seize him by the ear for some measure of strife. He turned to stand with a stiff back, holding out his chest to emphasize that he *was* one of the Chosen. Terese met his gaze with a burning fury as she explained in careful tones, ‘You will cease your pursuit of Jean Fairsythe immediately. You will not pull her into corners to attempt to kiss her. You will not fool with her fragile mind with your words of love and devotion. And you will no longer meet with her on moonlit balconies . . . do you understand?’

Her tone at the last promised a Hero’s wrath if her demands were not followed to the letter. She wore an emerald silk coat that hung to her hips embroidered with golden flowers, baggy blue woollen trousers and knee-high green leather boots, one hand resting on the hilt of her enchanted blade hanging from her sword belt. She was of the Nordic clan of immortals in her previous life, large dark eyes and pointed brows, strikingly beautiful.

‘I hear your words and I shall consider what you have told me,’ Adem managed to say though his tone revealed the caution of one who knew the Legends of Terese Silverblade. ‘Might I request that you pass a message to her from me?’ he asked with some manner of dignity. Terese sniffed loudly before she replied, ‘What do you wish her to know?’

‘Tell her that I hope she accomplishes her dreams,’ Adem said in controlled tones. The fire cooled in those large dark eyes before the woman replied, ‘Wise words, Adem

Highlander. I shall relay your message.’ Her heels clipped against the pavement as she swiftly stalked away, leaving Adem alone to brood. Arawn offered no sympathy or wisdom through the *kigare*. Arawn was a Lord of the Underworld; he had never loved a woman. At least, if he had ever loved one of the female Great Angels in Ages past, he gave no hint of it to Adem. Viewing Arawn’s mind and heart was like falling into the flames of the sun, an eternal fire that gave no warmth. Adem often worried that too much of his Battle Angel’s personality was transferred to his own.

The next time he passed Jean in the hallway, she was with Terese and Queen Lydia. Terese stared at him as if he were a worm that needed to crawl back into that tiny crack in the wall, while Lydia’s gaze held a little more kindness. He stood silently while all three women looked at him as if he were a complete fool, before he bowed deeply; flourishing his Guardian cloak that – he was certain – would be hiding part of his form, because at that moment he did not want to be seen! The women nodded when he straightened; Jean’s expression was hurt as she passed by him. He realised then he could have offered some kind words, for Jean at least. He stumbled onwards with a heavy heart.

In the weeks that followed, Adem focused all his frustration and anger into his sword practice. The Nordic Blademasters were considered the best in the Free Lands. Kailus Broeduthar taught Adem most days using wooden practice blades, though they used steel for three hours at least once a week. Kailus was tall and solid with a wide chest and a closely cropped black beard with drooping moustaches. His eyes were dark blue with tan skin. He reminded Adem of a bear, though with the sword he was even more dangerous than a charging grizzly.

His movements were fluid from one stance to the next; Adem often stumbled as he retreated from one of the Guardian’s flowing attacks. Other times Kailus would have three Guardians attacking Adem with practice blades while the Blademaster stood and watched with arms crossed and a face carved from stone. Adem usually needed Healing after these fights as the strike of a practice blade could fracture bones and create nasty bruises.

Carl and Wil’s weapon training was usually separate from Adem’s as they had their own Blademasters teaching them most days. Sometimes they were allowed to fight together however, against six or nine Guardians wielding practice blades. Wil used a blunt wooden axe that still caused pain on impact, and Carl wielded a wooden quarterstaff.

Carl was becoming highly skilled with the spear as a result of his training; he tripped Guardians and cracked their ribs or skulls even with the practice spear, and Wil was earning a reputation for breaking bones when he swung his practice axe like a wild man. Kailus and the other Blademasters forbid them to use the Power during these practice fights. They wanted the Sons of Odin to learn to become experts with their weapons without relying on magic.

‘The Power is a great weapon,’ Kailus would say to Adem. ‘But if you are drained of the strength to wield, the Power is useless. Your blade will then be your only defence. A true Blademaster can face twenty Rokhal and still emerge the victor. You must become as worthy in *your* swordsmanship.’

Working with the Power was something very different. You did not drip with sweat, your muscles did not ache, and you did not hunger or thirst. Seizing the Power was like grappling with the horns of a charging bull; *teron* was a raging storm of ice and an avalanche of fire. *Teron* needed to be controlled once the Power flowed through you, like teaching the

bull to dance once you gripped it by the horns. Any slight slip in that fight for control could result in being burnt out and severed from the Power forever. The Alit'aren also warned that a loss of control could result in unleashing the Power by accident which could harm or kill those around you.

For this reason, the three Sons of Odin usually always practiced wielding *teron* in separate areas of the Palace Courtyard. In the beginning, only three Alit'aren would monitor their practice, though as the months progressed, their strength in the Power grew, and so the number of Alit'aren increased to ensure Adem and his friends could be shielded if they ever lost control of *teron*. Seven Alit'aren were stationed around them now after nearly four months' training.

Chapter

7



The Daughter of Thor

Jean stood on one of the grey stone balconies overlooking the Royal Courtyard. The thick layers of snow were pushed back in neat circles to expose the paved stone in places. That was where the Alit'aren and Blademasters trained the Sons of Odin. The circles were twenty paces in diameter in some cases, with four-foot-high walls of snow pushed up around the edges.

The wind was like ice as it passed through her blue woollen cloak and white silk coat and skirt worked with black fox embroidery. She wore thick white stockings and her blue leather boots were fur lined, but still she barely resisted the urge to shiver. Ignoring the heat

and cold was something she learnt from her Ael Trael instructors. They told her that her 'sense of temperature is a state of mind and can be ignored through disciplined training.'

Part of that training was vigorous exercise in the early stages though for the most part it simply required the skill of switching off the senses that felt heat or cold. Adem insisted he had already learnt this trick before they arrived in Kismeria, but Adem was always boasting of his many talents. He was a ridiculous oaf most of the times he decided to speak.

She watched him battle against three Guardians armed with practice swords. Despite how much he managed to get under her skin, her breath still caught when she watched him move through the forms taught to him by Kailus and the other Guardians. She knew many of the names of those forms from her own sword training. Terese was teaching her to be more than just a wielder of a sword; she taught her to become one with the blade. Terese insisted that the Power had no influence there, except for the meditation practices to focus the mind known as the *Tar'deith* or True Flow.

'Stop mooning over that fool of a man!' Terese said irritably. 'You need to focus, Jean. It's integral to your training. Love will only dull your wits and make you easy prey for his lust.'

'Surely you've been in love?' Jean asked.

'I don't recall,' Terese said with a sniff. She stood under the arch of the open door, leaning against a slab of grey stone. She wore a waist-length golden coat of silk with white embroidery, grey woollen trousers, and knee-high white leather boots. The woman never wore skirts or dresses. 'They are impractical for swordplay,' she would say, 'and I don't care about looking pretty.' Her denial of ever being in love struck a chord of intrigue with Jean however.

'But you can recall the exact number of casualties after the Battle of Tarvis Krell,' Jean said flatly. 'You remember facing a horde of Nymloc on the Peaks of Dorshorath over three thousand years ago, but you do not remember love. How can that be?' She flashed the woman a challenging glare before returning her focus to Adem's swordplay.

'I remember some things more clearly than others,' Terese said defensively. 'My mother's name, the age I first learnt to wield a blade, just pockets of information . . . the rest is fading. Soon I may only remember this life.'

Jean kept her eyes on Adem – he pushed back two Guardians with flowing strikes – though she felt a stab of pain in her heart for Terese's lost memories.

'I still say you must remember your true love,' she said sadly. 'Love is the strongest of emotions. It writes itself upon our every fibre. That is something one does not easily forget.'

'Perhaps I do remember . . . a man,' Terese admitted. 'But I do not let those thoughts cloud my judgement, nor did I then. I remained in service to my people and to the Lord. Your duty is to all the people, Jean Fairsythe, in your world and mine. If you fail to defeat the Dark One, he will bring terror and destruction on Earth also. You are the White Snow Fox, the Daughter of Thor, and a Child of Prophecy that has been known since the First Age. Our destiny is in your hands, and the hands of those . . . young men.' Fools is what she was about to call them, Jean was certain. 'I understand that to try to keep you and Adem apart is a battle we cannot win, but I must try to keep your head clear of thoughts that would distract you from your duty.'

‘You may have your lover when the Great Battle is won. Until that day, you are just another figurine on a field of black and white.’ The last was a reference to a chess board; in Kiseria, they called the game *mohrthra’daeghal*. Their version used a board with more squares and more figurines, though it was essentially the same as both were designed for battle strategy.

‘I understand,’ Jean sighed. ‘But can’t you see it my way too? I love Adem, and he loves me. We need to be together, it gives us greater strength than when we are apart . . . and . . .’

‘I disagree,’ Terese interjected. ‘You will both become stronger if you resist your desires. It is character building to accept faith rather than lust. You are young, Jean, with so many years to live and grow in your wisdom . . . though I think you are very wise. Listen to your true instincts, it will tell you that I’m right.’ Jean had been looking inward for answers ever since the woman banned her from seeing Adem. She searched for answers in the depths of meditation, but her emotions would always override her attempts at logic.

‘What if we are both fated to die in this Great Battle?’ Jean asked while still watching Adem – her words seemingly affecting his confidence – being forced back by one of the Guardians, barely raising his practice sword in time to defend against the onslaught. Terese sighed deeply before she replied, ‘Your duty, Jean Fairsythe, your duty above all.’

The next few days passed with intense training both at wielding the Power and her blade. Gabrielle Arnohell was the name of the Ael Terael who guided her lessons in wielding *terael*. The Power was a rising sun over a mountain top that filled you with its warmth when it rose above the peak. Meditation practices to open herself up to *terael* included this exact metaphor. *Terael* swept you up and carried you away like waves on the sea when you released the desire to fight, a sea of bliss with waves of ecstasy.

The times her Battle Angel had linked with the Battle Angels of the Sons of Odin, she had felt the savage nature of the male half of the Power. *Teron* was like a wild beast fighting to dominate the wielder, a blizzard raging on a sea of flames. And the taint . . . so foul it made her want to empty her stomach . . . so vile she nearly wailed in disgust the first time she sensed it. Her heart ached all the more to think that that vicious concoction was infecting Adem’s heart and mind. How long before he too became a beast?

During the first week of the second month of winter, Jean crossed paths with Adem in the hallways. He wore a black coat, trousers, and boots in imitation of the Alit’aren – golden dragons embroidered on the sleeves. The two black-coated men who marched behind him moved further down the hall at Adem’s request. Jean was reluctant to speak with him alone, but her heart made the decision for her.

‘It has been too long,’ Adem began. A stab of pain entered Jean’s heart at the thought that this was a break up speech.

‘Before you say another word, Adem Highlander, think very carefully about what you are about to say.’ She fixed him with a warning glare, arms crossed under her breasts. Adem stared wide eyed for a moment before saying, ‘You look very beautiful today, Jean. I was going to say that I miss you. We have been apart for over a month now. When will you see me?’ Jean began tapping her foot to emphasize that she was timing this.

‘I told you that you would have to wait for me,’ she said plainly. ‘Am I not worth the wait?’

‘You are more than worth it. I just feel so lost without you. Meet me tonight? Please?’

Jean wanted to tell him no, her mind said no, but her heart forced her to ask, ‘Same place?’

‘Terese will know to look for us there,’ Adem said with the expression of an expert tactician. ‘Meet me in the small garden in front of the church, before sunset.’ Jean smiled and nodded but offered no kisses. He grinned broadly as he bowed; then made his way to meet the other men. Jean’s training was finished for the day, so after snacking on some fruit she requested from one of the kitchen maids, she spent the afternoon trying on dresses to make Adem’s heart beat with wild passion.

She was torn between silver embroidery on a white silk gown with a low-cut neckline and a layered dress of crimson silk that exposed her knees. She thought white silk stockings with either dress would suit, though she did not like the idea of wearing fur-lined knee-high lace-up boots with the white gown. In the end, she chose a pale blue silk skirt and blouse with white embroidery, a white silk cloak, and silver-embroidered white gloves.

She did not think she looked any different to any normal day; however, when Terese saw her, she went berserk! It must have been Jean’s expression of sly guilt that gave her away. Either that or the woman sniffed her out. She thought Terese was part wolf.

‘You are going to see him.’ Terese snapped. ‘Don’t even try to deny it. I know. I can tell. What are you thinking, Jean? The man is mad! Less so now than he will be in time, but he is still a madman. There is no hope for the two of you.’ Jean drew herself up to face the woman as she said, ‘I *am* meeting him. It is *my* choice. Adem’s psychological condition is under control, less so now without his medication, but still under control and . . .’

‘The taint will corrupt his mind completely!’ Terese interjected. ‘No amount of Healing or medicine will ever save them. The Prophecies say that the Sons of Odin will go mad and destroy the world!’

‘Lydia says the Prophecies are difficult to interpret,’ Jean said, ‘and it could mean something other than the way it sounds.’

‘What other way can you interpret it?’ Terese asked in protest. ‘It means what it means.’

‘You told me I could have Adem when the war is over,’ Jean said heatedly.

‘I lied,’ Terese said followed by another deep sigh with a look of regret. Jean felt betrayed by the woman, giving her hope one day and destroying her entire perspective on another.

‘I have to go to him,’ Jean said in a firm tone. ‘He needs me.’

Terese rubbed her temples the way she did when she was stressed before saying, ‘Arrrgh . . . just this once, all right. I will allow it but only if you are back in time for supper.’ Jean smiled and rushed to give the woman a hug and a kiss on the cheek before saying, ‘Thank you, Terese. You have a soft heart after all.’ Terese snorted before replying, ‘Don’t bet on it!’

Adem was nowhere in sight when she arrived at the churchyard. Atlus Tordis was the smaller of the two churches within Nordhel. The medieval-style architecture was similar to a smaller version of Notre Dame.

The front courtyard was no more than twenty paces by twenty with a stone wall to section off the back of the church. Walls of the palace surrounded the churchyard though the

walls were raked levels to allow hours of daylight to penetrate the stain glass windows of the church.

A thick layer of snow crunched under her boots as she strolled towards the long wooden bench under a black tree of leafless branches. A small dark bird that looked like a robin with a blue breast hopped on the snow at her feet after she brushed aside some ice to take a seat. Then she saw him, his Guardian cloak shimmering white and grey to take the form of black shadows. He removed the hood and strode towards her with a smile.

‘Thank you for meeting me, my darling,’ he said softly in his charming way. ‘I wanted to bring you flowers, but I think I have something better.’ He then reached inside his brown leather belt pouch to pull forth a golden ring with a diamond the size of his thumb nail! Jean thought her eyes must have been bulging in complete shock as he then got down on one knee! He’s going to bloody *propose!* She thought in a state of elation and anguish.

Her heart was racing, and her knees felt weak. She would not be surprised if she began to break into a sweat despite the cold. ‘I have only known you for a relatively short time, Jean,’ he continued in tender tones. ‘But I always told myself if I ever met the right woman, I would tell her that I love her more than money or gold, that I desired her more than fame or success, and that I needed her like a plant needs sunlight to grow and a fish needs water to breathe. I know now that you are that woman.’

‘I want nothing more in this life than for you to be my wife. I will love and cherish you, have and hold you, in sickness and in health. You are my day and my night, my waking hours and my dreams. I want everyone in Kismeria to know that this Son of Odin is married to the Daughter of Thor, and I want everyone on Earth to know that Jean Fairsythe is my wife.’

‘Adem . . . don’t you think you’re rushing into this . . .,’ she said slowly before he gently interrupted by saying, ‘You don’t have to make a decision yet. Just think about it. But for now, I want you to wear the ring. So that everyone will know I have made the commitment. But . . .’

‘What is it, Adem?’ she asked with a frown.

‘I have already . . . made the arrangements. If you are ready, that is. The priest is waiting in the church. Carl and Wil are in there too. They are our witnesses. I don’t want to rush you, but what do you think?’ She could hear his nervousness beneath the beaming anticipation in his eyes. She could feel it too. Ever since the first Link between their Battle Angels, she had felt as if she could sense part of his emotions. She had not discussed it with her trainers yet, but she was certain it was not her imagination. She knew his heart was yearning for her to say yes, and she wanted to, but she knew Terese would never forgive her for betraying her trust.

‘I can’t, Adem, I’m so sorry.’ Tears immediately welled in her eyes as a great pain throbbed in her heart. ‘Terese says the taint will drive you mad, more than you are already.’

‘My condition is under control,’ Adem said with a hurt expression. ‘I just need my medication to get better.’

‘But there is no such medicine in Kismeria,’ Jean said sadly. ‘Terese says even Healing can only slow the taint, she says it is inevitable. I do love you, Adem, with all my heart, but I cannot marry you.’ His face was unreadable, though her sense of him through the *kigare* told her she had just ripped out his heart. His months training with the sword had

stripped the excess fat off his bones. He was lean muscle now with a face that looked chiselled from stone. He wore the high-collared black coat, trousers, and boots of an Alit'aren under the Guardian cloak. He looked like a priest.

'You don't have to make that decision now,' he said, 'at least not right away. Just think about it, and please wear the ring to give me some sign of hope.'

'There is no hope for us, Adem,' she said with tears streaming down her face. She wiped at her cheeks while rising as he stared up at her in disbelief. Her sense of him was that he had turned suddenly cold, though the cold was like falling through pits of endless flames.

'You can't mean that, Jean,' he said softly, but she stepped past him and ran off through the snow. She did not look back until she had reached the stone staircase that led to a palace door. He was still on one knee, his eyes searching the sky.

Looking for answers from your Lord God, Adem Highlander? Madness!

She didn't really mean it. She had learnt so much about the human spirit these past months she was beginning to be a believer too. But spirits and magic was one thing, God was taking the issue much further in your beliefs. She was raised as an Atheist and that was a hard mindset to unravel despite all the evidence she had seen. She still believed there was a scientific rationale to all of this without the need for faith. Adem had told her once that ghosts were scientific proof of God, but she did not quite understand how or why he thought that was true. Her vision became water before she turned away to rush up the steps.

Terese watched from the balcony as Jean walked away from Adem in the churchyard. She had followed the girl because she had not taken her bow. Without it, she could not summon Tanriel. She had insisted the girl take the bow, but they had come to a compromise when she belted on her sword. She was glad she had witnessed this event however, worse than any of her suspicions about the boy. The fool thought she would marry him.

Well, perhaps she would have if Terese had not told her the truth. The Saviours were fated to fight together but nothing more than that according to the Prophecies. She could not allow the girl to get in deeper trouble than she already was. She would have to watch her every waking hour to make sure they had no more secret meetings. Seeing Adem propose had stirred Terese's memories. She recalled the day Gairlar Evorisel had sworn his oath to serve her till death. That was the Guardian Oath, though the man had been her lover before then. Strong and proud, the man had the wits of an ox before she taught him to yield.

Though there was always a give and take between them, him usually having the upper hand in the bedchamber. The man had died with a stake through the heart after he was turned by a Vampire of the Reihei Coven. She still remembered the look in his eyes when she drove that wooden dagger through his chest. That was the first time he told her that he loved her and no other. Tears welled in her eyes, and she took deep breaths to steady herself. That was ancient history now. She had her duty to the Daughter of Thor.

Jean lay on her front over the red silk bed sheets and thick mauve quilt. She was still fighting the tears, and her heart was filled with regret. She did not know how long Terese had been standing in her doorway before she spoke, though she guessed it was more than a brief moment. At first it shamed her to be seen in this state, but when she looked at the dark-haired woman, she saw that Terese's face was also red and puffy. She could not believe the immortal woman was capable of tears before that moment.

'I saw,' the woman said calmly.

'You were spying on me?' Jean asked incredulously.

'I am your sworn protector,' Terese said sternly. 'The enemy could strike again at any time. You refused to take your bow, so I was forced to follow you. I also wanted to know your new meeting place. If you can keep secrets from me, you will. However, I was pleasantly surprised by your sensible behaviour. You cannot allow this to work you into knots. It was a foolish idea, and you made the right choice. When I find out who gave him that ring, I will make a fine coat from their hide,' her last words spoke of a promise. 'In time you will understand that you had no other choice. If Adem turns out to be the Blue Water Dragon, marrying him would make you an even greater target than you are already. I'm sorry that I had to break your resilience.

'You just have to forget what your heart yearns for and turn your anguish into fuel for the fire. You are going to become very strong, Jean, stronger in the Power than any of the Heroines of Legend. Believe me, I know the pain you are feeling, but it will pass, in time.' At that moment, Jean felt like her heart was about to explode. She thought her eyes must be filled with suffering. Finally, she said, 'You were right. There is no hope for us.'

'I'm so sorry, Jean.' Terese breathed emphatically. 'If I could take your place and let you become the wife of Adem, I would make it so. But you hold the Power of the female Great Angels. It is your reward, and therefore, your subsequent responsibility is your burden, just as it is his too.

'I once loved a man more than my heart could take. It nearly cost me my sanity when I had to lose him. I can't let that happen to you. I need to make you stronger than I could ever be.' Jean still lay on her stomach with her elbows propped up to rest her chin on her hands.

She gave one more sniff, wiped her eyes, and rolled over to sit upright with her legs hanging over the side of the bed as she said, 'Come and sit beside me and tell me all about this man you loved.' Terese rolled her eyes with her hands crossed under her breasts before she walked to sit beside her to relate the tale. By the time Terese had told her how her lover died, Jean decided her life was the much easier one to live.

Chapter



The Green Men

With the spring thaw came the arrival of mortal Lords and Ladies, leading armies to fight alongside the Saviours, as well as some immortal tribes, including the Dremelden, Forest Immortals of the Kingarin Forest to the west of Nordhel.

Among the mortals came Lord Jothar Kelderath, High Seat of House Kelderath, Commander of the Sea of Spears, Wielder of the Blade of Turmoil, Captain of the Remleden Heart Guard, and Keeper of the Staff of Reckoning. The man was tall for a mortal – tall mortals were of a height with Adem and his friends – his head was shaved except for a topknot tail of white hair that fell down to his shoulders, a neatly trimmed white moustache like down-curving horns and a pointed white tuft of hair falling from his chin.

‘I am honoured to be in the presence of the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor,’ the man said in scraping tones though he looked hard as nails. He stood proudly in a way that emphasised his height even though most immortals in the room were a head taller.

‘I bring news from the west of war and dissension amongst the nobles,’ Kelderath continued. ‘There is war between the Gorthair and the Bretons. They are fighting over the arrival of the Saviours to Kismeria and the threat of Alit’aren going mad from the taint on *teron*. Lord Mark of the Bretons says we should preserve the Alit’aren for the Great Battle. Lord Tintor of the Gorthair says that the Alit’aren must be hunted down and severed from the Power before they can start a war that will destroy the world.’

Adem could now see where all of this was leading. Kelderath himself must have come to Nordhel to seek aid from the immortals to stop revolution from spreading to his own lands. This theory was confirmed as the man continued, stating that he feared ‘the threat of revolution will spread like a festering wound throughout the lands.’

When Kelderath finished his speech, Tobin sat for some time stroking his chin hair before he replied, 'We must first tackle the problem of Alit'aren going mad and destroying homes before we can unite the people under our banners. I fear we may be forced into battle with these rogue armies when we invade their lands to try to seek out these mad Alit'aren.

'We must keep a vigilant watch on these men who serve as the Hammer of the Light in our armies. We have trusted the Alit'aren to protect us in times of war and unrest. I fear for the days when their madness becomes the source of those wars.' There were twelve Alit'aren standing along the walls to either side of the thrones all dressed in their black coats and cloaks. They stood like relaxed lions with their eyes searching the faces of Kelderath and his men. Torin was among them; his face looked troubled when Adem looked to him, and the man usually showed as much emotion as a stone. Adem wondered whether it was wise for Tobin to speak of the issue of trust of Alit'aren with the male wielders present.

'We will journey west to try to put an end to this unrest and to restore order,' Tobin said. 'We shall take a show of force that should convince these farmer armies to submit. The Mortal Wars are a black stain on our history.'

Kelderath gave only the slightest tilt of his head for a bow to the king, a man of self-assured importance. He wore a dark-blue silk coat, worked with silver-and-gold scrollwork upon the shoulders and the Golden Owl upon his left pocket. His boots were dark and also worked with vertical gold lines with trousers of dark leather. The Blade of Turmoil was a gold-hilted long sword in a gold scabbard encrusted with emeralds, so large he wore it strapped to his back.

The Court Chamber was fifty paces by fifty, polished blue marble columns supported a vaulted ceiling worked with gilt, and the floor was white and black marble squares. The wall friezes, tapestries, and paintings were large pieces depicting the ancient armies of the Nordic Kings in battle against the Shadow. Demons were present in many of the works, most detailed in the paintings with accurate colouring and textures.

The next to enter was Lord Farrigan Barmellis, First Speaker of the High Council of the Kingarin Forest clan, and Commander of the Reaven Archers. Reaven Archers were immortal archers armed with Lukrorian Bows. Arawn explained that the Reaven had to become Blademasters before they were accepted into the Brotherhood of Archers. Five Archers entered following Lord Farrigan, all tall with lightly tanned skin, dark eyes, and long dark hair tied at the nape of the neck. They all wore the *torin 'sidhe*, long swords at their hips with bows slanting above their shoulders.

Farrigan was very tall, spiked black hair and large green eyes. His tanned skin was slightly darker than the Archers. He wore a dark green coat worked with black wolves upon the sleeves. His cloak pin and belt buckle were also of the Wolf. His long sword was gold-hilted capped with a fat ruby with golden wolves scrawled across the black scabbard.

A very beautiful Dremelden woman also stood beside the man, with bright blue eyes and thick golden curls tied back into a braid. She wore the same style of clothing as the Archers with a bow and sword.

'May I present the Lady Gwyndel Haveroan, Blademaiden of the Elder Tree sept, Archer of the Trevellin Brotherhood, Wielder of the Bow of Soliden, Resting Point of the Great Angel, Druantia,' Farrigan said.

Gwyndel stepped forward to bow on one knee with her eyes facing the floor as she said, 'I have come to pledge my service to the Daughter of Thor. I have brought the Bow of Soliden to present the Great Angel, Druantia, with the intention that she become one of Jean Fairsythe's Battle Angels.' She then reached for the yellow bow that glowed with a golden light when it was in her grasp. She remained on one knee as she held out the bow before her and spoke the name, 'Druantia.'

Adem looked in amazement as the floor in front of the bow began to break apart. Shoots of new spring growth began to push through the cracking marble. The shoots grew thick, and vines began to wrap around the growths that were now bark-covered trunks and branches. The growing vines and bark became first legs and then a female torso and arms of vine covered wood. A head sprouted from the top – skin like aged wood – that was an oval face with large dark eyes, like seeds, and flowing black hair of moss worked with flowers and dried brown leaves.

Arawn informed Adem this was not Druantia, however. The figure was twelve feet tall, and when it walked, the cracked floor behind it became whole again, and the floor where it stepped became broken marble with the shoots rising through. Another two giant figures rose to either side of the first through cracked marble in a rising of tangled vines and shoots. These second two were male figures – Green Men, Arawn called them. They were the Guardians of the Forests, wide bellied with thick trunk like arms and legs where the female figure was slender and curvaceous. Then Druantia appeared as a figure of blue-green fire, a beautiful female Great Angel of a similar size to Tanriel. The apparition hung two feet above the floor in front of the Forest Guardians. Her gown was blue-green silk that glowed with golden runes, her hair was black fire, and her eyes were burning black seeds on a pale oval face.

When she spoke, it reminded Adem of wind chimes as she said, 'I pledge myself to the service of the Daughter of Thor. The taint is already infecting my Brothers, and I wish to form an alliance with the woman who will surely be our Salvation. I was among the Second Born of the Great Angels, and I am stronger than Tanriel, who I believe was your first Battle Angel. Do you accept my pledge, Daughter of Thor?'

Jean stood with a curious smile on her lips as she stepped forward with her hand on her heart as she said, 'I graciously accept your offer, Druantia of the Second Born, Queen of the Druids, High Priestess of the Dremelden, Wife to the Green Man, and Great Angel of Summer and Spring. I am humbled by this great gift, Lady Gwyndel. I only hope I can repay you for it.'

Druantia smiled as she replied, 'Tanriel must have given you some of those titles. I sense that my remarks did offend her. I have longed to speak with her again about the powers of the earth. I look forward to being linked with her in battle. So you accept?' Jean then drew her blade; that was also so long she usually wore it across her shoulders. The blade glowed with a blue light as she held it laying flat in both hands.

'I accept your offer. I present my sword as your new Resting Point. I will uphold my duty to your lands and to your people. I take solace in the fact that you will serve as my guide and my protector. I accept wholeheartedly.'

Druantia was then absorbed by the sword that glowed more brightly as her form became one with the blade. The Forest Guardians then shrunk back into the floor like the

reverse of plant growth. When the sentinels were reduced to tiny-leafed shoots, the cracked marble reformed around them to make a whole slab without markings. Wil made a whistling sound in the silence that followed before Jean sheathed the blade and returned to her seat with that same curious smile.

When all had had their chance to speak before the King and Queen of the Nordics, a great feast was held. It was the last day of the second week of spring, the night of the Bellatanus Festival. It was to honour the Great Angels of spring and summer, growth and regeneration, of which Druantia was one of three, the other two being Fodla and Eriu. The sigils of the Rohjors hung on huge banners around the room that created hallways for servants to enter. Nordhellin musicians – both male and female – played flutes, harps, dulcimers, and drums while entertainers danced, juggled fire sticks, did back flips, and somersaults in brightly coloured silks.

The feast table was spread across many tables, to seat over two hundred guests, including some knights, captains, lieutenants, and other soldiers of the mortal armies, along with delegates of the four immortal clans. The scene was a mix of ladies in fine silk dresses and jewels with men in finely cut silk or wool coats; some in shining breastplates and cuirasses.

Jean had her hair tied up in intricate braids and wound into a bun in a style similar to the two immortal queens. She wore a snow-white knee-length skirt and white silk blouse; blue-embroidered foxes on the cuffs and hem, pale blue silk stockings, and white leather boots worked with gold vertical lines. Adem wore the dark coat and trousers of an Alit'aren's uniform with brown leather boots, as did Carl and Wil.

Between the day of meeting nobles and the beginning of the feast, Adem had worked out how to charge his phone using a small trickle of the Power with guidance from Arawn.

So there is a science to all of this! He had noted with excitement.

He sat at the banquet, taking photos while thinking what to say to Jean. Every time he glanced across at her, she smiled timidly, as if she wanted to apologise. Adem was not sure he wanted to discuss her rejection of his proposal in front of so many.

Orion showed a keen interest in Adem's phone – which he called a 'crystal box' – and Adem asked the king to take a photo of him and Jean together. Elmira smiled warmly at that, and Orion took several photos after Adem had photographed the two kings and queens for some time and showed them the pictures. It was the first pictures of Jean he had, a memory of her that would never fade. He sat staring at the picture for some time before she said, 'Could I have another look, please, Adem?'

'Of course, you may, Jean,' he replied as he handed her the phone. 'You look very beautiful as always. I will cherish those pictures, forever.' That comment gained him a warning glare from Terese who sat beside Jean. The woman appeared utterly bamboozled over Elmira's insistence that Adem and Jean sit together.

'You'll get to take plenty more, silly boy,' Jean said with a grin. 'Let me take one of you, Carl and Wil together in your uniforms. You all look so handsome.' Adem smiled, and they both stood to make their way around to Carl and Wil's chairs. The seats were high-backed rectangular gilded thrones with colourful cushioned material. His two friends stood on either side of him with their hands around his shoulders as Jean took a number of shots.

Carl had tried to console Adem many times since Jean's refusal to marry him, though Adem did not want to hear Carl's attempted rationale of why it was 'probably for the best.'

Since that day Adem had felt himself sliding deeper and deeper into a state of mental illness. Not madness in fact, more a burning rage like a volcano erupting within his flesh and bones – his blood and spirit. It was similar to the theme of falling through fire that he sensed in Arawn through the *kigare*, endless pain, endless suffering. What he could not understand was how Jean could reject her own true feelings for him. He knew she had loved him. Then she just *changed*.

His worst fear was that something might happen to her; she was so brave and so strong, but she was just a fragile little girl at heart, though a young woman in fact. Her rejection had torn apart that delicate fabric that had held him in a state of sanity for all of those years before he met her. It wasn't her fault of course, he didn't blame her; he didn't even blame Terese *bloody* Silverblade! He understood she thought her decision was the right thing to do; he just could not believe she made that decision.

The daily Healings were the only thing that kept him in a state of calm in outward appearance. Though he felt tense and nervous in Jean's presence, unsure of what to say and unable to suppress his anguish on the inside. And then there was the taint, working its way ever deeper into his mind and soul the more he used the Power. Arawn tried to tell him that the pain would make him stronger; *it will make you a real man*, Arawn would say, and, *the taint will also make you strong, if you can resist it. There is great strength in your depths, Son of Odin*.

When they returned to their seats, Adem was able to make civil conversation with Jean though his chest was aching every time he looked at her, more so than when he was just listening to her voice. Finally she said, 'You look worn out, Adem. You look tired, drained, as if something has been ripped out of you. We are supposed to save the world, not fall in love. It just wasn't meant to be.'

'So you plan to fall in love with another?' Adem asked. 'When we are fated to be together, you choose to run and hide from my sight because your love is aching just as badly? Something *was* ripped out of me, my heart. All that is left now is fire, eternal flame.' He finished with a deliberate sneer he knew she would not approve of.

'Have you been accepting your Healing every evening, Adem?' Jean asked with a concerned frown and what appeared to be a hint of fear in her large blue eyes. His faint sense of her through the *kigare* confirmed it was both concern and fear. 'You are a changed person from when we first met, in some ways much the better. But when I hear you talk like that, it's like you're a different person entirely. You can't afford to become two people, Adem. You have to be you, just you and no one else. Understand?' She smiled nervously at the end as she waited for a response. He sighed deeply and felt a wave of calm wash over him as he said, 'There *is* only one me, Jean. There was never more than one.'

Suddenly her mood brightened and her eyes sparkled as she smiled warmly and said, 'That's the Adem Highlander I know and love. I don't ever want to see that other guy again, Promise me?'

'I promise,' he said after another sigh over hearing her say that she still loved him. His sense of her through the *kigare* was that she did still love him, so much so he was stunned by it, even though it was still only a very faint perception. He also realised what must have

brightened her mood. It was not just his words that had cheered her; it was her sense of his suddenly letting go of all of his pain and despair. He was surprised himself when he realised it had melted away at her words and what he sensed in her. ‘But I need you to promise me something; that if I break my promise; and that ‘other guy’ shows his face again, I need you to forgive me.’ She crossed her arms under her breasts at that and looked at him with scorn before she said, ‘Just make sure I never see him again, Adem Highlander.’ He realised the conversation could turn nasty from then onwards if he kept this up, so he pointed to the performers and started to capture them on video. Jean turned her attention to the performers, and they just sat and watched for a time and listened to the music. It was peaceful. He was content once more.

Chapter

9



The Bellatanus Festival

The festivities lasted another four days. Celebrations poured out on to the streets of Nordhel from the houses and inns within the city where people held grand parties in fancy costumes and gilded and feathered masks. On the second night, a night of a near full waxing moon with bright stars lighting up the dark sky, Adem and his friends visited the Chestnut Quarter of the city, a section of streets and laneways mostly made up of three-storey inns and taverns sometimes built right up next to one another without a laneway between.

Orion walked to Adem's left with Tigerclaw hanging at his hip though the King of the Torvellen was dressed in Alit'aren black with a dark-gilded wolf mask. Masks of the Rohjors were a popular choice among the revellers, the Wolf, the Fox, the Lion, or the Dragon, though others wore the Owl, the Hawk, the Falcon, the Eagle, and other sigils of the many noble Houses across the lands. Not all wore the sigils of their own Houses however, as the mask was supposed to serve as a disguise, so that the wearer could be free to join in the celebrations without fear of how it would affect their standing in the days that followed.

Twelve Nordic Guardians followed Adem and his friends like wolves stalking in the night, along with four Torvellen who served as bodyguards to Orion, including Talegon and Kelflax. Crowds parted around them easily as they made their way through the streets. Even drunken civilians were wise enough to avoid getting in a scuffle with armed Guardians. Adem, Carl, and Wil did not wear masks; however, they saw no reason to hide who they were from the people. Orion had advised against this, stating that Darkservants could be amongst the crowds on any street.

Torin wore dark blue baggy silk trousers and a red silk coat lined with silver-and-gold scrollwork. His feet were bare, and he wore the four fat golden earrings of a Shorewarden. His beaded braids clicked together as his head swivelled left and right to scan the crowd as if he expected a Darkservant to lunge at them at any moment. The man wore a Red Badger mask; two long blue feathers rising from the top. His face below his nose was exposed; his dark moustache and goatee giving him the appearance of a wolf disguised as something tamer.

'Stay on the alert, Adem,' the man would say, from time to time. 'The enemy could be lying in wait around the next corner, and if you are not on your guard, a knife could easily slide under your ribs. I cannot cure death. If I am distracted by other assassins, there may not be time to save you before you bleed out.'

'I will be careful, Torin,' Adem replied as he waved to a woman in a cream silk dress and pink mask. When she removed the red feathered mask, she smiled with pearl-white teeth, large blue eyes, and red cheeks on a thin pale face. A mortal woman – she was very pretty and about his age. Her dark hair was braided and tied up into a bun similar to Jean's at the banquet the night before.

'Be warned, Adem,' Orion said in his deep tones, 'a woman so fair may steal more than your heart if you give in to her seduction.' Adem looked to the woman, and she gave a wicked grin as if she had overheard.

'What other than my heart would she seek?' Orion chuckled deeply as he replied, 'A woman may seek to steal your place of power. The Sons of Odin will sit highest amongst the kings and queens of the Free Lands. If you are too eager to fall in love and make a woman your wife, she will become higher than any queen. You should have worn the mask as I suggested.'

Adem snorted before he said, 'I already love one woman more than I can take. I have no room in my heart for another.' Though when the woman leaned forward to expose the tops of her breasts, then hitched up her skirt to show her legs up to her lower thighs, he knew that last comment was not entirely truthful. Ever since he arrived at Kiseria, his heart had become filled with passionate fires.

Finally, Orion pointed to a three-storey inn of blue stone with black balconies and a dark-tiled roof called The Dark Hound. ‘They do dark ale here that is my favourite,’ the king announced. ‘I have barrels of it delivered to Tarvel while I am staying in the palace.’

‘I am also fond of their brew,’ Torin said with a grin. ‘Lead the way, Your Majesty.’ They then turned to make their way towards the dark-stained door that was swung open to allow passage into the main common room. The dark rounded tables outside the inn were crammed with patrons of all classes, sitting and drinking and smoking their pipes under the balcony in the lamplight that poured from the round glass windows.

Music flowed from the common room on to the street, a harp and a flute and a drum. The tune was unfamiliar to Adem at first, though Arawn confirmed that it was called the Liar and the Jester. An immortal woman was singing to the tune when they entered the common room that was over forty paces deep and half as wide with whitewashed timber ceiling beams; dark-panelled walls that glowed in the lantern light. Large fires burnt on the north and south walls with a long bar. Patrons sat humming and swaying to the tune. Some women were up dancing on their chairs or even on the tables in fine silk dresses of bright reds, blues, and yellows.

Half the patrons looked to be of the Torvellen clan. Adem began to wonder if Orion had picked this inn because he knew it would be a safer place for the Sons of Odin to sit and enjoy the festival. His suspicions were confirmed when Orion removed his mask, and the Torvellen patrons within the room began to smile and bow to their king; some men even getting down to one knee with their right knuckles pressed to the floor and their left hands over their sword hilts while some of the Torvellen women began to heave for breath as if they suddenly felt faint.

‘Drink, dance, be merry, and enjoy the celebrations!’ Orion shouted to the people with his arms in the air. His words were greeted by a great cheer and shouts of worship for their leader; then slowly their eyes returned to the performers.

Their presence did draw the eyes of many of the patrons as they stood at the bar, sipping their ale however. Torin and the other Alit’aren scanned those faces like hawks spying for a mouse to catch in their claws, the Guardians watching the crowd just as warily.

They were all served a pint of the dark ale; however, the twenty-five men formed a line that spanned more than half the entire length of the bar. Adem, Carl and Wil casually leaning one elbow up on the dark polished wood.

‘I would give my right arm to spend a night with a woman that fine,’ Wil said with a nod towards a slim mortal woman in a red silk dress, dancing on a tabletop. The top of her head would only have reached Wil’s chest, large dark eyes and honey-coloured silk locks. Her generous bosom was heaving from exertion, and Adem had trouble dragging his focus away once he set eyes on the woman.

‘I miss my wife,’ Carl said with a sigh, he was also apparently having trouble taking his eyes off the dancing lady. ‘How long do you think we will be stuck here?’ he asked Adem.

‘We have not even begun to do what we are here for,’ Adem replied, ‘and we have a commitment to the people. After all, the taint was brought here by us. All that occurs as a result of that will be blame to place at our feet. I would not want to show my face in Kismertia again unless we fulfil the Prophecies.’

They were talking in tones that would only be heard by the three of them amongst the talk of the crowd and the music and singing. The next tune was the Duke and the Duckling, a song more common amongst the higher classes that Adem suspected was influenced by the arrival of King Orion. The woman's voice took on a more harmonious quality, and her focus often lingered on the face of her king.

The rest of the evening was spent at The Dark Hound, listening to the musicians and the female singer, drinking dark ale and allowing an intoxicated calm to wash over them. Adem still had lingering symptoms of the taint, despite accepting his evening Healing before setting out on the streets.

He began to notice what he would describe as dark auras around the forms of some of the soldiers sitting around the room. He rubbed his eyes, blinked, and then looked again, and the aura was gone, though when he turned his head, he would see the same dark aura around another man.

He didn't wish to discuss this with Orion, Torin, Carl, or Wil, so he silently conferred with Arawn for answers. Arawn warned that the taint was working its way deeper into his mind and soul.

I do not know how long you will be able to fight it, his Battle Angel explained. The question is whether you will be able to judge accurately whether you are receiving signs, or just seeing things. I sense no evil in these men.

I understand, Arawn, Adem replied with his mind. Still, I would be most grateful if you could always confirm whether you believe my visions are true or false.

I will always try to warn you of any dangers I am made aware of, Arawn replied.

He closed his eyes for a few moments, and when he opened them again, the visions were gone. He was relieved, though also certain they would return. He wanted to believe they were signs, though he knew in his heart it had to be the precursor of madness setting in.

'Is something bothering you, Adem?' Carl asked with a concerned frown. 'You look a little stressed. Did you have a vision?' The last was a whispered question. The question also confirmed Adem's concerns that Arawn may be passing information on to his Brothers.

'I thought I saw . . . something,' Adem admitted, 'but it was just my imagination. Have either of you had any strange visions these past months?'

'I could say everything I've seen since the photo shoot has been a strange vision,' Carl said calmly though his brow was furrowed with signs of stress. 'Sometimes . . . I think I hear something, a voice of a woman crying out in pain, or a man screaming with fear, in the dead of night while I lay awake in bed. But when I get up to speak to the guards, they report that they heard nothing.'

Carl's words hit Adem like a lightning-bolt. If his friends were already feeling the effects of the taint, how long before they also started to pose a risk to innocent lives?

'Perhaps it is time you and Wil started to receive your daily Healing,' Adem suggested. 'If the taint is already working its way into your mind, you can only benefit from relief of the symptoms.'

'I am nervous about anyone using the Power on me,' Wil said softly. 'Even a woman using the Power makes me paranoid, but I would never let a man try to Heal me.'

'Let one of the women take on the task then,' Adem said. 'It's like Orion said, the Sickness is in all of us from the first time we witnessed . . . apparitions. The taint was placed

upon our souls then and there. I accept that I have an illness and I believe you two are also at risk. So accept the Healing, for the sake of the people.'

Most of those words were spoken in tones so hushed not even Orion and Torin would have overheard. Immortals had exceptional hearing though the noise of the crowd was building and added to the music and singing. Adem wondered then how exceptional their hearing was. Was it possible that every immortal in the room could still filter out their voices over the noise? He questioned Arawn about this though the Battle Angel did not respond.

He looked around the room at the faces of the Nordics and Torvellen again to try to guess whether any of them had overheard. Some men sat stroking their beards with contemplative expressions in their large eyes, while some women looked at him with pale faces and wide eyes.

'We'll continue this discussion later in private,' Adem said quietly, 'as I fear there may be more listeners than we had predicted.' Carl and Wil then swept suspicious glances across the room to the many faces nearby. The considering men and pale-faced women had returned to their conversations only to be replaced by others who stared at them with expressions of concern or fear.

'I'll have another round of pints, for me and my companions,' Adem said to change the subject as he spilled silver coins on to the bar. A slim Torvellen bar maid with large green eyes and dark hair tied back with a dark kerchief smiled as she scooped up the three coins.

The pretty young woman gave him and his friends a warm smile as she said, 'You enjoy our special brew then?' She and the other barmaids all wore dark skirts and aprons with white silk blouses.

'Very much so, thank you,' Adem replied. 'It reminds me of something I tried back home.' The woman grinned as she said, 'Home is a long way away for you three, and I know, Adem Highlander.' The last was spoken with a sparkle in her eyes before she made her way through the door to the kitchens.

Three more Torvellen barmaids stood at the bar, pumping the taps for their pints. Later the women returned with trays of freshly baked breads with an assortment of cheeses. It was Adem's fourth pint, and he was glad to get something to eat to soak up the alcohol. They had eaten a light snack of roasted meats and breads before leaving the palace though that was a late lunch.

'I think you are right, Adem,' Carl said after a time. 'We should start to accept our healing daily, the same as you. I want to succeed here, not fail. I don't wish to become so far gone I can't make sense of anything. We need a plan to get the Dark One sealed away for the next thousand years.' He spoke the last in hushed tones, though Adem still held his index finger over his lips in a sign to suggest Carl hold his tongue.

'We have a fighting chance. The Enemy may be stronger than we have allowed ourselves to accept, though we have an army behind us that we shall lead to victory. It is our destiny to succeed. We shall win this war.' The last was spoken quietly though with some emphasis. Adem looked around at the men and women sitting at the tables after his speech, and he saw faces wearing wide smiles as they glanced his way with looks that he would have described as being filled with pride.

Orion clasped a hand over his left shoulder to say, 'A fine speech, Adem Highlander. You inspire us all with your words. We were not listening in, of course, though immortal ears detect more than the ears of the average mortal.'

'Do not fear that you have said more than you should, nothing you have mentioned is a secret amongst the people of Kisseria. Remember that Darkservants are amongst us. You must also be careful of what you say in crowded areas.'

Adem's head whipped around to scan the faces of the men in the room, the dark aura's returning to settle in around five of the Nordic soldiers and three Torvellen men. He rubbed his eyes and blinked again, but the aura's remained. 'I'm feeling a little weary, my king,' Adem said. 'Perhaps we shall finish our ales and return to the palace?'

Orion took another large gulp of his dark ale before wiping his moustache with a wide grin and a sparkle in his dark eyes as he replied, 'Of course, of course, you need your rest after such vigorous training. We will drink fast and leave at the end of this song, yes?' Adem grinned and took another swig of his ale. It was spicy and had a fine mix of flavours. He cautiously glanced around the room at the men with the dark auras while trying to appear half drunk and lost in his focus.

He wanted to ask Orion and Torin for names of the men with the dark auras though he didn't want to point or give away the fact that they had his attention for any reason. It seemed odd to him that the auras would fall in around the same men again. Not all the same, but some and no others. No new ones. It seemed to be a pattern of sorts. Was it the taint infecting his mind or was it a sign? He needed rest and another day of Healing to set his mind right before he could make any sense of it.

'You look troubled, Adem Highlander,' Torin said in his deep tones. 'We shall make our way back to the palace. I see something in your eyes, mistrust, paranoia, loathing, any or all of those. Perhaps we will allow the Sons of Odin longer hours to sleep each day and lesser hours wielding the Power, until we can understand the taint in greater detail.'

Orion grinned again and put down his mug to wave his hands in the air and shout his farewells to his people. His words were greeted by many shouts and cheers from the Torvellen in the room who continued to cheer as the Guardians formed a protective barrier.

They made their way out into the street where people still danced and swayed to the music that floated outwards from every inn and tavern, in bright silks and painted masks with colourful feathers. It was difficult to see the auras as clearly in the street as he had in the common room, though Adem still noticed the darkness around several Nordic men as they made their way along the cobble-stone lane. He decided not to mention it to Orion or Torin until they were out of earshot of the men, though, when he did tell them, Orion stopped to look back over his shoulder at the Nordics Adem had described. Adem turned too, and the men appeared to be following them; they stopped short under the gaze of the Torvellen King, like sheep spotted by a leopard, and turned their backs to march in the opposite direction.

'Very suspicious,' Torin said, 'they were following us without a doubt. Perhaps you do see signs after all, Son of Odin.' Orion wore an expression of open rage as he stared at the backs of the retreating men.

'We should arrest them for questioning,' Wil said, 'so we can figure out what they were planning.'

‘They were planning murder, Wil Martyr,’ Orion replied calmly, ‘plain and simple, though we have no proof of their intent. I will discuss this with Tobin, and we shall set our traps for these Darkservants.’ One of the retreating men looked back over his shoulder at those last words; Adem was sure they had all heard Orion’s threat. The Torvellen King stood proudly facing off against his would-be assassins. He was a man without fear. ‘Let us return to the palace with haste,’ he said in whispered tones.

They did move with haste after that; the Guardians looking in all directions, like cornered wolves ready to tear out the throat of any man that crossed their paths. Some had their swords drawn now, those close to Adem and his friends, while those on the outer edges wielded arrows of coloured fire. The light of those swords and arrows would have made them stand out to other assassins hiding in towers with arrows notched to bowstrings.

The Guardians judged it necessary however, as they had to make their way through many more crowded streets with revellers. The path opened up before them as dancing men and women suddenly moved out of their way with expressions of panic.

Adem had not drawn his blade yet, nor had his friends or Orion. Torin stalked like a large cat with balls of lightning hovering an inch below his downturned palms. As they were leaving the Chestnut Quarter, they had to cross a distance of streets that were mostly houses with dimly lit windows, though up ahead a few street lamps were not alight.

No one was visible through the darkness, nor was there any sign of movement when Torin launched two large balls of fire into the night sky that hovered over twenty feet above the street throwing pale blue light across the pavement. The laws that stated ‘no place should be in darkness, even if it is a place of sleeping’ were enforced throughout the city of Nordhel also, and so this was indeed a sign of devious mischief. Street lanterns were all fitted with glowbulbs, and so this meant they had been removed, or one with sufficient skill in the Power had snuffed them out. Adem saw no damage to the stone that encased the glowbulbs, suggesting a wielder had extinguished the lights.

‘I suspect a trap,’ Torin whispered. ‘We must be on our guard.’

‘Kelflax and I will scout ahead,’ Talegon said. The Torvellen Guardian sheathed his blade as did his companion, then both raised the dark hoods of their Guardian cloaks that blended with the shadows as they crept forwards. Even the hovering blue lights could not reveal their forms after they had taken their first few steps. Adem and his friends waited, though all had drawn their weapons, including Orion.

‘Do not summon your Battle Angels unless we are greatly outnumbered,’ Orion warned. Then a cry was heard; it was Talegon, a single word shouted, ‘Assassins!’

The sound of swords clashing rang out in the darkness, then the voices of dozens of men were heard shouting and roaring, and then bodies began to pour into the light. Some mortals though others were Nordics and Torvellen in armour of steel; they wielded flamespears – two feet of enchanted steel at the end of a two pace long black shaft – or axes, swords, or maces that glowed with enchantment. A stream of flaming arrows flew from the Guardians bows to hammer through armour, flesh, and bone as men fell screaming with holes burning through their chests.

The Guardians with swords closed the gaps around Orion and Torin, along with the other four Alit’aren, who stood guard around Adem and his friends. There were over fifty assassins that Adem could make out in the dull light, with more pouring from the shadows.

He seized the Power; lava and ice flooded his veins to mix with taint. He raised his left hand in a fist while his right clutched his sword hilt that glowed with a blue fire. When he opened his fist, he held a ball of blue flame. Though he did not throw it, he used that fire to draw more fire from the sky; suddenly balls of lightning were hailing down upon the advancing assassins. Where they fell and hit a target, men screamed as fire melted their skulls like flowing wax. It was a cruel way to kill a man, but these men were Servants of the Dark One.

Then he saw something that made him question that belief. Some of the mortal men were throwing up shields of the Power. *They can wield!* Suddenly he considered that these men may all be wielders who were turning mad from the taint! That would be his fault for bringing the taint, and he slaughtered these men without a thought to their motives.

In an instant, he made the balls of lightning vanish; then he used flows of Air to tie the nearest assassins hands at their sides. There was only twenty left alive at this point, and he quickly shouted to Torin and the Alit'aren to perform the same spell as Adem could not hold them all.

Carl and Wil had chosen not to participate in the battle so far, which was a relief to Adem as he imagined it would have been difficult to find a survivor if all three of them had been attacking with the Power. Both had their weapons drawn however, Wil's axe glowing golden in the darkness, and Carl's spear slanted at an angle. 'They may be wielders!' Adem shouted. 'They may be corrupted by the taint!'

The idea seemed to dawn upon Orion as he shouted, 'If that is so, they are innocent men! We cannot kill them!' The Guardians began rounding up the survivors and marching them into a line. Their weapons had fallen at their sides, and their hands were useless with flows of Air binding them. Every one of those men had the dark aura around their bodies. He could see it clearly now that they all stood under the blue light.

He saw it even more clearly as they marched the men through streets lined with lamps and where light poured from windows. *What does it mean?* If it was the taint that had infected them, perhaps that is why Arawn could sense no evil in the men in at The Dark Hound, because it was madness that had them in its grasp. The Prophecies said that the taint would eventually turn madmen into evil men, though perhaps Adem could see the aura of men tainted with madness before they became evil. He asked Arawn through the *kigare* if he sensed any evil in these men.

Perhaps, I sense something, Arawn replied. *They are infected with the taint, that much is certain, though all men who can wield are now infected, some more than others. They should be questioned, trialled, and executed if found guilty. If they are simply mad or becoming evil from the taint, they should be severed from the Power.*

It wasn't his Battle Angel's words that troubled him; however, it was the looks he received from his friends as they made their way towards the palace. Particularly Carl, who looked so shocked he seemed unable to hide his disgust over Adem's use of the Power to kill men, men who were now presumed innocent of serving the Dark One.

Both his friends had looked as if they were about to empty their stomachs at the sight of men with holes burnt through their skulls the size of grapefruits, and Adem realised later how offensive it must be to Carl as he was a devout Christian. Adem had never believed he would kill a man from the day he became a Witness, he was also a baptised Christian and a

strong believer that murderers went to Hell. But this was an act of self-defence and an attempt to save the fate of an entire world and to save a King! He knew in his heart his actions were justified, though the looks of scorn he received from Carl made his heart heavy with guilt.

He decided then and there that he would not use the Power to kill a human – mortal or immortal – as long as there was another option that could save his life and the lives of his friends without killing the man who threatened them.

He felt ashamed at what he had become. He had strayed from the path of his faith. Killing goblins with the Power was one thing, but using fire to burn through the skull of a human was ghastly and vile. He wanted to talk it out with his friends, but their looks made him avert his eyes from theirs and march beside them with his head hanging low. He tried to tell himself it was the taint that had taken over, the Sickness had made him do it. But he knew it was more than that, it was his choice. It was what he was becoming. He was becoming a weapon, but he was also becoming a monster.

Chapter

10

The Challenge

The next morning Adem woke at first light, he slept less without his medication. A knock at the door brought a serving woman into his chamber with one of the Guardians holding the door open. They didn't wait for a reply after knocking when it was his meals or someone important. It irritated him to be seen in his nightclothes, woollen shirt and pants of pale cream, though they had never entered while he was naked. The woman was mortal and of middling years – plump faced with rounded curves, dark eyes, and a pinched nose that reminded him of a sparrow.

Alisia Darmel – she wore the dark livery slashed with red of the Lion Rohjor with the lion embroidered on her dark apron in red and gold. The woman had delivered him breakfast for weeks now, always with a word or two about how he looked rake thin and he should eat up to put some meat on his bones. Adem was glad the exercise had thinned him out a bit, and he was cautious of his weight still. Though Healing left him famished immediately after, and he ate much more than any normal man his size, most days. He was licking the last crumbs of a crusty brown loaf of bread and some goat cheese off his fingers when he reached for one of the green apples sitting in a silver bowl.

After his bath, he returned to his room in a dark bath robe with the four Rohjors embroidered on the left breast pocket. He dressed when the Guardians left the room, blue leather boots, dark trousers, and a dark blue woollen coat with a high collar embroidered with silver and gold. He didn't feel like wearing Alit'aren black today. For some reason, the dark colours reminded him too much of the taint. He buckled on his sword belt and sword over the coat and was considering whether to wear his Guardian cloak – as the air in halls was quite warm – when another knock came and Torin entered without waiting for his call.

The man wore Alit'aren black today with the sigils of the Sons of Odin on his high collar. His eyes scanned the room as if seeking out enemies before they rested on Adem. He wondered if the taint was infecting his teacher also.

'The prisoners are being questioned in the dungeons,' Torin said, 'and after a night of interrogation, we have discovered that every man is teetering on the edge of madness or falling from the cliff. This suggests the dark auras you saw are a gift of the Light. The Lord may be speaking to you in ways we do not yet understand. You mentioned you had similar visions on Earth?'

'My doctors call that my illness, not my gift,' Adem remarked with his back straight, 'and I still cannot tell up from down with either theory. Your words are comforting however, I would prefer to believe it is not madness to see visions, though where I come from . . . it is.'

'Further evidence will provide us with greater understanding then,' Torin mused. 'If it is a gift, you must use it. We all must use it to spot threats that would otherwise be undetectable. Our best defenders are becoming our worst enemies, dark times indeed.' The man's dark eyes appeared to be looking inward with those last remarks. Did Torin see a darkness growing within his own heart and soul? How long could he trust the man? How long could he trust any of them? He sought advice from Arawn though the Battle Angel was brooding again, descending into endless pits of flame.

Adem would not question Torin's loyalty however, not yet anyway. He didn't want to offend one of the few men he trusted more than anyone, a man he looked up to, whatever his fate may be. After a long pause, Torin's eyes returned to focus, on Adem, like a dark eagle spotting its prey as he said, 'Today is the day of your Rights of Passage Ceremony, you, and your Brothers. It is a challenge, a test of sorts, though I cannot tell you what the test is or how you are to succeed in overcoming the challenges that are put before you and your friends.'

'I can tell you that you will be able to work together in the test, though your Battle Angels shall not be there to aid you. It is a test of your skills, your courage, your strengths and weaknesses, your hopes and your dreams. Remember most importantly that if you allow yourself to give in to fear and despair, regret or temptation, you shall fail the test.'

'What will it mean if we fail?' Adem asked.

'For apprentice wielders, to fail this challenge means a failure to become Alit'aren or Ael Trael. But for the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor, failure will bring a swift death to you all, and the hope of Kismeria will be lost forever. This challenge is a part of the Prophecies, the first of its kind were created during the First Age, as the final test for all who train to become Alit'aren and Ael Trael. However, the test was designed specifically for you and your friends, your Rights of Passage to confirm that you are the Saviours of Prophecy.'

'You said the test is for me and my Brothers, Carl and Wil, but you mention all four of the Saviours. Will Jean be involved in this challenge?'

‘She will be there, in a way, though you will not see her or hear her, nor will she see or hear you and your Brothers. Her path through the Rights of Passage leads another way to the destiny of the Sons of Odin, and the test will reflect that. You may still communicate with her through the *kigare* during the challenge, this will be vital when you are both stretched to your limits. I can tell you no more. Now follow me, I will take you to the Chameleon Arch.’

He followed his teacher with the two Guardians trailing behind until he met with Carl and Wil in a red-painted hallway with large tapestries of farm scenes decorating the walls. Both looked concerned, at first Adem was worried they were still shocked that he could kill with the Power, until Carl said, ‘I’m really nervous about this test, Adem. What if we don’t pass? It seems a great risk? We could die!’

‘You are forbidden to discuss the test before and after,’ Torin interjected with a scowl, then added in what seemed an afterthought, ‘though I am sure you will. Discussing what happens within the Chameleon Arch could also be fatal to your destinies. You may discuss your shared experiences, though you must never speak of what you witness when you are alone, not to anyone, ever! This is a test of fate.’

The four Guardians who were patrolling behind Carl and Wil moved to lead the procession. Soldiers stood guard around the hallways and servants scurried by busily with tasks, dusting and polishing, bearing trays of bread and cheese, tea, or goats’ milk. A few mortal nobles were about also, though they cleared a path for the Guardians with Torin striding defiantly in their wake.

After making their way down four floors, they entered a series of grey stone hallways with high-arched ceilings with chandeliers hanging over stone columns in Gothic style. It was a part of the palace Adem had never been to before. To reach it, they first had to pass through a large stone door engraved with the Rohjor sigils.

Alit’aren and Ael Trael walked these hallways mostly, with few servants or even soldiers that Adem could see. The floor was checked black and white marble like a chessboard. Carvings of angels and demons decorated the stone columns and arches above, cross-hatched gold on black within the vaulted ceiling. There were many Guardians moving about the hallways however, enough to make up for the apparent lack of guards. Then Adem heard voices singing, immortal men and women in a tune similar to when they first arrived in Kiseria.

‘Are they creating wards against evil with the song?’ Wil asked.

‘It is a custom,’ Torin replied flatly and said no more of it. The song grew louder and clearer as they approached a set of twenty-foot-high stained wooden doors. Torin said the wood was ancient, crafted with the Power, and stronger than any stone or metal. Adem guessed they wanted to keep enemies out of this place. Rohjor sigils decorated the dark shining doors that were swung wide to admit them when Torin performed an incantation that made the designs shine like gold.

The room within was the same stone columns and arches with the chessboard marble floor, a rounded room with the arches forming a peak over one hundred paces wide. Besides the people, the room was otherwise empty except for two dark stone archways that stood unsupported and rising only twelve feet off the ground at the peak. It looked like stone or polished wood that glistened as if slick with oil, though it also seemed metallic when Adem touched the Lion Rohjor carving down one of its sides.

That one bore the markings of the Sons of Odin – the male Arch – the other was decorated with dark foxes – the female Arch. Adem knew it without asking, as one seemed to sing to him, feeding off him and his ability to wield. The Power sprung up in him in response – flames and a blizzard filling his veins with the rancid taint – and he felt it rise in his Brothers. The other – marked with the foxes – was silent and still; he knew it would be singing to Jean however.

Jean entered moments later with an entourage of Ael Trael, including the two immortal queens and Terese Silverblade. Dressed in a red silk coat with silver buttons, a dark skirt that fell just below her hips worked with crimson embroidery, dark silk stockings, and red leather boots, she took his breath away as always. She avoided looking at him; immediately, he felt a stab of fear that she had heard of his acts the night before, killing innocent men. His heart ached at the thought that she would label him a murderer.

She wore her sword at her hip but didn't carry her Lukrorian Bow over her shoulder; none of them had brought their bows. It wasn't until they were all assembled; however, that Orion explained that they would not be taking any of their weapons into the Archways. They had only been allowed to bring them to this point for their own protection. It was explained that the Great Angels could not survive in this 'Shadow Realm' as Orion called it. Apparently some had been taken into the portals in ancient times which is how they learnt of the dangers it exposed them to.

Tobin was also present, the two kings both in Alit'aren black with their swords at their hips. Lydia wore dark silk embroidered with silver with lace at the neck and cuffs, while Elmira was dressed in a blue woollen robe under a white silk cloak embroidered with black foxes around the edges. Terese wore tight blue silk stockings, white boots, and a white woollen coat that hung below her hips. With the silver belt that held her sword, the bottom of the coat served as a short skirt.

Jean's golden braid and Terese's dark ponytail were almost identical today. Adem wondered if there was some meaning in that. Terese stared past him to gaze at the Archways; she seemed to be staring right through him as if he didn't even exist. Jean focused on his face for a brief moment; her expression mirrored the ache in her heart he sensed through the *kigare*. Then she was hard as nails as she stared at the female Arch. She burnt with fierce determination.

The rest of the small crowd in the room were Alit'aren and Ael Trael, the men in their black coats and the women in bright silks with shimmering embroidery. There were seven males and seven females, stationed on either side of the two Archways. They were the ones who had been singing when they entered, though they were silent now. Adem sensed the Power rising in all seven Alit'aren, and he knew the Ael Trael also held on to *terael* though he could sense nothing of it. He knew because the Rohjor sigils on the two Archways began to glow golden, then white, then blue, then red, and so on. They were using the Power to activate the portals.

A sound like thunder tore through the Archways, light like a small star blossomed in the heart of each. The light spread outwards like a stone thrown into a pond, flowing ripples on a sheet of incandescence until the light became flat as paper. A humming sound resonated from each Archway after the thunder. It was a machine of the Power that drew from the wielders.

‘Sons of Odin; throw down your weapons and prepare to face your fate,’ Tobin said in his deep tones, his voice enhanced by the Power to resonate over the humming of the Archways. ‘You have come to us from another world, a world so different from our own yet also alike in as many ways. You have come to fulfil a destiny that has been known by our people since the Dawn of Ages. Throw down your fears, throw down your hate, throw down your love, and throw down your tears. Prepare yourselves for the struggle of a lifetime, a challenge that will test your every fibre.’

‘The Sons of Odin shall be reborn of fire and bloodshed, shall be bathed in pain and heartache, shall be loved and despised, worshipped and feared, and shall rise to become the Saviours of Kisseria. So are the words of our Prophecy. Such are your Rights of Passage.’

‘Daughter of Thor, throw down your sword and your spear,’ Lydia said in her melodic voice, her words also enhanced by the Power. ‘You have come to us in the hour of our greatest need, when Darkness rises in the hearts of men, you bring us your courage and your strength, you fill us with hope, and you will be our guiding light when the Shadow returns to cover the lands in darkness. The Daughter of Thor shall be reborn of devastation and turmoil, of battle and carnage, of Darkness and the Light.’

‘You shall lead the Ael Trael to their destinies in the Great Battle at world’s end. You will fight for us, bleed for us, and die for us if you must, but you will never fail us. Such are the words of our Prophecy. Such are your Rights of Passage.’

Adem and his friends removed their weapons from their belts and stood proudly with hands by their sides. There was no more tradition to the ceremony other than this as far as they knew. They had never before been told of this test in the first place! Adem felt a surge of fear rising in his heart and he crushed it with a vengeance. He had to be strong. He could not give in to fear and doubt.

‘Remember, that what you see in the Archways is not real,’ Lydia said soothingly, ‘it is more like a dream that can harm you or Heal you, the limits of reality may be stretched there beyond your understanding, but this can be used as a weapon, your mind and your imagination shall be your sword, your spear, your axe, and your bow. I can tell you no more than this. Now go.’

Jean stepped defiantly towards the Archway, and Adem rushed to meet her steps, then raced past her to leap into the wall of light . . . music filled his ears . . . angelic female voices . . . flutes, drums, harps and violins, trumpets and trombones . . . he was falling . . . falling through infinite space . . . he fell for hours . . . fell for days . . . it seemed everlasting as a sweet blissful energy filled his heart and soul as he fell through the light, endless day and night, memories filled his mind, first of his own childhood, then other images of people and places flashed through his psyche, and they were not his own memories, and he realised within time that they were visions of Heroes of Kisseria, past lives of men and women that were bound to the Shield of Fire throughout the Ages, he saw their experiences through his own eyes, he received gifts from this ancient knowledge, as his depth of understanding of the Power increased dramatically.

Glimmer!

—Jarien Stonespear was born of the Torvellen Clans in the life he was second named Trahvesnihel, raised in the capital during the Age of Heroes, the son of a great Torvellen Captain, Johrdios Trahvesnihel, a man of great stature in the city of Tarvel, the capital only

newly built towards the end of this Age that had lasted some two thousand years since the Age of Defeat.

Jarien loved to hunt as a youngling, and his Father Johrdios taught him to use his bow with great precision, though when deer or rabbit hunting as a youngling, Jarien was told to always use a steel tipped arrow, rather than an arrow of flame, as ‘a rabbit is hard to eat when it is blasted to bits!’ his father would say each time Jarien refused to heed his father’s advice.

Jarien did not really like the killing side of hunting, and his Mother Adeilia, born of the Dremelden Clan, told him this was because his Dremelden blood cared for animals more than the Torvellen, so he was in conflict in this way, for he truly loved rabbits, and deer, and all the animals of the forests surrounding Tarvel in those days, and his heart truly ached the first time he had fired a burning arrow into a small bunny, but his reasoning was he wanted to improve his aim at a moving target, although the poor bunny was just sitting and grazing when he fired.

He cried that entire night, after he made a small grave and tombstone for the baby rabbit, his father helping him collect the pieces and place them in a small wooden box, where Jarien also placed an amulet his mother had gifted him at birth, for he wanted the little bunny to have something shiny to light up the box when it was buried beneath the dark earth. The amulet was of a honeyeater with eyes of pearl, forged in silver, though it glowed with some enchantment, and so he parted with it willingly to try to repay the poor bunny.

Glimmer!

. . . Adem felt pain . . . incredible agonising pain that flooded his senses . . . he could remember nothing other than eternal pain . . . his skin was flayed from his flesh . . . his eyes were gouged by claws . . . his mind felt as if it were in a furnace . . . he screamed, but no sound came, only darkness . . . and infinite suffering . . . he wept, but there were no tears, only a wellspring of eternal flames . . . he heard a voice . . . a deep bellowing voice that filled him with terror . . . the voice of the Dark Lord . . . SO, YOU HAVE COME TO FACE YOUR DOOM, SON OF ODIN! I LAUGH AT YOUR FEEBLE FLESH, I SNEER AT YOUR TINY BONES! I COULD CRUSH YOU LIKE A WORM UNDER A ROCK! YOU ARE WITHOUT HOPE! YOU SHALL SUFFER BEFORE YOUR DEATH!

He saw a shape, a mist of shadows rising to take the form of a giant male torso and arms . . . clawed black fists and a skull like a ram with twisted black horns . . . its eyes were endless caverns of flame . . . still he fell, through endless darkness, and the great shadow with eyes of flame pursued him as he fell . . . the pain became unbearable.

Glimmer!

—Jarien also loved to hunt with the spear, for he was named after many Heroes of the ancient world who had also been named Jarien, and in each life they took the legendary title of Stonespear. His father even told him often during his younger years that Jarien was in fact the true reincarnation of those ancient Heroes of Will, a man who is bound by fate to the Hero Chains and the Great Cycle, for his father was told this by a Reader when Jarien was first born, the Ael Tarael telling Johrdios that the soul of a Hero dwelt in his son, and that he would one day become a legend of the Age of Heroes also, within time.

Jarien did not truly believe this when he became older, for he had never remembered anything from a past life he was supposed to have lived, though his father told him bedtime stories of all the ancient Heroes of Will, but Jarien’s favourite stories were of course always

about the Hero Jarien Stonespear. Despite his doubts that he really was this man of legend reborn, Jarien hoped to one day live up to the legend by fulfilling his proclaimed destiny.

Glimmer!

. . . Adem felt as if he were being whipped, beaten, and burnt all at once while his bones were ground into dust . . . then he sensed Jean, her mind and his connected through the *kigare* . . . he could not hear her thoughts, but he could sense her feelings, she too felt pain, but it was not physical pain, it was suffering, as if his pain made her suffer . . . images entered his mind from hers. . . images that translated into words . . . the words he could make out of it were . . . *It is not real! You must fight!*

Glimmer!

Jarien Stonespear was many men, though only one man also, and throughout his memories of past lives, the one that haunted him most was during the Rokhal Wars, when he watched his family being slaughtered by Rokhal in the small village where he was raised. He had survived only for the fact that he had been out hunting with the spear when the Rokhal invaded his village, and he had rushed back to investigate when he saw smoke from that direction, returning with stealth to peer from the forest's edge, where he witnessed that terrible fate for his mother, father, sisters and brothers.

In that lifetime he had been second named Atelgoroth, born of the Torvellen Clans at the Dawn of the Age of Heroes. He lived with the horror of those memories for a further sixty years, until he finally attempted to avenge his family by marching to the East Lands with only a host of companions to fight at his side, and on the fourth week of battle, his soul returned to the Underworld and to Chains. Yet the fully grown reincarnation known as Jarien Trahvesnihiel was more than proud of the sacrifice of Jarien Atelgoroth, for his memories were vivid of the tens of thousands of demons that bathed the scorched Eastland soil with their dark blood, as they were ripped to shreds by the Stonespear and the Elemental Magic of the Legendary Hero of Will. It was upon this memory that Jarien Trahvesnihiel built his ambition to be remembered for such valour, and upon this heartache that he forged his hatred for the Shadow, and his thirst for revenge, even for a man who he had never known, yet a man who was also a part of his very soul.

Glimmer!

Adem reached for the Power, avalanches of fire and rivers of snow filled his soul, the taint was so foul here it made the pain seem like a minor flesh wound, then the pain vanished, though he still fell, the Dark One looming over him as they descended into flames . . . Adem shouted a word, it was in the immortal language . . . the word translated to . . . 'Blades of Odin!'

Lightning launched from his hands to slice through the huge muscular torso of the Dark One, blue bolts shaped like huge swords that lanced upwards again and again, blades thirty feet long that tore burning blue wounds through the Dark One . . . the Dark One roared, the sound like a thousand growling wolves, still they fell, still the Blades of Odin launched upwards from his open palms . . . he saw more images in his mind sent by Jean through the *kigare* . . . the words were, *You can fly, Adem!*

Glimmer!

Jarien Atelgoroth only ever loved one woman in his lifetime, an Elf girl he had grown up with in the same village where his family was murdered. The youngling girl—Elsalos was

her name—had been taken captive by the Rokhal to be stored in a cage for their cook pots when moving on the roads and fields in their relentless campaigns of pillaging, murder and rape.

Jarien could not bear to see another of his kin murdered, and his love for this girl was the strongest emotion he had ever experienced. It had even been considered by their parents that the pair should wed when they were fully grown, and these thoughts stirred emotions in Jarien that overpowered his fears, and so he set out on the road to track the Rokhal horde and seek his chance to rescue his beloved.

The journey was long and hard for him, though his Torvellen blood was akin to the fleet footed swiftness of not only the ancient Aelfin, but also their Dremelden Wood Kin cousins, and he moved like a phantom across the hills, fields and valleys, remaining hidden by shrub, tree and boulder, as he tracked the hoof prints of the horde for many days, each day half terrified that he would be too late to save dear Elsalos.

One night Jarien found the horde camped by a riverside in a deep valley, where he crept towards their perimeter with stealth in the shadows, although the moon was bright that night, though he could not risk another day, as he had found cook pots along the journey, and he had searched the remains in terror of finding some remnant of Elsalos' clothing or jewellery, and he was trembling though relieved that he did not.

He had not stopped to eat at all that day, and so he moved to a berry shrub to put something in his stomach to avoid it making any grumbling noises as he searched the camp with Elven eyesight, spying for any sign of the cages where he might hope to see his darling Elsalos.

A Grimwel guard was patrolling nearby, and when the little goblin creature passed within range, Jarien had a very clever idea. He had spotted some cages near the centre of the camp, and had up till now been dreading the suicidal mission he would be forced to attempt, however the goblin guard brought a potentially lifesaving opportunity.

He snuck up upon the guard using Wood Kin hunting strategy, which was made all the easier for the fact that the Grimwel wore a heavy iron helmet that blocked its vision anywhere but straight ahead, with a face guard and pointed horns rising from the helm. This Jarien realised, would provide him with the perfect disguise.

He used his hunting blade to slit the little creature's throat, and after dragging it into the nearby bushes, found that its clothing and helmet fit him quite well. He realised his Elven spear and bow might give him away, so he bundled them up with his clothes and left them hidden some distance from the dead Grimwel, though he could not spare the time to bury the creature. He did not want to use the goblin's sword sheath for his hunting knife either, because the goblin blade might have been dipped in poison, so his only option was to take the little sword and horn shaped bow and quiver, as he casually stepped back out from hiding, and continued to march on his patrol.

Glimmer!

Adem shouted another word in the Immortal Tongue, the words translated to, 'Wings of Odin!' Wings of blue flame blossomed on either side of his form, rising out of his shoulder blades to span the length of two horses! Instantly he soared upwards, slicing a hole straight through the chest of the Dark One with four of his Blades of Odin, through its back and up through the eternal pits of darkness he flew . . . the Dark One pursued him . . . shouting his

name . . . shouting that he would die . . . the great claw reached up for him . . . darkness . . . endless pain . . . he was burning alive . . . he couldn't breathe . . . he sensed Jean through the *kigare* . . . *You must fight, Adem!* Blades of Odin . . . he flew upwards through the heart of the Dark One with four blades of fire protecting him in a diamond, Wings of Odin carried him high into the blackness towards the tunnel of light. The Dark One roared . . . YOU WILL DIE SLOWLY, SON OF ODIN! PAIN WILL BE YOUR BLESSING BEFORE THE END! Blades of Odin falling down from his open palms to strike the top of the Dark One's skull, two blades, then four, then six, and then eight, fifty-foot-long blades that glowed with the Light of Odin.

The blades swirled into a vortex within the heart and skull of the Dark One. The Dark One roared in outrage. Lightning burst from the Blades of Odin, thick blue bolts that swirled around the Dark One's form like giant fire pythons. The Dark One began to fall, into eternal darkness. Adem soared towards the light above with the Wings of Odin carrying him like a great eagle. Rings of light surrounded him in the darkness, then light enveloped his form, bathing him in its bliss, he shouted one word, 'Victory!'

Chapter

11



The Saviours Reborn

Adem collapsed . . . blurred black and white squares filled his vision . . . he was bathed in sweat . . . his breathing laboured . . . he looked up . . . Tobin and Orion stood over him, a smile on the kings' faces. Orion reached out with his right hand, 'Welcome, Son of Odin, you are reborn of blood and battle, of horror and turmoil, of hope and justice, of courage and honour. Rise Son of Odin! Rise and receive the blessings of the Immortal Kings, for you are the fate of Kismeria. You are home, Adem Highlander.'

Adem took Orion's hand and pushed himself up to try to stand. His legs were like boiled water and his knees ached, but finally, he was standing tall with his back straight, though he still felt quite dizzy. He turned to see Jean kneeling before Lydia and Elmira. Lydia spoke the Rights of Passage for Jean, 'Welcome, Daughter of Thor, you are reborn of love and war, of hate and retribution, of disaster and despair, of wisdom and fate. Rise Daughter of Thor! Rise and receive the blessings of the Immortal Queens, for you are the hope of Kisseria. You are home, Jean Fairsythe.'

Jean looked just as exhausted as she made her first attempt to stand, then taking Elmira and Lydia by the hand, she was hauled to her feet to stand proudly with a light in her eyes and a darkness that Adem had never seen in her before. He immediately wanted to ask her what she had seen, what she had lived through, though it was forbidden. When she looked at him, he sensed deep love and endless hate for him through the *kigare*.

What did she see? Why would she hate me?

His love for her had grown a thousand times as he had lived all those lives, and in every life, he had loved her and made love to her. The soft touch of her skin against his own was a memory that burnt through his consciousness. Made his blood rise, made him weak and strong at the same time. But they were just fleeting moments inside the Archway, a lifetime in a heartbeat. What had she experienced that would make her feel such a way?

It took him a moment to realise that his wings were gone. The Power still filled him to the brink however. He was on edge, nervous, and anxious but also calm and at peace. He released the Power and felt the eternal bliss slip from his soul, though he was glad to be free of the taint that had consumed him inside the Arch.

Carl was next to fall from the doorway of light, followed by Wil, both collapsing in a heap before the Immortal Kings welcomed them with the Rights of Passage and helped them to stand. How many more lifetimes had they seen during those moments after Adem had first emerged from the Arch? What terrors did they know? What secrets had they learnt? Did they trust him more now, or less? Were they willing to fight till the end or did they want to turn and flee? No! They were the Saviours reborn; they were the fate of Kisseria. They would fight till their last breath.

The days that followed were filled with meetings with Alit'aren and Ael Tarael, captains, generals, lords and ladies, meetings to plan the battle, plans to win the war. Adem, Carl, Wil, and Jean were in every meeting together with the Immortal Kings and Queens, huge maps of the Free Lands covered the huge carved wooden desks within each Meeting Chamber, including the War Chamber, where a map of the entire Free Lands was displayed on the floor made up of a tile mosaic. Statues from a large game of *mohrthra'daeghal* stood three feet high, horses, soldiers, wielders, rulers, marking out the lands and the state of their rule or disorder.

Lord Kelderath was in that meeting, dressed in crimson armour embossed with the Golden Owl upon the chest like his Heart Guard soldiers who stood behind him in a line. He held his conical crimson helmet by his side with his Blademaster sword at his hip. The man was pompous arrogance right down to his core, though he knew more about battle than Arig Flamebow it seemed. He pointed to the chess pieces that symbolised armies and positioned them in places that Adem had never envisaged before. His strategies for taking out mad

Alit'aren were as cunning as a fox sneaking into the hen house. His tactics for battle against the farmer armies of the Revolution were bolder but equally as succinct.

The rest listened to Kelderath as if they were receiving a lecture from a great scholar. Even Lord Farrigan and Lady Gwyndel listened attentively and gave little interruption or discord to his plans. Arig and Terese seemed to hold the man in reverence even after their first meeting in the War Chamber. Adem thought they saw Kelderath as a great ally, someone who they could depend on, someone they could trust.

Lord Maldros and Lord Denel argued with Kelderath's plans however. It was hard to decide who was the most pompous of the three, as they poked at the statues with a finger or a stick, giving orders, suggesting strategies that they assumed would be followed, and disagreeing with one another until it seemed these meetings would outlast the war. But they were all great captains in their own right, each had something to offer that the other seemed to have missed; all were of great value to Adem.

Each could see things that were crucial to a clean victory, though how clean would remain to be seen. The basic plan was to split up into four separate armies, each led by one of the Saviours. Adem wasn't sure about the idea of dividing the strength of the Sons and Daughter, though Kelderath insisted it was the only way his plan could work.

They would approach each of the rebel armies with three to trap them into a hold or keep with the fourth Saviour army to attack from the rear. The idea was that the rebel army would attempt to flee, only to be routed and forced to submit or be slaughtered. None of these men wanted to destroy these farmer armies; they wanted to overwhelm them and force them into submission, quick, clean, and painless, in theory anyway.

Five days after the final meetings in the War Chamber, on a warm spring morning with a crisp cool breeze blowing from the south, the armies of Nordhel began to mobilize. The four armies were to travel together in the beginning and then separate when they neared the borders of the closest revolt. That was Charkel, over forty miles south-west of Nordhel, a Nordic province also populated by over forty thousand mortals, mostly farmers and villagers.

Charkel was the capital, a fortified stone wall and watch towers surrounding a moderate-sized city. The farmer armies there had laid siege to the capital after Lord and Lady Aravon managed to escape with a force of one thousand cavalry. They had known about the farmer armies marching on Charkel before they fled to seek aid from Nordhel.

The fields surrounding the main gate of Nordhel were swarming with soldiers, Ael Trael, Alit'aren, Guardians, Reaven Archers, and Wood Kin. The Nordics made up over twenty thousand of their numbers, with the entire army totalling over fifty thousand. That included the *sei'vani* and other servants, including fletchers, wheelwrights, cart drivers, blacksmiths, and cooks. Thousands of tents were loaded on carts, along with other supplies for weapons, horses, and meals.

Altherin horses made up the majority of mounts for the immortals while the mortal soldiers rode thoroughbreds and warhorses.

Adem sat in the saddle of the dark *altherin* stallion who had rescued him from the Rahkwel in the East Lands. He named him Tarkson, an immortal word meaning fire dancer. He wore Alit'aren black with a black breastplate worked with golden dragons, his Guardian cloak flowing behind him on the breeze. Carl and Wil rode to either side of Tarkson on the *altherin* horses they had adopted after passing through the Travelling Gate.

They also wore black coats and trousers with brown leather boots, though Carl wore a crimson breastplate and Wil's was golden, both with black dragons scrawled across the chest. Jean and Terese rode a short distance away with Lydia and Elmira. All were dressed in bright silks and female breastplates and all rode *altherin* mares. Tobin and Orion rode to the left of Adem and his friends in black coats and breastplates. Torin and Kailus also rode with them, the Blademaster in a grey coat and steel armour, Torin in a black coat and cloak. The mood from those four was that they were on edge, like steel waiting to be unsheathed.

Hundreds of Guardians and Alit'aren were in their war garb, called the *ghoda'sidhe*. They wore cloth or armoured masks that covered their mouths and noses, with matching gauntlets of the Rohjor colours though some wore emerald green or mauve, including Wood Kin and Reaven Archers amongst the Dremelden. Their clothing was shadow black cloth wrapped tightly around their arms and legs with black cloth covering their heads. It was the first time Adem saw the traditional battle costume, so different to their traditional uniforms. Some also wore black breastplates or lacquered to match their masks.

When Adem's line finally began to move, Carl and Wil moved up on either side of him for conversation. They had not spoken about their shared experiences inside the Arch. It still seemed a subject none of them wished to share. Speaking of it in public was forbidden, and Adem had learnt that immortal ears would easily pick up their words.

'How have you felt after you started accepting your Healing?' he asked Carl, who looked at him as if he been struck in the chest. Finally, Wil replied, 'I feel myself again, for the most part. I still have nightmares. I was never like this at home, well, not always. I still feel. . . I don't know, edgy and suspicious, like I fear everyone I talk to is harbouring secrets and wicked thoughts.' Adem breathed a deep sigh at that; it was similar for him too. Then Carl admitted, 'You were right to insist that we accept Healing, Adem. I feel much better now. Though, the taint seems stronger since we came out of the Chameleon Arch. I can sense it even when I'm not holding the Power, not nearly as strongly, but it *is* there.'

'I know what you mean,' Adem said sadly, 'but perhaps it is just that we are stronger now, so our sense of the taint seems stronger. If our ability to wield is enhanced, it makes sense that the taint would be too, right?'

'I guess so,' Carl said glumly. 'But what if the taint really is growing stronger? How long will we be able to resist its effects if it continues to grow? I'm really worried, Adem, I'm concerned for us, for Jean, for all of Kismeria. I understand now how important it is that we succeed here.' The last was a great relief to Adem's ears. He needed his friends to take on the responsibilities they were appointed; after all, they were the Saviours.

He tried to think of the right response, but all he could manage was, 'We made it through a life and death situation together at Bright, and I was there for you, I didn't let you down, nor did you. I promise I will always be there to do my best. I won't let you down.' As for Carl's question about the taint, he didn't know what the right answer would be, so he kept silent. They rode for the next hour in complete silence except for the trod of hooves and the sound of clinking steel.

Jean rode with Terese on one side and the Immortal Queens on the other, the four of them deep in conversation the entire time though Adem couldn't have eavesdropped if he wanted to. He wondered if Terese was telling Jean what he and his friends had discussed.

‘I’m worried about my wife and daughter too,’ Carl said. ‘I mean what if these wormholes we passed through are not just dimensional portals? What if they make us travel through time as well? That would mean my wife and child would be growing older without me – they could live their entire lives without me before I returned.’

‘I know we have a duty here, Adem, but I have my duty to my family too. If I can find a way to take us home, I’m going. If we have that chance, we should all go together. I’ll leave you behind if I have to, don’t think I won’t.’

The nearby soldiers who had been making conversation fell silent at that.

Adem looked to Orion and Tobin to see that their faces were troubled, as were Torin’s and Kailus’s. Obviously the chance of the Saviours abandoning them to their fate had never been considered before now. Adem thought for a moment about those last words before he said, ‘This is my home. This is what I was born to do. Think of all the training we have been through these last few months. They have been shaping us into weapons to fight for them. We have been reborn through our experiences in the Arch . . .’

‘Don’t speak of that, Adem!’ Carl barked. ‘Not here anyway, I remember what I saw in there, that place was . . . wrong, evil. I will never be the same person after that experience.’

‘I was reborn when my father baptised me in the sea back home, Adem. That is all that matters to me, my faith, and my family. You were also reborn when my father baptised you in your parents’ pool.’

‘I was there, Adem. I witnessed your rebirth. You were saved then and there, your soul promised to God. If you stay here, you will become so mad or evil you will destroy your own soul with foul deeds.’

‘I saw what you did to those men who attacked us. I saw what you are capable of. What will you do next, Adem?’

‘It wasn’t murder,’ Adem protested. ‘It was self-defence. I reacted harshly, I know, perhaps it was a result of the training, a reflex. Those men were going to kill us, Carl.’

‘Besides, you just said that you know we must succeed here, and then you tell me you are planning to find a way home.’

‘I meant what I said, Carl. This is my home until we reach our goals; it is my path to follow. We were chosen for this. Right back at Bright we were given this task to fulfil. Perhaps we were born for it.’

‘I don’t know about that, Adem,’ Carl said sullenly. ‘All I know is that we are in way over our heads here. You remember the Rahkwel, don’t you, and the Nymloc in the East Lands?’

‘Of course, I remember . . .,’ Adem began before Carl cut him off with, ‘Well that is just a flyspeck of an army compared to what we will face at the Great Battle. We are outmatched, Adem. What hope do we have to stand against the Dark Lord? We will surely die here. I know it.’

Adem tried to think of a winning argument; the best he could come up with for now was, ‘Suppose we find a way home. What if the Dark One finds a way to open a wormhole and bring those demons to Earth? Sure we have weapons, but we do not have the Power there or our Battle Angels. I can’t tell you what I learnt in the Arch, but I can tell you not to lose hope.’

Carl snorted and scowled at him before saying, 'I know why you would say that. I saw you up there, in the sky. You are the Blue Water Dragon. There can be no doubt of that.' That brought a wave of shocked murmurs from dozens of nearby soldiers, including the Immortal Kings and Torin and Kailus. 'I know that is why you think there is still a reason to trust to hope,' Carl continued. 'It is your destiny to lead us to victory. I have no remorse to be a lesser part in this Pagan ritual. I just wish you would try to think with your mind instead of always thinking with your heart.'

Adem did not know what to make of that, it was forbidden to speak in public of even shared events inside the Arch, and Adem felt that he always thought with his mind as well as his heart. He wondered if it was a quip about his obsession with polygraphs.

They rode in silence from then onwards until they made camp at the end of the day when the sun was a golden ball sinking behind dark forested peaks. The land hadn't changed much during the day's ride, mostly flat fields of matted brown grass with plenty of green spring shoots rising up through the soil. Some blue and yellow flowers decorated the fields, and pine and ash and oak trees were scattered along the way.

To the east, he could also see a forest at the foot of the Harknon Mountains at sunset. Nordhel was nowhere in sight when they made camp, a cluster of ancient ruins surrounded the fields where they pitched their tents and tethered the horses. It looked like an old defence fortification used by Nordhel, though the remaining wall lines were mostly only a few feet high on most sides.

Statues, half-ruined watchtowers and stone archways formed patchwork patterns along the horizon, dark-grey stone covered in creeper-vines with pink flowers. Mountains and cliff faces formed a perimeter on another edge of the camp. It was a sturdy place to form a defence. Though it was unlikely they would have any trouble this close to the capital. The first guarded watch towers were still a further day's ride north-west of this location. *Altherin* horses would normally cross that distance in half a day, though an army this size took much longer to travel. Torches and lanterns were lit in the fading light, as well as large campfires, where cooks began to boil stews and prepare spits for roast deer and lamb.

The entire camp spread out with hundreds of cook fires and thousands of tents of every shape and colour imaginable. The walled tents for the Immortal Kings and Queens were two enormous twelve pole structures of red-and-blue stripes. Two of equal sizes were set up behind those two, one for Adem, Carl, and Wil, the other for Jean and Terese. Guardians and soldiers were stationed around Adem's tent, and he had to wait for two soldiers to raise their crossed pikes before he could push back the door flap to enter.

Chapter

12



The Shadow Men

Inside, the tent was furnished with three beds, four high-backed oak chairs, a tall mirror, and six-mirrored lamps, as well as a large brass bound chest at the foot of each bed. Thick carpets of greens, blues, and yellows worked with birds and flowers covered most of the floor; and despite the clutter, there was still room to pace if desired.

Carl was still glowering over their discussions earlier in the day; Wil was quiet but seemed only tense about their arguments. Adem sat on one of the cots that were all a decent size considering they had to be hauled on a cart. They all sat on their beds in silence for a time until Adem suggested they practice their meditation techniques until supper arrived.

The others agreed and they folded their legs on the beds and sat in prayer position with their eyes closed as they made soft deep humming chants. It was a mixture of traditional Christian prayer with Yoga and the Kismirian method rolled into one. Adem liked to work some Tai Chi into it as well though Carl and Wil were still not familiar with the technique.

Of course, they were experienced at creating balls of fire with their bare hands which was the ultimate desire of anyone who practiced Tai Chi, though whether anyone on Earth had ever succeeded was unlikely. Adem felt the Power flow into him, rivers of ice and avalanches of fire, mixed with the foulness of the taint that made him want to empty the contents of his stomach. He slowly drew more and more of *teron* into him, much more than he could have held before passing through the Arch.

As he did, he felt Carl and Wil drawing more also; each was holding more than he could have before he was reborn. Then without discussing it first, they linked with one another; it was partly done through the will of their Battle Angels and the *kigare*, and the rest was their own decision, a shared request, and acceptance to link.

Teron rose like an erupting volcano in each of them, much, much more than they could have held unaided. Soon Adem was unsure if the humming sound he heard was his own voice or the Power itself resonating within the tent. A cool breeze swept over his face, and he opened his eyes partway to see Orion and Tobin bursting through the tent flap.

Their faces were filled with panic, with *teron* enhancing his senses, Adem clearly made out drops of sweat on each of their faces! For an immortal to sweat, it must have been serious. For the Immortal Kings to sweat, it was obviously a matter of life or death.

‘Stop this at once!’ Tobin growled. ‘You must let go of the Power immediately! You will burn yourselves out! If you lose the ability to wield, we are doomed!’ Adem’s eyes were fully opened now, he realised the danger once they had spoken, though it took some strength of will to let go of the endless bliss and raging chaos of *teron*.

Then he released the Power, as did his friends, and all three gave deep sighs that sounded like deep regret. Returning to life without *teron* was like waking from the most beautiful dream of ultimate pleasures and having an icy bucket of water tipped over your head. It was something like that, all the warmth and ecstasy that filled you was ripped out of you and you were left bland, dull, and numb by comparison.

‘You must not hold that much of the Power without your Battle Angels to guide your flows,’ Orion explained. ‘Even linked you are in danger of severing yourselves from ever being able to wield again.’

‘I know you have grown in your abilities since your rebirth, it is the same for all who pass through the Chameleon Arch, but you must contain your desire to draw too much. One slip in the flows and you could have turned this entire army into a bonfire! We feared you had all gone . . . we feared the taint had driven you to draw so much.’

‘I will send your Healers in before you eat. Don’t touch *teron* again this evening unless we are attacked. Even then, you must not enter battle unless we advise it. You have an army to serve you, you must conserve your strength, and we must preserve you to meet your fate.’

The two men left then without another word, both wearing expressions of dire concern. Adem was sure Orion had paused before saying, ‘we feared you had all gone mad,’ and then chose his words more carefully. Three immortal women entered not long after, all Nordic women with golden hair tied in thick braids, two with blue eyes and one with green. The green-eyed woman – Almer Farbris was her name – attended to Adem.

She wore a dress of dark green silk slashed with silver across the breasts and thighs. He would have called her plain faced for an immortal, though she was still very pretty, and youthful looking. She had a lovely smile that he would not have called plain however, and she flashed her pearl white teeth when she scanned him with the Power.

‘Where is Lira?’ Adem asked before she began the Healing. ‘She normally sees to this.’

‘Lira Tolnock is indisposed at present,’ the woman said in a crisp clear Nordic accent. Her voice was not musical like Lydia and Elmira, more childlike and self-important. Then she began the Healing, waves of ice flowed through his form, he shivered, then convulsed, fighting to avoid flailing his arms and legs; his fists and jaw clenched. When it was over, he found he was famished as was usual.

The women left and Adem and his friends stood and stretched and rubbed their eyes. He felt refreshed, his symptoms receding immediately after she finished the weaves. Not long after three *sei’vani* entered with bowls of lamb stew, slices of roast deer, and a large loaf of bread for each on three silver trays. They were Nordic men, all with eyes downcast and a kind of humbleness about them despite the fact that they radiated the presence of tame lions.

They did not give their names, so Adem did not ask. He was not sure if it was rude to question *sei'vani*, he would have to speak with Torin about that.

When the men left, Adem and his friends ate with a controlled frenzy, gulping down mouthfuls of hot stew and making sliced deer sandwich after sandwich. When he was finished, he felt he still had room for some cheese though he did not want to seem piggish. Then he heard music and singing outside the tent. It was some way off, but Arawn told him the tune was the Wishing Frog. Adem looked to Carl enthusiastically, Carl smiled back at him, and they all stood to make their way out to the festivities.

The furnishings inside Jean's tent were suited to a queen's palace, everything was gilded, the chairs, the bedposts, the mirrored lamps, the carpets, everywhere she looked was golden. She and Terese sat on high-backed chairs carved in the shapes of lions, eating their evening meals from silver trays on small round polished oak tables. Jean sipped the stew as it was still very hot and her breath did little to cool it. Terese had hardly touched her meal; she sat straight backed and stared at Jean with eyes that stabbed like daggers through her heart.

The immortal woman had been particularly on edge ever since Jean emerged from the Chameleon Arch. Sometimes Jean suspected the woman knew everything she had seen inside the Arch. She had inquired whether Terese had ever been through the Arch in any of her former lives, but the woman would not provide a straight answer.

One thing Terese would admit to was her concern over Jean's increase in the Power. It was a surge to be exact; she was easily ten times stronger than she had been before she entered the Arch. Being stronger in the Power had its benefits of course, though Terese seemed almost obsessed over the risks. Her focus became more inward when the sound of music and singing drifted through the tent walls.

She looked as if she were locked in some ancient memory; Jean wondered how often that occurred ever since the woman had admitted remembering so much about her lover from a past life. Then her focus returned to the present, regarding Jean like a hawk spying a fox, intimidated yet determined to make a meal out of her.

'You must meditate before you can venture out to explore the campsite.' Terese lectured. 'If you don't meditate every day you may lose control of your ability to wield. That could end in disaster for us all. Breathing and focus, those are the keys to controlling your abilities.' Jean sighed and rolled her eyes, placing the spoon back on the edge of the bowl before she said, 'Yes, I know all that, Terese, I know. But surely I can skip meditation for one evening to go enjoy the revelry. This is exciting for me! It's the most amazing experience I've ever had! I feel like shouting for joy, but . . .'

'What is it, Jean?' Terese asked. 'You look pale all of a sudden. Are you ill?'

'No, it's nothing, it's just . . . I feel different since coming out of the Archway, like I'm a different person entirely sometimes. The things I saw in there, the person I became . . . Oh, I know I can't tell you about it . . . it's forbidden . . .'

‘You can tell me,’ Terese said. ‘You can tell me anything, Jean. What did you see?’

‘I saw . . . so many things . . . awful things . . . the future of Kismeria . . . and the future for . . . for Adem, Carl, and Wil . . .’

‘What happened to them?’ Terese asked intently.

‘I want to tell you . . . but it is forbidden . . . Lydia and Elmira say it could affect the fate of Kismeria if I tell a soul what I saw . . . but what troubles me most is not what became of Adem or the other two. It was who I became that frightens me . . . I’m terrified that I will become something I never imagined I could be . . . weak . . . heartless . . . cruel and unrelenting . . . but it is my destiny . . . how can I change my destiny?’

Terese studied her for some time as if she were trying to see inside her skull before she replied, ‘Some say that our destinies are not fixed things, though we may see glimpses of the future. That future may change due to choices we make that alter events, resulting in a different destiny. Do not worry yourself with what you saw in that place.

‘It is designed to display your worst nightmares, to test your greatest fears, to make you stronger. I’m sure it has too. Finish your meal and you may join your friends.’ Jean smiled at that, for Terese to allow her to skip her meditation was a small favour; to allow her to spend time with Adem was a change she would never have expected. Perhaps their futures were not carved in stone after all.

Tairark Vampireking strode through the forest of thick oak, pine, and redwood trees that towered above him with dark canopies blocking out the light of the moon. A faint blue glow still covered most of what was not completely shrouded in darkness. Behind him stood one of his Brothers, Torkhan Dreadlord, who wore a silver skull marked with dark runes, and he was known as the Lord of the Souljhin; the silver skull was his sigil as well as theirs. Another large silver skull was embossed upon his black *racinthen* breastplate; the enchanted armour absorbed magic and was impervious to steel.

Tairark also wore black armour beneath his hooded cloak of shadows; none were taking chances now that they knew the boy Highlander had learnt the Spear of Odin. Their Brother was still recovering from his wounds taken in that moment that the boy learnt a fraction of his true ability.

Tairark’s mask was a silver human skull with sleek eyes and long golden fangs, the vampire sigil. Torkhan was also robed in a hooded cloak that seemed to be made of darkness. The pair would have been invisible in the shadows if not for the yellow-orange flames that burnt where their eyes should be. They both stood silently watching the campfires burn of the so-called Saviour army.

It was a sizeable force, more than Tairark and his Brother would attack; though behind them in the darkness of the forest waited over one thousand Fists of Nymloc and Jacoulra—one hundred for every Fist—with over one hundred and fifty Souljhin. They were Torkhan’s army, brought here through the Travelling Gate situated at the foot of the Harknon

Mountains. They remained hidden for the time being, joined in part with the shadows of the forest so that the Guardians could not detect their presence, though the enemy would know of their presence when the demons returned to their forms of flesh and bone.

Tairark had brought over five thousand of his vampire army from the Southlands. Beyond the southern borders, his vampire armies waited for the return, the days when the Dark One's armies marched upon the Free Lands once more. They were creatures more of flesh and bone than the demons, though they could mask their presence for a short time using the abilities gained from their most recent feed. A vampire could build their abilities over the years though they were unable to use most powers unless they had taken a fresh victim. Blood was the source of their power, fresh human blood, and they would feed tonight.

Adem sat cross-legged in front of the large campfire where a Torvellen woman was singing to tunes played on a flute, harp, and drum by three Nordic men. Carl and Wil sat to either side of him, and Jean stood nearby with Terese shadowing her. None of them had brought their bows, except for Jean. She seemed to want to keep her Battle Angels close at all times, even when there was no apparent danger, or perhaps it was Terese's influence that made her keep the emerald bow slanted across her shoulders.

She wore a pale blue silk skirt and a sky blue woollen coat with gold buttons, white silk stockings, and blue leather boots. Terese was dressed almost identically in dark green woollen stockings and an emerald silk skirt and coat.

A decent-sized crowd had gathered to listen to the music and the woman's fine voice. Soldiers, Ael Trael, Alit'aren, Wood Kin, over two hundred stood in an arc surrounding one side of the campfire with the musicians on the other. The rest of the camp was a scene of men and women going about their business, or following strict orders, servants bustling left and right with arms burdened with bundles, armoured soldiers marching in small groups carrying swords or shields towards the outer defence lines, Alit'aren strolling with an air of pride and dignity, often trailed by a host of Ael Trael like motherly foxes patrolling after potentially rabid wolves.

—A horn sounded on the outskirts of the camp, followed by others to the east and west! They were warnings to alert the camp that an attack was imminent! Suddenly the faces of those Alit'aren were filled with controlled rage and the Ael Trael moving about with expressions of caution and unease. Lightning flared on the edges of the camp, first a single blue bolt, followed by fourteen thick posts of light that flared before vanishing.

Moments later a torrent of lightning bolts began to fall from that section of camp borderline, twenty, fifty, a hundred bolts blasting the earth with every passing breath, as Adem watched the night turn into daylight in that area, as a fierce roar like ferocious lions filled the air, as the lightning bolts increased in a frenzy of colour, striking far off into the distance in waves of magic as Adem realised there was a vast demon army attempting to infiltrate the front lines!

Alit'aren and Ael Trael were already fighting with desperation, as the sound of lions roaring filled the air again, then ten thousand lions, this demon army is a massive force, and they had caught them by surprise! Guardians rushing by began to shout at the top of their lungs, 'Demons! There are tens of thousands of them! To the east! Defend the east!'

After hearing those words, Adem had his sword drawn. The blade glowed cool blue in the darkness. The two hundred or more who had been gathering to listen to the music were now huddling around the Saviours; lions protecting their cubs. Guardians held glowing rune marked blades while Ael Trael and Alit'aren wielded balls of coloured fire floating above their palms. 'Protect the Saviours!' the men shouted. Lightning filled the sky to the east, a thousand blades of fire lancing from the heavens.

Arrows of coloured flame and spheres of fire began to fly to the east also; he estimated there were at least five hundred Guardians there by now. Perhaps two hundred Alit'aren and Ael Trael, perhaps more, they had not protected the camp as well as they might have if they had suspected this. Shouts of commotion sounded all around, warriors raced towards the line of defenders, while others prepared to defend other sections of the camp in case they were caught in a pincer movement.

Orion and Tobin appeared amongst a crowd of Guardians with Lydia and Elmira close behind. The two kings wielded their rune marked blades that glowed amber and emerald. The queens wielded balls of blue flame with fierce determination in their gaze. They moved to surround Adem and his friends, forming an inner circle with the two hundred other warriors surrounding.

To the north and west the sound of horse cries filled the air as soldiers attempted to prepare mounts for a charge. Kelderath would be seeing to that, along with Maldros and Morthros. They would see this as their failure and hold themselves responsible for leading the army to victory. They were bold men, but they had obviously not planned for an attack of this scale.

The Harp of Souls had been left at Nordhel to be protected behind stone walls. The kings had decided taking the Harp with them would have been too great a risk. If it fell into the hands of the enemy, there would be no hope of victory at the Great Battle, for Odin's Harp was made to be used at the Great Battle. Therefore it would be up to the Battle Angels to decide their fate. Adem wanted to fight; this was his battle as much as theirs.

'We will ride to the front lines and summon our Battle Angels!' Adem shouted to his friends. 'When they link, they will feast on *ki'mera*, building their strength and our own!' As soon as the words left his mouth, he saw dark shapes flying overhead. They were human shapes! – Men and women wearing dark armour and clothing, some carrying spears or swords or axes.

Some of the soldiers began to shout, 'Vampires! Hundreds of them! Look, to the skies!' But there were not hundreds of them, there were thousands. They began to swoop down and launch upon soldiers, knocking them to the ground and biting at their necks, others landed to cross blades with Guardians and other defenders, and these vampires were Blademasters in their own rights, lightning quick in their movements, some cutting Guardians and other Blademasters down with forms that were considered simple and old style if not obsolete. It did not take long before a swarm of vampires had surrounded the circle of defenders protecting Adem and his companions, some launching savagely to tear out throats

with their teeth and claws, while others began to cut into the lines of defence with swift blades that glowed with dark powers.

Orion roared, 'Summon your Battle Angels! Do it now, Adem Highlander!'

Adem heard Jean shout the name, 'Tanriel!'

Waves of red fire began to blast outwards towards the vampires that flew overhead, and also incinerating a vast portion of those that attacked on the outskirts of their defence, first a single wave that set dozens of the creatures on fire and knocked them out the sky, then wave after wave that turned vampire flesh into balls of red flame, as those flying overhead began to crash land throughout the campsite. Tanriel rose above Jean's head, over twelve feet above her and climbing higher.

As the Battle Angel morphed into view, that same force of love and devotion was felt deeply by Adem and his friends, the companionship of a legendary hero, who would fight with every magic she contained to rid this place of the evil threat that was closing down around them. It was in a way almost like a beautiful song, that was felt more than heard, some ancient Power of the Great Angels that fed confidence and rejuvenation into the souls of those they protected, as Adem, Jean, Carl and Wil each drank in a flood of *teron* and *terael*, filling their blood and bones with the ecstasy of the Power, though the three men felt the agony of corruption like shadows in their veins.

Tanriel's wings of light glowed pale blue, her armour crimson and gold bands that burned with Elemental Magic, golden hair and eyes of blue flame, she was an image of majestic and superior spiritual energy, as the sense of love and devotion flowed from her form like a river of light.

Ki'mera orbs began to fly towards Jean and her emerald bow from the burning vampire forms, a shining halo of energies that were absorbed at the same moment that Tanriel's strength increased dramatically, as she hurled a spear of crimson light that suddenly became dozens of shafts, striking through the hearts of vampires that fell in twitching piles of scorched bones and ash!

All of this occurred in the seconds before Adem shouted the name, 'Arawn!'

Twelve Fire Lions burst from Adem's form, leaping over the defensive circles, spreading outwards in all directions, pushing vampires on to their backs; tearing out throats or crushing skulls in their jaws. The beasts were unrelenting in their attacks, as bolts of blue lightning and warps of crimson fire launched from their forms to tear holes through vampires that crossed their paths, their roars filling the night sky in glorious ferocity!

Arawn's cloak of darkness morphed into view, rising like a shadow spectre from the form of two Fire Lions; wielding a giant sword of red magma to slice vampires into halves. The Battle Angel flowed through the enemy lines, hacking skulls from shoulders in crimson sprays; releasing blasts of red lightning from his sword that vaporized flesh and bone.

Ki'mera orbs flowed towards Adem and his sword, enhancing his Battle Angels attacks as twelve Fire Lions became twenty, then thirty, the beasts moved as burning shadows, shredding through vampire armour and flesh, biting off skulls and limbs in bloodthirsty carnage, their battle roars drowning out the distant demons as the circle of defenders found new courage and fought back with newfound fervour.

Arawn released waves of that intimidating force of the Underworld, though the emotions permeating were bolstering to his courage, a feeling of Brotherhood, and the

Companionship of a Protector was evident within that dark and brooding elemental magic that was also like a deep male song of chaos and contempt, a rolling chant of feelings sensed that inspired hope and ambition, to crush these enemies like worms under a rock!

Adem felt Arawn link with Tanriel, and as they did he felt his awareness of Jean also increased through the *kigare*. At the same moment, he reached for the Lord's Power like it was an endless cup he wished to drain completely.

Teron flooded his veins in showers of fire and rivers and ice, the taint floating on the surface like a putrid gel, he was entranced by the beauty and magnificence of *teron*, but the corruption upon the Power brought him close to vomiting in revulsion. His eyes felt as if they were burning into ashes, his bones as if they were crumbling into dust, yet the light of *teron* was a burning beacon in his soul, enough to carry him to heaven and beyond in the glory of its purity, yet it was not pure at all, and that slick of rancid filth was a noxious fusion with enough strength to knock him off his feet!

Lightning began to fall all around them—a blazing storm that turned night into day as hundreds of bolts fell every heartbeat—striking vampires in the sky and on the ground, pummelling them into the earth in burning blue bolts. That was mostly his doing, though he had sensed Carl and Wil seizing even greater stores of the Power also, and they were wielding some of that lightning as Carl shouted, 'Math Mathonwy!'

Wil roared, 'Eledisren!'

Vampires still surrounded the two hundred who formed a defence around Adem and his friends, over three hundred of them, mostly men with sharp fangs; their eyes were large dark orbs. Alit'aren and Ael Trael threw balls of fire or bolts of lightning from their hands while Guardians fought the vampires with their blades and arrows. The soldiers were fighting hard also, though vampires were stronger and easily overpowered their opponents in most cases. One disadvantage the vampires had was their desire to feed every time they took down a soldier or Guardian. This gave some opportunity to hack their skulls off or blast them with fire while they were face down and gorging on human blood. Screams of men were heard all around them. Adem wondered how many men they would lose in this single attack.

Math's crimson cloak appeared morphing amongst the vampire swarms, a red phantom of menace that caused bodies to implode on contact, as the Hellfire Spear swept through their ranks with blazing vehemence, the golden armoured Battle Angel taking form to rip flesh from bones in a bloodthirsty display, the air permeating with the force of a Brother of the Underworld.

Dis Pater appeared alongside Math, his giant golden axe decapitating vampires at will, cutting torsos in half and splitting skulls in crimson sprays as the shadow figure rose and took shape like a behemoth of avalanching destruction, waves of Flame Crows launching from his form to blast through vampire hearts and chests like dark arrows!

Math's Shadow Hounds joined the carnage, as the three forms of Spirit Warden began to meld in that now familiar mess of magic that morphed into shapes like burning dragons of white flame that blasted vampire bodies into incinerated piles, as their deafening roar filled the air; joined by the aftermath of flames unleashed by Tanriel's Spears.

The four Battle Angels linked—burning love and shadows of chaos united in epic forces that washed over the Saviours and their adversaries, inspiring determination amongst his comrades and perhaps trepidation in those demonic hearts—as Adem sensed his three

friends more strongly via the *kigare*; they were all frightened, terrified was more like it, but they held on to what strengths they had gained through their training and their rebirths.

Each of them had been forged into a new breed of warrior, in some ways they were akin to any of the Alit'aren and Ael Tarael of this Age, or of any, though the tests and trials of the Chameleon Arch were designed especially for branding the souls of the Sons and Daughter with minds and hearts that could withstand anything the Dark One decided to throw against them!

A swirling vortex of grey clouds appeared above Adem and his protectors, spreading downwards as a great grey finger as the vortex became larger; the winds howled and lightning flared in many colours in the skies above, as the four Battle Angels were swept up into the clouds that surged with cataclysmic might that was almost terrifying to behold.

Bolts of lightning fell to blast vampires all around the protective circle, aqua, crimson, emerald and golden swords of flame lanced from above with ominous force and raging vehemence; vampires were caught in pillars of light that vanquished their flesh in that momentary blaze as an overwhelming clash of thunder tore the air.

Arawn, Math Mathonwy, and Dis Pater flew back down out of the clouds like giant birds of prey, wings of shadow or crimson and golden flames at their backs, weapons of light released blasts of lightning and fire; obliterating the scores of vampires that stood in their path. The three Brothers split off in three different directions when they reached the ground, hacking through torsos, decapitating, annihilating their enemies with devastating might as the vampire swarms began to back away or take to the skies in terrified awe.

Tanriel still hovered at the peak of the clouds; dozens of Flame Spears flew from her hands to punch through vampire flesh, setting them to flames in brilliant crimson flares as scorched bones collapsed in burning piles or blasted into ash. As the *ki'mera* orbs continued to flow to the Resting Points, the minions of the Battle Angels increased in strength and number. A hundred Fire Lions and over sixty Shadow Hounds charged through the camp, knocking down and devouring vampires in massive gulping bites.

Flame Crows punched through chests in blasts of shadows and fire, or swarmed in the air to crash land with deafening thuds that blasted flesh and bone to flying pieces. The Crows, Lions and Hounds melded whenever they closed ranks, becoming massive serpentine dragons of flame that gorged on vampire flesh as their long sinuous forms released blasts of lightning and fire to obliterate any enemies within range, as Tanriel's Spears struck to earth to unleash walls of pure crimson flame that turned flesh and bone to vapour and dust!

Orion shouted to Adem, 'We must move the Battle Angels to the eastern defences! We are outnumbered and in need of their strengths!' Adem gave this command to Arawn through the *kigare*. The Battle Angel responded by extending his giant wings of shadow flames, then flying back towards Adem, to swoop down and pick him up by the shoulders, launching him into the sky and flying towards the eastern defences!

Adem saw the demon army in those moments that he flew through the night sky; there must have been at least eighty thousand that he could make out in that sea of darkness. It was the red eyes of the Nymloc and the coloured eyes of flame of the Jacoulra that made it possible to estimate numbers, as well as the size of the dark bulk that formed their masses—thousands upon thousands of kindled coals glaring within a sea of flesh that swarmed together like some flowing river of tar!

With the Power enhancing his vision, he made out the black-robed forms of Souljhin mounted on their Shadow Steeds, pushing the demon army forwards in an effort to overpower the defensive lines. These demon generals were indeed the most fearsome of all, as the demon army suddenly unleashed the full force of their evil energies to pour forth in waves, battering the senses of the entire Nordic army. It was a devastating manoeuvre, penetrating the very fibres of flesh and fire of spirit of every man and woman on the battlefield, yet in the way it brought back the terrors of Bright, Adem believed he, Carl and Wil felt it more than any other.

Arawn placed him down in the centre of a wall of Alit'aren, Ael Tarael, and Guardians, who were behind thousands of Guardians and Blademasters defending the front lines. The battle was a scene of absolute chaos and disorder, though Adem soon saw how well the defenders were managing despite a need for reinforcements, as Alit'aren and Ael Tarael battered the front lines of demons with blasts of Elemental Magic, lightning flying from the fists of men, and balls of flame from the palms of the women, as the Guardians fired wave after wave of blazing arrows of light that launched over the front lines of defenders to fall as showers of flame that blasted demon flesh apart on impact, skulls and limbs torn free in blood and fire as lightning surged within the deeper ranks that spread like hungry serpents from the initial blasts.

Many Alit'aren and Ael Tarael were on the front lines attacking in similar styles, though their lightning and spheres of flame were thrown directly forwards in straight lines, with a punching action gestured with each energetic throw, the impact blasting demon bodies to shreds as spheres of energy expanded from every source, becoming snakes and leopards of burning light that pushed deeper within the enemy ranks, gorging and shredding through flesh and bone in a cosmic display of unrelenting annihilation.

Adem was on the ground only moments before he looked back into the sky to see Carl, Wil, and Jean being carried towards him by their Battle Angels. He sensed Jean's nervousness over flying though despite that her nerves were steel now.

The Alit'aren and Ael Tarael were also forming walls of shields wherever they could manage to, buffering the defenders with impenetrable barriers that the Guardians, Blademasters and other warriors could easily cut through from their own side, hacking down thousands of savage demons that pressed against the shields, biting and clawing to no effect before they were savagely cut to bleeding chunks. When the front lines fell, the hordes behind moved forwards in a wave; pushing at the front defences of pikemen, spears, swords, and axes.

These mostly immortal bred on the front lines moved with impossible speeds in their sword and blade forms also, a blurring to mortal eyes as enchanted weapons flared in arcs and slashes of vehement might, the enemy were being ground into minced meat against these walls of death!

Men were still dying out there; he heard their screams as flesh was ripped from their bones. Wherever a shield failed the defenders were soon overwhelmed by the crushing force of such numbers stacked against them, a never ending charge of teeth, claws and pure muscle, and Nymloc were particularly savage and bloodthirsty when enraged.

Jacoulra could create Fire spells also, balls of crimson magma flew towards the front defences to burn holes in the shields, allowing a flood of demons to push through before the

lines were more greatly defended, as wielders fought back desperately with their magic to burn the creatures to cinders and ash, and occasionally bolts of red lightning fell from the sky that were cast by the larger demons, these were quite devastating on impact, as massive crimson blasts obliterated dozens of warriors, turning them to burning corpses or even screaming scorched skeletons! Wielders were also attempting to at least keep the front line defenders protected from above with other shields, but the Jacoulra were casting waves of magma to try to burn through those barriers wherever possible.

Jacoulra wielders formed small packs in some areas of their ranks, fusing the might of their dark enchantments in wedges, each wielder holding a sceptre of dark iron that glowed like hot coals with odd shaped scythes burning at their tips, the points from which their dark magic was hurled. These wedges of demon wielders spoke in rude chants, a guttural Demonic Tongue that was forged of the Old Ways Magic, a bridge between the past and present of ancient evil that sent shivers down Adem's spine as he gazed upon those elemental casters, chanting their war cries' as raw emanations of evil energies coalesced and permeated from each wedge in a way that was as distressing as it was intimidating and abnormal.

The male Battle Angels swooped down to land in front of the warriors that formed the first line of defence, as Tanriel created a gap by unleashing a blast of red flames that spread for half a mile in a straight line; burning thousands of demons to ash in a matter of seconds, Jean drinking in a torrent of brilliant burning *ki'mera* moments after that was almost blinding. Adem watched as literally tens of thousands of colourful orbs flowed towards Jean and her bow that she clutched in her left hand, his sense of her via the *kigare* was that her strength had just increased tenfold!

For a time, she was encased in the spellbinding glow of colours that surrounded her like a vacuum. He sensed that she was also becoming overwhelmed from the surge in the Power. Tanriel began throwing out hundreds of crimson spears that fell to the earth to release walls of flame that erupted sideways through the demon ranks, reducing dark flesh to charred lumps of congealed mass on the far edges, but within the main source of flame the demons simply ceased to exist!

But the Battle Angels were still linked, so the *ki'mera* was shared even though it was delivered to Tanriel's Resting Point. Two hundred Shadow Hounds and three hundred Fire Lions appeared in the gap between the demon army and the front lines of defence. A thousand Crows swooped down from the sky; landing another crushing blow to the demons as the Shadow Hounds and Fire Lions rushed forward, hacking through demon flesh with razor-sharp claws and biting skulls or tearing off limbs.

As the Spirit Wardens began to meld once more, the darkness became alive with dozens of blazing white dragons, their jaws biting through even Jacoulra as if they were ripened dark melons fit for bursting, multiple claws of flame shredding through armour and flesh as blasts of energy erupted from their sinuous torsos and tails, bolts of lightning and rings of flames to vaporize demons with magnificent ferocity!

Ki'mera flowed to the Sons and Daughter like a floating river of light, filling them with the Power, enhancing their Battle Angels abilities until their attacks and minions doubled in number! Waves of Hounds, Lions and Crows flowed through the enemy ranks, splitting demons in half or ripping off skulls and limbs with bloodthirsty intensity, a force that could not be quelled even against such a vast horde of evil, the enemy became panicked

and disorganized, even breaking ranks as uncertainty took hold of beings that were normally bred to simply kill and eat, the emotion of fear was almost unknown to such creatures, yet Adem saw that they were at least more than intimidated.

Jean drew her sword of blue light and with admirable rage she shouted, 'Druantia!'

Twelve Green Men began sprouting from the earth in the gap between the first lines of defence and the demons that were being pushed back by Fire Lions and Shadow Hounds. They were all male Green Men this time, fat bellied and standing up to fourteen feet tall, a monstrosity of vines, wood, and leaves forming human figures with black seed-shaped eyes.

They began stomping through the demon ranks, striking with their fists like giant clubs, crushing demons in their wake as lightning and fire blasted from each point of impact; incinerating flesh and bone as the energies took forms of tiny winged pixies and axe wielding dwarf like beings, blasting and hacking through enemy ranks until their magic was dispersed.

As the *ki'mera* orbs flowed to Jean's sword, the Green Men increased in number, fifteen, and then twenty of the giants. They roared like massive bears as they stomped and clubbed at demon flesh as if they felt a deep hatred for the creatures. Pixies and Dwarves doubled in number as the Green Men actually now struck at the hordes with large wooden clubs that blazed with emerald light, the fires spreading outwards in various forms of Wardens that unleashed bolts and rings of flame from their own forms as they tore holes through chests or cut demons down at the knees to drive burning axes into their skulls!

The defenders were fortunate that their generals and kings had chosen this camp location for its various naturally formed points of defence, as although the front lines were mostly a level field between the lines of defenders and the enemy ranks, the demons were being forced to move through a sort of funnel formed in the landscape by a valley type formation rising to either side of the path of grasslands that flowed from the nearby forest where the creatures were emerging in dark waves.

Other borders of the camp would be more easily defended as the land rose higher around the circular edges of the camp on the southern and western sides, and a series of cliffs bordered the northern edges that rose to overlook rolling hillsides becoming much larger mountains further off in the distance, and it was for these very reasons that the camp was chosen to hold such a large force of defenders in possible safety so long as the eastern gap could be buffered with shields long enough to cut down this demon force.

Another advantage of this landscape was the rather predictable attacking formation of these kinds of demon, as Nymloc and Jacoula most often simply pressed their ranks forwards in endless waves to grind their victims into pieces, particularly when facing warriors without sufficient shields of the Power to defend their front lines. In this case and with many other ancient battles, the demon attack style provided some assurances that shields of Elemental Magic to form walls of defence would provide a point of focus for the enemy ranks, distracting them from more efficient manoeuvres such as attempting to surround the camp with their greater numbers and attacking from every point of defence at the same time.

Adem knew Rahkwel would have made such an attempt much sooner, as the goblins were more advantageous in battle formation and strategies than these perhaps less intelligent demons, but he also knew that the chaos being caused by the thousands of vampires still attacking the heart of the campsite from above, would have made it much more difficult to defend every border if the demons decided to change tactics, and so he knew he had to

destroy this massive force before the Souljhin decided it was time to restructure their attack formations.

A Rokhal horde would also have been disastrous if they had been summoned to this battle, as the larger swift moving beasts were also tactically smarter than these more ancient demon breeds, and eight to twelve feet tall figures of pure muscle attacking in a ring while pushing with spears, pikes and halberds would have put much greater pressure on their shields, as well as making it very difficult for the warriors to cut them down with such long gaps formed by the wooden hafts of each weapon. He did not care to wonder why the enemy had not thought of this, though he said a silent prayer in hope that such demon reinforcements did not show their faces.

The swarms of Spirit Wardens continued to plough through the enemy lines, white dragons devouring flesh and bones in bursts of dark blood; vaporizing enemies with blasts of flame, while thick muscled Hounds and shadow flamed Lions leapt from all sides of the twisting dragons, biting, clawing, ripping off skulls with a single swipe or chewing through demon chests with ravenous intensity!

The presence of the Crows even brought a new stage of ability for the Wardens, as the Crows grouped together to form Lions and Hounds with wings of burning shadows that lifted off the ground, some pouncing to land with shockwaves of force and energies that blasted demons into dust, while the larger groups of Warden took form as flying silver dragons that breathed walls of flame down upon the demon scourge.

During this massive Battle Angel Link, the Wardens also released their own waves of Pixies that flew off in every direction towards the demon hordes, punching through chests or blasting skulls to cinders and ash with lightning speed and unstoppable force. The flames released by the Lions at times became burning Leopards that joined the slaughter on the fields, as the energies charging around Shadow Hounds spread off into waves of Lightning Wolves that glowed like starlight as they tore through flesh and bone, shredding demons into bleeding chunks or biting into the jugular in dark sprays as they forced Nymloc and Jacoulra to the ground with heavy paws.

Flame Spears continued to clear a path for the three male Battle Angels further out within the demon masses, as Arawn spun in circles with his massive blade to cleave through three or four Jacoulra at a time, blade of flame slicing thick congealed halves of dark flesh that slid and collapsed in burning piles as he drove the blade through the chest of another, hacked off a skull or released a wave of crimson energies to vaporize a wedge of Jacoulra wielders.

Math and Dis Pater fought on Arawn's flanks, Hellfire Spear and axe of golden light releasing blasts and waves of Elemental Magic to burn demons into scorched piles of smoking flesh, hacking off limbs or crushing the smaller Nymloc demons underfoot before driving spear or axe blade through their chests and skulls. The three Brothers were relentless in their onslaught tactics, showing no signs of intimidation or fear as they drove through enemy lines amidst waves of lightning and fire that reduced demon flesh to ash as *ki'mera* fed their souls with greater endurance and might.

For a time, it looked as if it would be a fairly simple victory. The *ki'mera* orbs fed the Resting Points, and the Battle Angels increased the scale and level of their attacks. This was the main source of their attacking style, that while the four Angels continued to harvest

demon souls they also fed the Spirit Wardens that multiplied in number, harvesting greater stores of *ki'mera* to the effect of greater devastation of the enemy forces. The resulting scene was a bloodbath of burning chaos upon the battlefield, glorious to witness as it filled the Saviour army with courage and determination, as some time passed while the warriors gazed in awe upon the Battle Angels slaughtering demons, yet Adem realised that victory was still a small hope when Arawn spoke to him via the *kigare* to say that he was tired.

What does that mean? Adem asked.

It means I must rest, Arawn replied. We all must. It is up to you now, Son of Odin.

Then the three male Battle Angels and Tanriel unleashed a final wave of attacks, fire burst from crimson spears, Fire Lions and Shadow Hounds swept through the demon ranks like nightmares come to life, Crows covered the skies, swooping down to tear demon flesh or blast it into shreds on impact, the Wardens melding to become waves of Flame Dragons burning neon white as energies pulsed, flared and blasted from their massive winding forms that trailed through the dark demon masses to obliterate flesh and bone in cosmic flashes and flares of pure incineration! When Tanriel's Spears touched ground before and around the Flame Dragons, the burning white beasts' unleashed waves of fire from their own massive jaws that vaporized demons or turned them to congealed chunks of burning flesh as the fields were filled with their deafening roars!

Math, Dis Pater and Arawn released a unified wave of Elemental Magic that morphed around each of the three males to take the form of dozens of beings of golden-orange or crimson-shadow flames, all of equal height of the Battle Angel they surrounded and looked most like, as the Spirit Wardens began to hack and slash with vehement rage, wielding golden axe or spear or sword of burning magma, as the three Brothers focused these wedges of Wardens like spearheads to drive through the enemy bulk, flames flowed from each weapon like the roar of dragons as the burning sentinels carved a path of destruction in waves of incineration, hacking through dark flesh flying in fried chunks!

Then suddenly, they ceased their attacks, the Battle Angels returned to their Resting Points, their weapons and minions vanishing with them. Only Druantia's Green Men remained, the Battle Angel herself was a beacon of blue-green light with wings of blue fire hovering twenty feet above Jean. So she could see the battle field more clearly he assumed.

Though her attacks had less effect without the other four and she would tire soon too, it was up to him, now.

He didn't bother trying to summon Wings of Odin; he had tried enough times since emerging from the Arch and failed each time. He thought it must have been something he could only do in that strange reflection of worlds. If it were possible in the real world, he had not yet learnt how. The Immortal Kings and Queens had caught up to them by now, along with over two hundred Guardians wearing the masks and black garb of the *ghoda'sidhe*.

They formed a protective barrier around them with Ael Trael and Alit'aren on the outer edges. They were still very close to the front lines however, and the demons were beginning to push back, hard, and with a vengeance. The familiar screams of dying men filled the air once more as pikemen tried to push back the advancing demons. Adem could see the waves of Jacoulra magic that was being hurled at the walls of shields along the front lines of defence, and when blasts of that corrosive fusion melted the barriers, men screamed in terror and death. He had to think of something fast if he wanted to save more lives, but his heart

was stricken with panic, he fumbled at weaves as he wondered what spell would have the greatest impact, second guessing himself before releasing each attack.

Soldiers and Guardians were there also, hacking with blades and axes at black bull and ram skulled beasts. Ael Trael and Alit'aren who had been resting, during the time that the Battle Angels attacked, began casting balls of flame that took to the skies in the form of Pixie Wardens, angel winged beings of light that punched through demon chests in bright flares or caused skulls to explode on impact, as lightning bolts fell from the sky, blazing blades of emerald, golden and crimson fire lanced down to blast into sheets of flame, spreading in disc shaped rings of fire that obliterated dozens of demons with every strike, and soon there were hundreds of those blades falling every second that he watched with some sense of hope, while other blue bolts fell in the shape of giant serpents that snapped ferociously as they crushed demons in jaws of flame!

Kelderath, Morthros, and Maldros were mounted with five thousand cavalry and a thousand Dremelden. They were milling behind Adem and his friends, anxious for a charge though faltering due to the crowds that surged in front of them. Kelderath was barking orders like a mad dog, ordering Wood Kin Archers into formation, reinforcing his own ranks with more riders armed with lances and pikes to surround the charge, sending defenders to the front lines made up mostly of more Blademasters and Guardians of immortal blood as these would be the fastest and more enduring blades on the battlefield.

Morthros and Maldros assisted his commands by ordering the captains and lieutenants that surrounded them, reinforcing his tactics with a greater supply of leaders that nodded or bowed from the saddle before breaking off to separate points of defence; many of the commanders being sent closer to the front lines to lend some courage to those brave warriors and to inspire the will of defiance against this ominous threat of doom.

An addition to the front lines were greater numbers of Archers and Lukrorian Bow wielding Guardians, the Wood Kin on foot firing dead ahead while the Guardians were mounted behind them so they could fire from a higher vantage, as torrents of burning arrows launched at the demons, firing straight through the back of the protective walls to blast demons to blood and ashes on impact, line after line of enemies fell in glorious burning waves.

The Wood Kin also stood on a slightly raised plateau of land behind the main lines of Blademasters and Guardians defending with swords and other blades, which gave them a slight height advantage also to allow them to fire directly above the heads or between the gaps of two men's shoulders while the Guardians mounted behind them had an even greater height advantage. Their aim was still relatively straight despite this as some Jacoulra stood up to nine feet tall or more, and Nymloc at least seven feet with the taller breeds, so the Wood Kin aimed for Nymloc skulls and the Guardians fired at Jacoulra chests and skulls in waves of burning obliteration.

During this time Adem stood with Jean to his right and Carl and Wil to his left, as the four of them decided they should at least link, after communicating via their Battle Angels, and the skies came alive with lines of blazing blue bolts falling like spears and swords to almost double the number that had up till now been falling upon the fields.

They had not drawn too much of the Power, as they knew the risks, but the amount of *ki'mera* gathered by each of the Battle Angels allowed them to release torrents of *teron* and

terael with ease, once they had agreed upon the first weave. The link was passed mainly to Jean to control, and she looked more than a little pale with the revolting corruption upon *teron* sensed within her soul. Where those Spear and Blade tips touched ground, they not only blasted demons to shreds with the initial impact, but waves of magma erupted from the earth to flow outwards, burning demons to smoking husks.

Adem noted nods of approval from Orion and Tobin at this point, as well as from their wives, as those four formed their own link, and Adem saw Orion's Golden Tigers and Tobin's Emerald Lions launch upon the fields, attacking from the shield line to crash into the demon masses, spreading bolts of lightning and blasts of energy as the Wardens chomped down on limbs and skulls, pushing demons to the ground to rip through the jugular as dark blood flowed. Lydia and Elmira released waves of Pixies from their open palms that took to the skies in floating blue rivers of light, launching down upon the battlefield to blast demons apart on impact, burning holes through chests; skulls exploding in bursts of blood and flames.

They fought against the hordes in this link for some time, until Jean signalled to the men via their Battle Angels that she also required a while to rest and recover, and so the link was released, at which point Carl tapped Adem on the shoulder to shout, 'I have a plan, and I don't think we will succeed unless I try. You'll have to trust me!'

And with that, Carl was suddenly pushing his way back through the crowds of warriors, making his way towards the lines of mounted cavalry; his crimson spear glowing in the darkness like a sceptre of ill fate.

What is he doing? Adem wondered.

He looked over his shoulder again to see Carl shouting orders as he almost pulled a man out of the saddle; taking his horse to lead Kelderath and the others off to the south. Adem had noted Kelderath bowing to Carl from the saddle like a brow beaten wolf exuding shame and embarrassment for not seeing the same wisdom as one of the Chosen. Whatever Carl had planned, he was not sharing it via the *kigare*.

The five thousand horsemen followed Carl and the noblemen to vanish into the night. They broke off to the right and fanned out in a series of lines headed towards the hills that would give them a view of the demon flanks from that side of the battlefield.

Where are they going? Adem wondered again, hoping that Carl was not so affected by the corruption upon *teron* that he was experiencing delusions of grandeur.

He was more than relieved to see Carl taking initiative in this fight; it was alternatively perhaps a sign the man was coming to his senses. But Carl knew nothing of cavalry and charges, though that thought stirred memories of lessons Adem had learnt during his ordeal within the Arch, and he began to hope and trust that this new spurt of courage and initiative by his friend was a sign that Carl had also developed serious improvements in his understanding of war and battle tactics.

It was then that Adem noticed Wil had vanished too! He looked behind him to see the man running towards the line of Dremelden warriors, his golden axe swinging in his belt loop as he too began to bark orders at the Wood Kin Immortals, their leaders Farrigan and Gwyndel giving bows of subservience as he too apparently devised schemes they had not considered up until this point.

‘Now what is *he* doing?’ Adem asked himself. He began to wonder how much his friends had changed since being reborn within the Arch, and already he was seeing evidence of just how extreme and varied those changes may be in each of them.

‘Carl says he has a plan, Adem!’ Jean shouted with a fierce temper. ‘Put some trust in your friends and see what comes of this. For now, focus your might against this scourge and do some damage with what you can muster!’

So it’s up to me then, Adem thought as he pressed his palms together in prayer position, the Power bleeding into and throughout his skin and soul as lightning and flames ripped at the very fabric of his being, charged and flowed within his core to vast extremities of heat and light, with electric coolness added to the cataclysm of energies that threatened to tear him to shreds in its magnificence, as he laughed ecstatically within the confines of his mind while almost on the verge of tears in revulsion from that horrid foulness that corroded his flesh and bones, a vileness beyond compare that brought images of festering tar, bubbling as it nearly coalesced with *teron*; a river of pure and incandescent flames within his veins.

A hundred thick lightning bolts fell as giant swords of blue flame. That was all him this time. Another hundred, and then fifty more; each striking a different place each time. Demons howled as they were torn apart in flashes of blue flames.

He focused most of his attacks just behind the front lines of demons. He didn’t want to accidentally strike any of his own soldiers, but he wanted to make a mess of the front lines that were at times tearing his soldiers to shreds. This method gave the soldiers and Guardians more room to swing an axe or blade. The problem was this method could take all night. He was not sure he could keep this up for more than an hour. The Arch had improved his strength and endurance dramatically, but even these somewhat simply formed weaves were draining a vast portion of his vitality.

Ki’mera orbs flowed towards him, filling him with the glory of the Power, filling him with the vileness of corruption. Behind the walls of lightning he formed new weaves, making it hail balls of blue flame, each the size of a fist. They would mostly wound demons rather than kill them, but he divided the flows to make hundreds of the balls of light fall every few seconds, covering nearly a mile of black bodies.

He called that weave Lightning Hail. The balls of flame melted through demon skulls like hot knives through butter, tore limbs from the muscular beasts; hammering them into the earth. The Nymloc and Jacoulra preferred to move in huge wedges, formations of a sort where their front lines pushed, hacked, and slashed with their claws and fangs, while those behind waited to take over when the front lines were defeated. Battles of this kind were like one giant meat grinder regardless of whether you were on the winning or losing end. The elemental shields created by the Alit’aren and Ael Trael were the only thing stopping this vast horde from overwhelming the front line defenders and grinding them into blood and bones.

Adem continued to wield those same two weaves for an extended period of time, until he was in desperate need of a rest. By that time, a soldier had arrived leading his black stallion, along with others for the Ael Trael and Alit’aren to mount. This made it easier for Adem to see the battlefield, particularly the enemy and where to strike. However, they stood out to the Jacoulra wielders harnessing their dark magic.

Therefore more Ael Trael and Alit'aren were required to produce shields of Fire and Air to surround those mounted on horseback. Two dozen male and female wielders surrounded Adem to provide a substantial shield. He was close to exhaustion, though Arawn was gaining strength from the *ki'mera* that continued to flow into Adem's chest and his sheathed sword, mostly fanning around the hilt. This revived Adem's strength, providing new levels of endurance and enhancing his ability to wield. One moment he was so drained he thought he might collapse, then the flow of *ki'mera* produced a revitalising surge of energies flowing throughout his heart and soul, his mind suddenly alive with the Power as he sensed that his endurance had recovered more than adequately, compared to a solid two days sleep and full stomach of the types of energizing and healing sustenance only this world could provide.

He roared in defiance as he altered the weaves to what he decided then and there would be called Flame Crosses. Behind the walls of lightning, fourteen lines of blue fire appeared standing vertical, each as thick as his thigh. A second flow of the same weave created a second bar of flames that crossed over the first to form a series of giant burning blue crosses. These bars of fire hung suspended a foot above the ground and stood over fourteen feet tall.

With a slight altering of the weaves—as brilliant light and energy churned and coalesced around his fists like neon sprites—the giant crosses began to rotate, like aeroplane propellers, churning through demon flesh to turn Nymloc and Jacoulra into charred congealed lumps. The demons howled in terror as they began to attempt retreat from those churning discs of light, as Adem made a new alteration to the weaves, as the Flame Crosses began to move backwards through the demon ranks, slowly but with enough speed to constantly devour demon flesh before they could escape.

The result was a swift massacre of a large portion of the demon masses, bodies imploded, crumpled and fell apart without spray of blood as the laser lights burned through flesh while sealing the wounds at the same time, clumps of congealed flesh falling like small boulders while other demons melted into pools from the heat, a surging dark butter oozing onto the earth as the sounds of real fear began to erupt within the enemy ranks.

If he could have maintained these weaves, there might be some hope of victory; however, those Crosses drained his strength like water leaking out of a bucket full of holes. He thought he could have maintained them for longer if he were linked with Carl and Wil, or perhaps Orion and Tobin, but the two Immortal Kings were busily distracted making a mess of what remained of those front lines, attacking in their own link with their wives to create scores of Tigers and Lions, as well as waves of Pixies that tore through flesh or blasted skulls to blood and ashes.

For the short time that he was able to maintain the Flame Crosses, he must have reduced the number of demons to less than fifty thousand. His army had suffered great losses already, though he estimated it was only two or three thousand wounded or dead on the front lines. This meant the two armies were now almost equal in size, they were no longer outnumbered almost two to one.

However, the question remained as to how many servants and soldiers had been killed or bitten by vampires deeper within the campsite. Every time he looked back towards the centre of the camp, he still saw hundreds of human figures flying through the sky or

swooping down to take a victim. That problem was why the front lines were lacking in defence; there were still thousands of wielders and soldiers trying to save the servants from all being turned into vampires.

He released the weaves that held the Flame Crosses together, the discs of light vanished, and thousands of men and women cried out in despair to see such a powerful weapon disappear. They would know it meant Adem was becoming weak. Yet there was still a great battle to be fought. During the time Adem had wielded the Flame Crosses, most other wielders had taken a break to rest, including Jean. She began to wield again the moment the discs of blue flame ended in their onslaught.

Her method was different, though equal in terms of annihilation. Walls of golden-orange flame erupted ten feet high. She created these just behind the walls of lightning that Adem was still able to maintain. Stones and earth erupted in fountains of fire that ripped limbs from demon torsos and sent dark skulls flying in a spray of black blood.

The Ael Trael assisted her by creating more walls of flame alongside and behind hers. Hundreds of Fire Leopards charged out of those walls of flame to set demon flesh to fire, though their effect was minimal against such a force. The hundreds of Alit'aren began wielding lightning once more, focusing their attacks deep in the bulk of the demon ranks.

They seemed determined to rip out the core of the army before it advanced upon them. The result was a fireworks display of light and colour, including the constant flow of flaming arrows sent flying from Lukrorian Bows. Over a thousand Guardians had formed lines behind Adem and his protectors, their arrows hacked down the front ranks creating explosions and tearing demon flesh from bones.

This gave the soldiers and Guardians on the outer defences a chance to rest for the most part, despite dozens of ram or bull skulled monsters charging forwards though the blasts. They were usually hacked down with swords or axes, though occasionally a Jacoulra would break through the front lines and charge towards Adem while swinging its scythe-shaped red blade.

Jacoulra could stand up to nine feet tall and most were built like a bull, dark ram skulled beasts with bull horns and sleek eyes that blazed crimson, or aqua, emerald, or gold. Over fifteen of the massive creatures made it close to Adem and Jean, wounding or killing dozens of soldiers and Guardians in their wake. Ael Trael and Alit'aren always encased the demons in walls of fire before they could reach Adem or Jean.

Adem began to wonder about his friends. Wil and the Dremelden riders had vanished from the rear lines over a quarter hour ago. There was still no sign of Carl and the five thousand cavalry. Had they deserted him? No! He would not believe that possible. So what were they planning? How long would they wait? He changed the lightning weaves to Fire Serpents, the blue bolts moved outwards like a web of fire through the chests and torsos of hundreds of demons, burning them to ash. Sweat beaded on his brow, his breathing was desperate. He could not hold out much longer. Where *were* they?

Teron consumed him, a mountain of ice crumbling into a sea of flames. He wanted to laugh from the ecstasy and bliss that filled him, to scream from the raging torrent that was the Power, but the taint made him want to weep in despair. *Teron* made him feel as if his bones were burning to ashes, freezing to crystal stone. Through the flood of agony and bliss he wondered, *am I losing my mind? Is any of this even real?*

He heard Arawn's voice reply in his mind, *It is real, Son of Odin. Don't lose hope. You must succeed!*

Carl sat in the saddle of the grey colt he had borrowed from one of Kelderath's soldiers. Kelderath, Maldros, and Morthros were mounted on either side of his horse with the five thousand cavalry behind them. They were all mortal soldiers and mortal horses though they would do some damage to the demon ranks when they sounded the charge.

The thousand riders at the head of the charge held lances with two-foot steel points. Behind them the remainder of the charge would wield swords, spears, and axes to hack down demons that avoided being trampled by their steeds.

Carl was anxious to ride out of the shadows and sound the charge though he waited for the signal from Wil. They could not communicate with images to form words as they had in the Chameleon Arch. In the waking world, the *kigare* only provided an insight to the emotions of those you were connected to. Thoughts could be presumed from reading these emotions though words were only transferred via their Battle Angels, which would have otherwise made it quite difficult to know when his friend was ready.

His sense of Wil was that he was hunting, searching the wilds for something, though Carl had no idea what it was. He seemed calm, almost at peace, though he was anxious to fight also. Adem's emotions were a blurring of pain and bliss, the Power was taking control of him.

He tried to send reassurance to him through the *kigare*, a mood of determination and courage, like a lion waiting to pounce. A similar emotion was returned by Adem, though he was still fighting desperately, nearly completely drained of strength. Though Carl was certain Adem understood that they had not abandoned him.

Carl and Wil would not let Adem know the secret plan they were devising, though their Battle Angels had communicated to one another enough for each to know they had vital tools within their minds and souls to give them a greater chance of victory. The reason they could not tell one another more than this, for Carl's part at least, was the fact that discussing what had been learnt in the Chameleon Arch was forbidden, unless during shared experiences, and though Carl suspected Wil had also learnt some special gift through that experience, he understood that his friend could not explain any further details.

'How much longer must we sit here while our allies are being slaughtered?' Kelderath asked. 'I would rather die than sit by like a coward in the dark!' Carl resisted the urge to groan over that as he rode up and down the flanks of the riders to inspect each animal with the expert eye of a man who was a hundred men, no!—a thousand men!—and hundreds of them veterans of war leading cavalry charges, and in some of those lives, those men had defeated armies ten times this size with half as many riders. They had some help, of course, but this kind of memory gave Carl an edge in this predicament that he feared his fellow generals might be lacking.

Kelderath was clever when it came to battle but foolish when it came to bravery. Carl didn't want to die. He wanted to be home with his wife and child. Instead, he was forced to fight a battle he did not want to be a part of, in a strange land with strange people. Images flashed through his mind of ancient Kismerian battles, memories from a dozen different lifetimes, some where he was a Lord of War, others a Master Magician.

They were residues of what he had witnessed in the Arch. Memories of men who had fought and died for Kiseria. He knew them all, they were a part of him now, in a way they *were* him. He didn't want to fight, but he had no choice. Kiseria was in his blood now, not a strange land. It was his home, and they were his people, in some ways more so now than the people of Earth.

What Carl and Wil were able to discuss was some form of battle plan, in that while Wil waited to gather his special attack force, Carl waited on the opposite flank of the demon hordes with his host of riders, and when the time was right, they would crush this enemy with waves of magic and whatever else Wil had up his sleeve.

'On my signal we will charge head on into their flanks and ride till we reach the other side or fall from our saddles trying! Be ready, the time is near! Drive through them in a wide wedge twenty riders deep but keep a tight formation, we'll pound them into dust while the outer riders hack them down with everything we've got!'

'Your plan sounds . . . optimistic Odin Son,' Kelderath said with a sickly expression. 'Might I suggest a more suitable tactic?'

'I know what I'm doing, Kelderath, in this instance you will follow my orders to the letter. I know it's risky, but without this daring move we will not destroy them before our wielders tire completely. When the shields fail, our army will fall.'

'We must strike hard now while we have the momentum.'

'As you command, Carl Wilder,' Kelderath said after a sigh, 'although I must admit that this plan is *so* risky, I fear this will be the day I meet my maker.'

Horns sounded in the distance as Carl sensed Wil's alertness and determination rise up with a surge of ferociousness. He knew his friend was ready to fight! His sense of direction told him Wil was charging south towards the demon flanks. Carl and his cavalry would charge north, attacking from both sides in an attempt to obliterate the demon army or force them into a retreat.

He began to shout orders to Kelderath and his men, sounding the charge.

'Arvori t'kenek! Rukeni lo'akoth! Akroni lo'stansenis! Akroni ta'reldumeld! Arvori t'kenek!'

For a moment, Kelderath, Maldros, and Morthros sat staring at him with unreadable faces, though he would have guessed their eyes were attempting to hide their shock.

'You speak the Immortal Tongue?' Kelderath asked. It was only then that Carl realised he had given those orders in the language of the Nordics. He had never been an immortal in any of those past lives, though many of those dead men who now filled his mind had known the Immortal Tongue.

'Sound the charge!' he shouted in English. 'Form the lancers! Ready axes! Ready your swords! Sound the charge! We'll make a mess of them even if we die trying!'

He booted his mount into a swift gallop as horns began to sound behind him. The thunder of hooves filled his ears; horns continued as the black bulk of the demon army came

into view. They had hidden in a small cleft in the landscape a half mile from the battle which gave them the element of surprise.

Carl seized the Power.

Teron flooded his veins with showers of fire and rivers of ice, the taint floating on that river of light like rancid dark lava. When they were thirty paces from the outer wall of dark muscular demon bodies, Carl sent an arrow of Fire twelve paces wide to soften their entrance. The arrow of Fire tore through demon bodies, sending limbs flying in all directions as it began to spread like a wild conflagration, surging through the demon masses to take the form of cross wielding warriors standing eight feet tall, clubbing demons to crush skulls and split hides in bursts of burning crimson, the Warrior Priests soon numbering in the hundreds despite Carl wielding on his own, as flames roared from the swipes of the burning crosses in the form of raging red dragons!

He altered the weaves to make the line of Fire spread deeper and further outwards with mad vehemence, a scorching colossus turning blood and bone to congealed slag and vapour as giant spinning crosses of golden-orange flames stood upright to spray thousands more demons with rivers of fire; just as their horses ploughed through the remaining front ranks, man and demon roaring in agony and bloodlust as the ring of blades cutting swathes through Nymloc armour and hacking into thick *Jacoulra* flesh like the Reaper Harvesting the Crops, blood flying in dark bursts as thousands of scrambling dark bodies were cut down or trampled under hooves!

Carl rode at the head of that column of riders that first plunged through the bulk of the demon army—as the land dipped slightly to enter the shallower end of the long funnel in the landscape where the demon army were clustered in hordes of tens of thousands—his crimson spear tearing through demon flesh with bolts of thick tangled crimson flame, a massacre fit to make the Old Gods chant in pride as waves of *ki'mera* orbs filled his Resting Point, and he heard Math Mathonwy speaking to his mind.

I am ready, Son of Odin!

Carl shouted at the top of his lungs, 'Math *Mathonwy!*'

Twelve Shadow Hounds charged out ahead of his horse, Carl heard the cry of wolves to the north, thousands of wolves, and his curiosity almost sent him off balance before he focused the weaves again to obliterate the demon masses before him with the destructive force known to few wielders throughout the Ages.

The Hounds split to become thirty, then fifty black skinned beasts as tall as their horses, chomping down on skulls in dark sprays or shredding through armour, flesh and bone with claws that reduced the flying flesh to charred smoking husks, as the growls of the Hounds joined the howling cacophony of the wolves evidently attacking in the distance, and Carl had more than a hunch that those wolves had been commanded by Wil, evidently his friend had received *extra* special training in the Arch.

Hounds ploughed ahead through the demon ranks as Carl sent bursts of liquid flame surging alongside their path in the form of ravenous red dragons, as Carl's unique talent with magic unified the dragons with the Hounds to morph into burning white dragons with skulls that flickered from that of a dragon's jaws and fangs to that of a dark headed wolf with a maw gaping with razor sharp teeth that gleamed like polished steel, chewing holes through the enemy ranks while rivers of flame shot forth from the skulls of the Dragon-Wolves; the

elongated sinuous forms of the Elemental Spirits tearing through demon flesh with dragon claws and giant black wolf paws, as flames engulfed the demon ranks spraying outwards in brilliant crimson sheets or blasts of pure white flame, eradicating demon scum in the purification of the Power.

Math's crimson cape morphed into view at the head of the Dragon-Wolf charge, his burning red spear cleaving skulls and splitting torsos with an insatiable bloodlust of an Underworld Angel displaying invincible feats of carnage and retaliation against the ominous threat of such vast hordes. With each swipe of the Hellfire Spear sheets of burning crimson burst forth in waves flying horizontal through the enemy ranks to incinerate demon flesh ten ranks deep!

Soon they were charging so deep within the enemy lines Carl knew they would be trapped unless Wil succeeded to meet them halfway, and he prayed those wolves would be their saviour as he heard their howls growing closer on the northern enemy flanks. The skies were a wild calamity of lightning and hail of burning spheres of *teron* and *terael* to the western side of the demon wedges, and some of that lightning was falling close to the riders though the wielders seemed at least now aware of their position, as they focused their attacks further back from the charge to give them a chance to push through.

When Carl gave his position to Adem via their Battle Angels, he was soon surrounded in walls of burning emerald, crimson and amber flames spouting fifteen feet high and racing outwards in waves, within a short time after their communication, and this had been a part of Carl's hopes for success, as dozens of linked wielders created a funnel of fire for them to charge straight through, demons sizzled like sausages before bursting into flames by the thousands as the host of riders began a fierce roar of courage and determination, the thunder of hooves almost drowning out the thunder that tore the air with every bolt of lightning that fell like a burning Spear or Blade.

He heard Wil speak to his mind via Dis Pater: *We are on our way to you, my friend, just keep going and don't look back!*

In the distance, with the Power in his veins, Carl made out the dark furry shapes of thousands of very large wolves charging through the demon flanks, biting at skulls and tearing down victims with the savage hatred of animals that were fighting beyond the simple instinct of vicious predators, to them, these demons were a nightmare that needed to be wiped off the face of the planet. They barked and howled with savage vehemence as they tore through demon flesh with almost the same speed and skill as Math's Hounds, though the wolf packs were much greater in number.

Carl dug in his heels and charged with increased speed and fervour as he altered the weaves of the crimson bolts so that they spread outwards from the source in burning sheets that sliced through demon bodies like hot knives through butter, as effective as lasers and reducing the chance of losing momentum close to zero. Math and his Dragon-Wolves danced within that crescendo of flames as glowing spirits of devastating destruction, carving a clear path towards the oncoming masses of snarling ravenous wolves!

Adem was tiring to the point of exhaustion. His sense of Jean was that she too was at her limit. Druantia still hovered high in the sky, her Green Men still ploughed through the dark masses, crushing demon bodies with their feet and fists. Druantia must have been stronger to have lasted so long without rest. His own attacks had diminished to the walls of lightning and Fire Serpents.

Jean and the Ael Tarael still wielded walls of flame, and the Alit'aren and Guardians still provided a show of fire attacks. What had changed was Carl and Wil had joined the battle! Adem was overjoyed to sense their rage rising through the *kigare*, then to see Carl's cavalry and Wil's Dremelden begin to plough through the demon ranks.

He heard the cry of wolves also, thousands of wolves, coming from the same area as Wil and the immortals. Then he saw Shadow Hounds attacking from the right and crows swooping in from the left, which told him their Battle Angels had joined the fight. Jean shouted, 'Tanriel!' Adem heard his Battle Angel through the *kigare* saying, *I am ready, Son of Odin!* Adem shouted, 'Arawn!'

Adem sensed all five Battle Angels Link. Storm clouds suddenly covered the sky in a swirling grey vortex. Lightning began to fall from the clouds, fifty bolts, a hundred, a thousand, aqua, emerald, golden, crimson fire. The thick bolts struck the skulls and hearts of demons to release blasts of fire that sent dark bodies flying in pieces.

Tanriel appeared beside Druantia, throwing down hundreds of crimson spears that exploded outwards with walls of fire. Green Men rose from the earth within the demon bulk until there were thirty of the giants.

Over a hundred Shadow Hounds charged through the masses while Arawn's shadow form flew into the front lines of demon ranks to release over two hundred Fire Lions. A powerful roar erupted from the soldiers and Guardians protecting the front lines.

Then the Alit'aren and Ael Tarael began to unleash their most powerful attacks; many were linked to produce massive fireballs and walls of fire five paces thick. The Guardian archers behind Adem unleashed waves of arrows, and the front defenders began to move into an attack, charging forward to hack and slash at demon skulls.

Ki'mera flowed to Adem and Jean like rivers of light, charging them up, giving them strength. Despite this, Adem felt ready to collapse right there in the saddle, though his determination kept him sitting straight as he continued to wield the lightning.

He wanted to do something more, to unleash some final attack to settle the score, but he could barely hold the weaves necessary for the Fire Serpents. Then Arawn taught him a new weave, and Adem called them Jade Warriors.

Fifty figures rose up out of the ground, each ten feet tall, each a figure of emerald light in the form of a samurai. That was Adem's choice about how they would look; they could have been in any shape or form.

These Jade Warriors wielded giant blades of green fire that they immediately began to swing left and right, hacking through demon flesh and severing dark skulls. They were fast too, moving their blades similar to spinning saws.

This would be his last effort. He was only able to perform those weaves as they drained his strength less than the Flame Crosses. The Jade Warriors moved deep into the demon ranks, though he kept them at a distance from Carl's and Wil's forces.

He could not see far enough to be sure he would not make a mess of them too if they got too close. *Ki'mera* fed the Battle Angels, increasing the strength and volume of their attacks with the wielders unleashing their full power.

Hounds, Crows and Lions morphed and merged to form the sinuous serpentine dragons of burning white flames, gorging on demon flesh with ravenous bloodlust. *Ki'mera* flowed in four directions like rivers of pulsing energies. Green Men released more blasts of emerald light that formed the Dwarf minions, hacking and slashing with their burning axes; tearing through demons with bolts of blue fire that flared outwards like grasping claws.

Arawn, Math and Dis Pater gave a final charge of the Power, forming a wedge of identical figures of crimson, blue and golden fire, wielding blades, spears and axes as the Battle Angels fought at the head of each wedge; obliterating the bulk of the remaining enemy forces. Sheets of burning energies flew from the swipe of every blade, flames launching over fifty paces; slicing demons into burning chunks.

The earth erupted in flames, lightning flared in the skies as balls of fire, and flaming arrows hailed down upon the demon army until the battle field was over two miles of black smoking husks; minions of the Battle Angels ravaging any surviving demons that twitched or growled on the ground.

Adem turned to see Jean fall forwards in the saddle with exhaustion. Terese was by her side to pull her from the saddle in a heartbeat. Adem wanted to collapse, but he did not want anyone to see him show signs of weakness. Great cheers began amongst the masses and from deeper in the camp that must have included servants and *sei'vani*.

Taniel and Druantia returned to their Resting Points as Jean was helped to stand with her arm over Terese's shoulder. The male Battle Angels then returned to their Resting Points, and Arawn flew towards him to be consumed by the hilt of his blade in a flash of light.

As they did, the Shadow Hounds, Fire Lions, Green Men, crimson spears, and scavenging crows ceased to exist. Carl and Wil still led their patrols through the fields, lancers stabbing at demon husks and Guardians and Wood Kin occasionally unleashing a flurry of flaming arrows to make a small bonfire of demons.

Adem could make out the dark furred shapes of thousands of wolves surrounding Wil and the Dremelden. They snarled as they sniffed at demon corpses. Arawn explained through the *kigare* that the Dremelden had always been able to speak to animals, especially wolves.

Chapter

13

The Honour Code

There were thousands of servants and soldiers wounded deeper in the camp. Maybe a thousand or more were bitten by vampires and would turn in three moons. Arawn explained that they would not want food for those three days, or water, as the thirst for blood began to rise in their souls. Adem was very concerned about what their fate would be; they could not turn them loose to become a horde of scavenging vampires, draining the blood of innocent farmers and villagers.

It was a disease that had to be stopped like cutting off an infected limb. He sighed deeply when Arawn explained that they would all be decapitated and burnt. Healing could do nothing for the vampire curse. They were doomed. Adem didn't like it, but he understood this was their ways, and he could do more damage by interfering with their laws.

Carl and Wil rode their mounts to either side of his horse, a swarm of Guardians surrounding them on foot with blades or bows ready like stalking leopards. The wolves had vanished into the wilderness, their cries still sounding in the distance all around. He wanted to question Wil about that, about whether Wil had learnt to speak to wolves through his experiences in the Chameleon Arch, but he kept silent. Carl's bravery and battle cunning seemed something new also, and he suspected his friends had learnt much through their rebirth. It seemed unfair that they should all be keeping secrets from one another, though it was forbidden to speak of such things.

A vampire with a missing arm leapt to his feet and flew through the air towards Adem, a long dagger clutched in his fist. He created the weaves to unleash a ball of red fire when four arrows of flame struck the flying man simultaneously. The man fell in a ball of coloured flames, rolling on the ground and screaming as his flesh turned to ashes to leave remains of charred and crumbling bones.

Soldiers and Guardians still patrolled the camp, stopping to stick a sword or spear through the heart of a twitching vampire. Even steel through the heart could kill a vampire due to the severity of the wound and the amount of blood loss. Silver was better for keeping them dead, but silver was not as strong as steel.

Carl looked enraged when Adem looked across at his face. Adem knew Math Mathonwy must have been explaining to Carl about the fate of the infected men and women. It seemed unthinkable that they would kill women! But they were no longer just human, they were becoming evil.

'We can't let them do it!' Carl shouted suddenly as they were nearing their tent. Carl dismounted and handed the reins to a nearby Guardian wearing a blue mask and gauntlets. He waited for his friends to climb down from their saddles before he said, 'I will speak with Orion and Tobin. Perhaps something else can be arranged. Though, I don't have a viable solution at this point in time.'

'It would be murder, Adem!' Carl shouted in a rage. 'Their blood will be on your hands! I will not stand for it! We came here to help these people, not to murder them! Think of your duty to God, Adem.'

'Think of your immortal soul. If you allow this, I fear there will be no hope for you.' That struck a chord with Adem, and suddenly he felt rage welling up inside himself as he asked, 'Are you saying I will have no place in Heaven?' He emphasised the capital as Heaven

was a place and therefore not a common noun. ‘What about my faith? What of my duty to these people? We can’t allow a thousand men and women to walk free when they will become bloodsuckers in three days’ time! The Free Lands have been cleansed of the vampire covens for more than three thousand years.’ That last was Arawn’s instructions giving him the right words. ‘Before that, the night brought fear to all men and women, when plagues of vampires walked in the shadows, seeking out victims asleep in their beds. Now they are banished to the South Lands where they can walk in the daylight due to the dark clouds that cover the skies from the eruptions of Kerak’Otozi.

‘They are a weapon of the Dark One! A disease so terrible it could bring about the demise of an entire civilization. I don’t agree with it, Carl! I don’t want blood on my hands either! But what other choice do we have?’

They were inside the tent now, the mirrored lamps casting dark shadows on Carl’s twisted scowl. Wil moved to sit silently on his bed. He sat cross-legged with his elbows propped on his knees and his chin resting on his palms. He sighed deeply in that silence that stretched until Carl replied, ‘We could send them away, with food and water, so what if they won’t want the rations. It’s the humane thing to do. We can’t kill women, Adem.

‘It would be a very large black mark against your name in the eyes of God. Killing innocent men is nearly as bad and would bring about just as much damage to your soul.

‘They should be set free, to turn and hunt, and to be hunted in turn and die as evil creatures rather than innocent men and women. It may bring about a new age of the vampire clans. I agree that is a problem, but I can’t accept your thinking on this issue.

‘If you don’t want blood on your hands, then do something about it. You are the great appointed leader of the Saviours. It is your call.’ There was derision dripping from his voice at the last.

Adem stood silently for some time, his hand clutching the hilt of his blade, not as a threat, just as a reflex to still his temper. Carl propped his spear of crimson fire against the bedpost and sat with his legs crossed and hands in prayer position. Adem felt his face twitching with nerves at the thought of being left on Earth in purgatory like the ghosts of Bright. He feared that much more than he feared death.

‘All right,’ Adem said finally, ‘I will go and speak to the kings and tell them there is a change of plans.’ A look of hope blossomed in Carl’s eyes as he asked, ‘You will spare their lives?’ Adem grinned before he said, ‘I’m sure it will sound to them like I am suggesting they let a large pack of wolves walk free, knowing they will slaughter their sheep.

‘But these are human lives at stake. I agree it is too risky. I could not stand the thought of rejection from God. I could not abide it to be cursed for eternity, a ghost wandering the Earth, consumed by evil to become a thing of nightmares. I have been haunted by those memories for many years, and I will not accept that fate. Though, you ask a lot from me, Carl Wilder. You ask me to save lives only to let more die or become Nightwalkers.’

That name came from Arawn also, a common name for vampires. ‘How can I be sure that will not amount to more blood on my hands?’

‘I can’t guarantee anything,’ Carl said slowly, ‘but I know this is the right thing to do.’

Adem scowled at that, more uncertainty, more complications, so much responsibility. Finally he said, ‘You two stay here and get some rest. Sleep if you can. You will need your

strength if we are to face another attack. I will go and speak to Orion and Tobin. I will see what I can do.'

He then marched towards the tent flaps to push them back and step out into the moonlight. The moon was half full and gave ample light, bathing the camp in a blue hue. Campfires still burnt, throwing light against shining armour and the glint of steel.

Seven Guardians in the red masks and gauntlets of the *ghoda'sidhe* moved to surround him with their blades drawn as he made his way towards Orion's tent. He found both kings standing over a large oak desk, studying maps held down with iron paperweights in the form of eagles. They looked up when he entered alone, their faces wrought with worry in the lamplight. Both still wore burnished armour over their dark coats, their Guardian cloaks thrown over nearby chairs.

'You should be resting, Adem Highlander,' Orion said in his deep tones. They nearly always called Adem by his first and last name. It was a custom of the immortals, though not so common when speaking to their own kind. Adem took it as a badge of honour rather than an annoyance. It was a sign of their innocence, naming him the way a child would.

He unpinned his dark cloak and threw it over a nearby high-backed chair carved with vines and worked in gilt.

'We need to talk,' Adem said sternly. He then explained the issue of the infected men and women, stating that Carl Wilder was ordering changes be made to custom and law regarding victims of vampires. The two men tried to argue, with Adem defending his claims like a stone wall. He was still on edge with both of them for keeping secrets about the Shadow Men.

Eventually, they caved and agreed they would set them free. They tried to argue that it was pointless providing them with food and water though Adem insisted these were the terms of Carl Wilder, the will of one of the Chosen. Adem admitted he saw great flaws in the plan though he emphasised his desire to preserve his soul.

'We bring to Kismeria the teachings of Jesus Christ. You do not know this man, but on Earth, he is our one True King, the Son of God. We must impose the teachings of our Lord on to your people. It is as vital to your own souls as to ours, I believe. To murder innocent men and women is a great sin, worthy of great punishment from the Lord God. There would be too much blood on our hands to wash away.' The two kings stood staring into his eyes with graven expressions before Tobin said, 'Your Lord Jesus is a forgiving man; is he, Adem Highlander?'

'He teaches us to forgive and befriend our enemies,' Adem said. 'I understand that cannot apply in regard to Nymloc and Jacoulra, but men and women who have not yet been turned are still human beings. We cannot slaughter them like animals.'

'We cannot let a thousand or more potential vampires loose a day's ride from Nordhel,' Tobin said heatedly. 'We could return to find the entire city is infected. They will fly over the walls and spread the disease to every man, woman, and child.'

'Riders should leave immediately to warn Nordhel,' Adem replied. 'A curfew must be enforced to keep everyone inside by nightfall. The watch should be doubled, and everyone should remain cautious until it is deemed safe. Perhaps hunts should be organised in three day's time to try to put down as many as we can.'

‘That is sound advice, Adem Highlander,’ Tobin replied with a deep frown. ‘We agree to your terms.’ Orion then called two of the Guardians in and explained the change of plans. They were ordered to spread the word as fast as possible to save anyone from being exterminated.

‘I understand some will die within those three days from their wounds,’ Adem explained, that was Arawn’s knowledge again. ‘You will order the Alit’aren and Ael Trael to Heal anyone infected who looks like they will not survive.’ Again the kings tried to argue, but Adem would not relent.

Jean collapsed face down on her bedspread, her arms hanging over the sides as she kicked off her boots.

‘You need rest,’ Terese lectured. ‘I’ll get some herbs to help you sleep.’ Jean didn’t argue. Just the thought of another attack made her skin crawl, and she doubted she would get any sleep without the herbs. Even then her dreams would become plagued with nightmares, she was certain about that. When she closed her eyes, the screams of dying men filled her mind, just memories of those screams, but that was enough to make her shiver. When Terese returned with a steaming mug that smelled of cinnamon and parsley and other herbs, she didn’t know the names of, she gulped it down despite the bitter taste. ‘Now sleep,’ Terese said like a mother watching over her child.

Jean closed her eyes again; visions of men being torn apart by black claws filled her mind. She tried to chase them away with images of flowers in fields and sunshine and rainbows, but the images always returned, along with the memory of their screams.

When she finally did sleep, her dreams were different than she had expected. She dreamed of Adem, the two of them chasing one another through the hallways of Nordhel, sometimes he hunted her and vice versa. Sometimes his face changed to that of a black ram skulled beast with eyes of flame. She ran from him then, until his face returned and then she would chase him, pulling him down to kiss his lips and play with his coat buttons.

Those dreams lasted most of the five hours she was able to stay asleep. Six hours was common for her, but the returning images of the battle brought her awake with a startled scream. Terese was leaning over her to brush her damp, matted hair from her brow, whispering to her that she was safe. It was past first light, the walls of the tent, glowing with the light of the rising sun.

She knew it was a warm day without even stepping outside. The air in the tent was dry but comfortable. She wiped the remaining sweat from her face and stood to clean herself behind the changing screen that was decorated with birds of many colours. She washed her body with damp cloth dipped in a pot of warm water, scrubbing her body with a perfumed soap and finishing with sprays of perfume.

She could handle this living outdoors so long as her needs were met adequately. She stretched, yawned, dried herself, and slipped into some fresh undergarments, then stepped out from behind the screen to search the large chests for something to wear.

A golden skirt, yellow boots, and coat were her second choice which she wore with white stockings. She did not wait long before belting on her sword and fastening the harness of her bow case over her breasts. Terese insisted she wear her armour though the only two available didn't go with her outfit. The impossible woman then called a servant in who ran to fetch a golden breastplate! It wasn't that she didn't understand the need for safety; she just considered it more important that she not look the fool in front of Adem.

'You will look even more beautiful in your shiny armour, Miss Perfect,' Terese said chidingly as if reading her thoughts. Two serving girls then entered bearing trays of fresh porridge with honey, dried pears, apples, and mugs of goat milk. When the dark-eyed young woman set down her tray, Jean noticed twin bite marks, like a snake bite, on her neck!

She tried to remain calm until the two women had left the tent before she told Terese, 'That girl was bitten!' Terese then related Adem and Carl's new declaration that innocents infected by the vampire disease were to be spared and allowed to walk free. 'You see,' Jean said proudly, 'he's not mad, he cares.'

Terese's retort was that, 'It is madness to allow this disease to spread again.'

Adem woke from nightmares. He had only slept about three hours. This did nothing good for his symptoms, the lack of sleep or the nightmares. At breakfast, Carl was happy to see two of the serving girls enter with bite marks on their necks. He wasn't glad they were bitten, just that they were still alive.

Adem ate his porridge in a sullen mood. His thoughts were absorbed in what to do about the Travelling Gates. The scouts had left in the night on their *altherin* horses to send word to every keep, hold, fortress, or kingdom close to any of the Portals though the kings had explained they were not sure they could be sealed in a way that could stop the Shadow Men from opening them again.

They couldn't be destroyed, even with the Power, so the only option was that they be guarded. That would require a small force of wielders or an enormous army to keep watch at every Gate from now until the Great Battle.

Even that would not assure the chance of a demon army of enormous size being transported at any time. The only possible solution was to find a way to copy the portals used by the Shadow Men. The idea of capturing one of the Accursed and forcing them to give up their secrets seemed suicidal. The last hope lay in Carl's theory about wormholes.

He discussed his theory with Carl over breakfast and found some interesting theories were returned. Carl was almost certain he could now increase the size of one of the wormholes to something large enough to walk through. 'Where it would lead to is something I do not know the answer to,' Carl said glumly. 'I have considered making the attempt, but I feared it could open in the East Lands, or the South Lands, or at Kerak'Otozi! There is great risk in this, Adem.' There was a risk, to be sure, but the need outweighed the risks.

'Think on it,' Adem said. 'Let me know when you come up with something.'

As he stood to make his way to his bedside, Carl said, 'I'm proud of you, Adem. Saving all those lives, you really did something good this time.'

Adem grunted before buckling on his sword belt and fastening his bow case straps across his chest. He left without another word, wearing a grimace. The camp was in the final process of packing up tents and loading wagons.

Most of the Nordics were already mounted and forming a defence around the campsite. He saw Jean riding her white mare with Terese riding beside her on a grey horse. The dead had been buried where they fell, a huge grave for over two thousand soldiers and over two hundred Guardians.

Carl and Wil sat their mounts close to the graves, and Carl saying prayers for their souls. Adem noticed Torin standing there also, making signs and gestures as if he were saying a prayer in the immortal way.

An hour or so later, the last tents were dissembled and packed while Adem trotted around in the saddle. Guardians followed him as he patrolled the still smoking bones of vampires. The thousand or more infected soldiers and servants formed a wedge that began to wander back towards Nordhel.

Maybe they hoped they would still be welcomed home. There was no chance of that now though. Some remained, mostly women, staring wide eyed or pleading for help, crying or screaming as they pulled at the coats of men who ignored their pleas. It was a horrific fate. His heart was heavy when he looked into the eyes of those desperate women.

Carl and Wil joined him on their brown horses not long after, and then they were joined by Tobin and Orion, Torin and Kailus, all mounted and wearing armour over their coats. A half hour or so later, the horses began to move and the carts began to roll.

They would push the cart horses faster today to try to get some distance between them and the Travelling Gate. Moving such a massive force after nightfall was not an option however. They would have to make camp and wait out their fate. Arawn was weary from battle. The Battle Angel would not be able to fight so hard if they were attacked tonight.

The last of the frantic women were left behind, still wailing with tears streaming down their cheeks. He saw Jean looking at the infected women with a pained expression. He hoped none of them returned in search of blood. Crows and ravens had gathered on the fields, thousands of them feeding on demon carcasses. The wielders had made huge pyres to vaporize as much demon flesh as they could, though miles of dark congealed flesh remained. It was a feast for the spies of the Dark One.

Tairark Vampireking watched the Highlander army slowly moving off through the fields in the morning light. He and Torkhan remained hidden in the forest, watching with hatred as the campsite was dissembled. The next time the Highlander boy would need more than his windmills of fire to put a stop to their forces.

The Great Lord would not be pleased however. He had expected a complete annihilation of the Saviours. The Great Lord had instructed Tairark to crush them and leave none alive. He didn't relish the idea of returning to Kerak'Otozi to report his failure. Punishment could be brutal, even for one of the Appointed.

'He is getting stronger,' Torkhan whispered like a soft rumble of thunder. 'How long before we are outmatched?' Tairark wondered about that same question. They would have to strike soon to ensure that did not transpire. His only reply was, 'We are leaving.'

Then he made a hole in the air, warping reality to make two places join much like the methods Souljhin used to move from one place to another through shadows. Passing through that portal to enter the heart of Kerak'Otozi would be a world of pain and suffering for any but the Appointed, though for Tairark, it was home. So the Sons of Odin had decided to spare those who were bitten by vampires, a sign of weakness; he began to think of ways he could exploit that knowledge.

He stepped through the portal to enter a dark tunnel with cave like walls that flowed down around him like mud sliding down mountains, flames danced on those walls and further ahead. He moved swiftly towards the glowing beacon at the end of the tunnel, the heart of Kerak'Otozi.

He was aware of Torkhan trailing him, aware of his unease over facing the Great Lord. When they reached the end of the tunnel, they stood on a black stone bridge that extended halfway towards the cylindrical walls of flame that burst upwards from the endless depths.

The beacon of flames rose in a funnel of dark cave walls that was large at the bottom and becoming smaller towards the top. It was Mount Kerak'Otozi, the fountains of fire erupted from the opening at the tip of the mountain, the volcano, spreading dark clouds across the Eastlands and the Southlands.

Tairark and Torkhan waited at the edge of the bridge with the heat of the fountain of fire bathing him in its rich glow. The fire rose thousands of feet above them and was over five hundred feet wide at their level and growing larger as it descended into the earth.

The fountain of fire would glow golden-orange, then crimson fire, jade-green fountains, then eruptions of blue light, then purple, then white hot, the stolen Powers of the Great Angels that fed the Dark One in his Resting Point. Then they heard the voice of the Great Lord, a thundering echo of evil that filled their minds with agony like thousands of tiny needles burning inside their skulls.

YOU HAVE FAILED ME, TAIRARK! MY ORDERS WERE EXPLICIT! NONE WERE TO BE LEFT ALIVE! YOU WILL PAY FOR YOUR INCOMPETENCE!

The pain rushed from his skull to flow through his veins like molten lava, frying his bones, melting his flesh. The agony continued as the Great Lord spoke again.

YOU SHOULD HAVE TAKEN PART IN THE BATTLE! YOU WOULD HAVE DEFEATED THEM IF YOU HAD! I SHOULD MAKE AN EXAMPLE OF YOU!

That spawned true fear in Tairark's dark heart. He was no coward though he feared death. Death was not the end for those who served the Great Lord, it was only the beginning. The Great Lord had promised that Tairark and his Brothers would one day become Dark Angels of the Low Realm if they succeeded at the Great Battle. If the Great Lord decided to kill him before then, he would become a slave of torture and agony in the depths of Hell.

‘I will not fail you, Great Lord!’ Tairark pleaded with his hands raised towards the pillar of flames. ‘Give me this chance to prove my worth!’ For a time, the only sound was the roar of the flames rushing up through the darkness.

THIS WILL BE YOUR LAST CHANCE! THESE ARE MY ORDERS!

Chapter

14

The Holy Cross

Adem rode in silence for most of the morning as did Carl and Wil who rode to either side of his dark stallion on their brown colts. He assumed Carl’s thoughts were consumed by the innocent women who would become vampires in three days’ time. What would be their fate? Most likely they would be hunted and killed in a short amount of time, though those who were able to find blood and remain hidden by day and fly by night could make it anywhere across the Free Lands, spreading the vampire disease to create an army of Nightwalkers.

He tried not to think on it. He had done what Carl had ordered, or requested, to ensure his guilt wasn’t another burden to carry on his soul. They rode towards the head of the army with thousands of lancers and other soldiers leading the march to form a guard for the Saviours and rulers. Guardians were amongst those front masses, along with some wielders to provide attacks with the Power if necessary.

Adem rode behind the immortal kings and Torin, Kailus, and Arig, with Jean, Terese, and the two immortal queens riding on their right flank. Kelderath, Maldros, and Morthros rode in front of the kings as the bulk of the front lines of soldiers belonged to their armies. They would command the charge of lancers and see to the defences if another attack came about.

After three hours of riding Adem asked Carl, ‘Have you given any thoughts to my theory?’ Carl looked at him with wide eyes, filled with pain and regret. He had obviously been thinking of the infected women. There had been some *sei’vani* amongst those victims, though only a handful as it was not forbidden for immortal servants to defend themselves if they were attacked.

The rest were mostly mortal servants of Nordhel or the mortal armies who had journeyed to Nordhel. They would become dangerous creatures, though the immortal vampire could become even more powerful.

Vampires survived as long as they could find fresh blood, including mortals who now had the gift of immortality despite their curse. If a vampire went for weeks without blood, they would become more monstrous in appearance, dark around the eyes or eyes black as seeds, their fangs becoming elongated to the point that they looked like some kind of wild animal, and their skin becoming dry and flaky.

Feeding could replenish their disguise, even making their eyes appear human, which made it easier for them to hide their danger to unsuspecting victims. The bite marks vanished after their first feed; vampire healing was reliant on blood.

Human blood gave them greater powers, including the ability to fly, hide in darkness as if becoming a part of the shadows, increased strength, endurance, magic, and so on.

All this knowledge was passed to Adem by Arawn through the *kigare*. The *ki'mera* Arawn had absorbed through Adem's sword was revitalising his Battle Angel, though he was still in need of a few days rest to return to his usual strength. That meant it was vital they avoid another battle of that scale and doubly important that they avoid wasting their Battle Angel's *ki'mera* fighting human armies.

He considered this a positive to some degree as it would make it easier to convince the two kings that it was unwise to use the Battle Angels against the farmer armies. He didn't want more human blood, smearing his reputation.

Finally Carl said, 'I have thought about it a little. I have a few theories to test when I think it is safe to try. My thoughts are we may need to try to open one wormhole and join it to another a long distance away which is also enlarged when they make contact.

'With the Power, I can sense wormholes, even one's a long distance away. I can feel them, feel their energy. I learnt to do this with the hope of returning home, but I promise I won't make that attempt until we've completed our mission. I'm not able to sense them beyond this world anyway, so I don't know if I will ever be able to get us home.' His shoulders sagged at the last and his face looked bleak.

Adem replied, 'We will find our way home when the time is right, Carl.

'I understand your concerns. I'm also concerned that my parents may have been searching for me all this time, and they may be frantic with worry. But there is nothing we can do about that now. We are here now, and we must do what must be done.'

He saw Terese speaking to Jean after that and then saw Jean give him an approving nod. So the immortal woman was eavesdropping and telling Jean what they discussed. He would have to choose his words carefully.

'I'm proud of you too, Carl,' Adem said after a pause, 'and you too, Wil. You showed real courage and determination last night, and an insight into battle strategies that I do not remember being explained by any of our instructors.' That last was phrased with a hint of questioning, in an attempt to probe from them the source of their knowledge. 'I was a bit concerned there for a while,' he continued, 'as you were both gone for so long. I began to wonder . . .'

Both his friends scoffed at that, and Wil cut him off saying, 'We would never abandon you, Adem. We are all in this thing together. I will not give away any of my secrets.'

It is forbidden. But I will use everything I have learnt to see that we all get out of this alive.’ Carl gave an approving nod to that, though his face was still grim. Adem understood that the words ‘it is forbidden’ meant that they had obtained their knowledge from the Chameleon Arch. Adem had learnt much through those lifetimes he had lived through their shared experiences. He saw thousands of versions of his life and his fate, where he died a brutal and bloody death or became mad or evil and murdered hundreds of thousands of people with the Power. He always had a failure until the last where he was able to wound the Dark One enough to escape his endless pursuit flying upwards through that tunnel of darkness. Only then did he have the hope of victory in his heart.

He also wondered if what Carl had said was true, that Adem must be the Blue Water Dragon, as Carl had seen him flying through the sky with wings of blue flame. Arawn explained that the Prophecies stated only the Blue Water Dragon would learn the ability of flight, out of the three Sons of Odin.

So if that were true, it meant he must be the leader of their mission and the crux of victory at the Great Battle. Though, Arawn said things were possible in the Arch that weren’t possible in reality. He may have used the powers of the Arch to create wings and fly through those realms, though proof of his title would be earned when he could perform the same spell in reality.

An hour later, they began to push through orchards of oranges, apples, and peaches, a large farm that stretched for miles with three large farmhouses clustered together on a green field. Each house was three stories of blue stone with dark slate roofs and oak balconies and verandas. On the other side of the farmhouses were stonewalled fences that held thousands of sheep and goats, a herd of cows, and three large chicken coops fenced off with meshed wire.

They halted for an hour or so to pay the farmers for supplies, fruit, animal stock, and barrels of their apple cider for the nobles to savour. The bulk of the army would survive on water for the next few months.

The farmers were mortals, all the same extended family, some forty-three of them, including the women and children. Carl insisted they be warned about the threat of another demon invasion. He suggested they buy their entire stock when the farmers insisted they could not leave their farms behind.

Eventually, the three head male farmers agreed – thick muscled, dark-bearded men with dark eyes and hard faces – they had the look of veterans who possibly understood the danger better than the younger males. A lot of gold was passed over before the men decided they had been suitably reimbursed for their losses, the animals were slaughtered and loaded on carts except for the chickens and ducks that were stored live in large wooden crates. They would not have to use their supplies for some time except for the flour and grains to make bread.

A small force of soldiers were left behind to lead the farmers back to Nordhel, only a handful could be spared though the farmers felt safer to have some protection. If they rode with speed, they may reach Nordhel by nightfall though the farmers’ mortal horses would be near exhaustion.

The male farmers rode with swords at their waists, spears, or rusty lances in their hands and bows hanging from the saddles in leather cases. Carl then ordered them to send a

larger escort of soldiers, including some Guardians, to scout the farms surrounding Nordhel to bring as many families behind stone walls as possible.

The soldiers leading the farmers to the city were given orders to send more scouts and hosts of soldiers to bring in all the families surrounding Nordhel. They would try to cut off the blood supply for the newly turned vampires, perhaps starving them to the point of death. Though they would surely find animals to feed on, which still posed the problem of how to stop the spread of the disease.

He looked forward to his evening Healing. His morning's Healing was overlooked as a result of the attack last night. He felt better to receive it each morning as well as at night. He considered asking one of the Ael Trael to soothe his symptoms while the stock was still being loaded on to carts but decided it would only slow things up.

It was nearing midday by the position of the sun, a golden ball of fire moving towards the centre of the sky. There was still enough hours in the day for the farmers to reach the city though Adem warned them at the last minute that there may be some surviving vampires still roaming these lands. If they halted to water the horses, they may not reach the city walls before nightfall and then fall easy prey to Nightwalkers. It was then decided that they would make camp then and there; they had moved over five miles from the battlefield which wasn't far enough, but Carl enforced his wishes to protect these people.

So they would make camp and the family of farmers would be led to Nordhel an hour after first light. That would give them time to arrive safely, though the other scouts left immediately on immortal horses, including four Guardians who were sent to Nordhel to explain the new orders.

Pushed hard the *altherin* horses could reach Nordhel and the nearby farms in an hour or less. Some farms may be only a quarter hour ride away. So they were doing their best to protect the innocent and stem the spread of the disease. Carl looked satisfied though he didn't smile.

Adem wondered if his brooding was a sign of his friend's symptoms returning or that he was just concerned over the problems they faced. Wil appeared less stressed as they moved their horses to the picket lines where mortal men in Wolf Rohjor livery moved to take the reins as they dismounted.

As they were waiting for their tent to be constructed, Adem recalled the large wooden cross Carl had had erected over the mass grave of the slain soldiers. It was originally two plain planks of wood, though while Carl prayed, Adem saw light of changing colours spreading along the timber, carving smaller crosses, and shaping the wood to look ornamental.

The wood became dark as if stained and the colours remained when Carl finished his prayer. From what Adem could make out, Carl had also created weaves to protect the grave from scavengers. It was another ability Adem had never been taught.

The weaves were much more complex than anything Carl had been capable of before being Reborn. It seemed Carl was more adept at wielding than him. *What else have they learnt?* He had wondered as he stared at that cross of light, the first symbol of Jesus to stand permanently in Kisseria. It was the first Christian graveyard.

He wanted to question Carl about those weaves, though he assumed it was also forbidden. To his surprise, Carl wandered off with a host of Guardians and soldiers, some

bearing axes, to return later bearing another cross, even larger than the first, that stood over fifteen feet high and was ten feet wide on the cross bar.

Ael Trael used the Power to dig the hole and plant the massive structure, and Carl began to pray and create new weaves as the familiar light and symbols were engraved in the wood. Again the freshly cut timber became rectangular planes of dark-stained wood, a preserving element of some kind.

He noticed Carl tie off the weaves this time that allowed the coloured light to continue to shine on the engraved symbols. Adem and Wil made their way to the cross that stood at the centre of the clearing between the three farmhouses. Adem looked at the carvings to see that they were human friezes explaining the tale of Christ's Crucifixion. Each frieze glowed in a different colour from the one next to it, golden, aqua, crimson, emerald, or mauve; then the colours alternated. It was a marvellous creation!

'What about the taint?' Adem asked after staring for some time. 'Won't it corrupt this creation until it becomes something dangerous, something evil?'

Carl shook his head as he stared at the friezes, saying, 'I think I have worked out a way to filter the taint out of what I create with the Power. I still sense the taint as it is a part of what I am weaving, though the final creation seems to be cleansed.' That made Adem's eyebrows rise. His friend must be highly skilled with magic to understand such weaves.

'But what is it?' Adem asked, 'Besides a cross I mean? Does it do anything other than glow and tell a story?'

'I am not certain of what it will do,' Carl replied, 'other than teach the message of Christ. Though there is a Power that radiates from it now, sending out . . . something . . . the Power . . . perhaps the Power of Christ. I have not felt his Power strongly in this world.

'It is as if he is not a part of it. But he must be! He is the Son of God, the same God that made Kisméria. Anyway, the main purpose of it is to begin to spread the word of the Gospel.

'I will construct more wherever we go, until all of Kisméria knows of His Sacrifice. If they can learn about the man, they will learn to follow his teachings.'

'You should have scholars write down the stories of the Bible.' Wil said.

Adem thought that was a fine idea, and he did not doubt Carl had memorised every passage of the Bible to some extent through his constant readings. Carl agreed and hurried off to locate scribes and writing materials, shadowed by Guardians and Ael Trael.

Hopefully that would keep his friend distracted enough to avoid falling prey to dark thoughts. There were a number of scribes and scholars within the camp who were brought along to record the events that took place during their journey. Scholars and scribes had been recording events at Nordhel since the arrival of Adem and his friends. They called these recordings the Rohjor Chronicles.

Wil left Adem standing and staring at the Holy Cross Carl had created. He didn't want anyone to know it, but he had noticed one of the young farmer girls staring at him with her large dark eyes. She had raven black hair and fair skin, slender with nice curves, and she wore a white shirt with lace at the neck and wrists and a dark skirt that fell to her dark booted ankles. Her hair was in two thick braids which suggested she was not old enough to marry, though she looked at least nineteen which meant she was.

He found she was actually only eighteen and a half when he managed to make conversation with the young woman. Hayley Mijimha was her name. The three families fell under the names Mijimha, Alsop, Danley and Melodi. Her father was head of her family. Brose Hone Mijimha was his name.

Her sisters and cousins stood nearby whispering and giggling as Wil tried to find out more about the girl. They were all dark haired with large dark eyes, as well as her brothers and male cousins who also stood nearby wearing dark expressions whenever they glanced his way.

One of the Chosen he may be, but that didn't mean he had a right to speak to Hayley, in their obvious opinion. He tried to think of a way to calm their mood, and then he had the notion to use a bird call to summon a small flock of tiny little birds from the nearby trees.

At first they all stared at him with shocked expressions when he began to make the bird sounds, until seven of the little birds swooped down to land, chirping in a circle around Hayley's feet. They were cute enough to settle their nerves he wagered.

It was forbidden to tell of those memories from past lives of the Dremelden, though as he understood it, it was not forbidden to reveal secrets learnt through that experience.

Two more of the coloured birds landed on either of his shoulders when Hayley asked, 'Where did you learn that? Have you been receiving lessons from the Dremelden?' Wil didn't give her an answer, other than to make another bird sound which sent the birds flying back into the skies.

'Can we talk somewhere private?' he asked her. It was a very forward question to ask, though he wanted to get some alone time with this pretty girl if it was possible.

'My sisters will have to join me,' she said shyly but with a smile. 'This is Cara and Emma.' The two girls were almost twins though one was only about fifteen while the other was about a year younger than Hayley. 'I will show you our home,' Hayley said. 'It is a humble dwelling, but it is a comfortable living space.'

He wondered if he could get her alone if he used the excuse of seeing her bedroom. It wasn't just that he had been a long time without a woman; the girl reminded him of a girl back home.

He found that a strange coincidence seeing as the girl had made eyes at him, so he wanted to investigate. Her brothers Thad and Gilm followed them, much to his disappointment. The two boys who were both in their early twenties eyed him suspiciously but with small grins as they took over the tour of the house. 'Upstairs is where we sleep,' Thad explained, with an ever wider grin as he said, 'though there is nothing there you haven't seen countless times before, I'm sure.'

Drats! Wil thought to himself. He heard the deep echoing rumble of Dis Pater chuckling inside his mind. He resisted the urge to blush with some difficulty. It wasn't always a good thing to share the *kigare* with your Battle Angel.

The kitchen was large enough for the family of twelve plus the parents and an uncle who lived with them, polished oak benches forming an arc with slate tiled floors. The walls were whitewashed with timber beams crossed at angles with a roof that rose over fifteen feet on the lowest floor. A large fireplace stood on the west wall with a very long dining table of polished oak and twenty chairs. He assumed they sometimes catered to visitors or other family members.

‘Perhaps we could take a stroll through the orchards?’ Wil asked Hayley in chivalrous tones.

‘We will escort you,’ Thad said sternly.

‘My sisters will join me, thank you, Thad,’ Hayley replied with a touch of scorn. ‘There are still plenty of soldiers harvesting the trees, so we will be quite safe.’

She then stepped to Wil to link arms with him, and they strolled out the door with her sisters following and giggling behind their hands. Thad and Gilm followed them anyways, at a distance to try to avoid notice.

Hayley made a soft hissing noise when she noticed them trailing behind them but did not try to stop them with further words. ‘My brothers are very protective, Wil Martyr,’ she said as they walked under the apple branches.

Wil replied with, ‘I understand, Hayley. I would be too if I had a sister as gorgeous as you are.’ That was heavy flirtation, though the girl simply smiled and took him by the hand to pull him behind a tree trunk. Then she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him hard and with passion.

His eyes were wide in shock for a moment until he closed them and started to kiss her back. That lasted more than a minute, and when they pulled away, they stared at each other for moments longer. When they stepped back out into view, he saw Thad and Gilm rushing towards them with their bows slung over their shoulders in cases, right hands resting on the bronzed hilts of their long blades.

Hayley shouted to them that, ‘We are fine and do not need rescuing! Go back and help Papa, both of you!’ The boys eventually kicked at the soil with their leather boots before turning and marching away, looking back over their shoulders with scowls every so often. Her sisters hung back while Hayley pulled him back behind the same tree and kissed him again! He was going to have to carve their initials on that tree, in glowing colours like Carl’s Holy Crosses.

Chapter

15

In the Word

Carl had the scribes and scholars brought to his tent, along with a large oak desk retrieved from one of the carts, piles of fresh brown parchment cut into neat rectangles the size of a large print book, ink wells, quills, and plenty of vials of dark ink. He sat behind the desk in a high-backed cushioned throne carved with vines and grapes, while the scribes and scholars worked at small wooden desks piled with paper.

There were four scribes and two scholars taking down six identical versions of the Bible. Carl began with Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John as he wanted the stories of Christ to be foremost in their teachings. He was loath about lecturing them on Genesis as he feared those passages would conflict with the histories of Kismeria in too many ways to even consider.

He would complete those four books first, then perhaps move on to Revelations, as it revolved around issues related to his imaginings of what the Great Battle might look like. As he recited each passage, the scribes and scholars scribbled down the words furiously. He instructed them to write as legibly as possible however, so that more copies could be made by others.

They sat for hours as he worked his way through what he could remember of each book and verse. He tried to keep it as accurate as possible, and he had a good memory for Bible passages. Servants brought him a tray of fresh bread, roast lamb, fresh apples, and goat cheese at around four in the evening though he didn't touch it till after six.

He had already demonstrated the format for the writings, making it as exact a copy as he could without having the book in his clutches for an example. Two of the scholars were immortal, Danil Mardel and Aldin Foebius. Those two stood the entire time, listening but not writing; the rest were mortals though they were all from Nordhel.

The two immortals continued to interrupt him with questions, which was infuriating after a time. Though, after an Ael Trael came to see to his Healing, he was relieved of a growing unease at their constant nit-picking. They always wanted to know more about the events, particularly about the people who had witnessed the miracles of Christ. They required hard evidence. That was their game.

Carl kept telling them, 'The witnesses are the evidence. They are the proof!' But the scholars always wanted to know who had recorded the testimonies of these witnesses and when. Carl's limited understanding of that issue was that there may have been several hundred years between the telling of Bible stories and the beginning of scribes and religious scholars recording those events. 'It is a testimony of faith!' he shouted at them. 'Of stories passed down through the generations from the times of the real eyewitnesses. Christ's teachings were that it is more important to have faith in him than to have proof of the everlasting God.

'Even God wants faith more than he wants proof. You people live in a reality where spirituality is common place. You already have your evidence, your proof, as it were. On Earth we only have the stories of the Bible from a time when writing something down after witnessing it was the only form of evidence.'

‘What about Adem Highlander’s polygraphs?’ Danil asked after a pause, the last word spoken slowly and rolled around on his tongue. He was typically tall for an immortal, rake thin with a thick grey moustache, and large dark eyes under bushy brows.

Aldin was almost identical except his dark hair had no grey. Both had short, spiked haircuts, and they wore the Lion Rohjor sigils on their dark coats with red-and-gold embroidery. Carl gave a deep sigh after swallowing a large chunk of cheese. He nearly choked on the mouthful when the man questioned him about Adem Highlander’s *bloody* polygraphs!

He took a swig of the sweet apple cider from a glazed clay mug before saying, ‘There were no bloody polygraphs back then! People . . . just . . . had . . . faith.’ The last was spoken through clenched teeth of frustration.

‘So let me see if I understand this correctly,’ Aldin said in lecturing tones. ‘Your teachings come from a time when there were no polygraphs, no recording devices like your mobile phones . . .’ Carl had instructed them on the correct name, ‘. . . and you expect us to believe these writings from your ancient histories, which are based on the tales of descendants of the real eyewitnesses?’

‘That is what I am telling you,’ Carl said with a touch of animosity. ‘You must have similar methods for recording your histories. You have no recording devices other than paper and ink.’

‘Yes, but we have the testimonies of the Great Angels,’ Aldin interjected, ‘and the testimonies of the immortals who are the eyewitnesses to events that may have happened as long ago as your Christ, or even longer, much longer. What of these angels who spoke to Christ’s mother after his Resurrection? Were they Great Angels too?’

‘Yes, they were!’ Carl lied emphatically. He didn’t know what kind of angels they were though he knew they were important enough for him to make the claim that they were Great Angels.

That issue had also always puzzled him since he first arrived in Kismeria and learnt of the taint and the Great Angels fleeing Earth. Surely the angels in Heaven were not affected by the taint. So why were the Great Angels, who were worshipped as Celtic Gods, so susceptible to infection? And if the High Realm and Heaven were joined between the two worlds, what was there to stop the taint spreading to Heaven also?

His thoughts were interrupted again when Aldin remarked, ‘It still all seems terribly inconclusive.’ That got Carl hot under the collar, and he almost exploded in his retort saying, ‘Inconclusive is what they call Adem Highlander’s *bloody* polygraph report! This is the Word of God!’

Adem was heading towards his tent when he heard Carl shouting from inside about God and polygraphs. He sounded like he was in a foul mood, so Adem turned tail and marched

towards the campfires where the entire farmer family were gathered, and Guardians flowing behind him like hawks in search of prey.

Jean was there, talking to some of the farmers' daughters. Terese was close by her side, watching her like an eagle. Jean wore golden armour over her yellow coat and skirt and Terese wore dark green slashed with emerald across the coat and skirt with blue silk stockings and lime green leather boots. Over a dozen, Guardians surrounded the two women also, many wore boots of bright reds, greens, blues, or yellows to match their coats and armour though others wore plain brown leather.

Some Guardians even wore grey or brown woollen coats under silvered or bronzed armour, or leather jerkins sewn with steel discs, less distinctive than was common for most of their kind, though every one of them radiated alertness and prowess. Most wore the colours of the Rohjors, dark coats and armour, or red or blue or white, though Guardians could choose the colours of the House they served, a banner they marched under, or even a personal preference; they were as bright as a flock of rainbow parakeets, though all were more deadly than a venomous serpent.

Guardians were not servants to anyone in particular either; they did not serve the Ael Tarael or Alit'aren or even the kings and queens. Guardians were appointed duties and served different factions depending on that duty.

Adem could imagine their duty would become protecting the Ael Tarael from madmen Alit'aren in the future. He could see a future where Guardians were bodyguards for all female wielders, in their pursuit of men who can wield. They would have to give up their Lukrorian Bows if that plan was to succeed, or else they too would slowly turn mad or evil from the taint.

He had discussed this plan with Tobin and Orion in their tent the night before. Both kings had agreed this was a likely plan for the future. Any male wielder who wished to remain sane would have to give up holding the Power, no longer using it to Heal or as a weapon. This was their only choice to survive at a time when male wielders were crucial to the survival of all of Kismeria. They were being pushed to use the Power though they knew it would destroy them all.

The same Torvellen woman and musicians were seated close to one of the central fires and on logs and stumps. The Torvellen woman wore a deep blue silk gown sewn with pearls around the low-cut neckline and silver embroidery across the breasts and sleeves. Arawn confirmed the song was The March for Sinder Falls. It was a song about some ancient battle, where the march was a final mission from which most would not return.

They were an army of some twenty thousand, facing demon hordes that outnumbered them ten to one. Adem felt it was a fitting tune considering the loss of so many lives the night before. Tilden Acronis – a dark-eyed Guardian with long black hair tied at the nape of the neck – stood beside Adem in his shadow cloak and gleaming emerald armour over a black coat. The man had been appointed Guardian to Adem many times since their arrival in Kismeria.

Tilden was also there at his side during the battle last night. Mason Fordrel stood to his left – a taller blue-eyed Guardian with short, spiked black hair – in blue armour under a dark blue coat, dark trousers, and blue leather boots. Both wore their bows slanted across their backs, as did all eleven of the Guardians who had shadowed him most of the day.

Though all seemed to favour their swords as their hands hovered above their golden hilts as if ready to draw steel in a heartbeat. Finally, Tilden leaned towards Adem's ear to whisper, 'It may not be my place to say this, Adem Highlander. But I do not think it wise to stand idly when the risk of another attack draws near.'

It was true, the sky was beginning to darken, and with nightfall came the risk of another demon horde crossing the distance between the Travelling Gate and their campsite. Adem was still weary from lack of sleep and the use of the Power the night before. He felt as if he could sleep for a week if he was allowed, and he would be of little use if they were attacked tonight.

'I understand your concern, Tilden,' he said quietly. 'But the defences are more secure tonight. There are more wielders on the outer edges of the camp with enough soldiers and Guardians to hold off another attack, at least for the short term. I am weary and shaken from last night's ordeal, and the music is soothing. It helps my recuperation.'

That was the plain truth, though what he did not admit was that he also wanted to be close to Jean. Terese looked his way from time to time with a scowl that almost sent shivers down his spine. How far would that woman go to keep them apart? Jean spoke in whispers to the girls close to her own age, all dark of hair and eyes, slender and pale skinned; all of them quite pretty too. He wanted to go over and speak with her, but he didn't want to interrupt her conversation; he also feared the wrath of Terese.

The young men were seated on blankets further from the fire, with the mothers and fathers and grandparents seated further back, some on wooden rocking chairs that must have been carried from the farmhouses. The three bearded men who were the heads of the families sat smoking pipes with pints of cider, sitting on stumps beside their chairs.

They were hard-eyed men; each had the look of a veteran who knew how to handle the bronze hilted swords that rested against the arms of their chairs. When he looked into the innocent faces of the very young, some children only four or five years old, he hoped they all made it safely to Nordhel.

The next tune was the Fiddler and the Donkey. Arawn explained it was a light-hearted tune more suited to the inns and taverns of the lower classes. Adem assumed it was chosen to entertain the young ones. A smile crept on to the faces of the three bearded men, and they began to slap their knees in time to the tune. Some of the children began to dance and play which also brought smiles to many other faces, including Jean and Terese.

As darkness fell upon them, the mood became almost grim however. The music continued though the farmer families appeared tense over the prospect of another attack. Tilden looked to the east, perhaps sensing for any demons in the distance, as did all the Guardians while also trying to look in every direction at once. During that time, a larger crowd of Guardians and wielders gathered by the fires to listen to the tunes.

As Adem's thoughts began to drift, he started wondering what memories Jean had obtained through her experience in the Chameleon Arch. The memories he had of lives where he had made love to her, been married to her, had children with her, were not exactly shared experiences.

She would have no memory of those experiences that he witnessed, nor did he know of any of the memories she had obtained with him. A part of them was shared in the experience though it was not the same as the shared experiences he had had with Carl and

Wil, which they could all remember what they saw and heard and learnt. Sometimes she looked at him with such love; he knew she must have had some of the same experiences that he had.

Other times, she looked at him as if he were a rabid wolf, needing to be put down before he went wild and murdered innocent people. His sense of her through the *kigare* confirmed it was not just a look. Sometimes she truly hated him as if he were the most vile and repulsive being on the face of the planet.

What had she seen? How could he convince her that they were just possible visions of the future? How could he win back her trust? Her mood during the battle last night had mostly been a sense of pride however. He sensed her pride in his abilities to fight the demons. Hope too, she seemed to radiate the same sense of hope that he had felt ever since he achieved victory in the Arch.

Each time she looked his way tonight, he sensed her love for him, tinged with distrust and fear. He imagined it was fear of what he was to become. If only he could find a way to remove the taint from *teron*. That would assure them of victory.

If he failed to do this, he knew Kisméria would suffer the Age of Chaos, where mad Alit'aren destroyed the world with the Power. He had seen glimpses of that future through the Arch, and it was heartbreaking to think that it might come true. According to the Prophecies, it was destined to occur. He wondered if Carl could figure out a way to cleanse the taint, given his new understanding of weaves that could create something like the Holy Crosses, which were removed from the taint in their completion.

He discussed this with Carl when he returned to his tent. His friend was also weary from last night's battle and his afternoon of dictating the stories of the Bible. He still seemed to be in a foul mood when he sent the scribes and scholars away, though Adem guessed it was from his attempts to teach rather than his symptoms that should have been eased since his Healing. An Ael Trael arrived to Heal Adem at around half past seven, a different woman again this time, with dark hair and dark blue eyes. The other Nordic Ael Trael asked after Wil, but neither of them knew where he was.

'I suspect he is rolling in the hay with one of the farmer's daughters,' said the fair-haired woman with a sniff before she stalked out of the tent. The thought hadn't occurred to Adem that that might be what his friend was doing until the woman suggested it.

Though once it was mentioned, his faint sense of Wil's emotions through the *kigare* suggested that that was exactly what he was up to! Arawn offered no insights from his connection with Wil's Battle Angel however. Adem and Carl shrugged their shoulders and decided they had better go look for him.

One of the Chosen he may be, but he might find this young woman's father would do his best to drive a sword through Wil's heart if he found the pair locked in a fit of passion.

They were able to locate him quite easily using their sense of him through the *kigare*. Carl seemed more attuned to Wil through that connection, while Adem seemed more closely tied to Jean's emotions.

They were nearing one of the farmhouses when Wil stepped out of one of the side doors with his arm around the waist of a young farmer girl. They did not ask exactly what had occurred between them though the girl was blushing bright red when she saw them

approaching. Adem assumed Wil had sensed him and Carl getting closer to their location and would have realised they were searching for him.

‘This is Hayley,’ Wil said. ‘She wants to join us.’

‘That sounds too dangerous for such a young woman,’ Carl interjected.

‘Besides, I doubt her parents would allow it. Think of the risks, Wil. She will be safer at Nordhel.’

‘I am old enough to make my own decisions,’ Hayley said defiantly. ‘Though I know nothing of battle or sword play, I am skilled with the bow. Archery practice is something we are taught from a young age.’

‘A woman hiding in an attic window can be a formidable protection from bandits, and wolves are also a problem in these parts. Besides, Wil and I are to be married!’

Wil suddenly looked shocked to his core as he looked at her and said, ‘But I only kissed you!’

Hayley stared with serious eyes as she said, ‘It is the only decent thing to do, Wil Martyr. My parents would not approve unless we are wedded this very evening.’

‘I will perform the ceremony,’ Carl said with a sly grin.

‘But you’re not even a priest!’ Wil spluttered.

‘My father is a Pastor,’ Carl replied. ‘I know the formalities. Shall we do it right here and now or do you want more witnesses?’

‘My family would be very hurt if they were not included,’ Hayley said with a smile, and then she hurried off to alert them of the news. Wil stared after her as if he were about to speak but said nothing.

Carl slapped Wil on the shoulder as he said, ‘Congratulations, old friend! Welcome to the club!’ Adem assumed he meant the married club.

Adem suddenly remembered Orion’s words when they first arrived. What would happen when they left Kisméria, only to return over a thousand years later? Hayley was mortal, what hope was there in this marriage?

He explained his concern to Carl and Wil, but Wil simply said, ‘We will find a way around it, Adem. Perhaps she can learn to wield. She could live much longer then.’

‘Yes, but most mortal wielders don’t live past five or six hundred years,’ Adem said. ‘I’m only worried for you, Wil. How will you take it if you return here a thousand years later and Hayley is long gone? How will you cope?’

Wil sighed deeply and scratched his head for a moment before he looked Adem in the eyes and said, ‘I love her, Adem. I want to marry her. Whatever happens is fate, I can’t change that, but this is something I have to do.’

‘Yes, God will find a way,’ Carl said with a smile. ‘Now, are you ready to get married?’ Wil nodded, and they made their way back to the campfires where the farmer families were gathered. There were dozens of Guardians surrounding the farmers, as well as Ael Trael and Alit’aren in small clusters.

Hayley’s father had apparently heard the news as he was giving Wil a hard dark-eyed stare, as if he wanted to crush his bones with his bare hands. At Carl’s command, they all made their way to the Holy Cross that glowed incandescent in the darkness. A silvery glow traced the figures of everyone who stood before the Cross.

Wil stood in the centre of the clearing, facing Carl, while the musicians played a local wedding tune as Hayley was marched towards them with an arm linked to her father's. When Hayley stood beside Wil, Carl began the ceremony. It was traditional in the language, traditional for a Christian wedding, which would seem only fitting in Carl's opinion.

He did add in a few words and phrases that he must have learnt from Math Mathonwy, suited to a traditional Kismerian wedding. Finally, Carl asked, 'Do you, Wil Martyr, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?' To which Wil answered, 'I do.'

'And do you, Hayley Mijimha, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?'

To which Hayley replied, 'I do.'

'Then I now pronounce you, husband and wife,' Carl said with a smile. 'You may kiss the bride.' The newly married couple locked eyes, then lips, and held each other in a tight embrace as cheers erupted from the farmer families, clapping and shouting as the music began to play.

The farmers began to dance with their wives, and the young boys and girls clapped and swayed to the music with bright smiles. Even the Ael Trael chose Alit'aren or Guardian partners to join in the dancing until the dark field was a flowing tide of illuminated figures. The festivities then moved back to the campfires where more Ael Trael, Alit'aren, and Guardians stood watching, some dancing or clapping and swaying to the tunes.

The outer defences were still heavily guarded however. They were not taking any chances this time. Dinner turned into a feast of roasted meats, breads, cheeses, fruit, and cider. The large dining tables were carried out of the farmhouses and covered in white cloths in a U-shape around one of the fires with the married couple seated at its head.

Adem, Wil, and Jean also sat along the head table with Terese and the two kings and queens to either side. They had also been present for the ceremony. Adem and Carl gave speeches, wishing every happiness to the married couple, both of them avoiding making any mention of other women in Wil's past.

The speeches were followed by more cheers and applause, more music and feasting. The crowds that had gathered shared in the feast, Ael Trael and Alit'aren seated on large blankets around the fires, but the Guardians remained standing while they sampled meats and cheeses.

As the party was winding down, the crowd began to thin, and Wil and Hayley waved goodbye to everyone before making their way to their private tent. The fair-sized tent was occupied by two mortal ladies before they were moved on to something smaller.

Adem watched as his friend walked away with an arm around the waist of this new bride, and then he turned to see Jean standing behind him. She wore one of those curious smiles of hers, large blue eyes shining. She was so beautiful.

He wanted to ask her if she would reconsider marriage, but his sense of her through the *kigare* was that she felt uneasy in his presence, so he said, 'You look lovely this evening, Jean. I like what you've done with your hair.' It was up in one of those intricate braids she did in the feast style, copying the immortal queens. She had changed into a pale blue silk dress with silver embroidery across the breasts and dark blue slashes across the thighs. It had a high-necked collar with no neckline, suited to the most modest noblewoman, buttoned up with white pearls.

She looked as if she were about to say something when Terese called from the shadows, ‘Jean, it is time for bed. Come quickly now, girl. You need your rest.’ Jean turned towards Terese, looked back at Adem for a moment with eyes filled with what looked to be pain or suffering, and then she turned and hurried off into the darkness.

Adem stared after her until Carl clasped him on the shoulder, saying, ‘We best get some sleep too, Adem.’ Adem sighed deeply and moved off towards their tent with Carl at his side and Guardians patrolling their flanks. It must have been one in the morning, the near half moon bright in the starlit sky. The rest of the campsite was either mounds of sleeping soldiers on blankets, or Guardians, Ael Tarael and Alit’aren patrolling the campfires in small groups.

Most Ael Tarael had tents of their own, but some Alit’aren took to sleeping under the stars like the soldiers and Guardians. There were more tents if needed, but the weather allowed for a makeshift campsite that could be easily dissembled. Adem realised how tired he was when his head hit the pillow. He had stripped off his sword belt and dark coat, kicked off his brown leather boots and lay in his dark trousers and pale cotton shirt. Carl extinguished the lamps when he finally climbed into his own cot, and Adem closed his eyes and let sleep take him.

Chapter

16



Rivers of Sorrow

Jean sat up in her cot, drenched in sweat after waking from a nightmare about Adem. Those nightmares had plagued her dreams ever since she emerged from the Chameleon Arch. That test had changed her in so many ways. She wondered if she would ever find herself again.

She woke in a sweat most nights and had nightmares at least once a night but sometimes two or three times a night. She would roll over and go back to sleep, only to enter another nightmare about the terrible fate of the Sons of Odin and their curse upon Kisseria. Those memories and subsequent nightmares were her chains of regret, her rivers of sorrow.

Strangely the nightmares were never about life back home, always about this strange new land of magic and elves and angels of great power. She missed having regular dreams and nightmares, about shopping disasters or bad hair days or choosing the wrong shade of lipstick when going out on a hot date. She missed going to the movies and daydreaming of one day becoming a big star. She missed her tiny apartment in the city where her agent Anna had put her up until she was making more money.

But most of all, she longed to see her family again, hear her mother's voice, see her father smile in that way he did when he kept silent but said so much with just his eyes. She wanted to reach out and give them both a big hug, but she was a long way away from them now, alone in the darkness.

The sound of Terese's breathing was present as always when she woke in the middle of the night. Terese didn't snore, but she sometimes made funny little wheezing noises and slight grunts through her nostrils that Jean hadn't told her about yet. She smiled as the former Hero of Will made a noise that reminded her of a piglet.

Then, she reached for the towel she kept on her pillow for just such occasions to wipe away the sweat that soaked her brow and cheeks. When she was dry, she put her legs out over the side of the bed and stood to dress herself behind the folding screen.

She didn't light any of the lanterns as she did not wish to wake Terese. Instead, she wove a tiny ball of blue flame that hovered in mid air behind the screen to give her enough light to find a red woollen coat and silk skirt. She wore white silk stockings with crimson leather boots.

There was a breastplate to match the outfit, but she left it standing with the others on wooden racks. There would be no need for protection where she was going. Despite this, she slung her bow case over her back with the enchanted emerald bow sticking up above her shoulder and belted on her sword. Terese had instructed her to keep her Battle Angels close at all times, and she understood the importance of those words after the battle they faced the first night they set out.

That was over six weeks ago now, and they had made their camp around the city of Charkel since that time, recruiting soldiers for their army and bringing peace to the region that was infected by the threat of revolution. Charkel was where it started. It took nearly two weeks to reach the capital, where they faced an army almost equal in size to their own, mostly formed of mortal farmers and villagers, though there were thousands of immortals amongst them, wielders, Guardians, and even some Wood Kin and Archers from the Kingarin Forest.

The immortals were mostly Nordics; however, as Charkel was a Nordic province with over twenty thousand immortal families spread throughout the region, mostly farmers though some were of noble blood and most of the male farmers were also listed in the defence forces for Charkel.

It was a rude beginning to their quest, facing a potential bloodbath against their own kin, due to the taint that was infecting the minds of all male wielders, causing Alit'aren to go

mad and destroy farms and even entire villages with the Power. The people were tired of it; they wished something to be done about it and so began the spread of revolution, encouraged by the middle classes and some nobility who rallied these farmer armies and provided leadership to their cause.

Fortunately, there was no blood spilled on that day, after careful negotiations between the leaders of the two armies. Negotiations lasted four days in fact, in large pavilion-style tents set up in the centre of the battlefield. Jean had been present for most of those meetings, and she sensed that the four lords and six ladies, who led the army of Charkel were stricken with fear and loathing over the thought of facing the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor in battle.

They seemed more than willing to accept peace and to dedicate a portion of their forces to serve in King Tobin's army, though they managed to keep the discussion going for many days through polite bickering over terms and agreements. They were all mortals, the lords and ladies who represented the army of Charkel, though Terese had mentioned this was no surprise as the immortal lords and ladies would be too ashamed to face King Tobin and Queen Lydia in discussions of potential battles.

'They undoubtedly admitted defeat when they saw our banners and the size of our forces,' Terese had said. 'Their blood would have run cold at the idea of making war against the King of the Nordics.'

So that first encounter had been an easy victory and order was returned to these lands. The search for mad Alit'aren throughout the region had been unsuccessful, despite the arrest of three mortal Apprentices – Devoted – who were causing mischief in a town close to the capital. The taint had infected their minds to the extent that they could no longer be trusted to hold the Power, though they showed some signs of regret for their crimes once they were shielded from *teron* and made prisoners in preparation for trial.

Charkel provided the wielders and soldiers to return those three Devoted to Nordhel, though they would likely be held prisoners for some time before they were severed from ever touching *teron* again.

Filing these thoughts away in her mind, Jean stepped out of her tent and into the warm night air. Four Guardians sat outside the tent flaps. Kenen, the dark-eyed one, raised a thick black brow inquisitively at her being out so late at night.

'I require no guard this evening,' she said sternly. 'Watch over Lady Terese and see that she is not disturbed.' The tan-skinned Torvellen grunted and then returned to sharpening his knife that looked more like a short sword. The other three were Nordics; they glanced up at her for a moment and then returned their focus to the game of *mohrthra'daeghal* two of them were engaged in, the third watching the game with a look of slight amusement. Then deep laughter erupted from the watcher and the one who had just taken a very important piece out of action. The one who lost the piece – Zel was his name – glared with cold blue eyes, then his shoulders slumped as he released a deep groan.

Jean hoped all that noise didn't wake Terese. The woman would have her neck on a plate if she found Jean sneaking off in the middle of the night. But this wasn't the first time Jean had done this; it was in fact the seventh time she had disobeyed her oath to the woman. Drawing the dark hood of her velvet cloak up over her head to attempt a disguise, she made

her way through the camp towards the servants' quarters. It took her the better part of a quarter hour to reach her destination.

The tent she was headed for glowed dimly in the moonlight, lit by a ball of blue flame that pulsed on and off like a strobe light. It was a signal, telling her that her lover was waiting within. She grinned and moved to stand in front of the tent flaps where she made a ball of yellow flame dance above her right hand. At this signal, the tent flaps opened, and Adem thrust his head out wearing a wide grin on his muscular jaw. The yellow light that sparkled in his blue eyes went out when he pulled her towards him, into the tent.

Inside the tent, the strobe light still pulsed until he adjusted the weave to make it a very dim pale blue ball that outlined their faces. She untied the strap to her bow case as he kissed her hard on the lips, placing the bow down on the red-and-blue rug that covered the small space inside the tent.

They could stand with room above their heads inside the tent though there was barely room to move two steps with a double bed, a chest, and a desk taking up most of the space. She removed her cloak and let it fall to the floor as he worked at unbuckling her sword belt with more passionate kisses on her lips and neck.

His weapons were leaning against the side of the red quilted bed, his sword in its black scabbard, and his bow resting in its leather case. He wore the black high-collared woollen coat and dark trousers typical of an Alit'aren, knee-high brown leather boots with the Black Wolf and Red Lion sigils in gold-lined enamel on his left collar, the Blue Dragon on his right.

His Guardian cloak was hung across the only chair in the room, making the piece of furniture appear to be some sort of dark ghoul lurking in the shadows.

Her pulse was beginning to rise from his kisses. He made her heart flutter when he was so passionate and kind. His touch was so sensitive; he knew how to make her blush with only a soft kiss, and later, he would prove again how he had learnt to make her beg. In the space of a week, she had become his slave of passion, his trying to be as romantic as possible in the beginning and her making it clear she wanted action, not symbolic gestures.

She decided she would succumb to temptation after her experience in the Arch. Her head was filled with those memories of being Adem's lover, but she had never done more than kiss him in reality. That other world; or those other dimensions within the Arch; were reflections of Kiseria, glimpses of a world without the substance of the *real* world.

She decided she had to know the real memory of having spent the night in her lover's embrace. A faded reflection was unsatisfactory by comparison. Adem wasn't the first man she had bedded; she had slept with more than a few in her young adult years, but she kept that secret from him, fearing he would judge her for it.

She had not acted any worse than most girls her own age at the time, but Adem was strange about some things, like he was born a hundred years ago, or a thousand years – like he belonged more in a world like Kiseria than he did on Earth.

He started working with her coat buttons when she pulled back and stared at him pleadingly, both of them heaving for breath in the short break of coming up for air. He kissed her again, and for a while, she kissed him back, but a new thought had blossomed in her mind that made her pull away again.

‘Do you expect this to continue, night after night?’ she asked while wearing a scandalized expression.

‘We can be married,’ he said earnestly. ‘Let’s do it, tonight!’

‘Terese will have a fit! Besides, we’ve discussed marriage, and I thought I made it clear that wasn’t an option.’

‘But I have to keep seeing you,’ he said with desperation. ‘I’m lost without you, Jean. Now that I’ve had you in my arms and I know the touch of your skin against my own. I can’t bear the thought of being without you.’

‘Terese will learn of our secret meetings soon enough. When that happens, you’ll realise this was just taking advantage of an opportunity. It can’t be more than that, Adem, not now anyway. We have too much at stake to risk losing ourselves to lust.’

‘It’s love that I can feel for you, Jean, true love, not some half-baked emotion.’

‘It had better be, Adem Highlander, for your sake.’ She grinned at the last, and he stared at her with a confused frown. Then he smiled too and he kissed her lightly on the forehead and they held each other in an embrace. After a time, he asked, ‘Then why did you come to see me?’

‘I thought I wanted to, again,’ she said slowly, ‘but it’s passed. Now I want to end things, for now anyway. I can’t keep a secret this big from Terese. She will never trust me again.’

‘I understand. So you won’t come tomorrow night?’

‘I will let you know when we can be together again. Until then, you’ll just have to be patient.’ She stood to gather her belongings after that, fastening the Fox Rohjor pin around her neck after belting on her bow case and sword. She pulled the hood up over her face before stepping out of the tent.

When she looked back to wave farewell, she saw his eyes looked empty again; her sense of him through the *kigare* was that he was falling through endless flames, though his heart was ice.

She often wondered how he could be like that. He could suddenly change from such a warm loving man to such a cold heartless creature. She worried for him when she sensed those emotions in him. She worried for all men who could wield the Power but him more than any other.

‘Did you accept your Healing this evening?’ she asked as an afterthought before lifting the tent door flaps.

‘Of course,’ he whispered. ‘They never forget to send someone.’

‘Good,’ was all she said, and then she stepped out into the moonlight and walked away. As she made her way back through the servants’ camp, she noticed more soldiers moving about than she would normally expect, and some Alit’aren swaggering with self-importance through the firelight.

It was rare for Alit’aren or Ael Trael to enter this part of the camp unless there was a perceived danger of an attack. She was almost walking directly into the path of two mortal Alit’aren when she decided it would be wiser to be seen rather than appear to be trying to hide.

Removing her hood she continued to approach the two men – dark-eyed Rodor and pale-haired Eli – they were young for Alit’aren, newly raised after passing through the

Chameleon Arch at Rutheldor some three years past. They both had the look of boys to them really, though the fire in their eyes was beyond those years; it spoke of a crackling danger that could explode like a wagon full of fireworks. The taint worked its evil in them all.

The two men appeared surprised when they recognised her in the moonlight, the moment after she removed her hood. Green-eyed Eli cocked his head to one side and Rodor stroked the right end of his moustache that was quite thick for his twenty four years.

Both were of equal height with Adem, only slightly taller than herself; she straightened her spine to stare them down as Eli remarked, 'You should not be out wandering alone at night, Jean Fairsythe.'

'I wanted to take a stroll in the night air,' she said defiantly. 'There is no rule that says I cannot do so alone, within the confines of the camp.'

'Yes, but Terese Marheildon's orders,' Rodor said indignantly. 'You are to be watched at all times. Where are your Guardians?'

'I told you,' she snapped, 'I wished to spend some time alone. What are you two doing in the servants' camp? Why do I see Alit'aren and even some Ael Tarael wandering about?'

The two young men appeared taken aback by her tone, before Rodor answered, 'Scouts have reported seeing signs of vampires in the nearby fields and forests. Animals drained of blood with distinctive bite marks.

'Livestock mostly, and most victims were found several days ride from here, but the guard has been increased as a precaution. We were told to patrol this part of the camp to be sure there are wielders to protect the servants.' The man spoke as if he were defending himself, though Jean did not press him further; she had her own secrets to conceal.

'Very well,' she said. 'Go about your business.'

'We should escort you back to your tent,' Eli said in high tones. 'Lady Silverblade would skin us alive if she learnt that we let you . . .'

'You have your orders!' Jean commanded, cutting him off midsentence. 'Go back to your duties. Do not speak a word of this to anyone. Terese must not know of my . . . late-night strolls. You never saw me, understood?'

The two men stood with jaws flapping for a few moments before Rodor pressed his fist to heart and said, 'You have my word, Daughter of Thor.' Eli then copied the man and also swore.

She grinned to herself as she turned and pulled the hood back over her head. It was nice to be in command for a change. However, the news of the threat of vampires made her move back to her tent with haste.

When she arrived at the door to her tent, she saw a golden light burning within, Terese's dark braid and perfect posture a silhouette against the striped canvas wall. *Terese is awake!* she thought with a stab of guilt. She wasn't particularly afraid of the woman's temper these days, but she regretted having to face her when Jean had failed her in terms of honouring their agreement.

Honour was everything to Terese.

The four Guardians were now standing to attention outside the door flaps, each with the look of a large cat that had been browbeaten by a more ferocious feline. So Terese took her temper out on them for letting Jean leave without telling her. It would be difficult to get

past them from now on. They would surely alert the woman the moment Jean left unguarded, if they even allowed her to leave her tent without an escort. She decided it was wise that she had ended things with Adem tonight; it couldn't have continued after what she was about to endure.

'Lady Silverblade wishes to speak with you,' Kenen said through clenched teeth as she approached. As Captain Commander of Jean's personal guard, it was likely he was the one to bear the brunt of Terese's recent outbursts. 'Her orders were that you are to wait outside until you are called, Jean Fairsythe.'

'Am I to stand here and consider my fate?' Jean called through the tent wall, though Terese made no reply, the shadow of a quill feather bristling over the desk where the woman sat.

So she stood for a good quarter hour, trying not to glare at the four men who had been blamed for her disappearance. Finally, Kenen admitted, 'Perhaps we were a tad too loud, and, well . . . I think we woke her. Zel was making quite a comeback in the last round of *mohrthra'daeghal*, and we all got a bit excited for him, except for Tad that is, who looked like he had just sucked the bitterest lime he ever tasted, so then we . . .'

'I get the general drift of it, Kenen,' Jean said, cutting him off midsentence, followed by a deep sigh. Then she whispered, 'Does she know this is not the first time?'

'I know *everything!*' Terese snapped, her braid vanishing behind her silhouette as she turned to regard Jean through the tent wall. Jean often forgot how keen the woman's hearing was as it was with all immortals. 'Send her in,' Terese said after a pause where Jean heard the woman taking slow deep breaths, obviously trying to calm herself before exploding like a cannon.

Jean entered the tent, the light within cast by one large, square lantern standing atop the oak desk that was carved with foxes chasing plump chickens. Terese had salvaged the desk from piles of furniture and other gilded items that were gathered for a bonfire, one of the more disturbing practices emerging from revolution.

The farmer armies wanted to overthrow the monarchy, so they saw any signs of wealth or luxury as something to be burnt or gifted amongst the lower classes. Jean assumed the lords and ladies leading this revolution hadn't factored in such practices when they began. It was likely they despised seeing finely crafted furniture turned into firewood, or priceless works of art bartered for a crate of eggs, two chickens, and a handful of rabbit furs. Order was slowly being restored however.

'You should've known I would catch you out, sooner or later,' Terese said, glancing up from the scroll she was writing on. Jean was unsure whether to ask if the letter was detailing Terese's newfound knowledge of her late night strolls. 'You asked to be treated as an equal, rather than a pupil, so I give a little slack and you run wild. Why should I trust you again?' Her tone was surprisingly calm, though a fire burnt in those large dark eyes.

'It was only a few times . . .,' Jean began, before the former ghost cut her off with, 'Seven! Seven times you have broken your oath to me! Six out of seven of those nights you broke more than your oath, you broke the thin thread of trust I laid out for you.'

'I'm certain you didn't bed him tonight as I've learnt your outings were a great deal longer every other night. Therefore, I surmise that the young fool has some stamina.' Jean

began to blush. ‘Regardless of this,’ Terese continued, ‘I feel you have left me without any other option, other than to punish you severely.’

‘As you have behaved more like a greedy child, rather than a strong-willed young woman, I feel the most fitting punishment is to take something away from you, like taking the rattle away from the baby.’ She smiled at that last comment, looking mighty pleased with herself.

‘I’m not sure I follow . . . ,’ Jean said slowly, before Terese spoke over her saying, ‘I have decided I can no longer be your trainer. I will continue to act as your bodyguard, though your training with the sword will fall into the hands of . . . another.’ She smiled again at the last, some secret brewing her sense of humour.

‘Who will take over?’

‘You will learn soon enough,’ she said, that secret grin revealing greater fuel for amusement.

‘Not one of the Guardians?’

‘No, you will find this new trainer tougher than any Guardian,’ that secret grin flashed again. ‘Now I suggest you get some rest. Tomorrow is a big day for you. I have much planned.’ Jean shrugged under that dark-eyed glare, turned to stride towards her cot, and began to undress.

‘I hope it’s not Martha,’ Jean said teasingly as she leaned her Lukrorian Bow against the side dresser.

‘You got it in one,’ Terese replied, and when Jean spun about in shock to face her, the woman wore the look of a cat with a mouse in its claws. A cold shiver ran down Jean’s spine; Martha Skongrarth was the Kismerian equivalent to a Viking warrior woman. She was in fact from one of the seaside clans whose ancestors had invaded Kiseria after travelling across the Great Sea over three hundred years ago. So she was a Viking! Taller than Jean by a head and shoulders, the woman was big boned and thick muscled. Although she didn’t attain the title of Blademaiden, it was said there were few men who would dare to face her even with practice blades. Before the revolution, Martha had served as a Gate Captain for Charkel, now she was recruited in Tobin’s army after being recommended by a number of the other local captains. Jean presumed she was recommended in an attempt to get her out of their territory. The woman had the temper of a charging bull, and that was on a good day.

‘Break your oath to me again, and I shall find even more imaginative forms of punishment,’ Terese said with an expression of controlled rage. ‘Martha will be your trainer until I believe you have regained your honour.’

Blushing again, Jean made a half-curtsy partial bow with a bend to her knees and a tilt of her head. She then changed into her nightgown – a blue silk garment embroidered with white foxes – and climbed into bed to pull the blankets up over her head. ‘Sleep well,’ Terese said teasingly. Jean replied with a loud groan. Moments passed until the woman said, ‘You should know his illness is progressing.’ Jean pulled back the blankets and sat up in bed to stare at the other woman as she asked, ‘What do you mean?’

Adem sat on the edge of the bed for some time after Jean left. He still slept in his own tent where Carl also still had a cot, though he always waited at least a half hour, before stepping out, just to avoid suspicion. Any servant who recognised Adem Highlander, leaving a tent, moments after Jean Fairsythe, would start rumours that would result in the entire camp knowing of their secret meetings by lunch time the next day.

He sat alone with his thoughts, his heartache springing up anew at Jean's rejection, his sense of falling through endless flames extended to his awareness of Arawn's silent brooding through the *kigare*. His Battle Angel always appeared to be descending into fire, his heart colder than a lump of ice. As usual Arawn offered no words of wisdom, nor any sympathy for Adem's plight.

The Angel of the Underworld seemed to consider love a wasted emotion. Indeed emotion seemed wasted in the eyes of his Battle Angel. Arawn was a weapon, unbreakable, like cold hard steel, a raging torrent of destruction, like rivers of flame. The more Adem was joined to this warrior spirit through the *kigare*, the more he saw comparisons between his own psyche and that of the Great Angel.

Was it the taint infecting his mind, the Sickness, or the Darkness as the immortals called it? Or was it a part of that connection with this Angel of the Low Realm. Whatever the case, his concentration was failing; his training was suffering as a result, both with the sword and the Power. He became agitated with people more often, snapping at Guardians, Alit'aren, even Carl and Wil at times. His two friends seemed the least offended by it though they seemed more cautious of his mood swings as the days progressed. This past week spent with Jean had eased some of his symptoms though now he felt himself erupting inside like a volcano.

He rubbed his eyes and then his temples; headaches were also becoming a problem. That had been a major sign that his illness was progressing when he was on Earth. In those days, he would increase the dose to ease those symptoms. That was no longer an option of course.

Perhaps if he had known more about what was in his medication, he could get some alchemists to brew up something for the infected men. Though a bad batch could possibly be deadly, he didn't know enough about that sort of thing to even make an attempt.

He decided more Healing was the sensible choice. He would have to seek out an Ael Trael skilled in that practice. Lira had become somewhat of a recluse these past few weeks; every time he asked after her, she was reportedly busy with some other task that kept her from seeing to his treatment.

He wondered about that, had the woman seen something in him that frightened her enough to keep her distance whenever possible. And if so, was it a vision, or a Reading, or did she simply sense the nature of his illness which was enough to intimidate her into hiding from his sight? She had some ability to see the taint, or at least the illness that infected his mind before he learnt to wield the Power, though Orion and other close confidants insisted these were one and the same thing, the taint and his illness.

He stood to belt on his sword and bow case, fastening the Krielden sigil pin of his cloak around his neck. He pulled the hood up over his face before stepping out through the tent door, the globe of blue light vanishing as he stepped into the moonlight. There were

walled tents all around the one he and Jean had used for their secret meetings. The signal lights would only have been visible to anyone awake in the surrounding tents.

As he stepped through the maze of right angle laneways across muddy earth, he noticed Alit'aren and Ael Trael moving about through the servants' camp. There were a lot more than he would have expected to see, dozens of them in small groups of two or three. Something was wrong; there must be a newly perceived danger.

He moved on until he nearly stumbled into the path of Kaishel Lirbrine, an Ael Trael with hard dark eyes and a thick dark braid falling below her waist. The woman's youthful face appeared agitated when she saw him remove his hood. She was shadowed by her tall Guardian. Ardo Dulen was thick muscled with a dark moustache and blue eagle's eyes.

'You shouldn't be wandering about unguarded, Adem,' the woman said with fire in her eyes. Mortal Ael Trael and Alit'aren usually called him by his first and second name like the immortals, though Kaishel always addressed him simply as Adem, a touch of scorn in her voice each time she said his name.

'Why are there so many wielders inside the servants' camp?' he asked her to block the question. Her eyes bulged, possibly at his audacity, before she replied, 'You of all people should know we have a growing vampire problem. That is exactly why you should be guarded at all times, Adem. What are *you* doing in the servants' camp?'

'I was on my way to find an Ael Trael to provide an extra dose of Healing,' he replied calmly.

'Yes, you look very pale. Come to me, I will sort you out.' She extended her right hand reaching out towards his skull. He stepped out of her reach as a reflex; for some reason, he didn't trust the woman's eyes, or her tone, this time in particular.

Ardo grunted at the offense and his hand gripped the hilt of his sheathed blade. Adem could easily handle the man with weaves of Air, though with Kaishel there to block the weaves, the man could easily skewer him like a boar in a heartbeat.

'Forgive me,' he said earnestly. 'I had another in mind for my treatment.'

'Lira Tolnock will not see you,' the woman almost snapped, Adem thought this very strange. How many Ael Trael knew the woman was avoiding him?

'Can you tell me why?'

'I only know that she wishes to avoid being made responsible for your ongoing treatment.'

'And you would gladly take her place,' he phrased that more as stated fact than a question.

'I only wish for you to remain well, as well as we can keep you, Adem,' that touch of scorn again. 'You are vital to the preservation of Kismeria, you and your Brothers. Will you not submit to my care?' She extended her hand again, but he was out of her reach.

'I will make other arrangements,' he said before he prepared to step around the grim-faced Guardian. 'Excuse me, good evening to you both.'

When he had taken a number of decent strides away from the pair, he looked back over his shoulder to see their moonlit faces regarding him still.

He continued onwards towards the Ael Trael camp, which was in the centre of the circles of tents and campfires that made up the other parts of the camp. The Alit'aren camp surrounded the Ael Trael camp, followed by the servant camp, then the Guardians, soldiers,

and horses formed the outer rings. Orion and Tobin's tents, as well as the Saviour tents and various nobility, were within the Ael Trael camp, spread throughout various rings of tents that belonged to Guardians or wielders, both male and female. Luckily, Kaishel hadn't pressed him further as to what he was doing outside the Ael Trael camp in the first place.

His thoughts lingered on Kaishel as he crossed into the Alit'aren camp. It wasn't that he suspected the woman was a Darkservant, he just didn't trust her, or her Guardian. Her attempts to try to Heal him aroused his suspicions further however.

Would a Darkservant wielder make such a bold attempt on the life of one of the Sons of Odin? His distrust of Ael Trael he was not familiar with was possibly another sign of his illness increasing, though he knew Healing could easily be changed to a weave of death and he would be completely unaware until it was too late.

Soldiers, Guardians, and Alit'aren sat around the golden firelight, some looking up to regard him with a suspicious glare if they did not recognise his hooded face. Those that did recognise him offered a wave or even the occasional salute with fist to chest.

Apprentice and Gai'den level wielders were also seen in small groups around the fires. It was only about one in the morning, still early for some though they would only get about five hours' sleep. He wondered how they could cope with so little shut-eye. Surely it increased their symptoms.

Surprisingly, he sensed little contempt from the male wielders in regard to the Sons of Odin infecting *teron* with the taint. Female wielders struggled to hide their contempt, though for the most part, male wielders seemed to accept their fate.

He worried about the future however, a future with thousands of mad wielders, potentially evil men who could level mountains when linked in a chain of ten or more of similar strength to Adem. They could level entire cities with that much of the Power.

What would this world look like after the Age of Chaos? Would any of the cities still stand? What of his immortal friends? Would they survive to see the next Age? How mad or evil would Orion and Tobin be if they lived another thousand years with the taint in their veins?

Adem was aware that both kings had avoided even touching the Power, since the first days that *teron* was infected.

That was wise, Adem thought, the King of the Nordics and the King of the Torvellen would be vital to lead the armies that fought the madmen who wreaked havoc upon the land.

Without the Power to aid them, they would become more like Guardians to Lydia and Elmira. Taking on the role of protector of a female wielder, their skill with the blade would be their one true power. It must have affected their pride to lose such abilities, the power to destroy with only a thought, and the ability to defend without weapons of steel. The two men were considered strong amongst male wielders of the day, too. To go so long without wielding, the ecstasy and bliss of *teron* would also be like losing a part of their soul.

Sometimes he thought he could see that longing in their eyes.

Better than the dark fire I see in the eyes of so many male wielders, he thought to himself as he passed another gathering of Devoted and Gai'den.

The young men waved, all mortal boys of age sixteen or seventeen. Mortal wielders were usually raised much earlier than immortals. There was a perceived sense of urgency with mortals; most would be fully raised by their twenty-first year.

Apparently, some immortal wielders could remain Devoted or Gai'den for thirty years or more. Immortals received more thorough training with the Power during those years, though the mortal wielders were forged into weapons, using *teron* to tear demons apart with Air, blast them with walls of Fire, or strike them with bolts of lightning.

They were effective weapons.

When he looked in the eyes of those young men, he saw fear however. They were the eyes of frightened children, living in terror of one day becoming as evil as the creatures they were trained to destroy. He felt a stab of pain in his heart, and he couldn't ignore their fears. They were doomed because of him. He and his friends had brought the taint. It was his fault that they would suffer. Yet they also looked at him as if he was their only hope of survival and their last chance at salvation. He stumbled onwards with a heavy heart, brooding just like his Battle Angel, the two of them descending into endless circles of flames.

Chapter

17



A Spear of Fire

Carl sat at his writing desk in the large tent he shared with Adem. Wil had been sleeping in another tent with his new bride Hayley ever since that night they were wed. With Adem's recent outings – obviously he was meeting with Jean in secret – Carl was left with peace and quiet to read over the scriptures he was assembling. He didn't like to go to sleep too early, and this newfound work kept him busy enough to forget his other troubles.

He adjusted the light of the lantern that sat atop the heavy stained desk carved with lions. It was the only light within the large tent except for the moonlight that poured through

a thin sheet in the roof of the canvas. He worked with a quill and ink, writing passages of scripture that he had memorised from readings back home. Most days he would dictate to the scholars and scribes who transferred the words to neatly cut square sheets of paper for assembling into a number of large books. He found that doing God's work here, in this land that he could only describe as Pagan, was a fulfilling task that rejuvenated his mind and soul.

He felt he needed that as many months working with *teron*, and the taint, was taking its toll on his state of mind. He tried to avoid touching the Power, though its allure was so strong he found that he had to allow a trickling of *teron* to flow through his veins at least once a day.

The only other times he used the Power was when he was creating more of those giant crosses that glowed with a magic he didn't quite understand yet. He continued to make them however as he felt it was a symbol of Christ that needed to be spread throughout the lands.

These people were barbaric in so many ways, like the Romans when they worshipped false gods. They were bloodthirsty and cruel; some even sacrificed animals in the ways of the old Pagans of Earth. He had to convert them to Christ's teachings; it was a duty he considered highest on his list of priorities.

Their hopes that he would lead their armies in the Great Battle against their Dark Lord seemed to be an expectation beyond his capabilities. He wished Adem would face that fact. Sure he had great powers here in this world, the knowledge of a High Druid, the battle wits of a Captain General Commander, and the memories and talents of some of the greatest legends in the history of Kisseria, all gifted to him through his rebirth in the Chameleon Arch.

But he wasn't ready to lead armies, sure he had led an assault upon the demons that threatened to wipe out their army, but that was the memories of those dead men that filled his mind that told him what to do in that situation.

He himself was a man of peace, a pacifist, a kind-hearted soul, not a bloodthirsty warrior from some lost Age.

What if those memories failed him when he faced the Dark One in battle? What if he was forced to face the Heart of Evil with only his own mind as a resource? He would surely die. Why couldn't Adem see that? What would it take to convince him?

You will have me also, Son of Odin, boomed the deep voice of Math Mathonwy through the *kigare* to his mind. Carl glanced up from his work to stare at the spear of fire that leaned against the desk.

The enchantment upon the spear itself was also a source of power that fed the Great Angel, something Carl had begun to study in the hope of making more powerful weapons. He had already increased the strength of the crimson spear, formed of pure gold though it shone incandescent red.

He reached out to grasp the spear in his right hand to better communicate with his Battle Angel. It was warm to the touch but not burning hot like a coal or metal dipped in fire.

I know you will always be there for me, my friend, Carl sent through the *kigare*. *But are you strong enough to face the Dark One?*

Silence followed, his sense of Math Mathonwy was that he was brooding in a cloud of flames. The Angel of the Underworld had done this for as long as Carl had been joined with him through the *kigare*, though he understood it was a new practice as a result of the taint.

Fire had always been a strength amongst the Low Realm Angels though the brooding in flames seemed to result from their inevitable descent into madness.

Will you still fight for me if you are so corrupted you become a spirit of evil? Carl asked as he gripped the glowing metal. There was a long pause as if his Battle Angel was contemplating the question before Carl heard *I will serve you, always, Son of Odin.* There was another pause and then, *But who will you fight for when the taint has you in its grasp?*

A cold shiver ran down Carl's spine. He often wondered about that question. If he couldn't find a way to reverse the effects of the taint, this world was doomed. There was no way they could save these people as the Prophecies promised they would, but they had surely begun the process of breaking them.

His senses suddenly became alert to Adem receiving Healing.

His sense of Adem through the *kigare* was faint compared to his sense of Wil, but with Jean added in the mix, his awareness of what Wil and Hayley and obviously Adem and Jean had been up to these past six nights was something he often struggled to block from his mind. Indeed, Wil and Hayley had been going at it every night since their wedding; the emotions that surged through his friend during those first nights made it easy for Carl to detect the same behaviour in Adem and Jean in the past week.

He had sensed those emotions rising in Adem and Jean earlier this evening, though it hadn't lasted long enough to have been anything more than a few passionate kisses. His sense of Adem was that he seemed very upset following that brief meeting though the Healing seemed to balance him out.

After the Healing, Adem was fast approaching the tent. He was some distance away though Carl was certain he was within the Ael Tarael camp. When Carl released his grip on the spear of fire, he noticed his sense of Adem faded significantly. He understood this was because his Link to his friends was part of the *kigare* that was shared by their Battle Angels.

Therefore, his sense of Adem increased when he focused his connection with Math Mathonwy, as his Battle Angel was closely connected to Arawn, Adem's Battle Angel. However, he had never noted such a strong contrast between holding the spear and letting go. Perhaps their Link through the *kigare* increased in strength also. He continued to read over his notes until Adem stepped through the tent flaps.

He looked up to face his friend who wore a calm face that matched his current mood. The result of the Healing no doubt, because something still had him deeply disturbed, he burnt within that tainted mind of his, wreathed in flames. 'I take it things didn't go so well between you and Jean this evening.' Carl offered as much compassion as he could muster.

'I don't wish to discuss it,' was all Adem said, and then he sat on one of the high-backed cushioned chairs to rest his feet on a small stool. He rubbed his temples, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply in that meditation way of his.

'How are your headaches these days?' Carl asked.

'Getting worse,' Adem said while still rubbing his temples. 'Some days I would stay in bed if not for the Healing. It removes them for a time, though tonight even Healing isn't enough to stop this pain in my skull. Are you suffering from the same?'

'Headaches aren't a problem for me, yet,' Carl admitted. 'Do you think if you controlled your mood a little better, the headaches might dissipate?'

‘What’s wrong with my mood?’ Adem asked, opening one eye. He was still calm however, normally a question like that would have unsettled him.

‘You are lashing out at people all the time now, Adem. I think you’re losing control of your temper to say the least. I know you’re under a lot of pressure, we all are. But it seems to be a sign of . . . well, madness.’

Adem opened both eyes, lowering his hands to rest them on the arms of the chair. His brow was furrowed, he looked cross for a moment, and then he broke into a silent chuckle, his body shaking from the force of his amusement. Suddenly, the laughter became signs of pain; he trembled until he lowered his head and gave a deep whining sigh.

When he finished this display, he stared Carl in the eyes and said, ‘I’m a long way from mad yet, old friend.’ His mood was calm again, both his facial expression and what Carl could sense of him. Moments before Carl had sensed a whirlwind of emotions flooding his friend’s mind and soul, an intense high cascading into a terrible low.

‘I’m concerned about you, Adem. You insist that we must stay here and fight for this lost cause, but each day I see you becoming more dangerous to be around. What if you lose all memory of your true self?’

‘Will you still expect me to trust you?’ The man’s eyes took on an inward gaze as if he were hearing voices inside his mind. Carl hoped it was only Arawn speaking to him through the *kigare*. As far as he knew, hearing voices had never been a part of Adem’s illness.

Carl had admitted hearing screams of men and women in the palace of Nordhel, late at night, which none of his immortal guards ever heard, so it must have been a sign that Carl too was descending into madness. Perhaps the effects of the taint would be different for all of them. He hadn’t heard any voices since he began his daily Healing however.

Finally, Adem asked, ‘What would you have me do, give up holding the Power? Even you can’t resist the temptation to reach for *teron* at least once a day. You do it when I am far away, in the hope that I will not know, but I sense it through the *kigare*, the emotions that flood your mind when you hold lightning in your veins.’

‘You told me we have a duty, Adem, an obligation to serve the people. If we are to fight more battles, I must increase my ability to wield. Do not accuse me of having some kind of addiction to the bliss of *teron*.’

‘The taint that floats upon that river of fire and ice is a molten filth that turns my stomach. If I could avoid touching it ever again, I would make it so. But you are the one who insists that we must stay and make war with the Lord of Darkness.’

‘This is not my fight, Adem Highlander.’

A crack of thunder broke the air, and then twin bolts of lightning flared in the distance, the pale blue glow transparent through the roof and wall of the tent.

Carl didn’t need to know the skies were clear of clouds to be certain the lightning had been cast by female wielders. Something was attacking the camp.

Adem leapt to his feet and reached for his blue bow that was leaning against his chair in its brown leather case. ‘It must be vampires!’ he said urgently. More lightning flared through the wall of the tent, on both sides this time; the enemy must be trying to infiltrate the main camp.

That meant they were not the newly turned scavenger vampires who were formally servants and soldiers in Tobin's army. It was most likely these Nightwalkers were under the command of Tairark Vampireking.

Carl was belting on his bow case when a dark-eyed Guardian entered the tent to report the attack. The dark-eyed Torvellen was formerly one of Orion's personal bodyguards though he had been appointed as one of Carl's tent guards this past month.

Kole was his name; he wore the dark coat and armour typical of most Wolf Rohjor Guardians. 'The attack seems small,' Kole said, 'and unorganised. We suspect they are aimed at the Saviours however.'

'I have to get to Jean.' Adem said, and then he charged out of the tent before Carl could try to stop him. He reached for his spear as he said to Kole, 'Follow me.'

One of the other Guardians, who watched Carl's tent, was waiting outside when he stepped into the moonlight. He reported that the other two had followed Adem. Carl began to move through the laneways of tents with haste, the two Guardians flanking him a pace behind on either side.

Shouts of soldiers were heard in the distance, the clash of steel, and the occasional flare of lightning in the sky. Men and women sometimes rushed by through the laneways ahead of them, mostly Ael Trael and Guardians though sometimes nervous-faced servants or soldiers in breastplates, holding spears or waving swords.

The moon was near full tonight, though Carl didn't glance up once to see if any vampires were circling the skies above him. He left that up to his Guardians. Both of them held their enchanted bows with arrows of coloured flame.

He was focused on the path before him, taking long strides and using his spear like a walking staff. His grip on the spear increased his sense of Wil through the *kigare*. His friend was in serious pain, not physical but emotional pain, deep anguish. Something was terribly wrong.

When he arrived at Wil and Hayley's tent – a red and white striped wall construct with a golden light within – twelve Guardians stood around the door to the tent. They appeared to be crowding around something.

When Carl approached, they parted to reveal four Guardians lying with their throats ripped out. The bodies of men in breastplates or leather jerkins were also scattered about, their decapitated heads revealing the dark seed-like eyes of vampires.

He stepped into the tent to see Wil crouched beside the bed where Hayley lay with her eyes closed. She looked very pale and very still. A man lay on the floor, his head separated from his body. Wil's axe had obviously seen to that. The bearded face also bore the black vampire eyes and long white fangs. A pool of blood soaked the colourful rug that covered that part of the floor.

A large hole in the back of the tent revealed where the intruder had entered.

It was only when Carl moved to stand next to his friend that he saw the twin bite marks in the side of his wife's neck. A terrible pain gripped Wil's heart, a deep sorrow that he shared with Carl through their spiritual connection.

'Oh, Wil, I'm so sorry . . . ,' Carl began before Wil said, 'You can cure her, can't you? You know things, Carl, things none of these wielders have ever thought of doing with the Power. You can find a way. You can save her, right?'

‘Wil, I don’t know how to save her.’

‘You can try!’ Wil screamed. ‘You can try for me! You can try for her! Do something, please, save her! *Pleeeasse!*’ Wil’s head fell on to her waist, his hand clutching hers. He began to make deep throated sobbing sounds, a man in pain beyond imagining. Carl understood then that this attack had been aimed at Wil, aimed at what his heart cared for most. The enemy was trying to break the Sons of Odin from within their core. And then it hit him.

‘Oh my God, Wil, I have to go! They’re probably going after Jean too!’ He turned and began to make his way to the door of the tent when Wil called, ‘Promise me you’ll come back and try to help my wife, Carl. You promise me!’

Carl turned to face his friend. Tears were streaming down Wil’s face, his eyes red and puffy. He looked completely lost.

‘I’ll come back, Wil. I’ll try something, I promise.’ A light of hope blossomed in Wil’s eyes, and then he turned back to Hayley, stroking her hand and whispering in her ear. Carl leapt through the tent door and pushed past the Guardians to charge off into the night.

Adem moved through the night with speed and stealth. His footfalls were almost silent despite the fact that he was practically sprinting. Lightning flashed in the sky as he ran past campfires and through laneways of tents. He cursed the fact that Terese had insisted Jean’s tent be pitched so far away from his own.

His bow was gripped in his right hand though he hadn’t stopped to use it once so far, although he had had several opportunities to shoot down vampires from the night sky when he looked up.

He ran with desperation; a number of times he saw vampires feeding on servants or soldiers, but they were not Jean; they were not his heart, so he kept running. There was nothing he could do for them anyway. Once they were bitten, they would either die or become vampires. Healing could save some from death, but they were still infected with the curse.

He couldn’t waste a moment to save another life when Jean’s was in danger though. His sense of her through the *kigare* was that she was focused, slightly frightened but more alarmed.

So not in pain or immediate danger, he thought as he ran on through a laneway of tents.

Arawn told him Jean hadn’t summoned either of her Battle Angels yet either which suggested Terese had things under control. He heard a woman’s scream and turned to see a dark haired man with eyes like black seeds forcing himself down on top of a young servant girl.

He decided he could spare a moment to save this young woman. He drew back on the string of his Lukrorian Bow, and a shaft of brilliant blue light appeared. He released and the arrow launched into the skull of the vampire, blue sparks flying as his hair caught fire.

The man screamed and rolled off the woman, slapping his head in an attempt to put out the flames. The vampire leapt to his feet, hair still burning blue, when Adem released another blue arrow that struck the man's armour, burning through the iron plate. The man fell, clutching the gaping blue hole in his chest but that wasn't enough to kill him.

As the woman stood and stumbled towards Adem while screaming frantically, he drew back on the string again, drawing heavy flows of *teron* into the shaft of flames, then released. The arrow struck the man's forehead and his skull exploded like a ripe melon under a sledge hammer. He could have achieved this with the first arrow, but he didn't want any vampire blood falling into the mouth of the screaming woman.

The woman reached him and clawed at his coat, falling to her knees with tears streaming down her face. He offered her his hand and helped her to her feet. 'You have to run fast, or I'll have to leave you behind,' he told her.

She had stopped screaming when she reached him, and she nodded as she stared wide eyed. He started to run, and she soon showed she could keep up no matter how fast he ran. It was desperation that fuelled him. He guessed her motivation was terror. They ran on through the laneways of tents and past campfires though he saw no one to take over guarding this young woman, so he kept onwards towards Jean's tent.

He was still holding the dark-eyed woman's hand when he saw Jean standing outside the front of her tent with Terese at her side. Jean turned to regard him fast approaching while holding hands with this dark-haired servant girl.

Jean and Terese both raised an eyebrow in that calculating way women did when they were judging you. He tried to let go of the woman's hand, but she gripped it hard even after they stopped running, and they were both heaving for breath.

'I see you've made a new friend,' Jean said with a sour pout to her lips. The servant girl smiled and said, 'Forgive me, Daughter of Thor. I meant no offense. Adem saved my life, that's all. And I was so frightened I held his hand the entire time we ran. I didn't want to let go.'

'Yes, I see that,' Jean said with a jealous stare for his eyes. 'What is your name, girl?'

'Belsy is my name, Belsy Dalori.'

'You are a pretty young thing,' Jean said with a sudden smirk. 'Adem's heart must have leapt at the chance to save such a pretty face.'

The way she said that was cold and mirthless. Adem then looked around to see five vampire men slain at the feet of the Guardians who stood in front of the tent door.

'Are you all right, Jean?' he asked. She gave him a hurt look before she said, 'It seems they wanted me dead or to become one of them. Luckily, Terese was still awake when one of them cut a hole through the back of our tent.'

She stood with her arms crossed under her breasts, in a blue silk coat and skirt, red woollen stockings, and blue knee-high boots. Her golden hair was perfectly neat and braided, identical to Terese's thick dark braid. The immortal woman wore a long green coat and tight dark trousers with knee-high brown leather boots. She stood staring at Adem as if he should say something to soothe Jean's hurt feelings.

‘Jean, I came for you as soon as I knew we were under attack. I sensed you weren’t in any great danger, and then I saw this young woman with a man on top of her, and I . . .’

‘You did what you had to, Adem,’ Jean said with a casual wave. ‘I expect nothing more from you.’ Then she turned and marched back towards her tent. He moved to follow her, but Belsy still gripped his hand. He pulled away from the girl, and she gave him a hurt look.

He took two steps to follow Jean to her tent when Terese was suddenly stepping into his path. ‘Leave her!’ the woman snapped. ‘You have done enough already! Did you think I wouldn’t find out about the two of you and your secret meetings?’

Adem took a step back, and Terese stepped in to stand face to face with him. She raised a finger under his nose as she said, ‘I warned you, Adem Highlander. I told you not to toy with her emotions. But you did exactly that! Now I have to punish her for *your* selfish acts!

‘If you were any other man, I would cut you down where you stand.’ That last was spoken through clenched teeth. ‘We have everything under control here, as you can see. Why don’t you take young Belsy here for a nice roll in the hay, eh?’ With a satisfied grin, she spun on her heel and stalked away. He released a deep sigh before Belsy said, ‘I’m sorry that I made trouble for you, Adem.’

‘It’s not your fault, Belsy.’ He then called one of the Guardians to take the girl back to her camp. The attack appeared to be over. If they had only been after Jean, their attempt was foiled. He slung his bow back in the case that hung under his cloak. He was not going to leave until Jean was safe.

He gripped his sword to draw the blade when he was struck by a sense of immense pain . . . it was coming from Wil! Something terrible had happened! He turned to make his way towards his friend’s tent when he saw Carl’s red spear glowing in the shadows. They ran towards one another and when they met, Carl shouted, ‘Is Jean all right?’

‘She’s fine,’ Adem said. ‘Why? What happened to Wil?’

‘It’s not Wil who’s been hurt,’ Carl said with anger in his eyes. ‘It’s his wife!’

Wil knelt beside his wife for what seemed an eternity as he waited for Carl to return. He whispered to Hayley the entire time, ‘Carl can save you, my darling. He *will* save you, I promise.’ She had passed in and out of consciousness a number of times, her eyes fluttering open; then closing again.

Each time she looked at him, he saw dread in her eyes. She knew she was cursed. She knew it meant she would be hunted like an animal. But he would not let her become another Nightwalker, something to be feared and hated. He would protect her; he could keep her safe. Even if he had to leave Tobin’s army, they could go away together, and live their lives in peace, hiding from the world. He struggled to control his weeping as he waited, deep sobs erupting from his throat each time he lost hope.

Finally, he sensed Carl approaching, and Adem was with him. His sense of Adem was that he felt Wil's pain too, they both did. 'Carl is on his way, my darling. He will save you, I promise.'

When his friends entered the tent, he looked up at Carl with pleading in his eyes. 'You will try something, won't you? You said you would. You promised.' Carl moved to kneel beside Wil, leaning the red spear against the bedpost.

Adem stood further back with his arms crossed over his chest. He offered no words of sympathy though he looked deeply concerned. Adem wasn't one for words at times like these. He was cold, emotionless, like his Angel of the Underworld.

For the first time, Wil understood Adem's pain though. He understood that emotion of falling through fire; he sensed in the man so often of late.

Without Hayley, Wil would become filled with more sadness and hatred than his own Battle Angel. Dis Pater offered no words of wisdom or sympathy through the *kigare*. He too was heartless and cold.

Carl placed his right hand on Hayley's forehead, closed his eyes, and began what must have been the Seeking, to determine the nature of her illness and how to cure her. Some time passed before Carl said, 'I cannot cure the infection, but I can alter its affects.'

'You can make her well again?' Wil asked hopefully.

'I can make it appear that she isn't infected,' Carl explained. 'She will be warm blooded. She will be able to walk in daylight. Other vampires will know what she is, but she will be stronger than they are, faster too. She may gain other gifts as she begins to feed, but she will not crave human blood. Goat or sheep blood should keep her healthy. We will have the servants supply it from the animals they slaughter for eating. It's the best I can do, Wil. Perhaps this way she won't appear as a threat, and she can remain your wife.'

'Do it, Carl,' Wil said. 'I'll accept anything to keep her by my side.' Carl then placed his left hand on her brow and clasped his right fist around the burning spear. The red light of the shaft became brighter when he closed his eyes and began to concentrate. There were no chanting words or incantations; he just focused flows of *teron* into her body.

Wil could sense that it took relatively small amounts of the Power to complete the operation. Hayley lay completely still the entire time, her eyes fluttering occasionally though they did not open. He guessed Carl had to touch the spear to gain some assistance from Math Mathonwy.

Though Wil assumed the spell was something Carl had learnt through his experiences inside the Chameleon Arch. His sudden jump in knowledge of the Power was so extreme it had to be a result of his rebirth. Wil had also changed dramatically from that experience, though all the memories of those ancient warriors did not give him enough courage to face life without Hayley.

Most of those immortal men had died in battle, all of them regretting their lost love at the end. If Hayley died from this, Wil would not rest until he had destroyed Tairark Vampireking and every last creature that served him. He vowed to avenge her even if she did survive. She was so young, so innocent, and now she was doomed to carry a curse in her veins.

Finally, Carl released his grip on the spear, the light fading to a duller red, and he removed his hand from her brow as her eyes fluttered again, then opened.

‘Is she well?’ Wil asked.

‘She is better,’ Carl said, ‘better than any other of her kind. You must keep her well fed, Wil. She will no longer crave normal food. She can drink water or wine, but it will do her no good.’

‘You know what she needs to survive. She needs to feed immediately. This alteration spell has sped up the turning process. She is already one of them.’

‘I’ll have someone gather some blood,’ Adem said. His cold blue eyes appeared pained, though his voice was void of emotion. When he left the tent, Wil looked at Hayley and said, ‘You’re going to be all right, my sweetheart. Everything will be fine, I promise.’ Carl leaned on his spear to get to his feet; then he paced towards an armchair with red cushions.

‘I’ll stay until I’m certain she’ll recover,’ Carl said after he sat.

‘I won’t forget this,’ Wil said. ‘Thank you, my friend.’

‘It’s nothing,’ Carl said. ‘It’s the least I can do.’ Wil turned back to Hayley; her dark eyes looked calm now, peaceful, though after a time her brow became furrowed.

‘I’m so thirsty, Wil,’ she said, sounding weak.

‘We’ll get you something to drink, my darling,’ Wil said, and then he turned to Carl to ask, ‘Couldn’t you have healed her too?’

‘She must drink to Heal properly,’ Carl replied. They waited in silence after that until Adem returned with a servant girl carrying a bronze goblet and pitcher. The dark-eyed girl looked very nervous as she moved towards the bed.

While the young woman was setting the tray down on a table next to the bed, Orion and Tobin entered the tent, both in black coats and trousers under their shadow cloaks. The two immortal kings wore grim expressions as they moved to stand a few paces from the bed.

‘You may leave us now, Belsy,’ Adem said to the servant girl, who gave an adequate curtsy and hurried from the tent. She had already poured a goblet full of the dark liquid which Wil was holding up to Hayley’s lips after helping her to sit upright with pillows for support.

Hayley sipped at first and then took a gulp, then her eyes widened as she clutched the goblet with both hands and emptied the contents down her throat. When she released the goblet, Wil saw her little white fangs soaked in blood.

‘How do you feel, my love?’ he asked her as he watched her bite marks instantly Heal to smooth skin.

‘Much better, thank you,’ Hayley replied. She wiped the edge of the goblet and then sucked that finger for the remaining drops.

‘This will not do,’ Tobin said in his deep tones. ‘Do you expect to keep her alive?’

‘Carl has altered the infection,’ Wil said defensively, ‘and yes, she is my wife, I’ll murder any man who tries to harm her. She will not crave human blood, she can walk in daylight, and she will have other gifts.’

‘I’m not thrilled with the situation, but perhaps it will be harder now for the enemy to make her a target.’

‘Her bite won’t be contagious either,’ Carl explained. ‘She didn’t have to die to become one of them, and she will remain mostly human, with a human soul.’

‘You must explain this process to us, Carl Wilder,’ Orion said musingly. ‘If all this is true, it may lead to an actual cure for the vampire disease. We will begin to teach the weaves to Alit’aren and Ael Trael, and we will make records of these spells.’

‘That is something I wanted to discuss with you all, now that we are here,’ Carl said with one hand holding the spear beside the chair. ‘These past few weeks, as you all know, over a dozen Guardians have turned assassin against their own kin. The only explanation for this was that the taint had turned them mad or perhaps even evil. Four Alit’aren have been imprisoned and are awaiting trial at Nordhel. Alit’aren who began screaming like madmen and unleashing waves of the Power that killed over thirty soldiers and twice as many servants.’

‘We know this, Carl Wilder,’ Tobin said gruffly. ‘It is the taint on *teron*. It drives them all to madness. What is your point?’

‘That is my point exactly, King Tobin,’ Carl replied. ‘The taint drives them all mad. In the case of Guardians, it is their Lukrorian Bows that cause their illness. If we took away these enchanted bows and replaced them with normal bows and normal arrows . . .’

‘We cannot face the Dark Armies without our Lukrorian Bows!’ Tobin shouted. ‘Our Guardians become useless without them!’

‘They are still expert archers,’ Carl said sternly. ‘They will just have a limited supply of arrows. They are also still Blademasters, perfectly suited to guarding Ael Trael.’

‘The Guardians will have a new role from now on, most will serve the Ael Trael as personal bodyguards, and they will remain in this role for life. A war is coming between Alit’aren and Ael Trael, and the Ael Trael must win that war if Kisméria is to survive.’

The two kings’ faces were grim indeed. Wil listened intently while holding on to Hayley’s left hand. She was lying down again, her expression intent on what Carl was saying. Adem’s expression was also focused, though Wil’s sense of him through the *kigare* was that he was in conflict with Carl’s ideas.

‘Yes, but . . . what will we do with the Lukrorian Bows?’ Tobin asked. ‘Would you have us throw them into the sea?’

‘Give them to the female wielders,’ Carl said. ‘There are enough minor wielders amongst the immortals to take the bows and put them to good use. A declaration must be written that outlaws any Guardian to wield a Lukrorian Bow from this day forth.’

‘Those that disobey will be arrested and sent for trial. Those found guilty of breaking the new law will be severed from *teron*.’

‘But that is a death sentence,’ Orion pleaded. ‘We rely too heavily on the Guardians to enforce such a law.’

‘The law shall be the same for all Alit’aren,’ Carl interjected, ‘as all male wielders shall be ordered to never touch *teron* again, from this day forward.’ That brought grunts from both kings and a pained groan from Adem. Wil just stared at Carl in a amazement.

‘That would cripple our forces,’ Orion said in disgust, ‘and the Alit’aren will not accept this.’

‘You are two of the four immortal kings,’ Carl said firmly. ‘You must write the declaration and have the order sent to the King of the Dremelden and the King of the Ruhalden. The order must be sent to all corners of the Free Lands so that this law is enforced

across the entire continent. If we don't make this move now, I fear we will face more deaths than this world can recover from.'

'Will this law extend to the Sons of Odin?' Tobin asked incredulously.

'My Brothers and I will have to use the Power to defeat the Dark One,' Carl said calmly. 'That much is a certainty. Though, we must limit our use of the Power to avoid falling into madness.'

'There is no way to enforce or restrict the amount each of us holds or wields at any given time, because punishing us by restricting our resources could make us easier targets for our enemies.'

'However, I vow to only hold *teron* for one hour . . . once a week.'

'Well, I will not agree to that last part,' Adem said stubbornly.

'Then the day may come when I am forced to hunt you down, old friend,' Carl said with a frown and deep pain in his eyes. Adem glared at him with what appeared to be extreme anger, before he turned and marched out of the tent in a huff.

'You must write the declaration immediately,' Carl instructed. 'Have copies sent to the other rulers tonight and spread the word amongst the men in the camp. If the Alit'aren don't like it, they can leave. It will be the beginning of this inevitable war that will surely destroy you all.' The two kings stared at Carl with arms crossed over their chests for some time before they also left in foul moods.

Carl remained in that chair for another hour and a half after that. He kept watch over Hayley as the changes set in. He said she was still in a fragile state, and he didn't want to leave her if there was something more he could do. It must have been nearly two hours after Adem and the kings had left that lightning flared in the night sky, roaring thunder and dozens of thick blue bolts falling in the distance.

Wil sensed that it was from male wielders. A Guardian entered the tent to stand and salute about a quarter hour after, the lightning had ceased moments before. The Guardian wore Wolf Rohjor armour with a regular wooden bow sticking up above his right shoulder.

'The Alit'aren have started a rebellion,' the man said as if reporting that he'd eaten fish and potatoes for dinner. He had the tanned skin and dark blue eyes of a Torvellen. 'Most were unhappy about the new laws. They left with a large number of Guardians, claiming they would form their own city where the laws did not stand. There was some effort to contain them by the Ael Trael who were nearby. The Alit'aren tied some of the women up in weaves of Air, the rest . . . were murdered. The Alit'aren were also able to convince more than half the Devoted and Gai'den to follow them.'

'And what is your name, Guardian?' Carl asked.

'Lendel Alduri,' the man replied.

'You choose to remain loyal to your king, Lendel,' Carl remarked.

'I remain loyal to the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor,' Lendel said with his fist pressed to heart.

'What of Adem?' Carl asked.

'Adem Highlander remains in his tent. He was seen speaking to several Alit'aren before the uprising however. There is a suspicion that he influenced their decision.' The man then turned to exit the tent.

Wil looked to Carl with concern as he asked, 'Should we do something?'

‘Leave them to handle it themselves,’ Carl said with a wave of his hand. ‘Though what has begun tonight will return to haunt us. Tomorrow will be the dawning of the Age of Chaos.’

Lightning flared, thunder roared, and then silence. After a time of apparent deep contemplation, when Hayley had drifted back to sleep, Carl said, ‘There is one other thing.’

‘What is it?’ Wil asked.

‘Your wife . . . she is pregnant.’

Chapter 18



A Dark Princess

Wil stayed at his wife’s bed side the entire night. She drifted in and out of sleep, occasionally moaning, twitching, and bearing her fangs. Carl said it was the changes setting in. By first light, Carl decided she would survive, and he left to return to his own tent to get some rest. His friend had remained awake the entire night also, his concern for Hayley as apparent as if it were his own wife he was caring for.

Carl must’ve been blaming himself for the deaths of those Ael Trael who tried to stop the Alit’aren from leaving. He was the one who ordered the new laws, so he would no doubt see it as his fault entirely.

The light appeared to disturb Hayley when she woke, though Carl had explained that that would also pass in time. She looked healthier now, a pink glow to her cheeks and a glossy shine to her dark hair. He gave her another goblet full of the sheep’s blood that she sipped this time while sitting up in bed with a sly look in her eyes.

‘So you decided to spare my life, dear husband,’ she said with a grin after wiping her lips.

‘How do you feel?’ he asked her.

‘I feel different,’ she replied with a look of wonder. ‘I feel like I could run all day and never get sore or tired. But I also feel sadness, regret, that I will never live a normal life again. I guess it was my fate, Wil Martyr, as much my own destiny as it was to be your wife.’

‘Perhaps I will survive long enough to await your return. I will be lonely without you, but I will find ways to keep my mind distracted from the loss of you.’

That was something Wil had already discussed with Hayley many times since their marriage, the fact that the Sons of Odin were supposed to leave Kismeria for over a thousand years before the Second Arrival. Hayley had been mortal until now, and although the Ael Trael said she had some ability to learn to wield *terael*, the small amount she could draw would not have preserved her for much longer than her natural lifetime. Now there was a chance that she would survive, and wait for his return. It filled him with hope, but he also felt a deep sadness that it took a curse to create this miracle.

‘I will not leave you,’ he told her.

‘Dear husband, you simply must,’ she said in a lecturing tone. ‘For you are the one who will grow old and die if you remain in Kismeria, and you shall never see the Great Battle, where it is your destiny to fight beside your Brothers.’

‘I can’t bear the thought of leaving you alone for that long,’ he said as he brushed her cheek. ‘I will be fine,’ Hayley said. ‘It is our only chance of seeing each other again.’ He put both arms around her waist then; she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him gently. He started to kiss her lips and felt the light stabbing of her little fangs against his skin, but he didn’t pull away. This was how it was supposed to be.

She was his wife, his dark princess.

The same servant girl, Belsy, brought another pitcher of blood and a tray of breads and fruits for breakfast. Wil didn’t try to entice Hayley to even taste the food, though she drank two goblets full of the sheep’s blood. Carl said her thirst would lessen as the days progressed. For now she needed to build her strength. After breakfast, Wil donned his black coat and trousers with knee-high brown leather boots. He wore the sigils of the Sons of Odin on his collar like Adem and Carl.

The people who followed them expected them to wear those symbols of power. He had spent the evening still in his sleeping trousers and a white shirt that he replaced with a black silk one when he dressed in the morning. He’d kept his axe of golden light close the entire night in case of another attack. He slipped the enchanted weapon into his belt loop after strapping on his bow case. It was a warm spring day, so he didn’t bother to bring his cloak. Hayley wore a green silk dress so dark it appeared black, with silver patterns like birds and fish around the low-cut neckline that exposed her ample bosom. She left her hair falling around her face rather than tying it into her usual braid. She looked beautiful, though his heart ached over what had been done to her.

‘I thought we’d take a stroll through the city,’ he said when they left the tent. She wore high-heeled red-leather hiking boots under the divided skirts which he had suggested for her. Six Guardians followed them as they made their way through camp, rather than the usual four.

He assumed Tobin or Orion had ordered the extra two bodyguards. Lendel was one of them, and all wore dark armour and coats except for one who wore a crimson breastplate. They all carried normal wooden bows now, which prompted Wil to ask Lendel, 'What became of your Lukrorian Bow?'

'It was added to the piles to be given to female wielders,' Lendel replied.

'I want you to collect one for me and store it in my tent,' Wil said. 'And have someone patch up that hole the intruder made.' The slain vampire had been removed during the night while Wil waited for Carl to return to perform the spell upon Hayley.

The carpet was still heavily bloodstained however. 'Tell King Tobin I'd like a new rug too, thank you. And find an ornate bow case, for my lovely wife.' Lendel saluted and then moved off into the crowds. Hayley raised an inquisitive eyebrow at him as they moved on before he said, 'If I can give you unlimited arrows of flame, my mind will rest a lot easier when we are apart. Perhaps you should learn to use a sword too. I'll have a talk with Terese.'

It took over an hour to reach the outer gates of Charkel. The city was surrounded by fifty-foot-high grey stone walls with watch towers spread around the diamond-shaped defences. Soldiers marched along the tops of the walls armed with crossbows. Hundreds of people swarmed around the huge raised portcullis and tunnel, where carts and wagons were given right of way. Inside the walls, more soldiers marched with spears or swords at their hips, wearing armour of bronze or iron or steel. They had to give their names to the Gate Captain who scrawled them down on rolled parchment, the dark-eyed man eyed Wil with awe when he gave his name.

'You honour us, Son of Odin,' the man said. 'My name is Kelsid Torbros. Give my name at the markets for a discount on anything you desire.' Wil thanked Kelsid, and Hayley gave him a grin that made the man's grey moustache bristle. He must have noticed her fangs though he made no comment.

The market square was spread along the Merchant Road that was the wide stone-paved strip that ran from the inner gate to the heart of the city. Stalls on wooden tables and cloth-covered boxes lined both sides of the street with animal pens further back, selling every farm animal imaginable, even horses and cows! The front rows sold anything from weapons, jewellery, and home decor, to books, clothing, and even artefacts from past Ages.

He started by buying Hayley a gold necklace with a decent-sized ruby. He had plenty of gold given to him as one of the Chosen. The necklace cost more than he had hoped however, taking more than three quarters of his coin. The plump old woman who sold her the necklace seemed very pleased with the deal though he didn't care about the cost, he just worried he might not have enough to buy her a sword and the real reason he was there.

They looked at swords at seven blacksmith stalls, finally choosing one in a crimson scabbard worked with golden stars. Seven five-pointed stars also covered the steel blade that the blacksmith insisted was enchanted with *terael*. Hayley still could not sense enchantments, and he couldn't sense the female half of the Power, so he asked an Ael Trael he saw standing nearby if she could test the blade.

When the Ael Tarael held the sword, it began to glow red, and she assured him it was a demon-slaying blade. ‘From the past Age,’ the woman said – Febrise Lanto was her name. Febrise then helped them argue a better price for the sword despite Wil giving his own name and the Gate Captain’s. He found he still had enough coin to get what he was really after too.

They strolled around the animal pens for some time. They looked at pigs, sheep, ducks, and geese including lambs and ducklings, but meat or blood was not what Wil was after. Finally, they arrived at a pen that had puppies. That was his first idea, and he was about to buy two of the cute brown pups when he heard the barks of two adult versions. The dogs were large enough to be small ponies, brown furred with large dark eyes. They were the mother and father.

‘How much do you want for those two?’ he asked the owner as he pointed to the adult dogs.

The grey bearded man’s round belly shook with laughter before he waved a hand and said, ‘They only answer to me.’

‘If I can make them come to me and sit with only a wave and the command, will you give me a decent price for them?’ Wil asked, to which the man replied, ‘If you can make them sit, I’ll give them to you for free!’ Then he burst into laughter again. Wil grinned and was about to summon them with his new gift of speaking to animals, when Hayley whistled and the two dogs charged towards her to stop and sit at her feet. Wil tried to hide his shock as Hayley patted the male and scratched the female behind the ears. It was then that the man noticed Hayley’s teeth. His eyes widened, and he went pale as he waved a fist and said, ‘You tricked me! She’s a . . .’

‘I’ll pay you for them if you keep your voice down,’ Wil said, cutting the man off before he named her in front of everyone.

‘My price will be high,’ the man said with a nervous expression. Wil tossed the man the leather purse with the remaining gold and silver in it.

‘I’ll give you three times that tomorrow if you keep this to yourself,’ he said in a reasoning tone. ‘But I take the dogs with me now. Do we have a deal?’

The man agreed though Wil suspected his reasoning was that it was better not to get on the bad side of a vampire that can walk in daylight. Of course, he would be able to afford dozens more pairs of breeding dogs like these with the gold he was promised. His nervous eyes changed to a pleased grin when he emptied the coins on the table and started to inspect their markings.

‘Good day to you, good sir.’ the man said, waving goodbye as they started away with the dogs at their heels. ‘I’ll be here tomorrow, waiting for my gold.’ There was no threat in his tone however, and he wore a pleading expression when Wil turned to catch a glimpse.

‘How did you do that?’ he whispered to Hayley when they were alone on the Merchant Road.

‘I don’t have your gift, dear husband, but I just knew they would like me. Call it a woman’s intuition.’

A vampire’s sixth sense more likely, Wil thought as they headed towards the gate.

When they returned to their tent, there was a golden Lukrorian Bow with black veins leaning against the bed post. It was in a dark green leather case worked with small gems and golden scrollwork.

‘Perfect,’ Wil said as he handed the bow to his wife. Hayley held the bow with an uncertain expression, though when she pulled back on the string, a faint golden arrow appeared. A moment later, it vanished before she had relaxed the string, but Wil assured her she would get better at it. She had received some training to learn to wield with little success so far. Her new abilities must have sped up the process. She tried the string again, and this time the arrow was brighter and appeared more substantial, remaining until she eased the string to straight again.

‘*Terael*, it feels amazing!’ Hayley exclaimed. ‘It’s the most exhilarating emotion. I can’t describe it properly, but I love it!’

‘Let’s go and see Terese about some sword practice,’ Wil said with a smile. ‘I have a favour to ask Jean Fairsythe.’

Jean stood in a clearing with pine and oak trees surrounding her on the edges of the Ael Terael camp. She was heaving for breath from the intense work out she was forced to endure as part of her sword training. Her new trainer – the Viking! – stood with arms crossed under her large breasts, wearing a leather jerkin fitted to her form that was sewn with steel discs.

The large woman barked orders at Jean constantly as she moved from one form to the next, Mirror of Blades becoming Street Sweeper, then Cradle of Cuts turned into Hammer of Steel. She focused her mind while struggling to slow her breath. There was no cool breeze today either, nothing to relieve her of the hot sweat that covered her skin. Terese stood nearby wearing a very pleased expression.

Damn the woman for doing this to me! Jean thought with a sniff. She meant Terese of course, though she felt the same way about her new trainer. Lady Swan became Cross Cleave in a blurring of the blade that reflected the light, becoming Shadow Dancer followed by Night Hawk’s Wings.

One thing Jean had to admit that her new trainer was gifted with the blade. The times Martha had sparred with her with the practice blade so far had taught Jean that Terese had been going easy on her. Jean realised then that she was less capable with the blade than she had thought.

Four Ael Terael and a half-dozen Guardians stood watching at a distance. A black-coated Gai’den named Del stood there also, though he stood a considerable distance from the Ael Terael. Overnight, the trust between male and female wielders had been shattered.

Del was only twenty, green eyed with spiked sandy hair. He was mortal, formally a part of the armies of Charkel. There had been a lot of male wielders loyal to the revolution at Charkel in the beginning, which seemed strange considering the fact that the revolution was aimed at stamping out all male wielders.

Now he was one of the loyal ones who had remained despite the fact that he would never be able to touch *teron* again. He wore a sword at his hip, and he watched Jean as if he wanted to receive the same lessons she was getting. Male sword training was different though, different forms with different names. The female forms were designed to

accommodate for the fact that women would usually have less force behind their strikes and parries. Holding the sword, she was more attuned to the mind of Druantia through the *kigare*.

Her emerald bow that was the Resting Point for her other Battle Angel, Tanriel, lay nearby on the green field. Both were encouraging her though, their thoughts entering her mind, giving her focus, feeding her strength of will. Both weapons had been enhanced with some of the *ki'mera* orbs stored from the most recent battle against Nymloc and Jacoulra.

The sword would now easily destroy either of those types of demon with the first strike. Dodging the razor black claws of either in the heat of battle was still a concern though. Woman on the Water, the blade slicing horizontal through the air, became Knife Reeds, a series of vertical chopping actions, flowing into Heart Weaver which was a killing strike.

‘Good,’ Martha exclaimed in the accent of her ancestors. ‘Now faster this time, Slicing Icicles, into Morning Storm, then finish with Heart Weaver.’ Jean flowed through the forms as Druantia sent through the *kigare*.

You would do better if you held the Power while you practiced.

Terese disagreed however, always insisting that the bliss of *terael* could distract her from the forms. Despite this, Jean opened herself to the flood of emotions and the grace of the Light that *terael* gave her. A greater sense of calm washed over her; she practiced the forms again, finishing with a decapitating swipe. She was more fluid this time, more in tune with the blade and her surroundings.

She noticed the chirping of birds more clearly; the grass seemed to glow a brighter green, her breathing slowed. ‘That was much better,’ Martha said with a smirk. ‘You are holding it now, yes? *Terael*, it makes you more efficient, more deadly. I want you to hold the Power every time you practice the forms until I say to release.’

‘That will tire her out,’ Terese interjected.

‘Did you not make me her new trainer?’ Martha asked with a raised brow.

‘Of course, I did, my apologies,’ Terese said with a humbled expression. Jean then noticed Wil and Hayley approaching over the rise. They looked as if they wanted to speak with her.

‘Can we take a break?’ she asked her trainer, who grunted with a nod after seeing the reason.

Martha still seemed somewhat awed by the Sons of Odin, even though she treated the Daughter of Thor like an untrained lapdog as she said, ‘You may release *terael* for your short break.’ Jean sighed as the bliss of the Power drained out of her; she would have held on to *terael* if she hadn’t felt that Martha’s words were a command.

She moved to stand facing Wil and Hayley; she noticed the woman’s fangs immediately. She had already heard about the young woman’s fate. It pained her heart to see such a young innocent soul poisoned in such a way. A sword hung from her silver waist belt with a golden Lukrorian Bow sticking up above her right shoulder. Wil only wore his axe in the loop of his thick brown leather belt. She tried to hide her sorrow for Hayley as she asked, ‘You wanted to speak with me?’

‘I have a favour to ask,’ Wil said. ‘I need one of your Battle Angels for my wife’s protection.’

‘I will not allow it!’ Terese snapped, the woman sneaking up behind Jean without notice before she spoke. ‘The life of the Daughter of Thor is vital to Kismeria. I feel for your wife’s plight, Wil, but this can’t be done.’

‘I’ll allow it,’ Jean said with a grin, her decision motivated by Terese’s apparent abhorrence to the idea. If she could win some small victory over the woman for her new punishment, she would do all it takes. ‘She may have Druantia, as Tanriel is more closely tied to me as she has been with me longer.

‘Tanriel also commands the skies and the earth.’

‘Druantia is stronger,’ Terese insisted. ‘Think hard before you make this decision, girl.’

‘It is done,’ Jean said while flashing her teeth, and then she drew her sword and said the name, ‘Druantia.’ The Great Angel appeared hovering above Jean’s head, the form of a woman made of green and blue light, dark seed-shaped eyes and hair of black fire. Runes of gold and silver sparkled on her shimmering gown. ‘I release you, Druantia, of the Second Born, Wife to the Green Man, and give your service to Hayley Martyr, wife of Wil Martyr, one of the three Sons of Odin. To protect the wife of one of the Chosen is a great honour, and I know you will serve in good faith.’

She then looked to Hayley as she said, ‘Draw your sword or bow to provide a new Resting Point to complete the ceremony. No words are necessary.’

Despite this advice, Hayley reached for her golden bow and held it forward as she said, ‘I pledge to honour this great gift from the White Snow Fox, the Daughter of Thor, one of the Chosen.

‘I swear on the blood of my ancestors that I will serve the Light and protect what is good and what is innocent.’ Then she looked skyward to Druantia as she said, ‘You do me great honour, Druantia of the Second Born. I look forward to our kinship through the *kigare*, where I will know your thoughts and you shall know mine.

‘I pray that my dark powers do not infect your own, and I hope that we make an effective team, when facing the might of the Shadow.’

Jean blinked in surprise at those words; they were wise for one as young as Hayley. The girl had become a woman overnight. The knowledge in her eyes had turned from innocence to a sly knowing. Druantia was then absorbed by the bow that glowed with golden light as the blue-green fire surged into the enchanted weapon.

‘This is an outrage!’ Terese snapped. ‘The Daughter of Thor is now halved in her defences. If something happens to her, Wil Martyr, I’ll . . .’ She waved a threatening finger at Wil as he spoke over her saying, ‘Look at what they’ve done to my wife! She needs protection! I am grateful for this, to both of you. I will not forget the favour. Though, I have another to ask, of you, Terese.’

‘What is it?’ Jean asked before Terese could refuse.

‘I want Terese to train Hayley with the sword and the bow,’ Wil said. ‘I will pay for her training . . .’

‘Do not flaunt your purse strings at me, Son of Odin,’ Terese said, in a new state of calm. ‘I will grant you this favour, on the condition that Hayley returns Druantia to one of Jean’s Resting Points when another Battle Angel can be found for your wife.’

‘I accept those terms,’ Hayley said. ‘I promise to be a dutiful pupil, Terese Silverblade, former ghost of the Heroes of Will.’

‘There’s no need for such formality with me,’ Terese said after a sniff. ‘Your training will begin immediately. You can spar against Jean. Wil, you can stay and watch if you wish, but she is my student, and you will not question my demands upon her, ever.’ There was a threat in that last word. Wil grinned like a proud wolf as he said, ‘Of course, I will stay.’ He then offered a hand to take Hayley’s bow case while she unbuckled the strap. ‘Go easy on her.’

‘I will, of course,’ Jean said.

‘I was talking to my wife,’ Wil said with that sly grin. Hayley smiled to expose her little white fangs. Jean felt a cold shiver run down her spine. Terese exhaled audibly, sounding tense. Jean then turned to walk back to the centre of the clearing, where all eyes were on her once more.

The young Gai’den appeared to be studying his shoes. Was the man looking for something or was it the madness setting in? He then looked up to her and gave a warm smile. No! Those clear green eyes were a long way from mad. Del wasn’t corrupted like Adem, not yet. Then his eyes took on an inward gaze, the way she imagined she looked when her Battle Angels spoke to her mind through the *kigare*.

Then he returned to studying his shoes. Odd! Perhaps the taint had infected all of their minds in some small way. Every man able to wield the Power was doomed to destroy the world.

Hayley moved to stand facing Jean. They held their blades relaxed in their right hands hanging down pointed to the ground.

‘No!’ Martha shouted in her thick tongue. ‘You will teach her the forms first, Jean Fairsythe. First, Raven Dives, moving into Corn Harvest, flowing into Silver Snake, and finishing with Fire on the Water.’

Jean flowed through all four forms after moving a few paces from Hayley and facing the same way as her. Then she moved through them again more slowly, then slower the third time.

‘This is Raven Dives,’ Jean said as she lifted her arms with the sword out straight, then plunged the blade downwards and aimed at chest height, moving faster this fourth time.

‘This is Corn Harvest,’ she said as she began stepping forward making sideways angular slashes through the air.

‘This is Silver Snake,’ she said as she stopped to swing the blade upwards sliding it around through the air like a live serpent thrashing.

‘This is Fire on the Water,’ she said as stepped in again, four long strides, flicking the blade in precise wide cuts that was created for warding off demons. It was also a killing series of strikes. ‘Now you attack and I’ll defend.’

Hayley looked competent when she ran through the forms the first time, then the second. She moved with such fluid ease Jean nearly lost her footing. ‘You’re a fast learner,’ Jean said after barely defending the last flourishes of Hayley’s blade. They went through the forms a third time when Terese said, ‘Good, Hayley, you show great promise. Perhaps you shall attain the title of Blademaiden before Jean.’

That put a bur in Jean's boot. 'Now teach her Hawk Moth Flutters, leading into Maiden Weeps, followed by Right Stirrup, and finish with Crimson Sun.' It was Terese who gave the order this time, which earned another grunt from Martha.

This time Jean spoke the names of the forms every time she gave the four demonstrations at different speeds.

'This is Hawk Moth Flutters,' she said as she swung the sword through the air, twisting the two swipes around her form, another defensive move that was also deadly. It left the wielder somewhat vulnerable to frontal jabs however, so it was traditionally more for flaunting prowess.

'This is Maiden Weeps,' she said as she gripped the hilt with both hands and raised it over her head to bring it down in a flurry of cutting attacks.

'This is Right Stirrup,' she said as she moved the last slice of Maiden Weeps into a right-sided downward strike that would cut a man in half if the wielder was strong enough. It would at least cleave a nasty wound or leave a fatal one across the chest to abdomen.

'This is Crimson Sun,' she said as she swung the blade up again, pointing it high and straight upwards, to bring it down forwards in a slice that was designed for splitting skulls. It was a popular form for wielding the hammer or axe also.

Jean noticed Del staring at her intently when she finished each demonstration. Out of the corner of her eye, though each time she looked at him, he returned his attention to his shoes.

Does he like me? She wondered to herself.

He isn't blushing, but I saw him watching your behind while you practiced, was Tanriel's response to her mind through the *kigare*.

Jean felt hot flushes in her cheeks! It was sometimes embarrassing to share your thoughts with another woman. Finally, Del looked up at her again and gave another one of those handsome grins.

Adem Highlander would probably kill the boy if he saw those looks, Tanriel sent in her angelic tones like wind chimes.

'Do you want to stand around all day making eyes at young men or do you wish to train?' Martha shouted. 'Next, Knife Wind, flowing into River Warden, followed by Goose's Wing, and finish with Ram Heart!'

Jean taught the forms to Hayley and then they practice sparring, taking turns for who would defend the attacks. Then they practiced the entire routine, seven times until the sweat became uncomfortable on Jean's skin.

She had been holding the Power the entire time though, following Martha's order, and discomfort was still heaven when wrapped in the glow of *terael*. While she defended Hayley's assault during those seven rounds, she sensed the Power growing in Hayley too.

She was holding almost as much as Jean could without Tanriel! She had heard the woman had the talent to learn to wield a small amount of the Power while she was mortal, though her newly gifted immortality had come with a surprising surge in that amount.

Druantia would be fuelling it, though the source of her strength had to come from her dark curse. Jean tried to hide her shock as best she could. She had gone from simple farm girl to dark warrior princess overnight. With a Battle Angel and her enchanted weapons to aid her, Jean suddenly saw the woman as a potential strong ally.

‘We should go and talk,’ Jean said when Martha allowed them to finish practice. ‘We can become friends, confide in one another, and share secrets.’

‘Is that what women do where you come from, Jean Fairisythe?’ Hayley asked with that sly smile.

‘Well, we would normally drink lots of tequila shots and do each other’s make-up first, then we’d start to share. I think confiding in a friend is quite common here too, isn’t it?’

‘Of course, I was only teasing, Jean Fairisythe.’

‘Call me Jean, not Snow Fox, or Daughter of Thor or Chosen, just Jean. Friend’s don’t use each other’s surnames in conversation.’

‘Yes, but it is the way of the immortals,’ Hayley said with a hurt expression. ‘I would consider myself an immortal now. Before I accepted that I am a vampire, so I would call you by your full name, even if we were not friends.’ She smiled at the last, and then moved to collect her bow from Wil who looked pleased with her skill.

Jean followed with Terese trailing after them, along with a host of Guardians when a gathering of Ael Trael stepped into their path. They were among those that had watched the sword practice, Lauren Celman was amongst them, short with golden hair in intricate braids, and she wore the crimson silk cloak of a Lion Rohjor Ael Trael.

‘You must let us begin your training with the Power this evening, Hayley Martyr,’ Lauren said with a look of awe in her crystal blue eyes. ‘Your strength is phenomenal! You will stand high among the protectors of the White Snow Fox.’ Her gaze shifted to Jean at the last, the same look of wonder to her gaze.

After lunch where Jean ate fruits and drank orange juice and Hayley hopped into a goblet full of goat’s blood, the two of them sat on the edge of the bed in Jean’s tent and shared stories while Terese sat watching them from a chair at the far end of the pavilion.

There was no point insisting that Terese wait outside; she could just as easily listen in on every word they said. The dark-eyed former ghost sat with her boots crossed over and legs out straight, her arms resting on either side of the thick cushioned seat.

She looked very displeased when Jean began to relate intimate stories about Adem to her new confidant. Hayley’s stories about Wil were enough to make Jean’s heart flutter; the vampire woman giggled and whispered things in her ear that made Terese sniff or sigh.

After about an hour of chatting about girls stuff, Lauren entered the tent to summon Hayley for her training with the Power.

‘You should join us, Jean Fairisythe,’ Lauren said with a more reserved look to her eyes. ‘From now on, I will be training both of you, together. We see great promise in you both.’

The Ael Trael led them to another large tent where dozens of female wielders were gathered inside the empty space. The women wore bright silks and dark velvet or woollen cloaks, scrollwork or patterns on their dresses and jewellery shining on their necks and fingers. Kaishel was there; her Guardian had been standing guard outside. That woman was one of the Ael Trael Adem didn’t seem to trust. Jean found that she could be infuriating at times, though she sensed no evil intent in the woman.

Bellessair Roltoff was there in a blue velvet cloak. Her eyes were deep green and her hair in a dark braid. Her cloak pin was of the Snow Fox Rohjor, as her white gown sewn with intricate silver foxes also indicated. Lira Tolnock was also amongst them, in a deep-sea green

velvet cloak and emerald silk gown with divided skirts for riding; the Wolf Rohjor brooch fastening her cloak.

Lira had been hiding from Adem for some time now refusing to be appointed as his Healer. Jean wondered at the woman's reasons for that decision. She either despised him, or she was in love with him. Jean decided she would question the immortal woman about it some other time.

The rest were faces Jean recognised though she didn't know all of their names. Kaishel stared with that agitated look to her eyes; Lira appeared subdued with her thoughts, while that expression of awe had returned to Lauren's face as she said, 'We will begin with casting fire and shields. You will teach both of these weaves to Hayley and then take turns practicing each, against one another.'

Jean felt that she was competent to teach the weaves, so she began by telling Hayley to embrace *terael*. The next moment Hayley was flooded with the Power, her eyes taking on that look of nearly exploding with joy. That brought a murmur from many of the women standing around watching.

They whispered to one another behind cupped hands and others stared with a startled faces. 'Do not draw so much so quickly,' Lauren instructed, 'you could easily burn yourself out and become permanently severed. Release more than half of what you hold now, or Jean's shields will not be able to withstand your attacks.' That last comment was also a blow to Jean's ego. She believed she could block her if she had Tanriel's assistance though.

She then taught the weaves for a simple frontal shield that protected the entire body. Hayley was a fast learner with weaves too, and she soon had it mastered, so she then taught the weave for casting balls of flame. The first ball of fire Hayley created was golden; the second blue, the third red, the fourth orange, and finally purple.

She had mastered nearly every temperature of fire in her first lesson! Each time Hayley cast one of the balls of fire, Jean wove a frontal shield that was barely able to deflect the attack. It wasn't that Jean was weak with the Power after her sword training; she just wasn't strong enough with Air yet to hold off against Hayley's strength.

She decided not to test Hayley's strength with shields by casting while holding the maximum amount of the Power. Instead, she started with a quarter at Lauren's command and then progressed slowly up to half way. The shields appeared as a transparent glow of blue-white liquid fire though they were mostly formed of Air. Each time a ball of light struck the shield, it flared incandescent in the colour of the fireball. There was a slight pushing effect from the attacks as well. If the wielder was strong enough, they could still send you flying backwards with such an assault.

If the weaver of the shield was strong enough, they could deflect a herd of charging bulls if they wanted to however. Such shields were vital to staying alive when facing a horde of demons in a frontal attack.

Shields that surrounded the entire body were harder to teach however, the weaves more complex. She allowed Lauren to instruct Hayley with those, and they were about to start practicing the weaves when Del stuck his head inside the tent to report, 'Rebel Alit'aren have returned for peace talks. There is only a few of them, but King Tobin has instructed us not to attempt capture.' His green eyes appeared filled with caution when he gazed at the faces of the women in the tent.

The poor boy must feel like a rabbit with his foot in a snare, Tanriel sent through the *kigare*. Jean reached for her emerald bow that lay flat on the brightly carpeted floor.

They will all feel that way, before too long, Jean sent to Tanriel, her connection increasing when she held the bow.

‘They have requested to speak with Jean Fairsythe,’ Del said hesitantly.

‘They wish the declaration to be revoked, by order of the White Snow Fox.’

‘There is no chance of that happening,’ Terese said to the lad, who looked as if he had been stepped on.

‘They say, if agreements cannot be reached,’ Del continued, with more confidence, ‘or if these messengers do not return to them, it will be a declaration of *war!*’ The last word came out as a nervous croak.

‘Let’s go and see if we can stop a war then,’ Jean said as she began to stride towards the tent door. Del frowned at her with concern in his emerald eyes before he stepped back to allow her passage. When she was striding alongside the boy with Guardians flanking them, she turned back to see Terese, Hayley, and the tide of other women following with worried faces.

Chapter 19

To Avoid Destruction

Adem hurried from his tent and made his way towards the meeting area where the messenger Alit’aren were waiting. Guardians flanked him, and Carl strode beside him with his spear in hand. The gathering was within the Alit’aren camp, surrounded by Guardians, Devoted, Gai’den, and remaining Alit’aren who were loyal to King Tobin. Ael Tarael and female wielders with Lukrorian Bows also guarded the seven men who stood proudly in their dark uniforms.

Rodriel Tarz was amongst them, standing with the command of a leader; his arms crossed over his chest with the Odin Sons sigils on his collar. Only two others were actually full Alit’aren, another two were Gai’den, and the last two were Devoted looking no older than sixteen.

They were a humble emissary to send for this meeting after the deaths of so many Ael Tarael, as well as soldiers and Guardians who had tried to stop the rebellion. Adem suspected that Tarz wished to appease them with the innocent faces of young men who were sentenced to an early death. If the Alit’aren could not hold the Power, the slowing effect to their aging would cease, and they would only live a little longer than most mortals. Youngsters like these

two, Sedir and Calmus, would be lucky to live to eighty if they were severed from *teron* at this age.

That was cutting their potential life spans down to less than a sixth. Tarz made these same points as an appeal to Jean to destroy the declarations and allow the Alit'aren to continue using the Power.

'I speak for the entire clan when I say we wish to make peace, Daughter of Thor. We wish to end this so that order can be restored and protection provided.'

'Was it protection of our people that saw to the murder of over thirty fully raised Ael Tarael?' Jean asked. 'Would you have us forgive these crimes and accept you back into our army, only to watch you all continue to wield until the taint has driven you all beyond the brink of sanity?'

Adem stood a few paces to the side of Jean and Terese. Carl stood beside him and Hayley, and Wil stood a pace behind. They could all hear the conversation clearly however as the clearing was otherwise silent. Adem had wanted to speak with Tarz alone, though Jean would not allow it, and their appeal was addressed to the White Snow Fox, not one of the Sons of Odin.

'Carl Wilder's declaration will ruin our chances of victory over the Shadow,' Tarz stated in his deep tones. The man was nearly a head height taller than Adem, wide shoulders and dark hair and eyes. His black moustache was thick like two downward-curving horns. He was tanned skinned and muscular, an immortal of the Torvellen clan.

Adem wondered what Torin had learnt so far, his former trainer was his inside man amongst this Alit'aren rebellion. In truth, Adem had started the rebellion, by informing a number of Alit'aren and Gai'den of Carl's new declaration to outlaw male wielding. He'd sent the word out immediately after Carl stated the order. His mind flashed back to his words to Torin when lightning filled the sky and thunder roared.

'Go with them, Torin. Find out their plans and report back to me,' he'd said to his immortal friend. *'You will be my eyes and ears, and you may provide hope of me reuniting with the rebels when the time is critical.'*

The sky appeared to be on fire as more blue bolts had flared in the distance. Torin had promised he would send coded messages to Adem about the movements of the rebel Alit'aren army, sealed with his ancient signet.

He would require a trustworthy man to be his messenger and also one who could play both sides.

His mind returned to the present as Jean replied, 'To avoid destruction, we must make a declaration of peace, that much is agreed upon. Though, the terms of the agreement shall take time. Until then, you are free to come and go as you wish, sending messengers to discuss these terms in full.

'However, I stand by Carl Wilder's declaration, male wielding must remain outlawed, and the punishment shall also stand. Those that continue to disobey these commands shall meet their dues.

'The Alit'aren were once known as the Hammer of the Light, serving and protecting Kismeria from the terrors of the demon armies. From this day forward, the rebel army shall be known as the Forsaken.

‘For if they wish to continue to touch the taint on *teron*, there shall be no ending to the chaos we will surely endure. I wish to be rational with you, Rodriel Tarz, as I know you would have high command amongst the rebels, but I cannot revoke the new laws proclaimed by the Immortal Kings.

‘Messengers have already been sent to every corner of the Free Lands on *altherin* horses; they left last night after your disgraceful acts. Word will have reached many nations already, and you would have little hope of stopping any of them now that they’ve had such a head start. Those messengers will ride their horses into the ground to spread word to the distant keeps and holds.

‘Everyone will know of the new laws, and those Alit’aren that choose to rebel will no doubt fall into your hands. This presents the problem of two great armies inevitably facing off against one another.

‘This is as great a concern to me as it would be if I allowed the declaration to be revoked. I see your heart in this cause, Rodriel. I know you are still a good man with good intentions. Though, I also see that dark burning in your gaze that is more than just your temper brewing.

‘The Sickness is something we cannot predict. How can we trust men who may one day slay thousands in the blink of an eye? The risk is too great, you must see that.’

That burning dark-eyed gaze regarded Jean for some time before the man said, ‘I’m sorry we could not reach amiable terms this day, Jean Fairsythe. You hold the power to end this war, though I am sorry to say it has already begun. We will continue to hold *teron* everyday to preserve our life force.

‘We will continue to train our Gai’den and Devoted to wield against our enemies. We will continue to oppose this new law, and anyone who tries to uphold it, and we shall form our own kingdom where our own laws are governed.’

‘Then you will be hunted down and destroyed,’ Jean said coldly, though Adem sensed her nervousness. She had changed so much since she entered the Arch. She was a strong-willed woman before that, now she was hard as stone.

Tarz grunted and gave a tilt to his head, his eyes regarding her as if she were a white wolf. He then turned to leave when Adem ran up to him and began to follow as the emissaries departed through the crowd. He strode to keep pace with the other man, choosing his words carefully before he asked,

‘Where will you set up this new kingdom?’

‘We have not decided yet,’ Tarz replied in a displeased tone. ‘Far from Nordhel, that much is certain. Perhaps the Green Border nations will accept us, or we may be pushed as far south as the vampire cursed lands.

‘Wherever we go, we will send emissaries to every nation to gather those who choose to rebel against Carl Wilder’s decree. The Alit’aren will be needed when the Sons of Odin face the Dark One, in future battles and in the Great Battle. If we allow our knowledge to dwindle over the next thousand years, there is no hope of victory.’

‘I agree with you, Rodriel,’ Adem said, ‘I will need every male wielder I can summon if my plan is to work.’

‘And what is your plan?’

‘To imprison the Dark One in Kerak’Otozi, seal him within his Resting Point that will hopefully hold him until the end of the Age of Chaos, when we shall return for the Great Battle.’

‘The Shadow will gather a great army of demons to try to stop you from achieving this aim,’ Tarz remarked musingly.

‘That is exactly the reason why I agree with you, Tarz. I will require all of you to fight by my side,’ he whispered the last anxiously, looking around to see if any Ael Trael were following. ‘We can’t allow this war between Ael Trael and Alit’aren. Think of the lives of the young male wielders who will fight against your rebellion. They will hold to their oath to not touch *teron*, and they will face you in battle armed only with swords.

‘It will be a massacre if you choose to use the Power against them. Either way we will be cutting our forces in half. Thousands will die, perhaps tens of thousands. We must work together to ensure the Wars of Chaos do not occur. Jean’s words were simple truth; ‘to avoid destruction’ we must heal this rift.’

‘You wish to avoid destruction?’ Tarz asked with a snort. ‘Without male wielders, this entire world shall fall into ruin. The Dark Armies will destroy us all!’

‘Then follow my commands, as I am the only one of the Chosen who still sees the Light in your cause. Gather all those who oppose the decree, set up base somewhere that Tobin’s armies will be reluctant to attack. Wait for my summons, Rodriel Tarz, and you shall lead the rebel Alit’aren into redemption.’

The man rubbed his square chin for a time, still taking long strides, before he stopped to turn to Adem and offer his hand as he said, ‘My clan will remain loyal to the Blue Water Dragon. If you can prove yourself to be this man before your plan evolves, I will command them to follow you.’

Tarz was amongst those who had heard Carl name Adem as the Blue Dragon on the day they set out from Nordhel. The Prophecies said the Dragon would learn to fly, in the real world, along with other miracles to prove he was the leader of the Saviours. Those Prophecies also stated that the Dragon would not achieve this feat by becoming a Nightwalker, which was the only way Adem was sure he could achieve it. ‘I hope that day comes to fruition,’ Tarz said with an honest look to his eyes, after Adem shook his hand. Then the man scowled and moved off with his dark-coated followers.

Later, in his tent, Adem sat in a large armchair, rubbing his temples while Carl sat dictating scripture to the scholars and scribes. There were four of them today, two of each. The two scholars were the almost identical, secretary-looking immortals, who turned up for every sitting.

The two men were a bane to Carl’s existence, with their constant questions and bickering with him over details, such as the number of eyewitnesses to each accounted miracle.

Adem understood this about the scholars though he was one who could appreciate the meaning and value of a True Witness.

The subject was doubtful with Carl however, who only ever saw the importance of faith based on ancient eyewitness accounts recited to second and third-hand witnesses. Adem knew that in a way, Carl resented being an eyewitness to supernatural phenomenon; it made him feel that he needed purification from the sin of being witness to the afterlife.

Danil Mardel was one of the two scholars; his spiked hair and moustache were grey tinged, while Aldin Foebius, the other, had dark hair. Both often dressed similarly to Alit'aren in black coats and trousers, though most often with the Lion Rohjor sigil embroidered on their chests to mark them as servants to King Tobin.

The two mortal scribes were not so regular, and Carl appeared displeased with the way he often had to repeat himself while dictating. His mood was calm though, from what Adem could sense. Those two wore brown-hooded robes similar to monks.

One surprising change was that all four of the men had started wearing the Holy Cross somewhere on their bodies. Aldin wore a brown beaded wrist band with a chunky wooden cross marked with the symbol of a fish, the ancient sign for followers of Christ.

Danil wore a silver cross upon the right side of his high collar, in similar fashion to the Rohjor sigils most Alit'aren wore. The scribes wore heavy silver chains with silver crosses almost the size of a hand hanging down their chests. As Adem understood it, the base of those larger crosses was a silver dagger encased in another silver cast.

Silver was a strong weapon against vampires, though these men were starting to believe that the Holy Cross would also hold power over Nightwalkers.

Adem had chosen to stay and listen to Carl's recitals of Bible passages, as Adem didn't actually know the Bible stories all that well. He knew of Christ, the Exodus and Genesis, as he had studied religion at school. Adem felt that he needed to learn more of these stories, to preserve his soul. Of course, a madman who knows the stories of the Bible is still mad, and an evil madman is potentially much worse.

Perhaps even the Holy Scripture couldn't save him from the taint. He found the listening to be soothing however.

Carl was reciting the stories of Jesus, and when he got to the part when Jesus was about to heal some men that were stricken with leprosy, Adem exclaimed, 'Jesus will save them!'

He smiled after that as the two scholars turned to him with disgusted expressions as Aldin remarked, 'Oh, thank you indeed, Adem Highlander, for giving away the ending of a perfectly good story.'

'Not just a story,' Adem said waving a lecturing finger at the man, 'a true account of a genuine sign from God.' Carl smiled at that too; he liked it when Adem proclaimed the miracles that required faith.

'Perhaps you would like to tell the rest of this story, Adem,' his friend said.

Adem started to chuckle as he said, 'No no, you're the expert, Carl. I don't want to make any errors.'

Carl then continued with the story as Adem sat back to think on his conversation with Tarz. The man had basically guaranteed he would follow his orders if Adem was able to prove he was the Blue Water Dragon. This concerned him though, if Carl or Wil turned out to be the Dragon, they would probably try to defeat Tarz and the rebels.

His other concern was the fact that Tarz did not deny he would use the Power against Tobin's army, perhaps even slaughtering the Alit'aren that had remained loyal to the Saviours. He began to think of how that could be avoided when he asked Carl, 'What if the Alit'aren only used the Power to block frontal attacks during combat? Air requires less of the

Power, so the risk of the taint would be lowered, and the Alit'aren could increase their skills with the sword to become a legion of blades, buffered by shields formed from *teron*.'

He saw that that idea could work even if the loyalist Alit'aren were forced to fight the rebels. A legion of linked wielders creating walls of Air could slice through those barriers from the other side with their blades. If the shields could withstand fire and lightning, Blademasters could cut down any enemy.

Carl considered it for a time before he said, 'They will still turn mad, eventually. Perhaps this will create a necessary balance though. I see now that things have gotten too out of hand, with the rebel army and the divisions that are forming.'

'I will agree to allow our own wielders to weave Air once a week to increase their abilities at forming shields. Sword practice is first and foremost for them now, though I concede that we may need to allow this variation of the decree for our defences to hold any sort of chance.'

'It would be horrible to see thousands of male wielders massacred because we wouldn't allow them to defend themselves with the Power.'

'I agree, Adem. You may spread the word.'

Adem grinned so broadly his dimples must be showing. 'Thank you, Carl. I won't forget this.'

He then stood to gather his sword belt and blade in its dragon scrawled scabbard. Moments later, he was hurrying from the tent and strolling through the camp with Guardians at his side. It was starting to get dark though the air was humid.

He saw a gathering of Gai'den beside a fire with a spitted roast boar sizzling over the flames. The aroma made his mouth water, and he decided that was the place to be. Already servants were cutting slices off the roast and passing platefuls to a long serving table where Ael Trael, Alit'aren, and soldiers were gathering.

Freshly baked breads and whole cheese wheels also covered the white clothed table, and Adem was soon helping himself to a pork sandwich with a slice of cheese that was identical to Swiss. He carried the large meal in both hands as he moved to sit on the fallen tree beside two of the Gai'den. He knew these mortal boys better than he knew the immortal Alit'aren nearby, so he explained the news to the youngsters. A look of hope burnt in their eyes at his words; they would be allowed to touch *teron* once a week, and they would be able to weave shields to protect themselves while they fought with the sword.

Not all full Alit'aren were Blademasters, especially amongst the mortals, as before now the Power had been the only weapon they needed. Yet even a Blademaster was helpless against wielders unless they had adequate defences. Del was one of the boys, sandy haired and green eyed. Ron was the other, dark of eyes with blonde hair that appeared almost white.

'You have saved us, Adem Highlander!' Del said excitedly. 'Now we can live for hundreds of years with *teron* preserving our flesh. The men will be very happy to hear the news.'

He then began to move off through the crowds, stopping to speak to every male wielder he saw. Adem watched as word spread like wildfire; suddenly, there was a new burning in their eyes, not the taint, but the light that spoke of the wonder of feeling *teron* in your heart and soul.

They were beginning to touch the Power too, first a small few who couldn't resist, though others must have been delaying until they could no longer bare being without the ecstasy of *teron*. If they touched it now, they could not do so again for another week.

Dozens of them began to hold it though, small flows and simple weaves of Air designed to form shields, creating a murmur amongst the male wielders who still hadn't heard the news. They had to know something was up, but they were loyal to each other first and foremost it seemed, so none were named for holding the Power, while the female wielders were oblivious to the charging of energy that was lighting up around them.

Adem smiled again before he took another large bite of his sandwich and sat chewing with a contented heart.

It will still all end in disaster, he thought to himself.

Arawn sent through the *kigare*: *Maybe, but you were right to save them from an early death. There will be further need for the Alit'aren in the battles we will face.*

None of them could have resisted the desire to wield for long. If he hadn't been able to convince Carl, every loyal male wielder would have ended up trialled and severed from *teron* forever. A few years were the expected life span of anyone who suffered such a fate. It then occurred to Adem that perhaps being banned from wielding for the same amount of time may have resulted in the same effect.

Again he considered that longing he saw in the eyes of the immortal kings. Were they in danger of death if they continued to deny themselves even a trickle of the Power? He then realised he'd better go and discuss that with them, in case it hadn't crossed anyone's mind yet. In most cases, once someone learnt to wield, they reached for the Power at least once every day. The effects of resisting that gift could be as consequential as being cut from it.

He didn't want to waste the sandwich, so he took it and the plate, on his way towards Orion's tent. His two Guardians had been snacking close by and they quickly followed. One of the men, Suhl Trendin, leaned to his ear to whisper, 'I sense a lot of male wielders holding the Power, Adem Highlander. Shouldn't you do something about this?'

Adem realised he had started off with such vigour he'd forgotten to report the new declaration to his bodyguards.

'It's all right, Suhl,' Adem replied. 'There's a new decree. You may reach for the Power once a week, not for more than one hour, and you may only form the weaves to create shields of Air. I know you mustn't be strong with such weaves, but perhaps in time, you will be able to defend yourself better.'

'I can form a shield to protect me from steel or fire,' Suhl said which was unusual for a Guardian as most were very weak in the Power. Most could only wield enough to create Fire with their enchanted bows.

'You must be appointed trainer to other Guardians so that they too can learn,' Adem said as he clasped the man on the shoulder. The dark-eyed man wore a black coat and blue breastplate with a green-and-gold wooden bow sticking up above his right shoulder. Taking away their Lukrorian Bows had devastated the techniques that had served these people for hundreds of thousands of years. Fortunately, there were enough female wielders to fill that void in their defences.

Orion stood over a large map rolled out across his desk and held down by golden eagle weights. Tobin stood next to him as they examined the lands surrounding Charkel, planning the movements of scouts. Red figurines from a set of *mohrthra'daeghal* marked the places where revolution was still rife.

Blue figurines marked the holds and keeps that were said to be loyal to the immortal kings. Carl Wilder's decree would help to stem the spread of revolution; at least, they hoped it would.

Messengers were already returning from nearby kingdoms after delivering word of the declaration to banish male wielders from using the Power. A Guardian from Carl Wilder's tent had already reported the alterations to that decree, which meant that loyal wielders would be allowed to weave Air to defend themselves in swordfights. Orion was relieved to hear the news as he had feared his loyal Alit'aren would have been sent to their deaths if they were to face the rebels without such defences.

Lydia and Elmira sat on cushioned sofas within the same large tent, both of them whispering about Adem and Jean. Terese had reported the secret meetings of the two lovers to Elmira in a coded letter. The relationship between the Dragon and the Fox didn't concern Orion; he thought it was an untold part of the Prophecies. Adem and Jean would need each other to survive, just as Orion needed Elmira to breathe.

Tobin was pointing to the figurines placed over the regions surrounding Tentor and Corsair, when Adem entered the tent with a peculiar smile to his eyes. He must have been gloating over the changes to the decree. 'You have something to discuss with us?' Orion asked.

Adem moved to stand with his arms crossed over his chest as he said, 'I have a theory. I'm concerned that both you and Tobin may be denying yourselves precious life force if you continue to resist wielding *teron*.'

'Why do you say that?'

'My theory is that going for years without touching the Power could be as detrimental as being permanently severed from it. My concern is that this might result in an early death, even for immortals. I see the strain in your eyes as you yearn to feel *teron*. This may be even more fatal than the taint. Has any wielder ever resisted the Power for a long period of time voluntarily?'

'There has never been any reason to research such effects,' Tobin replied gruffly. 'Though, perhaps you are right. Lately I have felt, not myself. I stress more and sleep less. The taint could be the problem though I have very rarely touched *teron* since the First Arrival, so it seems more likely your theory is to blame.'

Orion said, 'I agree. We should act in accordance with the alterations, wielding once a week and only with Air for our protection. This should preserve our life forces. I have longed for this.'

He then opened himself to the Power. *Teron* flooded him with light and shadows, joy and despair. Before the Power was tainted, it had been a wellspring of ecstasy, now that

feeling was melded with a dark plague. He wanted to weep with relief at the flood of emotions that surged through him, though he kept his face calm.

Tobin embraced *teron* a moment later, the two of them matching one another, though they only held a portion of their potential. Surprisingly, Adem didn't open himself to the Power. He simply smiled and tilted his head to one side as he asked, 'Now, isn't that better?'

'Will things be better when our husbands have lost their minds?' Elmira asked with a raised brow.

'Would you rather risk them dying before the Great Battle?' Adem asked without turning to face the women. Elmira sniffed and Lydia glared as if she despised Adem.

'It is necessary, my love,' Tobin said to his wife. 'Do not blame the Sons of Odin for what has always been our fate. They shall redeem themselves in the Light.'

'He had better do exactly that,' Lydia replied, 'or his fate shall be the same as the rebels.' That last comment seemed to strike a nerve with Adem, who suddenly looked pained, his gaze inward.

'Thank you for bringing this to our attention, Adem Highlander,' Elmira said finally. 'Now if you would excuse us, we are about to sit for supper.'

'You are welcome to join us,' Orion remarked, which earned him a warning stare from his wife before he added, 'and we can discuss the problem of the rebels.'

'I have already eaten, thank you,' Adem said, his gaze returned to focus, and then he turned and marched from the tent. That response roused Orion's suspicions; he knew Adem had spoken with the rebel emissaries today; he also believed Adem had played a part in starting the rebellion. What was he planning behind that secretive smirk?

Chapter 20

A Place of Refuge

It took a further seven days for the first letter from Torin to arrive. The messenger was one of the youngsters who arrived amongst the emissaries who were free to visit the camp. Twelve men formed their party this time, four Alit'aren, four Gai'den, and four were Devoted.

Rohan Miredis was the lad's name, a boy of sixteen with apple-green eyes and spiked red hair, fair skinned with freckled cheeks. The seal was not damaged, nor did it appear tampered with; Torin had no doubt also cautioned Rohan about the importance of discretion.

He glanced up at the boy's eyes more than once during the time Rohan stood with arms at his sides, while Adem read over the letter. There was a sign of the Sickness in those young eyes, the taint working its evil within his mind. How long would Rohan resist the effects? How long would any of them last?

Adem coughed and folded the letter as the boy's eyes took on an inward gaze.

Hearing voices, most likely, Adem thought to himself.

Perhaps it would be wise to start killing them off before they become a danger, Arawn replied.

Adem's own eyes must have appeared inward while he listened to his Battle Angel. He wasn't sure if that comment was intended as a joke or not.

'Thank you, young Rohan,' Adem said finally. 'You may return to your party.' The boy nodded, which was an indication of a bow, before he turned to leave the tent. Adem unfolded the letter and looked over the coded message again, working the cipher through in his mind. It simply said,

We've camped north of the rising stars. We seek a place to form a foothold.

The grey bear rules the den, though the red wolf holds influence.

There is unrest in this region, we'll likely push southeast or west.

Morale is low amongst the men. There is a need for a strong leader.

There was no signature, though the seal was Torin's signet, the symbol of his ancient royal House. The 'red wolf' referred to Tarz, the 'grey bear' was Brolen Aeldur, a Nordic Alit'aren over eight hundred years old. The 'unrest' would refer to revolutionaries making life uneasy for the rebel Alit'aren invading their lands.

The 'need for a strong leader' was aimed directly at Adem though. Torin would see Adem's leadership as the only hope for the rebels. There was little else to the code except the reference to seeking a 'foothold' which meant there was still no decision as to where they would build a place of refuge.

North of the 'rising stars' put them close to the Mithrim Mountains on the border of Corsair. The mountains would provide a temporary foothold, though the people of Corsair would consider the invasion an act of war. It was unlikely they would engage in battle against thousands of potentially mad wielders however.

Though, the rebels' movements would be watched by a considerable force in that region. Torin's lack of detail about where they planned to move was also disturbing. Adem needed to know where to find this army of wielders when his need was great. The man would surely provide that information once they found a definite safe haven.

The main reason emissaries were still sent to the camp was to gather women loyal to the rebels, wives, mistresses, servant women, any who would leave Tobin's camp to join those that were now called the Forsaken. Many did go too; they must have seen an army of male wielders as a necessary danger for these lands and these times. Adem realised the rebels must be planning to build their own nation, breeding wielders who lived apart from the new laws.

Over fifty women left with the emissary on the day the first letter was delivered, and the following week, another hundred and fifty left. According to Rohan, they were also gathering up women from the villages and farms they passed through, as well as recruiting men to become soldiers in their army.

The rebels also sent out their own declaration, offering sanctuary to any male wielder who did not wish to comply with the new laws that tried to ban them from touching the Power. The alteration to that decree didn't entice the rebels to form a truce however. They seemed hesitant to trust in such a law that restricted them from wielding any more than once a week. They also didn't like the idea of only being allowed to wield Air.

'Alit'aren are weapons forged for destruction,' Tarz remarked when Adem tried to make the man see reason. 'Shields make adequate defences for soldiers, but if we aren't able to form walls of Fire and Earth, we lose the crux of our abilities.'

The following week, Adem received a letter from Torin that explained in code that the rebel army was on the move again. This time headed west between Mendora and Tentor. There was no mistaking their destination, the Kingarin Forest, where they would attempt to recruit Dremelden Immortals.

Perhaps they also intended to make a plea to the Dremelden King. If one of the four immortal kings did not agree with the banishment on male wielding, it would increase the size of the rebel army. Immortal Guardians, Wood Kin, Archers, as well as Alit'aren would join the Forsaken army, swelling their forces until they potentially outmatched the loyalist armies. Soldiers and Blademasters were effective for winning wars of steel, though they would be swept aside like driftwood in rapids against an army of wielders.

Adem discussed this threat with Carl many times as he waited for further news from Torin. He hadn't told anyone of Torin's letters, or that Torin was his inside man within the rebel army. He could not even trust Carl with this secret, for it could cost Torin his life if he was named a traitor. Surely, there were those within the rebel army who knew of Torin's writings to Adem, though none of the seals were broken so far, and Rohan seemed trustworthy, so he trusted that no one knew what information was contained in those letters.

Most of the information Torin had provided was available from scout reports and letters sent from officials in Corsair, Tentor, and Mendora. They detailed the movements of the rebel army and predicted their intended destination.

'We need to send ambassadors to make continued peace talks with the rebels,' Adem would say to his friend, to which Carl would always reply, 'We've tried that already, Adem. Jean gave them their ultimatum, and they would not comply with those terms. We've altered those terms and offered them sanctuary if they comply, and they have refused that offer also. I say let them go their own way, seeking refuge in lands that will surely deny them safe haven, until they are pushed as far as the Southlands, where they will have to watch their backs every moment in fear of vampires falling out of the skies.'

'That hardly seems a justified place for men who once held such honour in these lands,' Adem replied, before Carl would say something like, 'Yes, but perhaps that dent to their ego is what is required before they will see the error of their ways.'

'We have amended the decree to allow all male wielders to continue to touch *teron* once a week, wielding Air to form defences as they continue to practice becoming Blademasters, their new station, and a place of high honour within our armies.'

‘Why can’t they see the sense of this decision?’

‘I’m not sure if it sensible,’ Adem would retort, ‘if you consider the value of thousands of male wielders versus the same amount of Blademasters, it’s like replacing Fire Lions for kittens!’

‘We need the Power to win this war. Steel will not defeat the Dark One.’

Their arguments continued on like that, sometimes late into the night without either one relenting. Adem only wished Carl would see the sense of his argument, which was that they could not win without reuniting the rebels to their cause. He kept his true intentions secret however, only Tarz and Torin knew any part of those plans. Otherwise, everyone thought he was loyal to Tobin and Orion, everyone except perhaps the two kings. They were suspicious of his talks with Tarz, and they surely knew of Rohan acting as messenger for someone within the rebel camp. They would have eyes and ears surveying Adem’s movements to try to learn more.

For this reason, he kept to his tent unless he was in training; he kept his conversations to a minimum and did not discuss the rebels where there were others within earshot. He never mentioned Torin’s name in public, and he never spoke of forming alliances with any of the rebels. He needed everyone to assume that he was focused on how to achieve victory without the Alit’aren. Tobin and Orion also wanted him to meet with them each night to discuss a method of dealing with the rebels, though he always declined to attend. He couldn’t allow Tobin’s army to engage the Alit’aren in open warfare. The casualties on both sides would be extensive, including the possibility of starting wars across the Free Lands.

The Alit’aren could respond by tearing down city walls and burning thousands in giant bonfires. They may try this before they were turned to evil or madness, simply to make the point that they were vexed over being opposed by armies led by Ael Trael.

In his spare hours, he sat and meditated on how to deal with these problems though the solution continued to evade him.

The following week Tobin’s army was on the move again, heading southwest for Corsair, those lands still filled with volatile revolutionaries. Lady Elise Caravine was desperate to reach Auglem Watch, to speak with the lords and ladies there to try to make peace with the farmer armies that had started the uprising. It was the second week of summer when they crossed over into the borders of Corsair, where they met with a small portion of the farmer army, some six thousand men, mostly farmers armed with spears or pitchforks though many also wore swords at their hips.

A man in rusted armour with a grey beard greeted Tobin and Orion, with Adem riding at their side. His name was Tobroel Munjayer, a mortal, made captain of this smaller force that guarded the northern border of the province.

‘I do not wish to make war with you, King Tobin,’ the man said, ‘though I cannot allow you passage within our borders.’

‘We come to make peace,’ Orion said to the captain, ‘and to restore order to these lands.’

‘My orders come from the new ruler of Corsair,’ Tobroel explained. ‘He says to allow none of the immortal kind, nor any of their male wielders within these boundaries. You have many Alit’aren with you, I see.’

‘You are aware of the new laws that govern those loyal to us,’ Tobin said. ‘They are restricted in their wielding, decreasing the risk of infection by the taint.’

‘That may be so,’ Tobroel replied. ‘But I have my orders, and I cannot allow you to pass.’ The man held up a hand like a small wall, then crossed his arms over his breastplate. Adem discussed their next move with the two kings in hushed whispers.

‘We could go around them or go through them,’ Adem suggested, to which Tobin answered, ‘We will request to send emissaries to speak with this new ruler, to try to gain passage for our army.’

This request was at first denied by the captain, though the presence of one of the Chosen seemed to make the man uneasy, so Adem sent a messenger to bring Jean, Carl, and Wil forward. The three of them arrived shortly after on their mounts with Terese and Hayley flanking them.

‘What is your ruler’s name?’ Adem asked.

‘Keljar,’ Tobroel replied nervously. ‘Chief Keljar El’Koto.’

‘And would your chief refuse an audience with the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor?’ Adem asked with a sly grin.

‘Er, I ah . . . I’m not sure, my lord,’ Tobroel said, dabbing at sweat forming on his brow. ‘I suppose he would be honoured to receive such an audience.’

‘So you will grant passage for the Chosen, these two kings and their wives, and a small host of bodyguards?’ Adem asked.

‘I’ll allow it,’ Tobroel replied. ‘Though, your male wielders may not join your escort.’

‘I request to bring four Gai’den and four Devoted; all mortals,’ Adem said. ‘As you know they are only allowed to wield Air to defend themselves. Alit’aren and their Apprentices are basically swordsmen these days.’

The dark-eyed captain whispered to his First Lieutenant for some time before he agreed to those terms. The lieutenant’s name was Thal Agrem, a tall man in his forties, dark hair and eyes with a silvered breastplate over a green woollen coat.

Thal led their party to Auglem Watch. They were allowed to bring four Ael Trael and eight Guardians as well as the eight male wielders. Terese and Hayley were also allowed to join the party. Thal brought a dozen of his own soldiers for escort, all in rusted armour or leather jerkins sewn with metal discs – brown leathers and green coats and cloaks. Some wore rusted helmets of steel or iron, each one different with eagle wings or bat wings at the temples or face bars or chain mail at the back and sides.

Adem had chosen Del and Ron as two of the four Gai’den to join the party. More than once Adem was sure he caught Del making eyes at Jean! She seemed not to notice, or at least she pretended not to. He tried to tell himself it was nothing to be jealous about.

They reached the walls of Auglem Watch after two days. They stopped to make camp the first night and ate dried beef, flat bread, and cheeses from their ration packs. The women sat on their blankets and talked while the men practiced with their weapons, usually the Sons of Odin matched against the Guardians which provided a show for the Corsairan soldiers. That night Adem had questioned Thal about his new leader El’Koto.

‘Keljar is a hard man, Lord Adem,’ he said. ‘I have served better men than him. He seems determined to exercise absolute dominance over his people. He already seems to consider himself a King, and I’ve seen much better kings in my days too.’

‘But El’Koto is just a Chief,’ Adem replied.

‘With Keljar,’ Thal replied, ‘one is much like the other.’

Auglem Watch was fifty-feet-high grey stone walls with the Mithrim Mountains rising in the distance. Towers were spaced around the diamond-shaped structure where horns sounded at their approach. The light was fading when they reached the palace steps in the heart of the stronghold, where they entered to find high-stone walls hung with crimson-and-gold banners and a gilded throne on a dais where the new ruler sat, wearing a golden crown studded with emeralds and rubies.

Evidently, the former farmer had adequately financed himself after overthrowing the rulers in the region. Apparently, there had been no battle, the lords and ladies simply gave up Auglem Watch and the ruling of Corsair to this tall man with blue-grey eyes. Keljar El’Koto would no doubt change his title from chief to king in the months that followed if the region was not handed back to its rightful owners.

‘Welcome, Sons of Odin, Daughter of Thor,’ Keljar said when they stood before him. ‘It is a great honour to have you in my presence.’ The man wore bronzed armour under a red cloak, a dark coat, leather trousers, and boots.

‘We come to speak of peace terms with the rulers of this region.’ Orion began, before Keljar cut him off saying, ‘I make no address to you, immortal king, and I am the only ruler of Corsair, for the record.’ He swelled with confidence. Adem wondered at his audacity of refusing to acknowledge an immortal king’s right to speak.

‘Where are the former rulers?’ Adem asked, to which the man replied, ‘They are kept in a place of safety, where they are watched to ensure they do not attempt to reclaim these lands.’

‘You mean you have them imprisoned?’ Jean asked.

‘They are housed within the cells below the keep,’ Keljar said after a deep sigh. ‘A ruler must be firm with his subjects if he wishes to retain order.’

‘They gave you rule of these lands and you locked them away?’ Terese asked incredulously.

Keljar waved a hand and yawned before he answered, ‘I did not give you permission to speak. Only the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor may address me. If you make this mistake again, I shall have you beheaded.’

‘This is an outrage!’ Terese snapped, to which Keljar replied, ‘I warned you.’ Then he waved to soldiers standing behind the throne as he said, ‘Guards, arrest that dark-haired woman. Have her beheaded within the hour.’

Adem reached for his sword hilt as guards stepped to move around Terese; Jean reached for her bow and drew an arrow of emerald flame pointed at the head of one of the guards.

Wil was easing his golden axe out of his belt loop as Hayley drew an arrow of golden flame from her bow. Carl stood with a straight back, though the crimson spear in his grasp began to glow brightly.

‘There are five Battle Angels between us, Keljar!’ Adem shouted, his hand gripping his still sheathed sword hilt. ‘Tell your men to back off or we shall turn you all to ash.’

Keljar laughed at that, a deep booming chuckle that seemed to fill the chamber. Adem then noticed a touch of madness to those blue-grey eyes. After a long pause, the man said, ‘I

wish no harm upon the Chosen. I simply cannot abide rudeness from those who should crawl in my presence.'

'This woman is Terese Silverblade, Hero of Will, released from the Harp of Souls and the Shield of Fire!' Jean shouted proudly.

Keljar's eyes appeared to stare inward at these remarks, rubbing his golden beard for a time before he said, 'My apologies, Lady Silverblade. I consider you worthy of addressing me, though I would ask that you try to remain civil, or else my edict will be enforced.'

The man was surely mad with power. The question was, could he wield? Silence stretched for a time until Adem spoke up saying, 'Keljar El'Koto, you will swear your service to the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor. You will give up your ruling of these lands and these people so that this region can be restored to order. Your guards will throw down their arms and allow our army to invade . . .' His voice cut off as he suddenly felt a shield of Air snap closed around him, cutting him off from the Power!

'I'm shielded!' Jean cried. 'I cannot touch *terael!*'

'So am I!' Wil shouted, as Hayley said, 'Me too!'

The kings and queens began to groan, evidently fighting to gain a grip on the Power. They stood in a line, stiff as statues, fighting the bonds of Air that held them as surely as any rope or chain. Then out of the doorways on either side of the throne room stepped two men in dark coats and trousers with knee-high brown boots.

Alit'aren! Adem thought in surprise.

Two more of the dark-coated men stepped out after, then two more, then another two, until twenty of the mortal men stood surrounding either side of Keljar's throne. They were all linked, that was how they were able to cut them all off from the Power and shield them while Adem and his friends only held on to a trickle of *teron* or *terael*.

They hadn't suspected a trap, which was their mistake. If they had been holding more of the Power perhaps even all twenty of these men couldn't have cut them off from the Power. *Perhaps*, he thought doubtfully. None of them could release their Battle Angels from their Resting Points without at least a trickle of the Power. With the shield severing him from *teron*, he was helpless.

Keljar began to chuckle again, a deep booming laughter that seemed to make the walls shake. His voice was being enhanced by the Power! But whether it was he who could wield or it was a trick of one of his *Alit'aren*, Adem could not sense. He felt the Power resonating from the one who held the lead in the Link, a dark-haired, dark-eyed man with wide shoulders and tanned skin.

The man held so much of *teron* he seemed to glow like the sun in the darkness of the room. Finally Keljar said, 'You have attempted treason, the punishment for which is death! You will be taken to the dungeons, where you shall await your trails and executions.' He then waved to the dozens of soldiers who began to file out from the side doors as he said, 'Take them away.' Something hard struck the back of Adem's skull. Darkness . . .

Adem crouched in his dark cell, listening to the drip of water through the cracks in the stonework above. He wasn't certain how long he had been imprisoned, hours, days; time moved differently when you were in darkness and pain. He had been severely beaten by the guards who showed him to his cell while the Alit'aren who held his shield watched over him impassively.

Blood was caked on his brow from a wound that had opened up above his right eye and his cheeks were bruised and his jaw fractured. They had broken his right arm also, which hung feebly by his side. If he didn't receive Healing soon, the injury would never Heal completely.

He crouched with his back against the wall, his hands tied behind his back with a course rope, balanced on the tips of his toes with his heels raised. He focused his breathing and attempted to find enough calm to meditate in the hope of finding a crack in the shield that cut him off from the Power. *Teron* continued to evade him despite those attempts; he could sense the Power, and he could almost see it in the darkness, but that light always slipped from his grasp each time he reached out for it.

'Your attempts are futile, Adem Highlander,' the red-haired Alit'aren said. He was one of three wielders holding his shield. 'Each time you make the attempt to touch *teron*, you shall face the consequences.'

Suddenly pain flooded his body and a thousand tiny needles of white hot fire filling his mind and flesh. He screamed in agony; he couldn't have resisted the urge to cry out in pain if he tried. His thoughts were scattered under that force of punishment.

The pain continued, and he screamed again and again; the pain seemed to last an eternity as he begged for the wielder to release him. In his mind, Adem heard an old familiar voice, a voice that made his blood run cold; he wasn't sure if the voice was real or just a memory, but the voice of the Dark One roared, 'YOU HAVE LOST, SON OF ODIN!'

Run and hide like the White Snow Fox, when your enemies are too many.

Fight like the Black Shadow Wolf, when your enemy least expects.

Roar like the Red Fire Lion, when victory is in your grasp.

Fly like the Blue Water Dragon, when the Dark One rises once more.

Ancient Kismerian Proverb from the *Translations of the Karaedhal Cycle*, Author: Talmairaine Honshorin, Court Bard of the Nordic Kingdom, from the Age of Rebirth.

The End of the First Book of

the Sons of Odin.

Book Two

of the

Sons

of

Odin

Druantia's Curse

Collector's Edition

L.A. Hammer

Copyright 2016 L.A. Hammer.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Prologue

To Stage a Rescue

Jothar Kelderath sat behind the large carved oak desk within his tent, situated in the heart of the Ael Trael camp on the borders of Corsair. He looked over scout reports of the fortifications and soldier positions of the armies of the new Chief of Corsair, Keljar El'Koto.

It was only the first morning after the night that the Saviours and the Immortal Kings and Queens had arrived at Auglem Watch with a small host of bodyguards, including some wielders, though some of those reports included eye witnesses to the chief sitting in his gilded throne, with the weapons of the Saviours positioned around his body, like ornamental relics. The Guardians who had made those sightings—after scaling the fortress walls in the night, and peering through the windows of the keep—insisted there could be no mistaking those weapons for any other than the property of Adem Highlander, Carl Wilder, Wil Martyr, and Jean Fairsythe.

Those weapons housed the spirits of the Battle Angels who served the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor. They would never leave those weapons unguarded, and certainly never in the hands of this madman El'Koto. So, Jothar's worst fears were confirmed, the Chosen had become prisoners of this mad chief. That the man was mad there could be no doubt, even his soldiers admitted their chief was a rabid wolf that needed to be put out of its misery. Any man who would take the Chosen as prisoners, was madness right down to his boots!

He crumpled the report in his right fist as he shouted for his First Lieutenant to, ‘Enter!’ Bordin Cremples entered to salute with a straight spine as Jothar began to bark orders at the man. Cremples was slightly taller than himself, a fact that irked Jothar every time he stood face to face with the man. Today the young man wore a bright red silk coat with white cuffs and golden buttons, dark trousers and knee-high leather boots. His angular shaved face and dark eyes gave him the appearance of a loyal hound with his thick down curving moustache. ‘Start moving the men into position!’ Jothar shouted. ‘Prepare to invade! Take that border riff raff hostage and keep them guarded within the soldiers’ camp! Go! Move it man! Now! That’s an order!’

The poor fellow twitched nervously at every command, still saluting furiously until he exited with the look of a man who wished he’d never joined the legions. He always looked that way when Jothar was in a mood, and today Jothar was so outraged he felt he might remove the head of the first man who slipped up in his presence.

No!—It was El’Koto’s head he wanted to plant on the end of a spear, to put on display for all the peoples of Auglem Watch to admire as they cheered for joy at the death of the mad usurper. Yes, he would make it just so, by sunset this day, he would make amends to this travesty. He sat pondering his victory while waiting for those other two. Maldros and Morthros were his least favourite of allies, though he needed their expertise now more than ever. If they began to bicker in his presence he just might start by taking off either one of *their* heads. He smiled at the thought of it, a wicked grin . . . when suddenly the two men came bustling in through the tent flaps in their armour and cloaks. Maldros wore silvered armour over a coat with puffy sleeves of blue-and-red stripes, his cloak also blood red, while Morthros wore a dark green coat and cloak with bronzed armour embossed with charging rams.

The two men looked at one another as if they had been arguing the entire way to his tent. Both appeared quite stricken with grief over the current situation also. To Jothar’s shock, both men offered him salutes! So, they were deferring to his leadership at this juncture. He would remind them both of that whenever they strayed in the future.

The scouts had been sent to follow the Saviours on their three day journey to Auglem Watch. Jothar had sent them as a precaution. Their *altherin* bred horses had made the same journey back to camp in a matter of hours, though he didn’t wish to see the state of the animals after being pushed so hard. It would take a further six days for the entire army to reach the fortified walls, so his only option was to send a small army of wielders on *altherin* horses with a substantial guard to protect them while a rescue team of Guardians and Alit’aren try to infiltrate the keep.

They would reach the walls of Auglem Watch by midday if they allowed the horses to rest for part of the journey. His plan was to arrive in half that time, as they could not waste a single moment. A second wave of soldiers and wielders would arrive by the afternoon to secure the region in case El’Koto’s armies tried to retake the capital. The rest of the camp would make the journey towards Auglem Watch, where they would hold the region until order was restored.

‘We await your orders, Jothar.’ Maldros said.

‘The orders have already been given.’ Jothar replied. ‘The fate of Kismertia rests on our shoulders, gentlemen. If we fail in this task, all is lost.’

‘We have heard your plan of attack, Captain Jothar,’ Morthros said with a twitching of his moustache, ‘but we see some risks there. What if this El’Koto decides to murder the Sons and Daughter before we can reach them?’

‘That is precisely why we must move now!’ Jothar barked in irritation. So, it seemed they were not going to let the day pass without judging his every decision as appointed leader! He was hardly surprised at this, though it caused his rage to bubble and stew, like a hot pot over open flames.

‘But surely there is still the possibility of reasoning with El’Koto,’ Maldros said with obvious strain and extreme concern. ‘However mad he may be, he will have to accept that our forces will wipe him out soon enough!’

‘In my experience,’ Jothar replied through clenched jaws, ‘madmen have little care for death or defeat. Of course I have considered reasoning with the man! I have even sent messengers to attempt such a feat! But I know in my heart that he will not see the sense of reason, he will dig in his heels and harden his heart until we are without any other option but to take back our leaders in a desperate struggle.’ His last sentence was said with a new level of calm, though his teeth were still clenched as each word seethed through in pure expression of angst and waning tolerance for such interruptions.

‘Well, if you see it that way, we will back you as far as we can go,’ Maldros said finally after a deep sigh, as Morthros straightened his spine to salute again which gave Jothar pause to relax a little more.

‘Shall we go over the battle plans once more?’ Morthros asked with a raised bushy brow. ‘I’m still a little nervous that we may have missed something. Do you suppose this abduction could all be part of some greater scheme by the Dark One?’

‘I don’t know about that,’ Jothar replied, resigned to tolerate a little more before he set out on this daring campaign. ‘You have had the entire morning to look over the maps I marked out with our attack formations, but if we must, we must.’

Jothar then used the large map on his desk to run through the marked positions of Jothar’s forces and the army of most mortal farmers belonging to El’Koto. Jothar’s forces were marked by blue figurines taken from a large game of *mohrthra’daeghal*, while El’Koto’s army was displayed with red figurines. Just looking at this example on the map, it was clear Jothar’s army was superior in number, and ability, as his was an army formed mostly of Nordics, some the finest and strongest warriors in all of Kisseria, and the mortal warriors amongst their ranks were also revered as some of the greatest in the land.

It was clear therefore that El’Koto’s plan was fatally flawed, and this made Jothar consider the possibility of a grander scheme by the Shadow as even more plausible. However, if the Dark One knew the Sons and Daughter were held helpless in dark prison cells, he would likely have already sent his Souljhin into those prisons to wipe out the Saviours before the night was through.

His intelligence gave no suggestion that this had already occurred, though the possibility of this becoming the next move of the Dark One caused greater fear to swell in Jothar’s heart, as he suddenly smashed a number of red figurines aside with a swipe of his right hand, as he stared with fuming eyes at his companions as he began to shout, ‘We must move now, gentlemen! The risks are more serious than I had up till now considered. If the

Dark One were to learn of this predicament, just think what he might throw against the Sons and Daughter in their vulnerable condition!’

The realisation seemed to dawn upon the two men who saluted once more with breastplates raised like a pair of plovers before all three men began to march from the tent with extremely agitated vigour.

Talegon Mobritha, Guardian and personal bodyguard to King Orion Demonslayer, was in a foul mood this morning, as he scaled the walls of Auglem Watch for the second time in a matter of hours. He knew he would have been just as helpless if he had joined the king when they first arrived at the keep, though he still blamed himself for not being there. Garbed in the *ghoda’sidhe*, black material tightly wrapped about his arms and legs, the only parts of his body that would appear visible—even in broad daylight—were his eyes, and his bright emerald mask and gauntlets of lacquered steel. This was the result of the enchantment upon the warrior garb, identical to the Guardian cloaks in its crafting; that made the shadow-like material blend with its surroundings to create a perfect camouflage. He could have made the disguise more complete by wrapping the same material about his mask and gauntlets, though this interfered with the code of honour that every Guardian and Alit’aren lived by.

His only weapon was his long sword strapped across his back, also wrapped in the same camouflage material except for the golden hilt above his shoulder. Any guards on the walkways who spotted him would take some time before they understood the threat he posed.

Further along the walkway, Kelflax, Orion’s other bodyguard, hauled himself over the wall to land and crouch, his mauve mask and gauntlets the only parts of him visible on that stone path. Talegon raised his right gauntlet to signal to Kelflax, raising three fingers and pointing to his right which meant there were three guards in sight in that direction. Kelflax raised his purple steel gauntlet, with two fingers raised as he pointed in the opposite direction.

Talegon crouched, watching Kelflax creep along the walkway behind one of the soldiers; garbed in dark leather with a steel breastplate, armed with a crossbow. Keeping himself hidden required a twisting of the limbs from time to time to keep the camouflage material facing the sight lines of the enemy. Kelflax was also skilled at moving silently.

When the first soldier fell from the wall, his scream alerted the second. Kelflax drew his sword and charged towards the man who stood with a confused expression, holding the crossbow bolt pointed downwards. Kelflax’s blade glinted in the morning light, denting the steel conical helmet worn by the guard, flecks of blood spurting outwards as the second man fell to his death.

Talegon watched as Kelflax sheathed his blade and crept onwards along the walkway towards the staircase that would lead to the dungeons beneath the Keep of Auglem Watch. Talegon crouched and waited as the other three guards began to charge towards him, seeing no danger, only hearing the screams of their fallen comrades. These three had their swords drawn, and they ran in blindly. Talegon was relieved at this, as he would have had trouble

dodging their crossbow bolts if the two behind spotted him while he dealt with the first. He waited, until the first was within reach, and then stood to strike the man across the throat with the blade bone of his right hand. The man stood gasping, his sword clanging to the paved stones. Talegon gripped the man by the shoulder and waist belt, hauling him up and over the wall. The man screamed as he fell. The other two charging men slowed in confusion, still not seeing his form completely.

In that moment Talegon charged forwards, crossing the distance between him and the second guard, drawing his sword as he ran. His blade cleaved through the leather vest worn by the second guard, who fell to his knees as Talegon leapt over him to raise the sword high above the third guard, who was fumbling for his crossbow.

‘Mercy!’ the guard shouted as he also fell to his knees, the crossbow falling from his trembling grasp. ‘Please, show mercy,’ the man begged, raising his palms in prayer position.

‘You will show me the location of the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor,’ Talegon said. ‘The Immortal Kings and Queens also, if you attempt to deceive me, you will die slowly and painfully. Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ the man said with a relieved expression, ‘I will show you where they are, I promise.’

Talegon made a bird noise, a signal to Kelflax, he saw his friend raise his mauve gauntlet. Thunder roared a moment after; Talegon looked to the fields surrounding the keep to see Kelderath’s horsemen facing a much larger force of farmer warriors.

Though, Kelderath’s forcers were mostly formed of wielders, Alit’aren to help form shields from arrows and spears—in accordance with the decree—and Ael Tarael to scare this farmer army into submission to avoid bloodshed. The earth heaved and walls of fire erupted ten feet high, flowing towards the farmer warriors like a golden wave.

Lightning flared in the sky, dozens of blue bolts that moved closer to the defenders of the keep with every strike. It was a warning, and a distraction. Talegon and Kelflax were supposed to have waited for this signal before scaling the walls, though they burnt with rage to rescue their king from this madman El’Koto.

When Kelflax reached him, Talegon turned to explain that they would follow this soldier to the dungeons where they would stage a rescue. ‘There are wielders down there,’ the soldier insisted. ‘Alit’aren, they hold the shields over the Chosen. You will need wielders strong at forming shields to defeat those men.’ Talegon looked left and right to see the *ghoda’sidhe* masks and gauntlets of more Guardians and some Alit’aren reaching the tops of the walls. ‘How many hold each shield?’ Kelflax asked.

‘Three linked Alit’aren for every captured wielder,’ was the man’s nervous reply.

‘Gather the Alit’aren strong at weaving shields,’ Talegon instructed his friend. ‘We will attempt to overpower them, one group at a time.’

Something whisked through the air past his face, a crossbow bolt struck the arm of one of the nearby Guardians. The man fell to his knees as his form became the shadow-like material, blood gushing from the wound.

‘Get those gates open, now!’ Talegon shouted gruffly. Soldiers began rushing towards them on both sides of the walkway, crossbows raised as they shouted and pointed at the fallen Guardian. Talegon leapt for the highest rooftop within the walls of the keep, he landed and rolled off the side of the roof to catch himself with his free hand, clinging to the stone and

hanging over forty feet above the pavement. Crossbow bolts whisked past his head, striking the stones where he held his grip.

Terese Marheildon, once known as Terese Silverblade, crouched low in her cell of darkness. The shouts and footfalls alerted her to the presence of guards; she was certain rescue was on its way.

Her immortal ears detected the Power being wielded on the fields surrounding Auglem Watch, she knew it would be Ael Trael either intimidating or annihilating the farmer army that stood defending the walls of the keep. She did not hear the screams of men or horses, which suggested those weaves were only intended to frighten the defenders into submission. A wise plan, it would be difficult to restore order in this region if they began by slaughtering soldiers with the Power.

Damn that mad bloody fool El'Koto!

It infuriated her that they had been so easily duped by the charade of peace that the mad chief had lured them in with. Fear for Jean's life kept her rage boiling like a hot kettle. There were no Alit'aren to guard her, her limited use of the Power was not perceived as any kind of threat.

There was little she could do to get herself out of this situation; other than startle the guards with weaves of Fire, so small they would only be an annoyance. In her past lives she had been an Archer of various clans, wielding arrows of fire from a Lukrorian Bow, though she was always more skilled with the sword, and her abilities were always limited to a tiny spark of the Power compared to most immortals of that Age. Her only hope was to wait for rescue. She prayed that she could save Jean in time . . . and the others.

The Sons of Odin were equally important to fulfilling the Prophecies, though she cared for Jean like the woman was a little sister who needed her protection. Well, Jean needed it now, perhaps more than she ever would again. Terese began to grind her teeth in frustration, wriggling in the ropes that bound her wrists behind her back. She could easily escape those with tiny weaves of Fire to slice through the bonds, and she had done so twice already, which only resulted in a beating by one of the guards. Her rib cage ached from the beatings; she feared some bones were fractured. It seemed beyond belief that these soldiers would willingly assault *women* who were not guilty of any crime.

Perhaps they're all mad.

Her breathing became laboured as a result of the pain in her ribs.

She heard shouts in the hallways outside her cell, the guards also heard though they seemed reluctant to leave her unguarded. Finally one of the men left though the heavy iron door, revealing the sounds of clashing steel and the screams of dying men. The sounds were becoming more distant, as if the fight was moving beyond her cell. She decided it must be because she had no wielders to shield her. Rescuers would not sense the Power in this area so they would move on to cells where they knew Alit'aren were standing guard. Those would be

the cells that held the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor, which would be their primary objective.

Her mind began to race at the possibilities of *teron* being thrown around so close to where Jean was imprisoned. Jean could be torn apart by the Power during such a battle! *I have to get to her*, she thought desperately. *These fools could bungle any plan no matter how cleverly it was devised.*

Then a plan struck her, she wondered how it had taken so long for her to see it. She began to weave Fire and Air, an intricate series of weaves, first to blend her form with the dark stone walls, as she began to force herself to stand. A slice of Fire released her from her bonds, then she created even more complex weaves, to produce a mirror image of herself, formed of Fire and Air, standing outside the cell and facing the guard. The white robed man drew his sword and started to shout, 'How did you manage to escape?' Stepping forward he moved close enough to the prison bars for her plan to succeed.

Her real self, still inside the cage, reached out to pull him towards the bars with both hands. She considered snapping his neck, though she had time to cut off his air supply with an arm around his throat, knocking him out so she could retrieve his cell keys from his waist belt. She did not like to kill pawns in situations where they could be spared, even this one who had seen to her beating.

He was just following orders, she told herself as she unlocked the cell door and moved to take his sword. She would have to exercise restraint when facing these Alit'aren who held Jean captive, provided she was able to secure wielders to create shields to hold the traitors. To run them through with the blade would be to go against the decree of the immortal kings, that even mad or evil Alit'aren must be spared if they could be captured rather than killed.

Just following orders, she thought to herself, grinding her teeth as she opened the door to peer into the hallway of darkness and terrified screams.

Tobin Fireheart, King of the Nordics, listened to the sounds of battle taking place in the hallways surrounding his cell. Rescue would come soon, and he would have vengeance against the mad fool El'Koto for this injustice. He feared for the safety of the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor, for the hope of Kisméria rested on their shoulders, yet his greatest fear was that his dear wife Lydia may be badly wounded, or worse . . . He stood from his crouched position, his hands bound behind his back with a course rope. The shields held by the three linked Alit'aren outside his cell made it impossible for him to touch *teron*.

If he could reach for the Power, he would fill this hallway with blasts of flame; stripping flesh from these traitorous bones. Still, three linked mortal wielders of their strength were sufficient to keep the Power beyond his reach, though he did try, despite the pain they sent through his flesh, like thousands of white hot needles inside his body and mind. He ignored the pain. He laughed at them; snarled like a feral wolf.

'Release me!' He bellowed. 'If my wife has been harmed, you will hang before the sun sets this day!'

One of the men shouted from the shadows, ‘Silence, Tobin Fireheart!’ More pain followed, pulsating through his mind and flesh. The punishment lasted so long this time, he thought he might cry out to beg for mercy. Suddenly the pain vanished—and in that stunned moment that the Alit’aren began to groan in the shadows—he felt the shields vanish also, allowing him to reach for the Power.

Teron flooded his veins, rivers of ice and rain of fire, the ropes fell away from his hands. The Alit’aren outside his cell must have been shielded by other wielders in the hallway. Tobin’s thirst for vengeance overpowered his restraint. A ball of flame hovered in mid air outside the cell, giving him clearer view of the three Alit’aren in their dark coats and trousers. He harnessed enough of the Power to melt the iron bars to burning slag within seconds. As he was stepping over the hissing sludge of the ruined cell, the hallway door opened to reveal the face of Terese Silverblade, wielding a steel sword and followed by two Guardians in a purple and jade mask of the *ghoda’sidhe*.

‘Where is King Orion?’ The emerald masked one asked, Tobin recognising the voice as Talegon, one of Orion’s bodyguards. The other was surely Kelflax.

‘I don’t know,’ Tobin said as he moved to draw a sword from the belt of one of the Alit’aren. ‘I must find my wife first. Who will help me?’ Talegon and Kelflax made vexed noises through their masks—they would be anxious to rescue Orion and Elmira—then both bowed their heads as Talegon said, ‘Of course, we will search for your wife, King Tobin.’

‘We are looking for Jean first and foremost,’ Terese interjected. ‘Any we find before then will be rescued, but we question every guard we can capture as to the location of the Daughter of Thor.’

‘Lead the way,’ Tobin said with a slight tilt of his head; a sign of submission to her demands.

Orion Demonslayer, King of the Torvellen, strode through the hallways of the dungeons of Auglem Watch like a phantom. He held more of the Power than he should have without the aid of a Battle Angel or a wielding artefact to enhance his control, but he did not care for the risks. His soul burned to find his wife.

‘Elmira?’ he cried; flinging a weave of Fire at the seven guards that charged towards him. The bolt flew through their silvered breastplates—an arrow of golden flame as thick as his forearm—to blast all seven into ashes that floated and flared in the dark hallway.

Behind him marched the five Alit’aren who had rescued him from his cell. They had Healed his bruises and the fracture in his skull where he was struck when first captured. The three traitorous Alit’aren who had held his shield before then were wrapped in chambers of Fire the moment Orion was able to wield. With *teron* flooding his veins, the taint was enhanced to amounts that made him want to vomit in disgust. The taint filled his mind also, making him dance on the precipice of sanity—he unleashed another weave that enveloped four guards in a tunnel of burning emerald, the men melted into vapour in a flickering halo—as he fought for control of his wits within the ecstasy and bliss of *teron*. ‘Elmira!’ He shouted. ‘Elmira! Where are you my love?’

Chapter

1



Out of Darkness

‘Silence, Adem Highlander!’ Ekron shouted, stepping forward into the amber torchlight. Pain flooded Adem’s mind and body, hot filaments of energy, like holding onto an electric fence. He screamed in agony, begging them to stop, when suddenly the pain ended, and at the same time his shield vanished!

As he reached for the Power—rivers of lava and hail of ice rushed through his core, the taint so foul he had to heave for breath—his hands were cut free, a ball of light appeared in mid air amongst the three Alit’aren. They were shielded from the Power, and their hands were tied at their sides with flows of Air.

He gestured with his left hand, a pushing motion that flung the cell door off its hinges with a flash of sparks. He drew the sword that hung from the belt of the shielded Alit’aren.

His right arm was useless, and he had had little training to wield a blade using only his left hand, but it gave him some sense of security. He opened the door to the hallway with keys taken from the same Alit’aren, peering out into a scene of shadows and fire. Orion walked surrounded by a blue-white nimbus, his dark eyes looked crazed. The tall man gestured towards a number of soldiers who charged down the hallway, and a moment later those men were wreathed in walls of emerald fire. Their screams were filled with agony.

The wielder moved closer towards Adem’s door, with more warriors garbed in the *ghoda’sidhe* behind him. In the torchlight, Adem made out the face of the man who held more Power than any man should hold unaided.

Orion looked like another person, the taint and *teron* a clear battle in his expression of ecstasy and disgust. Though, it was his rage that burnt in his eyes.

‘Adem Highlander?’ The king asked with a confused expression, still holding more of the Power than Adem would be capable of even if he was aided by his Battle Angel.

‘Yes . . . it’s me,’ Adem replied. ‘You should release . . . some of the Power.’

‘Not until my wife is safe,’ Orion replied in deep tones. ‘Where is she? I have searched for hours in this maze of dungeons.’

‘I’m . . . not sure,’ Adem replied, ‘but . . . I will . . . help you find her. But first, could you . . . Heal me please? My arm, it’s broken, and . . . my jaw.’

‘Of course,’ Orion replied, then he clasped Adem by the shoulder, rivers of ice flooded his mind and soul, he trembled, then convulsed, then struggled to keep his arms at his sides as he felt the bones knit back together by the magic of *teron*. He gasped for breath, feeling young again.

‘Thank you,’ Adem said, as he reached for the sword hilt with his right hand, weaving flows of *teron* into the blade until it shone emerald-blue. ‘You lead the way,’ he suggested, as he didn’t want to be in the firing line between the enemy guards and the amount of the Power that Orion still held. Adem was desperate to find Jean, and his friends, the thought of losing any of them gripped him with fear. But he would not argue with that ferocity in the eyes of the Torvellen King. It was the look of a man in the grip of a mad rage, a burning desire to turn his enemies to vapour, which he continued to do every time they were confronted by guards within the dark tunnels.

Adem wasn’t sure what Jean would say about one of the Immortal Kings breaking the laws of the new decree; he just knew he wouldn’t be the one to tell of what he had seen occur on this day.

Jean listened to the sounds of battle. She sat on the hard bench within the darkness, her hands bound. Three Alit’aren guarded her cell, their faces hidden by shadows unless one of them stepped into the torchlight. The three men were nervous now, also listening to the screams of men dying from what she guessed were attacks unleashed by wielders.

She had sensed the incredible pain felt by the three Sons of Odin during their captivity however, especially Adem’s torture. Her sense of his relief was the sure sign that he’d escaped, though she could also detect him moving towards her cell.

She knew Adem would not let her down, nor would Terese. She regretted not sharing the *kigare* with Terese also. Perhaps she could find a way to bind their senses with a spell, to link their minds for greater security during just such situations. Of course, the woman would then know immediately if Jean ever bedded Adem again.

If I ever get out here alive.

Suddenly, she felt her shield vanish! She reached for *terael* and the Power flooded her veins. The three men began to shout curses; obviously they had been overpowered and shielded. She created three new shields. She sealed the weaves; then she demanded, ‘Release me!’

Two of the men were bound in walls of Air also, so they were unable to move, though she allowed the key holder to walk to the cell to open the door after she gave the threat of, ‘Unlock this door or I’ll burn you alive!’ It was just a threat of course; she didn’t have it in

her to resort to such violence against human beings, especially such innocent eyed youths as these three were.

Her hands had been freed the moment she touched the Power. The dark eyed young man fumbled for the keys and opened the lock with trembling hands.

‘Don’t hurt us, please,’ he pleaded after she was free of the cell. She immediately bound the third male with Air so his hands were locked at his sides, then she took the keys from his fingers and moved to open the large iron door that enclosed her quarters.

The first face she saw in the hallway of shadows and fire was Terese, charging towards her shouting, ‘Jean, thank heavens you’re alright!’ Jean stepped into the hallway to see King Tobin striding behind her with a host of Guardians and Alit’aren following, all garbed in the black wrappings and brightly coloured masks of the *ghoda’sidhe*.

She heard a shout behind her, and turned to see a guard charging towards her with his sword raised. A bolt of lightning flew past her head to strike the man, sending him flying in the opposite direction in a ball of blue fire. She turned back to see that it was Tobin who had cast the bolt. Blue fire still burnt in his palms.

‘You mustn’t wield Fire, even to save my life, King Tobin.’ Jean said urgently. ‘I cannot protect you from the new laws. Even a king must suffer his fate if he disobeys the decree.’

‘You would sever me from wielding?’ Tobin asked with a puzzled expression.

‘That is in accordance with the law.’ Jean replied. ‘Please, you must not do more than weave shields of Air. These men are witnesses to your crime, if I allow you pardon it will suggest the rules may be broken under special circumstances.’

‘But that would be a death sentence,’ Terese said. ‘He was only trying to save your life, the life of the Daughter of Thor! Be reasonable, Jean. Tobin is a great king. He cannot suffer such a fate.’ The woman’s eyes were pleading; she would see the necessity of his act, and hope that Jean could forgive him. But Jean had to uphold the law, it was her duty. She looked behind the men down the hallway to see the bodies of guards still writhing in agony from the flames that licked along their flesh and bones.

‘If this is your doing, Tobin Fireheart,’ Jean said, ‘you will face due punishment.’

‘They have my wife!’ The man replied in outrage. ‘I tried to conform to the laws, but there were too many of them, we were outnumbered. I must save Lydia.’ His words were desperate at the last.

‘We will find your wife, Tobin.’ Jean said reassuringly. ‘Do not wield Fire again in my presence. I may be able to keep you alive if you follow my orders.’

Carl marched through the dark tunnels of the dungeons, four Alit’aren behind him as he moved with the temper of a lion on edge. They would form shields to protect him if he was in any danger, though with the amount of *teron* he held, there was little chance of that.

He had ripped off his cell door with weaves of Air, as soon as the three Alit’aren who guarded his cell were shielded. Those three would be unable to move until he returned to release the weaves.

He would not let his temper turn him into a murderer, when there was the option of preserving life. These traitors deserved a fair trial, perhaps then they would be severed from *teron* to never wield again, a sure death sentence, though that was more humane than burning them alive.

The guards he had confronted during his search through the dungeons had been dealt with by similar means. He bound them in shields, trapping them as surely as if they were frozen stiff. He was only strong enough with Air, due to his knowledge gained from the life of the High Druid—during his experience in the Chameleon Arch—and as a result of his link with the four Alit'aren who had rescued him, their strength in the Power passed onto him for the most part.

Behind the Alit'aren walked Hayley Martyr and Queen Lydia, both also rescued from their cells by the same four wielders. They would be more effective against these guards and traitor Alit'aren, due to their willingness to wield Fire to vanquish their enemies, though Carl would not allow such destruction of human life. He saw it as his duty to protect the souls of those two women also. They were unharmed, which was a great relief to him. He feared what Wil and Tobin might be capable of if their wives were badly injured. They often found congealed dark corpses licked with flames and the scent of burning flesh.

They approached a cell door. He sensed the three male wielders within that area. *Teron* flooded his veins and he weaved shields to surround the three Alit'aren behind the door. He felt their hold on the Power vanish as he locked the shields. There were no other male wielders in there, he could sense it. He broke the lock on the door with Earth and Fire, then pushed the door inwards to reveal the three men frozen with their arms at their sides. He could only make out one of their faces in the torchlight, though that young man looked terrified and the other two groaned with despair. 'I won't harm you,' Carl said. 'Who is your prisoner?'

'The Torvellen Queen is here.' The first young man replied, dark of hair and eyes. Carl wove a ball of blue light that hovered in the air in front of the cage, revealing Queen Elmira, in her blue silk gown and white cloak. Her jewels had been taken from her evidently, as was the case with Hayley and Lydia. The mad fool El'Koto obviously followed some of the rules of revolution, taking from the rich with the premise of giving to the less fortunate. Though Carl suspected the man would use the wealth to build his armies in an effort to conquer the world.

Delusions of grandeur, he thought to himself.

He gestured to unlock the cage and make the door swing outwards.

Wil's eyes shot open, the Power flooding his veins. It was the familiar ice cold trickling of *terael* flowing through him. He trembled from the force of the Healing, the most violent spasms he had ever experienced, which was no surprise, as his wound was deep. He gasped for air when the feeling left him, his focus returned to allow him to make out the face of the

woman in the shadows. It was Jean. He looked around his body to see a large pool of blood, so much he wondered how he had held on this long.

He realised when he woke that it was Jean's voice that he had heard. 'Thank you,' he said after a few breaths. 'You saved me. How can I repay you?'

'By helping us get out of here.' That was Terese's voice; he made out her dark braid surrounded by a nimbus behind Jean.

'I must find Hayley first,' he said as he tried to stand, and then he collapsed from the incredible pain that still filled his chest, like a hole of fire. Two Guardians moved to pick him up and put his arms over their shoulders, he recognised their eyes through the green and mauve masks they wore, Talegon and Kelflax. 'We cannot leave without Hayley!' He breathed desperately. 'Will you find her, Jean?'

'You require an expert Healer.' Jean said. Wil had formed a shield a half-second too late to stop a crossbow bolt from punching through his chest. 'I promise I will find your wife and bring her out of here alive and well.' Then she gave orders to Talegon and Kelflax to take him to the surface. He passed more Guardians and Alit'aren in black garb and coloured masks and gauntlets, as well as King Tobin in his dark blue silk robe and black cloak. His crown was missing, and his eyes appeared filled with the same despair that Wil felt in the search for his wife. Then he heard Jean shout down the hallway, 'Tobin, go with Wil and guard him.'

'I'm not leaving without Lydia!' Tobin bellowed.

'That's an order!' Jean snapped back at him. 'You mustn't wield any element other than Air. I will question Talegon and Kelflax to learn if you disobeyed me, now go!' To Wil's pure amazement, the Immortal King obeyed her. He raised the steel sword in his grasp to hold it vertical in front of his face as he gave a short bow, then turned and began to stride down the hallway with two more Alit'aren following.

'This way, Wil Martyr,' Tobin said. 'I shall lead us to safety.'

Adem watched Orion turn a group of guards into pillars of flame with a gesture. The immortal must have taken down over fifty men in such a way since Adem had begun to follow him. The five guards were standing with swords and axes in their hands one minute, then they were screaming as red flames wreathed their forms, arms wide and bodies falling as the scent of burnt flesh swept down the hall. Their search had been pointless however.

Everywhere they went they found either empty cells or more guards needing punishment. Behind them marched more Alit'aren and Guardians who protected the rear with shields of Air, and more than once they had been forced to protect Adem and Orion from guards wielding crossbows. If Adem had his way, the Alit'aren would be allowed to use any means of force necessary to ensure the safety of the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor.

They turned a corner to see four guards with crossbows aimed. The bolts flew towards Adem and Orion as they both wielded shields of Air like a transparent wall of stone. The four bolts struck the invisible shield, two of them punching through the wall but the shafts were frozen halfway. In the same moment Orion gestured towards the men, his right hand

squeezing into a fist. The four guards exploded into fountains of blood, body parts flying in all directions.

Adem was sickened by what he saw, though he also saw the way those weaves were formed and stored that information away like precious gems. The man's rage was at boiling point, the poor guards becoming helpless victims whenever they stood in his path. Adem wondered if he could become so heartless and cruel at times when Jean's life was in danger. He was worried for her now, though his sense of her through the *kigare* was that she was free. He knew when he sensed her start to wield, the flood of emotions a sure giveaway of her holding the Power.

Shouts were heard up ahead, and then from behind, guards were charging in from both sides. Dozens of white robed soldiers began to file down the hallway; he looked behind to see just as many. Most were armed with swords, axes or spears, though others wielded crossbows.

Orion gestured; a bar of liquid blue light flew towards the men in front, the bar struck the first guard in the silvered breastplate; erupting out the back of the man in the pattern known as Fire Serpents. Lightning surged through the chests and out the backs of the columns of soldiers, the men screaming as they fell, scorched and twitching like sprayed insects. That occurred before Adem turned to face the guards behind them, the Alit'aren also facing them and weaving shields.

Crossbow bolts flew to strike the wall of Air, two punching through halfway. Adem gestured to the guards, weaving two Jade Warriors that stood eight feet tall. The emerald samurai warriors charged down the hallway; slicing bodies into piles of flesh fit for a butcher shop. It only lasted a matter of seconds. There was no way he could have avoided killing those men, they were outnumbered and even linked he would not have been able to hold all of them with Air. He realised he could become just as deadly as Orion.

He turned back to see the carnage of Orion's weaves, piles of bodies with holes burnt through their chests. That had to be the last of their reserves. Their escape was almost assured. His sense of Jean then was that she was making her way to the surface. He hoped that meant she had found the others. He said to Orion, 'Follow me.'

Chapter

2



Into the Light

Adem reached the surface level of the dungeons to find that Jean had played a major role in the rescue effort. Terese shadowed her as usual, the dark haired woman standing with her arms crossed under her breasts as she marched beside Jean step for step. Wil was badly wounded and lying on his back, waiting for the skills of an Ael Trael who was an expert Healer. His eyes were closed and his breathing slow, as if he barely held onto life.

Occasionally his eyes would flicker open with a look of dread, until Hayley arrived to put his mind at ease. Guardians carried Wil to the higher levels of the keep, towards the place where their Battle Angels resided in their Resting Points. The enchanted weapons stood leaning against the sides of El'Koto's throne, including Hayley's golden bow. Obviously the madman had planned on using the Battle Angels in his quest to conquer the Free Lands.

Their other weapons were found in large chests in rooms nearby. Adem was relieved when he closed his hand around the golden hilt of his enchanted blade, and felt his connection with Arawn increase dramatically. He had barely been able to detect the words Arawn sent through the *kigare* during his time in prison, now he heard the Battle Angel remark; *I blame myself for not seeing the trap, Son of Odin. Forgive me.*

Adem sent his reply. *We were taken by surprise, no one is to blame.* Regardless of this, Adem felt it had been his own fault. This would be a lesson to remember, they could not take chances by putting trust in strangers.

Jothar Kelderath and his small force of wielders had taken the city hostage some time before Adem reached the surface. Wil received the Healing he required from an Ael Trael in El'Koto's throne room. The woman had large dark eyes and the tanned skin of a Torvellen, though she was Nordic as her golden hair suggested. Dorelda Motolari was her name; Kelderath had brought a handful of expert Healer Ael Trael with the first wave of warriors. Lydia and Elmira had been reluctant to attempt to try to save Wil once they had a good look at the wound. Dorelda sealed that wound however, making flesh and muscle reform. Wil was on his feet moments after, looking half dazed and complaining of hunger. Adem was also famished, though his focus was on securing Auglem Watch.

El'Koto was in chains and being watched by some of Kelderath's soldiers, as well as Guardians and Alit'aren. Two Ael Trael also formed the guard in case there was a need. The mad chief looked forlorn when the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor stood before him,

holding the weapons he had so deviously coveted. When Adem asked the man if he had anything to say in his defence, El’Koto replied, ‘I only wished to keep the Saviours safe before their time to face the Dark Lord. So much depends on you four . . . without you . . . there is no hope . . . there is nothing.’ His grey eyes took on that look of madness as his gaze became inward.

Yet he had ordered our executions. Truly a madman then!

‘How did you recruit the Alit’aren?’ Jean asked in cold tones.

‘They wished to serve a ruler who would allow them to wield *teron* whenever they wished.’ El’Koto replied, a firmness returning to his voice, as if he were ruler once more. ‘They came from Rutheldor; months before the new laws were passed, seeking refuge from the threat of revolution.’

‘So you used their strength to intimidate the rulers of Auglem Watch to hand the city over to you.’ Jean said. ‘A clever plan, the only flaw I can see is that these Alit’aren would surely become madmen.’ El’Koto shrugged his shoulders at that, his expression suggesting a sickly feeling, most likely in his skull. The fact that so many Alit’aren could put their trust in this madman, showed just how dangerous the conflict between male wielders and the rest of the Free Lands was going to be. They longed for a strong leader who could provide them with a goal other than destroying the world. But what they also hoped for; was a leader who would provide them with immunity from the new decree. They were terrified of living in a world in which all of their abilities were taken away. They saw it as the beginning of the end.

And they could be right about that, Adem thought to himself, Arawn making no reply. Adem’s sense of his Battle Angel was the usual brooding, descending into fire with a heart of ice. ‘Take him to the dungeons,’ Adem commanded. ‘He will await his trial and meet his fate for his betrayal.’

For the next few hours the first wave of soldiers and Ael Trael secured the city, relieving the guards of their duty, and handing the protection of Auglem Watch over to Kelderath’s forces. The crowns and jewellery that were stolen from his friends were returned with apologies from the servants bearing them. Jean and Terese held the throne room while Adem, Carl and Wil patrolled the city streets with Hayley, Orion and Tobin. Lydia and Elmira also remained with Jean to see that order was restored within the keep. Adem guessed that Lady Elise Caravine would be appointed head ruler of Auglem Watch in good time.

Adem kept his hand hovering above his sword hilt as he strolled through the streets, Carl pacing beside him, using his red spear like a walking staff. Wil and Hayley marched behind, their eyes scanning in every direction like wolves on edge. Tobin and Orion marched proudly, striding with the grace and nobility that only two kings could manage. There were no casualties amongst Kelderath’s forces, all wounds were healed in time and then they saw to Healing El’Koto’s forces. They would not let good men die if they could be saved. These men were simply servants to a tyrant; they were not guilty of El’Koto’s betrayal.

When they returned to the throne room, Jean and the other women had found a number of other relics tucked away in chests that sparked his interest. One was a horn made of pure silver with gold rings around the tip and base and a golden ram scrawled across the middle. On closer inspection, Adem sensed the presence of a Battle Angel using the horn as a Resting Point. His sense of the spirit told him it was a male Battle Angel, confirmed by

Arawn through the *kigare*. It was the spirit of Balor Evil Eye, named for the loss of his eye in a battle against the Dark One.

When he summoned Balor, a ten feet tall figure of light and shadows appeared, a man with a flowing white beard and moustaches of fire, glowing blue armour and boots over a dark coat and trousers of dark scales. He wore a conical helmet of blue fire that surrounded the eyes—giving him the appearance of a great one-eyed owl—one blue fire, the other dark as tar, with thick twisted bull horns that were brown and ribbed, rising out of the steel skull cap. Balor gripped a massive double-bladed blue axe in his huge palms, holding the weapon across his body as he bowed in salute to Adem. ‘Balor the Invincible, Father of War, I give greeting. I am one of the Sons of Odin. Will you commit yourself to serve me, as my Battle Angel Guardian?’ The titles he gave Balor were provided by Arawn.

Balor grumbled like a great bear for some time, stroking his beard before he replied; ‘I will commit to serve, Son of Odin. Before now, there were none I deemed worthy of my strength. However, Arawn confirms to me that you are one of the Chosen. I accept.’ Balor’s voice was almost thunderous like the Shadow Men. He then returned to the silver horn in a cloud of colour and a white flare. Adem blinked, half dazed, and then tied the horn to his belt loop.

The next hour was spent looking over the piles of treasure, seeking out the artefacts that contained more Battle Angels. Jean found a small stone statue that looked to be made from ivory, a figurine of a swan with wings folded back as if floating on the water. The trinket fit neatly into her belt pouch, and was the Resting Point of Anwen—or Branwen as she was known as the sister of Bran the Blessed—a seven feet tall figure of emerald and aqua fire in a shimmering gown and crimson armour. She wielded a staff like an untrimmed tree branch with leaves of many colours at the tips and birds of fire nesting in the branches. Long golden hair and large dark eyes, her skin was pale cream and her figure was quite voluptuous. Jean said the correct words to request her service and the Great Angel accepted, transporting herself to the Resting Point of Jean’s blue glowing sword. She kept the trinket however; perhaps she saw that it had a use as another potential Resting Point. Though, Jean didn’t find another Battle Angel.

Carl found a small dagger that contained the spirit of Angus Mac, also known as Oengus Og. The Battle Angel was dressed in dark cloth with a green-and-red kilt, silver armour with snakes embossed across the chest and he wielded a staff of emerald light. Carl explained that Angus was said to be a great Healer.

Wil found a ring of gold with a fat cut ruby that was the Resting Point for Bran the Blessed, sister of Anwen and brother of Angus. It didn’t seem unusual that three family members could be found together in this horde of relics. Bran was eight feet tall, dark shoulder length hair with large blue eyes, skin of pale blue and mauve armour. He wielded a shield of golden light and a broadsword of emerald flames.

Adem also found Llew Llaw Gyffes. The Battle Angel stood over twelve feet tall, a figure of muscular blue arms and legs, golden scaled armour that glowed orange over his chest and torso, his hair flowing blue fire and his eyes were white light. He wore a golden crowned helmet that surrounded his eyes and jaw like a face guard with long bison horns moving out horizontal on either side of the skull. Llew wielded a long sword of blue flames—over eight feet long—and carried a massive rectangular shield of red light. A cape of

blue fire flowed around his form that was embroidered with gold patterns of wolves. The gigantic figure towered above Adem as he spoke the words of request, ‘Llew Llaw Gyffes, Brother of War, I request your service to me.’ Llew responded in deep rumbling tones as he said, ‘The Sons of Odin are the key to victory over the Shadow at the Great Battle. I will gladly serve you until that end.’ Adem then presented his blue enchanted bow for the Battle Angel to use as a Resting Point. He had found Llew residing in a golden statue that looked similar to the fat bellied, smiling Buddhist monk teachers most commonly known as a Buddha statue. He wrapped the relic in dark cloth and had it sent to be stored with his belongings.

The next six days were spent inside the walls of Auglem Watch while the forces that had already arrived made camp around the city. On the seventh day Jean declared Auglem Watch secure, and she began to unleash her wrath against the two immortal kings, for their actions during their escape. Her next move was going to shake the foundations of everything Kismeria held sacred.

Chapter

3



The Death of Two Kings

Jean called to order an official trial for Tobin Fireheart and Orion Demonslayer. Adem thought the move was desperate in an attempt to uphold the new laws that outlawed male wielding, though he did not argue with her decision. The trial was held in one of the large pavilion sized tents on the seventh night since the rescue. Tobin and Orion came to the meeting in their bright silk robes and dark velvet cloaks lined with black-spotted fox-fur.

They wore their jewelled crowns and their swords at their golden-medallion waist belts. They looked every bit the kings they were, esteemed and glorious. Lydia and Elmira were equally bright in silk gowns and woollen cloaks, their jewellery bright in the lantern light.

They brought twelve Ael Trael to stand as witnesses to the trial, seven dark coated Alit'aren also stood along the walls of the tent with hands clasped behind their backs. They all wore swords, their only weapons. The faces of those men were humbled when Jean began to tear into Tobin and Orion for their crimes. Jean had also brought another twelve Ael Trael who would hold judgement over the two immortal kings. The women filled most of the tent space in their bright silks and glimmering jewels. All stood with the expressions of those who wished to be anywhere other than here. The twelve Jean had appointed were all mortal Ael Trael, Lydia and Elmira had brought twelve immortals. 'We stand here today to make judgement over Tobin Fireheart and Orion Demonslayer, for breaking the oath of the new decree that restricts all male wielders from touching *teron*, except to weave shields of Air.' That was how Jean began the trial, followed by bringing forth witnesses who saw Tobin and Orion weaving fire and lightning to destroy mortal men inside the dungeons of Auglem Watch. When Jean called forth Adem, he cringed at the thought of betraying either Jean, or Tobin and Orion. Adem stepped forward to wait for questioning from Jean. Up till now all of her witnesses had been very forthcoming in their admitting to seeing the two kings wield the Power. Adem wished to do something before Jean made the mistake of her life and ordered that Tobin and Orion be severed from *teron*. 'You were with Orion in the dungeons during the escape?' Jean began in hard tones, to which Adem replied, 'I was.'

'And did you see Orion create weaves of Fire and Earth to kill guards and soldiers loyal to El'Koto?'

'I did,' Adem admitted, feeling a sinking feeling in his heart after deciding he could not betray Jean, especially when she needed his support in such an important decision. 'But he acted with nobility, saving the lives of those loyal to us, including providing Healing to me when I was seriously injured. I think these men deserve partial forgiveness for their crimes, and a lighter sentence.' Jean stared into his eyes like boring holes through his skull with invisible flames as she admitted, 'I also witnessed such weaves being performed by Tobin, once it was even to save *my* life. I understand that to order these men be severed from *teron*, is an almost certain death sentence, and the great King of the Nordics, and the mighty King of the Torvellen, will fade from memory in the minds of the mortals, becoming a myth of ancient days.

'Kismeria will be lost without strong leadership, but the new laws must be upheld, or we will invite anarchy when we attempt to judge others more harshly. Do either of you have anything to say before judgement?' Tobin and Orion looked to one another, nervously, and then Tobin said, 'I only wished to save the lives of my wife and the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor.'

'Do you have anything to add, Orion?' Jean asked with a raised brow.

'We were ambushed,' Orion said furiously, 'all of our lives were at stake, the fate of Kismeria! We cannot be judged. We are the Immortal Kings of Tarvel and Nordhel! The Power has been a part of our world since the First Age. We live to serve the Lord and now to serve you, Daughter of Thor, and you would hold judgement over us for this service? They took my wife! They could have killed her! If Elmira had died I would have gone to join the

rebel Alit'aren. I would have left the Sons of Odin and the Daughter of Thor to fight their own battles! I would have led an army of men who were still free to wield the Power!

'I would have faced the Dark One at the Great Battle, using the gifts that were granted to our world! We are lost and without hope if the Alit'aren are restricted in their wielding! The decree must be revoked!' He delivered the speech like a king, but also like a man enraged, a man on the brink of sanity. Both of Jean's and also Terese's eyebrows rose considerably during that speech, though Jean did not back down one bit as she said, 'I move to pass judgement that the two immortal kings should lose their crowns and their land, their kingdoms and their kingship, to become Guardians to serve as protectors to Lydia Everlight and Elmira Goldenbraid, who will also lose their titles as a lesson for them that they should keep a tighter rein on their husbands.' That pronouncement brought shocked murmurs from almost everyone in the tent, Tobin and Orion staring with outraged faces, Lydia and Elmira looking as if they were about to faint in sheer disbelief. 'Who will stand with me, to enforce this judgement?' Jean asked; her eyes still boring holes through Adem's skull. There was a long silence, everyone's eyes fixed on him or Jean. He realised if he didn't speak up now, he might lose her forever, so he said, 'I will enforce this judgement, as one of the Chosen. I offer my full support first and foremost, in the hope that it will sway others to agree with your decision, Daughter of Thor.' That brought a slight smirk to her lips, and her eyes took on a wicked new burning. He told himself he'd made the right decision there.

Tobin and Orion groaned, both knowing his move would hold influence over the others. Carl was next to offer support, followed by Hayley and Wil. That was the beginning of the cascade of votes, as hands began to rise and the twelve mortal Ael Trael began to speak saying, 'I will pass judgement!' Adem looked to the faces of the immortal kings and queens after all twelve women had agreed, when Jean said, 'If the twelve immortal witnesses will also agree, it will save these men from certain death, for if this cannot be agreed upon, they shall be severed from the Power.' That brought the twelve immortal Ael Trael around to a forced full agreement to her decision. 'Then it is done.' Jean said coldly. 'I strip you of your titles and your land, you are no longer king or queen of any land, and you have no homes and no fortune. Your coffers will be given to the armies of the Chosen. Your kingdom shall bar its doors to your arrival and you shall never set foot in its halls ever again, unless under the supervision of the Sons of Odin or the Daughter of Thor.' That brought exasperated sighs from Lydia and Elmira, Tobin and Orion looked as if Jean had fired crossbow bolts through their hearts. But Jean wasn't finished yet.

'You will no longer lead armies and you will no longer give commands. You shall serve your Ael Trael wives as Guardians to protect their lives as they uphold justice. As Guardians you shall be allowed to touch *teron*, once a week, to practice forming shields of Air. If I learn that either of you have touched *teron* to use another other weave, from now until the Great Battle, you shall be severed!' Her tone was cold as ice, though her eyes still burnt with fury. 'Strip these men and women of their crowns and their jewellery. They are no longer nobility, they are common folk. You shall not look upon them with awe any longer. You will watch them like hawks for the chance of conspiracy, and you shall only address them by their true titles, Tobin Fireheart, Lydia Everlight, Orion Demonslayer, and Elmira Goldenbraid.' Those last remarks brought glimmers of forgiveness in the eyes of the four she had passed judgement over. She had shown enough mercy to allow them to keep their names

of legend. Most would have still regarded them as such, and most would have addressed them by such titles if Jean wasn't in earshot, though these new rules she pronounced would see that they avoided such honouring if they knew Jean would find out about it. In a few minutes, Jean had destroyed two nations, broken two kingdoms and left them without rulers.

'This will fuel a war of succession.' Lydia said, with hardness to her tone. 'Kismeria will be bathed in bloodshed, the lands will become as they were during the Immortal Wars, when famine, disease, pestilence and war plagued this world. You will be responsible for this, Jean Fairsythe. It was your decision to make, and you Carl Wilder, for inventing the decree.' Those words sounded like a judgement of her own; though Jean simply replied, 'The new laws must be enforced, and an example had to be made.'

Adem glanced back at Carl and Wil over his shoulders; they both looked as perplexed as the former kings and queens. Hayley wore that sly look to her eyes, though she also appeared deep in thought, and equally concerned. The Ael Trael then began to parade around the four who were judged, stripping them of their crowns and jewellery. Jean told them they may work or trade for new jewels, though they were never to wear a crown again. They were allowed to keep their clothing on for the sake of modesty, though Tobin and Orion were told that they would only wear Alit'aren black or the *ghoda'sidhe* or *torin'sidhe* from now onwards. 'You are Guardians to your Ael Trael,' Jean told them. 'You shall no longer wear the finery of a nobleman; you will always wear the garb of warriors.' Tobin and Orion bowed their heads slightly as a sign of obedience. She had spared them some honour and hope of redemption.

Orion left the trial with Tobin at his side and Lydia and Elmira close behind. Neither of their wives discussed the judgement further with the twelve Ael Trael they had brought as witnesses. The decision was made, the word of the White Snow Fox was a law higher than any king or queen, and she was one of the Chosen, one of the Saviours of Kismeria. With Adem Highlander's support, his fate was sealed. He could not turn against them, nor would he ever leave their side, but right now he wanted to tear out Carl Wilder's hair for making that decree. His rage towards Jean Fairsythe was subdued by the honour she allowed them to serve as Guardians to their wives, as well as affording them the life force of the Power, rather than the alternative that was certain death. He considered himself lucky to be a king, when facing the wrath of Jean Fairsythe.

No other male wielder would have such a buffer to escape being severed from *teron*. He would never command an army ever again, never sit on his gilded throne in his Royal Throne Room at Tarvel, never order servants to do his bidding, or give commands in combat. He had lost everything that defined him in the wake of that wrath. Though, No!—He was still so much more than just a king, he was a Master of the Blade, an expert battle tactician, a great hunter and tracker, a resourceful man, a man who loved his wife.

When they arrived at their tent Lydia walked in behind Elmira, saying at the top of her voice, 'I will smother that little tart in her sleep! How dare she make judgement over the

Immortal Kings and Queens! I will demand a retrial! I will gather armies to support you until she is forced to give us back our titles and our kingdoms! The sheer nerve of that girl, to try to bully us because of one stupid rule being broken in a life or death situation! Agggghh! I would have scratched out her eyeballs if she was anyone other than the White bloody Snow Fox!' That put Tobin's eyebrows higher than usual, his wife had a temper, but Elmira put an invisible dagger through Orion's own heart when she said, 'Well my argument isn't with Jean Fairsythe. I see a husband here before me who has lost his kingdom, his loyal subjects, his gold and jewels, his horses, his farms and estates, his crown and the horse he rode in on, just to burn up a few bloody victims of his wrath! You must have been out of your mind! Jean was forced to uphold the law!' Then Elmira looked to Lydia, touching her on the shoulder as she said, 'Jean spared their lives, Lydia. For allowing us to keep our husbands for eternity, you must forgive Jean, Lydia, you must forgive her now.'

Lydia gave out a deep sigh, her head drooping before she replied, 'Elmira is right, I do forgive Jean, she was only doing her duty. If the laws were not enforced for the immortal kings, how would it be fair to punish others for doing the same? The laws must be just, gentlemen. You both somehow seemed to forget that. I will discuss this with you further when we are alone husband, and you shall know *my* wrath at that time.' Her eyes were fixed on Tobin at the last, a burning fury in her gaze. Elmira also fumed as she stared at Orion and said, 'I am not finished with you either, Orion the Dethroned!'

Adem arrived later to report that Jean was allowing them to keep their large pavilion style tents. That also brought sighs of relief from both women, they had lost their luxury so suddenly they must be grateful for anything they were given. They were shocked to their cores, but still grateful.

'I wondered if you gentlemen would like to discuss the rebel Alit'aren problem,' Adem suggested as he stepped further into the tent. Elmira and Lydia were seated on cushioned chairs when Adem was standing in front of the large map covered desk where Tobin and Orion were standing in an attempt to put a barrier between themselves and their wives.

Adem's willingness to discuss the rebel problem was a new development; prior to their imprisonment he had been considerably reclusive whenever Orion brought up the issue. Orion knew it was a tactic, he was certain Adem was planning something with the rebels. He had already learnt that Torin Modrellock was sending messages to Adem. Orion was anxious to discover the nature of those messages.

'Anything we say on the subject of the rebels will be stricken from the record if Jean Fairsythe learns of it.' Tobin said irritably. 'We are no longer the leaders of Tarvel and Nordhel. We have no armies to command, no resources, and so we have nothing to offer.' Lydia began to glare at her husband during that statement, and then she said, 'You still have your wits, dear husband. You will discuss the rebel problem with Adem Highlander to keep your mind distracted over the coming weeks.' Elmira flashed a glare at Orion before she added, 'You shall also work with Adem Highlander to dissolve the division between our armies. If the rebel Alit'aren cannot be commanded to heel, the future looks very bleak.' Adem waited patiently for them to finish before he said, 'Yes, you still have the knowledge of two great kings, you are experts of war and negotiation, and you still have great worth in my opinion.'

‘Why did you side with Jean Fairsythe?’ Orion asked Adem in cold tones. Adem bowed his head slightly, looking at his boots, before he replied, ‘I would have thought that answer would be obvious. Jean is my heart. I love her more than anything. I couldn’t let her stand alone and pronounce judgement over you two. I had to show my full support in her decision.’ Then he looked up to stare Orion in the eyes as he said, ‘But I am truly sorry for your situation, and I will do what I can to restore you to your rightful places in this world.’

‘Forget it,’ Orion said. ‘You did what you had to do. My place now is beside my wife as her Guardian. I cannot see any further into the future other than my desire to do well in that role.’ That brought him a smile from Elmira, a sweeter fire kindled in her big blue eyes.

‘Yes,’ Adem agreed, ‘though if you could still serve one of the Chosen and influence his decisions, you would still have great sway over the future, wouldn’t you?’ Now Orion saw Adem’s angle clearly, he wished to utilise Orion’s and Tobin’s skills while keeping the source of his knowledge from Jean. It could work. There was still much to be done before the Great Battle. Nations needed to be united, war had to end, and the people had to turn their focus to defeating the Dark One.

‘What would you ask of us,’ Orion asked probingly, ‘if we were to agree to these terms?’

‘I ask for nothing in return.’ Adem said innocently. ‘I still see the worth of your minds, and I foresee great things for the both of you, if you agree to become my advisors. Jean will learn of it soon enough, but I am a Son of Odin, I have the right to choose whoever I wish to advise me in my decisions. She may argue, and perhaps turn cold, but I agreed with her when it mattered, now it’s my turn to make a few heads spin.’

‘What do you have planned?’ Orion asked; which brought a sly grin to Adem’s face.

Jean stood in her tent behind the large carved desk that was covered in large maps of the surrounding territories. Terese stood on the opposite side of the desk, her arms crossed under her breasts. Terese wore a deep green woollen coat that was so long it served as a short skirt with a brown leather belt around her waist, blue stockings and navy blue boots. Jean wore a crimson silk coat with black buttons, a matching skirt embroidered with black foxes across the hem, golden silk stockings and red leather boots. They were the outfits they’d worn to the trial; Terese’s simple and humble while Jean’s outfit radiated the presence of one of the Chosen.

‘I still think there had to be some other way to deal with them,’ Terese said irritably. ‘To lose the Immortal Kings of Nordhel and Tarvel is a nightmare in the making. Lydia was right about a Succession War. Tobin’s three sons will move to claim the throne at Nordhel, perhaps leaving the Green Border undefended when they begin to bicker amongst themselves. Torvis could fall into civil war as the immortal lords and ladies gather armies to support their claim to the throne. I respect the decision you’ve made Jean, but I don’t like it one bit.’

‘I had to make an example of them.’ Jean said calmly. ‘Word will spread like wildfire that even the immortal kings aren’t safe from the new decree. Their punishment fit the crime

in my opinion; their suffering will be the dues they will pay for their own decisions. I had to do it, Terese, I saw no other way.'

'Yes,' Terese agreed, 'but you should have discussed this move with me first, Jean. I am your advisor as well as your protector. I have great knowledge in negotiations like these. I think I could have found a better solution.'

'What's done is done,' Jean said. 'I have allowed Tobin's sons to keep their royal titles, and to make their claim to the throne, I could have stripped them of their lands and kingdoms also to drive my point home.'

'Well you made the right decision there,' Terese said. 'Tobin's sons are good men from what I hear, two are great warriors, courageous but proud. They will surely contest one another for the claim to the throne, and there may be others who would wish to usurp their claims to place themselves on the throne. I predict great wars. Jean, what have you done?'

'At least Adem supported me,' Jean said defiantly. 'If he hadn't, well . . . he would've found no comfort in my presence. The fact that he did support me shows he has some sanity left. I expect you to show the same level of support in all of my decisions, Terese, whether I advise you about them first or not.' Terese gave out a deep sigh, her large dark eyes filled with challenge that dissipated to regret as she said, 'I tried to make you very strong, Jean Fairsythe. Perhaps I made you too strong. You were hard as nails in your judgement this evening, it was more than I could've ever expected of you.'

'Well,' Jean said, 'maybe now Lydia and Elmira will keep their husbands in line, and those that wish to break the new laws will remember the punishment of Orion and Tobin, former Kings of Nordhel and Tarvel.'

'I think you're right, Jean,' Terese agreed. 'To allow those two to get away with it would've been a terrible mistake. You made a fine example of them, and their wives. They will forgive you in time, I'm certain of that. You allowed them to keep their names of legend and afforded them great honour as Servants of the Light. They will appreciate that once they earn some status points through their good deeds.'

'Yes,' Jean said. 'Now, should we discuss the problem of the rebel Alit'aren?'

'What do you have in mind?' Terese asked; which brought a smile to Jean's lips.

'We seek them out,' Adem instructed, 'find where they're based and arrange peace talks with their leaders.'

'Rodriel Tarz holds sway over the rebels,' Orion said, 'and he visits the camp regularly. Why would it be necessary to seek them out?'

'Tarz holds influence,' Adem said, 'but he is not their leader.'

'How do you know this?' Tobin asked.

'I have eyes and ears within the rebel camp,' Adem admitted; he was aware that Orion and Tobin had already learnt of his correspondence with Torin.

'Who leads them?' Orion asked.

'Brolen Aeldur,' Adem replied.

‘The Grey Bear,’ Orion remarked. ‘He will not be easily bargained with. I’ve known Brolen since he was a young Gai’den, he was always stubborn, even as a lad, now he is known as the Bear because that’s exactly what he resembles when he’s backed into a corner.’

‘Scouts last reported that the rebels were headed west.’ Tobin said.

‘My intelligence suggests otherwise.’ Adem replied. ‘I have recently received word that they have used one of the Travelling Gates to make their way to the Green Border.’ The letter was handed to him by the young Rohan two days ago, the boy travelling at great speeds on an *altherin* horse to deliver the message. ‘I suggest we send scouts to the Green Border to confirm this information, and then we travel to the Border Kingdoms to meet with them and decide our fate.’

‘Do you know which Border Kingdoms they will seek out for refuge?’ Tobin asked.

‘I sent a reply message confirming the events of the trial just before I arrived.’ Adem said. ‘The messenger knows where they’re headed, and he will meet with them soon. My guess is that they will use the knowledge of a Succession War to influence your three sons, Tobin, to guide one of them towards the throne, in the hope of having the decree revoked.’

‘That sounds the most likely,’ Tobin agreed. ‘What say you, Orion?’

‘I agree,’ Orion said. ‘Your plan has merit, Adem Highlander. Will you order the scouts to be sent immediately?’

‘Yes,’ Adem said, ‘to all of the Border Kingdoms in case they choose another.’

‘What of the spread of revolution we were supposed to stamp out?’ Tobin asked.

‘The changes to the decree will influence most Alit’aren to obey the new laws.’ Adem replied. ‘This should appease the farmer armies to some degree, and perhaps the spread of revolution will be slowed by this. I know we must unite the nations, but we cannot allow an army of rabid wolves wielding *teron* without restriction.’

Guardians were then called into the tent to deliver the message to the scouts. The two immortal Guardians wore wooden bows at their backs, no longer wielding the enchanted style. Tobin and Orion had also given up their Lukrorian Bows to be replaced with a blue and a green one of plain wood, both worked with gold and silver lines, the two weapons leaning against chairs on either side of the desk. Orion then changed behind the screen to don the dark coat and trousers of an Alit’aren. Tobin and Lydia left for a while, and when they returned Tobin was wearing the *torin’sidhe* camouflage coat and trousers of greens, browns and greys. They were no longer kings; they were ordinary men, even though their immortal blood still made them extraordinary.

‘There is something else we must do when we reach the Borderlands.’ Orion said to Adem. ‘I had planned to delay this move, but if we are to face the rebels it will be necessary. There is an ancient power that resides on the Green Border, where we must seek out the Stairs of Odin. This staircase of enchanted stone is a moving platform, never residing in the same place for more than a few days. They say that to find the Stairs of Odin again, the Blue Water Dragon must search with a just cause. That staircase is a doorway to another dimension.’

‘What lies within that dimension?’ Adem asked eagerly.

‘An ancient form of the Power,’ Orion explained. ‘It is known as the Heart of Odin.’

‘What does it do?’ Adem asked.

‘It will show you your destiny, Adem Highlander.’

‘We defeat them with force,’ Jean said harshly, ‘and drive them into the sea if need be. The rebels are a problem we must face sooner or later. Adem will try to reason with them, but I will not stick my hand in the mouth of a pack of rabid wolves. We will hunt them down, find out their weaknesses, and then use that to force them into submission or we will annihilate them.’

‘Perhaps reasoning with them first would be a safer plan.’ Terese suggested.

‘I have already tried that,’ Jean snapped, ‘and Tarz was stubborn as a charging blind bull! We must make them realise that we will not accept their rebellion. They must be crushed by whatever means necessary to cut them out of the picture.’

‘What if they can be brought to heel?’ Terese asked, her face glowing in the lantern light, her eyes sparkling like dark gems.

‘That would be a miracle!’ Jean shouted in exasperation. ‘I have looked for other options ever since the division began, but I am running out of feasible ideas. They must be stopped before they turn into evil madmen.’

Chapter

4

To Find the Source

Carl sat in his tent, a square lantern glowing on the desktop over a large map of the three Immortal Borderland Kingdoms and its territories. He listened carefully as Adem sat across from him, explaining his plan to deal with the rebel Alit’aren, and his aim to go in search of this thing he called the Heart of Odin. Adem was sketchy about exactly what the Heart was, or what it did, which intrigued Carl in regards to whether or not Adem actually even knew what it was.

‘Turin is Prince of Orodhel,’ Carl said as he gazed at that point on the map. ‘Artur is Prince of Kareldon, and Lune is Prince of Korhad, the three immortal sons of Tobin Fireheart. They control the northern half of the Green Border, its armies and its people, and you think this will be the target of the rebels. To what aim?’

‘I already explained that part,’ Adem said in frustration, his symptoms beginning to emerge. ‘The rebels will hope to raise a new king who will outlaw the new decree, giving them the rights to wield any element they choose, whenever they wish to.’

‘So you suggest we get to those three Princes first?’ Carl asked.

‘I suggest we head for the Borderlands to seek out the Heart of Odin.’ Adem said simply. ‘While we are there it is most likely we will run into the rebel army as they are already there, as I mentioned already.’ Adem’s brow was furrowed with tension.

‘Did you take your Healing twice today?’ Carl asked to change the subject. He was still very concerned about Adem’s illness and the way it seemed to increase every day.

‘Only once this morning,’ Adem admitted, raising his hands to rub the sides of his temples.

‘Are you suffering from another headache?’ Carl asked calmly.

‘They’re getting worse,’ Adem replied with his eyes closed. ‘Sometimes they last from wake till sleep. I feel like I’m alone in this war, Carl, like I’m the only one who gives a damn.’

‘Jean certainly gave a damn when she cast down two Immortal Kings and Queens.’ Carl said. ‘I care too, Adem, but my concern for you is foremost when there are no signs of danger other than that concern.’

‘I’m fine,’ he said, still rubbing his temples. ‘I’m just worried about Jean, about us, about everyone. I feel a mountain of responsibility weighed on my shoulders; everyone looks to me for leadership. I can’t imagine myself living the same life I did back home, that person I once was is now only a faded and distant memory. But sometimes I wish to return to that simplicity, do you understand?’

‘I know exactly what you mean.’ Carl agreed. ‘But we are here, we have our duty and we must succeed.’ That brought a smile to Adem’s lips, he would’ve been proud to hear Carl speak in such a way. Up till now Carl had dodged that responsibility like a flying bullet; he felt it was time he owned up to it. ‘In regards to our search for this Heart of Odin, I agree it is pivotal to our cause. We will leave a substantial force here and we will mobilise for the Green Border as soon as possible.’

‘Thank you,’ Adem said, still smiling. ‘I’m glad you don’t want to argue this time.’

‘You said the Blue Water Dragon must search with a just cause?’ Carl asked.

‘Those were Orion’s words,’ Adem said, ‘though I don’t understand its meaning. Don’t we already stand for the ultimate cause, the preservation of all life on Kismeria?’

‘It could be cryptic,’ Carl added, ‘or meant to be interpreted literally. Perhaps it will unravel when we begin our search. To find the source of this power, you must begin a truly just cause.’

Wil lay across from his wife on their crimson silk sheets and pillow cases. A light mauve blanket was spread over the top as the nights were getting warmer. Change in temperature didn’t seem to bother Hayley much though; she already showed signs of the training to become a true Ael Trael. Her passion in the bedroom hadn’t altered much since her changes, though she was much stronger now, so much so that she had to be gentle to avoid hurting

him. He closed his eyes and saw a great shield of golden fire, embossed with carvings of kings and queens, animals and beasts, it was the afterglow of making love to his wife that gave him such images, it was a feeling beyond imagining, the satisfaction of a heightened reality.

Hayley was snoring soundly, something she would do on occasion, though he found it endearing. She was still so cute, so youthful and innocent, so sweet it was almost sickly. But the new sly knowing in her eyes and smile always gave him grave concerns. What if Carl's spell over her began to weaken; and she began to crave human blood, or became monstrous in appearance? What if the darkness of her curse began to creep into her human soul? He had thought over those issues many times during the hours he lay awake listening to her slow breathing while she slept. He tried to stay awake until daylight to ensure no Nightwalkers entered her tent to attempt another assassination. Sometimes he drifted off at first light, other times the tiredness took him before then, but he always woke to see her sitting up in bed reading a book or swallowing a goblet full of blood for breakfast.

Wil reached down to grasp the hilt of his double bladed axe that glowed brighter gold when he held it up above his face. His awareness of his Battle Angels increased while holding the enchanted weapon, he sensed the familiar brooding in a vortex of fire that was most common for Dis Pater's moods. His sense of Bran was that he was bathed in a sea of flames, though that other Battle Angel had offered no communication through the *kigare* since joining with him.

Will she survive? He asked Dis Pater, followed by a long pause before his Battle Angel replied; *I do not have the gift of foreseeing the future, Son of Odin. Though, her chances are improved.* Wil felt like two people now, the old Wil Martyr of Earth, and the new Wil Martyr of Kismeria, with memories of the lives of countless immortals throughout the history of this strange new land.

The new Wil of Kismeria wasn't all of those men as his new self however; he was one man with all of those memories and abilities collected into the one living shell. Sometimes he had dreams of those memories, and sometimes he even had flash memories of those lives while he was awake, and he felt he was that person at that time. But he was always himself too, now more than ever.

Shouts were heard outside the tent's entrance, his Guardians were alerted to danger. A horn sounded, so close it had to be one of those who guarded his tent. Lightning flared through the tent walls, thick bolts from both sides, turning night into day. Hayley was awake in a flash, sitting upright with a startled expression in her big dark eyes.

'What is going on, Wil?' She asked. 'Are we in danger?'

'Get dressed and armoured quickly,' he said as he stood, while still clutching his golden axe. 'I'll assess the danger and we will decide whether to stay here or start running.' He quickly threw on a dark navy woollen coat and black trousers with knee high brown leather boots. He strapped his bow to his chest and glanced at Hayley stepping out from behind the screen wearing a dark emerald dress with divided woollen skirts, a golden belt of medallions and her ruby necklace.

Horns had continued to sound in the distance during that time, along with more shouts and bolts of blue lightning in the sky. His Guardian Robin entered the tent in the dark cloth and emerald mask and gauntlets of the *ghoda'sidhe*.

‘Forgive my delay, Wil Martyr,’ the immortal Guardian said, ‘we were ambushed by Nightwalkers. It looks like another attempt like the last at Charkel. There are vampires all over the sky this time, enough to create serious problems.’ Wil glanced back over his shoulder to see Hayley in crimson armour and equipped with her bow and sword. He wanted to don some armour of his own, the kind that most blades couldn’t cut through, but there was no time. The shouts of the other Guardians outside his tent told him the Nightwalkers hadn’t finished trying to infiltrate and likely kill him and his wife. He held out his hand which Hayley rushed to clasp, and then they followed Robin out of the tent and into the night.

Adem heard the shouts of Guardians outside moments before he saw lightning flare in the sky around his tent. He and Carl stood and began to gather their weapons, as Morek Cinderblast entered to report the Nightwalker attack. Morek wore the *torin’sidhe* with his blue-and-gold worked wooden bow gripped in his right fist. The dark haired Guardian wore a hardened expression with concern in his large dark Torvellen eyes.

‘There are more this time than there was in the last attack,’ the man reported as if stating that he liked long walks. ‘The Guardians have formed a perimeter around your tent. We await your leadership, Sons of Odin.’ Adem had his horn attached to his waist belt; he quickly buckled on his bow and reached for his sword. He drew the blade that glowed pale blue. Carl reached for his crimson spear.

‘We must get to Jean first.’ Adem insisted.

‘Lead the way,’ Carl said as they stepped out into the scene of chaos. Vampires filled the skies; there must have been thousands of them. The advantage of killing vampires was that they were the only humans to contain *ki’mera* orbs. Adem shouted, ‘Arawn! Llew! Balor!’ Carl shouted, ‘Angus! Math Mathonwy!’ Bright fires erupted around their forms, filling Adem’s vision.

Llew Llaw Gyffes appeared, standing twelve-feet-tall, a shimmering blue apparition in armour of golden scales; massive shield and sword of flames held aloft, hacking flying vampires into charred glowing chunks. Spirit Wolves burst from the form of the Battle Angel, pony-sized beasts formed of blue fire charged along the ground, pushing vampires to the ground; tearing off limbs and biting through skulls, blood sprayed with the sounds of crushing bone.

Balor appeared as a ten feet tall spectre with wings of blue flames, his armour and helmet a pale apparition. He flew through the sky in a white flare, his massive blue axe hacking through vampire skulls and torsos like a quicksilver stream, flaring with each strike as the axe blade sunk into enemy flesh and bone.

Arawn appeared at the same time and mimicked this action of Balor’s. Arawn’s wings were burning crimson, his red blade lanced through the sky in a blurring pattern, striking in bright arcs that caused Nightwalker bodies to explode and splatter the earth below. Math Mathonwy copied them also; blood red cape becoming burning wings as he sliced through the heavens with the Hellfire Spear.

Shadow Hounds and Fire Lions charged along the grasslands of the camp and surrounding hillsides, burning prints of crimson and gold left along their paths as the beasts devoured demon flesh with ravenous veracity. *Ki'mera* orbs flowed towards Adem and Carl until their vision was again awash with colour. The *ki'mera* increased Adem's strength and vitality, and when he sheathed his blade he drew his bow and fired a stream of burning arrows. Carl's spear released bolts of red lightning; blasting small groups of vampires out of the sky and turning them to ash. Adem thought he might try to match him, so he began to summon blades of blue lightning.

Angus also hovered close to Carl, a looming spectre of light and shadows. Carl used the Battle Angel to cast a spell that expanded to surround Adem and the Guardians, rejuvenating their spirits with weaves similar to Healing. Adem felt a stronger charge of *teron* fill his veins, the taint riding that pure fire like dark acid. His lightning bolts spread in intricate patterns, tearing holes through dozens of vampires in a flicker of blue flames. Carl's hold on the Power also increased, as the red lightning turned twenty Nightwalkers to burnt char with a single bolt; spreading through the sky like a crimson claw.

Adem unleashed a few more arrows of blue flame from his bow—all hitting their targets due to his enhanced vision—when he sent to Arawn, *Take me to Jean, now!* There was no need to inform Carl of his destination, as Carl could simply tell one of his Battle Angels to follow Arawn. The ten feet tall spectre of scaled black armour swooped down out of the sky; lifting Adem over twenty feet off the ground. When Arawn set him down on the soft green field close to Jean's tent, he looked back to see Carl being carried by Math Mathonwy, burning wings like some massive crimson eagle clutching him in its claws.

Llew appeared out of thin air, the twelve feet tall figure must have the ability to teleport. Adem wondered at the possibilities there. Llew swung his blade, hacking into any vampires within his reach, his Blue Wolves launching out of his form to tear down enemies, devouring flesh and bone in savage horrid gulps. Arawn and Math Mathonwy returned to the skies like lightning-comets moving in all directions, hacking vampires in half with each point of impact. Balor could be seen amongst them too, his blue wings and axe visible in the dark night sky despite his incredible speed.

Jean was standing outside her tent, dressed in the crimson coat and skirt she'd worn to the trial. Terese stood beside her with her silver blade shining. Jean held her emerald bow, firing arrows of green flame at the circling vampires above. Tanriel hovered some twenty feet above her, wings of blue flames with crimson armour and an emerald skirt. The Battle Angel unleashed crimson spears that flew outwards from every point of her form like spokes flying off a wheel. The spears hit a target every time, punching through the chest or torso of the vampires, and releasing webs of blue lightning that struck others flying nearby. Tanriel appeared to be linked with Jean's new Battle Angel, Anwen, who stood beside Jean holding an emerald tree staff; hawks of red, yellow and orange flames flew from the branches of the staff, hundreds of the Fire Hawks that soared into the darkness above to tear at the faces of the vampires with large hooked claws. Fire Hawks punched straight through the chests of the Nightwalkers in a flash of light, which destroyed the vampire but the Hawk also vanished after the killing strike.

Eight Guardians also surrounded Jean and there were dozens more in a wider circle and around her tent. It seemed Terese had her well guarded at all times since the first attempt on Jean's life.

Math Mathonwy's Shadow Hounds and Arawn's Fire Lions began to charge through the rows of tents, tearing down vampires and biting off their skulls or shredding through armour and flesh with massive claws. *Ki'mera* continued to fountain towards Adem, Carl and Jean, though Adem was worried his Battle Angels would tire too soon. He unleashed a blur of blue arrows at the flying targets, also sending lightning that tore through vampire hearts before those cursed men plummeted to the earth.

Orion gripped the hilt of his long sword Tigerclaw, the blade golden in the darkness as he stood protecting the back of his wife. Elmira was casting balls of blue flame from her hands while wielding lightning that struck five, six, seven vampires at a time, knocking them out of the sky. The blue bolts flew from her fingertips while the balls of blue flame hovered outwards from the same source, flying into the night sky to seek out their targets. Lydia stood close by with Tobin guarding her back. Lydia cast similar spells of lightning though her Seeker Fires were in the form of palm sized fairies of blue light; something Ael Tarael called Pixie Wardens. The two women were gaining a considerable number of *ki'mera* orbs, which increased the scale of their attacks as time progressed.

Eleven other Guardians also stood close by, some firing arrows of steel from their wooden bows, others holding their blades that glowed crimson, or golden, aqua or emerald. The Elemental Power unleashed by their two wives was so intense the vampires took heed and started to clear out of the patch of dark sky overhead. They began to run onwards as a unit of four, Orion guarding Elmira, Tobin guarding Lydia, that was their duty now, it was all they had left to live for. Despite this fact they were headed for Jean Fairsythe's tent. The women had forgiven her, Orion and Tobin had seen the Light in her decision. So they decided they must still work to protect her, and Orion knew Adem Highlander would already be at Jean's side, which likely meant the other Saviours were there also. They still had an obligation to serve and protect the Chosen, whether it was requested or not. How they would manage to get around the conditions of Jean Fairsythe's new laws that restricted the actions of Tobin and Orion—and their wives—was a problem he hadn't yet been able to solve—

A black eyed vampire launched down out of the sky, Orion recoiled like a snake, his sword slicing through the air to cut a nasty wound across the chest and torso of the attacker. Blood spurted like a fountain as the body crashed into the earth. Orion spun in time to catch another attack from the corner of his eye, whipping the blade around to perform Heart Weaver—the sword skewering the attacker through the heart—then he drew the blade while the figure was still in mid air, changing to Crimson Sun—a slice upwards through the vampires torso and chest to bring the blade back down to cleave through his skull—which left the figure broken and bleeding on the ground before him.

Two vampires lay slain at Tobin's feet also, Orion had caught glimpses of Tobin's blade slicing through the darkness while he dealt with his own attackers, the former king roaring like a bear as he cleaved through flesh and bone. They ran on into the night, their Guardians surrounding them and running also.

No other Guardians or soldiers joined them as they ran through the camp however, it was forbidden by Jean Fairsythe, they could no longer command soldiers, and none could follow them who weren't their appointed Guardians. The fact that Jean had allowed those Guardians to remain as their bodyguards showed she still considered their lives worth preserving.

Hayley stood in the palm of the hand of the eighteen feet tall Green Man, a particularly large one created to carry her and her husband through the camp as they made their way towards Jean's tent. Adem and Carl would surely be there, and although Wil had suggested that they let Bran and Dis Pater carry them there faster, she felt safer under Druantia's care. Her dark eyed Battle Angel flowed through the air beside her—shimmering emerald dress and hair of black flames—wielding a bow of green light that she used to unleash arrows of emerald fire that knocked vampires out of the sky. Hayley covered the low ground, firing golden arrows that set vampires aflame as they screamed and fell to their knees.

Dis Pater's three hundred crows—with wing tips of golden flame and burning red eyes—squawked as they circled the Green Man, forming a moving barrier against Nightwalker attacks. Bran marched in front of the Green Man, wielding his bright sword to hack down any vampires that stood in his path, and there were hundreds of them. Most servants who saw them approaching ran away in terror, though dozens of soldiers, Guardians and some Alit'aren wielding swords were beginning to follow behind the Green Man, cutting down any Nightwalkers that made it past Bran's sweeping blade.

The face of the Green Man was slightly evil looking, a new kind of darkness to its seed shaped eyes, and large wooden fangs jutting out of its mouth of leaves and vines. Druantia also appeared slightly infected; that same look of evil lying behind those dark eyes. Evidently the vampire curse did have an influence on her Battle Angel and her powers. Hayley truly hoped it didn't infect other female Battle Angels as a result—and therefore all female wielders—as she was fairly certain the effects could not be reversed.

Carl unleashed a bolt of lightning from his spear; fire moving through vampire flesh like giant red claws. Angus stood by his side, his giant emerald staff held aloft as he and Carl weaved the last rejuvenation spell, casting outwards as a bubble of blue light that surrounded Adem, Jean, Terese and the former immortal kings and queens who had recently joined them.

The bubble wasn't large enough to spread to the Guardians who surrounded their inner circle, though their energy levels were replenished by the power source known as the gift that flowed through their veins. Some of those Guardians were firing steel arrows at the flying vampires, most hitting a target in the chest or between the eyes. Others wielded swords of fire, moving through the forms to hack down any Nightwalkers that tried to penetrate the inner circle.

Carl's other Battle Angel, Math Mathonwy, was also at a point where he would need to return to his Resting Point quite soon. The spirit warrior still flew through the dark night sky, moving in streaks of blurred light, his red spear carving through vampire flesh at each point of impact.

Adem stood close by Carl's side, still wielding lightning in the sky and firing arrows at their enemies. His three Battle Angels were all practicing the same technique, even twelve feet tall Llew Llaw Gyffes was soaring like a giant blue eagle, slicing through vampire bodies with lightning speed. The slightly smaller forms of Arawn's red wings and Balor's blue; could also be seen hacking and slashing. Balor's axe would cleave a vertical arc of blue flames, flaring like a small crescent moon, while Arawn's sword of red flames sliced in a horizontal blur. Lions, Fire Wolves and Dark Hounds still surrounded their inner circle on the dark green fields, most standing guard as sentinels now that most vampires on the ground had been dealt with.

There were still hundreds in the skies however, and small groups of them swooped down every few seconds, though Tanriel's red spears usually pierced their flesh before Carl or Adem managed to alter their weaves.

Carl then heard the familiar *thud* of one of the Green Men Druantia created, and he looked to the east to see a giant version of its kind, with a look of darkness to its eyes and long wooden fangs like a walking vampire tree! Wil and Hayley stood in either of the huge palms of the Green Man, Hayley unleashing golden arrows with Druantia by her side. Bran the Blessed marched in front of the Green Man, and dozens of soldiers, Guardians and Alit'aren followed behind the massive figures. Dis Pater's Flame Crows could also be seen circling the Green Man, seemingly as a protective barrier for Hayley and Wil. Then Dis Pater's golden wings and giant axe could be seen circling them from above, when Carl felt all ten Battle Angels form a Link!

The surge in *teron* that filled Carl's veins felt like a raging river cascading from a mountain cliff higher than the moon! Lightning and ice flowed through him, electrifying his blood and freezing his flesh!

Lightning flared in the sky above, beneath a vortex cloud of grey that appeared out of the dark night sky. There were golden bolts, aqua, emerald, crimson and mauve lightning, thousands of bolts launched from the clouds to strike the remaining vampires in the sky. Sometimes five bolts formed a spear to punch through the chest of one Nightwalker, others became forks that reached out like giant claws to tear through the forms of dozens of the flying creatures. During those brief moments that night was turned into daylight, and the skies were a blossom of colour and fire, the male Battle Angels in the sky began to move at twice their normal speed, moving in streaks of white light that were faster than the lightning bolts, cutting through vampire flesh with their weapons that flared like crescent moons.

Tanriel unleashed a blur of her red spears, each one hitting a target as red lightning flared outwards from the source, taking down more vampires in an instant. The sentinels that surrounded their inner circle, Lions, Wolves, Hounds and Crows, picked and clawed at the burnt corpses that fell out of the sky, until the Guardians began to roar with a victory cry; and the same sound was heard in the distance all around them. The battle was over. What concerned Carl was; how many servants and soldiers were now infected with the vampire curse throughout the camp?

Tobin lowered his blade, breathing a sigh of relief that the battle was won. Vampire corpses surrounded him and Lydia, and just as many were piled around the feet of Orion and Elmira. Some of those had been struck by the lightning in the sky, though most had made an attempt on his wife's life, which suggested the enemy did not yet know that Tobin and Orion had lost their crowns. Lydia looked half dazed from exertion, as did Elmira. Tobin's breathing was still laboured from his own work with the sword forms, and Orion was also breathing hard. They both sheathed their blades and moved to stand before Carl Wilder, who was shouting orders at the Guardians, soldiers and Alit'aren that had joined them towards the end of the battle.

'Find anyone who is bitten and line them up for release from their duties,' Carl was shouting. 'Have soldiers patrol the fields to put a sword or spear through any Nightwalker corpses that start to twitch. There is no need for Ael Trael to burn the corpses, the dawn will see to that. Have the Ael Trael expert in Healing seeing to any wounded, including the infected. I don't want to see any soldiers or servants with bite marks on their necks that don't look like they will survive the next three days.' The command in Carl Wilder's tones were remarkable compared to the man he had been when Tobin first met him. The Chameleon Arch had changed them all, but their experiences since leaving Nordhel had shaped them even more.

Tobin still didn't agree with Carl that infected men and women should be spared to have the chance to live on as vampires. He predicted those first thousand or so that they left near Nordhel had caused some serious damage in spreading the curse in that region. But that was someone else's concern now. He was no longer King of the Nordics.

'What would you have us do, Carl Wilder?' Lydia asked with that same exhausted look to her eyes.

'You four have done enough already, thank you.' Carl replied. 'You may return to your tents to get some rest. We are in command now. This is our mess to clean up.'

Thank you for reading the free Ebook of Book One of the
Sons of Odin: Collector's Edition.

The compilation Ebook, Books One to Three of the Sons of Odin is scheduled for release on Smashwords on 28th of August 2017.

This version of Book One and sample of Book Two is the updated edit, but the complete version may be updated before release.

Kind regards, L. A. Hammer