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The Boy With Green Eyes

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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by

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University of California, Riverside

## The Boy With Green Eyes

## PART I

### The Boy with Green Eyes

–CHAPTER 1: Compass–

“No doubt about it. He’s dead all right.”

Erron blinked.

“Face white an’ cold as snow. How’d he go?”

“I don’t really know. He was dead in his bed this morning.” Erron looked on as the man lined the body with red and blue azaleas, hand-picked from Kyra’s northern and southern forests. He looked so peaceful, like a different person. Like his Grandfather had died and this was a lump of old flesh carved in his likeness.

“Don’t make sense. Course, I never knew ‘im personally, but he seemed a healthy ol’ man.”

Erron watched the wooden lid close over his Grandfather’s body. The man was right. His face was white and cold as snow.

You were supposed to be sad when a family member died. Instead, Erron Laine watched the ocean, captivated by the distorted shapes twisting and folding over small

ripples. The reflection of the torches and the men standing on the dock like stone pillars glided over the surface.

The Priest stood close, watching the sky, looking for stars. It was said that a falling star was a soul passing to The Islands. Erron turned toward the Priest, or more formally the *Kadosh*, and thought about how easy it would be to push him in—a most holy offering to his Grandfather’s death. Erron didn’t bother looking up; the clouds were dark and purple, blotting out the light of the stars and the moon. It was not a good night to die.

Blood Men walked out into the water, pushing the casket, with thin ribbons of red trailing from their wrists like snakes. *From blood you come, from blood shall you go.* Erron never understood who would choose the life of a Blood Man. To be bled for the gods and live in the cold White Temple, your only hope in life to become a *Kadosh* one day. Erron would prefer shearing sheep, and he hated sheep.

“He was a good man.” Erron heard the deep voice, felt the pudgy hand on his shoulder and turned to see the silhouette of a large man with a thick beard and an even thicker stomach. Anyone who’d ever been to any festival, town gathering or even the great room in Townhall, would have seen his portrait, and would have known it was Brenden Murray, chairman of the High Council outlined against the glowing torches.

“Yes,” Erron said, eyeing the wolf pelt lined across the shoulders of Brenden Murray’s coat. He imagined the animal suddenly coming alive.

“Yes,” Brenden said, looking at his feet, “a good man.”

Erron nodded and looked out at the casket floating on the cold ocean.

“His voice will be missed on the council; he and I saw very much eye to eye on most matters. Not that his money hurt anyone either.” Brenden chuckled softly, and gave Erron’s shoulder a squeeze.

Erron looked at Brenden Murray. He watched the man’s breath slither from his mouth and rise into the cold winter air. Erron inhaled and smelled roast meat. A few women were cooking a pheasant on a spit just off shore. His stomach rolled as a splash disturbed the silence.

The men began throwing offerings into the water. Some brought flowers that broke apart in the air and glided down to float on the surface like little boats. Others brought knives, pieces of armor or jewelry. But most just brought a coin or two to drop to the bottom of the sea, forgotten like the body in the casket.

Brenden Murray looked at Erron as if trying to say something else, but in the end he just patted him on the shoulder again, dropped a healthy amount of coins into the water and left.

Erron looked down at the small golden compass he had brought to give for his Grandfather’s send off. He moved it about in his fingers and tried to be sad. Erron couldn’t help but think, oddly enough, about the first time he had tried to ride a horse.

Kyren, a newly hired stable boy was out training the two stallions when Erron approached and told him that his Grandfather had requested that he teach him to ride. Erron’s Grandfather had strictly forbidden it, of course, but Kyren was too new to challenge any sort of order from Erron’s Grandfather.



Erron remembered the feel of the powerful animal between his legs; he remembered kicking the horse like he'd seen done before and he remembered the earth and the sky rapidly exchanging places as he fell. The next thing Erron remembered was his Grandfather carrying him in his arms back towards the estate. Erron had felt wetness on the side of his face and ear. But what he remembered most was seeing his Grandfather's face, feeling his arms tight around him, and watching his eyes, wider than normal, in something that might have been concern.

But Erron also remembered the dark nights, the fear, and the bruises on his sister, Taylor's, face. He thought about her, back at the estate, alone with their tutor Olyen. Was she sad? Relieved? The truth was, their Grandfather had been their guardian for all their lives, but the man had been as cold and angry as the winter moon.

Erron thumbed the compass in his palm and slid it comfortably back into his jacket. He looked down at the dock and saw a small pebble perched on the edge.

"Perfect." Erron kicked the pebble and the water welcomed it in with a sucking sound and it disappeared into the murky darkness.

The White Priest – the *Kadosh* – the Holy one – the bald skinny man who smelled perpetually of incense, looked down at Erron between thick eyebrows and cleared his throat.

"I think it's time to say your prayers boy." He addressed Erron without meeting his eyes. Erron's eyes made him uncomfortable, they made everyone uncomfortable.

“I’ve said them already,” he lied—wanting nothing to do with the distant gods and their cold statues and sanctuaries.

“Of course you have.” His lips smiled, “but not in the Temple.”

Erron exhaled. It would look bad if he refused to say the prayers for his Grandfather. After all, no matter how horrible a person, the man had fed, clothed and housed him for fifteen winters.

Erron nodded. He had to.

The wagon, a large enclosed black thing led by two silent stallions, was past the beaches, on a small rise overlooking the docks and the few fishing boats anchored dangerously close to one another, moored out of the way for the death rites. There were still quite a few men on the docks paying their respects, and even more women and children just off shore, waiting, praying or pretending to pray. Erron passed faces he didn’t know and smelled meat roasting somewhere further down the beach. The two Blood Men were outside the wagon, bandaging their cut wrists, perhaps even praying to the gods that they would survive the night, that the cuts weren’t too deep. Erron thought it odd, almost funny, to think of a man dying for a death rite tradition, but it had happened before.

“Therin, Wade, where is your faith? Into the wagon, if the gods are willing, your wounds will heal,” the White Priest said, sounding calm but waving his arms toward the wagon door. He gurgled phlegm in his throat.

The Blood Men rushed inside and the Priest held open the door. “If you please,” he said.

Erron stepped in, carefully planting his foot on the Priest’s toes. He’d been doing it all day, and the old man hadn’t said anything yet, but Erron knew it was wearing on him.

As the door closed behind him, Erron sat down on the seat draped in velvet and watched the two Blood Men on the opposite side. Their pale faces glanced nervously at their wrists. The wagon was cold, and smelled of incense – why wouldn’t it? The White Priest thumped on the door once it was closed, and looked down at Erron. After a few moments, and a yell from the driver, the wagon jolted awake and the wheels rattled and vibrated beneath them.

Erron looked out the clear blue window at the sky and couldn’t help feeling a sense of freedom. Life with his Grandfather was over. He saw a small break in the clouds, revealing a thin patch of stars as through a dark tunnel, and he watched. It wasn’t a matter of hoping to see the soul pass; it wasn’t even a matter of owing anything to his Grandfather, more than anything Erron was just curious. So he watched that small stretch of lights to see if any of them would fall and mark the passing of a bitter old man into paradise. But as the clouds gathered and swarmed the stars hung motionless in the sky, watching as the small boat made its way along the water. Erron couldn’t help but smile.

–CHAPTER 2: The Temple–

Erron could see most of Kyra, nestled between forests that spread along the valley before arching into the mountains on its northern and southern borders. As they passed, he watched the city slope down, past the markets, to the docks where the fishing boats were anchored on its western side opening up to the Addrean Ocean. The buildings were crafted from the dense wood cut from the Northern and Southern Forests, all except Townhall and the White Temple, which had been made hundreds of years ago from the stone mined from the Northern Mountains. Those two buildings, Erron had come to learn, were the anchors to which all of Kyra turned and twisted. To the east the town rose to a plateau that led to East Arch Keep, the Forest of Faces and the end of the world. Beyond that, of course, a vast nothingness, a lifeless wasteland long destroyed by what the elder's called *The Great Wars*.

The White Temple was on the southeastern end of town. Erron had only really seen it once. His Grandfather had allowed him to go into town to bargain for the season's wheat. Most of his crops he sold directly to the Council and the Council sold the shares to the merchants, but through a series of bargains his Grandfather had found that his wheat could be sold at a much better price if he dispersed it himself directly to the merchants. More work, but more money. He was in the process of doing the same with his other

crops, and even the wool from his sheep, but now the old man was dead. Now the crops, the estate, the animals, according to law and tradition, belonged to Erron. Erron toyed with the idea of selling it all; perhaps he'd move into the woods with Taylor—a foolish thing to do, unrealistic, unstable and yet perfect. Grandfather wouldn't have approved.

They passed through the market square, where the most desperate of merchants were still pushing their wares. A few even ran on the side of the wagon, thrusting necklaces and fake pearls against the window. The White Priest shooed them away, yelling and pounding at the windows. Erron watched with a glowing fascination.

The White Temple loomed in the distance as the wagon rattled against the cobbled streets, rolling past dark buildings, homes and murky alleyways. Erron craned his neck to see the tower, like a white blade, stabbing at the sky.

They rolled to a stop and the Priest led the way into the temple, through large, scuffed wooden doors, which looked as if they were being crushed under the weight of the oppressive tower. The sanctuary was a large stone room. Its ceilings high and pointing toward the god's moon. It was surrounded by rows of candles flickering gently. A man in grey passed by, lighting those that had gone out.

“You two are excused, report to me in the morning,” The Priest said as the Blood Men bowed slightly with a hand to their chest, and like obedient dogs hurried across the stone sanctuary up a flight of stairs.

Across the room were carvings of the gods protruding from the stonewalls, with a wooden kneeler at the base of each. Erron scanned the cold faces, their expressions changing with the flickering light. Solemn, disappointed, angry, scared.

“Yer majesty!” came a rough voice from the corner of the room. A dark shape emerged, wearing a brown cloak, some yellow-stained cloth tied around his head and partly covering one eye, and rough stubble scarring his face. “Welcome, back, been takin’ care o’ the place while ya’ve been gone.”

“You? What are you doing here?” The Priest glared.

“Why, they, what? They let me in, the Temple of the gods, open to all and everyone in it,” he said, his arms scanning the sanctuary as if introducing it to them.

“The gods do not want street rabble poisoning their sanctuary. You, for the last time, are not welcome. I trust you –”

The man dove at the priest, knees bent in front of him, hands grasping at his white robes. “No, don’t do it, don’t send me back out there, they’ll find me, I’m safe here, you’ll keep me safe, I know ya will. Oh please. Let me just stay, just stay.”

The White Priest grabbed the man’s clutching arms and threw him aside with surprising speed and strength.

“Out with you, now, get out!” He kicked the man, waved his arms as if casting some sort of spell. “I’ll bring the Town Guard on you, is that what you want? Be gone, now!”

The man cowed away from the Priest.

“Yes, out, of course, I’ll get out is what I’ll do. Thank you yer majesty, thank you, I’m gone. Don’t worry ‘bout me no more, I’m gone is what I am.” He continued mumbling, shrinking away from the Priest’s angry boot.

When he passed Erron he turned, “Listen to ‘im boy, he knows, by the gods ‘e does.” The man took a step closer and looked at Erron, “Bloody Mallek, but yer eyes, they’re –”

“Enough. Out.” The Priest took a threatening step forward and Erron looked at his feet as if to hide the color of his eyes, he felt the man’s gaze pressing in, accusing him.

“Gone, gone,” he bowed repeatedly, glancing at Erron as he went, “gone, it’s wat I am, I’m gone.” He stumbled out the door and it shut with a thud that echoed around the enclosed sanctuary and sent a few of the candles flickering.

The Priest looked down at his white robes; they were scarred with two brown streaks of dirt from the man’s grubby hands. He wiped at them before turning back to Erron.

“Get on with it boy-ahem-to Mallek first.”

Erron looked about the room, the candles, the stone faces, he didn’t know which one was Mallek.

“By the gods, the one with the hammer across his chest, there.”

Erron walked over to the statue and knelt, thinking that anywhere would have been better to be, even out in the cold with the crazy man with grubby hands. He clasped his palms together and put his thumbs to his head. Olyen, his old tutor, had taught him

several orisons to pray or sing to the gods. Erron used to change the words in his head. “Everlasting gods” became everlasting sods, “blessings come to pass,” became blessings in my ass. He accidentally said his version once in front of Olyen, and the fat tutor had slammed a book onto Erron’s hand so hard it broke his small finger.

Erron recited a few of his orisons in his head before moving on to the next statue while the Priest stood, watching. Erron moved around the room kneeling at the feet of the gods, the smell of incense burning in his nose.

Finally when he reached the last statue, it was a woman, which meant it was Teresa, goddess of mercy and forgiveness. Erron couldn’t help but look into her cold, stone face. There was something about it, something different. She reminded him of Taylor. Erron put his hands to his head. There must have been something good about his Grandfather. He thought again of the time he rode the horse.

After a few moments, he stood and walked over to the Priest, who was waiting with his hands clasped behind his back. Erron looked at the brown stains and had to stifle a smile.

“You think you’re quite clever don’t you?” the Priest said.

Erron looked up.

“Or perhaps you think you’re special? Marked by the gods.” He leaned in closer. “Fascinating, isn’t it? Your eyes, like no one else in the known world,” Erron felt a liquid anger bubbling inside of him, “unfortunately, it’s not a blessing. You see, green is the color of decay boy, of rot. No, not a blessing, in fact, I’d call it more of a curse. Go



ahead, don't pray for your Grandfather's soul, perhaps you should be more worried about your own."

The White Priest straightened himself, his lip twitching slightly, his eyes burning like the candles all around them. Erron could have spit on him. In fact, he thought about it.

"This way," the Priest said in a lighter tone, as if welcoming a guest. "I'll show you to your room."

"What? I'm not staying here, I'm going home, my sister is –"

"Your sister is already here, most likely asleep, you'll stay here tonight, you'll leave in the morning."

"Leave? Where? I'm –"

"Oh have we not told you? My apologies, must have slipped my mind. I've spoken with Brenden. We feel the best place for you and your sister right now, is at East Arch Keep. Your Grandfather's estate will be well taken care of in the mean time." He cleared his throat. "East Arch will be a good place for you to learn the value of hard work, of course you're too late to begin training with the Watchmen, but I trust the kitchens or the stables could use you quite well." He smiled, of course he did.

–CHAPTER 3: Locks, Hawks and Beggars–

It wasn't until well into the night that he was able to pick the lock to his door.

Ghairen had taught him.

Through some strange affair with the High Council, Ghairen had managed to receive permission to live in the northern forest, and not being a man who traveled into town very often, would come to their farm to bargain for goods, supplies and whatever else they had to offer. For some reason, which was surprising, Erron's Grandfather tolerated the old man and allowed him to stay as long as he wanted. Ghairen, however, would never stay the night; he would always wander back to his odd looking horse and make his way through the woods, even long after dark.

The strange old man seemed to be fond of Erron. Every once in a while he would help shear the sheep, "Good for the bones," he'd say, and for having never done it before, he was surprisingly deft. Ghairen was able to shear an entire sheep without having to knock it out his first time.

Erron remembered when Ghairen had taught him to pick a lock. He'd brought locks from his house in a large brown bag one day and had motioned him behind the barn.

"Never know when this'll come in handy. Really good thing to have under one's belt if you ask me," he had said while splitting the lock in half with a pair of small silver

tools, the pieces scattering about in the dirt. “Now,” he said, with a child like laugh, “we put it back together.”

Erron had mastered the dismantling and reassembling of all kinds of different locks before Ghairen had showed him how to pick it, or, “persuade it open,” as he would often say.

“It’s all about touch, you have to listen to it with your fingers, you have to feel it open.”

“When will I ever use this?”

“That’s the thing, you never know, you just never know.”

Erron heard a soft click. He wiped his tired eyes and whispered a thanks to Ghairen.

Erron had taken apart his compass and had used two of the pins inside to persuade the lock open. He stuffed the pieces back into his pocket; he’d put it back together later.

The hall outside was dimly lit by the light of a few sparse hanging lanterns, and was surprisingly warm for the coldness of the night outside. Someone a floor or two below was walking about, the click of footsteps like knives being tapped together. Erron moved down the hall on the balls of his feet. He figured Taylor’s room would be as far away from his as possible.

The sound beneath him stopped and Erron wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and moved slowly, listening to the empty corridors. He pictured dark figures moving

around every corner, waiting for him. Staying close to the wall he passed by a tall room with a chandelier draping down from the ceiling. With the candles out it looked like a distorted spider. Multicolored tapestries hung from the walls as he passed, but in the dim light they all looked grey. They depicted scenes of the gods, sometimes battling, sometimes sitting on their moon, looking down on the world. Erron reached a hallway with doors on either side, and heard footsteps. He flattened himself against the wall—next to a tapestry of Mallek crushing a giant demon with his hammer—as a hooded figure stepped across the hallway. Outlined in darkness the figure was dressed in grey, holding what looked like a small candle-less lantern on a rope, rocking it gently back and forth. It was one of the Blood Men.

The man stopped, looked down the hallway toward Erron, his face hidden behind the shadow of his hood. Erron closed his eyes and listened to the Blood Man’s breathing. A steady in and out that seemed louder than it should have been. Erron held his own breath, opened his eyes and watched the Blood Man continue down the hallway, his black lantern swinging behind him.

Once he passed, Erron walked to the first door. He looked at the dark wood looming in front of him, and he pressed his hand to the knob and turned – it wasn’t locked, so he moved on until he found a door that was. He put his ear up to the door.

“Taylor,” he whispered as loud as he could.

No response.

“Taylor,” he tried again.

Nothing.

There was no way of being sure that it was her room so he rapped on the door a couple times with his knuckles and ran down the hall and around a corner.

After a few moments a man, who looked like a walking corpse, emerged, grumbling. His old skin melted off his face, and his thin arms stuck out from underneath a thick night robe that might have been held some extravagant designs.

“Who is it?” His voice rattled. “Who’s out there?”

Erron clung to the wall wishing he could sink into it.

“Damn rats,” the man said pounding his heel on the floor before turning back to his room.

The door closed with an exaggerated bang.

Erron listened to the empty sounds of the hallway and his breath moving in and out of his mouth. His heart pounded in his ears. He waited for it to slow before moving on. Taylor had to be in one of the rooms. There couldn’t be that many guest rooms in the Temple. The *Kadosh* were famous for having the highest, most lavish suites and the Blood Men were known for either not being allowed their own rooms or staying in dank cells or dungeons. Perhaps that was simply rumor, but after having a look at the color of the apprentices’ faces, white like spoiled milk, he didn’t doubt it.

A few more doors proved to be unlocked until Erron reached the one next to a flight of stairs, leading back to, he guessed, the sanctuary. The door was locked and when Erron knocked and hid around the corner, no one came.

He took out his two needles from his pocket and began to work. His blood was pumping again, which was not good. Picking a lock was easiest when relaxed.

Footsteps wandered through the walls like ghosts. Half the time Erron couldn't tell whether they were coming closer or moving further away, and more than once he hid himself in shadow, and no one came.

His fingers felt large and clumsy as he fumbled at the lock. He tried to feel it, tried to picture the latches and clasps he knew were in there, tried to visualize the different pieces he'd taken apart so many times.

He heard thumping footsteps.

Twisting the pin around he knew he was close. Just a few more moments – the steps seemed to be getting closer, but he couldn't say for sure. Just a few more moments.

“Erron?” He spun around expecting the worst and saw a figure moving toward him in the dark. But it wasn't the White Priest, or a Blood Man. It was a girl.

“Taylor?”

“What are you doing?” She came closer and Erron could make out her delicate features, her blonde hair, her ratty clothes. She smelled like the farm, or at least what the farm would smell like saturated in incense.

“Well, I was, uh, breaking you out.” He pulled the pins from the lock and put them back in his pocket, “I thought you – aawh!”

Taylor kicked him hard in the shin. “What're you stupid, you want to get us both in trouble?”

Erron backed away from her a step.

“Dammit Taylor. I was trying to help.”

“Shh. You’ll wake the whole Temple.” She bit her lip.

Erron thought about kicking her back. “Do you even know what’s going on? Do you know that they’re sending us to East Arch in the morning?”

All expression fell from Taylor’s face. “What? What about the estate?”

“I don’t know, they’re taking care of it,” Erron resisted the urge to rub his throbbing shin.

“They? Who?” Taylor’s anger, if that’s what it was, was melting away, replaced by a leveled look of what might have been fear.

“The High Council, the *Kadosh*, I don’t know, doesn’t matter, we have to get out of here.” Erron thought he heard the footsteps again.

“Are you daft? Where would we go?”

“Ghairen’s, maybe he can help us, it doesn’t matter, we just need to –”

The footsteps had grown loud, so they dove towards the stairs and pressed themselves against the wall.

Erron held his breath and looked over at Taylor. She had her eyes closed tight, as if by not looking, whoever it was would go away. The footsteps only grew louder, closer, as if whoever it was knew where they were, and was taking his time. This wasn’t how things were supposed to turn out.

Erron and Taylor had despised each other when they were younger. The simple truth of it was that Erron had wanted to tend to the horses, but Taylor, to their Grandfather's great amusement, had been given the job instead. Erron was denied any access to the stables at all. For this he hated Taylor, and for that, Taylor hated him.

It wasn't until the week after their Grandfather's saddle had gone missing that they became friends. Their Grandfather was a man of tradition, and being such, only had one saddle, which he used religiously. When it went missing he looked for it, yelled and screamed around the house, beat at the servants and broke all kinds of plates and dinnerware. A week after it had disappeared Erron and Taylor were sitting at the table, eating bread and milk for breakfast, and looking out the window so as not to talk to one another. Kyren had come running through the dining room, swiftly followed by their Grandfather, stomping and cursing again about his saddle. He ignored the two of them and continued his rampage around the house.

Erron remembered looking at Taylor, he remembered seeing a small bruise on her chin as she shook softly, nibbling at her bread.

"C'mere," he said to her, getting up from the table and walking out the door. Taylor looked at him, suspicion and curiosity mixed in her expression. "Come, no tricks," Erron said. She didn't move. "What, you got something better to do?" The day had been warm, summer was just beginning and the sun was high in the sky. They walked around the side of the house and a little further to the barn where Erron sheared the sheep. Sheep pens circled the small space inside, empty and dusty. The air was warm and thick with



the smell of animal, wood and hay. They walked to the back corner and entered one of the pens. Erron kicked away some of the hay and dirt. He got down on his knees and lifted a few loose floorboards and moved away for Taylor to look. She peered into the dark opening cautiously, probably half expecting Erron to push her in at any moment. When she saw the saddle, dirty and half buried under the floorboards of the barn she looked up at Erron with her mouth wide open. He smiled and her laughter sang through the air like the dust floating around in the beams of sunlight.

From that moment on, until he met Ghairén, Taylor was his only friend.

The man with the lightless lantern passed the hall's entrance. Swinging the lantern on the rope. Erron caught a glimpse of him as he passed by the window. His hood was up and he was moving slowly. Erron saw the traces of smoke drifting from the lantern and sliding against the window, looking for a way out. It was incense. The stuff was everywhere.

The man, most likely a Blood Man, moved on, swinging the lantern like a noose, back and forth, back and forth.

Once he was gone, Erron and Taylor made their way down the stairs hoping it led back to the sanctuary. Erron thought about looking for another way out, but he wanted to be gone as soon as possible, and decided that he would take whatever route they could find, and find fast. Besides, he was sure that no one would be looking for him, not yet anyway.

They saw the flickering of candles before they reached the sanctuary. Erron motioned Taylor to stand still as he peered around the corner – someone had to keep all those candles lit. But no one was there, or at least no one he could see.

They moved out into the empty room.

Erron glanced at the stone statues he had ‘prayed’ to not all that long ago. The faces seemed to disapprove. A candle flickered to his left, a footstep, Taylor’s slight intake of breath – Erron pushed open the doors.

“C’mon,” he said, shoving Taylor out the door.

“Stop it.” She shrugged away from him.

It had all been too easy. Too simple, and yet they were free. He imagined the White Priest snoring in his bed, a small smile gracing his holy sleeping lips.

They moved out into the cobbled streets, the cold once again biting at their faces. Shadows swaying in the night, and the smell of ice in the air.

Then a voice cut through the silence. “Gods be blessed I knew it I tell you. From the moment I saw yer sparklin’ eyes I knew I’d see you again.”

Erron spun around as Taylor let out a gentle yelp. A figure moved towards them from the shadows, Erron was waiting to see the bald head, the white robes. It wasn’t. It was the beggar. The one with grubby hands.

“Oh sorry, sorry, din’ mean ta frighten you. Just saw you two leaving the holy place and knew it was fate,” he said, adjusting the cloth on his head so that it hung at an angle over his ear.

“Right,” Erron said as he began to walk again, motioning for Taylor to do the same. She fell into step with a scowl.

“Come now, you don’t think our paths’d cross twice in one night without the gods havin’ a say ‘bout it do yeh?”

Erron wanted nothing more to do with the gods this night. “I think the gods could care less,” Erron said, moving a bit faster, “now leave us alone.” Taylor gave him a look.

“Couldn’t do it, not after I seen your eyes young one, I’m bound to you, true as rain, I’m here to honor and protect those blessed by the gods. And you friend, are blessed by the gods,” he said with a happy chuckle and a bow of the head.

Even as he was moving swiftly between dark streets and empty buildings, with Taylor by his side, Erron glanced back and gaped at the man. All of his life, Erron had been quietly shunned, openly ridiculed and rejected. The color of his eyes was a cause for awe at times, but mostly for fear and contempt. Those forced to interact with him tried to ignore them, or at least not to look. Erron’s eyes had never, in all his seasons been inspiration for respect, or considered blessed.

“Name’s Marten,” he said, pausing for Erron to reply.

“I’m Taylor and this is Erron, we’re leaving Town, tonight,” Taylor said.

Erron glared.

“Wonderful, jus’ wonderful, I’m ready to go, packed myself jus’ this mornin’.”

He laughed, patting the pockets of his jacket.

“No,” Erron said, trying for some authority, “you’ll only slow us down, three bodies are easier to find and track than two.”

“Very true, true, true, true, my friend, but I’m quiet, and I know the back alleys of this place better ‘an most. Might be I’m of great use to you.”

“We’re heading to the northern forest, to Ghairen’s,” Taylor said.

Erron looked at her wondering if she was doing this just to annoy him.

“That’s perfect, by the gods, just perfect I tell you. Fate my friends, fate, fate, fate. I’ve spent days in the forest, know its every tree, trail and creek. If you want to pass through quickly and quietly, I’m your man. I am your man,” he said, skipping to keep up with them as they turned off the cobbled street onto a dirt road that led to the northern farmlands.

“Sounds good to me,” Taylor said.

Erron, stopped, he felt anger boiling in his throat. “No, absolutely not, get out of here. We’re on our own and we like it that way. Now leave, get away from us, you’re not wanted.” Erron turned on Martin with a rush of movement.

“Couldn’t, not even if you told me to.”

“I am. I am telling you, get out of here, get away from us.” Erron kicked dirt at him, like he would to get rid of an unwanted dog. Marten stopped walking with a pained look on his face. Erron hoped he wasn’t going to cower away like he had in the Temple.

“Erron,” Taylor said.

“No, forget it, let’s go.” Erron stalked off into the darkness, and Taylor followed.

Marten was silent and still behind them.

“You’re an ass,” she said.

“Taylor, the man was a half-wit.”

They walked the dirt road past grassy lands and a few sporadic houses made purple by the dark clouds. In one there was a fire burning and laughter within. A dog barked.

Erron noticed Taylor glancing behind them.

“What?” he said.

She smiled. “Looks like we’ve found ourselves a pet.”

Erron looked back and saw Marten following at a steady distance.

“You must be joking,” Erron said.

They stopped by their Grandfather’s estate; careful to make sure it was empty before approaching. Marten had hidden himself in a strip of bushes not too far away.

The doors were locked and Erron didn’t have a key.

He broke into his Grandfather’s home much easier than he had the lock to his room at the Temple. In fact, he didn’t even pick a lock, he climbed a tree by Taylor’s room and squeezed through her window as he’d done a hundred times before. The house felt larger and emptier in the darkness. It smelled like home, but that didn’t mean pleasant. He packed a bag for them, a change of clothes, some bread and apples, and his

knife. He slung the pack on his shoulder and climbed back down the tree and around the building to where Taylor was waiting.

To his left he saw the barn where he had sheared countless sheep and he was suddenly filled with a rush of memory – the long days of work, the constant bleating, his aching shoulders and neck, and the pile of wool he'd always wanted to jump into. That was another world away now, floating on the Addrean.

“Here.” He handed Taylor an apple and they shared a piece of bread.

“What about Marten?” Taylor asked.

“What is with you? He’s half mad, might try to kill us in our sleep.” Erron thought of their Grandfather’s anger.

“Shut up, he will not,” she said, splashing a bit of apple onto her chin.

“Right, because you know him so well.”

The edge of the northern forest was less than a mile away from their estate. They left the path and walked the barren farmlands, the cold and lifeless dirt crunching beneath their feet. The solid colors of the clouds sunk low toward the solid black earth making the world small, and tunnel like, leading to the forest. They moved swiftly without pausing till they reached the edge of the woods.

Taylor was breathing hard, and Erron pretending not to as he looked around, expecting the White Priest at any moment. There was no rustle, no wind, no sound other

than the smashing of earth underneath Marten's slow-moving boots a few yards behind them.

Taylor looked at Erron.

"Well I suppose if there's no bloody stopping you," Erron said over his shoulder.

"Come on."

"Bless yeh, bless yeh indeed friend," he yelled after them.

"Shh," Erron said.

"Won't regret it, promise you that, won't indeed."

"I already do, keep your voice down." Erron shook his head.

Taylor smiled. "You hungry Marten?"

"Me, no, course not. Couldn't eat if you asked me to."

Erron pulled an apple from his pack and tossed it to Marten.

"Well now, didn't say it were apples did yeh? Now apples I can eat any time of the day."

Taylor chuckled; it was a light refreshing sound like cold water in the heat of summer. Erron turned back toward the forest. He looked at the unfamiliar ground. The vegetation was not as thick since it was winter, but the trees were still dense and the paths were almost invisible.

"You say you know this forest well?" Erron said looking back at Marten.

He crunched into his apple.

“This apple is perhaps the greatest thing that ‘as ever had the courtesy to grace my lips.”

“That is perhaps the weirdest thing I’ve ever heard,” Taylor said.

“Marten, listen, you said that you knew this forest?” Erron pulled him away from his ecstasy of fruit.

“Why yes, of course, know it perfect. Well, not as good as the southern forest, better mushrooms in the southern, quite sparse here really.”

“Have you heard of a man named Ghairen?” Erron said, already finding himself annoyed at Marten all over again.

“Ghairen? Absolutely. Been to his place o’ plenty. He likes my stories.”

Erron stared at him. “You’ve actually been to his place?”

“Aye,” he said, his lips molesting the apple.

“Can you take us there?”

“This way,” he said and crashed through the line of trees without another word.

“Marten,” Taylor called after him.

Erron looked at his sister, shrugged and pushed the closest bush down with his boot. Taylor was close behind. They entered the forest following the sound of Marten, crashing through shrubs, humming softly, and crunching vigorously into his apple.

The trees spun by like unfamiliar faces in a crowd. They moved through the teeming forest until they reached something that might have been considered a path. It



was knife thin and they lost it periodically between trees or over small rises. Somehow, Marten was true to his word, he knew the forest well even in the night. His humming throbbed in the air around him and seemed to call out to the forest. Small insects and the shadow of larger animals called back to him in a chirp or a rustle of sleepy bushes. Through the canopy of branches Erron could see the mountain rising like a black wall. Erron remembered the stories he'd heard from one of his Grandfather's hired hands, an old man named Micah, about the Northern and Southern Mountains. No one really believes them, but Erron had heard there were a people, half man, half wolf, half spirit, that came from the ruined world beyond Kyra that lived in the rocks and caves. A long time ago on a mining trip in the Southern mountains a man had gone missing and apparently they found his arm with bite marks all over it. Since then the mining trips had been sparse. Erron didn't really believe such stories, but still, he loved to hear them.

Ghairen lived, or so he said, at the base of the Northern Mountain, where no farmers, herbalists or men with axes ever reached. Erron had lived his life on the edge of this forest and had only entered it once. It was night then too. He had been about to run away to Ghairen's. Taking a few cautious steps in, he had slipped in the mud. As the earth rushed to greet him he had heard a voice calling out—faint and distant. When he got to his feet he ran back to the estate, wiping his muddy backside as he went.

Marten paused as he devoured the last of his apple, core, seeds, stem and all. Erron found himself breathing hard and heard Taylor doing the same next to him. His face was numb and he could feel snot running into his upper lip. Three of his fingers

stung like he'd hit a patch of poison ivy, though he hadn't remembered them hurting. They had been moving fast, not running, but there was something about the chill of the night, the foreign woods and the excitement of their escape that pulsed in Erron's blood and drove him onward.

"Why are we stopping?" Erron said.

"Thought I 'erd somthin'," Marten said looking around the trees. He didn't look scared or suspicious, he looked entertained if anything.

"What was it?" Taylor said, keeping her voice low.

A Hawk broke through a copse of oaks and floated above their heads to a branch within throwing distance. Swirling its head, it sidestepped along the branch, drawing closer to the trunk of the tree, looking down on the three of them. Erron had never seen one so close before.

"Gods above, would'ya look at her," Marten stared, "might be a god herself." He bowed at the bird.

Erron gave Taylor a look that he hoped said, *see, I told you he was half-off*. But Taylor was staring at the hawk.

"Is it looking at us?" Taylor said chewing at her lower lip.

"May be. Could be her forest after all." Marten pulled up from his bow.

"Lets go, unless you two want to stand and freeze all night?" Erron said, glancing at the bird.

"Yeah, lets go." Taylor agreed, finally.

“Course, course, we go, that’s what we’ll do, off to Ghairen’s.” Marten turned to the bird, “Peace to you, may yer feathers grow a thousand strong, and may we pass safely through yer wood.”

The hawk’s scream shattered the silence. High-pitched and pure. It was as if a veil had been torn from Erron’s eyes, as if he suddenly realized they were out in the middle of a forest, in the strange of the night – no place they had any right to be.

Taylor pressed her hands to her ears, Erron half ducked as if struck, and Marten stood mystified. The scream reverberated across the forest floor and seemed to climb the mountain beyond.

Erron started moving away and they all followed. A second scream, just as loud as the first struck their ears and they moved faster. The bird stayed where it was, content to just sit and cry out. It continued to screech long after they were gone, but they still heard it as they moved deeper into the forest. It wasn’t until it had become a faint echo that it finally stopped.

“What was that?” Erron said as they continued through the forest.

“She must of had a nest there or something.” Taylor looked back as if expecting it to follow them and almost tripped on a root.

“But why didn’t she fly at us? She just sat there, staring. Besides, who said she’s a she anyway?”

“It was looking at us wasn’t it?” Taylor kept glancing back.

“Stupid bird,” Erron said.

Marten didn't say anything to them, he just kept on the small path, moving forward muttering, "almost there, almost there, almost there," over and over.

Erron listened to Marten's steady chanting and found himself moving his feet to it, the words bouncing about in his head. His right heel hitting the ground with every, "-there-there-there." Each word another step toward Ghairen's, each word a pushing out of the world behind them.

Erron couldn't get the bird out of his mind, the desperate look in its eye, the ear-bleeding scream. He looked once over his shoulder and saw Taylor behind him looking over hers.

Weren't hawks supposed to hunt during the day?

It *had* looked at them hadn't it?

*Stupid bird.*

–CHAPTER 4: Rain –

At first the sound came like a distant rain. Like the clouds had finally filled and were just beginning to drop. Then it came faster, heavier, crashing through the bushes behind them – the rapid thudding on soft earth – a voice called out, too distant to catch

any meaning, but they could ignore it no longer. It was the sound of men on horseback moving through the forest. Making little to no attempt at discretion. Perfect.

“What do we do?” Taylor said, more than a little panic in her voice.

Erron tried, and failed to think of a plan. He looked at Marten.

“We hide, low, in dark bushes and pray,” Marten said, still wearing a look of amusement.

“Where?” Erron said.

“My Pa always told me, never underestimate the value of a good hiding spot... or never value the estimate of a good hiding spot? Never estimate under a—”

“Let’s go.” Erron tried to keep his voice low.

Marten touched a finger to his nose. “Right ya are, we go, this way, I know where, just over here, over here, over here.”

He glided off the path with Erron and Taylor close behind, chanting, “over here, over here, over here.” A horse neighed behind them. Erron resisted the urge to turn around. His heart was thumping against his chest, his nostrils stung from the cold, and suddenly he had a strong need to pee.

They broke through a small clearing and crunched through dry, cold bushes. Marten ducked under a fallen log and sprawled out in the dirt.

“Here, here, here. Low, don’t move,” he said.

Erron and Taylor crawled in beside him. It smelled of earth and fern mixed with Marten’s onion-like aroma.

“This is your great spot?” Erron said.

“Shh.” Taylor jabbed him in the ribs.

“This is where I find the best mushrooms. Not that there’s many here o’ course, it’s much better in the southern forest. But the ones here, when you can find ‘em, are not bad a’ tol.”

“Marten,” Erron said sharply.

“Right, right right,” he said, “shh.”

Erron saw Taylor close her eyes, as the hoof beats grew louder. Marten was sniffing the dirt. Erron could feel coldness gathering around his arms and legs as the earth pressed up against him. Holy gods, he needed to pee.

Taylor screamed as something collided with the fallen tree above their heads. The log shivered with a heavy thud as if struck by an arrow, and Marten pressed his hands up against the bark as if it were going to fall on their heads.

The hawk, now directly above them, let out another ear-piercing cry.

Taylor pressed her hands to her ears.

“It’s back, we’ve angered her, shouldn’t have come. We shouldn’t,” Marten said still pushing against the log.

“Shut up, it’s just a bird.” Erron leaned around the log and saw the hawk sitting higher up on the trunk. He grabbed a rock with a handful of dirt and hurled it at the bird. The hawk dodged his throw with two lazy flaps of its wings, landed, and screamed. What was wrong with this bird?

The hoof beats were getting faster and closer.

“Shit,” Erron said. He threw another rock; it might have been a pinecone. The bird dodged and screamed again, and again. *Over here, over here, over here* it called.

“We have to move,” Erron said. Taylor nodded; she looked like she would cry. Erron had never seen her cry.

“The gods will save us, we –”

“Now!” Erron had no more patience for Marten’s religious ramblings.

It took much more time than Erron had envisioned to get them all standing and moving again from their cramped hiding spot. They ran past the small clearing, away from the fallen tree, into the bushes. This time Erron led the way.

The hawk called out from above them. Erron looked up and saw a shadow moving through the trees. It was unnatural, otherworldly, and if it wasn’t so aggravating, it might have been fascinating. Erron felt a mix of anger and fear fighting to take control. He glanced at Taylor, her cheeks were colored and her eyes were wide. Marten, however, seemed relatively placid, as if observing the scene from somewhere far away and uninvolved.

The hawk screamed one more time, and then suddenly—silence. Erron looked up and couldn’t find it. He pictured it up there still, floating on a cold breeze, watching.

“There they go!” An excited voice called out behind them.

“Erron,” Taylor said.

“Faster.”

“Keep going lads and ladies. I’ll lead them away,” Marten said turning sharply to their left. “Ho there! Here I am! And here I go!”

He tumbled through the trees, almost tripping as he went.

Errorn didn’t slow, or follow; he just kept running in the same direction, with Taylor close behind. The horses were now almost on top of them. Errorn was moving with all he had, the cold air stinging his lungs.

Taylor was falling behind.

“Hurry.”

A voice called out again, Errorn couldn’t catch what it said. He could feel the ground rumbling, and the horse’s breath in the cold air. The trees closed in, blocking his path. He thought he heard the hawk scream again, but he turned to see that it was Taylor, being grabbed by a thick arm.

Errorn turned around and rushed towards her. He saw a horse move to his left.

“Stop.” A man called at him.

He reached out as something collided with the back of his head. The world spun, and he felt the hard earth rush up to meet him. He was looking at the black clouds, and he thought he saw something move amidst the branches. The dark sky swallowed the trees – then the bushes – the ground – till everything went quiet and he was wrapped in a cold black nothingness.

\* \* \*



Ghairen wiped his forehead.

*Looks like it's finally going to rain.*

He'd been sitting on his roof, watching the clouds form into shapes, when the first vision came. It came like all the rest of them: sudden and unexpected.

He saw the boy, the girl, and Marten. They were standing, talking – he couldn't hear – at the edge of the northern forest. He saw the boy turn to Marten, his brows furrowed, and he said something. Marten ran into the woods, soon followed by the two children – hardly children anymore. They moved between trees, their bodies twisting and melting into shadows until finally fading into the darkness of the forest, and then there was no forest, just the dark clouds above, swirling and folding – about to vomit.

Ghairen looked off into the darkness and smiled a small smile. He had waited a long time for this. For the start of things.

He got up slowly; after all, old men shouldn't be out in the middle of the night on rooftops. So he pulled himself carefully to a standing position, cursing his sore knees.

He lowered himself through the wooden latch. His study was still warm from the fire, and it stung pleasantly on his cold face. He glanced at the brown, half torn letter on his desk, the message he'd received not a week ago. He filled his pipe with some of his leftover Pok weed and climbed back out on his roof. He lit the pipe and the leaves flared to life – he'd gotten good at it. Smoke dripped out of his mouth and he watched it climb toward the clouds. He waited.

“Strange,” he said, “still no rain.”

Then he remembered he wasn’t going to talk to himself out loud anymore.

*Strange, he thought, still no rain.*

The pipe weed was good, it was perhaps a week or so old, but it kept just fine. His head was swimming slightly when he heard the calls in the distance. He pulled more warm smoke into his mouth.

*Ah, there it is, another drop.*

He wiped his forehead, thinking about how many days he’d spent in the pouring rain, how many years he’d spent outside, how many lifetimes. It didn’t matter anymore, of course, so he tried not to think about it. *Thinking too hard about the past will only bring it back*, he used to tell himself.

Ghairen saw her coming through the darkness. He set his pipe down and stood up with his hand out, waiting. He didn’t like to admit it, but this part scared him every time, he was an old man after all.

The hawk flapped its wings hard and landed on the old man’s outstretched arm, squeezing its talons enough to stabilize itself, but not to pierce skin. Ghairen held the bird up trying not to let his arm shake.

“Well done, ol’ girl,” he pet her from beak to tail feather, “well done indeed.”

He walked her carefully down the steps into his study, placed her back in her cage, left the latch open and fed her a hardened chunk of honey, she loved honey.

“Enough for today eh?” He smiled and walked back up to the roof, this time grabbing a blanket so his joints wouldn’t freeze. His pipe had gone out but he still felt its warm sensations floating about in his head. Leaning back he looked up at the sky, and the dark clouds.

*You old liar, shoulda been raining by now.*

There was a time when he could have said exactly when it would rain, snow, blow or storm, and it had nothing to do with a hip acting up. He pushed the thought out of his mind, the past was better left where it was, he had made his choices hadn’t he?

Ghairen breathed in the cold air and felt it sting his nostrils and wake up his senses. He pulled the blanket closer around his shoulders, it was too cold.

The second vision came much as the first one did. This time there were horses, men in thick leather armor moving between the trees. He couldn’t see their faces, but that wasn’t important. The forest swayed in his vision, like shadows dancing in the firelight. Taylor, *there she is*, was sitting astride one of the horses with an arm wrapped tightly around her. Again, he couldn’t quite see her face but he could feel the anger and the fear. His vision swam about, half in darkness, half in forest. He saw Erron slumped across a guard’s lap, riding slowly. The boy wasn’t dead, he was breathing, dreaming perhaps. Ghairen saw his face, relaxed, eyes closed. He saw the boy’s lips, nose, eyebrows; he saw his hair shuffled about his face. He saw his eyelids, his eyelashes and beneath those he saw the boys green eyes.

*Oh yes, was Ghairen's last thought before the vision broke, his most brilliant green eyes.*

It began to rain.

–CHAPTER 5: The Temple Again–

Erroron woke to the smell of dirt and wet horse. Mostly wet horse.

He tried to lift up his head but felt painful stabs in his neck and side. He had been slung over the back of a horse. A man's legs were beneath him and his face was nuzzled against the horse's shoulder. Sharp pain shot through his ribs as the animal shifted its body weight from side to side. He could feel a dull throb in the back of his head, it felt wet too, but he was pretty sure that was from the rain, falling steadily all around him.

“There ya go, easy at it now,” came a voice from behind.

The night came back to him in a rush of angry memories, and so did the need to piss.

He thought about jumping off the horse and making a run for it. But his body ached everywhere—it wasn't worth it. It was light out, which surprised Erroron; he'd almost

thought the night would have lasted forever. He tried to adjust his position and noticed his shirt was soaked through.

“Alright, hang on, let’s get ya situated.” Came the voice again.

“He finally up?” Another voice.

“Erron!” That one was Taylor.

The man pulled the horse to a stop and got off. He grabbed at Erron’s waist as Erron slid from the horse. Erron pushed the man’s hands away and almost fell on his face. His feet hit the ground and his knees buckled a little. His ribs felt like they had caved into his stomach.

“Alright now, back up ya get.”

Erron looked up at the man. He was skinny, with dark eyes and patchy brown facial hair smeared about his face.

“Where are we going?” Erron’s voice sounded hoarse.

“Heh, where we goin’? Were takin’ you two back to the damn temple. Cost us a whole nights sleep is what you did. No matter, you’re here now ain’t ya? Here, I’ll give ya a leg up,” the skinny man said.

There were two other men on horseback. They had both stopped. The one holding Taylor was a big man with a thick black beard; the other was a bit smaller, clean-shaven with a long ugly nose. He had Erron’s pack tied down to the back of his saddle. They all wore the black leather of the Town Guard. Erron looked away, back through the trees the way they’d come.

“No sense boy. We’d ride you down sure enough,” said the skinny man.

Erron turned his back to the men, unbuttoned his pants and let out his urine for an uncomfortable, almost painful amount of time. “God’s boy, it’s a wonder you didn’t piss on the horse.” He buttoned up, put his foot in the saddle and swung up on the horse, kicking the skinny man’s hands away as he did.

“Yow!” the skinny man said shaking his fingers. “Fair enough,” he grabbed a hold of the reins before Erron could, and slung himself onto the horse, “guess we did bonk ya pretty hard.”

The man with the ugly nose rode up beside them. “And there’s more where that came from ya little shit, so don’t go trying anything stupid.” Erron looked at him and pictured punching his large nose flat onto his face. It’d feel good; probably make a nice crunching sound.

“Enough,” the man with a black beard said, still holding Taylor firmly in place.

Ugly-nose turned his horse and glared at Erron.

“That’s Mehl,” the skinny man whispered to Erron as their horse started again, “he’s the one ‘et bonked ya.”

The rain fell steady, even amidst the trees. The day was warmer than the night before, if not for the wetness. Erron felt the man’s skinny body pressed up against his as the horse rocked back and forth. He couldn’t see Taylor in front of him, but he could picture her—a little scared, and more than a little angry. The skinny man started whistling

“Nanny’s Fanny,” a drinking song Erron had heard a few of the hired hands sing after hours in the kitchens.

“Oh shut up will ya?” Mehl said.

The skinny man started humming.

Erron unclenched his shoulders as they made their way through the forest. The whole thing had been a waste. All he’d gotten for running off was a night without sleep and a bump on the back of the head. He found himself thinking about Marten, and how he’d gotten away. Perhaps they didn’t even look for him because they didn’t care. Perhaps Marten went off to Ghairen’s alone. They’d probably never see Marten again. The man was half mad, half stupid, and smelled like onions, but he did know his forests. Erron had to give him that.

“Right on time,” the White Priest said, “In fact, I believe we’re ahead of schedule. Your little venture only served to speed up the process it seems.” He smiled, a full toothy smile. The bastard was genuinely enjoying himself.

The White Priest and a few Blood Men had gathered outside the Temple. A wagon was waiting fully equipped with a pair of horses and a driver. The road that led to East Arch Keep passed right by the White Temple, and as the new apprentices left each year the *Kadosh* and the Blood Men would all gather outside to see them off, blessing their journey. Erron had no doubt that the White Priest was here to do the exact opposite.

They dismounted and Mehl saw to the horses as black-beard spoke quietly to the White Priest. The skinny man Erron had rode with stood close.

Erron looked at his sister and she gave him a look that said *what do we do now?*

He shrugged.

“Looks like it’s letting up a bit,” the skinny man said, his face directed at the sky.

Erron had hardly noticed that the rain had almost completely stopped. He held out his hand and felt a few drops on his fingers.

Black-beard turned from the Priest and got into the wagon. He looked upset.

“Here we are,” the Priest said, opening the door to the wagon and gesturing Erron and Taylor inside, “have a pleasant journey, under your seat you’ll find some bread, it’s a long ride after all.”

Taylor glanced at Erron before stepping into the wagon.

“Come now, in you go,” the Priest said.

“Yup,” the skinny man said, “it’s letting up.”

Erron walked up to the wagon and glared at the smiling Priest. Before stepping in, he lifted his foot high and brought it down swiftly. The Priest moved this time and Erron’s heel thudded against the dirt road. Erron felt himself shoved into the wagon, he tripped and landed sprawled out on the wood floor.

“While you’re at East Arch, you might get comfortable,” the Priest said. “The gods tell me you’ll be there for quite some time.” Erron watched the bald man’s figure outlined against the White Temple. His lips were wet and shining like his eyes. This was



probably the last time Erron would ever see him and he felt helpless, lying on floor, watching. He wanted to scream, to kick the bald white head.

The Priest's lips formed a watery smile as he slammed the door with a crushing finality.

#### –CHAPTER 6: Back in the Wagon–

They sat in silence. The only sounds were the rattling of the wagon and the occasional drops of rain on the roof. Erron wondered what had happened to his backpack. He pressed his hands against his pocket and felt the small pins and the case. At least he still had the pieces of the compass. The wagon was enclosed, dark and nothing compared to the Priest's wagon. Instead of velvet draped seats, they were bare wood, knotted and uncomfortable. The windows were small and opaque, making the grey images outside distorted and blurry. Erron's ass hurt. He seemed to feel every bump, dive, and rock on the road. Taylor didn't look any happier.

Across from them, black-beard sat quietly looking out the window as if he could see the passing shapes. The man hadn't said a word to them. Taylor kept looking over at Erron as if she had something to say, but each time thought better of it.

Erron didn't want to talk. His body still ached from the night before; he was tired and felt a tightness gathering in his chest and throat. He kept picturing East Arch Keep, dark and oppressive, getting closer in the distance.

Erron's legs felt like they were going numb when he pulled the hard lump of bread from underneath their seat. He shared it with Taylor, not offering any to black-beard, who hardly seemed to notice either of them. There was something strange about him. He didn't shift about in his seat. His legs were stuck to the floor as with mortar, his hands planted on his thighs and his head turned to the window. The man hardly seemed to breathe.

They ate most of the bread, Erron's jaw grew tired from having to chew so hard. He put the rest back in the wrapping and stowed it under the seat.

Taylor gave Erron a pointed look.

Erron was pretty sure she was trying to communicate something like, *we should try to run again, or, why aren't we doing anything, or even, look what you've gotten us into.*

He squinted his eyes and shrugged at her.

She shook her head.

The wagon slammed to a stop.

Erron felt his body lurch forward, and his face somehow ended up in black-beard's lap. The pain in his head sprung back to life. Black-beard looked down at him. Erron felt

his ears grow hot between black-beard's legs. He shoved himself off and found his seat again. Taylor was already back in hers, rubbing her head.

"You all right?" Erron said.

She nodded.

"Stay put." Black-beard grumbled and slammed the door behind him.

"If my head didn't hurt so bad I'd be laughing at you right now," Taylor said, almost smiling.

"Drop dead," Erron said.

"I think he likes you," Taylor said, still not quite smiling.

Erron peered out the smudged glass. He could hear the driver cursing and he saw black-beard's shape move past the window. Erron looked at Taylor and realized that she was sitting at his height. The wagon was slanted unnaturally to one side. Somehow he hadn't even noticed. He rubbed his own head and looked back out the window. He thought he saw something move between the trees.

"What is..." he said, leaning out of his seat.

"What?" Taylor said.

Erron rubbed the glass with his sleeve, but it didn't do anything. He made his eyes small, looking at the shapes he assumed were trees. He saw something move again between them.

"There."

"What?"

Erron stared as the shape got bigger and more definite. It was a man. Erron thought he recognized him. Then when he heard a familiar voice, he knew he had.

–CHAPTER 7: The Elkarian–

*No damn respect.*

He slammed the door to the wagon.

*I'm a captain not a nursemaid.*

“We’re stuck!” A shout from the front of the wagon.

*Clearly!*

“Yes, I see.”

Broan thought about the hard work he’d done to become a Captain. Three years as a page to the Open Council, two years training in the Town Guard and three more years working his way up the ranks.

*No damn respect.*

He walked behind the wagon and saw that the back left wheel was stuck in a rather deep and jagged crevice in the middle of the road. The wheel itself, however,

seemed completely intact. How the driver hadn't noticed the crevice, or how the front wheel had missed it for that matter was astonishing.

"What the hell happened?" The driver yelled back, seemingly unable to move from his seat. *He is probably fat. Fat men have trouble moving sometimes.* Broan realized that he hadn't actually seen the man yet.

He looked around for a large stick he could use as leverage to prop the wheel out of the hole.

*I shook Brenden Murray's hand, he thought, and currently I'm fetching sticks.*

He left the dirt road and shuffled through the grass and bushes. He found one but it broke in his hands. It was soaked through.

Broan heard a twig snap to his right.

"Ah, looks to me as if you're stuck."

Broan almost yelled. He raised the soaked stick in his hand like a weapon, forgetting the sword at his side. In front of him was an old man, skinny, with a long green coat and brown riding pants. He had grey hair, almost white, was clean-shaven and had long eyebrows that seemed to dangle into his eyes. The man sat atop a strange, ugly looking horse the likes of which Broan had never seen before.

"Easy now fella. I may just send my donkey at you, he has a fierce bite you know."

Broan looked down at his stick.

"Sorry, I, your what?"

He stared at the donkey. There hadn't been a donkey in the world for something like a hundred winters. They were said to have all died out. Ugly, mostly useless creatures anyway, but still.

“Well, he's an Elkarian, but you might as well call him a donkey. Or an ass. Do you prefer ass?”

Broan stared, at first pondering the question. Then he remembered himself, “Who are you? What are you doing here?” Broan said, trying to take back some of the authority he felt he had lost when he threatened the old man with his soggy stick.

“My name is Ghairen, and you are?”

“Broan, and I'm –”

“Good, Broan, well it seems you sir, are stuck. I think I can help.”

Broan scratched at his beard and dropped his stick.

“No, that's fine, we're fine. Be about your day. This is official business, no concern of yours.”

“Nonsense, nothing official about getting stuck in the mud is there?”

Ghairen and his donkey were already moving toward the wagon.

Broan wasn't sure what to do. On one hand he wanted nothing to do with this strange old man and his creature, on the other, he was curious as to how an old man and a useless animal were supposed to help.

“What's going on?” The driver had gotten down from his perch and was mulling about the wheel when Broan, Ghairen and the ass emerged from the bushes. Broan saw

the driver, who was actually not as fat as he'd imagined, furrow his eyebrows and crinkle his nose at Ghairen and the donkey.

“Bloody Mallek, what is that?” the driver said.

“It’s an Elkarian, or donkey if you like.” Ghairen smiled.

“Probably just an ugly breed of horse,” Broan said.

Ghairen dismounted, gave Broan a fake-looking smile, and took a look at the wheel.

“Yup, yup. Seems the wheel is fine, which is a grand stroke of good luck. Looks like oak, not bad, would have been better if it were teak, but no matter, either way, as you can see, the wheel is still in tact. I’ve had this happen before. Of course, then we were in quite the hurry, and it was snowing. Not hard mind you, but enough that we didn’t want to linger, and the horses were getting anxious, and hungry. Could have used a pair of strong Elkarians if you ask me.”

Broan just stared. *Where am I? Am I still a Captain of the Town Guard?*

“Elkarians?” the driver said.

“Yes, let me have a look...” Ghairen trailed off, leading his donkey toward the front of the wagon.

“Erron! Why look at you lad,” Ghairen said turning to the open door.

“They’re taking us to East Arch, you have to help us!” came the boy’s pleading voice.

Broan rushed to the side of the wagon and shoved Erron inside. “You come out again, and you’ll be food for the wolves. Both of you.” He slammed the door, pounding it with his fist as a threat. He was in no mood for children. He looked over at the old man watching him. “You know the boy?” Broan said.

Ghairen smiled. “Of course, hard to miss a lad with eyes like that. And you’re taking him...?”

“Like I said, official business,” Broan gave the old man a look, “we don’t need your help. Driver,” *what was his name?* “can we get these doors locked, for the time being?”

Ghairen stared at Broan between wiry eyebrows. “East Arch, and why not? Wonderful place for a young lad and his sister to learn to work hard, keep their heads down.” He brushed his face with his hands as if trying to smooth out the wrinkles. “Now, let me just...”

He trailed off again, moving toward the horses. The driver was close behind, staring at the donkey.

“I’ll give ya twelve drakes for yer donkey there,” the driver said.

“Ahh, a fine offer, but he’s more a friend than an animal.”

“I’d be willing to go to fourteen, fourteen and a half—what’re you doin’?”

Ghairen had begun unhitching one of the horses.

*What the hell?*

“What the hell are you doing?” Broan said.



“I’m helping. Trust me,” he gave Broan a fatherly smile, “Elkarians are quite strong, you’ll see.”

“No, I can’t let you,” Broan grabbed Ghairen’s arm, it was remarkably thin under the thick green robe, “you have to—”

Broan felt a weight collide against his chest and saw, as if through a blue cloud, Ghairen, the driver, and the ass moving further away. He realized, for a brief moment, that he was in the air, feet raised above the ground. He thought maybe he was floating away, leaving the world for good—dying. His back scraped against a rough surface and he found himself looking at the sky. A few raindrops landed on his forehead. For a moment he couldn’t breathe. Then he felt his throat burst open like a dam and air flooded in in painful panicky gulps.

“Bloody Mallek!” came the driver’s voice from somewhere far away.

Broan tasted blood in his mouth and smelled a mixture of cold mud and iron. He lifted his head and felt the weight condense on his chest in a solid block of pain.

“Ahh, sorry lad, you alright?” The old man, standing above him, “he gets defensive sometimes, doesn’t like it when folks lay hands on me. Not saying, of course, that you had any harmful intent, but Elkarians have a sense about things like that. Not to mention a vicious kick.” He laughed as if Broan’s ribs weren’t probably broken, and all that had transpired was an ill-advised joke. But still, Broan was alive, he was breathing.

They helped him gently to his feet, the pain shooting now through his back and neck. It was too much of an effort to stand upright, so he leaned against the slanting wagon.

“Now, lets get on with this shall we?” Ghairen said and walked back to the animals, stopping by the door on his way. “Erron, stay put now and hold on tight, we’re going to get you out.” He knocked on the door.

The driver looked over Broan’s shoulder. “That was quite the whollop. Do we need to head back? Still have quite a ride ahead of us, wouldn’t want you to keel over on the way,” he said.

“No I’m ok,” was what he meant to say, but it came out in a short exhale of painful air. So he just shook his head.

Broan looked at the driver and changed his mind; the man was actually kind of fat, well, husky at least.

The driver looked at him incredulously, then nodded.

“Alright then, stand clear if you would, please,” Ghairen called from the front of the wagon.

“Now wait a moment.” The driver shook a threatening hand and strode toward Ghairen.

“Hup hup,” Ghairen said and patted the Elkarian on the backside.

Broan saw the wagon jerk forward, he moved painfully out of the way. For a few brief moments the wagon shook with the strain and moaned with the sound of splitting

wood and stretched leather. The Elkarian and the horse beside it pulled slow and steady while the untethered horse watched with the others.

“Hold it now, hold it!” the driver’s panicked voice, “you’ll snap the wheel off,” he called over the stretching wagon.

Broan found himself distant from the whole scene. Like he could care less if the wagon snapped in two, even with the children inside. He found a tree to lean against and watched.

“Just about...” Ghairen said as the wagon popped out of the hole and rolled violently forward, tilting and wobbling its weight back and forth, “Ah hah!” He clapped his hands together. “There you see, Elkarians, strong, sturdy and good to have in a pinch. Well done my friend, well done indeed,” he said rubbing the animal’s muzzle.

The driver stared in amazement at the old man and his animal. Broan stared as well, he was out of words, or rather, he was done making them.

“How the hell did this little animal do that?” The driver rubbed his head.

“You’re not listening are you? Elkarians are known for their strength. Bred that way.”

“I’ve never heard o’ them before.”

Ghairen smiled. “Really? Interesting.”

The driver mumbled some kind of thanks and helped Ghairen unleash his donkey, or ass, or Elkarian, or ugly horse, or whatever it was.

“Well,” Ghairen walked over to Broan while the driver was re-tethering his own horse, “I am sorry about that. Here,” he reached into his jacket and pulled out something that looked like a soggy root, “take this, won’t mend broken bones if that’s what you got, but I’m quite certain it will make you feel better. Trust me.”

Broan took it, and surprisingly felt something like gratitude. His anger diminished to a place where he could call it back easily, but for the moment he was fine with just being alive, and breathing, one breath at a time.

“Take care of yourself,” Ghairen said and before mounting his donkey, he put his face up to the wagon’s window and tapped on it, “ta, Erron, I’m sure I’ll be seeing you.”

He threw his leg over the animal, gave a “hup hup,” and disappeared back into the forest.

*Why would he go back into the forest?*

Broan looked down at the soggy root in his hand and placed a hand tenderly on his ribs, happy to be breathing, though the pain in his chest was something awful.

The driver walked up beside him. “Isn’t that the way he came?”

“Let’s go,” Broan managed to say.

He ripped a piece of the root off with his teeth and chewed. It wasn’t bad.

–CHAPTER 8: The Kulkai–

Ghairen had just stood there.

Perhaps Erron’s face hadn’t looked as desperate as he thought, or his voice as panicked. Ghairen had looked placid and oblivious, “look at you,” he’d said as if nothing more than pleasantly surprised to see him. Maybe there wasn’t anything he could have done. What had Erron expected him to do, throw them on his horse and ride into the forest again? No, they would have just been chased down and drug back. But, he could have done something, couldn’t he? Something. Anything but just stand there.

As the wagon rolled onward, a deep feeling settled into his chest, his shoulders, his neck. They were alone, abandoned and discarded and East Arch was getting closer with every rock and jolt of the wagon.

Erron watched Taylor in her corner, her eyes were half closed and her lips pursed. She was rigid as if she were listening intently to something. Who cares? It wasn’t his fault.

Erron used to sneak out of his room at night. Sometimes he’d go to the edge of the northern forest and stand there looking into the smoky blackness. Sometimes there would be fog and he would imagine spirits dancing and moving between the trees. Maybe his parents were in there.

But most of the time Erron would sneak through Taylor's window and they'd talk about, and imagine, Allytrium.

Taylor had come up with the name. Sometimes they pretended it was a city past the Forest of Faces that had survived the wars. A place where people built houses in the trees and walked on the branches like roads. Other times it was an island floating on the Addean, far to the west, undiscovered, where people lived on the water, fished all day and had silver and rainbow eyes like fish scales. Sometimes their parents were there waiting for them.

"When can we go?" Taylor would ask.

"We'll have to build a boat first. We'll cut down a tree in the forest and take turns at night carving it. Or maybe we can steal one of the boats in the harbor when the sailors are all in town drinking."

"You don't know how to sail."

They would stay up late looking out the window to the forest, the moon's light slanting through the room, making their faces blue. They'd imagine what Allytrium was going to be like. They'd never talk about when they were going, or how they'd know how to find it. One day they'd just crawl out that window, and they wouldn't come back.

"I can't wait to see it," Taylor said.

"It's gonna be perfect."

She'd kiss him on the cheek before he left each night, which always awoke strange emotions.

Eventually Erron stopped sneaking into her room. She would want to sleep, or she would already be asleep when he got there. Sometimes he would wake her, but whenever he did, she never seemed to want to talk anymore.

“But I think we’re going to leave soon.”

“Erron.”

“I mean it.”

“You’ve always meant it,” she’d say. But she’d look sad.

He’d trace the wooden edges of the window with his finger, and watch the forest as if waiting for something to happen in that blue light. Taylor would pull the covers back over her chest and soon he’d hear her heavy breathing, and leave.

They’d make casual mention of Allytrium during the day, and talk about leaving every once in a while. But they didn’t stay up late anymore, or plan a way to escape. Taylor slept through the night; she’d grown out of whatever it was. But Erron would wake up and look out his window at the forest—the fog. He’d think of Taylor, asleep in her bed. Nothing had changed, nothing had truly changed. He thought of how she used to kiss him before he left her room each night.

“See you in Allytrium,” she’d whisper.

Black-beard didn’t look good. Every breath seemed a struggle. His back was slightly bent over his knees and his arms folded over his stomach. With every bounce of

the wagon you could see the pain on his face as he let out a grunt. Erron almost felt bad for him. Not quite.

Taylor had fallen asleep beside him. How she had managed to fall asleep in the rickety wagon, on the way to East Arch Keep—their new home—he had no idea. Oh well. It had been a long night, and an even longer day. Maybe she wouldn't be as angry when she woke.

Erron wrapped his arms around his chest and kicked the discarded bread on the floor. It was getting dark outside and Erron could feel the cold pressing in on the wagon. He breathed out and watched his breath swirl and dance like fog in an empty forest. He leaned his head against the corner of the wagon and tried to sleep, hoping not to dream...

...Erron woke to the sound of rushing water. It was the river Ide, flowing from the Northern Mountains. It crossed in front of East Arch before bearing west to the Addrean. The wagon slowed to a stop and Erron heard the driver talking to someone outside. Black-beard grunted.

“What are we doing?” Erron said.

Black-beard just stared. Taylor had woken up and was looking around, trying to see out the cloudy, pitch black window.

The door opened and the driver stood rubbing his face as if he'd been sleeping.

“You two, out, lets go,” he said pointing to Erron and Taylor.



“What is this?” Erron said as he and Taylor stepped down from the wagon, Blackbeard just watched them go as if half asleep.

When they got out there was a man standing before the river, next to a small hut in front of a large stone bridge. He had long hair and a dark smile on his face that looked sinister against the flickering light of a lantern, which he held in front of him.

“Always good to see new ones. Follow me then.”

Taylor gave Erron a confused look, but they followed the man down to the waters edge. Erron looked up at the bridge. It seemed small for the size of the river, but wide enough for the wagon. They reached the edge of the water and Erron listened to its urgency, rushing off somewhere he couldn’t see. He felt its cold spray moisten his face and hands.

“What are we doing here?” Taylor said over the noise of the water.

Erron almost didn’t care, he was glad to be out of the wagon.

“Here now, your hand young one, let me have it,” the man said. He set his lantern down on a rock and smiled, revealing bent teeth.

Erron frowned, but reached out his hand waiting to be given something, and before he had time to realize what was happening the man cut a small slash in Erron’s palm with a knife.

“Ah.” Erron pulled away. The man started laughing and Erron thought about pushing him in the river. The man grabbed Erron’s arm with an iron grip.

“Open your palm, it’s over, that’s all I needed I promise,” he said to Erron, smiling but not releasing his firm grip. Taylor stood by the river on some rocks looking pale.

Erron opened his palm.

“That’s it,” the man said and pressed the sides of the knife up against his skin. The blade pulled away wet with Erron’s blood.

“You two are fresh blood. Unbled, unbound to the gods.”

“What do you mean?” Erron said as the man bent down to the river, dipping the bloody blade into the water and whispering Mallek’s name.

“Neither of you have been to East Arch before. This is the end of the world, children, a sacred place, the gods demand this sacrifice and the river takes it to them. Now,” he stepped toward Taylor, “if you please.”

Taylor yelped when her skin was cut and Erron almost leapt for the blade. When the man sunk the knife into the river again Erron saw bugs, thousands and thousands of them, flying above the surface moving up the river. He stepped closer and watched them.

“Ahh,” the man noticed as well. “Kulkai, river bugs. The second moon must be strong tonight. A storm is coming, I’d say.”

Erron watched their silver bodies bounce above the surface; they swarmed about and moved up the river together in what seemed like a sort of dance.

The man bound their cuts with cloth that he pulled from his pockets and walked them back up the bank to the wagon. “May Mallek go with you,” he said, touching his heart and bowing, all the while a thin smile never leaving his mouth.

Erron sat back in the wagon with his sister, she looked even paler and Erron was aware of the sharp pain in his hand. He pictured his blood flowing up the river to the gods, riding the steady stream. He thought of the Kulkai dipping into the water drinking, the liquid a mixture of red and silver, as they danced, waiting for the light of the second moon to come out from behind thick clouds.

With a single snap of the reins the wagon shook back to life and carried them over the river, across the bridge, toward the end of the world.

## -CHAPTER 9: East Arch Keep-

“Let’s go,” Black-beard said.

The gate was closing behind them with a metallic rattle. They were here.

Black-beard held open the door letting in a frozen breeze, but he seemed to be sweating despite the cold. Taylor was already outside, waiting. Erron stepped out of the wagon and saw East Arch for the first time, hovering over them like a giant beast. The

clouds had cleared, and the light of the moon blanketed the stars and outlined the rising towers in silver. There were two of them reaching towards the sky in the distance, with barracks connecting them at their base. On either side of East Arch the Southern and Northern Mountains rose from the earth blocking all paths. All paths but the Eastern forest. The forest of faces, where the eyes of the towers watched.

Where Erron found himself now was what appeared to be a sort of town square. Buildings lined a large cobbled street; there was what looked like a forge, an armory, and a few of them, probably taverns, were still alive with light and music. On the sides of the street were strange orange orbs hanging from the eaves of the buildings, probably wax or some sort of glass, flickering and humming with candlelight. They cast shadows on the shops, making the buildings look oddly fake, like they were going to topple over at any moment and reveal the rock and dirt beneath.

*So this was East Arch Keep, he felt a knot developing in his throat, their new home.*

“The stables are down this road, tell them you’re with the Town Guard, they’ll give you lodging for the night, I’ll find you in the morning,” Black-beard told the driver. The wagon pulled away.

“Where are we going?” Taylor said.

“I’m instructed to take the two of you to the kitchens, might be some work left for you. From there, you’re out of my control,” he said in a *thank-the-gods* sort of tone.

As they moved up the street Erron watched the orange globes pass like fireflies.

He thought of Ghairen.

“Fireflies, come now lad, small bugs like faeries, they light up like small flames in the night and dance around fields and ponds,” Gharien had told him on his way back to the forest. Erron had liked the idea, but still, “Never heard of them,” he’d said. Ghairen had thought that a damn shame. “Everyone in their life needs to see a firefly, if only just one,” he told him. Erron had almost laughed, but he saw Ghairen’s eyebrows furrow, so he just nodded.

But these orange globes were probably nothing like fireflies— circular and lifeless, falling from the sides of buildings on small wires.

They moved among them, relatively unnoticed. Erron could hear the sound of music, too distant to recognize the tune, pulsing through the open street. People spilled out of the taverns and hugged the buildings as if the world were slanted. The smell of some sort of meat roasting warmed the air. Erron felt his stomach fold.

No one said a word, and Taylor was too busy looking around to make eye contact with Erron, so they walked in silence. The kitchens were up the main street and around a corner down a small alleyway, if you could even call it an alleyway in this fake-town. They branched out from the main keep, a side extension of the main grounds, not intended to be noticed. Erron heard the sound of pots and pans and running water before he saw the steam, and the open door.

“Next load, here she comes!” A thick voice sang over the noise of the kitchens. “Hurry it up, I’ve got things to do tonight.”

Black beard walked through the open door and knocked, first soft and then much harder after no one responded. “Eh, excuse me?” The kitchen was bustling with life. Warm steam rising from sinks, dripping plates, and hanging knives. Workers both young and old were scrubbing and shuffling about the kitchen.

“What?” The deep voice belonged to the largest man Erron had ever seen. Large didn’t quite do it. This man was huge. Shoulders, stomach, and neck bulging out of his greasy white shirt. Erron couldn’t tell whether he was a heaping pile of blubber or if there was muscle, and power beneath. “I’m comin’, I’m comin’,” he said, wrestling his way around counters and workers.

Taylor took a step toward Erron. Erron looked at her wondering if she was actually scared. He stood up tall.

“Looking for something?” said the huge man.

“No. These two are your new workers, I’m sure you’ve been informed,” Blackbeard said, gesturing toward Erron and Taylor.

“Really? New workers eh? No, wasn’t informed a’tal. But if you ask me, it’s about bloody time. New recruits are sent to the damn towers every winter, and all the manual labors end up either hittin’ iron or tanning leather.”

“Well, by order of the High Council, they’re yours now. I should warn you, they’ve taken to running off.”

The fat man scratched his cheek and gave them a wary eye. “Ah, I see. Well, won’t be any of that here. Nothin’ to run to, plenty o’ guards and dogs around, and

there's quite the penalty for desertion. But, I'm sure we won't have a problem with that.”

He leaned forward and smiled out of the corner of his mouth. “Welcome, welcome. Take a look around ya lads. Your new home.” He waved his arm, gesturing at the sinks, the tables. A few workers had stopped or slowed what they were doing to watch. Dishes held between fingers, water running. Erron looked across blank stares—the busy kitchen. *Their new home.*

“Excuse me, uh...” Black-beard stammered.

“Horus, and you are?”

“Broan, Captain in the Town Guard.”

“Well now, good fer you isn't it?” He chuckled, deep and belly shaking.

“Yes, well, is there some sort of guest housing in the Keep?”

“No, definitely not. Even if there were, they've all got coals up their asses at the Keep. There's apprentice, and worker housing, but you're better off just headin' to Tully's. It's the tavern just down the way. They've got some nice, warm rooms. Well, warm anyway.”

Black-beard, or Broan, looked put out, maybe offended. He still had a hand pressed to his stomach.

“Alright then. Well, these two are yours now, and I take my leave,” he said with a nod.

“Fine by me.”

Broan turned and looked at Erron. He coughed, wincing, one hand at his mouth, the other at his side, then shook his head, like he knew there was something he should do or say, but wasn't going to. Then he walked back down the street, a trail of steam following behind him.

“Well, now,” Horus was wiping his hands on a dishtowel, “like I said, always happy to have new workers. And as tradition, fresh blood gets to finish the evening dishes, alone. But, you're in luck, we're oh, I'd say over half way done already. Shouldn't –”

A girl standing by a sink full of large pots screamed, pushing herself up on her toes.

“Rat,” someone said, pointing at the ground.

Horus whirled around, a cleaver materializing in his hand. He bounded past workers, knocking a stack of pots onto the floor.

“Fucking rats!” He bellowed.

Taylor was behind Erron now.

“Look out, move, move, move.” Workers ducked and scampered away from his swinging blade.

He raced around the kitchen, shoved a table out of the way, and leapt forward, blade pointing ahead of him like an arrow. It was an odd thing to see such a large man dive, leaving the ground for a split second, and float to the floor. He landed with a surprisingly soft thud, followed by the thwack of his blade against the hard ground.



“Hah! Ya bastard. Come in my kitchen will you? Now there’s bloody two o’ you,” he said, holding up two wet globs of hair, flesh and blood, one he held dripping by the tail, the other sprawled out on the face of his knife.

“Rat problem,” he grumbled the explanation to Erron and Taylor, “I hate the squirmy little things.”

Erron looked at Taylor. She let go of his sleeve, and punched his shoulder. “Shut up.” It would have been funny, in a different place.

Horus dumped the two rat halves into a large bin while one of the workers went about cleaning the blood from the floor. “Ok then. Like I said,” he wiped his hands off on his shirt, “the dishes are yours. Wash the large pots here. Plates, bowls, and silverware go on these trays, then in here.” He patted a large silver container with levers on either side. He pulled one of the levers, lifting a side panel, and shoved a tray full of plates inside, then closed it. Erron saw steam escaping from either side of the thing, and heard what sounded like running water. Tubes connected it to the wall and two square pumps bounced up and down on top of it emitting steam and a slight whistle with each descent. “This lever here stops it. Plates are put back up there, bowls over here and well, right, you can figure out the rest. Tully’s is callin’ my name friends,” he said, a smile erupting on his face. The workers watched Horus from where they had scattered, waiting, as if they couldn’t quite believe that they could stop working. “Really great to have you, uh, what was yer names?”

Erron thought about not telling him. But the whole room was waiting.

“Erron,” he said. “That’s Taylor.”

“Good to meet ya, you’re scrawny little things, but we’ll get some good work outta ya wont we lads?” he said, a few workers laughed, most just grumbled.

He leaned in close and studied Erron’s face. “Well, shit on me boy, I swear but you have green eyes.” A slow murmur spread through the room as the workers whispered to one another and shuffled forward. “Never seen that before, I can promise ya.”

Faces twisted and craned like curious animals to get a look at Erron, they crowded around Horus, one even stood up on the counter to get a better view. Some looked astonished, some still whispered to one another, while others scowled. This was always how it was. People were always the same.

“Why does he—”

“Look—”

“How can—”

“Holy Mallek—”

“Unnatural—”

“Leave him alone!” Taylor said. Erron looked behind him to see his sister, face red.

The workers stopped pressing in, but Horus studied Erron like he hadn’t heard anything.

“Yup, never seen that before, all my days. Well, just the same, good luck to the both o’ you lads. If ya finish before I’ve come back, head down the street to Tully’s. I’ll

be the one dancin' by the fire, singin' *Winter Women*." He turned to the herd of workers. "All right then, on with it, unless ya want to stay and help?" They threw down their aprons and hurried out the door. Some still squinting at Erron.

"Nice to meet you." Nodded an old man as he passed through the door. He had a thick white mustache and heavy wrinkles around his eyes.

Erron watched them all go. Taylor looked like she was going to hit one of them.

When they were all out the door, Horus leaned in close, "By tomorrow boy, the whole of East Arch will know about you an' them eyes. Best not to draw too much attention to them, some people 'ere might not find 'em so interesting." He smiled and nodded as if there was no danger behind his words. "Alright, she's all yours." Horus maneuvered his girth through the door and bounded down the street.

*"Oh, the coldest heart, lips like ice, no rays of golden sun, so empty your pockets and grab yer boots, and pick the fattest one."*

Horus's voice filled the air, and rose with the steam from the running water while Erron and Taylor surveyed the piles of dishes yet to be washed.

"Great," Taylor said.

There was a small smear of rat blood still left on the floor, and a sink spilled water into an overflowing pot in the corner of the room.

*"No rays of golden sun,"* the voice echoed down the street. *"Oh, I'll pick the fattest one. Yes I'll pick the fattest one!"*

It was well into the night when the dishes were finally finished. Erron's hands were pink, sore and beginning to wrinkle. He was trying to figure out where a particularly large cooking pot was supposed to go when Horus spilled through the door.

"Aha! Looks great lads. Here, call it a reward," he said, producing a large brown napkin. He unfolded it and handed Erron two thick, fatty slices of meat. Looked like chicken. "Eat up you two, put some fat on yer bones."

Erron was too hungry to be offended. He ate, passing the other half to Taylor. They didn't bother sitting down, or using the counter, and they sure as hell weren't going to dirty another plate. So they stood where they were and devoured the meat in a few hasty bites. Horus watched as if he were enjoying the food himself.

"Hmmm, nah as good as duck, but tasty just the same eh?" He chuckled like he'd said something funny, his words slurring together a bit. Erron noticed his red cheeks, saw his head swerving as if it were tracing some invisible circle above his head, the placid smile, the wet, shiny lips—Horus was drunk.

Fortunately he was a relatively happy drunk. Erron tried to imagine the amount of drink it would take to put a man the size of Horus over the edge.

"Les go then shall we?" Horus said, and gestured the two of them out the door.

The night was cool, but felt good on Erron's warm skin. The music from the street below was gone, replaced by a stillness, no wind, no rattle of wagons, only small sounds. Horus' boots shuffling on the road, Taylor wiping her hands on her pants, Erron's own

intake of breath, then exhale – a puff of white, disappearing quickly in the open air.

Horus began to hum.

“He’s drunk,” Taylor said to Erron as they followed him past moonlit buildings.

“I figured.”

“I like him,” she said it like a threat.

“You like everybody.” Erron thought of Marten.

Taylor looked at him, “What do we do?”

Horus stopped humming. “I think you’ll like it here at East Arch,” Horus said, “it’s hard living but damn it all, ale is good!”

They came to a stop where a line of buildings ended on the north side of the Keep. It was larger than the others by half, made of dark reddish stained wood, with a pointing roof. Horus knocked loudly on the double doors. “Lazy,” he said then knocked again, louder.

The door flung open revealing a short woman in a thin–very thin–nightgown. She was not unattractive, neither fat nor skinny. She might have been considered quite pretty in a different situation but the scowl on her face emanated anger, not beauty. Horus was a large, intimidating man but that woman’s glare was a flaming dagger. Perhaps it was a good thing Horus was drunk.

“Ellie, how’re ya?”

“Horus? What do you think you are doing you slobbering s–”

“New recruits, Ellie, couldn’t be helped.”

Ellie looked at Erron, then over at Taylor.

“Need to find her a bed.” Horus scratched at the side of his face.

“Horus if you ever come pounding at our doors at this hour again, in this state, I’ll find something large enough to wring the life out of your bulbous neck. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” Horus had laughter in his voice.

“Well? Come. Get in.” She was looking at Taylor.

Taylor looked at Erron. *What do we do?*

“Lets, go!” Ellie said, slicing the air with her hand.

Taylor scurried over to her side and glanced back at Erron. “Night,” she said like she wasn’t scared, like she wasn’t about to burst into tears of anger, sadness, mere exhaustion at any second. Erron wondered if he would see her tomorrow. Maybe the next day?

“Never. Again,” Ellie said to Horus before slamming the door shut.

Horus turned and looked at Erron. “No worries lad,” he slapped him on the back, knocking the wind out of him, “she’s not always like that, most of the time she’s quite lovely.” Horus laughed.

They continued walking as the road thinned and turned to dirt. Erron followed the sluggish footsteps of Horus, who didn’t trip or stumble, just walked slow and awkward like his legs were full of water. Eventually they came to a building roughly the same size as Taylor’s, but isolated. It was off the dirt road, surrounded by grass, next to a slope leading to the Northern forest. Erron took in the trees, the dark—the forest as a living,

heaving thing. It wasn't the Forest of Faces, so it wasn't necessarily forbidden. But still, he had never seen this area of forest, never been between those trees, seen the points of the mountains beyond from this angle, so close to the end of the world. Its general untouched-feel was eerie. He imagined the Forest of Faces, the darkness moving through the trees like fog. A darkness untouched by humans since the Ancients carved the faces on the bark. And then, like so many times in his life, he let his thoughts drift to a world beyond, to Allytrium. He was closer than he'd ever been, and yet Allytrium, in his thoughts, was darker than ever, surrounded by black fog and bent trees.

“Here we are then. Not much but it's home. Everyone calls it the Shack, though I'm not sure it deserves the name,” Horus said opening the door. “Up the stairs, on your right and your left are the beds, plenty of room for ya, should be blankets up there too. Don't wake Tomm though, gets cranky when ya wake 'im up.” Horus burped, deep and thick with the smell of ale and chicken. “I'll wake ya in the morning lad,” he said and moved past the stairs to a room on the main floor, shutting the door behind him.

Erron walked up the stairs, feeling the railing between his fingers. The place was cold and dusty and smelled like wet wood. He listened to his footsteps, trying to be as quiet as he could.

The sleeping quarters were two large rooms, straddling a hallway, filled with bunk beds. There were men, and boys, sleeping, snoring, and turning about in them. A few spots remained open, one in the corner by a window that Erron chose immediately. He took off his boots and coat and set them on the floor beside the bed, then crawled into

it and pulled the covers over his chest, looking out the window at the clear sky. The moon cast shadows along the edges of the window frame. Erron stared at it until there was a golden moon shaped hole in his vision when he looked away. He was exhausted.

“Get out,” came a young voice from above him.

Erron twitched with surprise. “What?”

“You’re in my spot, this is my bunk. My bunk.” The boy was in the bed above him, looking over the edge. Erron could only see his head, but even then he could tell that he was a scrawny kid, with dark eyes and brown hair cut short, poking from the surface of his domed head.

“You can’t have both bunks.” Erron was tired and now a little annoyed.

“Get out! That’s my bunk freak! No one wants you here!” He yelled. Yelled! A few of the others woke up.

“Shut up!” one of them said, maybe it was Tomm.

“What is it?” Came another one.

“The freak’s in my bunk. Get out!”

Erron was already moving. He kept his head down, not wanting to meet any angry eyes and clutched his blankets to his chest. He raced out the door and down the stairs, skipping over the bottom step and almost tumbling to the floor. Voices echoed after him; he heard someone yell for silence. Erron looked at the front doors now before him. A cold breeze flew in from the slit in the door; it brushed Erron's face and rattled the handle. He thought for a moment about running off. He’d find Taylor and they’d make



their way through the forest again. They'd move faster this time, and kill any hawk in their way. Erron looked up the stairs, heard the voices dying down to a tense shimmer. He looked back at the door. He was so tired. Maybe tomorrow.

He found a supply closet behind the stairs and crawled in, pulled the blanket over himself and closed his eyes. He never wanted to see any of the other workers or the shorthaired boy again. He'd keep his head down, stay hidden till he could get away. A broom pressed up against his shoulder, dirty rags hung low over his face, smelling of solvents, and his legs were bent to his waist. Maybe tomorrow... he'd get Taylor, they'd find Ghairen. He wiped his nose and felt warm tears on the back of his hand.

So this was East Arch Keep. So this was home.

–CHAPTER 10: The First Day–

Erron was already awake when he heard the footsteps echoing all around him. It had been a horrible night of waking, drifting, and waking again. He felt light headed and his limbs were stiff and sore. The footsteps of the workers pounded on his head as they thudded down the stairs directly above him. Erron thought about hiding there all day, but

he realized he was hungry, and besides, if someone needed the mop, or broom, or rags he'd have a hard time explaining himself.

He folded the blankets and shoved them under one of the shelves between two empty buckets and walked slowly out the door. Peering through the railing he watched the bodies trudge past, wiping tired faces, some pulling on clothes as they went.

Errorr waited till they were all gone and the house was still and empty. He walked to the front doors and pushed them open. The air was cold, but there was no wind. It was halfway between night and morning, the clouds turning from black to grey.

“There ya are,” came the deep voice.

Errorr turned and saw Horus standing at the top of the stairs looking down at him.

“Been looking for ya. How you expect to do your job today if I ain't even given it to ya?” He looked Errorr up and down. “What'd'ya do sleep with the crickets?”

Errorr didn't know what that meant so he shrugged.

“There's a few positions that need to be filled, I'll give you the choice but really Kane needs an extra hand in the stables. You know anything about horses?”

Errorr looked up at him. “Yeah, some.”

“Doesn't matter, Kane'll show ya, or he'll put ya to wiping their asses, either way. But there's also room at the smithy, though you look kinda scrawny. I could pretty-talk my way into gettin' you a job at Tully's or—”

“The stables is fine,” Errorr said.

“Good, you’ll make ole Kane’s day, though he’s a grumpy shit. You’ll work there till the first bell, that means lunch, we’ll serve, then clean, then a short break until the second bell and we’ll do the same for dinner, got it?”

“What about breakfast?”

“Breakfast? What the hell do I care, find yer own damn breakfast.”

Erron felt his face flush.

“Follow me.”

For the second time in what felt like the same day, Erron followed Horus down the dirt road, this time leading back to the main square. When they got to the cobbled street, they turned left, away from the kitchen and the shops and followed the bend of the main Keep. It led them around the side, which opened up to grass fields. Erron saw a small brown barn in front of them attached to a corral.

“Looks like Kane’s already at it. Must have some riders coming this morning,” Horus said and spat on the grass.

Eventually they left the path and entered the open barn. Inside, Erron saw several horses standing in stalls lining the sides, hay scattered about and an old man brushing a rather large and impressive brown stallion. The whole place smelled of shit.

“Kane, I brought you a present,” Horus said, grabbing Erron’s shoulder.

“Howssat? What?”

“Brought you a present, know how you’ve been complaining you get no help around here? Well, here ya go, here’s help.” He smiled down at Erron.

Kane stood slowly and hitched over to the two of them. He looked down at Erron awkwardly close, inspecting him.

Kane was a thin old man with patches of white hair on his face and one eye that seemed to be permanently half closed. He smelled like dirty sheep wool. Kane grabbed Erron's arm and shook it, then slapped him on the chest, which caught Erron off guard and almost knocked the wind out of him.

"Worthless. He won't do," Kane said and turned back to the horse.

"Well, he's what you got old man so take 'im or leave 'im," Horus said, then leaning down to Erron, "don't worry, he says that 'bout everybody."

Kane was silent for a while, brushing the brown hair methodically.

"All these years, and this is what I get eh?" he said. Then stopped brushing and turned over his shoulder. "Fine, leave em. But don't be expectin' thanks outta me. You'll get none of it."

"I hear ya you old grouch. Have a pleasant day," he slapped Erron's back, "see ya at lunch Ron."

"It's Erron," Erron said.

Horus walked back out the barn doors scratching his belly as he went.

Erron watched and waited as Kane continued to brush the stallion without saying a word. Erron wondered if he was supposed to help. Looking around, he took in the other horses. They looked strong, healthy; he wondered what it would be like to ride one.

"You know anything about horses boy?"

“Yes.” He lied. There was a long pause. “Well, no,” he said eventually.

“I thought not,” came the old man’s reply. He stepped away from the horse and looked at it, inspecting his fine work. “Bring me a blanket in the corner there.” Erron got it and handed it to him. Kane laid the blanket over the stallion’s back. “Now the saddle, over there.” It was heavier than Erron imagined and awkward to carry. “See, useless, here.” He took it from him and slapped it over the blanket with surprising speed and dexterity. Kane showed him the little adjustments to make on the saddle, the stirrups had to sit right and the girth had to be adjusted several times. “Tighten it once,” he grunted, “pause, tighten it again, and again. Ya see? The fat ole devil sticks out his belly so it’s loose and comfortable. But we want it tight to his hide. Get it?” Erron nodded. “Now we get the bit in his mouth, I’ll do it, this one don’t take it easy, the baby.”

Kane grabbed the horse by its head and tried shoving the bit in its mouth. The stallion pulled away, grunting.

“C’mon, ya fat goat.” Kane grabbed his ear and pulled, trying again with the bit. “Here, grab his neck, no his neck, there, there.” Erron grabbed and tried to hold it down, but when the horse wanted to move, it twitched its head back quick and easy. “Hold ‘im, hold ‘im, ah useless.”

Kane leaned in close to the horse’s face and bit down hard on its lip, it let out a squeal and Kane slid the bit swiftly into its mouth.

“There, ya whiny baby,” Kane said, slapping the horse’s head playfully, but hard. Kane looked from the horse over at Erron as if reassessing him. “Alright, think you can

do that? I'll take this one around the corral to warm 'im up, you get the black gelding saddled, Brianne will be here soon."

By the time Kane was closing the gate to the corral and well out of ear shot, Erron realized that he should have asked what a gelding was. Looking around he saw another brown horse, a brown and white spotted one and two black ones. This was stupid, he should have just pushed the old man over and made a run for the woods. He approached the black one to his right. Such a large animal. Erron looked in its eyes and wondered if it was thinking of bolting as soon as he lifted the latch. Is this really what Erron had begged his Grandfather to be a part of?

Erron went to the corner and got a blanket and saddle. He realized his hands were sweaty so he wiped them on his pants and walked up to the gate. The latch was rusty and pinched his fingers when he pried it open. The wooden panel swung heavy and Erron saw the horse shaking its head in anticipation, it was going to run him over, and bolt for the fields.

"Not that one, the other one, over there." Erron turned and saw a young girl, probably around his age, watching him from the other side of the barn, she had laughter in her voice. "These three are geldings, that's one of the stallions." She pointed to the horse in front of Erron and moved closer. Erron noticed her fitted leather riding pants and intricately embroidered blue linen shirt. She was pretty, very pretty.

"I know," he said, "I was just looking." He felt like a fool.

“Uh huh,” she said, smiling. Her smile was thin, and her lips looked abnormally red, like her wavy hair.

“You need help?” she said, brushing her hair back.

“No, I’ve got it.”

She laughed. “I know you do, but you might as well let me help.”

Erron latched the gate back up. The black stallion stomped in disappointment.

“Are you new here then?”

Erron nodded.

“What’s your name?”

“Erron.”

“That’s cute.”

Erron busied himself lifting the latch to the gelding’s pen. He laid out the blanket, and together they lifted the saddle onto the horse’s back. As they hoisted it up Erron caught a whiff of the girl’s hair, it smelt like vanilla.

“You know what a gelding is Erron?” she said his name as if testing it on her tongue.

“Yes.”

“No you don’t,” she tossed her hair, “it’s a horse with its balls cut off. Isn’t that gross?”

Erron shrugged.

She lifted her head, proud of her knowledge. “It makes them more gentle, for a lady to ride. This one’s my favorite.”

“You’ve ridden him?” Erron said.

“Of course I have, I’m riding him today.”

Erron scratched his head, feeling stupid all over again. “So you’re Brianne?”

“Yes, my Father is the Royal of East Arch Keep, but don’t worry about him, he’s old.”

Erron stepped back and looked at her as if she’d just told him that her hair was spun gold.

She leaned forward and stared at his face.

“Wow, you have green eyes,” she said, her mouth dropping slightly, “that’s interesting,” she took a step forward, “I like interesting people.” She put a hand on his arm. Erron resisted the urge to flinch away.

“Lady Brianne!” came a man’s voice.

Erron jerked out of her grasp as a soldier from the Keep approached. He was a husky man with thick shoulders and a round belly wearing heavy leather and a sword strapped to his side. He was breathing hard.

“You run off on me one more time, and I’m telling your father, I don’t care anymore, I really don’t.” He ran a hand through his beard.

“Huh,” Brianne said, rolling her eyes, “Father won’t do anything, he’ll probably just assign a new watchdog for me. You’ll be fired.”



“Blessed Teresa, I’m talking to him tonight.”

“You are not.” She laughed.

“Well let’s go then.” He waved a hand at her as Kane approached with the stallion.

“Rafe, this is Erron, he’s new,” Brianne said.

Rafe nodded. “Hello.”

“Can he come on the ride?”

“Brianne, I’m sure the boy’s got work to do.”

“Oh c’mon, he couldn’t just miss one mornings work to ride with a friend.”

Rafe shrugged, “Doesn’t matter to me, seems it’s up to the boy.”

Erron looked from one face to the other. “Uh, no, sorry, I can’t.”

“What? Why? Come on, it’ll be fun.” She touched his arm again. Erron looked over at Kane walking in with the horse.

“Hold up then, doesn’t anybody ask me? Not that you would, but I say no, he’s my charge and he’s working for me this morning.”

“There you have it, Brianne, lets be off,” Rafe said

She turned back to Erron, her hair twirling across her face as she did. “Next time then? You’ll come next time?”

“Sure, maybe,” Erron said.

“Good.” She smiled and led the gelding behind Rafe out of the barn.

“Stealing my workers,” Kane said, “don’t even care that an old man’s got ‘is work cut out for ‘im.”

Erron watched Brianne mount her horse and ride off across the grass with Rafe, her hair bouncing with the horse’s steps.

Kane retrieved a shovel from the corner of the barn and handed it to Erron. “Smell that boy?”

“It’s Erron,” he said, inhaling the strong scent of horse shit.

The bell rang in the Keep while Erron was brushing his second horse. The manure was piled and stored away to be used as fertilizer and the barn was beginning to smell more like hay than shit. The methodic shoveling and brushing had lulled him into a state of mind where he had stopped thinking and just kept shoveling and brushing. It was the same with shearing sheep, except with sheep, the result was a pile of wool, not a pile of dung.

Now, as the bell rang over and over, Erron felt his mind wake up and his heart leap. He was a mixture of hungry and nervous, and strangely didn’t want to leave the barn.

“Off yeh go then. I’ll take care o’ Brianne when she gets back. Don’t wanna keep the guards waiting for their food.”

Erron brushed dust and hay off of his hands and pants and walked out into the grey light.

“Same time tomorrow boy, don’t be late,” Kane said, which Erron figured was as close to ‘good job today’ as he would ever hear. “Get goin’ now.” The old man scratched his mustache, and turned back to the horses.

Erron hurried across the field toward the path. When he reached the cobbled streets he saw other workers heading toward the kitchen. He wondered if he’d see Taylor.

There were raised voices coming through the open doorway and the sound of plates and glasses tapping tables. Erron walked behind one of the workers, a boy about his age, but taller with short black hair. The boy saw Erron out of the corner of his eye and turned.

“Hey, you’re the new one right?” he said stopping just before the doorway to the kitchen.

Erron nodded. The boy squinted looking closely at Erron’s eyes.

“So it’s true, you really do have green eyes. Mik thinks you’re sent from the gods. They say you never had parents.”

“I had parents,” Erron said, stepping toward the kitchen.

“Course you did,” the boy blocked his way, “Mik’s a cretin, but you got a bigger problem.”

“What?” Erron said.

“You just gonna sleep in the damn storage closet for the rest o’ your life? That’s farcical.”

“That’s what?”

“Stupid, listen, we call the kid Weasel, because, well that’s obvious. He’s the one that yelled you out o’ your bed last night. You’re gonna have to take him.” He wiped his nose on the back of his hand. The boy looked excited.

“Take him?”

“Yeah, you know, lay him out.” The boy punched the palm of his hand with his fist.

“Uhh, I don’t think so,” Erron said pushing his way through to the kitchen.

“I think you could take him, he yells lots but he’s a scrawny fellow.” The boy followed Erron into the kitchen. Workers hurried past them, hot plates and cold glasses in their hands.

Horus yelled from the back of the kitchen, “You two, stop standin’ around and handle the vegetables. Now!”

Erron quick-stepped to the counter and grabbed two plates with steaming vegetables; the boy behind him did the same.

“I’m Pok by the way. Like the weed.”

“Your name is Pok?” Erron said as he followed the rest of the workers out through the side kitchen doors into the dining hall. The room was huge. High ceilings from which draped multicolored banners with pictures of the gods, Mallek with his

hammer and Jade with his bow, and the wolf of Kyra hunting under the two moons. A fire burning in the hearth and thick rugs lying on the ground supporting long rectangular tables. Soldiers and Apprentices to the Watchmen were gathering, laughing and waiting for their food. Some had already begun to eat. Erron looked around at the other servers trying to spot Taylor without being noticed. He was scared someone was going to see his eyes.

“Well no, but I smokes a lot, so that’s why. I guess we should call you greeneyes.”

“Call me Erron.”

“Well that’s boring.”

They walked past the chairs and shouldered around the men sitting there looking for tables without vegetables.

“Meat over here,” “More ale,” “Hurry with the food boy,” the men called out at passing servers.

“Don’t mind them, they’re just farcical,” Pok said placing down his plates.

Erron kept his head down. He could only imagine one of the guards noticing his eyes, then all of the room would need to have a look, maybe some of them wouldn’t be so nice. He found a table without vegetables and placed the plate in the middle.

“Dammit, we want meat, not this green shit,” one of the Watchmen said as Erron placed the dish down in front of them. Erron almost dropped it as he turned his back to avoid making eye contact.

“Oh shut up and eat, they’re good fer ya,” another man said.

Erron hurried back between the tables to the kitchen to fetch another dish. Pok was there waiting for him. A girl hurried past him and Erron spun around thinking it was Taylor. He watched her go—brown hair, not blonde.

“Here,” Pok said handing Erron another plate of vegetables. “Hurry, before they get cold.” Pok was clearly enjoying his role as an experienced server showing around the fresh blood, but Erron was too nervous to care or be angry. They moved back out into the dining hall as Horus yelled in the kitchen.

Erron put out plates of vegetables, roast goose, cheese, and filled glasses of ale until everyone was served. Not one of the soldiers noticed his eyes, even when they yelled for more food they didn’t seem to see the servers at all.

Afterwards everyone gathered in the kitchen where the workers stood around a pile of leftovers picking and eating what they could. Horus had grabbed his food first and saved himself a plate to eat off of. Erron ate a handful of vegetables and a small slice of meat, and took sips out of a jug of water that was passed around. There were small conversations, but mostly mouths were filled with food instead of words. A man with four fingers on one hand thumbed at a carrot, looking at Erron.

“So,” Pok said with a mouth full of goose. “You seen the forest yet?”

Erron looked at him. “Yes.”

“The Forest o’ Faces, you seen it already?” Pok said, swallowing and looking at Erron.

“Oh, no, I guess not. I thought only the Watchmen are allowed there,” Erron said shoveling more food into his mouth. He wasn’t used to not eating breakfast.

“That’s true, but it don’t mean we can’t get there,” Pok said. “C’mon lets go.”

“Don’t we have work to do?” Erron said, not quite trusting Pok. Was he trying to be a friend? Erron had never really had friends.

“Not till dinner. What? Shouldn’t we get some sort of break?” Pok said. “C’mon, you got something better to do?”

Erron looked at him, he remembered saying the same thing to Taylor the day they became friends. He wondered where Taylor was, what she was doing, but mostly he realized that he did want to see the Forest of Faces; he wanted to see it more than anything.

## –CHAPTER 11: The Forest of Faces–

The day had strangely grown darker, the air colder and thin with winter. Erron and Pok walked out from the kitchen and made their way through the crowd of workers. Erron found himself wondering what he was doing. He hardly knew this kid, and he’d heard stories about the rough life at East Arch. But Erron had no money, in fact he had nothing of value at all. He was just like Pok. Erron began to feel like he fit in as a poor,

dirty servant better than he ever did as a wealthy farmer's son. He remembered his fat tutor, Olyen, trying to teach him the names of the stars. Erron would simply watch the bright lights in the sky as the sound of Olyen's voice became a dull humming. The stories he read about the gods were more interesting, but Erron just didn't seem to have the reverence that was expected of him. "Why do you think Jade betrayed the goddess Teresa?" Olyen had asked him. "Because he preferred Mallek?" That had earned him a swift rap on the knuckles. Maybe this was where he belonged all along, this godsless life at the edge of the world.

He breathed in the cold air and felt it fill in his chest.

"Pok where ya goin'?" A younger boy with short blonde hair, and a dirty face came running up to the two of them.

"Nowhere, Seayn, leave us alone." Pok barely stopped for the boy and Erron kept pace.

"I know where you're going, and I'm coming." He had to half jog to keep up with them. Erron thought of Marten suddenly and wondered where his old tag-a-long had gotten to.

"No, you'll get us caught." Pok shook his head.

"Will not, I've been there already remember, I'm coming," he said, sidling up to Pok.

Pok rolled his eyes. "Fine, but when we get to the door not a word out of you from there on alright?"

"Fine." He smiled, unable to hold his excitement.



“Erron, this is Seayn, he’s only twelve winters and is completely farcical.”

Erron immediately didn’t like Seayn, but for reasons he couldn’t quite place. Maybe the boy just seemed too young to seem so comfortable with life as a server.

“Pleasure,” Seayn said, holding out his hand. Erron shook it, looking down at the boy’s lips curving upward like the sliver of the moon. “Hey, you’re the one with the eyes—”

“Shut up Seayn, everyone knows,” Pok said.

They passed the open market. Erron noticed the shops and taverns circling the square, they were open but didn’t have the same mysterious feel to them. Without the night air and the buzzing golden orbs, they were merely buildings serving their purpose.

“What’s the door?” Erron asked, finding his heart racing with the speed of their step, or perhaps with excitement.

“It’s a side gate at the Keep that leads to the *between*. We could go around the Keep, most of ‘em used to go that way till Lhairs was caught, and whipped for it. I discovered this way,” Pok said straightening his white shirt as he walked—at least it might have been white at one time.

“Did not, Old Tomm found this way like ten winters ago,” Seayn said kicking a pebble off the street.

“Yeah, you dolt, I was with him when he found it, and stop flappin’ your mouth or I’ll kick your ass all the way back to the kitchen.” Pok punched his fists together.

They walked in silence for a while, curving past the shops to the other end of the Keep. Groups of soldiers passed them on their way back to duty. The soldiers were

dressed in dark brown leather and blue undershirts. They were young, maybe a little bit older than Erron. He glanced warily at them and thought of the Blood Men, marching, following, bleeding for their order. He didn't know if he hated the soldiers or pitied them.

"This way," Pok said, motioning with his head. Erron hadn't noticed that he'd stopped moving. "Keep up."

Stone walls rose like grey hills to their left as the noise of the shops grew dimmer. They turned down a small alleyway poorly lit against the winter clouds, but Erron could still see his breath passing in front of him. They moved between the stone walls and reached an iron clad door at the end of the alleyway.

"Here." Pok motioned to a drain pipe that climbed the left wall and disappeared toward the top.

Erron watched as Pok placed both hands around the thick pipe and propelled his feet up. He moved slowly, working his way up one hand and foot at a time, Erron remembered climbing the tree outside of Taylor's room just the same. Pok reached the top of the doorway, balanced himself, and dropped over to the other side. Erron heard a thin thump as his feet landed behind the door. There was a heavy creaking, a metallic clang and the iron door swung slowly open.

"C'mon," Pok said, propping the door open with his foot.

Erron and Seayn moved quickly through. Pok closed it again, reinstating the latch.

They followed the line of the keep and to their left Erron could see the towers lifting above the stone walls. He felt a short pang of fear, suddenly wondering what the

punishment was for servers being across grounds. Either way it didn't matter, they were too far into it now.

As the stone wall ended and opened up to a grass field stretching to their left and right they stopped against the edge of the Keep and for the first time in his life, Erron saw it—the end of the world.

On the grass, sprouting like trunks, were the Guard Towers spanning across the field, from one base of the mountain to the next. They hugged the forest line as warders, guards of Kyra, protectors of the last civilization. Erron took in the sight.

“What now?” Erron said.

“Well, normally we'd have to stop here. There's no chance of getting to the forest without being spotted by the guards. But you see there,” he said, pointing to the forest, “in front of that tower here, the line of the forest dips backward so that only the guard in that tower can see that area. It's the only spot like it in all of East Arch. We call it the *between*,” Pok said.

“But what's stopping that guard from spotting us?” Erron said, wondering if he was going to regret coming after all.

“Because we know that guard, that's what,” Seayn said.

“Damn it Seayn, I told you to shut it,” Pok said, shoving Seayn. “The guard that mans this post between lunch and dinner is Vince, he used to be a server till his father made a name for himself as a miner. I heard he found a new location in the mountains, one easier to get to,” Pok said growing more animated.

“So Vince just lets you by whenever you want? Couldn’t he get in trouble?” Erron said, and watched Seayn roll his eyes at the question. Erron looked at the small boy and understood Pok’s annoyance.

“Course he does. He used to be one of us after all. Watch this.”

Pok got down on his knees and picked up a few pebbles, then after scanning the open grounds ran toward Vince’s tower. He stopped a few paces before the stone structure and hurled a pebble. It came up short so he threw again, this time a guard—Vince—appeared looking down from the wooden railings at the top. They exchanged glances and Pok motioned Erron and Seayn to follow.

They moved across to the other side of the tower, the forest looking closer than ever, the mountains on either side crushing in on the line of trees. Erron could have thrown a stick into it. Stopping only long enough for Pok to glance at the other towers, they ran across the rest of the distance. They shot straight across the grass into the bend of the forest, the *between*, without being seen. No alarm was raised, no voices called out, and they were standing in front of the Forest of Faces. Erron approached slowly and saw the strange markings, the twisted bark on the trees. As he came closer it formed into a face, angled slightly upward. It was the face of an old man with an eyepatch and thick lips parting into a scream. Erron looked across the faces on all of the trees. Each of them coming into focus, all of them men, all of them screaming as if in some sort of pain.

“The Old Ones carved the faces as a warning,” Pok said. Erron turned to see Pok watching him. Pok seemed to be more fascinated by Erron’s reaction than by the woods

itself. “We call this one Harvey. I’ve heard he’s the only one in the whole place ‘ats got an eyepatch. Old Tomm has names for some of the others, but everyone knows this one.”

Erron walked toward the face with the eyepatch, Harvy. He looked past the tree and deeper into the woods. There were trunks bursting from the dirt, thick and dominant with moss cascading down their length, bushes dressed the ground surrounded by twigs and frozen leaves. It looked pretty much like any other forest Erron had ever seen, except for the fog. It was mid-day, the clouds were flying high in the sky and yet a fog moved slowly between the trees. It was everywhere, and thick. Erron watched it move.

Ghairen had told him about the Forest of Faces, where his tutor had never wanted to talk about it. “Unnatural,” his tutor Olyen had said and then grumbled, changing the subject. But Ghairen would talk about it, in fact the old man would get quite animated. He told him that no animal had ever been seen in the forest before, that’s why if the guards ever saw any movement between the trees they’d ring the warning bells.

But there was something unnatural about the fog.

“What’d’ya think?” Pok said as if displaying his own creation.

“There’s no wind today,” Erron said as if he had just found the remains of a lost sheep.

“What? Yeah, so?” Pok said giving Seayn a sideways glance. Seayn just rolled his eyes again.

“How can the fog move like that with no wind?” Erron pointed into the forest.

Seayn and Pok moved closer. Seayn stayed a little further behind, looking over Pok’s shoulder.

“Shit,” said Seayn, “he’s right.”

“Shut up. Don’t be farcical. There must be a breeze in the forest, the trees are just blocking us from it,” Pok said. They looked up at the branches. The branches didn’t move.

“Shit,” Seayn said.

Erron squinted to try and see further into the forest. He held his breath waiting for a shadow to move, a bush to rustle. He used to stand like this on a green hill just above the farm where he’d take the sheep to pasture. The northern forest lay across the side of that hill and Erron would often look through the trees for movement or listen in the distance for the howling of wolves. Even when he did hear howling, the sheep would continue to graze as if nothing in the world were wrong. Their ears lay relaxed as the sounds grew louder, their mouths chewing dumbly. Taking another step closer, Erron could smell the bark reaching out to his face. One-eyed Harvey silently screamed at him, and the fog neither rose nor fell but enfolded the trees, moving steadily onward.

## –CHAPTER 12: The Acaine Wolves–

The wagon ride back to town was almost as painful as the ride to East Arch. He had slept the night before in a cold sweat on an uncomfortable bed at an Inn in East Arch

Keep. Broan's ribs throbbed with a horrible pain, but it wasn't as sharp as the day before, and he was able to breath a bit easier, but the greatfullness just to be alive had faded and been replaced by a cold anger. *If I ever see that old man and his donkey again, I'm going to break more than just a few of his ribs.*

"How'd ya sleep?" The driver had asked him, in a cheery sort of voice. Broan wondered what sort of company the old man had found, or paid for, last night.

"Just try to avoid the damn potholes this time alright?" Broan had told him.

Now, as the wagon rocked and rattled down the dirt road Broan wondered if the damn driver was hitting every bump, dip and dive on purpose.

When the wagon finally rolled to a stop in Town it was evening and cold. Broan dropped to the cobbled streets, feeling the weight of his body collide with the stone sending bricks of pain against his aching chest. He straightened himself. *I'm a Captain in the Town Guard.* Broan took a steadying breath, grunted at the driver and headed down the street toward the closest tavern. He was due at Townhall to report the Laine children's safe passage, but at the moment a drink seemed the more important endeavor. *They could wait a while.*

The Brown Barrel was open and alive with music and dancing. Broan entered from the cold night and felt the heat on his face as a welcome companion. He heard the music beat in his ears, the sound of laughter, singing and the clinking of full glasses. His stomach rolled as a waitress passed him with a plate of roast boar and cheese. He worked his way through the crowd, looking for an empty table.

“Captain.” Broan winced at the sound coming from a table next to the fire. He turned and saw two soldiers from his own patrol sitting with Ser Jonus, another Captain. Broan nodded his head. “Over here, join us.” It was Shaylen, a soldier under Broan, a talented swordsman, but cocky, next to him was the youngest in his crew, the one everyone called Scrub. Broan had yet to learn Scrub’s real name. There was no way out of it, Broan had to sit with them.

Ser Jonus nodded at him as he approached “Broan.”

*What the hell is a Captain doing sitting with petty soldiers? And why can't the bastard address me as Ser Landden?*

“Ser Jonus,” Broan said sitting down looking at his own two soldiers across from him.

“We didn’t expect you back till tomorrow Ser, how was East Arch?” Shaylen said happily.

“I need a drink,” Broan said.

“That bad huh?” Ser Jonus laughed and called for the waitress. “This one’s on me.” When his drink came Ser Jonus raised his glass, “For the Captain who took the job none of us wanted to.” He laughed again, Broan even found himself chuckling until he felt the familiar pain in his ribs. It also didn’t help to see two of his subordinates laughing at his expense as well. He looked at Scrub, who stopped smiling. *Oh you’ll pay for that when you get double duty on the docks this week.*

“Look, there he goes again, wait for it,” Shaylen said, pointing towards the dancers in the middle of the room. Broan looked to see another one of the soldiers in his



regiment, Miller, dancing with some girl, struggling to stay on his feet. He sagged and twirled, dipped sideways, but made it back to his feet. “Damn, thought he was in for it that time.” They all laughed, and after a few more drinks Broan began to smile more easily. They talked and watched Miller dancing, barely staying upright. After a while they even made a few bets whether or not Miller would fall, and Broan made a few drakes off of Ser Jonus. Broan was beginning to feel better, warmer, the pain in his ribs seemed lighter.

*I like these fellows, maybe Scrub doesn't deserve the docks this week.*

“So, I shouldn't be asking but I don't know if I can hold it any longer...” Ser Jonus said, pausing to swallow.

“No, no, please,” Broan said.

“Well, I'm curious is all. What did Brenden Murray want?” Ser Jonus said.

Broan laughed, though he didn't know exactly why. “What do you mean?”

“You met with him. Ser Sorren told me that he was to send you directly to Brenden Murray himself. Don't play dumb.”

Broan felt the color and warmth drain from his face. He stood up abruptly and barely noticed the chair fall behind him. He turned to leave, pushing through the crowd.

“Where are you going?” Ser Jonus called, but Broan was already moving for the door, barely noticing Miller falling to the ground and the cheers that followed.

*Curse my blasted luck. Brenden Murray himself!* Broan burst out of the doors and felt the cold air once again on his face. It stung at his warm lungs, but it was good and sobering. *It can't be too late. It musn't be too late.*

Broan moved through the streets, staggering only slightly, he straightened his heavy head and focused on moving, and moving quickly. The pain was coming back in his ribs with each step.

He turned a corner too sharply and the street slid in his vision. He saw the fountain in front of Townhall, now dry and silent because of the coming winter. It was a sculpture of one of the Ancients lifting Mallek's hammer back to the sky. Broan walked a little slower, waiting for the street to catch up with the movements of his head. He wished there had been water in the fountain so he could splash his face with it and sober up a bit.

*Nothing for it*, he breathed a steadying breath, scratched his beard and walked through the heavy wooden doors, *here we go*.

The place smelled of pine and fire. A small piece of wood was burning in the fireplace in at the end of the room. To his left the doors to the council chambers were closed, there was a scribe writing on the floor by the fire, to his right were a few offices and ahead of him, directly in front of him, were the stairs. He walked up them without looking at the scribe. Broan's footsteps echoed through the open spaces of the Townhall. He held on to the the railing for support. When he reached the top of the stairs he quickly found Ser Sorren's office and knocked, a bit louder than he had meant to. Or perhaps his head made it sound a bit louder than it was.

The door flung open before Broan heard a reply and Ser Sorren stood in front of him, wearing a finely embroidered blue shirt. He looked at Broan like he was making a bad joke he couldn't recover from.

“Your wagon has been here half the night!” *Well that’s an exaggeration.* Ser Sorren grabbed Broan’s arm and led him down the hallway. Ser Sorren was not a small man, nor was he too old to have lost any of his younger strength, and his grip was firm on Broan’s arm. “Where have you been, blessed Mallek are you drunk boy?”

*Boy, damnit I’m a bloody Captain.*

“No sir, well I had a few drinks. You see there was this donkey...”

“I don’t care if there was a gods damned dragon, when you’re supposed to report to me, you better as hell report, understand?” Ser Sorren was a man accustomed to anger and strict reprimands, but Broan realized he had never really been angry before, merely playing a part. He was angry now and Broan could see it on his face. “Brenden Murray has been waiting in his office for you. For you! And he is not a man to be kept waiting.”

They walked down the rest of the hall and up another flight of stairs, one Broan had never been up, or ever seen anyone go up before. The steps closed off at the top by red painted doors with fancy designs carved on their surface, two soldiers stood guard. Their silent faces reflecting no emotion.

Ser Sorren knocked.

“Come in,” a voice said from inside the room.

Ser Sorren opened the doors to Brenden Murray’s office. Only it didn’t look much like an office. There was a desk in the corner by the fire with papers and a large glass of wine on it, but the room was more like a luxurious bedroom than anything else. Tapestries hung from the walls, and couches and velvet chairs were organized about the room on a rug that looked like it was made from wolf hide. It was warm and smelled of incense

burning from the candles on the desk, where Brenden Murray sat drinking wine. Broan caught Brenden Murray's eyes from across the room and felt immediately small. Brenden Murray was a thick man, with deep, but peircing eyes, which were currently fixed on Broan.

*What does this man want with me? I'm just a bloody Captain.*

"Ser Broan, excellent, come sit, please." Brenden gestured to one of the velvet chairs in front of his desk. "Thank you Kale, you may leave us." Ser Sorren stood stiff and nodded his head. Broan looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. It was refreshing, satisfying even to see that the the heirarchy touched all men, even Ser Sorren. Broan watched him leave, then turned his gaze back to Brenden Murray, who smiled.

*Well, perhaps not all men are under the heirarchy.*

"Would you a glass of wine?" Brenden Murray said, motioning to the bottle sitting next to his full glass on the desk.

"No, no thank you sir," Broan said. He was just beginning to feel sober again, but the ale was starting to churn in his stomach. He sat down slowly. The chair was comfortable and soft.

"So, how was East Arch? I trust the journey was a smooth one," Brenden Murray said, leaning back and sipping at his wine.

"Yes sir, it was fine," Broan said, smiling through the returning pain in his ribs.

"Good, good, I heard there was some trouble with the Laine children, but I suppose that all got sorted did it?"

"Yes sir," Broan said, remembering the late night trek through the forest.

“Good. I prefer handling things the easy way, rather than making it more complicated and messy. Wouldn’t you say?”

Broan didn’t know what he was talking about so he just nodded his agreement.

Brenden Murray took another sip of his wine and watched Broan as if waiting for him to do something. Broan envied him for being so comfortable, for working in this office, *if you could call it that*, and of course for holding all the power of the world at his fingertips. Of course there was the Council, but they were mostly puppets, empty minds to fill empty chairs. The real power was in the High Council, and Brenden Murray was the Chairmen.

“Tell me, Broan, have you heard about the problem with the Acaine Wolves in the northern forests?” Brenden Murray said. Broan shook his head, *he brought me here to talk about wolves?* “Oh you know, they’ve been at the livestock for a while now. Yren Hallis even blames them for ruining his crops, but the man is a fool of a farmer. I’m sure he’d blame the mice for lack of rain if he could rally enough of the town’s anger around it.”

Broan felt like he was supposed to laugh, but all he could conjure up was a weak, and painful, chuckle.

“You see the thing is, I like the Acaine Wolves. They instill a healthy fear of the forest, they keep the farmers cautious and on their toes and as a breed they are quite fascinating.” Brenden Murray paused. Broan hated these games, the man clearly hadn’t asked Broan here to chat about the wolf population.

“How so sir?” Broan took the bait. He had to.

“Well they are pack creatures as you know, and they are completely loyal. You see, if one of them makes a kill, a deer perhaps, they won’t eat it until they’ve dragged it back to their den and can share it with the rest of the pack. Isn’t that interesting? You’d think such a survivalist would feast as soon as it got the chance, but these wolves are patient, they are loyal.”

“That is quite amazing,” Broan said, putting on his most interested tone.

“It is actually, it really is.” Brenden smiled, and Broan realized this wasn’t going the way he’d expected. He had imagined himself speaking with Brenden Murray in the past. But in his mind Brenden Murray was always giving him praise, honoring his dedication, or promoting him. Broan was beginning to feel he wasn’t going to like where this was going.

“You see, Broan, I’m in need of a man to do a job for me.” *Ah, now we get to it.* “I proposed this to the High Council and your name came up. You’ve been a loyal, hard working Captain for some time now, and I would very much like to be able to trust you with this.” Brenden Murray looked Broan in the eyes and set his glass of wine on the desk.

*My name came up? Who would have brought my name up? Surely not Ser Sorren?*

“Sir, if I may ask, who was it who recommended me?” It was a bold move, too rash.

Brenden Murray lost all the warmth from his face. “No. You may not ask. As you should well know, no one speaks of the High Council or it’s members to keep it’s

meetings and decisions untainted. You understand? Not even the members speak of it outside the meeting hall.”

“Yes sir, please, I forgot. Of course you cannot tell me. I’m so very sorry.” He lowered his head, not knowing what he was supposed to do.

*It’s the damn drink in me. Curse ale, I’m never drinking again.*

Brenden Murray raised a hand in the air as if to say, *enough, forget it*. “I need to know that I can trust you Broan. I need to know that whatever I ask of you stays between you and I. That when you have accomplished your duties that you report back to me and only me. You understand of course?” His hand fell back to his desk. Broan watched it as if waiting for it to strike.

“Of course, anything sir. I am loyal to you and the High Council,” Broan said, lowering his head again. This time he felt a bit foolish, as if he were overdoing things.

“Good. You know Ser Robbins right?”

“Yes sir.”

“Well, Broan, Ser Robbins is overseeing the docks two evenings from now, and he is going to drown unfortunately in the Addrean.”

Broan felt his stomach roll. The words hung in the air like a peircing darkness. Broan was waiting for Brenden Murray to smile, to laugh and tell him he was merely joking, but his face remained blank, emotionless.

“I need you to make sure that this happens. You understand?”

Broan reached for words but found none waiting for him.

“You understand what I’m asking you?”

“Sir, you want me to kill Ser Robbins, but—”

“It is not your place to be asking questions Captain. Clearly I’ve chosen the wrong man for the job!”

“No, Sir, please I, I just want to make sure I understand you.”

“I think I’m quite clear. Either you are with me or you are against me, Broan, which is it?” Brenden stared at Broan from his chair, both hands on the desk now.

“Sir I am with you completely. Please have no doubt.” The room seemed to be swimming again. Broan felt sick.

Brenden leaned back in his chair and smiled again, a warm smile as if he were welcoming a guest, not asking him to kill a man. The punishment for murder was the same every time. The hands that committed the crime were removed and burnt for the gods, followed by the head and then the rest of the body. Broan looked down at his hands. He wiggled his fingers.

“I knew it. I knew I could count on you Broan. You’ve been an excellent Captain so far. I see a bright future ahead for you my friend. We are friends now, are we not Broan?” Brenden Murray kept using his name as if signing it in blood with his lips.

“Of course sir,” Broan said.

“You know Broan, another thing about the Acaine Wolves that I find most interesting,” he said standing up and nodding at Broan to do the same. They walked towards the door and Brenden put a hand on Broan’s shoulder. “If a member of the pack makes a kill and eats it before returning to the others, the rest of the pack kill the wolf. In fact, I do believe they eat him. You see, they can smell the betrayal on his flesh, in his



mouth. Nothing makes them more furious than a pack member who turns his back on his family. Makes perfect sense though when you think about it, wouldn't you say Broan?" They stopped just before the door as Brenden Murray took his glass of wine, red like blood, and put it to his lips.

"Yes, sir, perfect sense."

Broan could hardly remember walking down the stairs and out the door. He found himself outside standing in front of the fountain. He was trying to decide whether or not his conversation with Brenden Murray was real or the ale playing tricks on him. Perhaps he was delirious from the pain in his ribs. But then he remembered the smile, recalled the hands placed firmly on the desk. The conversation was all too real. Broan looked down at his hands and noticed the light hairs between the knuckles, the small mole on his sword hand. He pictured them burning in a pile of his own flesh. The world seemed to be swaying back and forth in his vision. In three days Broan was going to kill Ser Robbins.

He leaned over the fountain and vomited violently onto the dry stone.

–CHAPTER 13: The Weasel–

They were back with plenty of time before the dinner bell rang. Pok led them to a knife shop in the square and the owner let them into the basement where they could throw old knives at an empty wine barrel. Pok was pretty good.

“You got to picture the spins in your head. Think of the knife circling twice, then hitting the barrel,” Pok said handing Erron the blade.

Erron grabbed the knife by the blade and stared at the barrel. Seayn watched in the corner, he wasn't very good. Erron closed his eyes. He wanted to impress them, but he tried to not let the pressure get to him. He took in the smell of old wood and the rusty basement, he took a breath and imagined the knife, saw it circling through the air...once....twice...he felt the blade slide out of his fingers, he watched it for a split second in the air, until it collided with the barrel with a satisfying thud—perfectly straight.

“Well yeah, there ya go. Told ya. Nice shot,” Pok said pulling the knife out of the wood with a jerk. Erron felt elated, but just shrugged. Were they actually friends?

Seayn ran up to Pok, “Lemme, try.”

“Hang on, it's my shot,” Pok said.

They kept at it for a while, Erron could never quite get it right again. The bell rang loud and clear from the kitchens and they left the knife in the barrel. Outside, the town square was beginning its evening glow. The day was growing darker and the orange light of the orbs was spreading around the shops.

When they got to the kitchens Horus was yelling. It seemed it never mattered when you got there, you were always late. Erron grabbed for a plate of steaming beans.

“No, no boy, the ale damnit, the ale out first.”

Erron dropped the beans down on the table, a few rolled off of the plate and over the counter.

“Gods boy,” Horus said dusting off two of the beans and putting them back on the plate. “From now on when that bell rings, all I want you thinking about is ale. Golden, thick, bubbling ale. The guards are willing to wait longer for the meat as long as that ale is on their tables, understand?”

Erron nodded. He decided he liked Horus better when he was drunk.

As they served the drinks and the food Erron kept glancing around for any sign of Taylor but she wasn't there.

The meal was some sort of liver. They ate in the kitchen as usual and afterwards the place was a mess. Erron found that he missed last night, with just him and Taylor working in the kitchen.

Horus wandered around and watched to make sure everyone was doing their part and doing it well.

“So, how was yer first day boy?” Horus patted Erron on the shoulder. Erron looked at him, surprised by the man's change of face. Horus was clearly a much nicer person when there wasn't food to be served to hungry soldiers.

Erron shrugged and kept scrubbing, feeling suddenly angry, as if it were Horus's fault that Taylor was not there.

“Ha! Well, you’ll get used to it won’t you,” Horus said.

When everything was finally done Horus dismissed them all, grumbling and trudging his way towards the taverns. The night air felt cool and welcoming on Erron’s warm skin. He looked down at his pink hands, they smelled of soap and rotten meat.

Pok came up beside him. “Wanna go to Tully’s?”

“No, I’m tired,” Erron said, and it was true.

“C’mon, don’t be a dolt, I’ll buy you a pint.”

“A what?” Erron said as Pok grabbed his shoulder.

“You serious? Gods Erron, you’re coming with me.”

Erron was tired and irritated, but Pok was forceful so he let himself be led down the street towards Town Square.

The air in Tully’s felt thick with the smell of food and drink and sweat. There was a crowd of people gathered around the bar and tables, but Pok still called it ‘not that busy.’ A boy in the corner was playing a lute, which was missing a string and a small fire was burning next to him in the hearth. On the walls were stuffed heads of animals. A stag, another type of deer that was much bigger than Erron didn’t recognize, and the head of a giant Acaine Wolf. It was mounted in the middle. It looked like it could have been the size of a young horse. Erron saw the red in its marble eyes, the fangs, and thought at any moment it would jump from the wall, snap its jaws and devour them all.

Pok ordered for them and it turned out that a *pint* was quite a bit of ale. It tasted bitter and lukewarm, but left a warm sensation in Erron’s throat and stomach so he didn’t

complain. Pok drank it down and pulled a pipe out of his jacket which he tried and failed to smoke.

As he was puffing at the wood pipe and producing only small puffs he told Erron the story of how him and Old Tomm found the door, and the way to the *between*. As it turned out they had been looking for a way for a few weeks, Old Tomm had even made it to the roof of a shop and shimmied up to the tower only to find that there was no way down on the other side. Eventually they spotted the alley and tried the drain pipe. They were almost caught the first time, but made it back safe enough. Erron wondered which of the workers was Old Tomm and looked around the room as if he might recognize him. In the corner one of the waitresses brought drinks to a group of soldiers. Erron watched as a soldier pulled her close and whispered something into her ear. She pulled away and laughed. Erron caught her face. It was Taylor. And she was laughing.

Erron felt his heart sink and his body go rigid. He looked at his sister and felt like he hardly recognized her. He watched her laugh and slammed his drink down on the table.

“Done already? Right I’ll get you another.” Pok went to the bar. Erron stood up and worked his way toward Taylor, practically shoving around counters and a few thick bodies. He distinctly heard her laugh again, the high delicate noise lifting toward the ceiling. Erron felt himself run into a chair, a bit too hard.

“Bah! What the hell?” a large man called out, standing up he was a fully built man, with broad shoulders, a thick beard and a penetrating scowl on his face. Erron noticed the large wet mark on his shirt where his ale had spilled. “You little rat, watch

where you're going," he said, shoving Erron with an iron fist. Erron felt something collide with his foot and he watched as the room spun. He toppled over someone carrying food and ended up with a bowl of hot soup in his lap. People around him laughed as the now souplless man swore.

"Erron?" Taylor approached with a look of genuine concern on her face. Erron stood up, more angry and embarrassed than he'd ever been. He tried to think of something to say, when he couldn't he just turned and walked toward the door.

"Erron," Taylor called after him, but he just kept walking, hoping to hurt Taylor with each step he took away from her. He wiped at his pants and burst through the doors into the street.

He wandered back through the town square toward the sleeping quarters, a few other workers were making their way to their beds as well. Erron snuck away from them and found his closet underneath the stairs. He put his head down beside the rags and pulled his feet to his chest to fit.

Erron thought of running off on his own, maybe he wouldn't be able to find Ghairen. But then, why should he? Ghairen hadn't helped him anyway. Maybe he'd live in the woods, hunt and fish and fend for himself. Maybe he would build a raft and sail to Allytrium. He even thought of his farm, and though it never had really been home for him, he could feel a warm anger resting almost comfortably in his gut toward the White Priest and Brenden Murray for taking it from him and sending him here.

He rested his head on his arm and fell asleep. He dreamed of Taylor, he called out her name and when she turned she had fish scales for eyes...

Once while Erron had taken the sheep to pasture he'd come across a group of boys fighting with sticks in the field. They were playing, but still hitting each other hard in the face and shoulders.

Erron had gone so far as to look for his own stick, but when he found one that suited him he was too nervous to approach them. But it didn't matter, they'd seen him.

They were all a little older than him and when they approached Erron realized that they were all much bigger than him too.

"We're not playing you know," the smallest of them said.

Erron just nodded.

"We're training."

One of their noses were bleeding, another had black around his eye.

"Shit Jules, look at his eyes."

"Gods, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Erron said.

They were silent for a while, staring at him. The smallest eyed Erron's stick, then pointed to it. "You wanna fight then?"

Erron shook his head, but didn't drop the stick.

They laughed.

"Oh come on. Holden, give him a whirl."

The biggest one came at him with a large stick and a swinging gait.

Erron dodged the first swing, the second, and almost ran away from the third but a foot caught his and he tumbled to the ground.

“Hold him,” someone called out. Erron struggled to his feet but two bodies fell on top of him and pinned him down. A knee slammed against his face and he thought he felt something crunch in his cheek.

“You got him?”

“Let me go.” Erron’s voice was muffled by dirt and grass and the weight of the body on top of him.

He felt his pants being tugged at, then pulled down completely.

“You’re just a little boy who shouldn’t be playing with sticks,” the smallest said, “boys with green eyes should be burned at the stake.”

The first blow stung terribly and Erron couldn’t help himself but call out from the pain. They all laughed. The second was much worse and from there it became unbearable. They beat his backside with the sticks and he cried out, screamed for someone, anyone to help, for them to have mercy. But they wouldn’t stop. The skinny one took several shots all at once, over and over and over again. Erron felt a trickle of blood drip down the side of his leg, he was crying and blubbering into the grass like a baby

“All right, gods, enough.” The other boys pulled him away and they let Erron off the ground. Except Erron was too hurt, too scared to move. His face was puffy and wet from the tears.

One or two of the boys laughed. The others walked away in silence.



“It’s all part of the training green eyes,” one of them said. Erron didn’t look to see which one.

He listened to their footsteps as they walked away. The sheep bleated in the field and Erron lay there crying for a long time, feeling the sun at his neck and the burning pain on his ass. He didn’t bother to pull his pants back up.

It had been the closest he’d ever come to playing with the other boys.

...Erron twitched awake and slammed his head against the shelf. He rubbed his head, cursing the shelf, the cramped closet, the dirty rags. Then he stood up, threw the door open and walked up the stairs. The sleeping quarters were mostly full now, Erron wondered how long he’d been asleep. It didn’t matter, he saw the bed in the corner by the window, he saw that the top bunk was full, the bottom empty.

“Erron,” a voice whispered. “There ya are, what happened to you? I looked all over.” It was Pok. Erron ignored him and walked past the bunks toward the window.

The boy with short cropped hair was still awake, he heard Erron coming and sat up.

“Get out! This is my bunk!” he said.

“Shut up Weasel,” someone called from the other side of the room.

Erron didn’t hesitate. He grabbed the boy by the collar of the shirt and threw him down onto the floor, the blankets cascading down with him like water. The boy yelped and landed hard on his side. Erron was quickly on top of him, he wasn’t thinking anymore, he only felt the anger pulsing through his body. His fists pushed against the

boy's face one after the other. He was dimly aware of the boy yelling to stop, of other bodies moving around him, of blood on his fingers and the terrible pain in his hands. But he kept at it. One fist after the other after the other after the other. Erron felt his body lift off of the boy. He looked back and saw Pok and a few others gripping his shoulders. Some of them were yelling.

The boy was helped out of the room while a few of the workers continued to yell at Erron, but none of them touched him, or even came close to him. Either way, Erron wasn't paying attention to what they said. Pok was in the midst of them, but he was smiling. It looked like he was about to laugh. Eventually things calmed down, the men seemed more upset about being woken up than they were about Weasel getting pummeled. Erron crawled into his new bed, the blood growing cold on his fingers and the dull pain blossoming to life all the way to his wrists. He relaxed his head against the pillow and closed his eyes.

Sometime later in the night the boy they called Weasel crawled quietly into the bed above him. Erron watched.

"Sorry," came the small voice after he had settled in.

"S'ok," Erron said.

"You can sleep there," Weasel said.

"I know." Erron said. He rolled over onto his side and fell asleep.

–CHAPTER 14: Firelight–

The next day passed much as the first. In the morning Erron shoveled horse shit waiting for Brianne to show up, but she never did. Kane seemed in a better mood, more talkative but just as insulting. Erron kept his head down during lunch and dinner, and in between Pok took him to the rooftops overlooking the Forest of Faces and they watched the Watchmen exchange positions. Erron got the feeling that Pok secretly wished to be one of them.

Dinner was served and this time, since it was the night of *Hama'or'hagadon*—the second moon, the god's moon—before anyone ate, a White Priest, one of the *Kadosh*, stood on the table and prayed to the gods. His liturgy was long and formal, after which every hand was raised to their hearts and heads bowed low to the table. Pok and the other servers joined in while Erron watched, thinking with everyone's head bowed, no one could see him looking.

The night was cold and the clouds still covered the sky. Erron could tell where *Hama'or'hagadon* was because it glowed beneath the clouds as if under the cover of thin blankets. Pok had gone to Tully's, but Erron was avoiding the place. Instead he wandered about the town, through dark alleyways and cold buildings. He heard the faint sound of dogs barking in the distance. The lights of Town Square were golden shadows on his shoulders. Erron climbed up the side of one of the drain pipes Pok had showed him

earlier that day and made it to the roof. There was a slight breeze which froze against Erron's skin, but he didn't care. He thought of Taylor, warm and laughing in the Inn and felt his heart sink.

The edge of the building was cold on Erron's legs as he sat down with his feet hanging off into space. He watched the Guard Towers, cold and silent beneath the passing clouds. There were no fires in the towers or near the forest so that the guards eyes could adjust to the night and see further into the woods. Besides, the fog in the Forest of Faces seemed to have a glow all its own.

"Nice breeze tonight."

Erron turned swiftly and saw the dark outline of a man standing directly behind him, and close. His voice and his posture seemed old, and yet he must have been spry enough to have climbed to the roof in the dark of the night.

"Course, you don't come here for the cool air, or to admire the guards do you boy?" He moved close enough for Erron to make out his features. He was a short, thin man with grey hair, a fat nose and thick, white sideburns, and he was smiling. Erron recognized him as the man who had welcomed him the first night he was there. Old Tomm.

"I've heard some stories about you," Erron said.

"Yeah, well I've 'erd that you're the bastard son of a god who sent you here to punish us for our evil," he said still smiling. "That 'er you're some sort o' freak of nature, cursed by the gods and marked by the dark one." Old Tomm bent his back and lowered himself next to Erron, "Me, I think you're a spirit, trapped in a human's body, trying to

burst free.” He looked down at Erron and smirked. Old Tomm started half chuckling, half coughing, and Erron caught himself laughing outloud. The first time in a long time.

“What are you doing up here then?” Erron said.

“Same as you boy.” He winked at Erron. “I’m up here so as not to be down there.” Old Tomm smiled and Erron realized that the old man had pretty much been smiling this whole time. “I’ve been thinkin’ about disappearing myself.” Erron looked at him. “I know these rooftops, these alleyways, even these buildings well enough to just disappear so not even the dogs could find me.”

Erron chuckled and looked back out at the forest, he felt the cold breeze sting his nostrils as he inhaled the smell of smoke. “That’s no escape, you’d still be at East Arch.”

“Escape don’t have to be about leaving boy, I’m escaped enough right here right now.” He tapped his head. “The only problem then, is tomorrow it starts again, then again, and again, and guess what? Yup, again the next day too. I could live on these rooftops, they’d be good enough as home, I figure.” Old Tomm looked over at Erron, still smiling as if he knew something that Erron didn’t.

“I suppose that beats washing dishes,” Erron said.

“That it does kiddo.” Old Tomm pulled a piece of bread out of his pocket and handed half of it to Erron. Erron was so hungry he barely muttered a “Thanks,” before biting into it. They ate in silence watching the forest.

“You know why the fog seems ta glow like that?” Old Tomm said.

“It really is glowing isn’t it?” Erron took his last bite of bread.

“Course it is, plain as day, well, er, night.” Old Tomm wiped the crumbs from his chin with his sleeve, “They say it’s cause it’s cursed. They say one of the ancients put a curse on it so as to keep everyone out.”

“Do you believe that?” Erron said.

“Well, no one’s ever proposed anythin’ else that s’plains it. Mostly they just ignore it. Like, Nah! It ain’t glowin’! But that’s bullshit. Ya see, we live in the shadow of that glow. I’ve lived in the shadow of that glow most all my life.”

Erron didn’t really know what Old Tomm meant, but he felt something awaken inside of him, a deep burning like he’d inhaled some of the fog itself and it was growing in his lungs.

“Tomm,” Erron said, “you ever think there might be anything else out there, you know, beyond the forest?”

Old Tomm shrugged. “Well boy, it don’t matter too much to me anymore. I’m too old to be frettin’ over stuff like that.”

Erron nodded.

“But I’ll tell you one thing. They don’t tell all of it,” Old Tomm said, looking from the forest to Erron.

“What do you mean?” Erron said feeling the fog turn in his lungs.

“Somethings wrong with this place, with the woods, with what we do here isn’t it?” Old Tomm said.

“Like what?”

“If I knew, I’d tell ya, wouldn’t I?” Old Tomm winked at him then turned his gaze back to the forest. They watched the trees for a while in silence until Erron became so cold he couldn’t stop from shaking.

“Better head down huh? Don’t wanna freeze up here,” Old Tomm said giving Erron a little nudge with his shoulder.

“Aren’t you cold?” Erron said.

“Nah, my bones are too old to feel it anymore.” He laughed. Erron smiled.

“Probably catch you up here again,” Tomm said, still looking out at the forest.

“Sure,” Erron said. And he realized that he would like to. He felt a kinship with Old Tomm, a strange instant bond.

As he climbed back down he looked at the old man sitting quietly on the ledge. Old Tomm watched the forest in the cold of the night as if waiting for something to happen.

Erron stepped quietly into the sleeping chambers and found his way to his bed. Most were already in their beds sleeping. Erron could hear a few voices whispering in the corner, but for the most part, the room was quiet. He ducked into his bunk, noticed the lump in the bed above him that must have been Weasel and pulled the blankets to his chest. They smelled like unwashed hair.

Erron saw Pok approach. “Hey, where’d you go?”

Erron just shrugged. He didn’t know why, but he didn’t want to tell Pok about the rooftop.

“Ah well, Tully’s was packed anyway.” Pok sat down on Erron’s bed and scratched his head. Erron heard Weasel sit up in his bed.

“Why are yer eyes green? You really a demon?” Weasel’s voice was high pitched.

“Ah shut it Weasel, you’re so damn farcical, you don’t even know,” Pok said.

“Hey I just wanna know what kind of person is sleeping under me, that so bad?” Weasel said, his voice growing higher.

“If I was a demon, you’d stop bothering me wouldn’t you?” Erron said.

Pok laughed. “Yeah, he’s a demon Weasel.”

“This close to the end of the world, ya never know what type of things are crawling around,” Weasel said, Erron heard his body lay flat above him.

“So damn farcical,” Pok shook his head and stood up, “don’t even know. Night Erron.”

Pok went back to his own bed and Erron could hear Weasel shifting around uncomfortably above him. Erron looked out the window and watched the clouds, dimly aglow with the light of the second moon. He listen to the sounds of the house. The floor boards settling in, the steady breathing all around him, blankets being shifted and pulled and the slight wind whistling against the windows.

Erron couldn’t sleep and after a while he realized that Weasel was still shifting around above him.

“I’m—” Erron was about to say he wasn’t a demon.

“There it is again!” Weasel said.

“What?” Erron said.



“The smoke, from the Northern Forest, there it is,” he said even more excited.

A few voices called out for silence.

Erron saw Pok leaning out from his bunk. “Ah shut it Weasel, I told you, it’s just the clouds.”

“Too low to be clouds,” Weasel said, ignoring the protests for silence.

“Then it’s fog. Now go to sleep,” a balding man rolling over in the bed to their right said.

“Too dark to be fog.”

“Shut up!” Someone called.

Weasel was silent as the others shifted around in their beds. Erron sat up and looked out the window. The glass was dirty but Erron could see the Northern Forest. He saw the trees, black and featureless in the dark. Erron saw a line of smoke rising from the forest like a garden snake. It was thin, but Erron could tell the color was too different to be fog or clouds. Erron squinted and saw, for a brief moment, what looked like a flicker of firelight amidst the trees. He sat up.

“Weasel thinks he sees things in the forest sometimes Erron, don’t worry ‘bout ‘im,” Pok said from his bunk.

“I do see things in the forest,” Weasel flopped down in his bed.

“Where you going?” Pok said. Erron was already out of bed and moving.

“Taking a piss,” Erron said, but Pok looked at him suspiciously.

“You–” Pok started.

“Just taking a piss,” Erron said and was soon past the beds and down the hall.

The stairs creaked under his feet but Erron ignored them, moving quickly he hoped that no one was following him. Erron felt a breeze through the crack in the front door. He pushed the door open and released the cool air into the building. After slowly closing the door he ran across the grass.

A dog barked in the distance and Erron felt his heart leap. He thought of running through the forest with Taylor and the crazy hawk. He felt the wind sting at his cheeks and the smell of ice in the air. To his left Town Square was hidden behind buildings, but its dim orange glow hovered above it. He crossed the grass field outside the servant's quarters toward the forest. The clouds hung low and bright in a night sky illuminated by *Hama'or'hagadon*.

Erron made it to the edge of the forest.

The trees reached out to him like jagged arms and the darkness seemed thick and impenetrable. He stopped for a moment, taking it in. Erron looked up and saw the glowing clouds, hiding the god's moon. He listened to the thrum of his heart in his ears. He was scared. Scared that he was going to get lost, scared that he was going to get caught, and scared that he was wrong about who he thought had made the fire. Erron wished that Taylor was with him, and for some reason he even wished that Old Tomm was with him. He thought of the old man sitting on the rooftop, waiting.

The dog barked again.

Erron ran through the trees, between the bushes, his feet thumping against the hard, frozen ground.

–Chapter 15: The Fourth Man–

Quentis Hale crested the small rise overlooking the vast planes and cut his bonds against a rock. The sun had now fully risen and despite the winter chill Quentis could feel it's lingering warmth on his cheek. He rubbed his red wrists and tossed the rope into a bush behind him. Quentis breathed in the cold air and listened to the sound of a bird chirping somewhere in the brush.

They'd catch up with him eventually, if they were any decent soldiers they'd never have let him escape in the first place. But they'd be on their way soon. He had little to no chance of being free for good. He'd escaped, more or less, only to assuage his wounded pride. Now he wasn't so sure it had been the best idea.

Quentis looked down at the wagons and could barely make out movement amidst the camp. He listened for the cries. Soon they'd find Friedren, or Fraydren, or whatever the fat man's name was, tied up inside his tent. It took some doing, and there almost wasn't enough rope to compensate for the man's girth, but after a small struggle and a large rock to the back of the head, the fat man was subdued. Quentis thought the whole camp would wake up with the absence of Friedren's snoring, which perhaps had been the worst part of the whole trip. Quentis hadn't slept for a moment.

After Quentis was satisfied that they weren't, at the moment, on their way, he continued up the path between rocks and small bushes, listening to the chirping of a

strange bird, still around despite the winter cold. To the East, rock pilings rose from the side of a large hill overlooking the plains. He turned towards the hill thinking he could find shelter between the rocks, or at least find a place to wait for the riders. Quentis noticed the snow lying thick on the tip of the hill. It would be a hard climb, but a hard climb for him meant an even harder climb for the horses.

He scrambled down a steep decline of crumbling rocks and thin bushes. The lack of sleep and the hard days of travel were beginning to catch up with him as his breathing quickened. A rock slid beneath his feet and he lost his balance and slid down the side of the hill. He grasped for purchase on the steep bank and his hand scraped against a jagged rock and curled around a thorny bush. A sharp, penetrating pain shot into his arm and up his wrist.

Once he came to a stop he lay motionless, not wanting to look at the damage to his hand. He felt a cold bead of sweat sliding down his forehead.

Quentis sat up slowly and looked down. Blood smeared across his palm and down his wrist. He ripped off a section of his sleeve and cleaned and wrapped the wound as best he could with it. Luckily the rock had missed his wrist. His hand was bleeding nicely but the cut wasn't too deep. He'd had worse. He'd had much worse.

He made it back to his feet and down the rest of the hill. By the time he was heading up the other side toward the rock formations he saw the dust gathering in the distance across the plains near the camp. Quentis squinted and watched the sun shine on the brown dirt, which rose from behind the hooves of the horses coming for him. And about time too. They'd have to slow eventually to track him and that would give him time

to prepare. He wasn't going to make it, but he'd sure as hell draw some of their blood in the process.

The rocks were steeper and the path narrower than he thought, which was good because their horses wouldn't make it through those paths. He climbed to the top of one of the rocks that hung over the path he was pretty sure they'd take. Quentis's hand was throbbing from the cut but he still managed to make a pile of large stones on top of the rock. He arranged them from best to worst and felt like a child again, throwing stones at his brothers, or even his sister. Hell, especially his sister.

The sun was reaching its peak in the sky, eliminating all the shadows on the ground. Quentis sat down on top of the rock and waited. He closed his eyes and felt the white light against his eyelids. He breathed in the cold air and the smell of rock and dirt. Emptying his mind he heard the strange bird calling in the distance. He wondered if somewhere a hawk or wolf was coming for the bird. The bird wouldn't last crying like that, perhaps it was wounded.

Long hours passed and Quentis was beginning to regret not moving onward and finding a better spot to make a stand, or maybe even finding a spot to hide. But they had trackers, they'd find him, and besides, there weren't any rock outcroppings like these, at least none that he could see. He let the time pass, listening to the strange bird, waiting for it to be suddenly silenced.

The sun was beginning its long climb home but Quentis could still feel its distant warmth like a fire burning behind a thick sheet of ice. He adjusted himself on the hard uncomfortable rock and realized that he was hungry. Climbing back down, he found

a patch of Rose berries, and ate only a few, not wanting to get a stomachache. Nothing worse than fighting while needing to vomit, unless perhaps it was fighting while needing to piss. He rolled down his pants and fertilized the Roseberry bushes as a thanks for their nourishment.

He climbed back up the rock, taking a few more stones with him. The climb was awkward and when he got to the top he accidentally knocked over one of the stones, which fell to the ground with a thud. Quentis was thinking about retrieving it when the sound of horse's hooves shuffling against rock and dirt met his ears.

They were still a ways off but it sounded like they were heading in the right direction. Quentis was glad of it. He was tired of waiting. His knee began to twitch as it always did before a fight. A mixture of nerves and excitement. He found himself, out of habit, reaching for the stone on his neck, which wasn't there anymore. Instead his fingers found the empty leather strap and skin. He felt the deep emptiness build inside of him, which he thought he'd already filled with anger, but apparently he had more filling to do. He did it now.

In Quentis's seventh winter he broke his brother's nose. It was really only fair, since his brother had broken his bow. His father had bought a bow from Clain Dhur and had given it to Quentis. He had tested it out, shooting an empty barrel of wine in one of his father's vineyards.

"Let me try," Mher said.

“Use your own.” Quentis pulled another arrow and fired. It sunk into the barrel with a hollow thwack.

“I want to try yours, it’s new. Come on now.”

“No, you have your own, use it,” Quentis said, but Mher, who was much bigger and stronger, had forced it from his hands and shoved him aside. Their other brothers were there watching and their sister, of course, laughed at all of them from the hill.

“Mher, it’s mine,” Quentis said diving on his brother. Mher threw him off easily but Quentis rebounded back and kneed him hard in the stomach. Mher doubled over and Quentis dove for the bow, but Mher had a thick grasp on it. He jerked it away, coughing, and lifted the bow above his head and came down hard on Quentis’s shoulder. There was a loud cracking sound and for the pain in his shoulder Quentis thought that he’d broken a bone. But when he looked down and saw half of his bow dangling from the string behind him he knew it was much worse. The others laughed, especially his sister.

“Serves you right,” Mher said, out of breath. He stood up and walked back through the rows of lifeless grapevines. Quentis looked down at the bow as the others retreated with Mher, all except his sister, who was still giggling. He felt a bubbling fire building inside of him. He wanted to kill Mher, but Mher was too big, too strong for him. To the right of the broken bow Quentis found a rock half buried beneath the dirt. He grabbed it and squeezed it in his hands. Mher and the others were already a considerable ways away, moving slowly like the soft clouds above them.

“Mher,” Quentis yelled. His brother turned. The rock was already mid air giving Mher no time before it slammed into his face with a liquid cracking sound. Mher spun on

his heels dramatically and hit the ground with his shoulder and the side of his head.

Quentis felt elated and horrified at the same time when his brother sat back up screaming and holding his face, blood running through his fingers.

Quentis turned and ran as fast as he could through the grapevines. One of his brothers was already chasing after him, but if Quentis had anything on his brothers it was speed, and, apparently, accuracy as well. He ran through the fields with the cold air stinging his lungs. He didn't want to think about the beating he would get if his brothers caught up to him, or what his father would do. So he just ran, one wild foot after the other toward the forest with the sound of his sister's bellowing laughter filling the cold winter air.

It was growing dark when the first man rounded the corner of the rocks. If they were smart they'd be coming at him in all directions. But he was in a good spot and if he kept his wits about him he should be able to see them coming from any angle. Another followed close behind the first. They had abandoned their horses and were moving slowly forward. They knew they were close.

Quentis heard the third man coming down from a rock to his left, and he couldn't hear the one behind him but he knew that he'd be there. They hadn't spotted him yet, but it was only a matter of time. One of them was a tracker, and by their swift path to him, Quentis judged he was actually very good, which was surprising. Quentis grabbed his first rock and held it high. It felt strong and heavy in his hand. He could picture the man's head smashing beneath it. Quentis took aim, it was a far shot but he hurled the stone as



hard as he could anyway. It flew into the first man's shoulder, knocking him backwards but not to the ground. The other man was quick and hurled himself behind a rock. Quentis threw again and missed. The rock hit another stone and split into little pieces. Quentis heard movement to his right and turned with another rock in hand. The man was closer than he'd figured already climbing a nearby boulder. Quentis threw the rock hitting him square in the face. The soldier fell and landed unnaturally twisted on the ground.

Quentis slid down the rock toward him, leaving the stones behind. He reached the body. The man was still breathing, but he was bloody and probably broken in one or two places. Quentis unsheathed the man's sword and ducked behind another boulder.

The first day of Quentis's training was the worst. He was by far the youngest in the Guild and the others expected him to fail within days. It was spring and the flowers were in full bloom, the creeks were rushing in the forests and if you listened carefully you could hear the distant roar of Kelkwa, the mountain waterfall, a sacred place.

They had hiked for most of the day up Mount La'Mun until they reached the opening of a cave. It dripped silver water and smelled of cold rock. The sun was brilliant in the sky, but the mouth of the cave opened like a throat revealing thick murky darkness.

"A rare patch of Snow flowers grows in these caves. Find me one, and bring it back, all of you," Master Mayen Jharlis, their trainer, said.

There were seven students there and they all rushed into the cave to be first to bring back the flower. A large boy with long black hair and sunburnt skin shoved Quentis to the side. When he got into the cave he was the last one in, the others had all scattered

down in different directions. The rocks twisted and jutted out of the side of the walls. There were so many directions he could go and he could hear the other's footsteps echoing down into the darkness. Quentis chose a small pathway he thought perhaps the other boys, being older and bigger than him, wouldn't take.

He crawled under the rock and felt the wetness against his back and thighs as they rubbed against the cold stone. Traveling further down the path he had to move forward on his hands and knees, sliding through the earth like a worm. The rocks pressed in on him and he was suddenly aware that perhaps he had chosen a wrong path, perhaps this path only got smaller and smaller until it collapsed in on itself. Quentis swallowed his fear, thinking of Mayen Jharlis's disappointed eyes, and continued forward.

The darkness was becoming so thick he couldn't see his hands moving in front of him. He wondered how he was going to see, let alone find, a Snow flower in the thick blackness. The rocks squeezed tighter against him until he found an opening and was able to stand. He felt around for two rocks that he struck together, trying to get at least a spark of light but the rocks were too wet. Footsteps echoed throughout the cave as he searched for another path.

It was perhaps the worst, longest day of Quentis's life. He spent all day in that cave, though it felt like months, searching for light, for the flower. He had a rough idea of how to get himself back, but could not return empty handed, he refused to confirm their suspicions that he was too young, too weak. The footsteps and anxious scrambling he'd heard from the others had dimmed to an empty, mind wrenching silence. Either he was too deep to hear them, or worse, they had already found the flowers and turned back. He

was completely soaked, exhausted and probably bleeding in one or two places. Then he saw the light. It seemed to be flickering and dancing dimly against the shining cave walls. He turned towards it and ducked under the rock overhead. His heart was pounding and his hands were shaking, either from excitement or overexertion.

“Quentis.” He heard his name being called from the direction of the light. He froze, and saw Mayen Jharlis emerge from around the corner carrying a torch. Quentis felt his heart drop at the look of relief and disappointment on Master Jharlis’s face.

“You are the last Quentis.” His words voiced Quentis’s fears. He had failed.

“I’ve looked everywhere?” Quentis said.

Master Jharlis exhaled deeply. “Have you ever seen a Snow flower?” he said.

Quentis nodded. “They grew in the hills next to our house.”

“Of course they did. Nurtured by rich soil and sunlight. Look around you Quentis.” He motioned with the torch making the shadows and light rapidly exchange places. “A Snow flower would never grow in here, not in a thousand seasons.” He brought the light back to his face.

“But you told us. We—”

“Must learn to trust your instincts, your knowledge, your studies, yourself.”

Quentis took a deep breath and looked up at Mayen Jharlis. He was tall, strong and so sure of everything. Quentis remembered looking at him, knowing that he would never be such a man. Not sure he wanted to.

“The others?” Quentis asked, scared of the answer.

“Returned long ago. Some realized there were no flowers. Others gave up.”

Perhaps it was a trick of the light and dark playing tricks on his eyes, but Quentis thought, for a brief moment that he saw the corners of Master Jharlis’s lips curve upward. “Except you. It seems you are just as stubborn as you are foolish. Come.” He motioned with the torch and they made their way back through the cave.

When they emerged Quentis was not surprised to see that it was night. The moon and the stars cast their silver light upon the mountainside, making the trees, grass, rocks and waterfalls shine like metal. The others were gathered around a small fire and when Quentis approached with Master Jharlis no one said anything to him, but they looked at him, stared actually, as if he were a spirit raised from the dead.

Quentis sat down by the fire and felt the warmth on his skin. He looked down at the view stretched out before him. The rocks, trees, and tangles of bushes. It felt good to be free of the darkness. It was a strange feeling, having relief at simply being able to see everything again. He pulled his legs up to his chest and looked back at the fire. It burned and spat its warmth into the cool spring evening, while the hum of the waterfall and the chirp of a cricket sounded somewhere in the distance.

He held the sword to his chest like a lover and flattened his back against the rock. One of them was approaching to his left, the other to his right, and Quentis was sure there was one more, but he couldn’t place him. Quentis closed his eyes and felt the rock against his back. He was aware of the strength of the rock, the stillness of the night, and the small clouds floating amidst the stars.

The first man made his move. Quentis ducked easily as the man's sword struck the rock beside him. It was a wounding blow, not meant to kill. They wanted him back alive.

Quentis moved to the man's right and made some weak attempts at the soldier's midsection, which were blocked, but not efficiently. Within the first few moves Quentis had gauged the man's ability. He was strong, maybe stronger than Quentis but was slower and a bit awkward in his movements. Quentis pushed him back to gain the higher ground. The man grunted with each movement. Quentis could tell he was concentrating hard.

A twig snapped behind Quentis, so he made several quick advances on the soldier. He knocked the man's blade to the left then swung his own over the man's right shoulder and brought it across his face with the flat of the blade. The soldier staggered back, not badly hurt but shocked nonetheless, giving Quentis enough time to turn and take a boot from the man behind him straight in the gut.

He sprawled backwards and felt the boulder slap his back and head. He saw a few small lights dance in his vision and was suddenly aware of the pain in his hand. The cut had probably started to bleed again. Quentis pushed himself up as fast as he could, bringing his sword around to block the first blow. The second man was smaller but came at him wildly, with poor form but a striking fury. Quentis was done testing, was through with strategy. He caught the man's blade with his, midair, and spun it around, loosening the man's grip, then he brought his down hard on the other's blade and it fell to the ground. Quentis gave him a grazing cut across the ribs and was about to bring the hilt

around to knock him on the head when the other man came at him with a renewed anger at having been flat-bladed across the face. The smaller man retrieved his fallen blade and Quentis found himself on the defense, blocking the swing of two angry swords.

They hacked and ducked and stabbed across the rocky ground, until Quentis's arm was sore and his hand hurt from the blows, which came in steady waves, neither ceasing in speed nor strength, both of which Quentis was losing. Luckily the two were not very good fighters, and even worse at fighting together. Quentis jumped on the side of the rock and came down hard, swinging his blade at the larger soldier. The man wasn't fast enough and the move caught him off guard. The blade cut deep into the man's hand as his sword dropped to the ground with a satisfying clang. Before the other had time to react Quentis was already moving on him. He struck hard and fast, gaining ground, made a sweeping cut that took the man across the shoulder, then the leg, then a hard kick to the chest. Two more swings disarmed the soldier and the third was with the hilt, which struck him in the temple. He fell hard to the ground like a large stone. Quentis turned and moved swiftly at the other man, who'd regained his feet. He feigned attacking left then ducked right and swept his legs. The large man fell and when he tried to get up again, Quentis put a boot to his face.

He looked down at the two lying there, bleeding, and wondered where the last man was. Quentis felt the strange anticlimactic feeling that he got after most fights, as if he'd expected something more to happen, something more satisfying. He belted the sword and moved up the mountain, not wanting to wait for the last man, who he still

hadn't heard. Perhaps there was no fourth. Those cocky bastards only sent three for him. Perhaps he would make it free after all.

The night was cold, Quentis could feel it on his skin, but his blood flowed quickly, keeping his body warm. He moved up the mountain breathing hard. The pain in his hand was a renewed burning fire but he needed to put enough distance between him and the three unconscious soldiers as he could before daybreak. He climbed over a rock face and found an elk path that led him further up the mountain. It wasn't till he stopped for a moment to catch his breath that he realized that someone was following him. The fourth man.

Quentis picked up the pace but could hear the man's movements in the distance. It wasn't twigs snapping or falling rocks, but merely a slight disturbance in the air, a murmur, hardly audible amidst the natural sounds of the night. Quentis put one foot in front of the other, at times using his hands as well. He was tired; his legs were beginning to give and his arms still felt soar from the fight. Quentis breathed hard and, further in the distance, heard the sound of the strange bird again, waiting for the coyotes to assemble.

After some distance Quentis stopped again to realize that the man was gaining ground. He was catching up to Quentis quickly, almost easily. Here was the tracker Quentis had been worried about; here was the brains and the skill of the operation. Quentis looked up at the rocks cutting the ground, pushing towards the stars. He saw the steep path ahead and felt his energy draining from him, so he stopped, sat down, and waited.

The dark figure emerged from the side of the rock after what must have only been moments. The man blended in to the night around him, becoming the darkness itself. He had short black hair, a thin beard and wore a dark brown jacket with a black leather vest overtop. Quentis could make out his features in the moonlight. He saw the piercing eyes, the slope of the nose and the curve of the lips. The man wasn't even breathing hard.

"I would have preferred to come alone anyway," he said after a moment.

"But then where's the fun in it for me?" Quentis said, not bothering to stand.

The man laughed. Loud and genuine. "This must be hard for you my friend. Believe me, I understand, I understand as the others do not," he said, lifting his hand to his lips and kissing his ring. The movement was smooth, habitual even. Quentis saw the ring in the moonlight, and the stone embedded into its center. Understanding flew through Quentis and he knew it was over. It was, in a way, almost a relief. "Jeryl isn't going to be very happy with you. Same with those soldiers when they wake."

Quentis nodded and looked up at the clouds passing in the sky. There were three of them, small and unthreatening.

"I'll need your sword then," he said, lifting his hand towards Quentis.

"But I was just beginning to grow fond of it," Quentis said, unbelting the blade and tossing it. There was no reason to fight, no purpose. He knew what he was facing, all too well. He had no chance; he'd never had a chance.

The man took the sword and tucked it away into his own belt. "As much as I may respect you, I will kill you if you try to run again, no matter what Jeryl says, you understand."



Quentis felt a fury rising in him at being spoken to like this, at being so tired, and at being so easily overcome. Quentis was more than a match for this man, and would be one day again. He touched the strap around his neck feeling for the stone that wasn't there. He got to his feet, and scratched his head.

“I was just going for a nightly piss. Couldn't find the right spot.”

The man smiled again, but it was clearly not at the joke. “You know who I am don't you?”

Quentis took a deep breath and shook his head. “No, but I know what you are.”

The man turned and headed back down the moonlit path, not waiting to see if Quentis would follow. Quentis took another breath, letting the anger melt away. It didn't quite work. He had never expected to make it anyway—but still. He looked down at his wrists and saw the red rings from his bonds made purple in the moonlight. The sound of the bird squawked again in the quiet night, happy and confident.

Quentis dropped his hands and followed the man back down the mountain.

–CHAPTER 16: The Northern Forest–

Erron heard the howl from an uncomfortable distance away. He moved faster trying not to pay attention to the rustling in the bushes around him. More than once he thought about turning back; this had been a bad idea in the first place. He couldn't see above the canopy of branches, so he could only guess at where the smoke had been. The night was darker beneath the trees, and the air thicker, as if it had been trapped inside the forest. Erron's insides were warm but his skin was cold like a shell. He smelled the blend of the forest with each breath—the mud beneath his feet, the moss climbing the trees, the tang of the bushes around him and the thick wood from fallen branches. Erron worked his way through the darkness and his heart leapt at the sound of another howl, closer than before.

Erron had seen one of the Acaine wolves once when he had taken his sheep to the hills to pasture. He had fallen asleep on the cool spring grass and to his left a wolf, which seemed twice his size, had emerged from the forest. Erron hadn't remembered hearing it, but something must have woken him.

The wolf was looking at the sheep. It seemed confused, like it had stumbled upon them without meaning to. It didn't look threatening at the time but Erron didn't doubt that any moment it would bare its teeth and charge.

Erron had stood up and grabbed the nearest stick he could find, which was small and worthless. He remembered a trick Ghairan had taught him. The old man had told him that if you emptied your mind of everything but the thing you wanted to happen, then it

would happen. Erron had thought Ghairen's advice was a sort of game. He had tried a couple times to make his sister trip while she was walking, or to make a sheep's wool shear itself but, of course, nothing had worked. Erron had stared at that wolf just outside the pasture and felt his body grow stiff. The fear turning his limbs into stone. He gripped the stick firmly in his hand and emptied his mind of all thoughts including the thought that he was about to die. He repeated in his mind over and over, *go away, leave us alone, go away, leave us alone*. The wolf had growled, a low rumble in the back of his throat. *Go away, leave us alone*. It sniffed at the air, looked hard at Erron and then turned back into the forest.

Erron had never really thought that Ghairen's trick had worked; he had just gotten lucky, run into a dumb wolf, or perhaps one that had already eaten. Either way, now, as Erron ran through the forest listening to the howls, he wished he had such power.

He scanned the woods, looking for any sign of firelight in the distance. A bush shook behind him and he panicked and ran faster. He was mindless of the contours of the forest floor and barreled past trees and through bushes hoping that his feet would find steady ground. Erron thought he heard whatever it was behind him moving with him, and he felt a numbing fear jolt through his body. He didn't want to turn around to look. He could already imagine the sharp teeth, the powerful claws and the warm breath. Jumping over a patch of bushes he twisted his ankle on a root and rolled. He felt twigs and stickers reach out and scrape his skin as a whirl of brown and silver-green rushed passed. When he came to a stop he scrambled back to his feet and turned to see whatever it was. His breath came in swift gasps and his heart pounded in his chest trying to get out.

The forest was quiet and still, and Erron could smell the cold air mixed with mud, which he felt was smeared across his face. He looked around and saw rows of purple Aychrids twisting and blossoming all around him. Their bright purple leaves glowed against the darkness. He caught his breath. He had never seen one before, except in pictures Olyen his old tutor had shown him. They were the cursed plant, banished by the gods for reasons Erron had never learned. He thought they had been all carefully destroyed. He looked around at the wild plants, forgetting his fear momentarily. Erron recalled that Aychrids only grew near water—there must have been a stream nearby. He reached out to touch the surface of one of the glowing leafs when the wolf emerged from the bushes to his right. Erron jerked his head toward the animal. The wolf was much larger than he'd imagined possible, twice the size of the one he'd seen in the field all those years ago. It was mostly white with grey and black stripes splashed on its back and head. Erron felt horror grip him as the reality of the moment sunk in and seemed to pull his body, his feet downward toward the earth. The wolf emitted a strange potent smell that made Erron's stomach churn. If he lived long enough he was going to be sick, but he couldn't stop thinking how he didn't want to die while he was vomiting.

Erron backed up as the wolf began closing the distance between them. It seemed every bone in his body was frozen. Erron always thought a moment like this would be a blur, a rush of movement, but everything felt slow, potent, hyper-real—the stalking movements of the wolf, it's shoulder blades rising up and down like the levers he'd seen in the kitchen, the dark grey air emitting from the hungry wolfs mouth and the pungent smell of the beast. Erron felt a strange, warm sensation on his back, but couldn't bring

himself to turn around or look anywhere other than at the wolf approaching in front of him. He hoped that it would go for his throat and end it quickly. He was more horrified of being eaten alive, he realized, than he was of dying. A light was beginning to dance behind him and Erron was only dimly aware that that's where the warmth had come from. Erron remembered Olyen talking about a bright light that you see before the gods call you home. Erron wondered if it was his time now. The wolf moved within a few steps and stood taller on four legs than Erron was on two. Maybe he'd be devoured in one bite.

Then, as if in a dream, Ghairen emerged from the trees behind Erron, yelling and waving a torch wildly around. At first the wolf backed away slowly. Erron thought he would pounce, but Ghairen was insistent and violent. He looked larger than Erron had ever seen him before, not the frail old man that Erron knew, but a warrior sent by Mallek himself, carrying the flame of the gods.

The wolf backed away to Ghairen's persistent yells. The torch danced across the old man's body and flickered against the purple Aychrids. The wolf slowly retreated back into the dark and Ghairen stood motionless, torch outstretched listening to the growling until even that faded into stillness as if the forest itself had taken a long exhale of relief. The old man turned and Erron saw his face for a moment alight from the torch in his hands. He saw a serious look that he'd never seen before, and Erron was suddenly aware of the fact that he knew so little about Ghairen.

The old man approached and reached out a hand with a now gentle smile on his face as if they were back on his Grandfather's farm and he had just emerged safely from

the forest for a visit instead of having just defended Erron against a giant Acaine wolf. Erron took a steadying breath and reached out for Ghairen's hand realizing that his life wasn't about to end.

“Why Erron, it's so good to see you again,” he said.

–CHAPTER 17: *Pelah'im*–

“Well it took a couple of nights my lad but you came, as I knew you would. I did, you know? Know that you would come that is.” Ghairen seemed giddy, which brightened Erron's spirits a bit, though he was still distantly aware that the wolf could still be lurking nearby. But Ghairen didn't seem to be worried.

They strolled through the cold winter forest like they were on a nice spring walk. Everything seemed out of place and unnatural. Erron wondered if it was just the effects of having almost been eaten alive.

“It's lucky I heard you really. The donkey and I were sitting by the fire when I noticed the donkey's ears perk up. Obviously I'd been waiting for you so I ventured out into the bush. Good ol' Elkarians, hearing as sharp as hawks,” Ghairen said. Erron could see the fire, the source of the smoke burning in the distance, he could hear it pop and whistle, promising warmth and comfort.

They approached the fire and Erron sat down and warmed his hands. The donkey stood a few paces away, not tethered or harnessed at all; it just stood there quiet and content. Ghairen patted it on the neck.

“Long way to travel by forest. But he doesn’t mind really,” Ghairen said.

“What are you doing here?” Erron regretted the way his voice sounded as soon as he asked the question. He was aware that he hadn’t uttered a word of greeting or thanks yet, but he couldn’t help it.

“Well, I would have thought it obvious. I’m here to see you,” Ghairen said, sitting down by the fire, motioning Erron to do the same.

Erron didn’t sit. “If you wanted to see me, why didn’t you help, back at the wagon? You just left,” Erron said, hearing the heat building in his voice as if he were somewhere else, listening to himself.

“Tell me, lad,” Ghairen said as calm as ever, “what is it that you wanted me to do? Beat down the guard with my walking stick, shuffle you and Taylor onto my donkey and ride off into the forest? They would have ridden us down all too easily, and they wouldn’t have been happy about it, with either of us. You were going to East Arch and it was out of our hands son, it was best that you went without a struggle.”

Erron felt his anger melting away as swiftly as it had come with the truth of the words. It seemed like in this, as in all things, he was helpless. “You could have done something, said something maybe,” he said, trying to hold on to the anger. He sat down.

“I’m sorry, truly, I wish I could have done something for you. But I’m here now aren’t I?” Ghairen said.

“Are we to make an escape?” Erron said, not daring to let himself get excited.

“No son, the same problems, alas, the same problems. The world isn’t big enough anymore.” Ghairen shook his head like he was really concerned.

“You shouldn’t have come. *I* shouldn’t have come.” Erron started to stand.

“Now wait a moment, just stop there and wait.”

Erron stopped, feeling the power that Ghairen’s voice always seemed to have take hold of him. “I traveled long hours to be here, and you, well, you ventured out into the wild, daring to see me, surely that means something. Can’t we just sit and talk a moment, I’ve brought something for you,” he said already reaching for his pack. He pulled out a large chunk of meat, a slice of bread and a bottle of wine, which he laid out next to the fire on a sheepskin blanket. “At least stay and eat a bit? This is fine elk meat here, it’s cold but still good, and this is fresh wheat along with what’s left of a bottle of wine I traded a cloak for at last winters Two Moons Festival. Now, how could you turn this down?”

Even though Erron had just shared some bread with Old Tomm, he realized he was hungry. It seemed that he had gotten so used to feeling hungry that he didn’t even notice anymore. Erron didn’t really care about the bread and wine so much, but he eyed the slab of Elk meat. Ghairen broke the bread into pieces and then tore the meat as best he could and passed some to Erron.

“Now I don’t have any glasses so we’ll just have to share, if that’s alright with you?” Ghairen said taking a drink of the wine straight from the bottle. Erron nodded and filled his mouth with the thick, salty meat. Ghairen passed the wine and Erron took a few



swallows and handed it back. Erron could feel the wine warming his insides. It felt good against the cold night air creeping up his spine. They ate for a while in silence, enjoying the small meal.

“Did you know that East Arch Keep used to be a sort of center for learning in the time of the Old Ones?” Ghairen said.

Erron shook his head and took another bite of the Elk.

“It did, in fact, Kyra’s greatest library is in the Keep. All the old books and scrolls are kept there, some written even before the faces were carved. Some say that there are even books behind locked doors that hail from the Great Wars.”

Erron looked up after taking his last bite. “What? Everything from the wars was destroyed. Olyen told me that the Old Ones burnt it all in a giant bonfire. He said they burnt the old scrolls, the clothes, everything. He said that the fire was so great and powerful that they burnt weapons from the old world, even swords and knives and shields, Olyen called it the Great Cleansing.”

“Ah yes, that is what is taught isn’t it,” Ghairen said, scratching his mustache.

Erron took a few more sips of wine. It was bitter and thick and beginning to make his head feel warm like his chest. Erron watched the fire dance in front of him. The bright red, gold, orange and blues mixing as one. He was hypnotized by it.

“Erron, you must be going soon, I’m afraid. But I’m wondering if you could do me a favor?”

Erron looked up at the old man, his face illuminated by the fire, his eyebrows grown thick and jagged from the shadows.

“There’s a book I would really like to have, it’s called *Pelah’im*. Unfortunately it’s at the bottom most level of the library locked behind a very old door. Perhaps you would get it for me?” Ghairen smiled and took the wine from Erron.

“Are you mad?” Erron said. He looked at Ghairen as if he were a stranger and suddenly became very aware that he was out in the middle of the forest, with an old man, a fire and a donkey. “I’m no more than a slave. I don’t even know where the library is and even if I did they wouldn’t let a servant in. Besides, how would I get behind the locked door anyway?”

Ghairen laughed, genuinely amused, which made blood rush into Erron’s face.

“Erron, you scoundrel,” Ghairen said dancing around the fire, and sidling up to Erron, “you vastly underestimate yourself. I have no doubt in my mind that you can find a way.”

Erron looked at the ground. “Look at you, you broke your way out of the White Temple did you not?”

“How d’you know about that?” Erron said.

“Our mutual friend, Marten told me, he’s watching my place while I’m away.”

Erron shook his head and found that he was somewhat relieved to hear what had happened to the crazy old beggar. “You trust him with that?” Erron said.

“Of course, I trust him with my life, don’t you?” Ghairen winked.

“Well—”

“It’s late my boy, you need your strength. We’ll see you to the edge of the forest.”

Ghairen stood up and took his torch from the fire and stomped the rest out. The smoke rose into the night air and seemed to be absorbed by the branches. “Shall we?” He said, nodding at the donkey to follow.

They worked their way back to the edge of the forest. The distance seemed much shorter than when he had come. When Erron could see the grass and the servant’s quarters through the trees Ghairen stuffed the torch into the ground. It hissed and smoked.

“So, good luck Erron. Two nights from now, look for the smoke. And hopefully you’ll have the book by then eh?” Ghairen said, patting Erron on the shoulder.

“Ghairen, I don’t know how I’ll—”

“I know, I know.” He leaned in close. Erron could smell the meat on his lips. “But I’ll bet you try.”

Erron smiled. He couldn’t help but love the old man. He had always loved Ghairen, and he found that he didn’t want to leave. He didn’t want to sleep and start the next day shoveling horseshit.

“Goodnight lad,” Ghairen said, turning back the way they’d come.

“Ghairen,” Erron said, “why do you want the book anyway?”

“Oh it’s not for me. It’s for you,” he said still walking into the forest, the darkness gathering around him.

“Ghairen, what about the wolves?” Erron said despite being overcome with curiosity about the book.

“Don’t worry,” he said. Erron watched the smoke swirl around him like a fey cloak as Ghairen disappeared into the trees. “I’ve got the donkey.”

–CHAPTER 18: Brianne–

Sneaking back in the house was surprisingly easy. Everyone was so soundly asleep that the noise Erron’s feet made against the cold wood floor was merely a backdrop to the chorus of snoring men. Erron lay down to sleep, and despite the excitement of the night, meeting with Ghairen and almost getting eaten alive, Erron was asleep in seconds. He didn’t dream.

The next morning Erron looked out the window to see a light snow falling on the ground. He shuffled his way down the stairs with the rest of the workers, looking for Old Tomm.

“I love the first snow.” Pok sidled up next to Erron.

“Why?” Erron said.

“We get new boots and jackets. Every winter, on the day of the first snow. Last winter was shit. Didn’t snow for so long but was cold as my grandma’s crotch.”

Erron hadn’t noticed Horus standing by the doorway with two large wooden boxes on his left.

“Alright ya greedy bastards, just no shoving,” Horus said as the first few servers reached the boxes and started digging.

“Come on,” Pok said, “it’s wicked hard to find one that fits. You gotta shove.” He found a small hole between two large bodies and burrowed inside. Erron tried to follow, but couldn’t squeeze through. He realized then that Pok wasn’t a large kid, in fact Erron was not only taller but broader in the shoulders than Pok was. Pok just seemed so confident all the time that Erron assumed he was bigger. Erron tried again.

Pok emerged from the mass holding two pairs of boots and two brown heavy jackets. They were poorly made and oddly stitched together around the shoulders and elbows.

“Here, I’m sure they won’t fit, but they’re better than some of the other ones. The black ones are made of goat hair. Itchy as hell.” Pok handed Erron a pair of boots and a jacket.

“Thanks,” Erron said, trying on the boots. They fit fine. The jacket was a bit too small, but warm enough.

“Rotten damn luck.” Seayn approached holding up a black jacket, which reached to his knees.

Pok laughed and slapped Seayn on the shoulder.

“Serves you right. Your jacket’s just as farcical as your sorry ass.”

“Shut up. I’ll trade you,” Seayn said, holding out the black jacket.

“No way,” Pok said, throwing his jacket around his shoulders.

“Here,” Erron said. “It’s too small for me anyway.” He held out his brown jacket to Seayn who looked up at Erron like it was some sort of trick. “You want it or don’t you?”

Seayn grabbed it and tossed Erron the black jacket muttering “thanks” as he put his hands into the sleeves and walked away.

“You’ll regret that. Cheap leather and goat hair. Had one a few seasons back, couldn’t stop itching.”

Erron put it on and it fit a little loose but much more comfortable than the other one.

“I’ll get used to it,” Erron said.

They walked out into the chill morning. The snow was beginning to gather on the grass and Erron was grateful for the new shoes. The clouds felt close, and thick, and everything seemed to be quieter, as if the small layer of snow absorbed all sound.

It was still dark, but getting lighter when Erron reached the stables. Kane handed him a shovel as he grumbled about the snow. The horse shit was frozen and much easier to clean up and didn’t stink hardly at all.

Erron shoveled and thought about his meeting with Ghairén. He thought about the book and wondered where the library was and how he was going to get to it. Erron’s Grandfather didn’t have a library. He had a few books, but nothing worth spending any time reading. All the books Erron had ever read were ones Olyen brought from his home. Mostly they were histories and legends about the gods, but there was this one called *Lyrian and The Deep*, about a man who adventured across the sea and made it to The

Islands. He was the only man ever to make it to paradise without dying. Erron must have read the book at least three times. When Olyen asked Erron what happened to it, Erron just shrugged and said that he'd given it back. Surprisingly Olyen didn't press him. The book was probably still under his bed.

“Get the gelding ready boy, Brianne's riding again today,” Kane said.

Erron felt his heart leap and blood rush to his face.

“She's riding today? In the snow?” Erron said.

“Course she is. That girl hardly misses a riding day. Sun, rain, or damn snow. I tell ya, I feel sorry for the poor guard that has to go with her is what I feel sorry for,” Kane said tossing his shovel into the corner.

They busied themselves getting the horses ready. Luckily Erron remembered which ones were the geldings and was able to get the black one Brianne had rode last time ready. He dropped the saddle, trying to get it on the horse's back and had some trouble with the girth and the bit again, but Kane helped, repeating “worthless” over and over.

They took the horses out and walked them around the coral to get them warm and ready for their riders. The darkness had retreated, revealing a bright world of white. The snow wasn't too thick yet, but a thin layer covered the ground and dusted the trees. It looked like the whole landscape was merely a reflection of the clouds.

Erron's hands were freezing from holding the horse's reins. He wished they had been given gloves along with the boots and the jacket. Erron squeezed his fingers together and felt the power of the animal with every turn and twitch of it's head. He

wondered what it was that kept it from bolting for freedom, surely it wasn't Erron's small hand wrapped around the reins guiding it in long circles. It would only take one jerk of the animal's head to break free and there would be nothing Erron could do about it. Erron pulled on the reins to motion for a turn, it snorted out a puff of warm air, and followed.

Erron saw Brianne and her guard coming from the Keep a long way off, bundled in multiple layers of red and black. She waved as they got closer. Erron could hear his blood pumping in his ears. He didn't know if he was more scared of her asking him to come along or her not asking at all.

"Erron," she said, "you coming riding with me today?" She smiled. As simple as that.

Erron looked at her, the line of her nose, the waves of her hair, which seemed to go on forever. "Umm, I don't know," he said and fiddled with the horse's reins.

"But you have to," she said, furrowing her eyebrows ever so slightly.

"It's up to Kane not me," Erron said, pointing over to Kane as if she didn't know where he was.

"Go, boy," Kane said before Brianne opened her mouth to ask. "I'll get the brown ready for ya." He walked back towards the stalls and half smiled at Erron. This was clearly punishment for having dropped the saddle earlier.

"Great," Brianne said, smiling, her white teeth making her lips look even more red. "Rafe, this is Erron, but you met him last time."

"Looks like it's getting thicker," Rafe said, holding a gloved hand out in front of him. "It's not too late to ride another day Brianne."



“Today is perfect,” she said, and lifted her hair off of her shoulder to reveal her naked, thin neck.

When Erron first got on the saddle it was nothing like he remembered. The first time he had ridden a horse, it had felt much bigger and much wilder. Erron held the reins tight in his hand and sat awkwardly. He felt like any moment the horse was going to take a sharp turn and he would be thrown to the ground.

“Give it a kick and a yell,” Brianne said, “hard enough so that it knows you’re in charge.”

Erron looked at her skeptically and down at the brown beast protruding from his front and backside.

“With the back of your heel, go on,” she said.

“Worthless,” Kane said from a few strides away.

Erron kicked the horse but forgot to yell. It did the trick fine enough and the horse started trotting through the snow and across the field.

Brianne and Rafe pulled up beside him.

“So you’ve really never ridden a horse before?” Brianne said looking over at him from her strange side position in the saddle.

“Well, once, but I was young, and it was only for a few moments,” Erron said.

“You fell?” she said in a half giggle.

“Uh, yes,” Erron said. He looked down at his hands and concentrated on the steady side to side movements while Brianne’s laughter echoed across the snow-covered field.

“I’m sorry. It’s just so strange. I’ve been riding since I was small and I’m just not used to it. That’s all. I’m sorry,” she said, still smiling.

Erron nodded and wiped a few flakes out of his eyelashes. They were growing bigger and falling heavier than before. Everything was so still all around them. Nothing seemed to be moving except the three of them, with only the sounds of the horses hooves crunching in the snow.

“Where to, Brianne?” Rafe said.

“Lets do the trails,” she said.

“No no, not today. Lets just ride the fields, maybe even circle the Keep. I don’t trust the forest in this weather.” Rafe looked over at her with stern eyes, but Erron could tell that he was really pleading.

“Rafe, when did you become such a chicken? We’ll do the forest, it’ll be fine,” she said.

Rafe shook his head. “I could have manned one of the towers, been a part of the Watch. This must be some sort of punishment.”

“Rafe is always complaining,” Brianne turned to Erron, “but he doesn’t mean it, he loves me like a daughter, or at least a much younger sister.” She smiled at Erron, but Erron turned away and watched the line of tree’s growing closer. He could feel her stare warming the side of his face but refused to turn his head.

“The trails it is my lady. As you command,” Rafe said in an over-exaggerated voice, sweeping his hand up and down in front of him and bowing his head.

Erron never knew that the northern forest had any sort of trails. Other than Ghairen and Marten, he had never even met anyone who had been into the northern forest. It wasn't forbidden of course, but because of the Forest of Faces all the forests around Kyra seemed to have a dark pall over them and the people generally stayed away. Even his Grandfather. Ghairen was the bizzare exception. They passed over the hills and entered between the trees onto a path wide enough for their two horses, with Rafe riding circumspectly behind them. The horse was well trained and moved easily with Erron's motions. Brianne rode so close that their legs bumped into one another a few times. Erron turned and looked between the trees, but couldn't help being infinitely more aware of the feel of her calf grazing his.

“Don't you worry about wolves?” Erron said.

“Of course not. We have Rafe, he's big and strong and has a sword, don't you Rafe? And besides, a horse can outrun an Acaine Wolf any day. I've heard they're not really as big as people say.”

Erron imagined the previous night, the wolf standing taller than he was, fur coarse like wire and teeth as large as knives. He wondered if maybe his image of the wolf had been distorted by his fear of the thing, or perhaps his memory had created something that wasn't entirely real. He doubted it.

They continued down the path, watching the snow fall all around them. It curved along the edge of the forest. Between and above the trees Erron could still see the Keep rising, getting lost in the thick clouds bloated with snow.

They were quiet for a time. Listening to the muted sounds of the forest.

Erron stared at the path in front of him as if hoping that something to say to Brianne might be written in the snow. “So your father is really the Royal of East Arch?” Erron said.

Briane nodded. “Before my mother died he even helped with the training of the guards, but now he just sits at his desk and looks over papers most of the day. He’s too old anyway. Ser Raymond handles most things for father now.”

Erron didn’t know what to say. He let his head move up and down like it was on a string.

“You should come visit the Keep sometime,” she said.

Erron studied her face. Her fine white skin, her clean clothes and well kept hair, now dotted with large white flakes. It seemed she didn’t understand. The world was hers to command, the people around her mere players. “I don’t really think we’re allowed visits to the keep.”

“Well,” she said, leaning in close and taking a glance back at Rafe, “then we shall have to do it in secret then.”

Erron felt his face flush and a strange stirring in his stomach.

“You really should see my room it’s quite lovely.” She smiled, and for a moment her smile reminded him of Taylor. He felt the horse’s movements beneath him as if he

could feel the animal's weight and power with each step. Erron thought for a moment about running off. He could charge the horse through the trees, up and over the mountains and never be heard from again.

Brianne was still smiling, that thin smile that looked like Taylor's. She was staring at his green eyes.

Erron turned to watch the path in front of him. He glanced up at the sloping trees, heavy with snow. He thought suddenly of Ghairen.

"Do you have many books in the Keep?" Erron said, sounding more excited than he'd meant to.

"Of course. Do you like to read?" Brianne said, her leg brushing up against his.

"Yes," he said, adjusting himself in his saddle and leaning in slightly.

"I didn't think many of the servants could read."

Erron pushed away his annoyance as quickly as he could and tried not to let it show on his face. "I wasn't always a servant. My Grandfather used to own a farm and he had a library with all kinds of books," Erron lied.

"Probably not as many books as we have in the Keep. Shelves and shelves of them." Erron nodded trying not to look impressed, trying to look as if he didn't quite believe her.

"I could show you, would you like to see?"

"I don't think I'm really supposed to."

She leaned in closer and glanced back at Rage. "Tonight, meet back at the stables," she said in a half whisper.

Erron nodded, excitement bubbling in his stomach. They continued down the path.

“We really should be getting back soon Brianne, you’re getting soaked,” Rafe said from behind them.

The sound of the horse’s footsteps pushed the snow against the ground and Erron watched as Brianne smiled again, her lips parting to reveal straight, perfect teeth, as white and brilliant as the snow falling gently around them.

–CHAPTER 19: Drowning–

The morning Broan was going to kill a man he ate breakfast in his room in the Captain’s Quarters. Once you reached the rank of Captain you moved out of the barracks and were given your own room in one of the housing developments near Townhall. Broan woke that morning, not wanting to leave his room. He was given the whole day off duty by order of Brenden Murray himself, and so he put out for some breakfast.

“Mayla.” Where is she? He called her name till the Servi came and knocked on his door.

Mayla was wearing her grey, cheaply made dress with a white apron tied around her waist. She was young, long dark hair, and showed signs of one day developing into

quite the beauty. “Ah Sir Landden, the way you say my name, with such power and desire, it tickles me all funny.” She laughed and smiled at him, moving closer to his bed.

“Mayla, I’ll be taking breakfast in my quarters today. Make it eggs, milk, some bread, and do we have any fresh oysters in the kitchen today?” Broan sat at the edge of the bed looking at Mayla. He hadn’t donned his uniform yet, and wasn’t sure he would at all.

“We do have a few left Sir, but I don’t know if I’d call em’ fresh ezactly.”

“Well bring them anyway. I’ll have a look,” he said and rubbed his face.

“Sir Landden is in bed late today? Does he not have duties to attend to?” she said moving closer to the bed. Broan watched her hips sway from one side to the next as she strolled forward and suddenly he wasn’t so sure that she was as young as he thought she was. She amused him but always made him feel uncomfortable as if he was naked and only she could see. Broan would squirm and blush whenever she seemed to be excited, which only ever served to encourage her.

“Yes, I have the morning off,” Broan said, feeling the familiar stone in his stomach when he thought of what he’d be doing that evening.

“Do you now?” she said, smiling.

“Yes, a nice breakfast would serve me great,” because I have to kill someone this evening, “do you mind?” Broan said and caught her light, playful brown eyes.

“Of course, of course, Sir Landden. You must keep your strength and your color about you, otherwise you don’t have nothin’.” She smiled again and hurried out the door.

*I suppose she is an attractive girl.*

Broan lifted himself out of bed, pulled his robe around him, not ready to bear his uniform, and looked out the window. It was snowing outside, but late enough in the morning for the clouds to be bright overhead. A few children were playing in the streets while people passed by in heavy cloaks.

He could picture the ocean, the docks, speckled with snow while the ships, naked of their sails sat in the freezing water. He could hear the calls from the fish market, see the breath of the salesmen pushing their silver scaled fish. He could see Ser Robbins, standing on one of the docks, inspecting the water, not knowing that he would soon suffocate beneath it's icy, unforgiving surface.

*What is the best way to go about drowning someone?*

Broan thought maybe he'd knock him unconscious then push him in. Maybe he'd have to tie a weight around his feet, or hands. Maybe he could just push him in and the freezing water would stifle his screams and he'd drown all on his own. Broan put a finger to his forehead and couldn't believe that he was actually contemplating how best to drown a man.

*I'm going to do this aren't I? What choice do I have?*

He looked down at his hands—his fingers—and pictured what it would be like to see them severed from his body as unattached lumps of flesh, no longer anything lifelike or even human. On the other hand, he pictured Brenden Murray's face flush with disappointment and wondered what sick punishment he'd have waiting for him. He had no choice. But I won't get caught, I have the Chairmen of the High Council on my side. Right?



Broan wasn't stupid enough to not have wondered if he was falling victim to some sort of trap. But what would Brenden Murray want with him? What had he done? And for that matter who had recommended his name to the High Council? He traced the window with his finger as if reaching for the falling flakes of snow.

Mayla kicked the door with her foot before entering.

"No more oysters Ser Landden, but if you tell me I'll go to the Addressan this moment and fish some out for ya fresh," she said, laying the plates of steaming eggs and bread on the bed and putting the glass of milk on the dresser.

"No, that's just fine. Thank you," Broan said, eyeing the food.

"Would you have anything else with me Ser Landden?" She smiled at him and lowered her head, just slightly. Broan watched her as a strand of hair fell down her face and across her nose.

"That'll be all Mayla. I need some peace and quiet," Broan said, sitting back down on the bed.

"Of course Ser Landden." She paused for a moment as if waiting for Broan to say something else, and then walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Broan took a bite of the eggs and made himself swallow. It didn't taste all bad, he just wasn't hungry. He thought of all the early mornings of training where he would have done anything to have had a late morning breakfast in his quarters. Now, he just moved the eggs around with his fork. Even their smell was nauseating. He stood, went to his dresser and pulled out his freshly cleaned uniform. He dressed slowly, pulling on the

leather last and tied it close to his chin. I'm a Captain in the Town Guard. He straightened himself and brushed his chest with his hands.

Taking the bread, eggs and glass of milk he walked over to the window and lifted the latch. The white flakes seemed to be already picking up as he dumped the food over the side. It fell to the ground with a sick slap, scattering the snow in a small circle around it.

"You need a what?" Marcus looked at Broan from behind the counter beneath bushy brown eyebrows.

"A cudgel, you know, like a large stick. Dammit Marcus is this too much to ask for?" Broan said, growing irritated and paranoid.

"Look, this is a weapons shop, you want a stick, go out to the woods and chop down a blasted tree," Marcus said growing animated, though he always seemed to be animated. "What you need a stick for anyway?"

"It's a new training technique, what does it matter what I need it for. You've got the best weapons shop in all Kyra, you'd think I could get whatever I needed."

"Alright, alright, look, I can get one made for you, but it'll take a few days. The snow'll slow business down a bit, maybe I could have it to you tomorrow morning."

Marcus looked at Broan like he was about to lose a customer, and not offending a friend. Business must be bad.

"Forget it. Forget I asked," Broan said. He looked around the shop, at the knives and swords with intricate handles hanging on the redwood walls.

“You look like you could use a drink? How ‘bout it? No one’s coming in today anyway.” Marcus said.

Broan looked at him. There was nothing he wanted more in the world than to forget about what he had to do and sit down to a tall glass of ale, but it was early, his stomach was still turning and he didn’t want to lose any of his wits.

“No, not today, I have business,” Broan said, and it wasn’t a lie.

“Shoulda guessed. You’re in uniform and everything. Where you stationed today? Maybe I’ll stop by.” He pulled out a dagger from one of his many drawers and took a whetstone to it.

“No, I’m not really stationed, I have just some work I have to get done is all. Check up on my patrol and whatnot.” Broan looked to the door. Marcus was an oblivious man, not prone to interesting conversation and lacking in most social skills but still, Broan was getting nervous with having to answer questions.

“Such is the grand life of a Captain I s’pose,” Marcus said, gliding the whetstone across the dull dagger.

“Well, goodbye then. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you,” Broan said turning for the door.

“Good luck in this weather, I’ll have the stick for you tomorrow,” Marcus said.

Broan turned on him. “No, no. Forget it. I don’t need it.”

“Dammit Braon, I dunno why you came in here in the first place.”

“Goodday,” Broan said.

“How you gonna get yer stick then?” Marcus called from behind the counter.

“I’ll chop down a bloody tree,” Broan said and walked back outside, closing the door rather too hard behind him.

*How hard can it be to find a damn stick?*

Broan wandered the edge of the forest. He had walked quite a ways and now he couldn’t find a stick that satisfied him. Too small, too big, not strong enough. How am I supposed to hide it anyway?

Killing a man was already proving to be much harder than Broan had ever thought. He’d imagined killing someone before, but it was always in some grand fight for honor, and it always ended with a quick stab through the heart or a slash to the throat. Drowning a man was completely different, not to mention murder. He thought about using the flat of his sword, but that wasn’t guaranteed to knock him out, and besides if he slipped and left a gash, it wouldn’t look like a proper drowning.

He looked back across the bare farming fields and the frozen grass. He saw Kyra laid out before him. Townhall rose above the buildings, rivaled only by the spires of the White Temple. Smoke pumped from the forge or the tannery in the heart of town and snaked into the falling clouds. Everything was so quiet Broan thought he could hear the clamor of the markets by the docks.

He turned back toward the forest and watched the flakes fall between the trees. He imagined running between those trees, the sound of his footsteps breaking the pristine snow into foot-shaped trenches. No...where would I go? What could I do? His duties were ineluctable. His appointment with murder unavoidable.

He picked up a rock just barely larger than his palm and put it in his jacket. It pushed against his pocket with preternatural weight. He pulled his jacket tighter around his neck and felt his leather vest against his chest. The day was already growing dark so Broan took a deep breath and stepped out into the path towards town.

The crowd at the docks were already beginning to disperse as night was taking hold. The days were growing shorter and fast. Broan walked through the market, watching as people bargained for fish, crab, trinkets and all other kinds of wares. Broan bought three fresh oysters from a large man with a heavy beard. He ate two and threw the third away. Broan's stomach was turning, he knew he should be hungry, he had hardly eaten all day, but he couldn't bring himself to eat any more.

He walked the cold cobbled streets dimly lit by candles hanging overhead as shadowed faces passed by. Broan was looking around for Ser Robbins, hoping all the while not to find him. Maybe he isn't here. Perhaps he's shirking his duties, or ill even. He walked through the market and over a small knoll overlooking the docks. The ocean stretched out before him, it's waves undulating futilely against the boats now boasting a thick layer of snow on their hulls. They'd have to be swept in the morning. Broan envied the simplicity of the sailor's life, or even just a deckhand, the ones who took care of the boats and didn't really do any sailing themselves. It couldn't rival the honor of being a Captain in the Town Guard, but to not have to worry about anything but cleaning and rigging seemed a luxury at the moment. Broan would have traded anything to sleep soundly, worried only about an early morning of sweeping the decks. Morning felt like

another world away, as if Broan might never quite make it there. There was nothing in his life, nothing in the world beyond what he had to do tonight.

A few dark shapes were making their way from the docks and struggling up the slopes toward the streets. The markets were growing quiet and Broan felt a deep and penetrating cold envelope his body. He couldn't help but shake silently, standing there in the snow. Fresh flakes were falling all around him and seemed to be congregating around the lamps lining the docks and the streets further down.

Time passed and as he shook he felt heavy with exhaustion as if he'd just done a full days training at the barracks. His muscles seemed drained, every movement was a labor and the stone in his jacket was growing heavier and heavier.

Eventually Broan saw what he was waiting for and his heart sunk in his stomach. He wished he hadn't eaten those oysters. Ser Robbins strolled underneath the lamps, patrolling the docks. Broan watched Ser Robbins wander past one of the ships kicking the snow around with his feet. The man was bored. But soon he won't even recall what boredom is. Broan couldn't help but feel sick with pity for the man. What has he done? No one ever looked more innocent. Broan trudged down the knoll toward the docks, almost slipping a few times on his way. He put his hands in his pocket and felt the sickening weight of the rock.

"Ser Robbins," Broan said from a few paces away, brushing his hands against his jacket. They felt clammy despite the weather.

"Oh Ser Landden. What-er, hello, I'm surprised to see you." He looked nervous, maybe embarrassed at having been somewhat playing in the snow.

“Yes, well, I was off duty tonight and thought I’d venture down to the docks to see what poor soul was stationed here. Thought maybe I’d offer some company.” Broan smiled, as fake and toothy as he could manage.

Broan hardly knew Ser Robbins. They had sat next to each other at a banquet in Townhall with all the Captains, and he had once stood guard with him during an Open Council meeting, but even then, they had been quite taciturn with each other.

“Oh I see. That’s very kind of you, but I’m just making my last few rounds and should be done shortly. The shops are all closed,” Ser Robbins said.

*Gods, he’s trying to get rid of me. I don’t blame him either.*

“Well maybe I’ll just walk with you a bit,” Broan said and immediately regretted how timid he sounded.

“Of course, of course,” Ser Robbins said as they turned and walked down one of the docks. “You know I think I’m being punished for something.” He looked over at Broan as they passed one of the tall ships on their right. “How many Captains do you know serve dock duty?”

Broan forced a chuckle. “I’m sure they were just short. A lot of illnesses being spread around this season.” Ser Robbins nodded.

They walked the length of the dock, the edge growing portentously closer. There was no use wasting time, might as well get it over with. They paused in front of the water and watched the flakes of snow disappearing on its surface.

“You like being a Captain Broan?” Ser Robbins broke the momentary silence.

Broan looked over at him, surprised, but trying not to show it. “Yes, of course I do. Why?”

“Oh it’s nothing, it’s just, sometimes, well, I always thought there was so much glory in all of this. As a boy I used to watch the cavalcade march down the streets for the initiation. I remember seeing the Captains out front and thinking what honor, what respect, you know?” He sneezed and wiped his nose with the side of his sleeve. “I don’t know. Sometimes I wonder at my choice, sometimes I wonder if I ever had a choice. My father served on the council and…” He trailed off as if realizing that he was divulging too much to a man who he wasn’t even sure was a friend. But then he continued.

“To be honest with you, I used to dream about taking one of these boats. There’s a couple little vessels just past these, that could be crewed by one man, maybe two. I used to imagine taking them out into the open sea, and not coming back.” He smiled and shook his head at the boyish fantasy. “My father was a sailor you know? He taught me enough, not a lot. But I could make it, I’m sure I could.” He looked off toward the ocean, silent for a while.

Broan let his mind go to the spray of the sea, the wind at his back and Kyra drifting behind the horizon for just a moment before pulling himself back to reality. Back to the place where he had to end another man’s life. He reached in his pocket and felt the rock’s smooth surface, which corrugated around the edges. His heart was beating so hard that for a moment he was afraid Ser Robbins would notice. I have to do this. I have to get this over with.



“Never mind. I think perhaps I’m just tired.” Ser Robbins sneezed, and was reaching to wipe his nose when Broan brought the rock out of his pocket. He lifted it high in the air and came down as hard as he could onto the back of Ser Robbins’s head. There was a grotesque thud and Ser Robbins keeled over. The hand that was trying to wipe his nose was still out in front of his face as if it were guiding him downward in an odd gesticulation. His body crumpled onto the snow-drenched dock and lay there motionless.

Broan realized that he was holding his breath and let out his air. He inhaled the smell of cold blood—the rock was smeared with it, as black as the water. Ser Robbins’s body lay in the cold, he was breathing slowly as small flakes fell on his jacket. But he was alive, it wasn’t over. I could save his life by just walking away.

He threw the rock and listened to the liquid thump and spray of the water and bent over the body. Broan’s cold fingers rested on Ser Robbins’s shoulder and he pushed. The body rolled over twice before Broan heard Ser Robbins’s right arm splash into the ocean. He pushed the body up on it’s side and looked around. There was no one. It was completely silent.

Broan pushed again, heard a slight grunt as Ser Robbins fell forward over the water. He felt a hand clamp down on his left leg and pull. Shit!

He slipped on the dock and came down hard on his ass. A fast and sharp pain shot up his back and he felt his foot sinking into the water, stuck to Ser Robbins’s frozen grip. Ser Robbin’s head surfaced and he let out a stifled yelp. Broan felt wetness seeping in through his boots. The freezing liquid burning at his skin. He kicked Ser Robbins in the

face as hard as he could and grasped the dock with his hands struggling for purchase as Ser Robbins flailed about.

“Stop!” Ser Robbins’s voice was hoarse and choked.

Broan kicked him again, shaking with exertion. Ser Robbins’s movements slowed, and his grip loosened. Broan could see blood on his face, but he kicked again and again. He heard a crack, then the hand let go and Broan watched it slide below the surface, following after Ser Robbins’s white and bloody face. Broan pulled his leg out of the freezing water and sat up, breathing heavily. He looked around again, waiting for someone to come out of the shadows at any moment. No one did. He stood slowly, trying not to slip and looked down at the water. Small ripples moved toward land as if to warn the world. Look below, look what Broan did.

Flakes fell on Broan’s cheeks and jacket as he waited. He had to be sure. His foot was growing numb from its submersion and he was already thinking about where he could go to warm it up. There was a fireplace on the main floor of his building, but there were usually Captains gathered about the fire until late in the night. They would surely notice his wet boot and ask.

Broan stood on the dock, watching the surface of the water grow calm. After a considerable amount of time, and a considerable amount of shaking quietly, he decided that no one could survive that long under freezing ocean water, so he turned and walked back across the dock. His foot was coming alive again with tingly pain like tiny knives. He trudged back up the hill and through the market, looking over his shoulder.

Have I really just killed a man?

He felt empty, a hollow sickness at the pit of his stomach, or maybe it was his heart, or even his mind. It was a crawling, wriggling sickness that slithered about in his skin as he worked his way through the streets blanketed by snow and dimly lit by the light of flickering street lamps.

He entered through the main doors of the Captain's Quarters and noticed a few men sitting around the fire, including Ser Jonus. Broan made fast for the stairs, feeling his left boot squish with the water saturated in it.

"Broan." It was Ser Jonus, "Come, have a drink by the fire." He waved Broan over.

"No, thanks, I must get some sleep," Broan said already moving up the stairs.

"Oh come now, I want to talk with you." Ser Jonus stood.

"No," Broan said and his tone made it final.

Ser Jonus chuckled nervously. "Alright, alright. Get your sleep." He sat back down.

Broan made it down the hall to his room to the sound of his one hard, one soft footsteps and the rolling laughter of Ser Jonus from downstairs.

He closed and locked the door behind him. Sleep, all I need is some sleep. He thought about reporting to Brenden Murray in the morning and envied the deck hands and their snow all over again. He thought about taking a boat into the ocean, escaping from all of this as Ser Robbins had wanted to.

He crawled into bed. The pain in his foot was growing fierce. He shook from the cold and the pain. He imagined a nice fire and felt a growing hatred for Ser Jonus. He closed his eyes.

*I killed a man today.*

Broan pictured Ser Robbins's body floating quietly in the ice cold water, heard his voice "Stop," he had said.

*I just need some sleep.*

Broan looked out his window and saw the flakes falling under the street lamps. He prayed silently to Trysten, the god of life and nature, that the snow would continue to fall, that it would cover all of Kyra, that it would cover his footprints leading to the docks, that it would fall so thick and heavy it would wipe out any trace that he had ever been there, or done anything at all.

–CHAPTER 20: The Library–

Erron was trying to remember the name of the book. Paylay something. He lay in bed hoping that he'd remember it when he saw it. *If* he saw it.

He looked through the opaque window and saw the snow, which had fallen all day, resting on the ground. Erron could feel it's heavy weight pushing against the earth,

he could sense it's ice cold body, freezing the grass and ground beneath it. The sky had rid itself of the thick clouds and was now clear and bright from the light of the stars and Hama'or'ha, the lesser moon, which shone down upon the snow making the ground sparkle silver and blue.

Eventually Weasel stopped rustling and seemed to finally settle down. He had been muttering, sitting up and staring out the window nervously while Erron had waited for him to fall asleep. Now as his movements settled and Erron could hear his breathing slow with the pace of the rest of the sleeping servants, Erron threw on his jacket and boots and snuck out of bed. He put his hand in his pocket and felt for the pieces of his Grandfather's compass he'd been keeping. He made sure the small needle was still there and walked slowly out into the hall. The floor boards moaned under his weight as he took his first precarious step onto the stairs.

"Where ya going this time?"

Erron felt his heart leap, and he twitched as he turned around to see Pok standing behind him in the hall.

"Gods Pok." Erron let out a steadying breath.

"Well?" Pok said, raising his eyebrows.

"I, I just forgot something in the barn that I need. That's all."

"That's shit is what that is. That's so farcical I can see it coming straight out your ass." Pok went back into the sleeping quarters and for a moment Erron thought that was going to be it, that Pok would just go back to sleep, so Erron turned back toward the stairs but but Pok quickly emerged with his own coat and boots.

“What are you doing?” Erron said.

“Goin’ with you dammit. This is the second time you’ve gone out without me, well, I’m comin’ with ya this time.”

“No, Pok, look, ok, you’re right, I’m meeting someone, you can’t come,” Erron said holding up his hands in protest.

“Look, I know East Arch better’n anyone alive. I don’t know what you’re doin’ but don’t act like you don’t need someone who knows every corner of this place. You’re gonna get yourself caught without me.” Pok lifted his head and tied his jacket defiantly.

“I’m meeting a girl, I want to be alone,” Erron said. He felt his face flush when he said it, but still, he didn’t want Pok coming.

Pok smiled. “First of all mate, I’m not sure I believe you, second of all, if ya are, then I’ll just get ya safely to ‘er and then I’ll be back on my way.” He cocked his head to the side and stared at Erron.

Erron shook his head. “Dammit Pok.” Then continued down the steps with Pok following behind.

They walked on footprints in the snow toward the barn, not wanting to make any tracks of their own to be followed. Pok seemed to be over-paranoid. They traveled close to the walls and every few steps he’d stop, hold up a hand and listen to the stillness as if waiting for the Watchmen to sound the alarm, or the dogs to howl. But the evening was silent, nothing seemed to be moving beyond their own footsteps on the cold compact

snow. They walked toward the barn followed only by their angular shadows cast by the light of Hama'or'ha.

“Brianne,” Erron whispered when they were close enough.

“Shhh,” Pok said pressing a finger to his lips. “You trying to call the guards on us?”

Erron looked around at the still night. “There’s no one here.”

“Check inside,” Pok said, pointing at the barn.

Erron walked inside cautiously. His feet crunched against the fresh hay they had scattered that morning, and the horses grunted in response. Erron could feel them, in their pens, watching him. They seemed like different beasts by night, wilder—their hot breath slid from their nostrils anxious for release, or perhaps annoyed at having been disturbed. The barn was empty.

“Brianne,” Erron whispered, walking slowly listening to the horses movements.

“Here,” came Pok’s subdued call from outside.

Erron emerged from the barn and saw Pok standing next to Brianne in the silver twilight. Erron smiled awkwardly at her.

“Erron, I thought you would never come,” Brianne said, a slight frown on her face.

“Sorry, I was trying to wait for everyone to fall asleep,” Erron said, glancing at Pok, who smiled.

“Well,” she said, glancing shyly at Pok and guiding a shining lock of red hair out of her face, “shall we go then.”

“Where we goin’?” Pok glanced from one face to the other.

Brianne looked over at him. “We’re going to the library. Of course, if its closed now, they’ll lock the doors, so we better hurry.”

“Great, thanks for coming Pok, I’ll see you in the morning,” Erron said and turned to follow Brianne.

“I’ve always wanted to see the library,” Pok said, matching their step.

“Of course you have.” Erron shook his head and heard Pok’s footsteps behind them.

“Besides, you’ll need me to get you back to the Shack safely,” Pok said.

Erron didn’t want to argue in front of Brianne, so he ignored Pok and fell into step with her.

They moved through the snow down the side of East Arch Keep. The stone walls rose vast and immovable, now heavier from the weight of snow at their tips. The three walked quietly, eyeing their surroundings until they reached an opening in the wall that gave way to a small wooden door.

“This is where I go when I want to escape without anyone noticing.” She held up a small silver key. “I stole it from my father a long time ago.” She smiled, her lips brilliant red even in the darkness.

She put the key in the lock and turned. There was a small click.

“Wazzat?” A voice came from above them.

“See, see, there are guards on the roof, damn, I told you,” Pok said.

“Shhh,” Brianne said and pushed the door open.



“S’nothing, leave it be...” Came a different voice, trailing off with mumblings Erron couldn’t hear. He looked up expecting to see dark faces looking down on him from the tower walls.

“Lets go,” Brianne said.

Erron and Pok moved through the door.

They emerged into a cellar of some kind, which might have stored wine or some other supplies at one time, but now was cold and empty. Erron could smell the dust and dirt on the stone and could almost feel a strange history to the room, a stillness that spoke of time passed and forgotten.

They moved through the room, it was dark, but illuminated by a sliver of dim light escaping from beneath a door at the opposite end. The door was raised by two steps, and when Brianne opened it, the light was so dim it barely brightened the room much more than when the door had been closed. They walked out into a hallway lit by a lamp hung on the wall much further down. The walls were plain, not decorated by fancy tapestries or colors like at the White Temple, but brown and red with high ceilings.

“This way,” Brianne said smiling. She was clearly enjoying herself.

“All my time as a servant, I’ve never actually been in the Keep, you know that?” Pok said, nudging Erron’s shoulder.

They made their way down the hall past closed doors and staircases, leading up and back down, until they descended a few short steps and came out into an antechamber with tall skinny windows and large brown tables on either side. Erron heard laughter from down the hall and the sound of men’s voices.

“Brianne.” Erron said.

“Ignore it. And if anything happens, the best thing you can do is act like you’re supposed to be here. My father is the Royal of this Keep after all.” She said passing past the tables and chairs.

“Your father is the bloody Royal of East Arch?” Pok said looking at Brianne as if she’d offended him.

“Yes, and keep your voice down.” Brianne said as if she were talking to a servant.

Pok looked abashed. He glanced over at Erron with his mouth slightly open and shook his head as if to say; what have you gotten me into? But the little bastard should have known what he’d gotten himself into when he had taken it upon himself to protect Erron.

They came upon two large double doors at the end of the room which Brianne pulled open and they stepped into the library.

Rows of vast shelves three times as tall as Erron rose in front of them. Each shelf was bloated with books, even the walls were lined with shelves full of books and papers. The room was much brighter than the antechamber. It was lit by a dangling chandelier, with small arms reaching out from the center holding flames enclosed in glass compartments, probably to protect the books from their fire. But how could the flames possibly stay lit?

“Bloody Mallek.” Pok breathed.

Erron looked around the room, and saw ladders leaning up against the walls in case a book too high to reach was needed, which must have been about most of them—hundreds of them. But Erron only needed one.

“Can you take me to the lowest level?” Erron said, turning to Brianne.

She lowered her eyebrows at him and her forehead delicately wrinkled. “How do you even know there are lower levels?” she said.

Erron shrugged. “A friend of mine told me about this library, and there’s this book he’s looking for. He said it’s in the lowest level.”

“So you know someone who’s been here before?” It sounded almost like an accusation.

“I guess so. Though I didn’t know he had,” Erron said.

“You are full of surprises. Damn but you are. Isn’t he?” Pok said, walking past the two of them.

“Yes, you definitely are.” Brianne said. “Though my Father told me I’m not to go down there without Raif or himself. And neither of them have ever taken me.”

“But you know how to get there?” Erron said.

“I said he told me not to go down, I didn’t say I hadn’t been.”

Erron thought quickly, then took a step toward her. He put a hand on her arm, his palms felt sweaty but she didn’t seem to notice.

“Well you wouldn’t be going alone you know. I’ll be there with you.” It was a stupid line and was made even stupider by Pok chiming in with: “And me too.” But Erron had seen the look on her face, and he had to do something.

Her face spread into a wicked grin.

They followed her through the rows of books toward the back of the room where the shelves ended and opened up to a small door, which seemed to blend into the wall. She opened it slowly, revealing a scuffed wooden platform enclosed by beams of wood on all sides. Erron looked in and saw beyond the platform a stone wall and a tangle of ropes and some sorts of metallic disks lining the sides. He stared in cautiously to the small room, which clearly wasn't, actually, a room.

“Well, you want the lowest level don't you?” Brianne said looking from Pok's face to Erron's. “It's perfectly safe, I've done it hundreds of times.”

“Done what exactly?” Pok said, biting his thumb.

“Step on, I'll show you.”

They stepped onto the wood platform and closed the door behind them. Brianne found a small lantern and some flint in the corner and lit it. “Hold this.” She handed it to Erron. “Over here.”

Erron held the light for her to see. On one side of the platform, connected to one of the wooden beams was a large lever, which she grabbed with both hands and pulled down. There was a metallic moan, which sounded like a puff of steam, and the platform rattled to life. The ropes lining the outside walls began to move as the disks turned slowly, croaking with every rotation. The platform began to sink, like the very floor they were standing on was moving.

“It's a lift, it'll take us to the lowest floor.” Brianne said with a pleasant look on her face.

Pok was clutching the walls like he was about to fall, while Erron held the lantern precariously in one hand, shaking and swaying with the downward motion. The disks sputtered to a stop and the ropes slowed until they collided roughly with the ground. Erron felt like every part of his body was jolted downward and he almost dropped the lantern.

“Here we are, the bottom floor.” She opened the door and they stepped out into a dark room. Erron squinted and could barely make out the shapes of shelves, not as tall, stretching out in front of him in a cramped space.

“Are we under ground?” Erron asked, swinging the lantern around the room to get a better look.

“Yes, the second floor is half submerged and the third submerged entirely. Most people don’t ever even come down here. It’s mostly old manuscripts and documents.” Brianne said, standing close. She smelled like some sort of exotic flower, both sweet and striking.

“Old Tomm told me ‘bout this place. Said all the old records of Kyra are here, burried beneath the earth. He told me that the librarian himself wrote most of them, said he’s as old as the Forest o’ Faces.” Pok said as he eyed the dark corners of the room.

“Julian?” Brianne giggled. The small spaces and the darkness seemed not to affect her at all. “He’s old, yes, but he’s not that old, and he certainly didn’t write most of these. The old documents were written by the Old Ones when they first fled the wars. And anyway, I doubt any of the real manuscripts survived that long.”

“You know the librarian?” Pok said as Erron led them down the small passageways in between the shelves of books.

“Of course I do, he’s a cranky old soul, protective of his precious books, but he likes me, I can tell.” She walked almost awkwardly close to Erron as they moved. Erron scanned the walls between the shelves, looking for a door. “What book are you looking for down here anyway?” Brianne said. Erron could feel her breath on the back of his ear.

“Umm, it’s for a friend, I forget the title. Payla something.” Erron turned toward the back corner of the room. Following along the dark walls and shelves.

“You don’t even know?” She laughed. A high pitched lilting sound. “My goodness you are different aren’t you?”

“Did you hear something?” Pok said, looking behind them. “I think I heard something.”

“You didn’t hear anything. There can’t be anyone down here, the lift was at the top when we used it. Besides, hardly anyone comes down here.” Brianne said.

“I know, you said that already, but I swear I heard something.” Pok said. “Erron we should go.”

Erron felt the pieces of the compass shift about in his pocket. “I just have to find the door.”

They walked through the cramped space around the shelves toward the back of the room. The walls were dark and appeared to be dirty stone. There was a musty smell to the air like thick liquid.

“There.” Erron said pointing to the corner of the room.

“What?” Pok and Brianne said simultaneously.

Erron led them past the final few shelves and held the lantern to the wall, revealing a tall iron door locked and bolted with a heavy chain.

“This is what you’ve been looking for?” Pok said.

“I think so.” Erron handed Brianne the lantern, and she smiled.

“You gotta be daft. How in Mallek’s name are ya going ta get in there?” Pok flailed his arms about. “You’re more farcical than damn Seayn.”

“Farcical?” Brianne said.

“Look, I’ve done it before.” Erron held out the needle from the broken compass.

“That. That’ll break like a twig against that lock. Have you noticed there’s two of them” Pok shook his head. Erron scanned the door and saw the chain connecting it to the wall, next to the keyhole for the actual door.

“All you wanted was to come to the library right?” Erron said as he inserted the pin into the lock. “Well, you’re in the library.”

Pok laughed, a sharp nervous sound.

“I’ve lived here all my life and I’ve never even heard of this door, how would your friend know what’s behind it?” Brianne said, leaning over Erron’s shoulder, watching him.

“Listen,” Pok said, “you hear that?”

Erron fiddled with the pin trying to find the latch, but he felt like he was fishing with a bit of string and no bait. He kept at it for a long time as the candle flickered,

casting shadows against the lock. Brianne watched with what felt like a genuine fascination as Pok shifted nervously about.

“Are you getting it?” Brianne said.

“I don’t think so. I’ve never seen a lock like this before.” He glanced from the lock on the door to the large bolt connecting the chain to the wall that he hadn’t even tried to break yet. “This could be a while.”

“Gods Erron, I didn’t sign up for this,” Pok said.

“Really, well I don’t remember asking for you to come either,” Erron said raising his voice slightly.

“Well bugger you man. Forgive me for trying to help out a friend.” Pok turned as if he would leave but stood still. “There.” His voice dropped to a whisper.

Erron heard the rustling that time, followed by distant footsteps.

“Ah shit,” Pok said.

Brianne blew out the light and set the lamp down on the ground.

“Come on,” she said and grabbed Erron’s hand. Even amidst the fear he suddenly felt, he was distinctly aware of the feel of her thin fingers around his.

They ran between the shelves back towards the lift, staying low as if that would help them not be seen. Brianne led the way and Erron could feel her heart pumping in her fingers. Erron was pretty sure that she was more excited than scared. For her the worst that could happen was that she’d be sent to her room with a scolding. For Erron and Pok they would most likely face a few lashes, if not worse.



There was another rustle, a click, and something that sounded like a door being opened and closed again. Erron could see the dark bulk of the shelves to their right passing by as solid images without detail or shape in the thick darkness. Pok was close behind, practically touching shoulders with Erron, his breath pouring into Erron's ear. By the time they had navigated their way to the lift they heard footsteps in the darkness. They stepped in.

"Close the door," Brianne said.

Erron fumbled for the latch and shut it just in time to see the dim light of a candle pass between the shelves.

"Someone's coming," Erron said.

"Of course someone's coming, I told you." Pok said from the corner of the lift.

"I can't find the lever," Brianne said feeling around in the dark.

"There," Erron said, "it's just here." He moved for it.

"Lift it up, all the way."

They heard a voice calling out from inside the room and footsteps getting closer and faster.

"Lift it lift it!" Pok said at the same time the voice called out again.

Erron pressed the lever as high as it would go and heard the wheels grind in response. The ground shuttered and Erron could dimly make out the ropes lifting and descending on either side of them. The voice called again and they heard pounding on the door below them as the lift ascended.

"Hold it now, open this door. Open up." More pounding.

“Gods, who is that?” Pok said.

The lift rattled and sputtered to a stop in front of a brown door with dim light seeping in through the creases.

“I don’t know,” Brianne said as she opened the door and walked out into the topmost floor of the library, “but how did they get down there? We had the lift at the bottom.”

“There must be underground tunnels, I knew it, I always thought there were,” Pok said excitedly.

“Well however they got down there, I bet they’re on their way back up for us now,” Erron said. With that they moved faster past the towering shelves and under the chandelier across the room. When they got to the hallway Erron listened for footsteps. But the whole Keep seemed to be humming with silence and they didn’t say a word either till they were through the hall, down the cellar and out the side door of the Keep.

The snow sparkled like tiny diamonds from the light of the stars and Hamma’or’ha. It was bitterly cold and there was no smell to the air but ice and wind.

“I can’t believe we went down there,” Pok said, like he’d been holding it in. “I can’t believe you almost let a silly girl get us whipped, thrown in chains too probably.”

Brianne puffed out a warm stream of hair. “You know Erron, I like seeing you, but next time, please don’t bring any of your paranoid friends.” Brianne glared at Pok.

“Paranoid?”

“Shh.” Erron put a hand to his lips. The fear and excitement he had felt were being melted away by a growing disappointment and anger. “Brianne, I’m sorry, won’t happen again. Pok, shut up and lets get going before we’re actually caught.”

“Erron,” Brianne said and put a hand on his sleeve. “I’m sorry about your book.” Erron shook his head. “I’ll be seeing you in the barn?” Her eyes got big and her hair could have been a glowing torch against the pale, sparkling snow.

Erron nodded. “Thanks for taking us.”

She smiled.

“You’re welcome,” she said, and looked at him as if waiting for something.

“Night,” Erron said and turned to go. He walked back through the snow with Pok, turning his head eventually to see that she had already disappeared back into the Keep.

When they had gotten a fair distance away, Pok turned to Erron, “Sorry about losing it a bit back there. I don’t wanna get whipped.”

“Neither do I,” Erron said.

“It’s just when I heard those footsteps from inside that door, all I could think of was a cold lash on my poor back. They whip the servants for shit like that you know? Old Tomm’s been whipped more’n once.”

“From inside the door?” Erron stopped walking.

“What?” Pok said.

“You said the footsteps were coming from inside the door? The one I was trying to open?” Erron couldn’t believe he hadn’t heard that, or hadn’t put it together.

“Of course, where’d you hear em?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t thinking about it I guess.”

“Well that’s farcical.” Pok scratched his short dirty hair.

“That means there’s got to be another way in right?” Erron said looking back at the Keep.

“Yeah, the tunnels. That’s what I was saying. I bet there’s tons of them beneath the Keep,” Pok said.

“Does anyone know how to get to them?” Erron said, growing excited.

“If anyone does, it’s Old Tomm, sure.”

“We need to find them,” Erron said.

Pok smiled for what might have been the first time that night.

“I like the sound of that,” Pok said, “but can we not take the girl this time?”

Erron laughed, and then remembered the guards. They started walking again, towards the Shack.

They snuck through the front door and back to their beds to the sound of snoring and heavy breathing from the rest of the men. Erron lay down, listening to Pok shuffling the blankets over his body. He closed his eyes and tried hard not to think of Taylor and wonder where she was or what she was doing. Instead he fell asleep thinking of Brianne’s shining hair and imagining cold dark tunnels leading to unimagined places buried below the reach of the moon.

–CHAPTER 21: A Message–

*Curse these old bones.*

Ghairen practically limped toward his cabin. The donkey followed close behind, nudging him encouragingly in the back. It had been a long night in the woods, followed by a slow day of traveling home.

*I'll have to get used to it, though next time I'm riding the donkey—I swear it. He's strong, he can handle what these old legs can't anymore. Perhaps I'll need to find a new route, too many hills, bushes and creeks...though there's not really much avoiding them now is there?*

Ghairen fed the donkey and then opened the door to his cabin. Marten was sleeping on a wooden chair by the fire. Ghairen walked in quietly. No need to wake him.

He put some more logs on the dying fire and watched the flames probe and explore the wood, it reminded him of a calm summer's evening. Marten rustled in his chair.

“Hello there sir. Long trip?” Marten's voice cracked like he hadn't used it in a while.

“Yes, for an old fellow like me, quite.” Ghairen sat next to him. “Will you be staying a while then?”

“No, I suppose I must be off soon, unless you have need of me, of course.”

Marten made like he would stand.

“Oh nonsense Marten, I’ll make us some tea. You sleep here tonight.”

Marten sunk back in the chair. No need to ask him twice.

Marten leaned back in the chair and was asleep by the time his head made contact with the wood. Ghairen made some tea for himself and enjoyed the warmth of the fire and the not-so-gentle snoring of Marten beside him.

He thought of Erron and as usual a deep sadness settled in his old bones as if to snap them. Eventually he stood, grabbed his pipe and used a coal from the fire to light the Pok weed, which he pulled from his pocket. He took a few relaxing puffs and then made his way up the ladder to the attic.

It was dark, but Ghairen didn’t light a lamp, didn’t need one. He made his way past the desks, papers, scattered boxes and other trinkets that littered his attic to the small cage dangling from the ceiling by the open window. The cage was open and empty.

*Darn, always when I need her, I swear. Blast, and I’m running out of honey for her too.*

He leaned out the window and felt the cold air bristle his mustache. Ghairen pursed his lips and whistled. The sound was high pitched and echoed through the still night. He whistled three times before making his way back to his desk. He pulled out a small piece of parchment, designed specifically for the task at hand. It was dark but he could see well enough to write, and the message wasn’t long. When he was done he rolled it up and went and sat by the window to wait.

He scratched his tired head, and felt the mixture of sweat and dirt beneath his fingernails.

*I shall have to bathe soon. I fear I smell something awful.*

There was a thud of talons on the window as the hawk landed and clicked its beak at Ghairen.

“Ah, my old friend, so good of you to come. I’m afraid I have quite the task for you.”

He held up the small parchment and nodded. The hawk fluttered her wings as if she understood, indeed, as if she were even excited about it.

“Good girl, you know who to take this to,” Ghairen said, and patted her head affectionately.

Before tying the note to her leg Ghairen unrolled it and held it out the window to catch the light of the first moon. His eyes weren’t as good as they used to be but he squinted and could make out the four words, written with a sloppy hand. He read it again just to make sure: HE’S AT EAST ARCH.

He tied it tightly, but not too tight as to be a hindrance, around her left leg and brushed his hand across her feathered head. Ghairen smiled as she took off into the night without a moments hesitation or a word of complaint. He watched her feathers shine a red-gold in the blue light.

“Good girl.” Ghairen muttered and took an extra long draw from his pipe. The smoke rose hot from his lips into the cold night air.

*Yes, I think a nice wash is just what I need.*

–CHAPTER 22: Another Message–

It took Erron and Pok a while to find Old Tomm after serving and eating lunch. They had seen him among the rest of the servants while setting and washing the plates, but when it came time to eat he was nowhere.

They searched some of the old shops and thought about going on the roof, but the snow was thick and they figured that even Old Tomm wouldn't venture up there. After a while they found him on the south side of the Keep, by the Watchmen's barracks. He was making shapes in the snow with a stick. His old body bent over and scribbling, he looked like an old, withering tree.

"Tomm." Pok called out. The old man didn't move he just kept scratching the snow. "What are you doing?"

"You know I used to design tapestries? Seems like a different lifetime now, but it's true." He said as if that answered the question.

"What the hell–"

"We have a question for you Tomm." Erron butted in.

Tomm's stick stopped it's motion and he unbent his back and scratched his dirty face.

"Erron, good to see you again kiddo."



“Tomm, do you, uh, know anything about tunnels under East Arch?” Erron felt almost bad about asking, as if he was using the old man.

“Tunnels? Now why...? Well, there’s sewers that’s sure, but tunnels?” He paused and scratched his face, “No. Never heard of ‘em.”

Pok kicked the snow, “You sure Tomm? Nothin’?”

“Not to my infinite knowledge,” he smiled, “why?”

“Never mind,” Pok said. They stood there silent for a while as if waiting for something else to happen. The cold seemed to be gathering around them and Erron became aware, oddly for the first time, of the sound of voices and metal clashing from the enclosed yard to their left.

“Is that where they train?” Erron said, pointing towards a roofless section of the keep that jutted out from the main body.

“Yes, it is, they train to be chosen.”

“Chosen for what?” Erron said.

“Gods Erron you don’t know anything do you?” Pok said.

“Shut it boy,” Old Tomm turned on Pok, “they practice, Erron, because once a year some of them are chosen to train under one of the Masters to become a Watchmen. Soon, in fact, in a few days time.”

“We gather on the roof to watch the choosing,” Pok said. Erron imagined standing on the roof watching the Masters. He pictured men in armor, swords, banners.

“Not all of them will get chosen. Some will just become soldiers in the Keep, some pages and so forth. The Masters meet and discuss who they want to train, some of

the better, older ones get priority and they hash it out. They choose as many young boys as they want and let the rest go. I've seen 'em each choose twenty, but I've also seen none of 'em choose more 'n five."

"Unless you're Master Kay." Pok said.

"Who's master Kay?" Erron looked from Pok to Old Tomm.

"He's the oldest of the Masters. He trains men to one day become Masters themselves. He hasn't chosen anybody in years, and the Masters are starting to get old." Old Tomm bent back over the snow as if he'd forgotten what he'd been doing and continued to draw lines.

"Anyway, Tomm have you ever been in these sewers?" Pok said.

"No of course not, they're too small, wouldn't fit a grown man, they're sewers lad."

"Let's go Erron."

Erron looked down at the snow in front of Old Tomm. "What are you drawing?" Erron said.

"Painting, I'm painting a tapestry, see the colors?" He chuckled, but Erron thought he might have been serious. The lines in front of him zig-zagged, curved and circled in no cohesive pattern. But Erron thought that there was something to it, something he just couldn't quite see or understand deep within the lines. As if there really were colors.

They left Old Tomm, and he continued to work as if they had never been there at all. The snow was soft beneath their feet, and the sky was glowing with bright clouds overhead.

“You think he really did make tapestry’s when he was younger?” Erron said once they were a distance away.

Pok shook his head. “No, he never did. Old Tomm’s been here since he was a child. He’s never known anything outside the Keep. You can imagine though, living here that long I mean. Does strange things to you.”

Erron looked back at Old Tomm and was reminded of a dog he’d seen when he was younger. It was a stray that had wandered to their farm. It had a gimp leg, and was far too skinny to be healthy. It would sleep behind the horse barn and Erron would bring food to it every morning, until one morning it was just gone. A wolf probably got to it, but Erron didn’t like to think that. He liked to think that it had gotten away, gone somewhere where it was warm.

Erron pictured Old Tomm painting a tapestry as he moved the stick slowly across the snow, careful that every line was right where it was supposed to be, right where his old hands, his old fingers guided it.

They wandered the streets and alley’s looking for any sign of an entrance to underground tunnels or even the sewers, but found nothing. There were pipes leading from some buildings to the street, but they dropped below ground with no openings.

Erron was frustrated, but Pok seemed desperate, he didn't want to give up, but eventually the bell tolled for dinner and they had to call it quits for the day.

It was some sort of soup that evening for dinner. It smelled awful, but Erron couldn't help but watch it hungrily as Horus slopped it into each bowl to be served. Some of the Guards were singing in the corner, which Erron did his best to avoid, while others called out hungrily.

Pok was serving the row next to him when a man grabbed Erron's hand. His grip was firm.

"Look at me," he pulled, "I said look at me."

Erron felt blood rush into his face. He looked up and caught his eyes. The man was thick, with an ugly, patchy beard and short, brown hair. His eyes were dark, they looked black and deep and empty.

"Bloody damn Mallek. It's true then isn't it freak boy? Hey Dale, you were right, there is a servant here with gods damned green eyes." He held up Erron's hand like a prize as others turned to look.

Erron looked over at Pok, who stared helplessly, like he was watching a thief being burned alive.

"Would you look at this." Another man approached.

"Not natural, it's unholy." Another called out from his seat.

The big man held tight to Erron's arm. "Where'd you get 'em boy? How'd you get them green eyes? You some kinda spirit?"

Erron tried to pull away but the man's grip got tighter as he laughed. Others started to look in their direction, muttering. Erron could hear their whispers all around him like little gusts of wind. He wished Taylor was there. She would yell, kick and scream. Erron felt helpless.

People started pressing in on him, faces like in a bad dream, but they were real, dirty and smelled rotten. "Leave him alone." Someone called out, but the voice was faint, with no power behind it.

Erron felt hands grasp his face and turn his head in different directions. Guards laughed and pulled at him.

"Let go," Erron said, kicking the big man, who just laughed and danced out of the way. Then Erron wound up and punched him in the stomach as hard as he could. He saw him double over in pain and the next thing Erron knew a fist was coming for his face and then he was sprawled across the floor. As his vision came slowly back to him, he wiped his chin and saw blood on his fingers. Some men were yelling, others were laughing. The big man approached.

"You filthy piece o' sh—" He wasn't able to finish the sentence, an arm holding a cooking pan flew across Erron's vision and slammed into the man's face, knocking him completely to the ground. Erron scrambled to his feet.

"Now either you eat the damn soup or stay the hell away from my table. And don't touch my gods damned workers!" Erron looked over at Horus's giant figure, made larger by the tight spaces between the tables. The men scattered and fumbled back to their

tables while the man who Horus had hit struggled back to his feet, glaring at Horus and Erron.

“You fat pig. I’ll have you whipped for this,” He said but sat back down at his table. All the fight had been knocked out of him.

Horus just laughed, good natured and hearty as if the man had made a friendly joke at his expense. He gestured to Erron to follow him back to the kitchens. Erron followed without saying a word, but he glared back at the large Guard who had hit him. Erron felt an animal instinct, a boiling anger inside of him swelling just below his skin. He wanted to hurt the big man, kill him even.

When they got to the kitchen Horus threw a rag at him. “Clean yourself off boy.” Erron looked down at himself and saw blood on his hands and shirt. There was a cut on his lip and one on his chin that was bleeding pretty bad. He wondered if maybe he’d hit a table or a chair on the way to the ground.

“We might have a problem here,” Horus said, “we might have to think up a different job for you. In the meantime, get some fresh air, I’ll call you when it’s time to eat and clean.”

Erron didn’t argue but stepped out into the night. The cold air filled his lungs. He glanced down the street and saw the glowing orbs in the distance. Their orange light spilling out onto the white streets.

After they ate and cleaned, Horus didn’t say another word to Erron, but Erron didn’t care either. He was grateful that Horus had helped him, but he was also strangely angry about it. Maybe he was ashamed.

“You look like a bloody corpse. You ok?” Pok said. They stood outside the kitchen, their skin warm and pink from washing.

Erron just glared at him.

“Come over to Tully’s, I’ll get ya a pint. It’ll make ya feel better I promise.”

“How do you have coin to pay for that anyway?”

“Ha. Well, sometimes I have to take it, but usually, there’s a sad soul in there willing to buy a poor servant a drink or two. You’d be surprised.” He smiled, proud of himself.

Erron thought about it. He pictured seeing Taylor again and his heart jumped. “No, you go. I’m going to sleep this off I think.” Erron wiped his face with the rag Horus had given him.

Pok just nodded, then looked at Erron like he was going to say something else, but slipped off down the street instead.

Erron walked back to the Shack by himself. He could feel the blood at the edge of his mouth growing hard and his chin hurt horribly. The Shack rose in front of him like a giant wolf. He entered and listened to hear if anyone was in the sleeping quarters. The building was silent except for the creaks and moans of the wood settling against the cold.

When Erron crawled into bed not even Weasel was there yet. He looked out the window at the forest. He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to see smoke or not, he was exhausted and in pain. Either way, there was nothing above the line of trees but thick clouds. Erron stared at the forest for a while. It started to snow lightly. Erron pulled his covers to his neck, careful not to get them too close to his chin. He thought of the kitchen

and the faces circling around him. Erron felt the anger course through his blood. He wanted to hurt the man, he wanted to hurt his Grandfather, the White Priest, gouge their eyes out, or perhaps his own. Maybe that would fix everything. He took a deep breath and listened to the stillness of the house. He fell asleep thinking he could hear the soft clicks of the falling snow on his window...

...“Erron...Erron?”

Erron opened his eyes to see Pok looking over him. His heart jumped and he sat up.

“What? Gods Pok.”

“Erron I have something for you, you stinking dog.” Pok smiled. He smelled of fire and ale.

“What is it?”

Pok handed him a folded piece of paper. “I don’t know how ya do it, must be the green eyes or something.”

Erron held the piece of paper as if he wasn’t really sure what to do with it. “What are you talking about?”

“The waitress from Tully’s. She gave me this, told me I had to give it to you. Made me promise like I wasn’t gonna,” he shook his head, “I don’t know how you do it, when did you even talk to her?”

Erron didn’t reply but unfolded the note as fast as his tired, cold fingers could.

*Meet behind Tully’s.*



That was all it said. Erron looked at Pok and shoved the covers off his warm body.

“You gonna go?” Pok said. Erron thought about all his reservations about seeing her, how angry and embarrassed he had been when he saw her last. In truth, he felt betrayed. But after reading the note all he wanted to do was see her again.

“Of course, and you’re not coming.”

“Hell no, not after last time. Besides I think this girl want’s something else.” Pok smiled.

“She’s my sister,” Erron said.

“What? Your sister? You never told me you had a sister.” Pok stood up from Erron’s bed.

“Should I have?” Erron said, Weasel rolled to one side, snoring softly. “I’m leaving.” “Yeah, go, go. Look out for the guards, it’s past curfew, they’ll be by the forest, sometimes the shops, don’t get caught. They’ll whip you sure.”

Erron grabbed his jacket and his shoes and hurried down the steps. His mind was racing. It was going to be another long night. He could feel it. He shoved the note into his pocket, stepped down the stairs, opened the door as quietly as he could and slipped out.

–CHAPTER 23: Taylor–

The summer after Erron had seen his tenth winter, Taylor snuck into his room. Erron hadn't been asleep at the time. The window was open and he had been listening to the hooting of an owl. He had felt a cool breeze move through the room and sat up instinctively. There hadn't been a sound, or at least he wasn't aware of having heard a sound, when he looked to the window and watched Taylor sneak in. He wasn't surprised, but excited and curious. She had never snuck into his room before. Erron saw her hair pushed forward from the wind and her hand reached up to her lips to silence him, as if he were about to call out in surprise. She walked over and sat on his bed.

Erron felt the weight of her body by his feet and looked at her in silence, not knowing what to say. He'd been over to her room countless times in the night, but seeing her here, on his bed, felt like a type of intrusion. It wasn't offensive, it just felt strange, unnatural. She looked at him.

“I had a bad dream,” she said.

Erron nodded.

“I was in the forest, and I could hear footsteps. They were growing louder and louder, getting closer. And they were coming for me, I just knew it.” She wiped her face and Erron noticed that she was crying, had probably been crying. “I know it doesn't sound so bad, but it was awful, I can't explain it,” she said, “just awful.”

“I'm sorry.” Erron didn't know what else to say.

He saw her shaking, and she put her hand to her face as she sobbed. Erron lifted his arm in the air and stretched it over her shoulder. She put her face into him before he even touched her. He held her silently while she cried, her ragged inhales filling the room and drowning out the sound of the owl.

Eventually she grew quiet, and took a long, steadying breath.

“Sometimes I have bad dreams too,” Erron said. She nodded. “You can come over anytime you need to.” She nodded again.

He held her like that for a while, until he heard her breathing slow, and he realized that she was asleep. He laid her gently down on his bed and pulled the blankets up over her shoulders. The owl had grown quiet but the cool breeze was still coming in through the window. It filled the room and smelled like summer. A chorus of frogs took up the owl’s silence.

Erron lay down on the floor and closed his eyes to the sound of the frogs, the wind and his sister’s breathing. She was sleeping, and somehow Erron knew that it was a deep, dreamless sleep. He felt a sudden urge, a need to protect her, to cover her with his blankets and shelter her from the forest, the footsteps, the world. Erron lay flat on his back with his arms folded over his chest and watched the ceiling. A strip of white light from the second moon, Hama’or’hagadon, was grazing the corner of his room. He started praying then. He’d never really prayed before, other than when his tutor Olyen made him. But this time he really prayed, he didn’t know who he was praying to, nor did he say a name. He just prayed to whoever was listening. He prayed for Taylor, for her dreams, for her safety and that one day he and her would be far away, and safe, in Allytrium.

Erron fell asleep praying and listening to the lively sounds of the summer night.

When he woke it was just barely light outside. The room was cold and there was a dim fog floating outside his window. Taylor was already gone. He drew his fingers along the bed, saw the outline of Taylor's body and crawled into it.

The light snow fell on his eyelashes and blurred his vision. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve. An old man with a ladder was snuffing out the lights in Town Square with what looked like a long metal stick with a cup at the end of it. The lack of light made the streets look dull and empty without their usual glow. Erron scanned the corners of the streets for any sign of movement, he even looked to the rooftops wondering if there would be guards up there. Tully's was getting closer so he snuck between two of the buildings and made his way to the other side. The snow was thicker on the untrod path and Erron felt his heart pounding with each step. He could hear it so loud in his ears he was scared that the guards would be able to hear it pulse and come running with their swords and their dogs. Erron was approaching Tully's. Or at least, he thought it was the back of Tully's, he couldn't tell from this side of the shops. He wiped his eyes.

A figure emerged from the shadows. It was Taylor.

"I almost gave up that you were coming," she said.

Erron gathered his breath as it flew out of his mouth and rose slowly. He looked at Taylor. She had a nice brown jacket on and heavy boots. He tried not to, but he smiled anyway.

"Gods, Erron, what happened to you." She took a few steps toward him.

Erron touched his chin and felt the the blood, which had already grown hard against his face. “Nothing, just...” There was nothing to say really.

Taylor looked at him, a sad look on her face, she knew, of course she knew. There was nothing for her to do or say. Erron looked at her and smiled again.

“What?” she said.

Erron shook his head. “Nothing, you look nice is all.”

“Oh shut it,” but she smiled too, “how are you?”

“I’m fine, you know, for cleaning dishes and scooping shit every day.” He realized he was trying to make her feel bad for him.

“I’m sorry,” she said and lowered her eyes.

“Looks like you’ve had a nice time of it?”

“It’s not so bad,” she shrugged, “I get to keep some of my tips and the people are actually pretty nice. Ellie’s sort of fun in her own way, you know, once you get used to her.”

“Ellie?” Erron watched her face in the shadows and could barely make out the movement of her lips as she talked.

“Yeah, she’s sort of in charge of us. She’s strict, but a good person, and fair. I like her.”

“All right,” Erron said looking out at the forest.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing, sounds like you’ve made a nice little home for yourself then.” He watched as her face changed. The comment had landed. But he didn’t care, he had meant it to.

“Gods Erron, you know if you would just let yourself be part of something for once maybe you’d relax a bit.”

“Relax? Come on Taylor, we’re basically slaves.” He had to focus on not raising his voice. “This will never be my home.”

“And what will be your home Erron? You think your green eyes make you an outcast, but it’s not true, you make yourself an outcast.”

Erron looked at her, trying not to let the hurt show on his face, but when he saw the anger draining from hers he looked away.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Erron brushed off the small flakes of snow gathering on his boots.

“Erron–”

“I saw Ghairen.” Erron interrupted her, he didn’t want to hear what she had to say. He wasn’t sure he could handle it.

“What? Where?” she said, pulling a strand of hair away from her eyes.

“In the forest, he sent up a signal fire, and I found it.”

“Really? You went into the Northern Forest? I heard you can get in some pretty big trouble for that.”

Erron shrugged heroically.

“Well what did he say?”

“He wants me to find a book for him.”

“A book?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of book?” Her eyebrows furrowed. For a moment he thought about not saying anything more, about keeping it to himself and letting her wonder. Besides, their lives were beginning to separate now anyway.

“I don’t know,” Erron said, “but it’s at the bottom of the library behind a locked and bolted door. I tried to pick it but we were almost caught.”

Taylor’s face contorted as she shook her head.

“We?”

“Yes, me, a boy named Pok and Brianne, the Royal’s daughter. I met her at the stables. She goes riding.” Erron felt a small sense of pride with that. “We think there may be another way into the room though. Pok says there’s underground tunnels beneath East Arch that could take us there. But he’s probably crazy. Actually, I don’t even know why he thinks that.” Erron felt like he was settling into his old self, telling Taylor everything, even growing animated in the telling. She was clearly taken aback.

Taylor put a hand to her cheek and looked at the snow on the ground in front of them. Maybe it was the way she was standing or perhaps how her hand touched her face, but for half a moment, Erron saw the child in her disappear. She looked completely grown up, standing there in the shadows. No longer the Taylor he knew at his Grandfather’s farm, but an adult, a woman. Then she shook her head and settled back into herself, but not quite the same.

“Come here,” she said and walked toward Tully’s.

“Where are you going?”

“Inside,” she said, and pulled open the back door.

“Why?” Erron watched the door swing open and saw the darkness beyond.

“Your friend, Pok?”

“Yes?” Erron said as she turned from the door to look at him.

“I think I know what he’s talking about.”

–CHAPTER 24: Tunnels–

The room was dark and smelled like dirt and old wood. There were shelves with dusty bottles filled with brown-looking liquid lining the walls. And all around them were casks of ale or wine or some other hard drink that Erron didn’t know anything about.

Taylor fumbled her way to the corner of the room and lit a lamp. The shadows flew to the corners of the floor and ceiling as the small flame flickered to life, making them dance.

“This way.” She walked to the opposite side of the room. “Hold this,” she said, handed him the lamp and shoved a cask to one side, not even asking for help as she rocked it back and forth and slowly away. The cask scraped against the stone until it



revealed a small wooden door with a black metal handle not tall enough even for Erron to walk through standing upright. Cobwebs draped the door and the handle was rusty, most likely not having seen use in a long while.

“What is this?” Erron said, handing the candle back to Taylor.

“Open it, it’s unlocked.”

Erron did so, and looked in. It was pitch black. She held the candle up to the opening and it showed a small entrance, made of the same stone as the floor beneath their feet. It was so small they’d have to crawl to get in, and it went further back into complete darkness.

“Come on, you have to see this.” She crawled through the entry way, candle carefully held up, and moved through on her hands and knees.

“Is this it, are these the tunnels?” Erron said, scrambling in.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Then where are we going?” The space was cramped and Erron felt like he was inhaling a mouthful of dirt with every breath.

“I’ll show you. Just wait,” Taylor said, she was annoyed but still excited.

They made their way through the small opening, which felt like it was getting smaller, made one turn and then the tunnel, or whatever it was, sloped downward until meeting a small iron gate blocking. Taylor pushed hard against it and it lifted upward making an old creaking sound as it did. Erron watched as Taylor stepped out into a much larger room. He scrambled out himself, and almost fell as he did. He glanced to see if Taylor had noticed.

“Look, over here.” Taylor walked to the wall on the other side.

The room was empty and seemed to be formed from jagged rock. It almost felt like they were in a cave, but Erron could see distinct and purposeful corners at the edges of the room. It was definitely man-made, but very old.

Erron approached a section of the wall that seemed to be cut out from the rest of the stone. He reached out his hand and realized that there was air coming from the cracks. It was a door.

“Go on, push it,” Taylor said from behind him.

Erron pushed and felt it begin to slide, but slowly. He pushed harder, and it moved a few more paces. It scraped against the floor in an agonizing screeching sound until it came to a stop and Erron couldn't get it to budge any more. He pushed again.

Nothing.

Erron stepped back and looked at the door. There was a black slit on the left side, not wide enough for either of them.

“What's back there?” Erron said, pretending he wasn't out of breath.

“I dunno, I've never been able to get the door open,” Taylor said contemplating the dark crack in the wall.

“Then why didn't—”

“I wanted to see if you could do it. Come on.”

Erron didn't know whether he was supposed to feel frustrated or embarrassed. Maybe both.

They pushed at the door together, ignored the rough scraping sound of stone against stone and soon opened enough space to fit through. Erron looked into that blackness leading into the earth and felt a sudden terror. It wasn't the same type of fear he'd felt with the wolf, it was stranger, deeper.

"How did you find this place?"

"I was getting another cask of ale to bring up, when I saw the door." She wiped her forehead. Erron was glad to see that she was sweating a bit too.

"And you just went in? By yourself?" Erron was surprised that she had, but for some reason he kind of liked that she did.

"Yes, why not?" It was a challenge. He looked past the door into the dark tunnel.

"What if we get stuck down there?" he said.

Taylor just shrugged. She was scared too.

"I suppose we should try anyway right?"

She nodded, then waited for him to go first.

There was a small breeze that made no sound, but slid between his fingers as he stepped through. He didn't know why, perhaps he was scared the air would be toxic, or somehow different, otherworldly, and would scare him away, but he held his breath as he entered through that small crack and into a deep blackness.

When they couldn't see the crack in the door anymore Erron realized that the small light of the candle was little help to them. Still, it was better than nothing.

They were able to walk standing up, though the path narrowed in places. Erron eyed the jagged rocks as they shifted shape beside him with the flickering of the candle light. They walked in silence, listening to the nothingness, smelling dirt and cold rock and feeling the passing of air. That ever-present breeze. The tunnel must exit somewhere.

The path twisted and turned, but never branched off in different directions, so they just followed, faithfully and slowly. Eventually they came to a dead end, blocked off by a wall of rock with strange black markings. It might have been a picture of some sort, but it was hard to tell.

“This is it? What’s the point?” Taylor said, looking at the strange markings with her candle.

Erron held up his hand to the wall, moved his palm to the edges and felt the strange breeze.

“This isn’t it, this is a door, like the last one, made to look like the rock around it. Here.” He took the candle from her. “And this, look,” he pointed to a place where the rock jutted out, and upward, strangely from the wall, “this is the door knob, come on.” They grabbed the handle, or what looked like a handle, and pulled. Erron tugged as hard as he could, saw Taylor doing the same, then heard the wall, the door, begin to move. It was heavy, maybe heavier than the last one, and it moved slow with the same stone on stone groaning.

When it was open enough for them to pass through, they did. Erron with the candle this time, holding it out in front of them like a weapon.

It was a room, much more distinct than the passageway they had been walking through. The stone on the wall was smooth, dirty, but smooth. There was an old wooden table with intricate woodwork around the corners like waves in the middle of the room. Around the room were shelves with papers and large scrolls scattered about. And all around, on the walls and ceiling were the strange black markings, Erron tried to make shapes out of them in his mind, but none were clearly distinguishable.

“Where are we?” Taylor said, brushing a finger across the table. It came up full of dust and dirt.

Erron set the candle down on the table and walked around. Further down the room, where the shelves stopped, there were more doors, this time made of wood, three of them, one on either side and one at the end. This meant there were more passageways, probably more doors. They had found it, this had to be it. Pok was right. There were tunnels beneath East Arch, and they were old.

Erron went back to the shelves and pulled down one of the scrolls. Taylor watched him as he laid it out on the dusty table.

“Look at this. This is writing, and it’s not Kyran.” Erron passed it to Taylor and she examined the undecipherable script.

Erron went back to the shelves and scanned through the scrolls until he found one in the language he knew, the language he’d thought was the only one left to know. He put it down on the table. It was hard to read.

*First moon of the beginning of the fifth age, Kartahn, the city itself...* the words were too smudged, written with an unsteady hand...*under the siege of...*Erron could make

out a few more words, but nothing distinguishable as a sentence. He passed it over to Taylor. He watched her face as she looked it over.

“Kartahn? What is that?”

“It’s a place right?” Erron said. “It has to be. It must have been before the Old Ones came here, must be from the Great Wars, before the world was destroyed.” Erron could hear the excitement in his own voice, but he didn’t care.

Taylor just shook her head and stared at the scroll. She set it down and looked around. “But why here? Why keep this stuff down here?”

“Because they don’t want us to know about it, they want the world to forget.”

“You sound like a crazy person Erron. Why? And they who?”

Erron shook his head. “I don’t know who, everyone I guess, but we must have done something, or been a part of something that they don’t want to remember. Or,” he wiped dust from his eye, “or they don’t want us to know what else is or was out there, they want us trapped here.” Erron knew it. He felt elated with the discovery. It had to be true. He wasn’t the problem, it was this place, it was Kyra, which had built itself upon buried secrets and lies.

Taylor stared at him, not moving for a long time.

A rustling sound, faint but obvious, began echoing around the tunnels. All thoughts of the world outside of the dank little room were shattered. They froze, listening to the rustling. Maybe it was footsteps.

“What is that?” Taylor said.

“I don’t know. Could be just a mouse,” Erron said, though he doubted it. Their voices suddenly sounded loud in the empty room. They must have both realized it, because neither spoke again.

Erron put the papers back where he found them. He wasn’t really worried about getting in trouble for stealing them, but still, in that moment, it felt like the right thing to do. He tried not to seem like he was hurrying. But the sound was getting louder.

“Lets go,” he said.

Then the rustling stopped completely.

They listened to the silence.

“What’s going on?” Taylor said.

“Maybe it was nothing.” Erron looked towards the doors at the far end of the room. Everything was so quiet, he could hear the faint flickering of the candle in his hand. Then the sound was upon them. Loud, and close, too close. Just as a door burst open Erron blew out the flame as fast as he could and lunged toward Taylor. He grabbed her arm and they flung themselves toward the back wall.

A shape moved in the darkness. Erron couldn’t see, but could hear it moving slowly, carefully. Breathing in a rasping sound. It lumbered around the room as if it were dragging something heavy. It didn’t sound like the footsteps of a normal human. But Erron didn’t know what else it could have been, didn’t want to think about it. It was moving closer to where they stood.

“HMMMMMMM.” The sound was definitely human, but not in any familiar way that Erron had heard before. It’s voice was raspy, almost hissing.

“HMMMMMMMM.” Taylor was beginning to shake. He held her arm tight, remembered, oddly, the night she had come to his room, it had been a bad dream then. This was different.

“HMMMMMMMM.” It was right in front of them now. Erron’s eyes were getting used to the dark, and he could see, amazingly, movement coming towards them. A large shape moving with the darkness.

Erron grasped the candle as hard as he could, felt its metal framing against his fingers and swung at the figure. It crashed into what he hoped was the head and the shape let out a piercing scream and crumpled backwards. Erron ran forward and kicked the figure, saw it falling and heard the sound of wood breaking followed by a heavy thud.

“Erron,” Taylor said, it was practically a scream. Erron realized that he’d let go of her hand, he saw her form still against the wall, and even in the dark, he knew she was still shaking. He grabbed for her hand and led her through the room towards the door. The thing yelled at them. It was a man. The words were inaudible, but it was human. A silly thought, but still, it was a sort of relief.

They fled through the tunnels. Taylor had her hands outstretched, feeling for the walls. But Erron could see everything. The turns of the tunnel, the jagged rocks reaching for them as they passed.

When they reached the second door into the room that looked like a cave they made sure to shut the heavy door. Then didn’t say a thing as they crawled back through



the small opening into the basement of Tully's—careful to slide the cask back in place—then out into the snowy night.

It felt like a different, or maybe a new world. The snow was still falling softly around them. Their breath billowed in front of their faces then rose towards the rooftops.

“What was that?” Taylor sounded like she was trying not to cry.

“I don't know, but I don't think we were supposed to be down there.” Erron looked at her eyes, trying to decide if she was crying.

“Well, I promise you I'll never go back again. In fact someone else can get the casks from now on,” Taylor said.

They paused and listened to the sounds of the night as if waiting for the rustling to begin again from deep below.

“Did you kill it?”

“No,” Erron said as if it were an accusation. A dog barked and they heard footsteps marching down the center of the square.

“We need to head back,” Erron said, Taylor nodded.

They walked through the snow, not saying anything as they went, choosing each step carefully. A patrol of guards passed by while they waited behind a building, but nothing seemed as frightening anymore.

Eventually they were in front of the women's housing.

“Can you just walk through the front door?” Erron said.

Taylor smiled, it was a relief to see her do so. “Yeah, Ellie sleeps soundly.”

“So does Horus.”

Taylor walked toward the door, then stopped and looked back at him. There was a slight breeze picking up and Erron could smell campfire in the wind.

“I’m sure I’ll see you again soon?” Erron said.

She nodded. “Erron, sorry about before. I didn’t mean that you don’t belong anywhere. I didn’t.”

It felt like a strange thing to say considering what their night had turned into, and yet, he knew it was important.

“It’s alright,” was all he was able to say. She looked at him for a moment longer as if wanting to say more, or as if she didn’t want to leave just yet. But she said goodnight and walked up the steps.

Erron turned down the snowy path towards the Shack with too many thoughts in his head. Taylor, the tunnels, the room, the papers, Kartahn, the thing that came after them. He wondered how he would sleep tonight, he wondered if Taylor would. He walked, as quietly as he could, through the doors of the Shack, felt the familiar creaking of the wood, and looked up at the steps leading to his room, his bed. He felt the breeze slide under the door and graze his neck. You make yourself an outcast, Taylor had said. Erron smiled, only slightly, and walked up the steps.

–CHAPTER 25: Man Among Wolves–

They had retied his wrists, the fat one had given him a healthy beating, and then they had left him alone. Days had gone by and he hadn't heard a word from anyone. They kept their pace, marching across the plain. He slept in the tent with the fat one, Fraydren, or whatever his name was, and another guarding the door. Quentis thought it funny really, he wasn't about to make another attempt, but he did like to see them on edge.

He was still permitted his run of the camp with the fat soldier following behind him like an unpleasant odor. At one of the fire pits, he'd heard rumors that the man who had brought him back, the Katahn, had left, or rather had been sent ahead to scout. Which seemed odd, but Quentis couldn't help but feel like he could breathe easier with him gone, even get some sleep despite Fraydren's ceaseless snoring.

The days seemed to be getting colder, and the ground harder. The sun, which had watched their progress across the grassy planes was suffocated by thick, dark clouds, and there always seemed to be thunder in the distance.

The morning of an icy rain, while Quentis and Fraydren were having some cheese and water for breakfast, Captain Jeryl came into their tent. His jacket and grey hair were soaked and his beard was filled with silver, liquid beads.

"Freidlan, leave us a moment would you?" Jeryl smiled at the fat man, whose name, apparently, was not Fraydren.

Fraydren lumbered out of the tent without a word. Quentis continued to eat.

"Cheese?" Quentis said after a moment of silence.

“We need to talk.” Jeryl said.

“Any particular subject?” Quentis said, swallowing a mouthful. It wasn’t actually very good.

“You know the thing about having you around is that you are supposed to be quite invaluable to us,” he said, and sat down next to Quentis, “and you know what? I haven’t been very impressed. The men are tired, some think we’re going the wrong way, which reflects very poorly on me, and in the meantime I’m having to keep a watchful eye on you so that you don’t escape.” He paused and wiped the water out of his beard. “All this to say, the reasons for keeping you alive are not looking as appealing as they once were.”

Quentis took another bite of the cheese, and washed it down with a swallow of water.

“This is all very interesting, but I do believe, and tell me if I’m wrong, that you are under fairly strict orders to keep me alive, and I don’t think his eminence would be very impressed if those were disobeyed,” Quentis said, looking up to gage Jeryl’s reaction.

Jeryl smiled, but there was anger in his eyes.

“No, no, I don’t imagine he would. But you see, he did tell me that, should you refuse to cooperate, I had full reign on your life. The way I see it, an attempted escape is a refusal to cooperate. And besides, I can tell him whatever I want, you’d be too dead to refute me.”

It was Quentis’s turn to smile.

“You lie horribly. I know who you have here in camp with you. I know what he’s capable of more than most. You don’t need to threaten death on me when you could make me cooperate. Besides, I’m here, I’ve made my deal, I’m cooperating.” Quentis turned the cheese around in his hand, it was hard and he’d eaten all the good parts.

“Then why run? It makes no sense,” Jeryl said.

“Of course it does. I’ve made my deal, I trust myself to hold up my end of the bargain, but I have significant less trust for the other end. And if I have something to bargain with, then my faith grows considerably.”

Jeryl ran a hand through his long grey hair. “You mean, you’d get there before us?”

“No, I mean, you wouldn’t get there at all.” Quentis looked into his eyes. It was meant as a challenge, a cut, but Jeryl just nodded as if it didn’t mean anything to him, then he looked at Quentis. There was something in his eyes that Quentis couldn’t read, something deeper, a longing, an anger, something that made the small tent feel like it was shrinking, and becoming colder.

“If you should run again. I won’t care about breaking orders, I won’t care about my own fate, I’ll kill you. I’ll have you drug back, and I’ll kill you myself, you understand?” Jeryl said, but there was no anger in his voice, it was not so much a threat as it was a statement of fact. He meant it.

Quentis watched the other man, then held up his hand. “You really should eat something you know, you’re looking quite pale.”

Jeryl's face was a blank slate, sucked dry of emotion. He stood up and walked out of the tent calling for Fraydren. Quentis watched him go and listened to the pounding rain on the tent flaps as if hearing it for the first time.

It poured for the next four days as they continued northwest. It was thick, pelting rain that stung against bare skin. The men and animals traveling with them lived in a perpetual state of wetness. No fires were to be had outside of the large tents, the ground and wood were too wet. Extra blankets were warmed by braziers and rationed to the soldiers for the nighttime, which Quentis spent warmed only by the body heat of the giant sleeping next to him.

The terrain became much more vegetated. Trees and thick grass sprouted from the ground and they began to see mountains rising in the distance, beneath the sprawling clouds.

And then, as quickly as it had come, the rains stopped. They were replaced by a dry cold air, windless and thin. Quentis watched his breath float from his mouth and mingle with the smoke of the first fire they'd had outside in a long time. The clouds had let up and the stars were bright above them.

Most of the men treated Quentis with a mixture of disdain and distant awe, but the few that tolerated Quentis's presence were gathered around the fire with him, none talking, all enjoying the warmth on their cold hands. Fraydren loomed behind him like the approaching mountains.

“I don’t like this place,” one of the men said. The bald one. “Too still, look,” he held up his hands, “no wind. S’not natural.”

No one said anything or made any indication that they were listening to him.

“It’s in the dead quiet when the spirits come. Spirits of the planes are usually harmless, even some of the forest. But in the between places, between forest an’ grasslands, they ain’t so harmless. They’re unrested, they don’t know where they belong. So they attack human souls, and suck ‘em up like soup,” he said, glancing warily at the few trees, and hills beginning to sprout around them.

Quentis listened to him with a measure of amusement. He never spoke. Whenever he opened his mouth he would inevitably say something that merited a fist from the fat one beside him, but he didn’t mind, the first time he’d spoken and received a blow, the others had silently decided to leave him alone, which he liked. So he remained silent as he warmed his hands by the fire and felt the color rise again in his cheeks.

Somewhere in the distance a wolf howled.

The soldiers around the fire visibly tensed, but said nothing. Quentis glanced around at the fires spread across their camp, with more men talking in hushed tones. They all heard it, and they’d all undoubtedly heard the rumors of the wolves to the North—heard of their size, speed, and their taste for flesh.

There was another howl, closer and much louder. It echoed through the air, making the silence that followed heavy with fear.

“See,” the bald man said, looking into the darkness.

Quentis had been here before, had heard the crying of these wild wolves, but never seen one. He found himself excited at the prospect and yet strangely vulnerable, and he didn't like the feeling, wasn't used to it. He touched the base of his neck, probing the hollowness, the stone which had been taken from him.

The wolves of the Northern plains were said to be ancient. Descendants of the spirit-wolves that used to walk the earth in the beginning, when they rose taller than the trees and hunted even the birds among them. Quentis thought such stories amusing more than anything else. He scanned the darkness. Then looked up at the sky. He saw the familiar stars. Hayden with his bow, the Great Bear, Ylles with his two swords, training to battle the last dragon. Quentis looked down at his bound hands. He rubbed them together, listening to the sound of his skin and the snap of the fire.

Another wolf howled.

“You think too much. I can see it in your eyes, and it shows in your body. Too slow, stop thinking.” Mayen Jharlis circled Quentis in the yard, fully robed despite the heat of the day. The plum trees were in full blossom and their petals lay scattered about the grass.

“Get up.” Master Jharlis said.

He was a hard man, but had chosen to personally train Quentis, and Quentis knew, or hoped rather, that that had meant something.

“You know the forms, let your body react. Strike out, don't just defend.” Master Jharlis wiped his forehead. “Now,” he held up his sword, “again.”



Quentis retrieved his own sword a few steps away from him and approached Master Jharlis. He found his footing and raised his sword.

Master Jharlis came at him with a swinging downward stroke which Quentis easily blocked but felt the sting in his hands immediately return. Again, he was losing his footing as Master Jharlis's strokes came down hard as thunder with too much speed. Quentis fought to maintain his grip on his sword and his feet on the ground.

He parried, spun and made a slash of his own which Master Jharlis lazily evaded, and then was on top of him. Quentis brought his sword around again and caught his opponent's awkwardly and a little late. The sword grazed his shoulder and had the blade not been blunt it would have taken a piece of him with it.

Quentis was flustered and Master Jharlis took easy advantage, bringing his sword around again and again in high swinging motions. He spun himself, feigning high, his sword went low and took out Quentis's legs. Quentis felt his feet leave the ground, felt something heavy collide with his head and then he was staring at the sky. He sat up.

Mayen Jharlis approached and sat down next to him, an uncustomary, even informal, gesture.

"When you begin, we teach you forms, postures, movements," he said the words slowly, carefully, "and you must learn them, you must think about them, see them in your mind as you move each part of your body correctly." He placed his sword on the ground in front of his feet. "But now you are older, you have learned the forms and must no longer see them in your head, but do them with your body. There is no decision, only action. It is a delicate balance between completely aware and completely empty." He

stood. Quentis felt the pain in his arm and shoulder throbbing. “Now, stand, close your eyes.”

Quentis stood and grasped his sword in his hands, then closed his eyes.

“Tell me what you feel.” Master Jharlis said.

“Pain.”

“No. What else?”

Quentis didn’t know what to say. “A... a breeze.”

“Yes. What else?”

“Grass.”

“Good, now take a deep breath.” Quentis did so. “And attack.”

Quentis moved forward, raised his sword and brought it down smoothly and swiftly. Master Jharlis blocked easily, and came back up with an attack of his own.

Quentis watched the sword and felt his body move. He dodged and swung his blade in a sweeping diagonal slash.

They moved about the yard, spinning, slashing and evading. For longer than Quentis was used to their blades didn’t touch, but found only empty air as each moved away from the other’s blow.

Then their blades collided, again and again. The steel rang through the yard and sent splinters of pain shooting up Quentis’s arm. He tried his best to ignore them and watched as his feet shifted and he lunged, swinging wildly.

Master Jharlis was caught off guard and brought his sword up just in time.

Quentis spun to the side and came at him again, but he was ready this time and his sword

was already moving. Quentis almost lost his blade, but instead rolled on the ground and came up fast at Master Jharlis's mid section. Again, blocked, but almost sloppy this time.

Quentis moved at him. His blade came down hard on his Master's sword to disarm him as he felt a foot collide with his head. A bright white light flashed across his vision. He thought he saw a sword fly, then he turned, saw Master Jharlis's arms moving several strides away, then a strange breeze, a slight disturbance in the air and Quentis felt as if a brick had struck his chest and he was, again, on the ground.

Quentis couldn't move for a moment. Then he took a deep breath, filled his lungs with a gasping sound and looked up at Master Jharlis standing above him. Quentis got to his feet, breathing raggedly, and felt that the world was tilting. He saw a few paces away Master Jharlis's sword lying on the ground. He didn't understand. What had just happened?

"Good," Master Jharlis said, eyeing him almost suspiciously, "again."

The night had grown quiet, and the men had settled.

"Anyone know anything about these wolves. I've heard they're twice as tall as a man," one of the soldiers said.

The others were silent. Quentis scanned their faces as they all turned back to the fire to watch.

"I know a story about these wolves," Quentis said.

The others looked at him, surprised that he'd spoken but willing to listen. Quentis glanced at Fraydren who stared blankly at him.

“Once there was a man called Draken. He was *Katahn*—”

“The *Katahn* don’t exist anymore,” the man on his right interrupted him.

“Don’t they?” Quentis said. “Well, either way, it’s a story that happened long ago. Before the dark spirits were banished from the world and you couldn’t tell which animal was just an animal, and which a spirit. Anyway, it was said that Draken was the greatest of the *Katahn*, and he traveled the world, searching out the great spirits to kill. He traveled to the south and fought a giant scorpion, to the east an elk, and in the north he came across Keltra, Queen of the wolves.” One of the men chuckled, but Quentis continued. “She was as tall as the trees and when he couldn’t kill her, he fell in love with her and followed her, they say to the end of the world, a great cliff looking over nothing but the stars and the moon. ‘If you love me,’ Keltra said, ‘jump from this cliff, turn into a bird, fly to the moon and bring it back to me between your beak.’ Draken could do no such thing, so he attacked her instead.”

“I thought he loved her,” a large man across the fire said, looking around for a laugh.

“He did.” Quentis smiled. “It’s funny how often love and rage can become confused with one another. Draken thought if he could defeat her, he could win her heart. They fought through the night, and by the time the sun rose, Draken had forgotten why they were fighting, he’d forgotten his love for her, and he slit her throat and made her coat into a great cloak. When he realized what he had done, he flung the cloak off the edge of the world and himself after it.” Quentis paused as if he would continue, but said nothing. Even Fraydren stared at him as if willing him to speak.

“That’s it?” The man on his right said. “That’s the story?”

Quentis shrugged.

Fraydren chuckled. Then the man across the fire began to laugh and soon they were all laughing like it had been an elaborate joke. Quentis smiled and nodded. He looked up and saw the *Hamma’or’hagadon*, the second, brighter moon above their heads, white like the winter sun.

Later, after the fires had been put out, they rolled up their mats under the stars. Fraydren close to Quentis’s side. He listened to the stillness of the night. The sound of bugs chirping nearby, the shuffling of men getting comfortable.

Another howl rose in the distance. Several men sat bolt upright. Followed by another howl.

There was silence for a while. Then the plains seemed to erupt into a chorus of howling. Wild and desperate.

Quentis sat up, looked around at the faces of the men, staring off into the open plains. Then he howled. He threw his head back and echoed the sound growing loud all around him. The air left his lungs and he looked around at all the men staring at him as if he’d lost his mind. Fraydren gave him a threatening look. But there was fear in the big man’s eyes.

And before his fist came and met Quentis’s face, Quentis threw his head back again, and howled as loud and as hard as he could at the night sky.

–CHAPTER 26: Frozen–

Broan was limping.

Something isn't right. There wasn't much pain, but actually there wasn't really much of anything. He couldn't feel his big toe and the rest of his foot tingled uncomfortably. The memories of the previous night felt like a ball of iron in his stomach, but if he breathed shallowly he couldn't feel it, maybe it would go away. He had slept horribly, drifting in a foggy state that felt like he was asleep but at the same time completely awake. Once he thought he heard Mayla, the Servi, come into the room, but when he sat up to look for her she was gone. Then she was in his dreams, lying beside him, her hand across his chest like a lover. When he woke, he could still feel her fingers on his skin.

He had dressed and walked downstairs—slowly. Mayla was probably in the kitchen. He didn't want to eat, couldn't eat yet. Brenden Murray would be waiting for him.

It was freezing outside and Broan had forgotten his jacket, but he didn't want to turn back and have to face those stairs again. He realized that he felt feverish, achy, almost sweaty. He headed down the freezing white streets toward the main building of

Townhall. His feet broke the snow with a distinct crunch, one hard, the next soft. He limped. Hard, then soft.

“Broan,” Broan turned, it was Marcus coming out of his shop. “How was the business yesterday, everything work out? You find your stick?”

Broan looked around like the whole town was listening. A few people passed on the opposite side of the street, a cart went by.

*Curse me for trusting him. Not his fault, really.*

“Uhh, yes, thank you. It was nothing really, forget it.” He watched the people pass. “Business must be slow yourself I suppose?”

“Always slow. Only a few shipments here and there to East Arch keeps it going. Probably cause I don’t have sticks like the people really want.”

Broan gave him a smile.

“We gettin’ that drink today?” Marcus tried not to look too needy. Broan could tell.

“I may be busy. I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure?”

Broan looked toward Townhall, he could see the tip rising from just around the corner, past the markets. “No, not sure.”

“Ahh, such is the life of a Captain I s’pose,” he patted Broan on the shoulder, “good luck to ya, should you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

Broan said goodbye and watched him walk back into his shop before continuing down the road.

*Marcus is a good man. It's been too long really. But still...*

The thought of drinking, laughing and listening to good music was a different world away now. One that was left to memory, like he'd woken up from a good dream, and had business to attend to, people to kill.

"Can I help you?" A skinny man with a thin mustache approached Broan as he was walking down the hallway toward Brenden Murray's door.

"I'm here to see Chairmen Murray," Broan said.

"Audience with Chairmen Murray is not simply open to the public, soldier."

"I'm a Captain actually," Broan said, the man didn't look impressed. He held a pad of paper to his chest, with the other arm on his stomach. The man stood with an air of importance. His spine and neck just perfectly straight, rigid even. Broan didn't like him.

"It doesn't matter what you are, Chairmen Murray is at a Council meeting right now and can't be disturbed." He seemed proud of his intimate knowledge.

"That's fine, I'll wait in his chambers perhaps?" Broan said.

The skinny man laughed. "You will certainly not. You may wait in the Great Room, warm yourself by the fire. When he's done I shall ask if he will endure you, but I wouldn't get your hopes up."

Broan looked at him, up and down. "I think I'll wait," he said, reclaiming the idea for his own.



The skinny man didn't move, as if to block Broan's way to Brenden Murray's office. Broan gave him one last glance and walked, or limped rather, down the stairs and sat in the Great Room by the fire.

People walked in and out of Townhall, all in a hurry. Broan looked down at his foot. Still couldn't feel parts of it. Had he not dried it off before going to bed? Had the covers not been on it? Did he even take off his boots? Hadn't he put them on this morning? He thought he had, but suddenly he wasn't sure.

He stretched his leg close to the fire and hoped it would warm.

Broan thought about Bray Henlen. Another soldier who'd been trained with him. He remembered how Bray had hurt his foot. Broan had gone out drinking with Bray and they had, rather stupidly, decided to break into Rory Jonus's, now Ser Jonus's, house. They were on the roof for some reason, with not much of a plan, but laughing hysterically. Bray had been a little extra tipsy and slipped and fell to the street. When Broan got down, Bray was holding his left ankle moaning and crying. It wasn't broken, but he had hurt it pretty bad. Bray didn't want to go for help or a physician, it was too late in the night anyway. Broan helped him back to the barracks as he limped and cried with each step.

The next morning he seemed better, but Broan could tell he was limping slightly. They were, surprisingly and for the first time, set to spar together. Bray was, normally, very good. The Captains were watching and Broan wanted to make a good impression. He attacked Bray repeatedly from the left. Low, deep swings, to keep him reaching and bending on his foot. Broan kicked his left leg and it buckled, he swung wildly and won,

impressively. Bray looked at him, angry, humiliated, and betrayed. They hadn't spoken since. Now Bray was a guard in the Southern Division, and Broan, a Captain.

He looked down at his left foot, still by the fire, still not feeling much. He shook his head, thinking of Bray. They had been friends, had done some stupid things together. But Bray didn't understand. Broan had done what he had to, he would have expected Bray to do the same thing in his position. It was Bray's own fault that he didn't understand.

Broan looked up and saw several men walking out of a pair of double doors down the hall near the stairs. More flooded out. The Council meeting must be over. Broan looked for Brenden Murray, but couldn't see the large man. Several of the men were talking happily, while others rushed for the door. Broan was suddenly grateful to not be on the council. He remembered standing guard at a few council meetings. They could get fairly heated. He'd been to one where several men stormed out, mid-meeting to the sound of Brenden Murray's laughter.

Eventually Brenden Murray came bounding through the double doors with an arm around an older fellow. Broan stood and walked over to him, staying a few steps away from their conversation.

"Of course it is, of course it is. But I don't need remind you about the product last year now do I? Prove that the quality will improve this year, fresh, plenty and tasty, and we'll get a nice fatty loan for you won't we?" Brenden slapped the man's shoulder and removed his arm to indicate that the conversation was over. The old man, moved away, biting his lip.

“Excuse me, Chairman Murray,” Broan said, his voice sounding smaller than he’d meant.

“Ahh, Ser Landden.” Brenden put the same arm he’d had around the old man over Broan’s shoulders. Broan felt it squeeze tight, not painfully, but enough to control Broan’s direction. “Good to see you again, as always. Let’s take a walk up to my office shall we?”

They walked up the stairs and down the hall in silence. Broan looked for the skinny man who’d stopped him before, hoping he’d see him walking with Brenden Murray’s arm over his shoulder. But no luck.

When they got to Chairman Murray’s office he motioned for Broan to sit while he lit his pipe.

“Curse these damn meetings. Most of the time is spent listening to complaints. Need more money, more lumber, more time. Too many wolves, not enough wine, crab numbers have been low. Boring, boring, boring, you know?”

“I’ve stood guard at a meeting or two sir,” Broan said, hoping to impress or sympathize with him, he wasn’t sure.

“Well of course you have haven’t you?” Brenden Murray looked at him with a strange smile on his face that barely touched the corner of his eyes. He took a long pull from his pipe, the smoke rolled over his face, seeming to hesitate around his eye brows.

“You know, I’ve just heard a sad story today,” Brenden began again. “It seems Ser Robbins failed to return from his post last night. It’s caused quite a stir. We’ve sent a troop looking for him, but he hasn’t turned up.”

Brenden paused and caught Broan's eyes. Broan new he was looking for a reaction, but he didn't know which one to give so he kept his face blank. Brenden looked away, obviously satisfied.

"My question for you Ser landden, is, are you surprised?"

"Surprised sir?"

"Yes, does this news surprise you?"

Broan took a deep breath. He wasn't sure how to play this game. "No sir, not in the least."

Brenden laughed and slapped his hand down on the desk. "Good, good, good. That's just the sort of thing I wanted to hear." He walked around the desk and sprawled his heavy body over one of the embroidered couches by the fire. There was something odd, almost disturbing about seeing Brenden Murray laying flat with his feet up, completely relaxed. A silenced passed and Broan wasn't sure if he was supposed to get up and leave or stay.

"Now tell me about your limp?"

Broan's heart jumped. "Sir?"

"I don't particularly like repeating myself Broan and now this is twice you've made me do so. Your limp Ser Landden, you have a limp. Why?"

Broan cleared his throat and sat up in his seat. There was a tension in the room that clearly only he was privy to.

"I, uh, got my foot wet on my rounds last night, and I didn't dry it properly. Stupid of me really. It's left me quite sore. I'll be fine by tomorrow no doubt."

“No doubt,” Brenden said and sat up, looking at Broan and puffing on his pipe.

“Let me see then.”

“See what?” Broan said, worried that the question would make Brenden repeat himself.

“See your foot, take off your boot.” Brenden stood up and approached Broan.

Broan shifted in his seat. “Really sir, it’s nothing much, just a bit cold, perhaps I should go warm it by the fire.”

“No, no, I’d like to see it. Now if you don’t mind, your boot.”

“Yes sir, of course.” Broan reached down and began undoing the laces. Brenden watched him in silence. Broan pulled the boot off, then his wool sock. He lowered his foot, which was a little off colored, and still a bit numb and tingly in spots.

Brenden kneeled down, with one knee stretched out in front of him. He patted his thigh, indicating that Broan set his foot on him. Broan couldn’t help but feel horrified. What the hell does he want with my foot? But he had no choice. He set his naked foot down on top of Brenden’s leg.

Brenden examined Broan’s foot and toes, touching each individually. Broan’s heart was pumping fast, and he didn’t like it. He felt violated, completely naked, though it was only his bare foot.

Brenden tsked. “Not good I’m afraid. I suppose I shall have to take you to my physician at once.”

“No, no, really, I’m fine, feels better than it did when I woke this morning,”

Broan lied.

Brenden set his foot back on the ground with a strange gentleness. He looked up at Broan and shook his head. “Broan, you are quite important to me now. I’ve entrusted you with a great deal have I not? And I plan on continuing to trust you, but only as long as you plan on continuing to trust me. Now, you are one of mine, and I take care of what’s mine understand?”

Broan nodded. *What have I gotten myself into?*

“Come, it’s not far.”

They walked down the street, people waving and smiling at Brenden as they passed. Broan felt like the Chairmen’s new pet he was taking for a brisk winter walk. He didn’t like it.

They approached a building next to Scallops, a tavern notorious for their seafood, and busy women. It wasn’t a particularly nice end of town, an odd place for a physician.

Brenden knocked on the door and a man emerged. Bald except for a few straggling hairs around the ears.

“Sylus. I have a patient for you. Unfortunately, he’s had a bit of the frost cling to his foot. I thought of you right away.”

“You fat ol’ bastard, you know I have other things to take care of don’t you.”

Broan cringed, expecting Brenden to order the man to an immediate burning, but instead Brenden just laughed and ushered Broan through the door.

“Don’t worry Broan, he’s much more talented a physician than he is a conversationalist. Besides, I made him what he is today, didn’t I Sylus?” The old man grumbled and went to a cabinet and retrieved a clear bottle of thick black liquid.

“Drink this.” The physician handed Broan the bottle. Broan looked at Brenden, who nodded approvingly. Well, I suppose there’s no turning back now. Broan turned the bottle upside down over his mouth and gulped down the putrid stuff. It burned on the way down, but not the pleasant burn of alcohol. When it was gone, he tasted it on his tongue and felt the thick coating around his mouth. It smelt terrible too, like rotten fruit.

“Have a seat Broan. No, no, here.” Brenden ushered him to a sort of table with a cushion and blanket spread across it.

Broan felt suddenly dizzy, and warm, and tired. Damn, but I’m tired.

“I’m sorry Broan, but your big toe doesn’t look good,” Brenden said. The lights above began to swim and glow with an orange, reddish tint. Funny that I didn’t notice that before. “I’m afraid, we’re going to have to take your big toe.” Broan suddenly couldn’t move. He tried to move his shoulders but they wouldn’t seem to budge. He felt a great wave of fear roll over him. His body grew heavy, and hot, and moist. Did he say ‘take my big toe’? Did he really say that? “Don’t worry, I’m sure it’ll be a short recovery, and I’ll see you back in my office as soon as you can, understand? After all, I have more work for you.” Brenden laughed, then turned to the physician and said something that Broan couldn’t understand. What are they saying? Their shapes grew distorted, and large. Broan tried to reach for his foot, to scream to them not to take his toe, he was fine, he just needed some rest and a warm fire. Don’t take the toe. Please, I’ll do anything. The edges

of his vision grew fuzzy, then dark, they seemed to turn in circles until he could barely see any light at all, he tried to call out again, but heard nothing. And then it grew darker still.

–CHAPTER 27: The Mountain–

“What was my Father like?” Erron had asked Ghairen one day while they were sheering sheep in the barn. Ghairen was struggling with a particularly rambunctious one.

“Ah well, didn’t know him very well. Seemed like a nice fella, from what I could tell. Looked a lot like you. Oh curse you, you rotten little fluff!” Ghairen tugged at the sheep. “Now stay.”

Erron finished with his and sat silent for a while. “How did they die?” he said.

Ghairen got the sheep under control with one arm and tried his best to shear the wool with the other. It looked awkward. “You know that, son. They took to the fever years back. Many in Kyra got it. Swept the whole place, though not everyone who got it died of course. With your parents though, it was quite unfortunate, quite unfortunate.”

Erron had heard the story before, it must have been at least the third time Erron had asked him. His Grandfather never talked about it, nor did Erron ever find the courage to ask. But Ghairen seemed comfortable enough to tell him the truth, only every time he



asked he always wished there was more. Wished that there was something exciting, or something his parents had left him that he could know, or touch.

“Did they have green eyes like me?” Erron said. A question he’d not asked yet, but always wanted to know. He felt silly asking.

Ghairen stopped shearing the sheep. He looked over at Erron with one side of his mouth curved slightly upward. “No. That seems to be just yours Erron.”

Erron figured as much, but he couldn’t help but hope. He nodded, then stood up and walked towards the pen to fetch another sheep.

It was three days after going down to the tunnels that Erron saw the light in the forest again. The days had passed by uneventful. No sign of Brianne for a while, and Erron and Pok had more or less given up looking for the tunnels. Erron had settled down for bed when he looked out to the forest, as he did each night, and saw the small light, and the smoke rising. He grabbed his jacket and boots and snuck out into the cold.

The second moon was bright overhead, there were no clouds so Erron had to do his best to stay hidden in the shadows, and when he wasn’t able to, he moved as quietly and as quickly as he could.

He felt a branch hit his face as he stepped between the trees. He was already breathing hard. The forest was a different place now. Alive with his fear. Every noise, every insect, whistle of the wind was a wolf about to pounce. He remembered the size, couldn’t forget, and the feeling that he was about to be killed.

“Ghairen,” he called, still keeping his voice down as if the guards could hear him. But he knew Ghairen must be a ways away still. He kept moving and calling out anyway.

His clothes were getting wet as he forced his way past bushes heavy with snow. It must have been snowing hard for the flakes to make it through the thick tree canopy. The light of Hama’or’hagadon shone through patches of the branches like silver beams reaching to the forest floor. Erron moved among them, trying to think of nothing, to simply put one foot in front of the other. He heard a stick break behind him.

“Ghairen,” he called again and picked up his speed.

Erron saw a light in the distance between the trees and a figure moved in front of it. Erron felt his heart leap in his chest and realized that he’d been running. He slowed and waved. The donkey was standing between the trees to the left of the fire. Ghairen approached, and even in the darkness Erron could see the smile on his face.

“Come, come, warm yourself.”

Erron nodded and walked toward the fire. He put his hands out and felt the warmth.

“Ghairen, I’m sorry. I didn’t get the book,” Erron said. He looked at the old man to judge his reaction. “I tried but—”

“No more, Erron.” Ghairen smiled, thank the gods, and took a deep breath. “Well then, we need to be off don’t we?”

“Off where?” Erron stood up as Ghairen grabbed a large walking stick from beside the fire.

“To get the book. Lets go, we can’t waste time, a lot of ground to cover after all.” Ghairen grabbed his small bag and tossed it over the donkey’s back. He left the fire and started walking north, further into the woods.

“Where are you going? The Keep is this way.” Erron pointed back the way he’d come.

“Yes, lad, but the book is this way,” he said and led the donkey north between the trees.

Erron walked in silence for a while. Feeling the ground crunch between his feet until his curiosity overcame him.

“You told me the book was in the library,” Erron said finally.

“Of course I did. Thats because that’s where it is.” Ghairen shook his head as if there was something Erron was supposed to understand but didn’t.

“Then where are we going now.”

“I told you lad, to go get it. You know the problem with boys your age is that they don’t listen. There’s too much going on around them, too many other things to worry about. They can’t just listen to words simply spoken. I tell you we’re going to get the book, now you trust me don’t you?”

Erron nodded, though he wasn’t actually sure anymore.

“Good, then you don’t need to ask me where we are going do you? Since you already know the answer.”

“We’re going to get the book,” Erron said, but shook his head. Ghairen was getting old.

“Ahh, good, you may have trouble listening but you learn fast don’t you.” Ghairen smiled an annoying full tooth smile.

They made their way through the dark trees. Ghairen didn’t bring a torch so their path was lit by the rays of the moon cutting between the branches. They walked for a long while without talking, and by the time the ground began to slope upward into the mountain, Erron was out of breath. They continued up the slope without stopping. Where was this old man taking him? The land sloped upward fast and the trees became more sparse and the ground more rocky. Erron looked back at the forest, wondering if he’d been right in trusting Ghairen, wondering if he should have come at all.

The path wound back and forth and at times Erron pressed his hands against his thighs to keep them moving. It had already been a long day. The moon was fat with light and when Erron looked away he could see a dark, circular spot in his vision where it had been.

“How much further?” Erron said.

“Oh we’ll be there any moment now. Are you tired lad? I’m not tired. You tired donkey? He says no.” Ghairen laughed. Erron shook his head. It wasn’t funny. He spat on a rock to his right, then pressed his hands back on his thighs and sucked in the freezing air as they continued to climb.

The moon was high in the sky when the ground started to level out. Erron straightened his back, both a painful and relieving movement. They continued on the flat

path and soon the rocks leveled and the few trees cleared and Erron took in the view. They were higher than he thought. Erron could see all of East Arch Keep, he could see the mountains to the South, and the small lights of Kyra and the ocean far to the West, and the northern forest just below him and of course the Forest of Faces to the East masked by fog that lifted above the trees and blocked his view of the naked world beyond.

“Erron, here look,” Ghairen said.

Erron rounded the corner and saw the old man standing in the snow beside a small pond that was lit up by bugs dancing above the surface.

“Fireflies boy! Ha, fireflies.” Ghairen clapped his hands like a child. “The old languages call them Kulkai, but I think fireflies just has a nice ring to it don’t you?” Ghairen’s face was glowing with the bug light and he smiled. “They come up here by the thousands to ponds such as these. It’s really quite a sacred place don’t you think?”

Erron didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to hear anything about the gods. “So this is where the book is?”

Ghairen looked up from the pond and shook his head. “No, no, this is where the fireflies are. There, see, that’s where the book is.” He pointed to the edge of the small clearing where the rocks jutted out from the side of the mountain. There was a small wooden structure. A sort of shack leaning against the rocks, poorly built and by the looks of it, not used in a long time. Erron walked toward it.

“Wait now, just wait a moment.” Ghairen looked back at the pond as if he were going to miss something that was about to happen. “Now when you get in, it should be on

the second shelf, in the back of the room, on your right. It's next to the door, but don't open the door, you understand?"

"You're not coming in too?" Erron said.

"No, of course not, the book is for you, so you must be the one to retrieve it."

Ghairen said as if the concept was all too simple. Erron studied the old man. The curve of his mustache, the lines around his mouth and eyes. So many things he said or did made no sense, and yet they always seemed to be of the utmost importance.

Erron just shrugged. "All right."

"Good. Now when you're in there, don't say a word, you understand? In fact, be as quiet as you can. Just get to the corner, find the book and come right back out."

"What? What's going on? What is this place?" Erron wiped a snowflake from his nose.

Ghairen stood up straight at an angle Erron didn't even know he could reach.

"Either you trust me or you don't boy," he said, "now, do you want the book or don't you?"

Erron didn't say anything. How could he know if he wanted the book when he knew nothing about it. But if Ghairen was willing to go through all this trouble to get it, it had to be something special. He burned with his questions, but he had to play Ghairen's game, so he kept his mouth shut.

"Good," Ghairen said and sat down in the snow by the pond and closed his eyes.

"Off you go then, be quick about it."

Erron turned and started walking toward the little building. It was so cold, and as he got closer to the wooden structure it seemed to be getting smaller, not bigger.

He stopped. “Ghairen, hey.” Ghairen turned and looked at him, a quizzical, almost annoyed look on his face. “What was the book called?”

“Gods Erron, Pelah’im, Pelah’im, how many times do I have to tell you?”

Erron felt a flash of anger in his chest. As far as he knew, the old man had told him once. He turned back to the building and walked for it.

The door was heavy and hard to pull open with the snow all around it and when Erron stepped inside it smelled musty, but with a hint of something sweet, like an incense had been burning and extinguished leaving a trace of its smell in the wood. Inside was a single room, dark, with shelves and scrolls lining the walls. The floor was made of stone, which seemed odd.

Erron walked to the corner of the room slowly with his hands out in front of him just in case. He thought of the tunnels beneath Tully’s, and the man, or the creature down there, but he shook off the memory and stepped forward.

In the corner of the room he saw the door, wide and reaching toward the roof of the place. It looked like light was coming from beneath it, but that couldn’t be, the cabin was hemmed in by rocks. Why would a door be there anyway?

Erron walked to the door and lowered himself to the second shelf. He began pulling out books. Most of them were leather bound, with strange writing or designs on the cover. Eventually he pulled out a heavy brown book. It was dusty with a strange circular design on the front cover. The words at the top were hard to make out but Erron

could just see the Pelah, the im was too blurry to make out but it was clear that there were only two letters next to the first part. It had to be it.

Erron opened the book carefully and the pages settled open slowly, heavy. They looked like old scrolls which had been cut apart and stitched into the binding with foreign writing. It was clearly words on the page, but they were odd, with lines and letters that he thought he could vaguely recognize, only to look further and realize that he was completely lost. He flipped to the end of the book. The pages fell smoother, and looked newer, not as dark brown as the ones before. The writing there was in Kyran.

Erron heard the rustling of feet and he froze. It was coming from the door. He thought he heard a voice. The rustling grew louder. Yes, definitely, a man's voice, and close. The bottom of the door lit up with faint candle light. None of it made sense. The door was pressed firmly up against the rock of the mountain. Then another voice, clearly different from the first. Erron stood and stepped toward the door. He could barely make out the words.

“They were here I saw them. Well, I saw the light, and then the lift went up on its own.”

“Were any of the books taken?” The first voice said, he sounded older, with a deeper tone and a slower way of speaking.

“No not in here, but I thought you might want to check this room. Of course, I wouldn't have to bother you if I myself possessed a key to—”

“Enough.” There was a pause, some breathing. “Thank you, you may go, I will check the room.”



“Yessir.”

Then footsteps, then the sound of metal on metal, and a latch turning.

Errorr was already moving. Book firmly in hand, he ran through the darkness of the room, he heard the door being pushed open and he burst through the front door, then turned and closed it as fast as he could, watching as the candle light filled the small shack.

Errorr stepped back out into snow and stars. He saw Ghairen still sitting quietly by the pond.

“Ghairen, lets go, there were people in there,” Errorr said when he’d reached the pond, still glowing with the fireflies.

Ghairen’s eyes were closed and he didn’t even flinch when Errorr spoke.

“Ghairen, lets get out of here.” Errorr put a hand on the old man’s shoulder. His eyes stayed closed, his expression the same. Errorr started to shake him, waiting for the man to emerge from the small building any moment. He gave up and cupped a hand into the small pond and threw it into Ghairen’s face.

“Dirty rotten stink-fish!” Ghairen said and spat. “Errorr? Just what do you think you’re doing. That’s a sacred pond you just violated.”

Errorr looked at him. “What do I think I’m doing? Well, honestly, I have no idea, because you won’t tell me. You knew there’d be people in there didn’t you? Why? What’s going on? What is this place? Are we on a mountain, or at the library in East Arch? What is this book? And why should I read it at all? Why should I trust you when you don’t trust me enough to tell me anything?” Errorr threw the book into the snow and

thrust his arms across his chest. He no longer cared whether or not someone came rushing through the door, in fact, he kind of hoped someone would.

Ghairen rose to his feet and wiped his wet mustache. He stood looking at Erron for a while before he spoke. “Believe me when I tell you, I had no idea there would be someone in there. But I did know of the possibility. I do not intend to make you feel like a fool Erron. The book is no secret to you now. I want you to read it. I think it might help explain a lot of things for you, even that shack, this place. But it may be better coming from that writing, than from my mouth. Or perhaps, it may be best with a mixture of both.”

“Why? Why can’t you just tell me?” Erron’s face felt hot, despite the snow all around him.

“Because even in my best of days, I don’t know that I understand it all.” Ghairen wiped a drop of water from his wet eyebrow.

“Understand what?”

Erron stared at the old man, whom he had trusted and looked up to most all of his life. He had never had a Father, all he ever had was a Grandfather, who was awful at that. Ghairen was the first adult he’d ever seen smile, or show kindness at all. Erron was an outcast in everything else, he didn’t want to be so with Ghairen. But still, Ghairen had always been forthright with him. Why did he seem so distant, so secretive now?

“I didn’t mean to make you feel the fool lad,” Ghairen repeated. “C’mon then.” Ghairen stepped toward Erron and put his thin arms around him. He smelled like smoke and fish, but it seemed familiar, almost comforting. Erron kept his hands at his sides.

Gharend pulled away, looked at Erron with what seemed like a sad expression and picked up the book. “Let’s go back, maybe we’ll do some reading by the fire before you head in for the night.” Erron let himself be led back toward the path. Not sure that he felt better at all, but still curious about the book.

As they rounded the corner of the mountain Erron looked back past the pond and the small glowing bugs at the wooden building at the base of the rock face. It stood silent and still, leaning slightly as if even a small gust of wind would fold it to the ground.

–CHAPTER 28: The Book–

The trip back down was much easier and somehow Ghairen knew the exact path to the fire. The flames were lower than before but it still felt warm against Erron’s cheeks. Erron wondered how Ghairen was even able to find dry wood in the snow-covered forest.

“Now let’s read, just a bit shall we?” Ghairen hopped around the fire toward Erron.

Erron was too curious to refuse so he cleared a space on the ground and sat down with the book in his lap. He unfolded the cover and the light of the fire fought with the shadows on the page.

“What is this language here?” Erron pointed to a page on the first half of the book.

“That lad is the oldest of all languages. It’s the first language. From it stems the root of all languages. It’s called Illvrit, though I’d wager no one understands it anymore.”

“Do you?”

“Even as old and worn out as I am Erron, I only read bits and pieces of it, and I wouldn’t dare try my tongue at speaking the words out loud.” Ghairen turned the pages.

“Here, that’s better isn’t it?”

Erron looked down at the page and began to read. The first part was smudged, so Erron skipped over it.

...the essence of the thing, then the shifting of reality becomes possible, and all things, both living and not are changeable, unmakeable...

“What is this?” Erron looked up from the book.

Ghairen took in a breath of air. “Think of it as a sort of guide.”

“For what?”

“For bending, reshaping reality.”

Erron stared at the old man. These were the answers he was looking for? “You mean like magic?”

“No, I mean alternating reality. When the first ones walked this earth, Erron, they had the ability to tap into a source that has been hidden from this world, a sort of power that we were always meant to have.”

Erron looked at Ghairen as if seeing him for the first time. He had always seemed different. But this, this Erron could never have guessed. “What sort of power?”

“You see that tree there.” Ghairen pointed. “That tree is rooted in the ground. It reaches for the sky and the warmth of the sun and that is its simple reality. Now, if I were to get myself an axe and chop down that tree, I could kill the tree, move the tree and make it into something else entirely. But that would not change the reality of the tree would it?” Ghairen paused to look at Erron, but Erron just furrowed his eyebrows. “Deep in the oldest parts of this world lies the power to make that tree no more. You see? Not moved, no more.”

Erron looked back down at the book, unsure what to believe. Was he supposed to learn this? Was this why he was different? “Can you do this?” The words came out faster than he’d meant them to.

Ghairen let out a deep breath and his body slackened. “I’m afraid I can’t, as of now, give you an example that would satisfy you lad.”

Erron shook his head. He knew it, none of this was true. Ghairen was just a nice old man who spent too much time alone in the woods with his donkey. Erron felt his shoulders lower and realized that he was disappointed. He couldn’t even bring himself to be angry anymore.

Ghairen reached out his hand and closed the book. “Read on, but not tonight. Find a safe place, where no one can find you, and read. We can speak more of this next time we meet. But keep the book hidden from others, can you do that?”

Erron nodded, though he wasn't sure exactly where he'd keep it, or that he really cared anyway.

"Good then, this is good. You better hurry now if you're to get any sleep at all."

Erron stood and tucked the book under his arm. "When will I see you next?"

"Sooner than you'd think but later than you'd like," he said, and smiled.

Erron rolled his eyes and started walking into the forest.

"You can find your way alright?" Ghairen said, standing by the fire and the donkey.

"I'll be fine." Erron waved. He probably should have thanked him for the book. Though he wasn't entirely sure he was thankful. So he didn't say another word, but trudged on through the trees the way he'd come.

Erron's mind was spinning with all kinds of thoughts. Of Ghairen, the hut on the mountain, and of course, the book. He adjusted the book under his arm, agreeing in his own mind to at least read a little bit more.

Erron thought he heard a sound as he passed the edge of the forest and stepped out into the clearing. The Shack rose in front of him, smothered in shadow, and behind that East Arch Keep with its high walls and rising turrets. He heard another sound, and thought he saw a motion out of the corner of his eye. He froze. There was something behind him.

"You know I wasn't sure if that kid was lying to us or not, until we saw the footprints in the snow, leading to the forest." Erron turned and saw a guard step out from

behind the trees, followed by three more. “The thing is,” he said, “it’s quite hard to sneak anywhere after such a heavy snowfall, wouldn’t you agree?” The rest laughed.

The man smiled, he had a baby smooth face with angular features, thin nose and lips. He was muscular, not very tall, but clearly older than the others.

“Kid?” Erron said, surprised to hear anger, not fear in his voice.

“I can’t recall, he was small, short hair, named after a weed or something wasn’t it?”

“Pok sir, I know him.” One of the others chimed in.

Erron’s face dropped. Pok? That jealous bastard. He tried to hide the hurt from his face. Pok had been his friend.

“And look, what do you have there, a stolen book no doubt?”

“It’s not stolen,” Erron said and began backing away.

The guard turned to the others. “Take the book, throw him in the dungeons. A few nights surrounded by bars and stone and then we’ll decide what to do with him.”

“I didn’t steal anything,” Erron said but the guards were already moving fast, kicking their feet high through the snow. Erron could feel the anger building inside of him. He thought of the boys with their sticks. He had gone from one awful place to the next his whole life, and in all honesty what difference would the dungeons make. But still, he was tired of giving in, tired of being drug without a fight. He went empty inside.

When the first body came near him, Erron’s fist was moving before he had a chance to think about it. The man buckled over when Erron’s knuckles connected with

his stomach and Erron was pleased to hear the sound of the man's breath jump from his lips.

The others reached to restrain him, but they were surprisingly slow. Erron ducked under them and kicked the man to his left in the stomach and he doubled over. The other man swung a fist at Erron's face. Erron watched the knuckles coming at him, the slow movement of the arm through the air, the elbow bent then straightening. Erron sidestepped the blow easily. Dropping his book he grabbed the man's wrist with his left hand. How easy it would be to break the man's arm, he thought, and so he did. He slammed the palm of his right hand into the man's straightened elbow. There was a loud snap that Erron felt between his fingers and the man went down with a cry of pain. The others were already coming at Erron again, but everything seemed so slow, so easy. Gods it felt good. Erron ducked and punched and moved away from the flailing figures who got more angry with each motion. He took in a few hits, and his head and shoulder were throbbing but soon the guards were on the ground again and the Captain was approaching. He pulled out his sword and took a giant swing at Erron. Erron ducked easily but was taken out at the feet by another guard. He rolled away from the man and spun back to his feet. They were all coming at him. Erron ducked and kicked another man and watched the sword coming for his midsection this time. He didn't feel fear, like when he had seen the wolf, but he was distinctly aware that the Captain had lost control, and was aiming to kill.

Erron ducked under the sword and came up in front of the Captain. He kned the man in the stomach, elbowed him in the head and came out with a fresh sword.



“Kill him!” The Captain said from the ground. The other three guards drew their swords and approached. The blade felt heavy and awkward in Erron’s hand and Erron was out of breath. He looked around for the book, suddenly angry with himself that he’d discarded it so easily. But did it really matter? Perhaps he wouldn’t even live out the night. He thought of Taylor for a second, but then pushed her out of his mind.

There was a strange hissing in the air and something kicked up the snow between Erron and the guards. The sound of heavy footfalls echoed around them followed by another hissing sound and an arrow landed in the ground between them.

“Enough.” It was a guard approaching, riding a horse and aiming an arrow directly at Erron. He looked at the other guards with anger in his eyes. “Enough.” His gaze took in Erron. “Drop the sword.”

Erron had no choice, he did so, and scanned the snow for the book.

“Sir he—”

“I said enough. Bind him, take him to the dungeons.” The others moved forward. Erron noticed blood on one of their faces, another one was cradling his arm, shushing it like a child. Erron had to smile. They grabbed him and thrust his arms behind him, one of them punched the back of his head. Erron saw red and yellow lights burst in front of his face. “Captain Skyler, a word,” the man said and turned his horse back toward the Keep without seeing if the Captain or the men would follow. One of the soldiers picked up the book, now covered in snow, from the ground.

“I hope this was worth it you little thief.”

Erron almost dove for the book. All this work for nothing. His only comfort was that the book was probably useless, the insane ranting of men just as crazy as Ghairen. It wouldn't make anything make sense. His eyes, his family, Kyra. Perhaps nothing would.

They tugged Erron, not gently, back across the snow. There was a strange sense of relief knowing he was getting away from the Shack and the horse shit and the kitchens. Besides, his only friend hadn't turned out the way he'd thought. He felt the betrayal keenly in his stomach like milk gone sour. He was truly never meant to have friends.

As they passed the Shack, Erron glanced up at the building. He saw a figure looking out in one of the windows, he wasn't sure it was the figure he was looking for, but he hoped. He dropped all expression from his face and stared at that window. He stared as they passed the building and made it to the street, he stared until he couldn't see it any more and they passed through Town Square and the giant doors to the Keep opened, welcoming them in with a high pitched grinding noise.

–CHAPTER 29: Vision–

Ghairen was practically shaking. Is it the cold, nerves, or excitement? The donkey moved slow through the forest carrying Ghairen on his back. It let out a little grumble. Oh I know I know, but I'm old and you're strong. Besides, I'm only a tiny old man, so stop your complaining. Ghairen patted the donkey at the base of the neck. He needed a smoke badly right now and tried not to think about the words Erron had just read. Ghairen saw the confused look on the boys face replayed in his mind and he wanted to reach out, grab him by the hair and scream that he was sorry over and over and over.

Curse this cold, I need a smoke. Ghairen adjusted his jacket around his shoulders while the donkey swayed back and forth, laboring in the snow. He breathed in the cold and the smell of the forest, a smell he'd come to know so well over the years. He closed his eyes. Everything had been different when the boy was just an idea. Before he'd seen him born, watched him grow and learn and rebel. Ghairen had come to love the sound of the boy's young voice, the look of his green eyes and the way his eyebrows lowered when he was concentrating on something. He was quite fond of Erron. Of course he was. And he felt all the worse for it. Oh why did I not bring my pipe? I'll have to remember for next time. Donkey, jacket, flint, pipe.

They continued through the forest for what felt like an eternity. Ghairen wondered what Erron was thinking right now. Who would listen to an old man like me? I know I wouldn't.

It was a long time before Ghairen was able to sit by the fire inside his home and smoke his pipe. He watched the flames through the smoke slithering from his mouth. The sensation was already filling his head and he closed his eyes. A chill crawled up his spine and he felt it pass through his thin grey hair and over his forehead. He took another pull on the Pok Weed and blew the warm smoke into the air. His lips tingled and he leaned back and tried to empty his mind. A lot to empty...

...soon there was only darkness. Then a green fog and a forest. The towers were behind him, rising from the Keep. Eyes from the towers. Then something stirred in the forest. A dark movement. And before him was a hooded figure standing in the fog. This, of course, was all wrong. The man pulled back his hood, his hair and beard were dark and there was a thin smile on his face. He looked at Ghairen. Directly at him. Now how can this be? The man walked closer to Ghairen and put a hand up towards Ghairen's face and moved it back and forth.

“Hello?” He said.

Well, this is quite odd. The fog gathered closer around him.

“You can show me the way out can't you?” The man said. Ghairen tried to speak but couldn't so he nodded. No point in lying.

The man scratched his beard. “But you're not going to are you?”

Ghairen shook his head.

“You know who I am?”

Ghairen shook his head.

“If you are who I think you are, then I’m not as impressed as I thought I’d be,” the man’s voice was low and rough but confident.

Ghairen smiled and nodded. The man took a step closer.

“Either way, I’m coming, do you know that?” The fog rose higher till it was all around him. “I am coming.” It was circling his face, clouding his vision. “Soon.” The man nodded, and then disappeared into the mist...

...Ghairen’s eyes snapped open. He shivered. The fire had died down to coals and his pipe was no longer burning. He sat up in the chair and stroked his mustache. He tried to clear his mind of the vision, but it was so fresh, had felt so real. Ghairen stood and tossed the unsmoked ruined weed into the fire then sat down on the floor where he could still feel the warmth of the coals. Oh Erron, they’re coming for you now aren’t they? What have I done?