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The Passing

A THESIS

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By

NOBLE DIVEN

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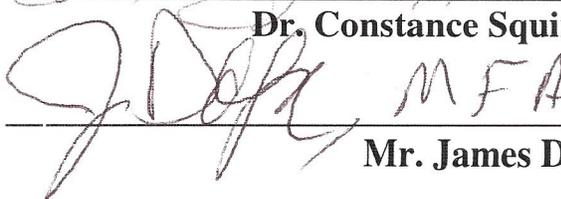
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ABSTRACT

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My thesis is a novel started in my MFA novel classes and completed December 2011. The principal theme of this novel is to explore the relationship between man and death in a fictional world called Aetheria. The protagonist, Kane Brennan, goes to war and is forced to decide what he truly believes about the world and himself while going through the dangers of battle alongside his best friend, Illian Rollow. By experiencing combat, Kane hopes to fill an emptiness he carries from watching his grandfather die violently as a child. A symbol of death in “The Passing” is the Breach, a divide between the living world and the afterlife, created when humanity rose up in the War of Ascension and destroyed the gods who had created them. Now all those who die must endure crossing the Breach. Some wander blindly forever while others eventually reach the afterlife. A few unlucky souls are pushed back to Aetheria in the form of monstrous spirits, driven mad by the trauma of returning to physical form.

This fantasy novel follows a single timeline and is in the close third person point of view. All events in the book are experienced and interpreted through Kane’s eyes. My influences for this novel are James Jones, H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen Crane, Tim O’Brien, Thom Jones, Erich Maria Remarque and Joseph Conrad.

The Passing, Book 1:
While the World Went Mad
By Noble Diven

Introduction:

Mazrath counted his candles. Just enough had survived the journey across the Tamarian Empire. He placed them in a circle before lighting each one. Soon the destroyed room glowed, revealing splintered furniture, layers of dust and bloodstains on the walls and floor.

He looked up from his work at the scratching of ghosts or mice. To step into Callinday, the City of Bones, risked alerting the tormented souls trapped within its broken walls to his mortal presence. If he were found, the souls of so many dead trying to escape the darkness by flooding into his body would utterly destroy him. But the chance at a life of strength without fear was worth the risk. If this summoning failed he would have nothing else to live for.

Mazrath pushed aside his oily and overgrown black hair while he crouched over a tattered book. The loosely bound pages spoke of lighting a beacon to the invisible world. Rather than tease the spirits of the dead hovering just beyond his awareness, he intended to summon a god.

The book he searched had survived the journey better than he. Months of wandering from city to city had left his rags faded and loose as they dangled from a body shriveled from exposure and neglect. He coughed, his whole body convulsing with the effort. He looked forward to leaving this weak flesh behind in favor of something stronger and immune to harm or fatigue. He had read of becoming a Firsborn from Aetheria's early days after the creation and imagined how wonderful that life must have been before the War of Ascension ruined everything.

He had spent many cold and lonely nights reading over the secret history of the world. Tahteem-Hodchi had hoped to bring a unified man to replace their creators and serve no gods but themselves. Instead of leading an age of enlightenment as the first godking, he was poisoned by a jealous brother. Rather than create a utopia, Tahteem's death had fractured the land into catastrophic civil war. From a vision, the unknown author of Mazrath's book also spoke of the Breach. At the death of Shasla, the Guardian Mother, Tahteem had corrupted the link between the mortal realm and man's eternal destination. The great unifier had not only doomed the living he left behind, but forever cursed all who died to a fate of wandering in the Breach's darkness where few trickled back into the mortal plane and fewer still ever reached the next place where the dead gods reigned.

When the Tamarians came from the western seas, they brought a new religion and buried the past through conquest, the militant Order and their priests. Because Mazrath had stumbled onto the truth of the world, the Order had chased him, burned his home, scattered his family and stolen his inheritance in the name of fighting heresy.

The ritual said it would bring the dead back from the Breach. One of these old gods, Carmil the Mountainbuilder, lay imprisoned under the Callinday in a mountain of ice. Mazrath clutched the pages while he went over the summoning again. With some slight modifications to the diagram, he could bring Carmil's awareness directly to this room. Alerting the spirits of Callinday's mad dead was possible, but they would scatter at Carmil's passing like minnows before a whale. If the Order knew what he was attempting, an army would have followed him here to destroy both him and the slumbering god.

He hummed softly while scratching out the last portions of the design. Once finished, he stood on a twisted keyhole shape touching three points of a circle. The chalk he held had cut

through the grime and he flicked off the accumulated filth from its white edge. Everything was in place.

The chant of invitation had once been used by Carmil's followers whose descendants had become the Mountainborne savages to the east. They would worship Mazrath when he brought the power of their god to their camps and primitive villages. Excitement flooded through his weak body at the prospect of joining. Uttering the sharp words of a forgotten tongue, he called out into the unknown.

A cold breeze pushed the burning tips of his candles outward. He stepped out of the chalked circle. His hands trembled and he crossed his arms to keep them still. In all his reading there wasn't any direction on how to greet something from beyond human reckoning so he tried straightening his rags and waited. This was it, the culminating answer to so much cruelty. In a matter of moments his salvation would appear.

The crudely scratched outline lit up and turned like the opening of a lock. Lore and legend be damned, Mazrath smiled wide and held up his arms as the room blazed with white light shining from the center of the circle.

The thing struggling out of the floor was the opposite of what he had expected. Rather than a god of fire and stone, a twisted patch of blackness ending in a hood emerged. Two long ashen arms no bigger than a child's wrist pushed weakly against the floor with spindly fingers. The twisted creature barely made it to his knees, sniffing and whimpering like a delirious wretch. It was a pathetic sight, reserved for only the most desperate addicts of a Gibeian slum. Anger surged through Mazrath's body at the sight of this cosmic joke. He had brought forth some residue from the Breach rather than drawing Carmil up from the earth. After putting this thing out of his its misery, he'd slice his own throat and simply be done with this wretched life.

Perhaps his soul could find Lothran, his dead wife, on its own and together they might survive crossing to the next world. He reached for his sacred knife, the one thing of worth he had taken from the Order, and sighed.

The thing jerked up at the noise.

It snatched at Mazrath's legs. Claws clamped down like iron shackles on his skin, pulling him to the ground. With monstrous strength it dragged him towards the center of the circle.

He screamed, desperately thrashing against the shadow pulling him closer. The thing climbed up his legs and chest until he lay inches away from the spirit's void of a face. He struck the thing with his hands, beating against what felt like wet steel.

The spirit shoved an elongated claw down his throat. He choked and heaved, smoke filling his senses as the arm forced its way down into his heart and lungs. Mazrath's vision faded from the pain of frozen glass cutting into his insides. The creature dug around his body as if blindly searching a sack. Organs Mazrath had never felt were jammed to one side or squeezed to near bursting. It was impossible to breathe and he choked, gasped and fought as the world dimmed.

Mazrath felt his soul being torn up by its roots like some plant. Still pinning him down with one arm, the spirit, with a strenuous effort, drew out a ripple of dull light. It held Mazrath's eternal essence up for momentary examination before shoving the entire fist and its contents into the hood. While it was distracted, Mazrath, gasping for air, tried to escape.

The spirit pulled him back, bending close. He struggled to breathe through a scraped throat numbed from ice and smoke. A trickle of blood ran down the outside of his mouth.

In a grating voice barely above a whisper, the spirit asked, "Whom do we serve?"

Mazrath coughed up more blood. In his delirious state he knew the answer. Though the flesh had decayed to dust long ago, the first godking of Aetheria still lived within the Breach.

“Tahteem Hodchi.”

“Then serve him well,” the spirit replied, “Your king requires blood. Lots of blood.”

In one violent motion, the spirit plunged a claw into Mazrath’s chest. He screamed, the cry cut short when he passed out from pain and blind terror.

Birds chirped as they fluttered through the broken house. Sunlight beamed through gaping holes in the roof of the house when Mazrath woke. The broken remains of Callinday’s streets and charred buildings stood visible through shattered windows.

Even for the City of Bones, the day seemed unusually pleasant, symbolic of a new life. Colors appeared brighter, even if those colors came from overgrown ruins or burned out houses.

Mazrath sat straight up. What had happened the night before felt inconsequential, like a bad dream scattered by the new morning. The leftovers of his interaction were everywhere: a circle of wax puddles, a smeared circle of chalk and deep lines cut into the filth where he had nearly lost his fingernails trying to escape. Looking back he shouldn’t have been so worried about receiving his gift and purpose. Even the awareness of something important missing inside his chest seemed...inconsequential.

He stood up and dusted himself off, gathered up his things and strode confidently into the city street.

Chapter 1:

Clouds filled the late summer sky and cooled Kane in their shadows as they passed. He dozed, draping an arm forged from years of farming over his eyes. A breeze drifted through the surrounding trees and tickled his shaggy blonde hair. The air stunk of wheat as it always did during harvest time. He lay on the worn remains of a large altar with his booted feet dangling off the edge. It was hard to imagine his ancestors had once sacrificed their kin on this very stone slab over two centuries ago before the Tamarians came and beat them into peaceful farmers. Strong hands and backs were of much more use than the favor of absent and bloodthirsty gods.

The moss covered ruins outlined a small temple surrounded by broken pillars. It was his secret refuge on the edge of the Whispering Woods and considered forbidden by other villagers. Kane was happy to let them have the safety of their houses and fields. Many things weighed on his mind, and solitude provided a chance to stop and think until a choice became clear.

He stretched, enjoying the strength hidden underneath his plain white shirt. By this time tomorrow, he would be off adventuring with his best friend, leaving all the doubts and confines of Tinder behind. Or, he would be spending his first afternoon as a bonded man to the angriest girl in Achritia. It was the most difficult choice he had ever faced.

Trees, their tops swaying in the breeze, surrounded the ruins. Around the opening to the sky, thick branches covered in leaves created an enclosure of wood. Something creaked nearby, sending a large translucent shape like a spider drifting across his vision. Most considered seeing a spirit dangerous. The Order hunted spirits in all their forms, which sometimes meant cutting open animals and people to get at the returned soul and destroy it. Kane watched the thing lightly attach itself to a branch. He had been told that some spirits consumed their hosts or

combined with the living to create an abomination as flesh and spirit twisted together. Though it was the distorted soul of someone returned from the Breach, the spider certainly didn't look very frightening or dangerous. After surviving the pain of death and eternal darkness to return to the living world, Kane decided to let such creatures content themselves with a quiet existence. He could handle being a ghost if floating freely amongst the trees on a summer's day was his eternal fate. Perhaps that spider was his grandfather watching over him.

A rock bounced against the side of the altar. Kane rolled off the stone top and ducked a second projectile. He charged the woods in the direction of the throw, grabbing a nearby stick and threatening the underbrush.

“Out, knave, or by Shasla I'll cleave you.”

Illian came out with leaves in his short brown hair and waving his hands in surrender. “I beg for mercy, good sir, I have no control of my stones.”

As soon as Kane lowered his stick, Illian tackled him and they wrestled on the temple floor laughing between punches. Kane, using his size, eventually trapped Illian's head in his arm. They sat breathing amongst the grass and stone.

“I'll pop off your head unless you surrender,” Kane said.

“If you do that then you'll have to answer to my mother. She'd turn you into the Order or flay you alive for mentioning the old gods.”

Kane eased his grip, “I'll live. Those priests have more important things to do than make sure one village in the south of Achritia is worshipping correctly.”

“Perhaps, but when we're with the Tamarians, you'll be sorry if you let that name slip.”

“So we're still going through this plan of yours?” Kane asked.

“Of course. When was the last time the Tamarian Empire decided to expand its borders or fill its vaults with plundered gold? We can’t miss reliving the glory days of Achritian warriors and getting rich in the process.”

Kane sighed, “When was the last time one of us was getting bonded? I don’t have enough fingers to count the people who’d kill me if they discovered this plot of yours.”

“She’ll be around when you get back. Nineteen is old to get bonded, but not that old. We’ll only be gone a couple months and return before the first snows.”

“I wonder if they’ll even take us back if we go off to war.”

Illian struggled against Kane’s hold. “They’d have to and before you know it all this will become just a fireside story for your children. We can’t just wait for the fields to slowly grind us into dust without seeing some of the outside world first. Are you going to let me go?”

“Oh, sorry.” Kane released Illian’s head. “I wish my grandfather was still around. He’d tell me what to do.”

A bell rang in the distance. Kane groaned, “Time to get to work.”

Illian rolled over and slapped Kane hard across the face before running off into the woods.

“Oh, that’s it!” Kane yelled, chasing after him.

Light gave way to shade as Kane ran along the forest floor. Fallen logs, low hanging vines and thickets masked thin trails through the undergrowth as he ran. The rush of air flavored by wood, water and grass invigorated him while he leapt and ducked along the path towards Tinder. Illian remained just ahead of his grasp as the day sent slivers of light through the trees. Soon open fields appeared ahead of him. Illian slowed his run and they both stopped at the forest’s edge.

Golden fields of wheat and green pastures filled the space between the forest and Tinder. An overgrown road wound from where they stood all the way up to the village. At the edge of a rise sat the meager fence of Tinder, a stroke of dark brown between gold, green and blue. All the crops danced in the constant wind blowing across the open plains. The bell continued ringing.

“You have everything ready?” Illian asked.

“Of course. Just meet me at the altar before sundown and our first steps to glory begin. Avoid Therise as well. She has ways of gaining information better left to a thoughtful note.”

Illian scoffed, “What do you mean by ways?”

“You know, torture, playing tricks with your mind and general cruelty. I can’t believe I’m supposed to marry that girl.”

“At least she’s decent. Knowing my luck I’ll get stuck with some lazy cow.”

“Don’t give up hope, Illian. All everyone’s talked about is me and Therise but your time will come. When we come back on a horses in fine armor with bags of gold to hand out, girls will be climbing over each other to snatch you up.”

“Just make sure you don’t have any second thoughts about this. She’ll change your mind if she finds out.”

“She won’t,” Kane replied, doubting the words.

They walked on a path between golden fields towards Tinder at a leisurely pace. Somewhere within that cluster of stick houses was a girl he had been sentenced to like a criminal. The preparations were set, the families had agreed on terms for bonding and the time of the ceremony had arrived. Therise was not a bad match, Shasla knew there were plenty of those, but anyone beyond his own company just felt constricting, like a shirt a size too small. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked up at the sky.

“I’m practically a family man after tonight and father would feed me to the pigs if he caught any scent of this plot of ours.”

“She’ll be there when we return as heroes. Everyone knows Therise makes the stubbornest mule look like a whipped dog. I would worry more for any fool trying to steal her away while we’re off living as true Achritians on the battlefield.”

The bell summoning Kane started to clatter.

“Off I go. Until tonight.”

They shook hands and Kane sprinted along the path towards Tinder. It was a small village, built atop a slight rise and protected by a diamond shaped wall of flat stones and sticks bundled together. Houses of clay brick and thatch roofs were built in short blocks placed around the shrine to Shasla in a loose circle. At the center was the Bonding Tree, an old and massive oak with white blossoms poking out through its dark green leaves.

He stopped at the shrine for a hurried prayer. The Order proclaimed the god of Achritia to be Uriel and was generous with force to gain obedience to the Tamarian religion. What Kane saw was the same stone image of a smiling girl in a bellowing dress looking west. Which name he called her didn’t matter, Shasla or Uriel, as long as he might receive an answer. He admitted fear and doubt about which path to choose, being stuck between living his dreams of battle and responsibilities to his family and village. No sign came, no choice emerged clearer than the other in his mind. Weighed down by indecision, he continued on towards the fields and the ringing bell.

Most ignored him as he ran by, content to their own business. Kane caught glimpses from farmers and their families as they guided livestock or cleaned their homes. He vaulted a pig as it waddled across his path.

The bell sounded like it was being torn from its mount by the time Kane reached the other side of the village. Once outside the wall Kane spotted his father and the clattering noise stopped. His older brother, Staton, stood atop the cart mashing down the bushels of wheat while the other workers cut and bound the crop around them. Directing the crowds was the hunched form of their father, Ira.

“Where were you?” Staton asked, looking over the edge of the cart.

“Sleeping,” Kane said.

“Hopefully that girl will grow you up in time for next year. It is going to be a cold winter,” Ira growled.

“Every winter is cold, father, but you’ve prepared me admirably for it.”

Ira wiped his hands on a pair of stained pants, “Get to work while I see to the ceremony. This field needs to be done before tonight. I’ll have you show up covered in dust and sweat if that’s what it takes.” Ira thrust the pitchfork’s handle against Kane’s chest and walked back towards the village.

“Where do you go?” Staton asked as he reached for the load of hay Kane brought up to him.

“Away. My thoughts escape me sometimes and I have to chase them down.”

“Not into the forest, I hope. You know what they say about the spirits out there.”

“I do, but I have an understanding with the dwellers in the forest.”

“I would find somewhere else to go. It’s a dangerous to be outside the bonding tree’s protection.”

“What’s the hurry with this wheat?” Kane asked, “We normally have another week to deliver this to Alton.”

“Lord Elias needs it for his troops. He promised to send recruiters to all the villages of he doesn’t get what he needs.”

“That wouldn’t be so bad,” Kane said.

“For you, maybe. Don’t endanger us all by skipping work.”

Staton was the older of the two, but stood a hand shorter than Kane. Both had the Brennan features of blonde hair and sharp features. Staton was not a bad brother, content with his place in life and committed to his family. At no point during Staton’s ceremony and bonding did there appear any doubts about his place in the world. Staton and his wife were happy, especially so with a child on the way. Kane envied his older brother’s single-mindedness and wondered if he had missed the lesson which made the transition to husband and father easier. Getting to fight had been his dream ever since he was old enough to imagine a battlefield. What should he do?

“You have a family to worry about. I’ll be fine,” Kane said, forking up another load.

“You are my brother. Don’t ever think father being who he is makes you any less important to this family. We are the future of Tinder.”

“And what a future it is. Ira would trade me in for a decent horse in a second.”

“Didn’t a horse seal the arrangement between Ira and Therise’s father? That’s quite a prize in this part of the Empire.”

“It’s a foal and blind in one eye. I’m more of a tool to him than this pitchfork.”

“That’s his way. You’ll earn his respect when you stop hiding from your responsibilities. I imagine you’re nervous about tonight. It’s scary but everyone goes through it and trust me, you’ll be happy you did.”

“Perhaps, but your wife doesn’t have such a violent history. Every boy growing up in Tinder has a story of Therise’s bullying and I’ve been chosen to wrangle that beast. I won’t be surprised if she tries to eat me in my sleep once she’s with child.”

They worked in silence for the rest of the afternoon. Kane went over what he would need to survive in the world beyond Tinder and the Whispering Woods. He didn’t even know how far the woods went; the ruined temple was as far as he ever dared to venture. What other shapes might the spirits of the outside take? Would he be able to resist them if they attacked like the stories told? His mind flipped between serious doubt about leaving and impatience to go, never settling for long on one before shifting to the other.

Staton grabbed the last bushel and stomped it down into the cart. “You go ahead and get ready. I’ll take all this back to the barn. Relax, Kane. It’s going to be a fun evening.”

“I’m sure it will be.”

Kane met Illian at a well near the Bonding Tree. The sun dipped towards the western horizon and Tinder hummed with activity. Kane felt as if each of his neighbors knew and condemned his decision to abandon them at this moment of celebration. Leaving might just be too hard now that people with flowers and pots of ale were gathering underneath the great branches of the Bonding Tree. After they finished cleaning up from the day’s work, Illian pulled him close.

“We’ve got to leave as soon as possible. Do you still want to go through with this?” Illian asked.

Kane nodded, “I’ll go get my things. What about you?”

“Of course. This was my idea, after all. If we go out and there isn’t any war, we’ll be back within the week. People will say you just got frightened and there’ll be another celebration for our safe return.”

“Perhaps I can find some courage to face Therise out there as well,” Kane said as they walked towards the Brannan house.

“I doubt even slaying a Mountainborne king will help you with that. You’ll be fine and she didn’t want to go through with this anyway.”

They stopped in front of Illian’s house. Fireflies fluttered around them. It was another perfect evening where the heat of summer had gone but winter remained weeks away.

“We’ve got to hurry before I change my mind,” Kane said.

“Meet me at the altar as soon as you can. I’ll pack some things and we’ll be off before anyone knows you’re missing.”

Kane walked along the dirt path towards what he hoped was an empty house. Tinder in the evening would be among the sights he would miss the most. When the sun came down, going from gold to red, it lit the fields around it in a fire of color. He followed the wall towards the Brennan house, looking out over the fields and forest beyond. What he wanted more than gold and glory was knowing he’d faced death and survived. Therise could torture him the rest of his life but he would endure it all for a glimpse of his innermost character. His grandfather hadn’t blinked at facing the terrors of the darkness beyond mortality and Kane had to see if he could do the same. The bonding ceremony was no rite of passage compared to facing the Breach, but the gathering of a hundred people under a tree to jam two of their own together. He was not proven and, when he truly thought about it, had not earned anything for his existence beyond a half-blind horse. He didn’t want to go, but failing to discover what lay hidden within

the mysterious future was an act of cowardice in his mind. At his deepest point, he had no choice but to go and fight for the glory of his people and find out who he truly was. Shasla had to appreciate and forgive one of her own for momentarily skipping tradition to truly seek her out in the world.

He hurried up to the back steps of his family's house. After a quick peek through the shutters, he opened the door and went to his corner of the single room house. Under a few sacks lay his bundle: an old brown cloak, his father's knife, some bread and salted meat, along with a bit of wool and flint for the colder nights. He dressed himself in his cloak, strapped the knife to his belt and strode out the back door. Therise stood waiting for him.

There were many things Kane liked about Therise's appearance. She stood up to his shoulder, was thin but had the hands of a true worker. She wore a fine green dress and her brown hair was combed to a shine. A braid dangled on each side of her freckled face, tied with green ribbon and held in place with a thin gold ring. She might have been pretty if she wasn't scowling. It was hard to get past the deep frown, furrowed brow and deep breaths she took while just staring at him. Dirt stained the hem of her dress and she breathed from running but tried to hide it. Signs of hurry marked her appearance, and the inconvenience of having to hurry in the first place added to the image of a bull preparing to charge. Kane wasn't sure if she was going to cry or gut him like a pig.

“So it's true.”

“You weren’t supposed to see this,” Kane said, taking a step back.

Therise strode up to him and looked ready to burst. “I wasn’t supposed to see my future husband run off on a silly adventure, leaving me alone and at the mercy of a village full of gossipers? How very considerate of you.”

“You look nice.”

She slapped him hard across the face.

“Every other match before tonight has gone to the Bonding Tree with smiles or tears and usually both. It is the one tradition the Tamarians let us keep and the start of my true contribution to the village. Must I drag you up there like some spoiled child or are you forcing me to be up there and look like the biggest fool in the Empire? I promised myself I wouldn’t be one of those wives locked up at home, but the shame of losing you before we’ve even bonded will keep me from leaving the front step.”

“I will come back.”

Therise laughed, “Oh, thank you. How proud I will be to exchange a decent companion for a war-torn husband. Of the half dozen clods running around this village, you were the one I hated the least.”

Kane readied himself for another blow and then stopped, “Wait. You actually want to go through with this?”

Dusk filtered across sky. He was running out of time. The ceremony would start soon and that meant their absence might already be noticed. If he wasn’t careful, he might end up in front of the bonding tree with Ardom and Therise, leaving Illian to adventure alone. He might go just to see how drunk Ardom was for this ceremony. For being an Order rank of Witness and

priest of Uriel, he acted like someone who had been quietly transferred to a remote village as a favor to someone else.

“I’m not ready for any of this,” Kane said.

“Neither am I, but welcome to being a nervous newlywed.”

Kane blurted out, “If I don’t go, I won’t feel worthy of being your husband, of leading a household and running this village with the other elders someday. It will haunt me, and I need to go now.” Kane looked back at the forest, wondering if Illian was still waiting for him. Therise looked ready to claw his face into shreds and he needed to escape before she actually changed his mind. The vice of indecision squeezed against his heart as he tried to stare back at Therise’s stern expression.

After a moment, her shoulders dropped and she said, “I know, and that’s the worst part,”

“What?”

“My father had the same notion when he was a boy, it left him without an arm but when he talks of going to battle he speaks as if in a dream. The only other time he drifted off like that was remembering my mother. He’ll hold to his side of the agreement between our families, but you will come back to me.”

Kane saw his chance and pushed for it, “This should only last a season and once I return, I swear I will make the other wives ill with jealousy. Let me have this and I will live only for you and our family in every thought and deed.”

“Such flattery. I hope the Mountainborne will be as easily persuaded as I seem to be. The ceremony is about to start and I won’t be suspected of appearing to approve of this silly adventure. Come back to me a whole and good man or I will extract an angry wife’s vengeance.”

She pulled out a thin knife with an ornately carved bone handle of clouds and stars.

“Ardom’s knife! How did you get that?”

“Don’t ask and shut up.”

Kane couldn’t tell if she was upset or having fun with him. Therise pricked the end of her finger and handed the knife to Kane, “By my blood and soul, under these stars we are bonded and one.”

Kane did the same, repeated the phrase and touched the bloody finger to hers. Something changed within him, but there was too much flashing by to trap the feeling before it disappeared. His bonded’s pleased face and shining eyes pulled him to another part of life he didn’t expect. He would have kissed her gently if she had not grabbed his hair and pulled his face into hers. The contact was wet and awkward, but neither of them seemed interested in ending it quickly.

After a long moment, she pushed him away and cut off one of her braids with the knife. The remaining braid added to her slowly increasing beauty. She tied the loose end and shoved it into his chest, “Go be a hero, then return home.” After another quick and less awkward embrace he hopped the fence. He looked back at her after a few steps and waved. She returned the gesture. The image of Therise standing alone in the last minutes of sunlight burned into Kane’s memory.

His run across the fields felt strange. This was the plan and his body knew where it wished to go. Kane tried to decide once and for all if he should give up and stay or push on, but his thoughts were numb and unable to change the course of his steps.

Illian sat waiting for him on the altar. “I was just about to leave without you.”

“Or you hoped I had quit first and given you a way out of this.”

“Never. What happened?”

“I bonded with Therise outside my window and I think she cried a little.”

Illian looked surprised, “So she is capable of feeling. Interesting. And you actually went through it? I’m surprised she wasn’t waiting out there with an axe. People do the strangest things sometimes. There will be plenty of time to regret your decision when we get back.”

“I can’t believe you told her. We swore each other to secrecy.”

“I didn’t speak a word. She probably found the note you left sooner than anticipated. It’s just like the stories to have someone waiting for you. Imagine her standing at the gate every evening waiting for our triumphant return.”

“I already am. Let’s go.” Kane said.

Illian laughed, “You’ll see how right I’ve been about this soon enough.”

Illian started off and Kane followed behind. They were actually going through with it, trudging off through the Whispering Woods to the outside world in search of war.

“I heard from a trader in Alton that the Tamarians are camped a few days to the north of forest. We’ll be there in no time.”

“What are we going to do about weapons and armor?” Kane asked

“We’ll find some.”

“Do you even know why they’re pushing this far east?”

“He said the Mountainborne have been getting violent along the border towns. The Tamarians are using this as an excuse to push back and expand their territory.”

“So we’re aiding the Tamarians in doing what they did to us when they first moved across the continent.”

Illian shrugged, “That was over a hundred years ago and if we don’t do something now, the Mountainborne will be at our doors. They weren’t as accommodating as we were to the

Empire so there's plenty of hatred between the two. You wouldn't want that bitterness loosed on your bonded, now would you? Speaking of which, did you seal the bonding?" Illian asked the last question with a wry smile.

"No and I won't tell you when the real bonding actually happens."

"Too bad. You're too ashamed of your humanity."

"Perhaps, but you can thank my parents for that. I'm more worried about getting home at the moment. We can fight the Mountainborn out there or here though I doubt two farmers will make much of a difference. Perhaps we should wait for the war to come to us if things are that bad."

"Nothing good ever came from waiting around and besides, if things get dangerous, wouldn't you rather have soldiers guarding your flanks?"

Kane thought for a moment. "It's what everyone else in Tander is doing. They'd starve or freeze in the fields before leaving their land."

"We're the only ones looking up, Kane. Everyone back home just wants to work and let the world go by."

The forest darkened into layers of shadow as the world faded into evening. A rising moon gave them just enough light filtering through the trees to continue. He heard a distant rustling amongst the trees and wondered if the worst spirits only came out at night. The forest seemed to change as sounds very different from the daytime rose around them. Rattles, croaks and whistles seemed distant and yet right beside Kane as he walked. The silhouettes of the trees started looking like they had been frozen mid-stride, their elongated faces following two young fools passing through their sacred territory.

Illian stopped. They stood as shadows in the night. The bell at Tinder rang violently. Whoever rang it didn't sound terribly pleased.

"There's your signal to give this up before we head off into the unknown."

"I'm not going back. We've done everything together as far as I can remember and I've got to keep an eye on you."

Illian's form nodded, "Therise will be fine until we get back. Trust me."

Kane pictured Therise standing tall and alone before the table surrounded by curious stares and whispers regarding the location of her supposed husband. Would they see the mark on her finger and know they had been tricked? What stories would they tell about the first bride left alone under Shasla's sacred tree in the past hundred years? Could Therise's unshakeable will handle the insult to her pride? What might his father think if he found out his son had gone off to fight a war that was none of his business?" The questions passing through his mind were the last fragments of a life not chosen before slipping past in the face of the immediate moment.

Kane pushed Illian forward lightly, "Let's go before something large and hungry wakes at our debating."

They trudged on in silence, their steps trained from hunting to make as little noise as possible. The last rings died away and the loneliness of Kane's decision settled on him. A creature skittered by. Even with the teeming life around them, Kane felt like they made too much noise crashing through the forest. Illian trudged on ahead of him so Kane just followed the sound. He heard the sound of a burbling creek and assumed this was their guide through the forest.

He ran a finger along the braid in his pocket, hoping Therise was not currently plotting her revenge. Perhaps she wanted him to leave to make a mockery of the Brennan family. They

hadn't interacted much growing up. As children she seemed content pushing him into puddles or stealing his toys, whatever it took to leave him crying in the street. The bonding was more planned out by the families, so her appearance at the house was a strange move. Still, he imagined her sitting in a corner of her family's house while her father debated with Ira on how to proceed. At the perfect moment, she would reveal that they had bonded just to see the look on their fathers' faces. Insidious, fearless and willing to crush all things in her path. He felt a bit of pride for her.

But she had known he was leaving. The only other person who knew of this plot was Illian, which meant his old friend had let slip the secret. More questions and doubts as they trudged along northwards deeper into the forest to war.

Chapter 3

"Are you going the right way?" Kane asked Illian after they had been walking for hours. The noise of the forest had settled to a constant hum. It had gotten quiet enough for Kane to hear the breezes which gave the Whispering Woods its name. The smell of wet earth and old tree bark filled the night.

"We'll stay here for the night," Illian said, moving underneath a jutting rock. Even nearly blind in the darkness, Kane felt the size of the thing weigh down him while they moved into a shallow cave at its base. It was a steep hill of solid jagged stone emerging from the ground like a crooked tooth. As they passed under, Kane saw the shadows of trees and bushes lining the grooves around the top.

Kane gathered up some branches for bedding and rolled his blanket on top while Illian started a small fire at the cave's opening. Compared to the size of the world around them, their tiny blaze might as well have been a match held up to the night sky.

After settling down, they lay looking up at the glowing ceiling of their refuge. Kane asked, "You had this all planned out, didn't you?"

"Head north through the woods. It's pretty simple. I'm just glad we haven't run into anything dangerous yet."

Kane broke a stick and tossed it into the fire. "We're just a couple souls minding our business while we pass through. The spirits here seem happy enough but I doubt that will be the case once we leave the peace of these woods."

"What do you think the spirits out there will be like?" Illian asked

"Desperate. Those who return from the Breach have been tormented to madness. I suppose after going through what they suffer, a little quiet must be nice. Without the peace of these woods to calm them, who knows what monsters they'll become?"

They ate bits of the meat and bread for dinner. Kane felt like he and Illian were guests of the forest, sharing the wonder and majesty with all the other creatures and spirits wandering about the shadows. A deer blurred across the mouth of the cave in a bounding streak. It came back and stopped, looking at Kane and Illian for a moment as if deciding whether or not to join them by the fire. Kane raised his water skin in a friendly salute.

A forest tiger smashed into the deer, its green and black striped hulk sending them both tumbling out of sight. A terrific growl and wet crunch cut the deer's cry short.

"Did you see that?" Kane whispered.

"Of course, you idiot. Do you have your knife?" Illian said.

“Maybe it didn’t see us.”

Illian picked up a burning stick. “I doubt that.”

Kane tried not to breathe. Moonlight came lit the edge of the cave. At any moment he expected the massive creature to burst in and devour them. Not a day’s march from Tinder and was about to get smeared on a cave wall, leaving everyone in Tinder behind to wonder of his fate.

The noise of squished flesh and snapping bone continued. Kane thought back to the stories of spirits finding their way into animals and people. If the bodies weren’t burned, releasing the soul of all ties to the physical world, it wouldn’t have the freedom to survive the Breach and fell back to Aetheria. Perhaps the tiger they saw was not just a tiger, but a lost soul expressing its singular mind for violence and blood. Kane hoped and prayed to Shasla for the former.

The growling and biting stopped, replaced by the tiger dragging the mangled corpse of the deer across the cave entrance. Kane pushed his body into the ground and watched, knife ready, awestruck by the mass of fur and muscle not six paces from him. The tiger stopped and cleaned its paws like every cat he had seen back in Tinder and looked up at the moon. Perhaps it hadn’t noticed them. Then it looked directly at Kane, its eyes glowing green. It blinked and went back to cleaning itself.

When it finished, the tiger gripped the shattered carcass of the deer in its jaws and carried it away like a cat carries a slain bird. Kane pressed to the cold rock and waited for Illian to move. They remained still for what felt like hours before Kane finally decided to get up. The cold night air was getting uncomfortable, though it had the crisp scent of moist wood. Kane got up and threw another branch onto the dwindling fire.

“What are you doing?” Illian whispered.

“Going to bed.”

A storm came. Kane woke from an empty dream to the rumble of thunder. Rain curtained down the cave mouth and he appreciated the slight incline which kept them and their gear from getting soaked.

Illian slept facing the opposite wall on his own makeshift bed. After a satisfying stretch, Kane sat up. He listened to the sound of rain and thunder, enjoying the protection offered by the shelter of the cave. He imagined at some point they would have to endure harsh weather without any protection so now was the time to be thankful. He couldn't shake the wonder that they were actually going through with this plan. War, bloodshed, violence, terror, victory, defeat and all the unseen consequences of this decision lingered in his mind. He wanted to hoard as much of this peace as he could, because this was not a childhood war against imaginary bandits or monsters, but true visceral battle.

Kane's chosen path led to fire, where he would either be tempered into the man he should be or get consumed in the process. His grandfather, Liam Brennan, had fought in skirmishes against bandits and was always the first to volunteer for any dangerous tasks to better Tinder. He trapped a wolf or put out fires as if they were as dangerous as pruning trees or planting seeds. However small his life mattered against the movements of the Empire, he lived apart from those men who had remained at home. Liam walked the same paths around the Bonding Tree, spoke the same words and lived the same lives as everyone else, but something intangible was different. The two things Kane remembered while he watched the rain come down was that sardonic smile his grandfather always wore and seeing him die, trampled and gored by an escaped bull. Compared to the freshness of the Whispering Woods and the rain, Kane could still

feel the blood caking his hands, the smell of meat and watching the light go out in Liam's eyes before he went limp in Kane's hands. It had been six years since that day, and Kane remembered each detail as it had cut off a part of his soul that had yet to grow back. He prayed for Liam's soul and believed he survived the Breach and now rested in the next world.

Sleep was impossible and rather than lie down, Kane watched the rain glisten under the moon as it fell past the cave's opening. Something else shined as it walked up to the dripping sheet of water separating their hiding place and the forest. The tiger had returned.

Kane didn't feel afraid of the thing veiled in night and rain, until lightning flashed to reveal the gray-green and black stripes of the Whispering Wood's unrivaled king. Wolves and foxes, along with the occasional snake were common threats on the plains. But, the sole purpose of the fence was to keep animals or children from wandering too close to the forest edge. Only the cut fields and open ground kept the livestock safe within Tinder as forest tigers hated the exposure of open ground. There was no such protection now.

Even sitting and several paces away, the predator's head was nearly to Kane's shoulder. It watched him with glowing eyes that shined through the darkness, turning to black holes when the lightning flashed overhead.

Illian mumbled and rolled onto his back. The tiger raised a large paw and beckoned Kane forward. So someone had joined their lost soul with the tiger's. When it huffed and beckoned again, Kane carefully got out of his bed. Since he wasn't being eaten, Kane inched closer to the veil of falling water that separated them. Either this was a trap or an actual attempt at communication. Kane pointed at Illian's sleeping form to tempt a response; the tiger shook its head.

He crouched close to the creature now, “What do you want?” Kane whispered. He was within claw’s reach and felt the misty breath of leaves and blood pushing through the sheet of rain separating them.

The tiger looked back towards the dark woods and walked into the night. Kane picked up his cloak and followed. Since he had expected to be torn to shreds, Kane indulged the tiger as a small gesture of appreciation for not being eaten. Besides, this was how some of the stories he had heard as a child began. With a quick glance back at Illian, he pushed through the rain and into the night.

Flashes of lightning stamped the ground around them with spots of light as the tiger wound along an invisible trail. A swollen creek rushed underneath them as they walked over a fallen log, along a shallow ridge and into a grove of trees. He felt eyes watching him and saw branches bend out of his way. They entered a tunnel of vines and leaves winding down into darkness. The last noises of the storm slipped away as he descended after the beast. Air pushed against him, heavy with the scent of trees mixed with a touch of salt.

Kane tried to remain calm. These stories usually ended with a test of character, and he was pretty sure his heart was mostly clean. Perhaps running away from home, disappointing his father and bonded and going off to slaughter were not as condemning as they sounded when lined up together. In time the passage opened to a wide shore under a night sky. Kane stopped at the entrance, mouth open. He had never been to the sea, even imagined what it must look like and somehow he had been transported to another realm. Was this death? Had he and Illian actually been killed and now his journey into the Breach about to begin? Stars shined close from a sky rather than a ceiling. Appearing within bowshot, they lit up the shore and dark sky with soft blue and purple glow that reflected off a thin layer of dew. Ancient trees with trunks the size

of houses rose up into darkness, their roots wild and twisted into the living wall that followed the shore line. A band of lush grass divided the woods and water. Kane could only guess he still lived, but knew this realm was not a part of Aetheria.

It was terribly quiet. Kane listened to the gentle steps of the tiger as it walked towards a tangle of thick roots jutting up from the ground. What would Illian or Therise think of this dream world?

He cleared his throat. It sounded like a violent choke.

A young girl in a dress of vines and leaves sat on a root by the untouched surface of the still water. She shifted around to face him. Whatever she was, only her white face and shoulders looked human while everything else blended into the root. The flow of hair spilling around her delicate shoulders looked like the moon. The life shining from her face made Kane feel like an exhausted old man.

“Hello,” The girl said, her voice youthful and delicate.

“Um, hello.”

“How are you?”

Kane avoided looking at how far down her white skin went into the shroud of vines and branches. His face reddened.

The girl laughed.

“Oh, it’s been so long since I’ve had visitors and forgotten how much fun you all are.”

“Who?”

“All of you out there in the world. You have conquered the world but not your instincts. It is adorable. Come, come. Have a seat.”

The spirit patted the root beside her with a slender hand.

Kane felt hot under his cloak and dropped it to the grass. The tiger sat on the grass but followed him with those emerald eyes.

“You’re not a deer, are you?” The girl asked.

“No,” Kane said, glancing back at the animal.

“Then don’t worry about Vielo. He is very sweet if you are not a deer, so I think you are safe.”

The tiger licked bloody lips.

Kane stared out across the water. Beyond the undisturbed sea a universe shifted. A large green planet partially hidden by the horizon slowly turned while threads of yellow and orange crossed the crimson depths of the sky. Moons slowly drifted around the larger planet while the whole scene appeared lit by a distant sun. It was too rich a scene for him to fully understand the purpose of what moved before him. His farm shirt and pants looked primitive in comparison to such splendor.

The root they sat on rose up and slid gently away from the shoreline. He stiffened, nearly falling off his seat. She laughed, squeezing the back of his arm.

“Don’t worry. If you fall, death will be instant.”

Kane clamped down on the root with both hands. “What is this place?”

“Don’t you want to know who I am?”

“I think I know who you are: Shasla, the mother of all creatures and one of the six who helped create Aetheria.”

“Close. I am Uriel, Shasla’s daughter.”

“Then where is your mother?”

“Gone, like so many other things with time’s passing.”

“So should I worship you or Shasla?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters,” Kane said.

Uriel smiled. Her skin was tight and clean and glowed from the light coming off the cosmic scene before them. He was being toyed with. Or not, he couldn't tell what was happening to him.

“Then you know who I am,” Kane said.

“You are a familiar soul. I see in you the sadness that I carry. Others in Tinder have buried their pain while you cannot escape who you have lost.”

“My grandfather,” Kane said quickly.

“You'll have to tell me about him sometime.”

Kane hadn't told anyone about the missing piece of his heart stolen away by his grandfather's death; not even Illian. Anything besides endurance was something men in Tinder didn't understand or express. Here he was, sharing a living root with a goddess while staring at some otherworldly sea and all she wanted to talk about was the one thing he could never speak of.

“Perhaps, sometime,” Kane said.

Uriel presented a hand, “I'll be here when you wish to speak.”

Kane took the flawless fingers into his own. “Thank you for helping us.”

“Just you for the moment. Your friend will need some guidance if he is to find me as you have.”

“I'll try my best.”

“Good. Off you go.”

Kane felt Uriel's hidden strength fling him off the root. He scrambled as the still water rushed up to him.

Kane woke in the cave wrapped in his cloak. Illian sat by a small fire while a rabbit cooked. A delicious aroma filled the cave. Outside the sun shined golden down on the forest.

"That'll make things easier," Illian said, scratching his tiny beard. "I thought I might have to set your bed on fire to get you up."

"Is that for breakfast? I'll add the bread and cheese but we should eat quickly before your cooking attracts any attention," Kane said, thinking of Vielo, Uriel's tiger.

"We'll get an early start and be out of the forest by sundown, but I want to get going as soon as possible. There's a war to get to."

Kane spoke through a mouthful of rabbit, "What do you think the Mountainbore are like?"

"I don't know. They've always been a danger on the eastern edge of the Empire, savages and beasts in the shape of men is what I've been told.

"That's what I've heard as well. It will be strange fighting against someone without using sticks, won't it?"

Illian nodded, "Killing is what we Achritians did before the Tamarians came, so we'll just join in our people's history of war. As far as I'm concerned, the Mountainborne are just an opponent to slay and obstacle to our glory and riches."

"That sounds good," Kane said. He didn't believe the words, instead picturing a pair of young Mountainborne boys coming down from the Worldgate mountains, discussing what the Tamarians might look like. He and Illian wouldn't meet those two distant strangers with words, but with blades.

Chapter 4

The forest went back to appearing normal in the morning light. No tigers or spirits or gods appeared as Kane followed Illian along the overflowing creek they'd traveled along the night before. Kane just followed his friend past new ponds formed around moss-covered trees and large chunks of cut stone left behind from a distant age. Kane wondered if Shasla had lived when those buildings had stood or where She had gone after leaving Uriel behind. Decaying trunks large enough to walk through lay on their sides, a mountain of fungus and termites. He wanted to tell Illian about what happened to him, but it felt so much like a dream that his doubts kept him silent. He wondered what Illian had dreamed of while Uriel spoke with him by the eternal shore.

Even though Vielo the tiger had appeared behaved, he now wondered at the other animals of the forest flying by or crawling around them. Were the birds obedient to Uriel's control? What about beyond the Whispering Woods, where other gods reigned? At least the trees around them looked normal, though older and larger than anything near Tinder.

They camped on the forest edge, waking to a cold and dreary morning clouded with mist. As the sun burned away the fog, Kane saw rolling hills of grass and rocks appear. Behind them stood the Whispering Woods while to their front lay a land of deep grass and shrub. The exposed sun heated them quickly while a wind blew east. A few birds hovered above them. As they walked, they grew hot as the day passed. Illian stopped at the top of a sloping hill with a good view of the surrounding plains.

“Where are we going?” Kane asked.

“We have to find them. It’s an army, for Shasla’s sake. They’ve got to be pretty easy to find.”

“Is there even a war going on?”

Illian turned around, “There is. An army is out there and we just have to keep going until we find it.”

Doubts settled into Kane’s mind as he watched Illian look west before searching around towards the east. There was nothing around them except grass. Perhaps Illian hadn’t planned this far ahead and believed, as was often the case growing up, that things would just fall into place. This assumption might work in Tinder, but out here the stakes felt much higher to approach the unknown so lightly.

Illian mumbled something.

“What?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. We’ll get there soon.”

Kane picked up a small red wildflower, “You sure? I’ve got half a block of cheese left and there’s barely anything to eat out here.”

“There’s barely anything at all,” Illian said.

Kane moved up beside Illian. The world around them was blank as if this part of Aerithia had been forgotten during the First Building. Wildflowers spread out in every direction with nothing on the horizon. When Kane looked up at the sky, it was so clear he felt like he might suddenly fall upward into the blue expanse. Even the birds kept their distance, flying slowly northeast, towards a thin strand of smoky clouds miles and miles away. There were actually quite a few birds following each other: mostly crows, vultures and other predators.

“Follow the birds,” Kane said.

“What? Why?” Illian asked, still sounding disgruntled.

“Carrion.”

“Of course.”

They ran northeast, brushing through knee high grass down the hill. The day passed, clouds slid out from the west and now closed in on them, sprinkling rain and shading the countryside in a gray. They lost track of the birds in the clouds but continued on.

Kane felt the drizzle and wet grass soak through his clothes. He kept up but let Illian stay in lead to keep his friend from getting much more defensive.

“Illian, we need to slow down a little,” Kane said.

“Not yet, we’re almost there.”

“Illian!” Kane said, stopping.

His friend stopped, leaned his head back and turned around, looking exasperated. “What are you doing? We’re almost there. I’m certain of it.”

Kane wasn’t sure about that last part. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to bump into Mountainborne or a wandering spirit out here. We’re hard to spot within this fallen cloud, but what if an enemy raiding party just so happens to move by and spots us? You remember the stories of Tamarians wiping out villages and whole tribes of them during the last push west? For us they’re stories, but they tell of hatred being the Mountainborne life. That whole kingdom lives for vengeance against the Tamarians and her forgotten allies like our ancestors. Uriel can’t protect us from possessed beasts or maddened spirits.”

“You speaking of Uriel now? What happened to the old ways?”

“She spoke to me in a dream last night,” Kane said.

“Did she tell you where to find the Tamarian army?” Illian asked.

“No.”

“Anything else I should know?” Illian said.

“Not at the moment.” Kane wanted to share the entirety of his experience, but the cold wetness soaking his legs and his friend’s attitude forced the words down.

Illian smiled back with a look that barely hid his impatience. “I’m sorry to anger you, Kane. I just doubt she can help us more than we can help ourselves. We’re being careful now but it won’t matter if the war moves past us.”

“I’ve been thinking about that as well,” Kane said, looking around. The grey mist made it difficult to see anything. They might be running in circles and totally lost by now. Maybe the army was gone and they would become stuck on these plains between safety and war.

“Come on now. We’ll be fine if we keep moving. I’m getting cold with all this standing around.” Illian tugged on Kane’s arm.

A deep moan interrupted their conversation. The sound vibrated across the plain. Kane crouched to put his ear against the ground.

“What are you doing?” Illian said, looking for the source of the sound.

“I’m trying not to get eaten.”

The ground shook under Kane while he lay amongst the grass. Whatever made the noise was moving closer.

“Get down, Illian. Now.”

Illian didn’t get down.

“Illian!” Kane tackled him and they both fell into the wet grass. If it wasn’t for his larger size, Illian would have escaped. Kane covered his mouth to stop the yelling.

Illian grunted and struggled under Kane's body but stopped when a creature larger than the Bonding Tree came into view.

The spirit reminded Kane of Tinder's drunks after a heavy night at the tavern. Every slow step was exaggerated and unsteady. It looked like a mud covered frog propped up on different sized tree trunks for legs. Branches, fence posts, bones, a weather vane and other debris poked through roots which wound all over the thing pulsing with unnatural energy. It looked too large to stand, much less move under any natural law. The air became charged as if lightning might crash down at any instant. The grass shook and blew in wild directions. What looked like eyes glowed pale yellow from the cloud above them like lanterns in the mist. It stopped within thirty paces of Kane and the weakly struggling Illian.

It turned slightly, creaking like a tree bending in the wind. The spirit let out a deafening howl full of pain and sadness. Kane had heard that kind of bleating before when a calf lost its mother. The monstrosity towering above them was a lost child, frightened and alone in the wilderness. Even after the noise was gone, the anguish lingered and Illian cried underneath him. The drizzle turned to hard rain.

The creature bellowed again, searching for them. Kane looked up, wondering if this creature was the result of a soul falling back from the Breach.

Kane gagged as the smell of decay, manure, rotten meat and spoiled food wafted over them. Illian stopped fighting under him. If the abomination saw them, they'd be crushed or gobbled up. Kane prayed to Uriel as the creature stumbled around them. With a confused groan, it moved away, searching for escape and crying out with every step as if nails were driven into its twisted feet.

Illian lay unconscious in the matted grass while rain drenched them. The air retained a sweet scent of lightning and the ground shook slightly at the creature's parting steps.

Kane stood up. The indentation they had left in the wet grass looked like a puddle beside the small ponds left by the spirit's gait. Its wail echoed through the rain.

"Help me up." Illian raised a hand.

Kane pulled him up to standing. Without a word, Illian trudged through the wet grass back to the northeast, going around the pooling craters. The rain didn't matter, it wasn't a cold day and there would be time to dry out. As they walked, Kane's hands shook.

"Are you okay?" Kane asked.

"I'm fine. I felt something pulling me but we fought it off. Thank you for that. We'll need to watch out for each other like that in the future. How'd you survive?"

"I prayed."

"You'll have to teach me that trick."

"It's no trick."

Illian nodded.

Kane jogged with Illian to the northeast. The size of the creature didn't scare him, but the sound it had made tore his heart. It was an odd contradiction to have slaughtered hundreds of animals as a child. After the death of his grandfather, the killing of most animals felt like small acts of revenge. Still, the cries of an orphaned calf brought him to tears at times. The spirit sounded like a helpless creature trapped within a giant moving prison. He pictured the people of Tinder wandering in a lonely and foreign world crying out against the disaster of invasion. If the Mountainborne came, and they would if given the chance, then Therise, Staton, and all the others

would suffer. He would fight and die both to protect them and honor the fearlessness of his ancestors.

Chapter 5

Neither of them spoke the rest of the day, running north until sundown fearing the beast might be following them. Islands of trees appeared among the rolling plains. They hid in one of them for the night. The trees were thick enough to keep most of the wind out and Kane found enough dry wood to start a fire. They used leaves to drink the rain and fill their water skins while their clothes dried. Illian looked shaken from his experience. They sat for a while staring into the flames. The air felt tense, as if Illian's ordeal near the lost spirit exposed something shameful that Kane was never supposed to see. He chuckled. If the day's experience was any indication, more surprises would come.

"What's so funny?" Illian asked.

"All this," Kane said, waving a hand towards the night. "It's exactly what I hoped it would be so far."

"We haven't even made it to the front yet." Illian sighed, "It could be miles away by now."

"Are you sure?"

Illian smiled, "No. As you said, follow the birds. I just hope we get there soon. Thanks for helping me out back there."

Kane smiled, "Of course. We're practically brothers so I'd have fought the thing away if I needed to. Your squirming kept me too busy to be scared."

“You’ll leave that part of this adventure out when we’re sitting around the fire at Tinder telling stories, okay?”

Kane smiled, “We’ll have been brave at all times when I tell of this journey. I can’t wait to be on the other side of all this, armed with memories and stories safely beyond the danger.”

“You say that now. I still can’t believe you actually went through with it.”

“The bonding? I had to or Therise would have killed me.”

“But what about all the other women running around castles and lands yet to be conquered? Ardom had the life of a soldier before becoming an Order priest.”

“What about keeping our honor?” Kane asked.

“I’ll keep mine, but such things don’t matter in war. Ardom said he had to fight and live dirty to survive, but he relished every moment of it.”

“Why don’t you marry him when we get back?”

Illian laughed, “No thanks. If you decide to slip up, I won’t tell Therise.”

Kane dressed, “Something tells me she’d know somehow.”

He found the tied braid still wet in his pocket and ran a finger along the folds of hair. What a strange piece of her to take with him to war. He thought of her waiting for him by the Bonding Tree back home.

Illian tossed a stick onto their meager fire, “We should sleep. I’m hoping to be at war tomorrow.”

The same gray mist and cold greeted them in the morning, but this time it lingered. After a few hours of walking they reached a small rise. The ground went from wet grass to mud

churned by thousands and thousands of steps marching east. They followed the trail on the edge where the grass wasn't beaten down.

Kane spotted the first body. It was a soldier stripped of all his equipment. The large bloody gash from his neck across his chest looked to be a couple days old, if men and deer bled the same.

"What is it?" Illian asked. He looked more shocked at the sight than Kane expected, as if the dead man might suddenly rise up and attack them.

"He's smaller than I thought. The only reason you know he's a Mountainborne is because of the face and tattoos."

The corpse lay sprawled on his back. There didn't appear to be much of a difference between the enemy of the Empire and any other man. The Mountainborne were killable, small. If this was the savage enemy, their adventure might already be over. Kane had an advantage of inches and pounds over the dead soldier.

Other Mountainborne dead lay in larger groups the further west they went. The muddy ground turned red and more torn up with every step. Arrow shafts stuck in oddly organized rows of casualties. The ground looked scorched as the surface appeared to have been flipped upside down. Discarded weapons, all broken or useless, lay scattered everywhere in a solid line that extended into the mist along a north and south line. A large Tamarian pyre smoldered to Kane's right. A tattered blue banner splashed with white measuring scales stood against the gray sky. There couldn't have been more than the ashes of fifty men mashed together so it must have been a great victory for the empire. When they continued on a little farther, more and more smoking pits appeared in the mist, each marked with a similar banner. Perhaps this victory had not been nearly as easy as Kane first thought.

Scavengers searched the battlefield, even though there didn't appear to be much left to take. Scattered bits of clothing, roughly cut statues of the Mountainborne dragon god and debris lay across the quiet battlefield, all of it useless. They passed the edge of a mass grave. The bodies had been stacked like wood and left to rot. Through the mist Kane saw that they were Mountainborne casualties, some had missing limbs, or their stomachs cut open while others were missing their heads; all lay contorted, frozen in agony. Hoofprints lay all around the southern edge of the main fighting line. Kane could almost feel the ground rumble underneath him when he saw the splintered tips of lances in an erratic "V" pattern around them. The bones of a horse and rider lay crumpled in a separate pyre nearby. The shredded earth squeezed out blood with every step.

Rather than honor the dead by burning their bodies, the Tamarians had pushed the Mountainborne slain further into the ground, strengthening the connection between soul and flesh. These dead would haunt this battlefield lost and hopeless forever. The unburned bodies nearly hummed with trapped life.

The ground all around them looked like an open sore. As on the western side, the signs of an army on the move continued east. The stumps of cut trees acted as splintered guideposts leading onward into the mist. Grass appeared between rows of shallow troughs cut into the ground from the steps of thousands of boots and hooves. Ruts cut by wheels filled with water and blood. Illian suddenly pulled Kane to the ground.

"What is it?" Kane whispered, looking around.

"Quiet."

"You're not going to need holding down again, are you?"

"Listen!" Illian said, looking forward.

Kane sunk lower, trying to keep his cheek above the bloody ground. He found the sickly sweet smell bubbling up from their hiding place tolerable compared to the grotesque odors from their encounter with the large spirit.

The air grew cold, the sparse grass twitched around them in an erratic pattern similar to the wailing hulk back on the plains.

Kane only heard his steady breathing. Whatever mix of water and blood soaking the ground seeped through his clothes. Muffled voices nearby spoke a language Kane didn't understand. The three or four shapes in the mist moved and crouched over the occasional body searching for anything useful.

“You're an ass,” Kane said quietly.

“Sorry. I thought it was something else.”

Calls of surprise and warning turned to panicked screams. Frantic steps echoed through the ground. Kane looked up, seeing a woman missing an arm stumble by. The sound of swishing, like a broom against a stone, followed her. A glistening shadow shambled by, rippling the air. It looked nothing like the lost spirit at all, but a creature of water with a tail and narrow dripping snout. The body glistened in the limited light like moving ice which barely held its shape.

The spirit swiped at the girl. Her body melted under the blow, leaving a gurgling head attached to a neck and one arm falling to the ground. The legs ran forward a few more steps before falling down. The spirit stopped and fell to what might have been knees, rather than a blob of flesh. The elongated head split into seven gelatinous tendrils and swept up the rest of the body. Kane closed his eyes and pushed his face down. If this was the world outside Tinder, he

was going to need Uriel every day until he returned safely home. He wanted to be with Therise and cursed himself and Illian for being in this situation.

Kane's body tensed, wanting to flee, but he breathed and regained in control of himself. More scavengers yelled behind them and the spirit was up and bounding towards the sound. They waited a few breaths before getting up. Red mud stained the length of their clothes.

Illian looked shaken and tried to smear off the mud before giving up. "I guess there are scavengers of all sorts following the Tamarians. Let's go before that thing comes back."

"Agreed."

Chapter 6

A beautiful morning purged the memories of the previous day. Even though there was much Kane wanted to say about his fear, Illian either ignored his questions or gave him short answers. The men of Tinder didn't speak about that which they could simply endure, so after a time Kane just gave up.

When they reached the edge of the Tamarian camp, Kane's spirit was high and Illian looked ready to lock arms and dance around. They didn't celebrate since there might have been soldiers watching. So far it had been dodging spirits and getting dirty and Kane felt especially filthy compared to the clean and bright camp. Fighting against something substantial and shaped like a man sounded like a reward for the strange things that had happened to them so far. They stood near the camp for a time.

"Would you look at that?" Illian said.

Hundreds of clean blue and white tents stood in neat rows on the plain. It was more of a city than a campsite, holding tens of thousands of soldiers and their supplies. Dozens of fires sent thin lines of smoke up while mounted and foot patrols marched around its border.

Kane and Illian walked slowly towards the picket lines. Men carried themselves with the contained wrath of professional soldiers. While the camp appeared full and cramped, there was no doubt that every man inside was healthy, well trained and fed. Kane couldn't wait to join the ranks of the Empire's finest on their journey east to glory and conquest. They walked towards the closest tent.

“Halt!”

A tall soldier in shining armor and brandishing a halberd strode towards them. He wore a blue tunic with the crescent moon and waves of Tamaria. A full helmet covered the face.

“We're here to join the army,” Illian said.

“Are you now? Escaped your mummies and daddies to become heroes, did you?”

“That's exactly right,” Kane said, staring at the soldier. He needed to show his fearlessness from this moment onward.

The soldier laughed, “Well then, you can go join the rest of the trash that's washed up since we left Tamaria. There are fewer of them now after the last battle, but there always seems to be more of you lurking about.”

“We're honorable men from Achritia province ready to serve the Emperor on the battlefield.”

“Achritians! When did your fathers decide fighting was better than farming again? I thought we beat that warrior spirit out of your kind long ago.”

Kane stepped forward, “We are here to fight and nothing else. Show us where we can perform our duties or get out of the way.”

“Your duties are waiting for you back home. This is no game, children. The Mountainborne have been under our boot so long they’re born with tread on their backs. No one knows what happened beyond the Worldgate Mountains but they’ve got some fight in them.

Kane waved a dismissive hand, “Do you think we’ve wandered through the plains, dodged spirits and lived like animals if we weren’t prepared to fight? Give us a sword and an enemy, and we’ll show you what Achritians can do.”

Another soldier strolled up to the conversation. In his armor he looked the twin of the other, but with a rounder accent.

“What are you doing with these heroes of the empire?” The second asked the first.

“Well, I was just about to show them to their assigned quarters,” answered the first.

Illian winked at Kane.

“Ah yes, Emperor Tibrias will leap into his carriage at the news that you two have arrived,” the first soldier said.

“I can see you both were conscripted for your jesting,” Kane said.

“This one has wit,” said the first, “We pass the time with humor, but our ability to skewer is how we earn our bread.”

Kane’s stomach rumbled at the thought of food.

“I know just the place for them,” The second said, pointing a finger into the air. “The Dogs are always recruiting and they are the proudest regiment in the army.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” replied the first. “Men of your talent are sure to fit in with the other volunteers there. It’s a dangerous assignment but we still tell stories of their deeds from the last battle.”

“They take in anyone and you won’t even have to clean up,” said the second.

Kane looked at Illian, “Well? Their company has to be better than this.”

“Lead on,” Illian said to the soldiers.

“Yes, of course. Forgive this humble soldier for his lack of manners,” said the first soldier, making an exaggerated bow.

“I’ll take them,” said the second.

Inside, the camp grew more impressive. Huge enclosed carts with locked iron doors stood silent behind a circle of braziers letting off green smoke. A few men in gold robes walked along the outskirts, sprinkling salt and creating a beaten circle around the carts which looked like prison cells for two dozen men. The priests didn’t look up from their duties as the soldier led Kane and Illian by with hurried steps.

Well beyond the strange wagons, the camp hummed with activity. From makeshift tents smiths, cooks, apothecaries and other supporting crews worked away as if they occupied a large market square rather than a grassy field at the edge of the Empire. Outside one tent a large bellied cook watched over several pots over open fires. At each station Mountainborne slaves dropped or peeled potatoes. One of them looked up at Kane, showing three teeth in a smile. The Mountainborne’s hair was tattered, with patches torn out and bruises all over his arms, covering tribal marks and tattoos. The slaves wore potato sacks tied together with rope. Kane saw glossy black eyes that looked like they belonged to a spider peering back at him.

The Mountainborne all looked nearly human. But something about the enemy of the Empire and the threat they might pose to Tinder inspired hatred within Kane. The enemy didn't deserve pity or kindness as such luxuries had no place in war. Doing battle with the Mountainborne was going to be easier than he thought.

"We're almost there," the soldier said. "I must apologize for the behavior of my companion. Guard duty gets rather dull when there's nothing to guard against."

Illian asked, "What about the spirits? I figure with the countless dead you'd leave a haunted trail behind you."

"The Order takes care of us."

"Why is that?" Kane asked.

"We Tamarians have our ashes sent into the sky or sea to escape the Breach. Who will be your guide through the Breach?"

"Uriel," Kane said quickly.

They passed a pavilion consisting of five colored sections: blue, gold, purple black and brown. A robed statue stood under each band of the tent. Most were men holding their representative symbol. Kane guessed Uriel was the one in the middle as she was the only statue of a woman. All the others just blended together.

"Do you recognize any of the others?" The soldier stopped and gestured towards the Order's tent.

Kane shook his head. He stared at the familiar stone face of Uriel while the soldier went on about the various gods the Tamarians worshiped. Kane had only been invited to visit one otherworldly lair so the four robed men didn't matter in his mind.

The statue of Uriel looked something like the god Kane had actually seen, but the likeness did little for the real thing. He thought about bragging of his encounter with the real Uriel but thought better of it. The consequences of speaking about the gods were unknown in this new and varied company. Besides, perhaps it had just been a dream as Uriel hadn't visited him since that first night in the Whispering Woods.

“Stop here for a prayer before battle and make sure you include Asheroth in your prayers. Uriel can intercede on your behalf, son, but the choice of life or death is his judgment alone.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Kane said. He'd ask Uriel whether or not that was true if he saw her again.

They passed by a hundred or so large warhorses grazing in a fenced pasture. Their silver coats and white manes gave them a ghostly appearance, though their muscles showed tremendous power. Kane pictured his father selling off all his children and half of Tinder for such an animal.

“What are those horses for?” Illian asked.

“Don't even look at them. They are the mounts of the Tamarian knights known as the Emperor's Wave. You haven't seen anything until they complete a charge against the enemy. It is a tide of glittering steel that sweeps aside all resistance. They single handedly broke the line a couple of days ago with only the loss of one of their own and caused a lovely route. The general's son rides with them; they live and fight on a higher level. We are all lower than the grass those horses feed on.”

Kane wasn't interested in horses, unless he could eat one. His stomach rumbled again.

At the furthest edge of the camp the guard stopped.

“Here we are,” the soldier said.

“Here? You brought us to the other side of camp as if playing a joke?” Illian asked, clenching his fists.

“Not at all. Your new friends are masters of disguise and camouflage.” The Tamarian soldier kicked something in the grass. “Up, dog!”

A boy several years younger than Kane popped up and looked around, “Where did she go?”

“There are no true women outside of camp for scoundrels like you.”

“Then where has your mother gone? We were having such a lovely time.”

The Tamarian kicked the boy again. “My mother’s a fine whore and too good for the likes of you. Take these pups and get them situated.”

The boy looked over, “At least you found us a couple of big ones this time around.”

“Just keep them with your lot. I don’t want to see you mongrels wandering around until we move camp.”

The boy put a closed fist against his unkempt hair and stuck out his tongue, “Yes, your holy liege!”

The soldier threatened another blow before strolling back to the main Tamarian camp.

The boy was as muddy and worn as Kane was, but even now he felt defiance spilling out of this new acquaintance, along with the smell of not being washed in weeks. He wasn’t sure what color the boy’s hair was, as it had grass, dirt and who knew what else tangled within it. Whatever his clothes had been before, they all looked dark brown now. Kane was surprised to see only a small knife on a belt as the boy’s weapon.

“So what’s your name?” Kane asked.

“Chubs. The Dogs are over there.” Chubs pointed somewhere behind him, then lay back down in the grass.

“That’s it?” Illian asked.

“That’s it,” Chubs said, now hidden again.

“What do you think?” Illian asked.

“Can’t hurt to look,” Kane said.

If Kane wasn’t thinking mainly of food, where he was going to sleep or how many baths it would take to get the caked dirt off of him, he would have found a spot by Chubs and slept through the rest of the day. The breeze and sun reminded him of his quiet moments back at the altar in Tinder. He felt off balance by the experiences of the past couple days and a quiet nap sounded wonderful.

The Dogs lived and acted exactly as the name suggested. Kane and Illian stood at the border just beyond a small rise. For being the most glorious regiment in the army and full of warriors, Kane thought the scene looked more like a prison riot. Brown was everywhere as mud, leather and wood seemed to hide the filthy men running about. Rickety shelters stood propped up with wooden poles but still drooped. Hundreds of men and a few greasy women sounded extremely drunk and looked the part. Kane easily spotted the girls who sold themselves instantly. Excess of makeup mixed with smeared dirt made them look like discarded dolls among the tanned skin and dirty fingers of their customers. Some soldiers fought over food, for seats surrounding the few large fires or just to fight. The ragged banner hanging limply before them was smeared with dirt and other substances. Kane and Illian covered their mouths as the stench of old sweat, vomit and alcohol wafted out from the campsite like a protective barrier. At the end of all society, this had to be the result.

“Hey! We got new pups!” A voice cried out. Fifty nearby ruffians immediately looked up from their food or sleep and towards Illian and Kane with predatory eyes.

Kane looked at Illian. Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea.

Chapter 7

Kane had imagined his test of manhood for years, but this was something entirely different. As the Dogs crept closer, Illian took a step back. Kane grabbed his arm.

“We got to fight our way in, just like any other pack of animals.”

Illian tried to jerk the arm free. “I'm not dying here. Not like this.”

“They won't kill us but if they know we won't fight, we'll never find a place here and the Tamarians won't take us back. This is it, Illian.”

“I hate it when you're right.”

Illian put out a hand and Kane shook it. Then they charged. The first attacker, a hunched Dog covered in a black beard, went for Kane's legs and missed. Kane kicked him across the face while throwing punches at three others who joined the fray. He lost sight of Illian. Most tried tackling Kane, but he drove them either to the ground or beat them back with every bit of his strength. Kane felt one latch onto his back so he fell hard against the ground, feeling hot breath push past his ear as the Dog let go.

Others came and one by one Kane felt his limbs locked by five or six Dogs, eventually pinning him to the ground. Kane fought with everything he had. Hands reached into all his pockets and the sack he carried. Others struck him across the face and body while kicks battered his sides. Once finished, they dragged him further into the camp. The noise, smell and pain felt

like he was being dragged into a sewer so rancid it kept the rats away. A clean sky and healthy trees around the camp looked like paradise just beyond his reach.

Illian appeared beside him as the hollering mob pulled them through puddles to the camp's center. A single tent occupied a clearing amongst the half shelters and dirt. The Dogs pushed them forward and threw Kane to his knees. Four did the same to Illian. Despite gagging with every painful breath and feeling blood trickle down his nose, Kane felt like he had passed his first test. There was something proudly rebellious about his experience with the Dogs so far. They did what they wanted and saw smiles all around him when he looked. This was a game to them rather than an initiation or punishment.

Kane continued to struggle against the arms that held him, but it was more for presentation than fighting back. Leftover animal bones, broken glass and shreds of cloth littered the space between them and the entrance to the tent. It was small compared to the ones in the Tamarian camp and leaning to one side.

A man not much larger than Kane's father strode out and stood tall in front of him. He was the cleanest of all the Dogs Kane had yet seen and wore a mismatch of uniform pieces sewn together into a motley tunic over chainmail. Different plates covered one shoulder, elbow and knee while he wore a single metal boot beside a leather one. The armor and weapons he wore looked thrown together from the army's leftovers. Even the face, underneath a leather cap, looked like the result of different skins sewn together with scars and age. Holes from stitches, wrinkles and old wounds gathered around eyes sharper than a flying arrow. His mouth, curled in a sneer from an old scar, revealed jagged yellow teeth nearly broken away but still sharp. If it wasn't for the cold wisdom of the eyes, the man looked like a horror mothers spoke of to disobedient children. A hand missing a ring and forefinger rested on the pommel of a sheathed

broadsword. A small hatchet hung from a belt loop and other knives dangled about from homemade loops and buckles.

“What have we here?” The man asked. He rasped with a damaged voice, but which still carried tremendous power and confidence.

“Sir Boil, we have new recruits from the Tamarian camp,” a man said, pushing Kane forward.

Kane immediately stood up head and shoulders above Boil, who looked up at him indifferently. Illian joined Kane’s side. Boil grabbed Kane by the cheek and looked up into his teeth as if examining an animal. When he let go, Kane spit blood onto the ground. Boil glanced over at Illian.

Boil turned around back into his tent. “Good enough. Get them some gruel and a place to lie down.”

“That’s it?” Illian asked

Boil looked back and chuckled, “Not at all.”

The mob laughed and dispersed. Kane checked for the braid. His heart jumped when he found it missing. Therise was going to kill him if he didn’t return it to her. Illian looked ready to cry when a boy older than Chubs with the same youthful look but with black hair approached them. “We haven’t lost the war yet, boys. Buck up.” The boy rolled a toothpick in this mouth. “You all look like the world’s just ended. Follow me.”

“Name’s Slick. I’m Boil’s first officer and his stand in when necessary.”

Slick walked them through the camp as it returned to its previous state of disorder.

“What is this?” Illian asked. “This is nothing like an army.”

Slick laughed, “And that’s how we want it to be. The Dogs are the prisoners, deviants and all the other elements of Tamaria that can be sent to die for a good cause. If we live like animals, we also fight like animals. Every Tamarian emperor has believed in final redemption on the battlefield. The Dogs are the most storied regiment in history of the Tamarian army. While some barons have withheld troops or refrained from traveling to the further reaches of the Empire, the Dogs have been everywhere. Windred, the emperor’s son, leads the army now and he hates us after we saved his life during the last campaign.”

“Where was that?” Illian asked.

“The northern coast about six hundred miles from here. A spirit had gotten pulled into a man proclaiming to be Zemran the sea god reborn and started a region wide rebellion. The Order heard of it and sent an army to purge the tainted. We’re treated well enough if we survive, so it’s better than having nothing. The Order calls it a chance for salvation. We call it living out our miserable lives as brutally as we like it. What did you do to end up here?”

“Ran away from home,” Illian said.

“You all just looking for a fight and a couple stories for the ladies?”

Kane nodded.

Slick put a hand on their shoulders. Kane was surprised the young man held such a high post. He might have been a few years older than Kane but acted like a leader. “Boys, soon you’ll get all the fighting you can handle. If you’re lucky you’ll get a couple scars and a few coins for your trouble. Most here aren’t that lucky. We came here to fight and there’s word of another army a few days march east. I don’t know where they keep popping up from, but we’ll cut them down every time.”

“How did you end up here?” Illian asked.

“I killed some people, just like most of us here. You can tell the difference between those who have slit a throat and those who merely picked the pocket.”

“What about our things?” Kane asked, thinking of Therise’s braid.

“Don’t worry about that. Once you survive a battle everything will be returned to you.”

“When will we get that chance?”

Slick smiled, “Soon enough. There’s a fire on the northern edge of the camp where you can stay. I’ll be along in a bit. I think Chubs has returned, so he can take care of you.”

Slick stopped speaking to Kane and walked away, leaving them alone in the evening light. A clatter of metal on metal sounded like a dented bell some ways behind them. For an instant it sounded like home.

“Get your slop!” A voice cried out. Several rough men and a barely dressed girl nearly ran them over as they galloped towards the makeshift kitchen entering the camp. Kane wandered over to their appointed fire and slumped onto a log, exhausted. The events of the day had been more tiring than any harvest he had worked back in Tinder. The hunger returned, but the noise coming from where all the Dogs ate strangled his appetite.

“I’m going to die,” Illian said.

“Don’t give up now. We could go enjoy some slop,” Kane said.

“I’d rather eat grass. I doubt there’s a single fork in this camp and have you seen any kind of water around here? We’ll die of a sickness before any kind of battle.”

Chubs appeared, rubbing his eyes and yawning. “Has the food gotten here yet?”

Kane looked up, “You didn’t hear all that noise? We were nearly trampled by those thugs trying to get to their meal.”

“That’s not food. Whatever’s leftover and wasted by the Tamarians trickles down to us in cauldrons that never get cleaned or are used for all sorts of things. If you can survive on that stuff, you’ll survive any sickness in the empire.”

Night settled, leaving everything around the fire in shadow. Stars appeared like powdered glass as the noise at the slop trough tapered off. Kane looked up and noticed that the sky miles from home looked the same as if he was standing in Tinder’s fields. He felt the emptiness of his pocket, picturing himself being home with Therise and staring at this same sky. Would the doubt in his decision to stay haunt him like his choice to leave did now? The pace of crops compared to war seemed very different. The events of the day hadn’t given him a chance to think. What Slick had said was already partly true. It had occurred to him that the free chaos of the Dogs did have a wider sense of freedom when compared to the rigidity of the Tamarian army. If they had found jobs in that camp, he’d probably be peeling potatoes beside Mountainborne slaves right now.

Three men carrying sacks, Slick being one of them, appeared at the fire’s edge.

“What took you all so long?” Boil asked, appearing out of the darkness and taking a seat on a fallen tree.

“Easy, boss, good thieves are only known for their results.” A loaf of bread flew across the fire and into Boil’s outstretched hand.

“Hey, pups. You two hungry?” Chubs asked.

Illian nodded and more bread was tossed across the fire. Kane nearly dropped the steaming loaf when it hit his hands. It smelled wonderful.

The three sat down on the opposite side of the fire. Chubs spoke between mouthfuls, “We’re brothers. That’s Slick, the oldest and Jarp, the youngest.” Kane nodded. They looked nothing alike but if more food was involved, Kane could agree to just about anything.

Slick tossed over a water skin to Kane. “You hold onto that. I heard they took your other one.”

“Where are our other things? There are some personal items I want to take into battle with me.” Kane said.

“The gods, new or old, don’t care what happens to you while you live,” Boil said.

“Mine do,” Kane replied.

Boil nodded, drool slipping through his scarred lower lip while he chewed. “I didn’t know we had a priest in our humble company. What carved idol do you serve? The only religious symbols I wear are hard enough to deflect an arrow.”

“A strand of hair,” Kane said.

“From a girl?”

“Yes, she’s my bonded from home. It was a gift the night I left for war.”

Boil laughed a deep, fatherly laugh. “Now we share a common understanding. The only thing you need to worship as a man is a woman. You are much wiser than you look, Kane Brennan.”

Boil changed logs and took a seat next to Kane. The leader of the Dogs looked beaten down but the nearby air immediately changed. It wasn’t fear that Kane detected welling up inside him, but admiration for the old man sitting in their midst. Kane felt as if a favorite uncle from had just surprised him with a visit. The crisscrossed scars and half missing ear didn’t look so frightening anymore.

“What else did you bring?” Boil asked Slick.

“All kinds, boss. The guards are getting lazy.”

“I love overconfidence,” Boil said catching a large leg of meat.

Jarp stretched out on the grass by the fire. “What’s the news, boss?”

“I just got the word from the Tamarians. We’re invading Mountainborne country within the week.”

Chapter 8

Boil chewed, sending bits of meat and spit from his mouth. “I’m surprised you two haven’t skipped camp by now.”

“I wasn’t aware we could just walk away,” Kane said, feeling much better with some kind of food in him.

“You can’t, officially. The Dogs operate on shame and heckling if someone decides to run. If that fails, there are constant Tamarian patrols on the lookout for deserters. We risk stealing all the food we need and you’re free to leave at any time, but if you get caught...”

“Don’t get caught,” Jarp said, picking his teeth, “we’re all criminals and the Tamarians are much crueller than they appear.”

“Why are you being so kind to us?” Kane asked Boil, “We aren’t murderers or thieves and yet you treat us as guests.”

Boil shrugged, “I’m getting soft, perhaps. We live in a bloody world and you two are quite clean underneath all that muck. I have a hundreds of killers in my ranks, but few good men.”

“That seems pretty trusting for your station,” Illian said.

“I can kill you and no one will say anything. The rules of the Dogs are simple: you live on a wide plateau where you are free to act as you please. Get greedy, you fall off. Since you two are farmers, I’m guessing you both haven’t ever handled a real weapon.”

Boil yawned. Everyone left besides Kane and Illian. “You’re welcome to stay by the fire tonight. On my word, nothing will happen to you.”

Kane believed him.

Boil stood up and stretched, “Get some sleep boys, things tend to move quickly when there’s a chance for battle.”

Kane found a soft patch of grass just beyond the fire and lay down. The warmth of fire combined with the cool touch of the ground sent him right to sleep.

“Wake up.”

Kane opened his eyes to Uriel’s young face lying inches away from his. She didn’t breathe, but her eyes radiated light much like those of her tiger sitting behind them watching the eternal sea. He sat up. Even for his second visit, the sense of space and weight of the astral bodies inspired awe. To their movements, Aetheria was simply a speck drifting dust.

Uriel rose up beside him, “The gears of the universe.”

She cuddled up beside him. A shock ran through Kane’s body. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone had gotten so physically close. Even the brief meeting of lips with Therise seemed more like a collision than intentional contact. It was hard to relax with another body against his, even if that body felt like soft leaves and smelled of flowers. At his old age of nineteen, he had never really touched anyone beyond a friendly handshake or punch to the gut.

Uriel didn't appear to be trying to seduce him, he thought, but the huddling beside him felt like an awfully human gesture for a god. On the other hand, she looked close to his age and was quite lovely in an ageless way. Beauty and wisdom was a good combination in a girl, which was one of the reasons why Therise's assault on his person before he left hadn't been so intolerable. This strange attention seemed a bit disturbing, as if he was a pet to be called upon when the master needed comforting. Since his present company was pretty, soft and harmless he didn't mind. Therise was miles and miles away. He pictured this situation playing out with his bonded, just on a fence looking out over ripe fields of wheat swaying in the wind rather than the endless twirling of galaxies.

"I can almost hear you thinking," Uriel said, "Planets make less noise than that mind of yours."

"I'm sorry," Kane said, looking down at the flowing silver of Uriel's hair. Did she know his thoughts? Was this even real?

"I've been here hundreds times with a hundreds of comforting arms. You boys are awfully easy to predict after a while. The next time we meet you'll think of giving me a kiss."

"I hardly think..." heat rushed to Kane's face.

"See?" Uriel reached up and tapped Kane's nose with a finger. "Adorable."

Kane's shifted on the grass. Uriel laughed and snuggled in closer.

"Are you a dream?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think. I've followed your mother all my life and now it's just another deception. She's gone and you're here, and yet you only want to hear about my grandfather."

“If I’m a dream, then what’s the harm in just talking?”

Kane considered this. In Tiner, men didn’t speak about emotions unless it was satisfaction after a successful harvest or they were too drunk to remember it. They had a god assigned to them by the Order, but he was pretty sure they all worshiped endurance rather than Uriel.

“Wouldn’t you know everything about me if you were a dream?”

“Oh, you’re no fun. There is so much you want to say, but cannot. Tell me.”

“I can’t.”

“If you share the story of your grandfather with me, I’ll tell you everything about Shasla.” Kane felt the words begin to rise up his throat, but they were denied by a culture of silence. “Another time,” he said.

“I’m not the one hurrying towards the Breach,” Uriel said.

“Do you know my fate?” Kane asked, excitement pushing past the stuck words. “Should I have stayed in Tinder?”

“No one knows what the future holds except swindlers and liars. My mother thought she knew the thoughts of men enough to direct their steps, and it ended up costing us everything.”

For a time only the heavy puffs from the tiger gave any sound. Kane thought of pursuing the topic further, but the sudden coldness of the air suggested otherwise. A single leaf flipped by his face. He was torn between remaining with Uriel who was wrapped around his arm and reaching out for the leaf before it upset the crystal stillness of the water before them. The moment before impact felt like a stone falling against a sheet of glass, but nothing happened. He watched the tiny speck of green touch lightly against the surface; an insignificance among drifting stars.

“We saw something outside the forest,” Kane said.

“It was pretty sad, wasn’t it?” Uriel said, sounding distant.

“And very large. It nearly crushed us while Illian was squirming away underneath me.”

“Every soul wants nothing more than to go home but that luxury is gone now. The results are usually tragic.”

“Who was it before?” Kane asked.

“Someone like you, I imagine. Hopes and potential rejected from the Breach like trash.”

“Is there anything to be done?”

“Give it a second chance of release through fire.”

“What about the one who seemed to drink up people?” Kane asked.

“I do not know the minds of such things, as they are each distortions of a tormented individual. Have you ever gotten drunk?”

Kane shook his head.

“You will at some point. Enough strong drink lets out the person hidden inside. You’ll see someone you thought you knew become violent, peaceful, exuberant or moody without any explanation. In the torment of the Breach, so much is revealed through suffering that most cannot handle it, becoming so twisted they are no longer aware of who they are or what they’ve become.”

“Who are you when you’re drunk?” Kane asked.

“You trying to take advantage of me?”

“Uh, no?”

“A wise answer.”

Against his side, Uriel looked like a child wanting to asleep as close to another person as possible. Kane wasn't exactly sure what to do next.

"The gears of the universe," Kane said.

Uriel sighed, "It's already nearly morning again. I'm having a hard time keeping up with you through all the muck out there. Be careful out there and speak to me next time we meet."

"Why me?" Kane asked.

"Why not you?"

Kane jolted awake to the sound of metal banging against metal. Ira and his bell didn't sound so bad in comparison to what thing was being beaten to rouse the Dogs. Kane shivered in the pre-dawn cold and stood up. The fire smoldered as Boil and few others ate leftovers from the previous night. Kane found a seat, feeling the bloody mud from the battlefield sticking to his clothes and hair. He hadn't been this filthy in years. Illian wore the same sad look on his face when he sat down on the other side of the fire. Unlike his friend, Kane felt well rested after the peaceful night on the eternal shore.

"You two look cheerful in the mornings," Boil said through a mouthful, "Eat up, we've got lots of work to do."

"Like what? This isn't much of camp to clean up and no one has anything to take with them."

"True, but the Tamarians do not waste their manpower. It's one of the many reasons why they keep us around."

"How many reasons are there?" Kane asked.

"Two. Labor and killing."

The work began right after breakfast. Kane followed the forms of Dogs as they went into the Tamarian camp under the eyes of soldiers standing around fires. Some units chose to collapse and store their tents without help but most sat idly by, eating their own meals and watching. Several times Kane was pushed aside by a Tamarian only to have a slave take his place at uncoiling string or folding a tent. His inexperienced hands fumbled most tasks at first, but he quickly caught on to the process. Being just above the Mountainborne was insulting, but he was in no mood to protest. The dark and cold muted any desire to argue and he slipped into following the examples of his fellows. Everyone else around him, Tamarian and Mountainborne, shared the same sentiment and went about their business in silence. Orders were only given in whispers as if each word cost the speaker warmth and effort. He moved with the army across the camp, preparing one tent or cart at a time, while all around the mass of humanity prepared to move. The possibility of just being able to walk unburdened felt like a reward as the tasks dragged on into daylight.

Without a word, the Dogs went from furious work to wandering back to their section of the camp. Under the morning sun, Kane and his group passed by the Order's pavilion.

"That place is always the last to go, the slowest to store and gods help any fool who tries to lend a hand," Boil said as they passed.

Kneeling soldiers crowded around their respective gods to receive blessings, looking like beetles in their steel helmets back-slung shields. To Kane, the stone statues of the gods besides Uriel each wore the dissatisfied face of his father.

"The Tamarians don't act very religious," Kane said as he followed Boil into the Dogs' camp, "Out of an army of thousands there are less than a hundred believers there."

“There are more important things going on right now besides religion, Kane, like breakfast.”

Unlike the heavy labor of the Tamarian camp, everyone threw their belongings into a single cart as Chubs attached the front to Tibrius the drooling ox named after the emperor. Kane got a hand on his sack and retrieved Therise’s braid before throwing his belongings in with everything else. He would return the token to her eventually, even if it was the only thing he brought back to Tinder with him. After brushing a finger along the hair, he went back to work.

After Kane waited in place for what felt like half the day, the march and his adventure east finally began. While the Tamarian soldiers, knights, archers, slavers and support crews marched in tightly organized groups, the Dogs walked in a loose formation with a dozen mounted Tamarians watching them. Kane kept with Illian and Boil near the front of the Dogs and saw only rows of armed men ahead of him. As the day heated up the march became quite pleasant. A western wind pushed his unwashed odor away and fluttered the hundreds of banners and flags which marked the battalions and regiments of the army. All of the flags were blue and silver with slight variations in trim and iconography. Every bird and predator Kane could imagine seemed represented, from diving cloudhawks to boars and rams, all looking angry.

The gentle dips and rises of the grasslands continued on without interruption, as did the routine for setting up and tearing down camp. For several days they repeated the pattern. Eventually the army stepped onto a wide paved road heading east. Kane smelled as bad if not worse than his companions but he got used to it, growing more concerned with eating and sleeping than his appearance.

He spent his time talking with Boil and the others while trying to understand the Dogs. No one in the Tamarian army liked them and Kane guessed they were allowed to live because of

the Emperor's directive enforced by the Order. He had no idea such a group of people existed who used their limited freedom to flaunt their rebellion. At first it seemed like it was just a show that prisoners used to defy their captors but as time went the idea seemed more like a creed. They took pride in being one word or glance away from a beating, from fighting over the Tamarian scraps of food and wearing filth like a badge. Life was cheap and the Dogs laughed first and moved on quickly. When the Tamarians tossed the lifeless and broken body of a deserter from the Dogs at their feet, most forgot about the man immediately and went back to their business of acting like wild children. As head of the Dogs, Boil was treated more like a father than a leader and he embraced the role. Kane wondered how this contradiction of freedom in captivity would survive the stresses of battle.

The filth got worse the further east they went. Gentle hills became small cliffs surrounded by shrubs. Every night Kane spent some time trying to connect with Uriel or Therise, depending on who he wanted to appease more at the moment of prayer. He focused on the bloody speck hidden under the skin of finger from that night in Tinder. His bonding felt like it had happened to another person whose memory he only shared. His empty dreams at night turned to doubts during the day. Did physical distance matter for a spiritual connection? Instead of praying he spent nights before sleep brushing his finger along Therise's braid. Despite his efforts, the hair of his bonded grew just as dirty as everything else he touched.

Illian didn't talk much. Kane watched him just keep up with everyone and not make any more than required conversation. There were no spirit sightings, but only rumors of their presence in the area. At times the Order came through with pouches of what looked like green salt to throw into the fires to keep the spirits away. Since nothing came, Kane guessed the stuff worked.

When Kane asked Boil about the Order and the iron wagons, or the hairless and tattooed figures that occasionally walked through the Dogs' camp, he said, "It's all for show. The Order toys with unknowable things and call it knowledge. You know where all the Mountainborne slaves go when they've either gotten too slow or weak? Into the carts. It's no spirit that needs ten horses to cart it around, but a monster."

At the end of a week, rumors of contact filtered down to the back of the army's column. Kane sat beside the road with Illian when Slick came running up.

"We're setting up camp here. The Tamarian scouts just came back with reports of Mountainborne movements. It's going to be a real scrap."

Kane looked over at Illian, "You hear that? We're going to have a chance to fight."

"Finally," Illian said, "How many do you think you'll kill?"

"I don't know, perhaps fifty, maybe a hundred?"

"You keep talking like that they'll make you the new Mountainborne king. I'm just so tired of walking that I'll punch a bear to stay in the same place for more than a day."

"I understand that, I've been setting up tents in my sleep."

The Dogs moved with a new energy in getting the camp prepared. Before sundown neat rows of Tamarian tents occupied a square of the vast rocky plain. They worked around soldiers hastily gathering up arrows and large steel tower shields polished to a mirror shine. The downward looks and sense of arrogance Kane felt each time he ventured into the Tamarian camp was gone, replaced instead with a professional coldness of purpose. Men sharpened swords as if that one task made up the entire world. From out of raised tents emerged fully armed men, concealed behind plate and blue jerkins and armed with unblemished and shining steel halberds, axes and other implements of war. The crowds around the Order were much larger than the days

previous. Even the Mountainborne slaves felt the change, moving quickly with their eyes locked firmly on the ground, their wills drowning in the military power swarming around them.

“We still don’t have any weapons,” Kane asked Illian as they walked back to the Dogs’ camp.

“Every hero had to start somewhere. We’ll figure it out.”

Kane stopped Illian. “I refuse to just go out on the battlefield and figure out how to get a Mountainborne ax out of my skull. We don’t even have weapons or armor, much less the knowledge on how to use them. Are you getting scared of all this?”

Illian brushed past, “Of course not. We’ll endure and survive. There’s no way the Dogs or Boil would let us go into battle unprepared.”

Kane caught up to his friend and walked beside him, “I hope you’re right. Illian, this is about to get dangerous.”

“That never stopped your grandfather from chasing bandits or hunting wolves, now did it?”

“But something eventually did,” Kane replied.

“And where did he learn how to fight? He figured it out, just like all the others who watched over Tinder and the surrounding villages. Don’t worry, Kane. Before you know it we’ll be fighting like we were born with a sword.”

Boil appeared between them, “You might get a sword eventually, but you two will start with a stick.”

Kane stood with Illian in one line of Dogs facing another line. Boil stood in the middle at one edge. He pointed at the opposing force and they charged, brandishing sticks no thicker than Kane's wrist but still looking dangerous.

Kane raised his own stick and joined the bellow of defiance coming from the two dozen others around him. He tried for a swing and instead got knocked down hard at the impact. By the time he recovered and climbed back to standing, the skirmish was over. The sides separated and reformed. Boil pointed to Kane's side and the process repeated itself. Kane lasted a little longer the second time, blocking one or two blows but still ending up on the ground. At least four bruises formed on his ribs and upper body. The process went on, one side attacking the other, until Kane couldn't see his opponents in the darkness of night.

Under a starless sky, the camp hummed with preparation. Patrols increased their frequency and numerous fires made the night glow. Kane rested on the grass beside Illian in front of Boil while the brothers were out foraging. Everything hurt. Even though the sparring felt like a light chore compared to farming, Kane's muscles stung and required twice as much effort to function. A determined squirrel could have pinned him down.

"So, when will we get our weapons?" Illian asked, touching a swollen cheek. He didn't look much better. His brown hair was rustled and bits of grass stuck in his small beard.

"When you get them. We don't even know if they'll offer battle or if there's even an army out there. For all we know tomorrow is tearing down and a full day of marching."

Kane shook his head. He could barely lift an arm, much less a tent pole or barrel of water. "How did we do today?"

Boil smiled, or grimaced, Kane couldn't tell. "You have to get used to hitting and being hit. Most of the Dogs are so reckless it doesn't matter who they fight. Death is something that

happens and if you fall, we'll take care of you. The Breach awaits, and fighting here just prepares you for what lies out beyond. Before all that, you have to get used to fighting and so does your body."

"It sounds like I have a lot to learn."

"You did fine. Both of you. Most lose at least one tooth their first day."

Kane eased himself up onto his elbows, "I'm not looking to lose anything."

"Everyone loses something." Boil gestured at his ruined face, "I wasn't born like this."

The brothers returned. Jarp and Slick came out of the darkness with a sack of the same bread and meat that they stole almost every night.

Chubs sat down beside the fire, "If they want to keep eating our food, they'll have to make a run one of these nights."

Illian chewed slowly, wincing. "When I feel my arms again, I'll be happy to come along."

Kane nodded in agreement.

Slick went straight for the wine. "It might have to wait. We overheard some of the soldiers talking as they passed by. We fight the Mountainborne tomorrow."

Chapter 11

The horn signaling the army's assembly shattered Kane's sleep. He rolled over on his back, feeling worse the night before. The mix of dawn light and defiant stars reminded him of the eternal shore and he wondered if Uriel could actually protect him. The prospect of death didn't scare as much as he thought. Being severed from his body and trapped in the Breach, left

to wander for all time sounded much worse. He still hurt, but after a good night's rest he stood up without too much trouble. Boil walked out of his tent, fully arrayed for battle in all his patchwork colors and plates. "You feel it yet? The fear?" He said while strapping iron studded bands around his forearms.

"Not yet." Kane said. The words came quickly, as if to cover some terrible secret. Unlike all the stories of heroes marching to their deaths and accepting their fate with faultless courage, something else pulled and twisted his insides. Perhaps underneath his skin and muscle was the soul of a coward.

"Do most people survive?" Kane asked.

"Most. Usually"

Illian spoke up, "What about the wounded?"

"If you lose something crucial and survive, the Tamarians consider your debt paid and you leave."

"No option to stay?"

"You can, but the some of Order priests will get you drunk and feed you to the wagons."

"What's in those things, anyway?" Kane asked.

"Nothing worth seeing, I imagine. Go over to the cart and find some leftover weapons to use. They won't be much, but feel free to find better ones on the battlefield."

A pile of rusted daggers, swords and axes lay beside the cart where Tibrius grazed. Several Dogs kicked and sifted through to find something better than what they had. By the time Kane got through to make a choice, the best option looked to be a small mace and a dented buckler with blood crusted along the inside. Illian waited for him on the outside the shuffle of bodies and equipment.

“You going to use your fists against the Mountainborne?” Kane asked.

“I’m not marching to battle armed with that.” Illian waved a hand at Kane’s weapon.

“We journeyed all the way out here, almost getting crushed or devoured, spent nearly two weeks wandering along the open plains and now you don’t want to fight? Go in there and get armed.”

Illian didn’t move. This was a new development. In all their years as friends, almost their entire lives, they had never had an argument. Now this whole venture, an Empire on the warpath adding thousands to already thousands of dead, had become a trick to pull Kane away from a good life.

“You talked me into all of this. I don’t care if you run at the first sign of trouble. We are marching out there together, even if I have to knock you out with this toy and drag you behind me,” Kane said gesturing his mace towards Illian’s face.

A flash of anger went across Illian’s face as he pushed by Kane and disappeared into the crowd. He came back with half a spear and a small knife. “Are you satisfied?”

“I will be when we’re laughing about this over a victory fire this evening.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Kane wanted to say more, but this was not the time to confront his friend’s attitude. It was easier just to play it off and join the march east towards the assembly area. They were still friends and Kane would look out for him once the battle was joined. He kept his mouth shut and followed Illian as they moved east.

Before the sun had reached the middle of the sky Kane and Illian joined the stream of Dogs feeding into a river of soldiers flowing through the Tamarian camp. It was impossible to tell where they were going. To his front were only shining helmets and blue coats with the

brown smudge of a Dog amongst them. Ahead of him Illian appeared to search for a way out from the middle of the throng. Damn him, Kane thought. Illian's moment of indecision might cost either of them their lives.

Kane cleared his mind and pictured returning to Therise back home. All he needed to do was survive and fight for the life waiting for him on the other side of his great adventure. So far nothing resembled his childish imaginings, which meant he needed to grow up now and feel different, ready, for his fate. Unlike everything Kane thought of battle, no glint of impending victory greeted his eyes when he looked about him, no great speech to mark their moving forward for glory and conquest. What he saw was all the veterans entering into a sort of trance, as if each soul was already retreating into the flesh. Perhaps war was a god to worship, and they were all just going through the same ritual performed since Aetheria's first days.

"Are you all right?" Kane asked.

"I'm fine," Illian said without looking back.

If they weren't marching to battle, Kane would have grabbed Illian by the hair, dragged him to the ground and hopefully beat some sense into his old friend. This wasn't fair for either of them. Quailing before the bitter realities of their choice to leave Tinder was not an option now that they marched with the current of the Tamarian army. This reversal of Illian's should have happened back in the Whispering Woods where the spirits drifted about harmlessly and they didn't face destruction. Illian couldn't be fine, but terrified. Kane knew this as he glanced over at his friend because he felt terror gripping him.

The human tide ahead of Kane passed between two large stones and suddenly the sea of soldiers split, revealing a great red host of Mountainborne facing them under a perfect day and bright sun. A great band of grass dancing in the wind divided the opposing forces. Both stood

on small hills which ran the length of the battlefield. The two forces would collide like red and blue ink poured into the shallow valley's center.

Great crimson banners of winged serpents, flaming rocks and fanged wolves hung from crooked wooden poles while thousands of hostile faces seemed honed in on Kane alone. The armor and weapons of the enemy mimicked their jagged features, their blades glinting obsidian with sharp and uneven angles. Drums sounded and the Dogs around him started into a trot. Kane caught glimpses of the Mountainborne horde through the gaps between Tamarian regiments already formed up. Large flags of blue and white separating different regiments hung limply in the peaceful day.

Kane ran along, noting the impacts of his feet, the feeling of breath in his lungs, the touch of wood and steel in his hands and the breeze through his hair from a distance, separated, as if his soul was already escaping the immediate and unbearable tension. He had joined in the ritual of war.

The Dogs ended up on the southern edge of the battle line. Illian lingered in the rear of the disorganized formation and didn't meet Kane's eyes. Just to prove his friend's fear wrong, he started moving to the front when an old white haired soldier in plate armor patched together with coins and leather stopped him. "Don't be in such a hurry, son. You'll get your chance soon enough."

"What's the plan?" Kane asked.

The man smiled with a peaceful look towards the Mountainborne army that was now banging their shields and yelling across the grassy plain. "Plan? We wait for our signal and charge. Then we charge."

Kane returned to Illian at the back of the formation where it was impossible to see what was happening through the soiled ranks standing in front of him. The stink of hundreds of unwashed bodies standing shoulder to shoulder soured the otherwise fresh air. Kane smiled. He was about to die and could only think of the smell.

“What do you think?” Kane asked Illian.

Illian didn't say anything. He just stared straight ahead.

“You still mad at me for dragging you out here?”

“Are you scared?” Illian asked.

“I am,” Kane said.

Illian trembled all over. When Kane looked at his own hands he felt them shake despite all his strength to still them. He gripped his meager weapons until his hand ached but still they shook.

“Aw, what are they waiting for?” someone said up ahead of them through the mass of stained clothes and rusted armor.

Kane wanted to run, to cry and hide. He wished to Uriel, to Therise and to anyone else who might listen to whisk him away. The roar of thousands of enraged voices rolled across the valley. Not a single Tamarian voice responded. The roar came a second time. Again, nothing. Kane watched a sparrow flutter by. A breeze from the north picked up. In the moments of quiet he heard the sound of banners unfurl and snap.

A low horn bellowed so loudly it shook the ground. Kane looked around. No one else seemed to notice the ground didn't stop moving after the noise subsided. Dust discolored the flawless blue of the sky to the Tamarian army's front. One of the new Dogs next to Kane soiled himself.

The sound of slaughter echoed down to the Dogs but Kane still saw nothing of the battle. He looked at all the faces around him to see if it was common to stand idly by while a fight was going on. A few looked anxious. Others seemed to pray while someone in front of Kane appeared sleeping on his feet. Flies buzzed about them while the noise of the battle grew louder. The air began to stink of carnage, bringing memories of slaughtering pigs during the summer. Kane remembered his grandfather had smelled this way when he died. The metallic salty taste of blood overpowered the sweat amongst the Dogs. Some wretched. One started crying.

Kane dropped his buckler, touched Illian's shoulder with his free hand, and pulled their heads together.

"We'll live this day, I promise you. Uriel told me."

"You and your gods, Kane. There is only death in this place and the Breach beyond."

"True, but we still live. And we shall remain."

"I couldn't have done this without you," Illian said, smiling weakly.

The sun beat down on his back as Kane picked up his tiny shield while dust and specks of grass choked the air around the killing.

A flat and wobbly trumpet sounded and the battered standard of the Dogs rose to a raucous cheer. They were going in. Kane's bowels wavered at his first step.

This was it. Every dream and childish fantasy in his mind now felt useless and a waste of energy compared to the intensity of the present moment. His senses focused in on every movement, scrambling for sensation. The scratch of dirt against his legs and filthy smell of vomit and alcohol on his compatriots was magnified and yet he enjoyed the wretched odors. Time sped up as his senses reacted in their own way to the terrific fear inside him. The person

he was fled within his heart, replaced by someone else whose presence he had never realized until now.

Kane tried to look over and through the rows of helmets, caps and exposed heads to see where death's cliff at the edge of this mortal life might be. The Dogs' pace quickened.

He heard the Dogs' flat horn a second and more hurried time. The walk transformed into a slow jog and back to a walk again. Groans of impatience rippled through the Dogs as Kane looked back at the green hills and peace still within reach. The grass and thin trees of the gently sloping green valley waved goodbye in the breeze. There was still time to escape and some took advantage of the advance to slip away, though Illian remained beside him.

The sounds and smells of chaos grew to overwhelming levels. He stepped over fallen dead and the grass turned dark red and moist under his feet.

The walk sped up once again to a jog, then a sprint. All around him Dogs cried in a rising chorus as Kane caught sight of tattered red Mountainborne and elegantly blue Tamarian banners wavering ahead of him. He joined his cry with all the others, wondering if sweat or tears lined his cheeks as the Dogs slammed into the Mountainborne ranks.

Chapter 10

Instead of tremendous impact, the Dogs melted into the fray. Their charge broke down into dozens of smaller skirmishes between individuals and groups. Mountainborne warriors appeared. Blood and noise made a stark contrast to the beauty of the day as blood and death bruised the valley floor under Kane's feet.

Unlike the dead Mountainborne soldier or battered slaves, the enemy of the east stood taller, straighter and larger. Most wore a mix of armor plates strapped together with gray leather.

Animal skulls fashioned into helmets at first made them look like men possessed. Necklaces, bracelets and other decorations of bones and teeth rattled as they fought and fell. Hints of smoke and entrails lingered above the odor of death. Blood streaked their faces and hands and dripped from bellowing mouths which frothed in unleashed frenzy. They exuded hate. Even their weapons were jagged and black, appearing built for no other person than to terrorize, maim and kill. Other combinations of colors and skulls gathered around the different banners.

The Tamarians fought a host of gathered tribes rather than one cohesive fighting force. Compared to the Mountainborne, the Dogs looked like cultured elite.

A single Mountainborne soldier picked Kane out and attacked. He winced when he deflected a wide blow of the axe with his buckler, feeling the shock of the impact rattle up his arm. The reality of the situation, the danger, the injury, the screaming desire to survive all felt like too much. His strength left him as he dodged another attack, feeling the air ripple over his head. He was helpless, drowning and his body failed to respond beyond avoiding death. Dogs around him cursed, or cried while fighting their own battles. At this moment of testing, Kane's life suddenly felt worthless, almost a forgery of what a man should be and what his grandfather would have expected of him.

The rage he felt was not directed towards the Mountainborne getting closer and closer with their furious attacks, but towards himself. Perhaps he deserved to die here since this weakness would only lead to failure in his duties towards Illian, the Dogs and Therise.

The Mountainborne swung down in a feint, pushing Kane to the ground with a lowered shoulder. Kane felt tears well up in his eyes. It was all so pathetic, this last moment before the Breach. He'd face his end as a bullied child. A memory of Therise pushing him into a puddle and snatching away the young puppy he carried flashed across his mind. He choked and

watched the burning eyes of the Mountainborne soldier gleam bright with exultation from the shadow of the skull helmet.

A spear flew past his shoulder and punched into the Mountainborne's chest.

Kane felt a hand drag him up to his feet.

"Let's fight, you overgrown child." Kane a hand squeezed his shoulder and saw Illian beside him.

The terror in his heart burned into something else, as if his fear had only acted as kindling. Whoever occupied his body now was still Kane but this version roared to life. Spurred on by his initial cowardice, he got angry.

Seeing the blood spattered face of Illian as he dipped and picked up the dropped axe in a smooth action gave this new feeling permission to appear and do whatever it wished. New strength flowed across Kane's limbs as he nodded at Illian when their eyes met. The coward inside had been banished, abdicating control and letting a mind of blood and slaughter take its place.

"Lead the way," Kane said.

Thoughts of pain no longer clouded his mind. No images of failure, of ruined pride or death hindered his movements. Power and confidence, rather than fear drove his mace across heads, into exposed arms and through the enemy's blocks. Flesh buckled under his might, skulls split and gore sprayed into the air, a fountain honoring each individual victory.

Kane's mace was small and light. He found getting in close worked the best. He deflected a spear jab from a bearded Mountainborne smeared with blue before bringing the mace down between the neck and shoulder. In the noise of battle and Kane's own blood

pounding in his ears like a heavy drum, he couldn't hear the enemy's scream. A second blow ended the Mountainborne as he fell onto the dead piled around the battlefield.

Kane looked around to see the entire battlefield, including both sides, covered in glistening red under the sky. All looked nearly the same as soldiers stumbled over the dead while countless wounded writhed and struggled about their feet. Beyond the fray thousands of troops stood distant, nearly decorative against the flowing green grass of the valley sides. He wondered for a moment why they didn't commit but new Mountainborne challenged him to his immediate front. He felt Illian step beside him and they charged in together.

This was the reason for leaving home and a secure life. The risk of death, the pain of injury now thrilled Kane rather than make him quail. After struggling up to the peak of his courage, now he slid down the other side into a new awareness of power and manhood. As Illian drove the axe deep into a Mountainborne torso, Kane saw the flash of an open mouthed smile. Clearly his friend felt the same way as he did, and together they could wipe out the entire Mountainborne race, given enough time.

Kane caught glimpses of other Mountainborne through the chaos of battle. They wore crimson armor of plate and scale while striding through the deafening chaos. They carried elegant great swords of black glass and wore helmets with silver faceplates carved into leering animal and reptilian faces. They looked crude compared to the rounded and shining armored Tamarians they fought, but they balanced this lack of elegance with swift brutality.

Further in the depths of the battle were Tamarians standing behind a gleaming shield wall. Though the Tamarians looked outnumbered to the north, the Mountainborne horde struggled against the front line. Waves of them broke against the heavy shields and spear points of the Tamarian formations. Kane realized the Dogs, along with other Tamarian shock troops,

were pushing the Mountainborne attack into a funnel towards the immovable spear wall.

Archers standing along the edge of the released volley after volley of arrows down into the attackers as they clumped together. The Mountainborne desperation for combat complied well with the Tamarian strategy.

Kane joined Illian as other Dogs engaged a group of a dozen Mountainborne in the same manner as the training at the Tamarian camp. It was all a matter of strength, Kane decided. His muscles released energy stored up from years of wrangling calves, chasing pigs and driving plows across fields. Illian worked with his axe and dagger. There was a merciless efficiency to his friend's movements as if this was a fantasy of theirs rather than the graveyards of thousands. Dogs fell around them. Tamarians fell around them. But a sense of invulnerability pervaded Kane's thoughts as the fight wore on.

Then Illian fell, tripping over a still breathing Mountainborne who grabbed his leg. Another approached ready to finish him off and Kane was out of reach to stop it. Without thinking he threw his mace as hard as he could, watching the thing sail end over end, flicking blood, as it hovered through the air and into the Mountainborne's helmet, shattering the bone covering and digging into the skull underneath.

Illian jammed his dagger into the Mountainborne who continued to struggle against him despite missing an arm.

Kane helped Illian up. "Now we're even."

"I could have taken them both."

Kane paused, realizing he had only a dinner plate of a shield strapped to his wrist. Illian looked unsure of what to do next. Other fights dragged on around them as the battle became a bloody maelstrom, with the lines of Mountainborne and Tamarian blurring.

The fight took place atop a layer of bodies, with men sliding and tripping around in a search for a foothold. Some drowned, pushed into the soaked earth by the eager steps of their fellows. Kane found a Tamarian sword but when he looked up, only Dogs and Tamarians surrounded him. The pause pushed fatigue through Kane's sore limbs. Despite the noise, the smell and the danger, he wanted to sleep. Hundreds of fresh Mountainborne in a clump marched towards them. Kane sighed, his body ached and the prospect of more combat made his heart sink. Up until now had been a feast, but this was gluttony.

Jarp walked between Kane and Illian. In the red of battle they all looked like brothers.

"What do we do now?" Kane asked.

Jarp wiped blood from a long knife, "We fight. That's what you came here for, right?"

Kane nodded. Other Dogs and Tamarian swordsmen rallied back to their waving banners behind them. The casual gathering under a banner hanging by one thread made the Dogs easy to spot amongst the tight formations of the Tamarians.

The enemy ranks grew from the remains of broken waves and marched boldly forward, hunched warriors and armored leaders ignoring the arrows cutting down their comrades.

"What is wrong with them?" Kane asked Jarp.

"Does it matter?"

At the army's center, the wall of shields and spears inched forward with uniform steps. Clouds moved in from the west, gray and full of rain.

All the Dogs looked the same. Blood, dirt and filth smeared their hands and faces while their clothes took on only different shades of red. Kane saw Boil and twenty others approach.

"How's it looking?" Kane asked.

"Good enough, where's everyone else?"

Jarp spoke, "On their way. We should have a couple hundred by the time they get here."

The two talked as if the Mountainborne reinforcements were miles away rather than within bowshot. A breeze picked up, stirring up the stench of death. The smell seeped into every pore and forced its way into Kane's mouth. A thousand baths wouldn't get that rotten stink out of his skin.

"It's going to be a giant mess if that rain gets here before we finish," Jarp said.

"A little rain won't hurt." Boil looked at all the gaunt faces, sending an approving glance at Kane, "Form up! Our day's not done yet, lads."

The block of troops was smaller now, but no one noticed who was or wasn't around.

"Thanks for coming with me," Illian said to Kane.

"Thanks for pulling me along. I feel like we're in the right place."

"It does."

They touched blood stained foreheads as the Mountainborne reinforcements attacked.

The Dog's parody of a horn bleated like a drunken sheep, signaling the charge.

Kane jammed pommel of his sword into a Mountainborne's temple before cutting a deep gash across an exposed back. Unlike the first engagement, this felt more direct. Tamarian swordsmen joined them to push the Mountainborne wave into the center as before. Back to their left, the spears and shields continued to hold and stab the enemy while arrows fell into the approaching ranks.

Kane took a shield blow to the stomach and narrowly blocked the Mountainborne's axe before it took his arm off. His movements were slower after hours of violent exertion. If something didn't change soon, he might collapse and rest in death. The Breach might not be so bad as long as his soul could leave this exhaustion behind. A Dog next to him dropped with a

spearhead through his throat. Other Dogs fought with all the dirty tricks and ferocity of an alley street fight. Both sides cared little for noble combat, and Kane started going for what would cripple an enemy and leave him to bleed out. Years of slaughtering animals in Tinder came into play as he cut into tendons and arteries with methodical precision.

He blocked out the deafening noise of men crying out in fear and pain while metal and flesh clashed together. Each step became a tiring effort. The ache in his muscles burned, growing tight with every use.

More and more Mountainborne flooded into the battle. The Dogs continued to fight, but moved backwards. A Dog tripped over a body and stayed there after four spears pierced him. The sword became heavy in Kane's hands while the buckler pulled his wrist down. He kept fighting, but now with only quick exertions and he gasped the rank air. This didn't look good, but at least he'd die a warrior, a soldier fighting alongside his friend in the name of his home. His grandfather would have to be proud of that much.

Above the roar, a single horn called across the valley. As if Aetheria signaled the charge of the Emperor's Wave, a beam of sunlight cut through the clouds and shined far to Kane's right towards the south. The ground thundered, causing bloody pools to ripple and the fighting for a moment stopped at this approaching wonder.

The gray horses Kane had seen his first day at the Tamarian camp were now approaching the stream of Mountainborne at a full gallop. Both horse and rider was encased in shining armor with lances of crossed blue and white pointed level. The world froze and Kane thought the fighting of the infantry had been the frolicking of children compared to the glory and power hovering for a moment before exploding into the Mountainborne, sending shattered lances and broken bodies into the air. Like a massive silver arrowhead, the Wave punched through enemy

lines stretched thin after crowding into the Tamarian's funnel. A shudder went through the ranks of the Mountainborne. All, Tamarian and Mountainborne, seemed to pause, awestruck at this sight, before the fight resumed.

Still tired, Kane pushed forward with the Dogs and Tamarians as the Mountainborne started a fighting retreat. A new fervor had been reached, as if battling harder might earn a place besides the Emperor's Wave. The taste of victory pushed Kane's body beyond all sensible limits. He roared, more frustrated with his slowing arms and failing legs than to intimidate his wavering enemy.

A jagged mace came down and Kane tried to raise his arm, but the dented plate of steel was too small and the arm too slow to save him. To die at the end, with victory certain, felt like an insult. The black glass head filled his vision and darkness took him.

Chapter 12

Did death hurt? Was the rending of a soul trying to escape the stiffened body painful? These thoughts in black silence entered his mind, giving him the sensation of drowning in a bottomless sea. Had he entered the Breach? He simply watched a distant light shimmer above him and wondered, as an afterthought, if his soul had the strength to escape to new worlds or return to his corpse. His body gently landed on a soft surface and instinctively he knew where he was.

"Am I dead?" Kane asked Uriel looking up into her face.

His head lay in her lap and leaves tickled his ear. Strands of Uriel's silver hair dangled by his vision while the rest of it fell behind her back. The consuming noise of battle was gone, replaced by the stillness of the eternal shore. The sudden change came to Kane as an

afterthought. He rested, enjoying the absence of ringing ears, strained muscles and the hundred bruises and cuts covering his abandoned flesh. Considering all the bodies littering the field in that valley, he wondered why he alone watched the planets move while a goddess stroked his hair. Was this his fate? To be trapped as a companion or pet until the last cycle of the world? Perhaps spending his days lounging and dreaming and watching wouldn't be so bad. He'd miss Therise and Illian, certainly, but of all the fates that could have befallen him on this journey, this end wasn't so bad.

“You are not dead,” Uriel said.

“It sure feels like it. My brains are probably scattered about the battlefield right now. We fought them hard, though.”

“Did you enjoy it, being a part of all that death?” Uriel asked. She spoke in near whispers.

“I suppose I did.” The words sounded odd. He had never been a terribly violent person in all his years in Tinder. When bullied, he had endured rather than fight back, even though throughout his memories he stood larger than the other children. Hunting and preparing meat was sometimes a bloody affair, but nothing like an actual battle. Men contained a tremendous amount of blood which almost exploded out of them. And yet, the sensations experienced there felt like some intoxicating drug which dimmed the richness of the eternal shore. Even as he lay there in a place of utter peace, now that his body felt healed, he actually wanted to be back there, bathing in all the noise and gore and excitement.

“I knew it,” Uriel said.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing. Fighting is in your nature, as it is with so many of my mother’s creations. Shasla had no idea such a deep desire slipped in to her work until it was too late and Tahteem was driving his sword into her heart.”

Uriel sighed, the light of her face dimming slightly.

“I thought you wouldn’t say anything about your mother until I told you about my grandfather.

“I changed mind.”

“What do you want to know?” Kane asked. He looked past her face now. Uriel’s eyes shined and on the verge of tears. Lamenting was a private affair in Tinder, and Kane remained still only as he had no place to go. He had no idea how to comfort the daughter of a slain god, so he remained and averted his eyes, giving Uriel what little privacy to grieve as the gesture offered.

“I’m sorry,” Kane said, finding Uriel’s hand with his own, “You’ve had the gap in your heart much longer than I have. I must have brought a stink of death with me to this place.”

“It can’t be helped. I am nearly blind to the world now and the Tamarians know nothing of my pain, so perhaps it is for the best that I remain alone, trying to save those few that I can.”

“Can you find any of the slain Tamarians from the battlefield?”

“Only if the bodies are burned, as is their way. When the fires start, the leaves will come and drift off into the stream.”

“And the Mountainborne?”

“They have their own ways, since their creator and father still lives.”

Kane watched a single large tear form along the bottom of Uriel’s eye. It sparkled in the light of dusk as it broke free from the lash and lingered there before tapping against his face.

Kane woke with a groan. A drop of water slid down his cheek.

He tried to move, but his body was frozen and each effort to move sent throbbing pain along his arms and legs. It was dark, so Kane guessed he had lain unconscious throughout the rest of the battle. Breathing hurt, blinking hurt and after trying to move both eyes he found one immobilized under a layer of caked blood. As his eye adjusted, he saw cracks of light above him. His joints creaked and grated with each limited movement. He was buried, trapped under layers of bodies.

Kane pushed through the pain and yelled in an effort to break free from the dead Tamarians. The absence of life around him seemed to draw the attention of each dull eye and broken limb. Their spirits had yet to be released by the fire and now, as ripples in the confined and barely lit space, they oozed towards him. If he wasn't overcome and possessed then he'd surely be torched as one body among many. He struggled, trying to pry his legs out from under the dead while bare outlines of souls still tied to their stiff and cold bodies reached for him.

Kane got one hand free, forcing it through the cracks between the bodies towards freedom. His hand felt cold air and he yelled. Without help, the Order would come with fire and not notice a flailing hand or cries for help amongst the roaring flames of the pyre.

No help came. A drop of water or sweat fell into his eye.

He lay there, finding it strange that his heart adjusted quickly to the presence of so much death. While he felt his own heartbeat, his lungs fill with breath and thoughts pass through his mind, the tens or hundreds around him were just empty pits. He felt their extinguished life, the terrible gap in the world he now lay in and wondered what farms, homes or streets the dead had come from. Perhaps they had someone like Therise waiting for them each evening, wondering forever the fate of their beloved. The thought of his bonded made Kane struggle again, gaining very little movement before his strength collapsed. His body remained weak after fighting for so

long. He ignored the pain and pushed and struggled, picturing flames and death to drive his exhausted efforts.

A hand grabbed Kane's. "Easy there. Give me a moment."

One by one, legs, arms, and bodies were shifted aside as more gray light filled Kane's vision.

By the time Kane emerged from under the corpses, it took a strong arm to get him standing. The joints in his legs felt rusted. At length he stood upright, though his legs wobbled under him. "You're a lucky one, aren't you?"

Kane looked at the man who saved his life. Long black hair nearly covered one side of the thin face and pale lips bent in a grin. Life had been hard to this person, Kane guessed, but it had apparently only made him stronger.

"Where did you get strength like that?"

The man looked half the weight of Kane and barely came up to his bicep. He wore a tattered cloak over a thin frame.

"Don't worry about that. I'm just glad I heard you struggling. The Order's setting torch to all these soon. What's your name?"

"Kane."

"Mazrath. You don't look Tamarian, but I guess you all blend together under all that blood. How do you feel?"

"My head has suddenly started to feel like it's breaking apart."

Kane's legs gave away. He threw up, squeezing last bits of strength from his convulsing body. When he finished, Mazrath pulled him up again.

"Let's go. I know the way to the Dogs."

“What happened?” Kane asked.

“We won. I’ll help you get back.”

Despite the strength Mazrath had in tossing bodies aside, he now struggled under Kane’s weight. More than once they had to stop and rest, leaning against trees and rocks to catch their breath. Kane’s skin felt like it was lead and made the journey back seem like his entire march from Tinder to the eastern reaches of the Empire. Perhaps, despite Uriel’s promise that he was alive, he now walked alongside the spirit of death who guided him towards his true eternal resting place.

“Are you with the Dogs?” Kane asked.

“I’m not at the moment, more a wanderer these days. If the army is looking for help, I can work for food.”

“If you can drag me along, I’ll put my word behind you.”

“I’m a healer by trade, so I can sew you back together. The blades of war are too destructive for my use.”

“You’ve already saved my life so I think you can earn a place among us.”

“Very good.”

They stopped speaking. Kane figured they both were now putting all their energies together to beat nightfall back to the camp and safety.

Alone in the mist, Kane trusted Mazrath to guide him home. They walked through fog, past other pyres, and soon they followed a trail of burning piles of dead like beacons in the night. The Order went about their business as shadows outlined against the flames of dead. There were a lot more than Kane could have guessed from seeing his small part of the battle.

After a time the sounds of camp echoed through the darkness. They walked along, past rows of tents full of screaming wounded. Order priests of different colored robes worked while soldiers continued to fight for their lives even after battle's end. The noise didn't repulse Kane and the sight of blood, insides and shattered limbs tossed into buckets looked far too much like a slaughterhouse than a hospital. Besides, Kane felt too tired to do anything beyond push one foot in front of the other. Mazrath continued bracing him, looking on, untouched by grisly scene.

The Dogs' camp was more subdued than Kane had ever seen it. Men lay around fires already asleep. No pickets challenged them and they approached the first group of lounging soldiers. Some had bandages and others nursed bloody stumps wrapped in soiled cloth. Each fire they approached, Kane hoped to find Illian and Boil with the brothers waiting for him.

Halfway through Kane recognized the grimace of Boil and gestured to Mazrath where they needed to go.

"Is that a ghost?" Boil asked, smiling.

"Not yet," Kane said, easing down into a seat and sighing with relief. "This is Mazrath and he saved my life. Do we have room? He's also a healer."

Boil nodded approvingly, "We can always use more of those. It was a pretty rough scuffle today. We lost around a hundred dead and wounded, from what I can tell. Jarp was one of them."

"That is unfortunate for the brothers. Where's Illian?"

"Foraging with Slick and Chubs. They needed the distraction. The Tamarians are especially lax after a battle so they should have enough for all of us."

"What happens now?" Kane asked. The heat from the fire magnified his exhaustion. He yawned.

“Nothing. We’ll see what happens tomorrow,” Boil turned to Mazrath, “Where were you all through the battle? Your skills could have been very useful afterwards.”

Mazrath sat against a log, “I heard the noise of fighting from such a long ways away. I didn’t know what was happening so I may have been too cautious in my approach. You don’t see many Tamarians this far east.”

“I was wondering that myself,” Boil said, eyeing Mazrath.

“Don’t worry, I’m no spy for the Mountainborne. I’ve been walking north for some time now after leaving the Empire’s provinces along the mountains. Most are moving west out of fear of invasion so food has been more than ample for my needs.”

“Well, it’s good to have you with us. Unfortunately, you’ve ended up in an invasion towards the east and they don’t like deserters.”

“Then I’ll do what I can to help out. The Mountainborne seem to be everywhere these days. Shall I get to work?”

Boil smiled, “By all means.”

“My first recommendation is for this young man,” Mazrath gestured towards Kane, “to get some sleep.”

“But I’m not tired,” Kane said.

“Right,” Boil replied, “You just find a soft patch of grass to lay on. Your friend will be here tomorrow with breakfast.”

Kane didn’t remember hitting the ground.

The following day was bright and clear. Kane woke with the rising of an unobstructed sun flaring out from the eastern horizon. The soreness from the previous day had deepened during his rest. He grimaced with effort just to sit up. Illian slept beside him and a sack of

leftovers lay by the smoldering fire. Kane crawled over and ate. A few women walked about the camp, those who had once hung onto the arms of now dead men searched for new shelters. He saw them carry the skirts of their stained dresses while they searched around for any eyes meeting theirs.

To Kane, the world had quickly forgotten the horror and butchery of the previous day. Birds sang, a few Dogs sat in the grass talking and laughing and the air was clear. The extreme sensations of the previous day, like a terrific thunderstorm, had passed. Now it was time to be human again. The scene almost appeared normal, if it wasn't for the streaks of dried blood covering everyone.

“So you are alive,” Illian said to Kane.

They embraced, “gods, you're disgusting,” Kane said as their clothes matted with blood stuck together.

“I tried waking you but Mazrath stopped me. You looked dead to the world.”

“I was. What did I miss?”

“As soon as you went down I tried to find you. The Mountainborne broke soon after and then it was a slaughter. All the dead looked the same afterwards and I couldn't find the exact spot once things settled down.”

“I would have loved to join in pursuit. Did anyone look for me after the battle was over?” Boil spoke up, “It's impossible, lad. You might as well search for one blade of grass amongst this field. At the end everything looks the same. The ground becomes a sore where the earth is soaked in blood. You might have been covered by Mountainborne dead or anything else. We captured plenty of slaves to prepare the Tamarians for burning. It's a good thing you got out in time.”

“The Wave just left a trail of dead Mountainborne behind them. I’ve never seen anything like it,” Illian said.

Boil smiled, “Your friend here is in love.”

“Oh?” Kane asked.

Illian flushed, “It’s not like that. Those knights live how we dreamed, Kane. Each one a champion and tireless in battle. They fought their way through so many Mountainborne and didn’t lose a single man or a horse. Can you believe that?”

“I wish we could say the same,” Boil said.

“Where’s Mazrath?” Kane asked.

“Looking at our wounded. You are one lucky bastard to survive a hit like that,” Boil pointed at Kane’s head, “and find such a valuable ally in the process.”

Chubs and Slick returned, looking by far the cleanest of the bunch. Even Illian, to Kane’s surprise, seemed comfortable underneath the coats of sweat and blood accumulated from the past few weeks.

There wasn’t anything to say that would bring their brother back. As the brothers sat down and started exchanging stories, everyone laughed along at the right moments. As Kane watched, he noticed forced smiles and sadness moving through the undercurrents of the conversation. Chubs, by far the youngest of the group, had streaks of clean skin cut through the grime from his eyes and down his cheeks. The one thing Kane learned from his first battle was the tremendous toll it took to reach the heights of emotion and energy that he had experienced. The other thing made abundantly clear around his laughing friends was the difficult nature of war. Illian was standing and pretending to be hiding behind an outstretched wrist, imitating fear for the amusement of those around him. Kane didn’t feel anything for Jarp’s death, but could

only empathize with the remaining brothers. Seeing the gap left open around the fire, Kane disagreed with Boil when it came to forgetting the dead. He thought everyone needed time to stop and recognize the passing of so many souls into the Breach. Behind him, smoke trailed up from the battlefield where the Order went about their rituals to send off the departed. At least for the priests, there had to be some closure and returning to the flow of time as the ashes of the dead floated up and into the breeze. These were the things Kane had never thought of throughout all his imagined adventures. With death being present in every thought and deed, his stock of things to consider and digest went beyond counting. After the previous day's battle, it might take him months or years to fully understand all the emotions he had experienced.

Illian went on with his story and pointed at Kane. When the brothers and Boil laughed, Kane laughed along with them. Regardless of the story, Kane knew Illian was trying to convey the fear they all must have felt. Looking in the eyes of Boil, Chubs, Slick and Illian, he saw the same thirst for life, the desperate gathering up of humanity before the next battle forced them all into acting like beasts. It was depressing to think that all the twisting of his insides, the shaking hands and tears would happen before every battle. Such was the price of walking between two worlds: one of sun and grass, the other of noise and blood.

A Dog holding a splinted arm approached and whispered something in Boil's ear.

“Duty calls, children. I order you all to relax until my return.”

The two brothers stood up straight in a mock salute when Boil stood to leave. He ruffled Chubs' hair and followed the Dog towards the Tamarian camp.

Kane and the others found a patch of thick grass. Finding a suitable place, he lay on his back near Illian.

“Where is Boil going?” Illian asked. He sat beside him, picking apart blades of grass.

“We’ve got new orders, new recruits or both, would be my guess,” Slick said. “Did you see Jarp out there during your visit to the afterlife?”

“I didn’t see much of anything really. I just sat beside Uriel for a bit while we watched the sky.”

“Sounds like you were off on your own and leaving us to finish up.”

“Believe me, I’d rather have most of my head back and share the victory.”

Illian looked at the wound, “It’s not that bad. At least you’ll have proof of fighting to show off to Therise.”

Kane propped himself up on his elbows and felt his head. The Mountainborne’s attack must have grazed him. His fingers found a tender lump just above the right temple where blood matted down his hair.

“Mazrath said don’t touch it. He’s quite a fellow, isn’t he? You know he used to be in the Order?”

“I did not,” Kane said. “We didn’t speak much while he was dragging my carcass back here.”

Chubs spoke up from somewhere nearby, “He’s way too smart for all of us. Why do you think he’s out here?”

Kane didn’t know. He lay back and closed his eyes.

Illian picked apart a small wildflower, “Who knows? If he’s from the Order, he’s probably on the run for one thing or another. I bet he’ll be happy to hide with us until he can truly escape.”

No one spoke for a time. Kane either dozed or slept, he couldn't tell. He only felt the heat and light of the sun rejuvenating him, the grass scented air filling his breaths and the sounds of people he enjoyed talking around him.

The war so far had proven to be a strange thing. In the aftermath of so much death, he now felt like he was a part of the Dogs along with the brotherhood of warriors throughout history. He and Therise's father would have lots to talk about over dinner in Tinder someday. Kane now understood the appeal of such a violent life. Underneath the mystery, the fear, the pain, the violence and suffering was a new foundation of community that he had never been aware of. The people of Tinder were his fellow countrymen and farmers, but the labors of a harvest were not the same as being pulled from a pile of corpses. Tinder lived on an edge of sorts, one bad harvest or bitter winter away from destruction, but after being so close to death within the ranks of the Dogs he understood that soldiers had to be more present in their lives since with each death, the time to enjoy days like these grew increasingly precious.

Someone tapped Kane's shoulder. He looked up to see Slick. "Boil's back. He's got news."

Boil stood outside the circle of logs where Kane and others sat facing him. He didn't look happy. Kane's first thought was another battle, or having to break down the Tamarian camp, or anything beyond lying in the grass. Even now, as he felt strength return to his beaten body, the prospect of combat resonated inside him. It was only then that he realized he was completely unarmed.

"We rest and refit here for a few days while the Tamarian recruiters catch up to us with some reinforcements. They won't be as numerous this time, as the villages here are small. But, by the end of the week, we'll be in Mountainborne territory and heading towards Nagah. We'll

follow the road until it turns north. With winter approaching, we need to capture Nagah quickly so a few days is all that we're given, rather than the usual week or so. The only trouble is the road will take us near the near the City of Bones."

"City of Bones?" Kane asked.

"Callinday."

Chapter 15

Kane sensed the tension spike when the name came out. The smiles around him dropped and no one looked at him.

"Callinday? Never heard of it," Illian said.

Boil smiled a dark, knowing smile and leaned in. Even though everyone was no more than an arm's length away, they moved closer.

"Callinday's the leftover capital from Tahteem's failure of a kingdom. It used to be the jewel of the eastern fringe of the Empire and first line of defense against the Mountainborne during their raiding seasons. I spent a few months there as a child on my father's trade route around this part of the Empire. It was a lovely city back then. It sits atop a low plateau like a crown, with a massive pointed tower and gate in all four directions and a narrow castle at the center. Every building was made of polished stone and the walls are higher than anything you've ever seen. Traders from all parts of the world would come down from ports in the north to barter for the gems and metals found underneath the city. You could hear them haggling all night and into the morning outside of where we slept. I had to ride on my father's shoulders since the flow of people bustling around us was so strong. My father wanted to go back a few

years later but by then he only got reports that the gates to the city were mysteriously sealed to all outsiders.

“One day a survivor made it to our village, barely dressed in scorched rags, covered in scabs and screamed rather than slept through the night. He died about a week after biting off his own tongue while trying to dig a hole through the floor of the room we gave him.”

Boil continued, “What we gleaned from him was enough to keep our eyes glancing east for years afterward. He said something had changed underneath in the mines of the city. You see, Callinday has always been around, long before the Tamarians migrated east or the Mountainborne wandered down from their caves. He said there were two cities in Callinday, one on the surface and another winding downward into Aetheria’s depths. Hundreds of miles of mine shafts, tunnels and unexplored caverns spiraled underneath the city streets. Artifacts found there made Callinday an extremely rich place. Cups and trinkets from ages past were constantly being found in the dig sites. Then there were piles of jewels, gold, unbreakable metals and other mysterious things constantly turning up. Most people had no idea where they came from, only that it got them rich.

“Well, he talked of a switch or trap or mechanism being flipped in one of the deepest dig sites one day. The city shook and everyone just looked around, wondering at the odd earthquake before going back to their busy lives. That night, everyone had nightmares of shadows taking shape, stealing into homes and plundering riches and flesh. They dreamed of being bitten and clawed to death by decayed skeletons.”

“They say this is where all the bad spirits in the world come from,” Jarp added.

Kane didn’t think this was true, if Uriel spoke correctly, but remained silent.

Boil went on, lowering his voice, “So the next day everyone goes through all their belongings and checking their wives and children for marks, and what do you know? Teeth shaped bruises lightly pressed into everyone’s skin.”

“So neighbors accuse each other of pranks and everyone goes to bed with the doors locked. Our visitor was on the roof of his house but was woken up by screaming. Unlike the petty paranoia of the first day, people had gone crazy. Most in the street tore into each other with their teeth and fingers. He saw an old man dancing with a half-eaten dog. A family burned while they chased each other around their home until the flames consumed them. Fear and madness took Callinday and this guy barely made it out with his life. The nightmares followed him all the way to our village over a hundred miles away. He had run that far with nothing but a scorched night shirt on.”

“Ever since then, people have called that place the City of Bones. The very few who have explored there and survived say the streets and buildings littered with bleached bones, each one covered in small indentations. The amount of treasure there is enough to buy a kingdom, but you won’t live long inside its walls.”

Boil looked north, “Nobody goes within sight of the place, but we are, for some reason. I can only guess Windred is tempting the evil spirits to come out against the Order.”

“Why would we even go close to the city if it’s so dangerous?” Kane asked.

“Such is the plight of the uninformed, Kane. There’s a lot of ground to cover between here and Nagah. But that’s all something to worry about later. I’ll get the word out. You all get back to enjoying that sun.”

The next morning Kane awoke to find his and Illian's bags and all their contents sitting beside them. When asked about the bags, Boil only shrugged. Over the next few days, the sun beamed down on them and Kane scavenged up a sword. It was larger than the one he had lost and he could swing it with both hands. Between naps and meals, he practiced with the blade, sparring with some of the Dogs and hacking at nearby bushes. Illian found a larger shield to go with his ax, and they both gathered up some armor from the leftovers. Kane now wore a jacket of studded leather with one shoulder plate and Illian had a vest of chain. In Kane's mind, they were already soldiers after surviving their first battle, but now they started to look like them. One morning, thirty horsemen surrounding a hundred scared looking peasants approached the camp. Some of them ended up with the Dogs and kept to themselves.

"They'll either die or blend in soon enough," Boil said upon hearing of getting fifty new faces in his regiment.

Kane, wearing his new equipment, felt like a tested veteran of war and now longed to test his growing ability against the Mountainborn. One morning the Tamarian army gathered itself together and moved east. It didn't take long for the Tamarians marching ahead of them to kick up enough dust to make it unpleasant to walk and the Dogs spread out. Kane walked alongside Illian but was several paces between anyone else from their unit. The clouds overhead looked like hunks of wool as the wind blew them further east. They were similar to the ones he had spent days staring at in Tinder, creating a mixture of shade and light on the rolling plains. It seemed impossible that there were places in the world so devoid of life, but here they were. Ahead and to Kane's left was the army, snaking along towards the unknown east.

He also wondered when they should start thinking of home. It had been nearly a month since he had last seen Tinder, and the war couldn't last much longer with destruction of one army after another.

“Why don't the Tamarians just push all the way into Mountainborne country and put them down once and for all?” Kane asked Boil.

“It's too expensive to feed an army for one solid push. Total conquest takes time. Every village we passed would probably have torched the crops and poisoned the water long before we got there. This seems bad now, but after we find winter quarters, the army will be content to rest and train. It's what the Emperor wants, so it's what we will do.”

“So this campaign is to slaughter the Mountainborne into submission?” Kane asked.

“That sounds about right. It also clears out the prisons and sharpens the Tamarian army for future wars. I wouldn't be surprised to move south beyond the mountains once this war is finished.”

Kane nodded and fell back. The idea of returning home with pockets full of gold sounded foolish now, since this was a war of conquest rather than defending the homeland. They weren't too far away now, but without taking action they might end up missing their chance to return to Tinder before winter.

“What do you think?” Illian asked Kane while they descended a rise on the way to another tiny hill among thousands of other tiny hills.

“About what? All this?”

Illian nodded.

“What’s there to think about? I’d like to be home soon and every step we take east moves us further away. We fought our battle, earned the respect of our comrades and it sounds like this campaign is pretty much finished.”

“We’ll get back there soon enough. If we just hold out until Nagah falls then we can leave with whatever loot we find. Could you imagine returning to Tinder suddenly the richest men in the province? Lord Elias would have to give us respect if some of his farmers suddenly rise up to his level of wealth. We could even move stone from Alton and have a castle set up. With enough treasure, we could become the lords of Tinder and some of the other villages. Imagine us, earning nobility through valor on the battlefield.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” Kane said. “We’re farmers and will always be farmers. Today we just so happen to be armed farmers in the company of soldiers and criminals. Even wealthy, only nobles get to ride with the Emperor’s Wave. That’s just not our fate, Illian.”

Illian didn’t look convinced and Kane saw his friend become lost to imagined victories and riches.

Chapter 16

Kane felt the distance they crossed as the army moved onto a wide paved road leading further east. The established routine went on: break camp before dawn, march, make camp and sleep after sundown. Days bled together and eventually everyone ran out of things to talk about. Despite his apprehensions of fighting and once again risking death, something wound within his heart and Kane knew only battle would release the tension.

Most of the time Kane kept his head down, watching the grass poking through the paving stones while they trudged along, wondering if it was even possible for him to return now. Illian

said nothing of going home, and in the dullness home was all Kane thought about. The other Dogs said little, each man's mind hidden within a tired body. Uriel remained silent and in Kane's memory, Therise's face blurred. When he tried to see her, only a green dress and red hair appeared, looking out over the golden fields of Tinder.

Thoughts became aches and aches slowed time to a crawl with blank dreams providing the only respite from the endless marching. What little food there was went quickly and a rabbit became a valuable treat. Even the raids into the Tamarian camp provided little.

At the end of one morning, all eyes shifted north while the Tamarian army walked off the road as it curved up towards Callinday which stood miles to the north. Through a shredded veil of clouds the City of Bones remained visible in the distance. It stood like a miniature against the vast sky, but Kane could see how large the place must be up close. The pointed tops of the gateway towers and central castle remained sharp, but the stone looked black as if to remind the world of the horror hidden there.

The army moved east until the broken city was out of sight. Rumors flared up through the Dogs: the Mountainborne had poisoned the water and looted the city, meaning they had all the gold stashed somewhere, which was the real reason for the war. Another said the mines had uncovered a direct route to the Breach which sucked the essence out of everyone. Laughter responded to the possibility that Carmil, one of the old gods, had stirred after being trapped there.

A week after Callinday, the rumors continued until news trickled through the Tamarian ranks: they approached the gates of Nagah, the largest Mountainborne city in the region. Gold became the only topic of conversation among the greedy eyes making plans over the meager campfires that night. The weather grew cold and Kane was thankful for his father's cloak. The

Dogs lived and slept closer together and the city's possibilities fueled their criminal minds. Kane had seen them fight bravely, but he worried what might happen when they were given the chance to unleash their dark lusts. At some point he had fooled himself into thinking perhaps he lived in the company of men only looking for redemption for their crimes. It seemed they were used to a rough life but obeyed and suffered only for the opportunity to feed their crueler instincts at the first opportunity. Kane kept his distance while Illian seemed more and more interested in the fantasies spun by their comrades.

He remained on the fringe, cold, but trying to stay focused on the absent Uriel and Therise. He had to believe he would see them again and hiding the shame of misdeeds remained too high a price to fall in with all the other thieves and murderers getting more and more restless as the march went on. He might succumb eventually, but if he decided to drink and carouse with the others, then that meant he had given up on returning home in any capacity. If he saw the forests around Tinder again, he wanted only to be weighed down by wealth and not guilt.

Illian spent most of his time with Mazrath, who had moved quickly into the vacancy around Boil's fire. He kept the Dogs healthy and taught them which herbs to use to keep sickness away. Kane's own collection of minor wounds was now only two dozen small scars crossing his body. Despite all their sufferings, the nights by the fire were the best part. Mazrath spoke of the Tamarian capital, his studies there and the journey east trying to make a difference rather than follow the bureaucratic steps of his father. The move hadn't earned him many friends and most on the eastern parts of the Empire were leery of strangers, but he believed the gods had called out east so here he was. Still it was lonely work so Mazrath was always thanking them for letting him into their midst. He even made their meals taste better with the sprinkling of things picked up along the roadside.

After what felt like months, their target stood before them. Nagah was large, much bigger than Alton, the largest city in Achritia. The army arrived early in the morning and Kane didn't see it until dusk since he and the Dogs were at the back of the column as it slowly deployed. The army spread out and surrounded the entire city in a thick line of troops. From what he could tell, the inhabitants weren't expecting or prepared to be destroyed. Kane sat on a steep rock formation looking over the line in the fading sunlight, watching few farmers rushing towards the slightly open gates with handcarts of possessions and their families. Long after nightfall, the gates shut with an echoing crack.

He felt sorry for them, picturing his own people startled by the appearance of so many invaders. Kane doubted these were of the same breed who tried to cut their way through the Empire and yet they would feel the Tamarians wrath regardless. A frightened deer cornered by thousands of hunters.

The Dogs faced the wall on the eastern side with two of the largest Tamarian regiments on their side. All were equipped with close range weapons and would lead the attack once the walls were breached. What disturbed Kane, along with all the other Dogs, was the near proximity of the Order's iron wagons. They rested on iron wheels taller than Kane. That night, the sound of meat being devoured with sloppy gulps made sleep difficult. All eyes glanced towards them while speculation focused on how the Tamarians could bring down a thirty-foot stone wall without any kind of siege weapon fueled conversation. Another Mountainborne army could be waiting nearby until the Tamarians were committed or there was another army on the way, which explained why there had been no talks of quarter or honorable surrender. Kane assumed the townspeople hoped to hold out until aid arrived.

The talk died down and everyone settled in for the night before the assault, wondering at the Order's tricks. The air smelled of winter, but Kane felt warm enough. He figured there would be a time when such luxuries as solitude would not be easy to come by. The quiet moments never seemed to be enough to balance out the concentrated frenzy of battle. Kane recalled the bewildering madness going on around him during his only engagement with the Mountainborne. They seemed much too savage to build a city such as Nagah, and yet there it was. The cool night mixed with his unfamiliar and bloodthirsty aspect, as if the pondering of war was a part of the change from peaceful farmer to heartless killer.

He meditated on Uriel and her grove, trying again to communicate some blurred reminder that he was still the same person she brought to her long ago. His peaceful state was rattled at the thought. They had planned on two months and he had lost track of the passing days. Getting back in time for the final harvest was now impossible and even if he left now at a full run, the planting of the winter crops would be finished. What right did he have of praying for his bonded to Uriel when he had left her for such a selfish reason? He sighed at the predicament. If he couldn't be home this winter, then he might as well focus on getting back alive before the thaws of spring. The thought of being gone from two months to over a year's absence brought with it more guilt than he wanted to deal with at the moment. Upon his eventual return, he had better show up with a cart full of gold and atop a war horse. Perhaps those things waited for him within the walls of Nagah.

It was a day much like the day of Kane's first battle, except colder. They had woken to a glaze of frost and even now the scene seemed sharpened by the chill. Kane and Illian stood near the middle of the Dogs' formation and only heard the flapping of banners and rustling of grass while they, once again, waited for their signal to attack.

Ahead of him, the walls of Nagah looked imposing. Partially cut crops and irrigation occupied the quarter-mile stretch of land from the Tamarian lines to the stone wall. In the light and closer, the blocks making up the wall and towers did have an aged and unsophisticated roughness to them.

It seemed to him, even given his lack of exposure to the outside world, that men banging against a stone wall would be an ineffective means of attack.

The Dogs at the front reported that the Order, moving under mobile shields to protect against arrows, approached the wall casting out the strange salt and placing torches burning with green fire in a path leading up to within bowshot of the city. They had lost a few, but from what Chubs could tell, they succeeded in marking a lane going from the mysterious wagons straight into the wall.

Illian sniffed the air, "You smell that?"

"I'm guessing that's their mysterious salt," Kane replied. "What do you think we'll find in there?"

"Not much, I'm guessing. But the city after this one will have to be larger."

Kane was about to point out the flaw in Illian's logic, they couldn't possibly push this far into enemy territory and hope to survive, but a ground-shaking roar made Kane jump. The noise rattled his insides as it went on. Everyone looked around when a voice at the end of Kane's rank said, "The wagon is opening!"

Ranks dissolved as everyone struggled to see. One of the iron carts on its high wheels shook. Even though they were a hundred yards away, Kane heard the violent banging and watched the metal sides of the vehicle bend and swell. All around it, the Order fanned lines of green smoke into the tiny barred windows near the top. Kane, taller than those around him, looked on with nervous apprehension.

Illian gulped, "Here we go."

The front door, a thick sheet of iron, exploded off the front of the wagon and hurtled through the air towards Nagah, pushed aside by something that sent several of the Dogs around Kane running.

A swirling mass of eyes, teeth and muscle shifting around a hulking frame of misshapen arms and legs plunged out and rolled along the ground before finding its feet. A snapping jaw rounded off like a long beak filled with teeth coughed and roared from what might have been its head. The thing shouldn't have fit inside the cart as it expanded in the morning air. The creature choked while its limbs convulsed and changed shape and size. Kane watched, his mouth hanging open, dumbfounded by a thing that should remain in the darkest of nightmares.

The creature, if that was the accurate term, recoiled at the green smoke as it tried to escape the trail marked for it. Around it, the Tamarian army scrambled away. Only the Order remained, unmoved by the monstrosity they had unleashed.

After trying to escape and growing furious at the presence of the salt, the creature focused on the open space at the end of the marked corridor. It shambled at first but gained speed as it reached the end of the smoking path, running like a panicked blind man towards the wall.

By the time it hit the stone, it moved like a wave of flesh, roaring and shaking the ground with every heavy step. Huge gouges in the farmland were left behind in its blind assault. The impact sent some men to the ground. Kane thought the world might come apart.

The wall vanished in an explosion of stone and debris. While Kane watched, the creature dove into the town, attacking the buildings as the ruins cut into the uncontrolled flesh. Defenders were thrown aside, crushed and eaten even as they tried to fight or escape. Splintered beams stuck in its sides as it powered further into Nagah and out of sight. It left a bloody stain behind as it lashed and dug further into the city, leaving behind a gap in the wall wide enough for the Dogs to walk through ten wide.

A horn blew, but was barely heard from the noise being created by the monster inside the city. Kane barely noticed the sound, dumbfounded at the destruction being caused before his eyes. What steps had been taken to create such a thing? Kane looked back at the Order's monks, standing quietly with their hands in the folds of their robes while the hell they unleashed pushed into the center of Nagah. The horn blew again, and this time Boil appeared to hear it. He started pulling people to their feet while the regiment to their left marched towards the gap. The hardened Tamarian soldiers advanced at an uneasy pace.

Boil eventually got the Dogs formed up and Kane pulled the Dogs beside him along. When they got close he drew his sword. Mountainborne defenders, dressed more like Tamarians than the savages Kane had first encountered, appeared on the walls and lined the gap, shields up with spears pointed out. It looked like they meant to engage the invaders in a pushing match while those on the walls could shoot arrows down. There appeared to be only fifty or so trying to hold off the weight of several hundred.

The monster ahead of them was out of sight and the noise of its maddened flailing was lost in the sound of marching. Kane imagined they were going to fight towards one of the gates to let in other Tamarian reinforcements. The regiment widened as men crawled around or over large cut stones cast aside as if they were bundles of wool. A greasy black and red liquid that looked like congealed blood slid down the sides of the broken rocks.

Some were caught on the Mountainborne spears, but within moments Nagah's militia was pushed aside and slaughtered.

Blocks of multi-story houses stood in long rows leading all the way to the center of the Nagah. It looked as if some giant hand had punched all the way down the first block, jamming houses and rooms into each other.

By the time Kane climbed the pile of rubble, most of the Dogs and first wave of Tamarians were already inside and filing down the battered and bloody street. Some went down the wide terraced road which divided the homes from the ramparts. There was no sign or sound of battle, only the smell and clatter of armed warriors jammed together in a narrow space.

From out of doors, windows, and ruins, the Mountainborne, both militia and citizen, attacked.

Every soul in Nagah rushed like ants from a disturbed hill armed with farming tools, pots and other improvised weapons. The city instantly became a clustered frenzy.

Kane and Illian went down the right street which ran between the wall and the first rows of houses. The Dogs' banner wavered as invader and defending citizen fought face to face.

There was simply nowhere to go as soldiers pushed against Mountainborne women and men who cut and stabbed with whatever they had available. Pointed sticks and rocks fell from

windows or were thrown from doors, crushing skulls and sending Tamarians to the ground where they were trampled underneath the human tide.

There was an open door that led up into the wall and the push of his comrades practically forced Kane inside. A few others followed him but they quickly pushed back to the outside. Kane felt ready to fight now that he had a little swinging room. He'd rather fight here instead trying to conquer Nagah cramped by the soldiers around him.

Torches lined a passage large enough for Kane to get a good swing with his sword. It was also full of Mountainborne men and boys crouched against the stone floor. They all looked at him with those black glassy eyes and attacked. Kane charged forward.

Somewhere in the reaches of Kane's mind there floated a single thought through the gale of adrenaline. As Kane ducked under wide blows, shoved attacking Mountainborne into their comrades and sent others to the ground with severed limbs and gushing wounds, he was two people. One made the journey from battle to battle, fraught with doubt and always with an eye towards home. This other, newer, person was summoned only by places and times that ruined all the physical and emotional aspects of men.

Kane sent a wide sweep through a Mountainborne's fork handle and into the attacker's throat. The man, or boy, Kane couldn't tell, tumbled to the ground in a bloody gurgle. It seemed there was no end to them and Kane expected at any time to be cut down from behind.

He was barely a soldier and yet the citizens of Nagah were powerless to stop him because they were afraid. Fear sent them bleeding to the ground. The bloodthirsty half of Kane reveled in the power he held and used it generously as he pushed into the crowded passage. It was possible that he grinned or laughed while he stabbed and kicked against the enemy. He drank deep the violence because he had the power to do so.

The war became very individual. The centuries of enslavement, pillaging, massacres and other instigations of war between the Tamarians and Mountainborne, resulting in the deaths of thousands, faded away to one man cutting down another. What made the intimate combat so special was the feeling of total control Kane had over his body as he reacted against counter attacks and shrugged off superficial cuts. Here his direction was clear; the correctness of his choice to leave and fight was confirmed in the thrill rushing through Kane's veins, pushing his muscles in the flood of sensory experience. By proving his superiority over the Mountainborne, regardless of how the war turned out, he would survive and Tinder would always remain untouched. He knew this to be true.

When the poorly dressed and equipped Mountainborne broke and ran, Kane didn't pursue. As the quiet settled down to muffled shouts and clashes of steel on the outside of the wall, the ruthless part of him departed, extracting its price in energy and strength.

Kane turned around to see a stone passage littered with mangled bodies and blood glistening on the walls in crisscrossed patterns. Torches flickered orange, casting light on the remains of the carnage he had wrought. He stood dumbly as his senses returned to a familiar level as if waking from a dream. It was difficult to tell how many littered the passage, but there were at least twenty lying around there. His clothes and sword blade dripped into the crevasses between the stones in the floor while he considered the horrific scene he had just caused.

The ground shook again at the distant roar of that horror unleashed by Order. It sounded weaker than before, and the cry trailed off. Kane anticipated the tremor of its fall and waited. When the crash came, a torch fell from its hanging to the ground, revealing a cloven face with one eye staring off into darkness.

Kane barely kept his balance, feeling the familiar stiffness and fatigue that came with the pause in battle. He wanted to go out and join in the rest of the army, but only because that seemed obligatory, rather than an act of free will to engage in an enjoyable activity. The noise of battle seemed too loud and he suddenly wanted to plunge his head into water.

When a door opened behind him, the bright afternoon daylight cut across the passage. A hint of shame hit Kane as the soldiers that entered first came boldly, then slowed when they discovered the blood dripping from the ceiling.

“Hello?” One of them asked. The voice didn’t sound familiar but the roughly dressed silhouettes made them look like Dogs.

“In here,” Kane said.

“Where are the rest of them?” Kane asked, embarrassed to be caught in this moment of weakness.

“They’re fleeing across the city. We’ve broken them,” A dog in black said.

“Then let’s go,” Kane replied, wiping his blade on the leg of his pants, “There’s still killing to be done.”

Chapter 18

By nightfall, most of Nagah was in Tamarian hands. What Mountainborne remained had locked themselves, along with all the surviving women and children, in a gated temple on the southeastern side of the city. It seemed to have been built as a separate fort within the walls and mostly inaccessible beyond the single gate. While the Dogs cleared the dead under the distant eyes of the Order, the Tamarians went to looting. It seemed strange to Kane to be in the company of criminals while the honorable Tamarians performed the same criminal acts that his

companions had hoped to revel in. What women remained in the city were quickly taken and only a few golden articles were found and fought over by the victorious soldiers.

All avoided the bloody remains of the Order's creature as it lay sprawled on the street near the opposite wall from which it had entered. Splintered beams of wood, broken glass and pottery along with the pointed sculpture from a fountain had left the thing a shattered heap covered in streaks of black blood which pooled all around its abominable corpse. Some walked by, as if to prove their courage, while others made wide berths around the heap of flesh tangled against the eastern wall. If it had charged into the city at a slightly different angle, then the entirety of Nagah would be theirs as its bulk would have destroyed the fortified temple.

At camp that night, tales of Kane's accomplishments inside the city wall went from one occupied house to the next. Some guessed that the Mountainborne Kane had encountered had been moving to ambush the Tamarians once enough of them had committed to the fight. The story grew in size and scope until at one point during dinner in an abandoned tavern with the rest of the Dogs, Kane heard the story of a heroic spy who had sacrificed himself to prevent the first wave of the attack from being trapped and annihilated.

Boil sat with the two brothers and Mazrath when Kane and Illian joined them. Many had been killed in the streets and alleys, but not nearly as many as in the last battle. With the meager treasures already plundered, all conversations turned towards the next target to "teach the Mountainborne a lesson." Kane guessed the next blow would land on the temple, and the occupants there would suffer greatly for delaying the satisfaction of Dogs.

All around them the bloodstained Dogs drank and searched in vain for any treasure. A fight over a fur blanket moved to the street outside. Kane and the others occupied the only upright table and chairs on the main floor. Boil's calculating face was one of the reasons why

Kane liked him. There was nothing malicious being planned behind those off color eyes and snarled face, but just enough thought to scare away any trivial concerns brought to him by his soldiers.

Empty plates lay stacked at the center of the table. He wondered how many more cycles of battle he could survive before finally collapsing like an overworked animal. The anticipation, fear, contact, exhilaration, a healthy coat of someone else's blood, exhaustion and thoughts afterward took a permanent part of him away each time. Unlike his first battle, the wild abandon with which he chopped at an untrained and poorly armed enemy was especially troubling.

A pair of drunken Dogs stumbled in singing or shouting an evening greeting, it was impossible to tell.

“What’s wrong, hero?” Illian asked.

“It’s weird being inside a stranger’s house, isn’t it?”

Boil spoke up, “This gets easier.”

Slick, looking especially young and drunk, spoke up, “I’m surprised the Tamarians are even letting us stay inside the city. Ol’Windbag must be getting soft hearted for us.”

“Still,” Kane looked around at the tapestries and roughly painted pictures of men among the mountains scattered throughout the otherwise bare dining room. He was just a visitor here, and nothing else.

Home. Kane held Therise’s braid in the firelight and ran a thumb along its now greased strands.

“You’re still not carrying that thing around are you?” Illian said.

“I am. We cannot forget who we are or where we are going back to.”

Illian looked around the tavern. A burly Dog ran from three others carrying an armful of candlesticks. Boil looked at the worst of Tamarian society as a proud father. What a strange family, Kane thought.

“So what happens now?” Illian asked.

“I’ll get my orders at some point tonight and we’ll probably attack the temple tomorrow. I’m surprised you boys aren’t out there digging up shiny trinkets with everyone else. There’s a lot of wealth out there if you’re willing to dig and fight for it.”

“I’ve done enough fighting for today,” Kane said.

“So everyone says. How many was it again?” Illian tapped the dozen hairs on his chin in mock calculation, “Ten? Twenty? A hundred? I thought you had murdered your way through the entire town before taking a nap.”

“You look ridiculous when you’re jealous,” Kane said with a smile.

Illian smiled back and shrugged, “Then you won’t mind if I dig around for some trinkets as the Achritian representative.” He stood up, made an exaggerated bow and left.

Kane pardoned himself from the table and after promising to find Boil again for a night of drinking appropriate for a warrior, he stepped out into the street still littered with the remains of battle. Outside the walls he heard curses and yells from Tamarians pushing the new and old Mountainborne slaves as they went about burning the Tamarian dead and leaving the Mountainborne corpses in large piles by the remaining Order wagons.

The sun was gone now, and a candle burned in the occasional window as Kane strolled through the streets with drunken soldiers lying by every door. What he wanted was to clean up the grim that had probably soaked into his skin by now. He imagined returning home with his skin permanently colored in red streaks from all the blood which had doused his skin. The

feeling reminded him of how out of place he truly was: a farmer who had survived this far on pure strength, youth and luck.

The blasted trail left behind by the monster looked like a grim parody of the forest paths in the Whispering Woods. Tattered curtains and the spare remains of unbroken roofs stretched out over the destruction. He stepped carefully along the path making sure to avoid the glistening blood splattered everywhere. Some had probably been caught completely unaware until the creature was in their home, and even then they must have only had enough time to blink and wonder before getting crushed.

What was he truly doing this far from home? What purpose was there to be gained from slaughter? He recalled that delirious moment in the passage where he felt a brief flicker of total confidence in his decisions and direction. Could he truly be nothing more than a simple killer? Through sheer fortune and immaturity had he actually found his home? He looked at his hands, unable to see much detail in the night but feeling the crusted remains of his deeds. The indecision weighed on him while he picked his way through the remains of strangely decorated homes littered with discarded toys and shredded tapestries. A pair of Dogs slept on a bed tossed aside by the creature's impact and others still looked for treasure, going so far as to risk the collapse of a damaged house by tromping around the broken second story. A glimmer caught Kane's eye in the shadowed insides of a large house. The kitchen was a grisly scene with bits of food and flesh scattered about the stove and table. Something gleamed in the black room beyond.

A basin lay undisturbed and filled with now cold water. It was barely large enough for him to sit in, but a heroic prize in Kane's mind. He carefully undressed, making mental notes of where everything lay in the darkness and gently lowered his stiff and filthy body into the water, inhaling sharply at the cold.

All the grime and terror of the past dissolved off his skin while he sat there in a broken room of the ruined city.

He gently brushed Therise's braid while he cleaned himself, wondering what color the water might be when he was finished. If the feeling in his legs hadn't started to go numb, he would have stayed in longer. He stood and splashed his skin with handfuls of water, knowing it wouldn't be enough to get him clean, but at least it was a start. While he dried in the cold night air, he washed his clothes as best he could in the water, squeezing out plenty of dirt, sweat and blood.

A drunken Dog wandered by the open kitchen, "Is that the scent of a woman in there?"

"Just an angry naked man with a sword," Kane replied.

"If you find one, pass her around won't you?"

"I will."

The Dog stumbled off, tripping over a fallen beam and cursing in the increasingly quiet night. Kane decided he would never get used to the carnal pursuits of the army. The endless talk and stalking of women for some cruel and brief exercise countered everything Kane had learned and saw growing up in Tinder. Avoiding having to figure out what to do with Therise on their wedding night was perhaps the nicest part of being at the edge of a foreign country at war. It wasn't that he never thought about the inevitable collision of people, he just found the whole process....undignified. Still, it was the inevitable end of most men, so as he dressed he looked around the dark room and shivered in the now chilly air. It was a stark contrast to imagine a warm fire, full table and family of little ones scrambling around while he eyed his wife with the mischievous glint he had seen in married couples back home. Kane decided on sticking with his

family's principles so when the reunion with Therise finally came, he could embrace her with a clean heart. And a clean shirt.

Chapter 19

Kane stood outside an occupied tavern where the Dogs were now loud and drunk. The sounds of glass breaking accompanied a song which echoed down the quiet Nagah street. Those who had fallen asleep around town now wandered towards the brightly lit three-story building. He felt clean for the first time in months, feeling the heat billowing out from the open doorway as bodies jammed inside. After bathing in blood multiple times and seeing all the ways a man could die in battle, the thought of all that sweat and vomit waiting inside made him feel sick.

Kane slipped a half full bottle of wine from a nearby sleeping Dog and carried it into the house on the other side of the street. It was impossible to see more than a foot in front of him in the darkness so Kane felt his way carefully around broken chairs, shards of glass and what may have been an arm. He stepped in a puddle of something and pushed ahead to the stairs in one corner of the room. Staying close to the Dogs was important, but joining a congestion of drunks sounded repulsive. He missed the freedom of the open plain and made his way to the less disturbed top floor which contained a single slashed bed beside a circular window. A chest of clothes was open, with most of the contents scattered about the room. Kane gathered up an armful and sat on the small bed, trying to cover himself as best he could with small shirts and blankets.

After some work he was comfortable enough and with the bottle in hand, he stared out through the window towards the moon and took a long drink, thankful that the wine had a decent

taste. He had been given only sips as a child, but judging by the uncontrolled celebration of the tavern across the street, the escape it offered seemed like his best course of action as an uninvited stranger to this house.

“Kane!” Illian’s voice echoed through the house, “I know you’re in here somewhere, come out and celebrate with me.” The words stretched together and Kane knew his friend had consumed much more than half a bottle.

“I’m up here,” Kane replied. So much for getting some time alone.

Illian stumbled up the stairs, “Am I hearing things?”

“One more flight.”

Illian’s shadow fell through the darkened doorway. “There you are. Why does the great hero of Nagah hide up here? You should be drinking with the rest of us men.”

“I’m tired and needed some time alone,” Kane replied. He took another drink.

“Oh, you’re holding out on us. Give me a drink of that. It tastes pretty good, doesn’t it? No wonder our parents wanted to keep it for themselves when we were children. Drink is the finest secret in the Empire, if you ask me.”

“You’ll probably fall down the stairs if you’re not careful.”

Nonsense! If you share it with me, I’ll tell you a secret.”

“We don’t have secrets between us, Illian.” Kane said this, but doubted the words. Kane offered Illian the bottle, “Here you go. Now what’s this secret?”

Illian raised the bottle to his lips and drank with his legs wide and free arm stretched out for balance. He finished off the bottle and threw it against the wall.

“That’s better. These comrades of ours have it figured out, I think.”

“What do you mean?” Kane asked.

“Fight with everything you have, sleep where you wish and take what you want. That’s my kind of life.”

Illian shuffled closer and nearly fell onto Kane but braced himself with a hand on the bed post. “I’ve been with a woman, Kane. I’m a man, now.”

“You what?” Kane asked.

“It was easy, my best of friends. Everyone cheered me on and we had a good laugh afterwards.”

“But, what about the laws of Tinder, of Uriel, of our fathers? You cannot be bonded to anyone now.”

Illian pushed himself back to standing on his own. The room now smelled like the tavern Kane had hoped to avoid. “Those rules are meaningless, Kane. No curse has befallen me, my honor is intact in my mind and no one needs to know. You know what we should do? Stay with the army and become career soldiers.”

“You know I can’t do that. I’ve Therise waiting for me. We promised to return before leaving Tinder and I’m not going back without you.”

“We’re dead on some battlefield for all they know. If we get bored with this life, which I won’t, I promise you, then Tinder will be there.”

Kane shook his head, “I will not turn my back on our homeland, Illian. Be a man of many lovers like your father but I have a home I wish to return to as soon as possible.”

“You’ll betray me, won’t you?” Illian asked. “In order to save this fantasy life of yours that you wanted to escape in the first place, you’d abandon me here in Nagah.”

Kane rose from his makeshift bed and struck Illian across the face, “Don’t you talk to me about betrayal. You promised me that we would return before the first snows and now all the bloodshed and suffering we’ve been through is just some trick you’ve pulled on me.”

“Our old lives are a trick, don’t you see? We could have it both ways, but I can’t stay if you’re not here. You have to stay, Kane. Whatever happens, you will not strike me again.”

“We belong in Tinder where all of this madness just passes us by. I’ll drag you home unconscious if that’s what it takes.”

“I thought you were my friend, my comrade and brother in war. It turns out you are just a coward who can’t stand leaving his mother.”

Kane sighed, “You need a drink.”

“That’s the one good thing you’ve said tonight.”

Illian took erratic steps down the stairs. When he tumbled down the last few, Kane heard him say, “Do not help me.”

Kane lay down, feeling his boots hanging off the bed’s edge. He heard the tavern roar in delight at Illian’s return. The scent of dust and straw returned. What was he to do now? Perhaps Illian would drink himself into a stupor and forget his foolish plan of staying. Kane thought about staying, going from one woman to the next, but the animalistic nature of the soldier’s life outside of actual fighting repelled him. Therise came to his mind, and the desire to be home burned within his chest. This whole adventure had turned out to be a mistake. The one thing he had never expected to lose in this war was his oldest friend. Rather than Illian and him riding home together as conquerors, only he would come back alone and on foot.

Guilt also tugged his soul. Kane had built a world in his mind where certain things had remained true. He and Illian being together forever was one of the foundations. With that idea

undone, Kane viewed it as a personal failure to live up to the expectations he had set for his life. By avoiding the tavern he had let Illian down by stopping him before the Dogs' mentality had burrowed into his mind. Without the childish hopes and thrills sustaining him, the dangers of the situation became abundantly clear. Kane was not a hero, a soldier, or a man, but an invader amongst a host of invaders. The bed he occupied belonged to someone else. It seemed no one else cared to notice these facts, but the realization brought tears to Kane's eyes. A child once slept here, and now that child was probably gone, dead and tossed aside in this horrific pursuit of wealth and sensation. Now he only wanted to fight or go home. As he drifted off to sleep, his mind made a list of things he'd need for the journey back to Tinder. He was truly alone now.

Kane woke to see the trees of Uriel's shore. There was something comforting in the multicolor clouds of dust drifting by the planets as they went about their eternal business. After the conversation with Illian, seeing the heavenly bodies still turning reminded him that the world had not ended and time remained to fix their friendship. No matter how bad things might get between them, they would survive the journey home, together.

He felt Uriel's presence, but didn't see her. His clothes, the same white shirt and brown pants he'd worn during his first visit, smelled clean and didn't have the grit of dirt lining them. With the rustle of leaves in a gentle wind and the scent of the sea, Kane knew this place to be a dream compared to the cold discomfort of the waking world.

"Found you," Uriel said, appearing first as a blob of grass which then slid apart, revealing her in the familiar dress of vines and ivy. Small yellow flowers dotted the skirt, making her appear even more regal than normal. She sat with her arms crossing the tops of her knees. The tiger Veilo sat on Kane's other side and a holy silence reigned as the universe spun its course.

"What's happening to me?" Kane asked, still lying on his back.

“You’re growing up. It’s not as fun as you hoped, is it?”

“Growing up, barging into the homes of people you’ve slaughtered or seeing your friend betray your trust while he accuses you of betraying him? That doesn’t sound fun?”

Uriel chuckled. Kane decided the Dogs had one thing right, there was something missing without a woman nearby. He stretched out, feeling the soft grass tickle his arms.

“I could stay here forever.”

“You remember that this is a dream.”

“Where have you been?” Kane asked.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been as available to you as you would like, but there are other matters I’ve had to address.”

“Such as?”

Uriel ran fingers through Kane’s hair, “Are you ready to talk?”

“Is that why I’m here? Do you summon me when you require conversation?”

The fingers stopped. “I thought you and I were so alike,” Uriel said, “Maybe I am mistaken.”

“How similar can a boy be with a god?”

“Loss, betrayal, loneliness and hatred are felt by gods just as they are by men.”

“You just described my current feelings toward Illian.”

“Your friend?”

“What am I supposed to do? He’s dragged me out here and now he wants to stay drunk, filthy and bouncing from one woman to another and I’m supposed to either let him abandon our home or drag him back to Tinder where he’ll hate me forever. Either way, I’ve lost him. I didn’t know the world had such a powerful influence over a man.”

Uriel's fingers resumed brushing, "What would your grandfather have done?"

"I don't know, probably clubbed Illian over the head and not let him regain consciousness until we were home. I wish he could tell me what I needed to do. Ira would just grunt and tell me to get back to work."

"There might be a way for you to see him again, if he's still within the Breach."

"That's impossible. No one can just be pulled back from that place unless it decides to spit you out. What shape would he be in if it happens anyway?"

Uriel smiled down at him, "You might be able to save him if he's struggling. It wouldn't be permanent, but he might be drowning and this would give him a breath and the strength to push through the Breach."

Seeing his grandfather again sounded like an unexpected gift. The idea of at least spending some time with Liam would give Kane a chance to find some closure. Life in Tinder had continued after his grandfather's death as if he hadn't done more than all of them combined to keep the village alive and safe. When that smiling and courageous presence was suddenly taken from Kane's life, the weight of all the talks, fireside stories and advice trapped in an impossible future fell onto his shoulders. It was a burden he felt sure Liam wouldn't have wanted him to carry, but Kane could only hear the forgiving words in person. "What would I have to do?"

The eternal shore shuddered. Kane looked at the dark and tangled wall of trees behind them.

"You need to wake up. Now."

Chapter 20

Kane sat up, sending the clothes of his makeshift blanket sliding to the floor. He heard no sound beyond his own breathing and the creaks of the building he occupied. Uriel's warning lingered in his mind, but nothing seemed out of place when he looked out the circular window. He got up and hurried downstairs.

Dogs slept while others patrolled Nagah. The upright Dogs walked alert, glancing around at the dark houses as if ghosts might spring from a burned out window or broken door and drag them into endless shadow.

Kane went to the broken section of the city wall. The buildings near the opening looked like they might collapse on him if he sneezed. He needed to be under open sky and feel nothing but space around him as he thought about Illian and his own path. The presence of the dead beast behind him still lingered and his steps became hurried. A few Dogs lay against the rubble of the wall with the remains of a meal scattered around them. Kane accidentally kicked a plate and sent it clattering against chunks of broken stone.

"Who's there?" One of them asked quickly as the four shadows stood up quickly.

"Just Kane the Bloodthirsty."

"The one from the wall today?"

"The one from the wall. Has anything strange happened while you've been out here?"

One dark figure addressed his companions in a language Kane didn't recognize. The lights of the Tamarian camp spread along the plains outside the city. A strange scent pushed across the plains while a cloud obscured the half moon.

“They haven’t heard anything new from the camp, but Aleese here is more jumpy than normal.”

“Where are they from? I haven’t heard that tongue before.”

“They come from far to the south beyond the mountains. Their kingdom is having troubles of their own and they decided this was a better place to be than there.”

“Why would they leave their homes for a war this far east?”

“When you are considered rebels and murderers at such a young age, a change is the wiser choice. They came up along the coast to Thannon and joined in with the Dogs. A face among faceless is best, especially where brutality is commonplace.”

“What a world we live in,” Kane said.

An attempt at pleasant conversation didn’t soothe Kane’s mind, even though he saw nothing to support his anxiety. The lights of the camp went on twinkling from the wall and wrapped around both sides of the city. The night remained quiet, clean, and crisp with a chill in the wind coming down from the north.

“I think your friend might be on to something.”

“He usually is, which is why we stayed out here. The Tamarians aren’t too worried about another army anytime soon but that doesn’t mean we’re completely safe. This was a city of theirs, after all.”

“Why did they let us stay in the city while most of the army remains outside?”

“From what I heard, the Tamarians find the creature a little too disturbing to share a space with. Better to keep the filth with the filth, you understand. I think they’ll want to torch everything here when we leave after that temple falls tomorrow. They’ve already gotten what they wanted in the loot, so they prefer their tents to our company.”

“Do you see that?”

Kane pointed out across the tent towards the furthest edge of the Tamarian camp where the lamps and braziers twinkled like orange stars. A few of the lights went out. Across the Tamarian camp in front of them all the human movements stopped.

“What could that be?” The shadow nearest Kane asked, sounding more irritated than alarmed.

More lights along the edge went out. A trumpet started but was cut short. Others began, joined by some bells and other sounds of warning. The Tamarian camp went from quiet to full battle instantly. Soldiers streamed out armed and ready to form up and face the enemy.

“Do they sleep in their armor?” The Dog asked.

Kane climbed to the top of a rubble pile to get a better view.

The sound of marching reached Kane’s ears and he thought he saw movement along the plain beyond the camp. The far darkness slowly shifted with the movement of thousands of shadows.

A strange song played out across the night shrouded plain. Kane heard a flute softly playing, but it carried over the distance from the camp to the wall and over the sounds of a spreading battle.

The ghosts of Mountainborne slain walked calmly into view. Some were missing arms while others wielded the same black glass weapons from Kane’s first battle. Dirt covered them all, as if they had clawed their way out of the ground. This effect, combined with the haunting flute, was terrifying in its unexpected appearance. The notes stuck to his head, making his thoughts unsure and courage falter. The Tamarians responded to this strange threat quickly and the battle appeared contained along the northwest portion of the camp. Kane suddenly realized

he should warn the other Dogs and turned around to see most of them had already gathered near the breach. Boil stood at the front, with the brothers and Illian. When Kane looked at his old friend, Illian didn't respond. Either he was still too drunk to think straight or their conversation had forced an uncrossable gap between them. Mazrath was nowhere to be seen, probably getting his tools ready for the flow of wounded, Kane thought.

“What do you see?” Boil asked, his mask of scars showing in the moonlight.

“A new army, or should I say an old army is attacking to the northwest.”

“It's too late for riddles, Kane.”

“The dead Mountainborne are attacking again and there's an odd song in the air.”

Kane looked back, fear squeezing his insides. The dead pushed along the Tamarian front while the rest of the army gathered its strength. Kane tapped his head as the song continued to play, its notes mocking or sinister behind the music's high and flowing tones.

If even half the Mountainborne that had been killed were advancing, the army might be overwhelmed.

“It's the curse of Callinday following us east,” A Dog said, his words quivering.

In sections of the camp, small parties of Tamarians retreated towards the relative safety of the city. Boil climbed up to the ruined section of wall where Kane stood.

“Never seen that before,” Boil said.

“What do you think?”

“Nothing yet.”

Perhaps each soul of the slain Mountainborne had lain dormant in their graves until someone called them up. Kane wondered at the sight and hoped Boil had a plan for this new situation.

Tamarian stragglers ran up to the walls.

“What’s happening out there?” Boil asked one soldier scrambling over the shattered stone.

“It’s an army of death. The curse of Callinday has found us!” Another Dog cried.

Boil looked unperturbed. “There’s another voice for Callinday.”

“So, what do we do?” Kane asked.

The mysterious enemy continued their slow advance, moving within bowshot. Kane watched a wave of pale faces sway in the moonlight as they advanced. Their skin had a blue tint as if each corpse walking toward them had been bled dry. The song continued across the fields of Nagah.

“Should we attack?” Kane asked.

Boil chuckled, “All of them against us? Let them get clogged in this gap and wait for the rest of the Tamarians to rally. If all that fails, we cut our way south.”

“I didn’t think I’d end up in a story like this,” Kane said.

“That’s what makes them good stories,” Boil replied, placing a hand on Kane’s shoulder.

The advancing dead were too many to count, though not unstoppable with the Dogs’ defensive advantage.

Kane watched Boil deftly step down from one block to another, landing on the battered streets below. Whatever he said rang true, and the Dogs went quickly from fear to joy at the prospect of more fighting; whether against the dead or living, it didn’t matter.

As Kane joined his fellow Dogs, he listened to the sweet sound of unsheathing swords, including his own, mixed with the tightening of leather straps and clink of metal. If the strange melodies were what fueled this undead army, they would answer with their own song.

Boil spoke loudly from where he stood, at the front, beside Kane, “You all killed these Mountainborne once before, lads. Let’s remind them what real men can do.”

The dead approached at a run in disorganized and silent lines. Only the sound of their boots and Kane’s own breathing made a sound as they closed. Some limped on broken legs, others ignored dislocated arms which flailed about as they ran. Dirt and blood stained their pale skin. Kane wanted to fight, was ready to fight. Illian stood beside him and they touched foreheads in what was quickly becoming their pre-fight ritual. Kane still had his doubts to his own path, the chance to see grandfather Liam again and the future of his friendship with Illian but for now he shoved all distractions aside.

A cry whipped up from the Dogs as the dead ran closer, stumbling without a word over the discarded stones of Nagah’s wall.

Chapter 21

A rush of wind preceded the dead army’s impact against the Dogs. Kane hoped this was the only point of access as the Mountainborne ran, loped and struggled forward on injured legs. The absence of life Kane had felt after his first battle returned, smelling it in the wind that tossed his hair as thousands of shadows poured across fields into the gap.

Being this close to the Tamarians, Kane saw how the masters of the Empire fought. They were used to easy wins against tribesman on the open field of battle dictated at their leisure. Now they stood with criminals against something wholly unfamiliar to their logic. Those that stood nearby looked jittery and unsure.

The Dogs, on the other hand, as the dead came close, faced this unique horror with the same grim approach that solved all of their problems. Regardless of what it might take to kill something already dead, limbs required tendons which could be cut as easily as a taught string. What they looked at, as far as Kane could tell, was fighting a group of disabled soldiers was easier than fighting complete people.

Kane raised his sword, skewering the first corpse that came into his range and let his bloody-self run free.

The blows of these new foes came heavy and awkward, as if the armed corpses were all extremely drunk, more so than the Dogs already were. The dead horde lunged forward, pushing heedlessly into the waiting blades of the Dogs and Tamarians.

For a time, bodies fell in pieces like chopped wood at the Dogs' feet. Kane kept his attacks short to avoid banging into the soldiers on his left and right. He went for arms and legs, making sure what weapons the corpses did carry were useless. Left with only their teeth, Kane figured they wouldn't pose much of a threat.

The bloodless slaughter went on, with only a few Tamarian casualties. Some pulled back, replaced by fresher arms, but Kane stood beside Illian, testing new depths of his strength.

The weight of numbers pushed the line backwards into Nagah. The dead poured into the gap while the Tamarians demolished bodies into dismembered heaps, but the tide inched forward. Some Dogs and Tamarians slipped away, screaming into the black morass of still faces and tattered clothes.

The act of slaying became tedious. When the silent dead slipped through the gaps in the walls and into the dark streets of Nagah, the stalemate eroded the will to fight. Some cried in

fear at being surrounded and devoured and over the din of battle Kane heard Boil calling for the Dogs to stand fast.

The dead were not tough, but one landed a glancing blow against Kane's shoulder, sending pain stabbing along his arm. He felt his attacks become stiff and jilted while hands clawed at his feet from the crippled dead dragging themselves along the ground.

The desire to run whispered in his mind, then spoke, then screamed. Breathing became difficult in the tight space, fatigue gradually filtering into his arms. No reinforcements came that he could see beyond the flood of eyeless faces and broken shoulders.

He took a step back, feeling hands all along his legs, pulling him down towards a black abyss. A hand grabbed his shoulder.

"We need to go," Boil yelled into his ear.

The clatter of metal against metal rang off the walls and buildings of the street but Kane heard and obeyed.

Others around them already fought as they retreated, refusing to expose their backs to the undaunted foe. Kane looked up along the broken wall where dead men climbed over the debris like insects.

"We're falling back," Kane said to Illian, who nodded in response.

The ground shook as the day before when the Order's corrupt pet was loosed. Kane and Boil looked at each other. The crushing roar of the thing pushed out from the dark tunnel of ruined houses.

"Get back!" Kane shouted, dragging Dogs and Tamarians away from the fight. The mangled roar cut across the night and into the hearts of the living. With foes appearing on all sides and the return of that unholy thing, the will of those fighting faltered.

The rout began.

Kane turned left with Boil and a few others to head south towards escape. Two dozen Dogs and Tamarians ran through deserted streets, past empty buildings towards the untouched southern wall. The ground shook again, throwing Kane to the ground. He was up again in an instant as the Order's monster thrashed back to life.

There was no time to be afraid. He would not die, and he would save Illian. His mind held to that notion as he hurried along and the sounds of panic, cries of terror and the monster gradually faded. The wall appeared in the distance as a slightly glowing line of stone rising at the end of the street they found.

This dark day would eventually become another memory placed in the pile of others to draw upon in the safety of Tinder. Toughened by the farm, tempered by war. There was no other way for this adventure to play out. An abrupt ending was impossible, regardless of the horrors, mysteries and endless line of dangerous surprises. They looked trapped, but Kane knew there would always be a way out. Dead Mountainborne ran through the streets as they fought on the run, always pushing towards the south. There were only so many places to hide in Nagah if they got cut off.

The gates on the southern side were closed. With some effort, Kane and the others unhinged the crossbar and pushed the doors open to a strange scene.

Flashes of battle raged amongst torches, overturned braziers and burning tents, giving light to the chaotic melee engulfing the entire Tamarian army. Kane followed the others across the plain, stopping to let groups of dead lumber by. Around them the fighting moved to the west as the Tamarians appeared to be fighting their way out, but leaving behind many of their supplies. They slid into a cluster of empty tents on the southern edge of the line. The group hid

in an empty kitchen tent full of upturned tables and spilled pots. While everyone caught their breaths, Kane searched for Illian.

“You okay?” Kane asked.

Illian ran a trembling hand through his hair, “This has been one fine night, hasn’t it?”

Kane searched the face of Illian. This was the same person he had grown up with and made promises that they would be brothers until the end. What had happened between them could be forgotten once they saw Tinder again.

“It sure has. I guess this as good a reason to head home as any, I suppose.”

Illian sighed, “I don’t want to go home.”

“Now is not the time to worry about that,” Kane said. Perhaps this Illian before him was no longer the same person he had left Tinder with. “We can figure this out later after we’re safe.”

“Lead the way.”

Kane noticed the barely visible group seemed to be staring at him.

“Gather what you can from the camp,” Kane ordered. “We’ll meet at... He stopped to look at Boil, “My apologies. What are your orders?”

Boil patted Kane on the back, “That sounds like a good enough plan to me. Gather only food and water and find something warm. It could be a cold and long walk back to the Empire. Let’s see how things are looking before we desert.”

One of the Tamarians spoke behind them in the darkness, “It won’t matter if we’re dead. Once the army breaks, it becomes of matter of who can survive.”

Kane looked back at the battle swirling around a city. In the shadows of the clouded night he didn’t have the slightest idea who or what had the upper hand. The sounds of fighting

echoed across the plain to their hiding place. No one had any suggestions as they watched the campaign stall and possibly fail before their eyes. The creature inside roared again and Kane picked out the sound of breaking wood and falling stone over the din of battle.

Boil pointed to the east, "Is that what I think it is?"

"It can't be..." A Tamarian said.

More Mountainborne marched from the east. The only reason they were different from the rest of the fighting was their more ordered approach to the walls of Nagah. The Tamarians, if they were not careful, could be totally wiped out, caught between living and dead Mountainborne.

"That settles it. We go south, unless anyone wants to go out there and die a hero. If you want to live, go and find what you can and meet at beyond the tents before the Mountainborne figure out where we're hiding."

Kane started with the adjacent tent and to found two empty potato sacks. He filled them with all the food he could carry before moving on. Just outside one prim tent lay an ornate great sword in the grass. Its silver hilt shined in the limited moonlight, as if announcing its presence to any passerby. The sheath and strap were long enough that he could sling the weapon across his back and not restrict his movement too much. Kane thought of Boil's order to grab only food and water, and wondered if stealing this would get him in trouble. He dropped his old sword and slung this new blade across his back.

Kane made sure he followed the sounds of his comrade's movements to avoid being left behind. The horn of the Emperor's Wave sliced across the night. It sounded like a wounded beast, calling out to the merciless expanse of Mountainborne country. Kane relied on his senses of touch and smell to find what he else he needed. If he didn't hurry, he'd be left behind.

Lamenting not having enough time or sight to find other tools for survival among the chests and tents of the Tamarians, he abandoned his search. He was going home and needed something worthy to present to Therise. He supposed showing up alive would have to do when passed the last tents. He carried the sacks over his shoulders and ran towards someone howling in the night. Behind him the horns and drums of the Mountainborne overpowered the other, stranger song.

Kane smiled at the strangeness of the world. In less than a day, he had ransacked the homes of two different nations and now fled like a rabbit. The group of men barely lit by the concealed moon stood in a silent clump at the southern edge of the tents.

“We all here?” Boil asked.

No response as Kane looked about the shadowed faces. He counted at least five Tamarians among them, their armored silhouettes highlighted in the night sky.

“Illian?” Kane asked no one.

“Right behind you,” Illian said.

“We go south for tonight,” Boil said. “Tomorrow we’ll figure out what to do with ourselves. Any objections?”

No response.

“Let’s go.”

Without a glance back, Kane and the others ran south. Monsters, the dead, a new Mountainborne army and now a retreat into the hostile wilds. Thoughts of home filled his mind rather than fear. Oh, the stories he could tell now, of the forest, the battle, of Uriel, of Nagah, of monsters and corpses attacking at night. What a strange place the world outside Tinder turned out to be.

They spent the night on one of the many small rock-covered hills of the plain. When the sun rose, Kane leaned against the base of the large moss-covered rock which loomed over their hiding place. All around him the others slept, except for Illian, who sat at the edge of the rock's shadow looking towards the east. Even though he could only see the folds of cloak surrounding his bushy brown head, Kane felt an odd peace coming from his friend. The shoulders, even under layers of clothing, looked loose and hung naturally instead of up, tense and ready. Illian's head rolled from one side to the other as if listening to music but there was no sound but the calls of distant birds.

Kane took a seat next to Illian, "Are you all right?"

Illian smiled. His eyes were closed.

"I've never seen you ready to accept the sun like this before. Even the Order priest back home couldn't ever make you do it," Kane said.

"I'm fine. It was good we got away. The fear and running through the night was exactly what I needed to sober up."

"I'm sorry if things got difficult last night. I know you want to stay, but I can't live the soldier's life."

Illian let out a long breath, "Things are different now between us, aren't they? You stand on one side of a line and I am on the other. I think you are making a mistake by passing on future riches and glory."

"We are brothers in battle, Illian. You'll always be welcome in my boring home."

Illian kept his eyes closed and his voice sounded distant, dreaming. Kane relaxed, letting the sun warm them both. He may not be in Tinder, but perhaps the companionship of his friend was home enough until he saw those fields again.

“Do you remember that music from last night? I can’t seem to get the song out of my head,” Illian said.

Kane nodded, “Not until you mentioned it. Last night was just...I don’t know what it was.”

“Part of our adventure,” Illian said.

“Well said.”

“You boys better get something to eat,” Boil said behind them, “We’re going back to Nagah to see where things stand.”

“Are you sure?” Kane asked.

“Of course. We’re Dogs and criminals, but I don’t want to be known as the one who fled and missed out on something. The Tamarians might have won for all we know and now we’re deserters rather than survivors. Head back and take a look, then we decide what to do.”

No one objected to returning. Kane looked around the scraggly faces and saw defeated looks. The soldiers in their group chose to hide within themselves and let others do the thinking. They all looked like men resigned to death but unwilling to face it yet.

Except for one.

A Tamarian in appearance and standing taller than the others. Even though they had run for some time before stopping, the brute looked refreshed after only a couple hours of sleep in full armor and resting on stone. His head appeared to be on fire when the sun caught the red hair which sloped down his neck. A thick beard left only tanned cheeks and a sharp nose which appeared to have been broken before. The man’s bright eyes flared with unquenchable life and outshined the subdued faces of those who around him. Through swaggered movements, a constant smile and posing rather than standing, Kane got the impression that while Boil was the

one who had survived a life of losing fights, this soldier spent his life ever victorious. The questions Kane asked of himself had been answered by this man long ago.

The group jogged north, and Kane kept an eye on the strange soldier ahead of him in the two-wide column. In all their adventures, especially amongst the Dogs, Kane had only seen the Tamarians when they ordered him about or fought alongside him on the battlefield. He hadn't actually ever talked to one without being mocked. What he had grown up on were stories of how they came from the sea to the west and pushed their will across the world until reaching the Worldgate Mountains at the western edge of the map. Men of the sea and stars who brought civilization to an untamed wild of savages and beasts. Just as Kane was the distant offspring of the natives of the plains, the last to submit to the Emperor's will several hundred years ago, this man was the enemy who became the protector, teacher and leader of all those villages dotting the expanse of the Empire.

As the sun rose, Kane guessed their journey would take them to Nagah within a couple hours. Birds drifted overhead and the occasional rabbit sprinted by towards cover. He wasn't sure if going back to see the state of the army was wise.

Wisps of smoke sailed up just over the horizon. Boil stopped the formation and Kane joined the others as they spread out into a skirmish line, hunched as they approached a rise clustered with large rocks. There was more than enough cover, but giving anything away by a careless move risked horrible death for all of them.

Boil motioned Kane to sneak up to the rocks with him. They crawled up to the nearly square stones which Kane could almost stand up behind without being seen. His heart thudded against his chest. Games of hiding from his younger days came to his mind and the thrill of avoiding detection, whether it was by children or the Mountainborne, added a strange excitement

to lying against the cold ground and inching up to a small gap between the stones. Some, including the fiery Tamarian, stayed at the bottom, either ready to flee at the first signal or to alert the others of any surprises coming up from the rear.

Before looking out, Kane listened and heard sounds of activity too distant to determine the source. Something stirred in the Tamarian camp or walls of Nagah. He smelled smoke and death. Slowly, he leaned over to get one eye past the rock.

Nagah looked just as abused as the day before when the Tamarian army broke through the wall and tore the place apart. The debris of war littered the fields and farmland surrounding the city. There was no Tamarian army, just the remains of the tents ahead of them, dotting a blue and white circle which was broken on the east and west side. The plains and fields were torn apart from the movements of armies. Kane saw no bodies. Only the wind against fabric gave any sound.

Kane leaned back to look at Boil's face, finding it difficult to gauge an expression through all the wrinkles and scars.

"What do you think?" Kane whispered, he felt the eyes of all the others looking up at them.

"The Tamarians are either in the city or retreated west. After what we saw, I doubt they'd want to push any further into Mountainborne territory until they have a winter to recover their forces and pride. I'm suspicious, but I don't want to leave without having some idea where everyone is."

Kane leaned back over to look at what should have been a field strewn with dead men and horses, but instead only saw a few birds pecking at the ground. The sound of voices reached

his ears from beyond the city walls. He was about a half mile away from the city, and yet something stirred amongst the ruins of Nagah.

Boil rolled back towards the expectant group. “Who’s feeling like a mistake?”

Most nodded. Only the large Tamarian with his torch of hair flashed a gleeful smile.

“Maybe I was wrong about you Tamarians,” Boil said. “I figured you’d be gone with all our food and heading for the comforts of home by now.”

“There’s still time,” the Tamarian said. Kane recognized the voice as belonging to one of the soldiers he and Illian had encountered their first day at the Tamarian camp; what a strange world.

“Good enough for me.” Boil stood to a low crouch, “Keep your eyes out and ears sharp, lads. We’re going to poke the bear.”

Illian went down near the last and Kane dropped in behind him. The soldiers knew what they were doing and moved from the cover of one tent to another with unspoken signals and deliberate movements. Kane felt the rhythm of their advance. Sprint, pause, glance, pause, sprint. He was pretty sure if anyone spotted them, he would be indistinguishable from all the other veterans. He smiled at the thought.

Uncut grass between the tents and the tilled fields provided some cover and Kane joined the rest as they paused at the edge of the grass. Stalks of corn stood before some, while others had an exposed path of threshed wheat. The birds nearby took up with a sudden beat of wings, causing Kane to jump. He prayed to Uriel for a little wind, just to give some noise to cover their advance, but cut his words short. She did not control the wind, or much else for that matter.

Kane spotted Boil’s leather cap beside him. The group hesitated, and Kane was about to make a move when Illian pulled him back.

“You can’t have all the adventure,” he said with a smile.

Kane bowed back, “After you.”

Illian ran forward across the threshed field, making more noise than Kane preferred. He watched the parapets of Nagah for any kind of movement. To their right was the southern gate which remained open from their escape. The scene felt like they had run back to a different world from the night before. The noise and suffocating proximity of combat lingered despite the fresh morning.

Illian made it to the wall and waved them in. Kane looked to his left to see the Tamarian staring at the walls.

“What’s your name?” Kane asked.

The Tamarian looked at him as one might stare at a mortal enemy. Kane leaned back slightly at the stare but then the fury evaporated into the confident blue eyes. He stuck out a leather glove surrounded by steel, “Grizzle, but call me Griz. Any more silly questions before we die?”

“No.”

“Then pick up your skirts and follow me, lad,” Griz said, rising up and running up to the wall in a muffled clatter of steel against wool. Kane ran for the walls with the others.

The voices spoke clearer, but Kane couldn’t distinguish the language. He knew only Tamarian, which meant this had to be Mountainborne.

“They don’t sound too worried about all this,” Boil said.

“How many Mountainborne are there?” Illian asked.

“Can’t say, but they sound like survivors, not soldiers. Mostly women and old men, from what I can tell. They sound pretty upset.”

“Who cares?” Illian said, “Where is the army?”

“They don’t know. But look,” Boil pointed out to the west. A mass of black and red slowly shifted across the rolling countryside. Far beyond the enemy forces, Kane saw the snowy peaks of mountains lining the horizon like a saw blade. The Worldgate Mountains, the end of all civilization.

“That looks like reinforcements,” Griz said. “Where are they finding these men? They’ve quieted down for years after one good lick in the past.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Boil said. “Winter’s coming and we’re not where we need to be. There’s still a Tamarian army out there to find.”

Kane glanced back at Illian who was staring east towards the enemy army and not paying attention to what was going on. It took a couple of pokes to bring him back to the conversation.

“What?”

“Looks bad,” Kane said.

“Sure does.”

“We need to get home before the Mountainborne break through the fleeing Tamarians. Tinder could be in danger and not even know it until those savages are torching the forest.”

“Which province is your village?” Boil asked.

“In southern Achritia, a day’s ride from Alton.”

“How far?”

“Quite a ways, at least, we’d be lucky to get back before the first snow,” Kane said. He had second thoughts of inviting nearly two dozen soldiers stained with war to the unsullied fields of Tinder. If needed, he and Illian could disappear during the journey back and bring the news of

the Tamarian defeat while sparing them the company of criminals with no stake in the future of Tinder.

A terrible thought shot across Kane's mind. The quiet and empty field suddenly became ominous. The tents and small hills and trees surrounding them each became a hiding place for shadowed creatures.

"Boil," Kane said, "Where are the Order's wagons?"

The massive iron hulks that used to be wagons were lined up on the western edge of the camp, each one blown open, the metal bent out like some strange flower in bloom.

"Gods," Boil said. It was the first time the weathered and beaten face showed any fear. He grabbed the men around him, "We run west. Now."

Chapter 23

They were mice sprinting across the field with at least one hawk circling overhead. No monstrous corpses meant that whatever had been released or escaped in the battle still roamed the plains around Nagah. All the dead had probably been eaten by the things driven only by their instinct. The worst part was in not knowing the shapes of creatures once hidden in the now broken wagons. As they ran west, Kane couldn't shake the feeling of a pair of great talons coming down to smash his body into the ground before getting devoured.

The burdens of the food they carried slowed the pace, but each man pushed on, fueled by fear of the enemy, of monstrous creatures and dying alone in the wilderness. After several miles across the rugged plains, Illian grabbed Boil's shoulder and they halted on top of a small hill surrounded by jagged white rocks. Similar hilltops were all around them in a broken series of

large mounds. The beaten grass and footprints of the Tamarian army's retreat left them a clear trail to follow back to the west towards safety and home.

"Why are we stopping?" Griz asked, standing tall with his hand on his hip.

"One of the Order's pets is close. Do you smell that?" Illian said. They took cover behind some nearby rocks and waited. Kane found their position exposed on the hilltop as there weren't enough hiding places for the two dozen of them. Kane looked south and saw only white stones surrounded with grass swaying in the wind.

"Where is it?" Griz asked.

"I don't know, but keep watch." Boil drew his sword. "If it gets wind of us, we'll have to split up and arrange a meeting place. Hopefully it will try to catch us all and get confused by our scurrying about."

"How about the road to Callinday?" Kane said. "It's the only landmark I know of and we can follow the army's trail there."

"I'd hate to spend more time near that city than I need to," Griz said, "But it's the only place we all know of."

Boil agreed, "We're probably all dead men anyway, whether it is by beasts or Mountainborne. Stay near that curve in the road for two days if we get separated, then set off on your own. The Empire may be caught by surprise and slow to react to this new threat of invasion from the east, so the further south we go the better.

Kane saw movement out of the corner of his eye. A muscled flesh dip behind a nearby hill.

"There!" Kane pointed north and dropped to the ground. He listened to the sound of hands slapping water under the rush of wind.

Kane watched through the grass as the creature pulled or slid its bulk over the hill. It looked like an overweight dog with a belly so large its legs dangled helplessly over folds of hairy skin. The thing moved like a slug but stood taller than a two-story house. A long wide head with no eyes but only teeth sticking out from and through its skin swayed with every movement. It seemed intent on struggling west but didn't notice them. Tendrils slid out from the rolls of skin, pulling its bulk along by grabbing on to the rocks of the plain. The smell of rotten meat filled the air. Every living creature in its proximity fled. A fox flashed past Kane's hiding place. More birds than Kane thought could possibly hide in such a featureless place took flight with some being caught by the creature's snapping vines of skin and muscle.

"It's slow," Boil whispered.

"Do we run?" Illian asked.

It seemed impossible for the awkward monstrosity to cover the ground between them if they got away quietly and quickly.

Then the creature stopped, its flabby body shifting over the stomach.

"Uh oh," Griz said.

"We run." Illian said before rising to his feet and sprinting down the other side of the hill.

The creature erupted, its flesh liquefying as a giant wolf-like creature formed or chewed its way through the belly and down the hill. A squashed face and jagged teeth bobbed with every bound forward. It was nearly hairless and appeared blind like its creator, but spines stuck out along its back and rattled with every step. Kane ran back to the east, losing sight of all the others in his panic. He felt the ground tremble with each bounding step, certain the thing had selected him. When he glanced back he saw the creature smash blindly against a rock, squashing a Dog between the two. It tossed the shattered remains into the air and caught it with open jaws.

Kane curved around a hill back to the west. He wouldn't be the one left alone when the creature finished devouring his comrades. The first creature struggled on its legs, slinging out ropes of flesh to increase its pace and dragging the torn belly behind it in a trail of black blood.

The obscene wolf turned and started loping towards Kane on its stubby legs. He sprinted towards another small hill, weaving through the largest rocks he could find, hoping to slow the thing down long enough to escape.

His legs and lungs burned as he heard rapid thumps of heavy feet against the grass. The creature gurgled, rather than roared in its pursuit.

Kane stopped and ducked behind the largest rock he could find. In the cold air he felt a burst of soggy warmth slide by him as he sprinted back north. The first and larger monster snagged a Tamarian and a Dog, dropping them screaming into a newly formed mouth.

The wolf-creature slid by but regained its footing by the time Kane took off again. Its long gait gained ground and ahead of Kane there was no rock large enough to stop the it.

Kane ran, reaching for the great sword strapped under his cloak. The wide hilt was stuck in the folds of cloth and he slowed to yank it free. He whimpered as the heat of death closed in on him. With a final panicked yank, he pulled the long blade free, cutting into his cloak and spinning to his left with the blade cutting across, the blow filled with all his strength and fear.

If his lumbering beast had leapt, death was certain, but it had instead tried to scoop him up midstride and caught the thick blade on one side of its mouth. The Tamarian steel went deep through skin and muscle, cutting through the joint of upper and lower jaw before the sword flew from Kane's hand.

A guttural roar of pain shook Kane's skull with the noise. The wounded beast tried to escape but found the pain of moving too difficult. A gnarled claw batted at the partially

embedded sword, causing it to shift around and soon the thing choked on its own blood. It wretched gouts of black ichor and slowed to a walk.

Griz ran up from somewhere and cut at the beast's legs. The creature staggered, trying to respond and instead fell to its side with a crash.

From behind Kane the first and larger creature wailed and fell silent. Its cry sounded similar to the lost spirit Kane and Illian had encountered long ago.

It was odd to feel pity for such a creature. On its side Kane didn't reach the top of the now still torso as the last vestiges of life slipped away. Its final breath was almost a sigh of relief. The sticky black blood clung to his boots and cloak while Kane worked to dislodge his sword from the great beast's jaw. Sweat misted his brow while he worked, despite the cold wind blowing across the hills. Slowly and with the sound of being withdrawn from thick mud, the oily black blade slid free.

He had killed a creature capable of destroying cities and men. Griz looked at him with disbelief and half a dozen of the others ran towards him waving their hands. Kane climbed to the top of the dead abomination tried cleaning the blade. Here was a story worthy of a fireside gathering under the Bonding Tree. Instead of gold or treasure lugged back to Tinder as a prize, Kane wanted this monster's head to decorate his home.

Boil arrived first, "You are the luckiest bastard I've ever seen."

"So it seems. Where is everyone else? The other creature could still be after us."

"The first creature is dying but our friends have scattered to the winds."

Illian and five others came up. Kane looked to his friend and was surprised to see a grimace on Illian's face.

"I'm glad to see you made it." Kane said.

“You'll be the greatest hero Tinder's ever borne,” Illian said, quickly shaking Kane's hand and not meeting his eyes. “With deeds like these, we should send you off to destroy the Mountainborne hordes and their ghosts and let us return home.”

They all laughed. Kane's excitement from killing such a large beast was increased by the number of survivors spared the fate of lying undigested in the stomachs of the slain creatures. Illian didn't seem happy at all to see that he was still alive.

Now was not the time to worry about such things. Kane felt capable to do the impossible and save the Empire on his own. He was ready for both glorious deeds and their rewards.

“We need to keep moving and find the rest of our party, if they're nearby,” Kane said. Boil nodded in agreement.

Kane took up his place in the single line of soldiers heading west.

Illian lingered to the rear of the group.

Griz strode alongside Kane, “I'm not sure if Illian's your friend or your wife.”

“What do you mean?”

“Women either love you or hate you and hardly anything in between. I'm sure he'll speak about it later on when his envy simmers down. If not, you could always solve this problem my way.”

“How's that?” Kane asked.

“Axe to the spine.”

“I won't try that yet.”

Crossing over a rise, Kane spotted the deflated remains of the original beast they had encountered. It looked similar to the corpse of the other that had been unleashed on Nagah. The limbs stuck up like broken branches from the bulk. Its head lay propped up with the long teeth

and serpentine tongue sticking out of the open mouth. The air stunk of gas seeping from a burst stomach. Kane wondered if Uriel could save whatever tortured spirit had been trapped in that prison of flesh.

For now he and Illian were alive and going home. Boil didn't seem as troubled about the army's defeat as some of the others, and Kane guessed his easy detachment was just the Dogs' philosophy of discarding the dead from his mind, but on a much larger scale. It appeared the Tamarian drive for expansion had been stopped and now the Mountainborne were looking for revenge. There was nothing to do beyond pushing for home so Kane set his worry aside as they moved back west.

Illian stayed near the back with another Dog Kane didn't recognize, making every deliberate effort to avoid any contact. Kane didn't mind, as they pushed towards Callinday after a brief search for the others. There might still be other creatures roaming nearby. Some debated whether or not the two separate creatures had somehow joined to each other at some point during their escape.

Griz was curious about Tinder and the Achritian Province, as it was one of the few places in the empire he hadn't visited. "Are there women?" Was his first question.

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Some," Kane answered warily.

"I can live with that. Do you have one waiting for you?"

"I do. Her name's Therise and I wouldn't be surprised if she's running the village now. Our elders are rather weak willed when it comes to loud women who start conversations by throwing things."

Griz smiled, “She sounds like my kind of woman. Are you married to her?”

“Yes, we have bonded in blood. Some flee from their obligations, but I decided to get it done before leaving on this campaign.” Kane decided now was not the time to impress Griz with his tales of self-doubt and fears about leaving Therise and Tinder behind, or his apprehension at returning home.

“That’s understandable. Most women hate the men they end up with.”

“Actually, it was the men who have traditionally fled, though it hasn’t happened recently until I ran off. Achritian women are known for their assertive nature. They used to fight alongside the men when my ancestors went raiding into the old Empire before the expansion east.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Griz asked, “I never thought death on the battlefield was preferable to death in the household.”

Kane wasn’t sure whether this was true or not, but the idea touched something inside him. Perhaps facing the horrors of war and dying for a cause were easier than facing the responsibility of being a husband, father and farmer. He hated the idea of letting someone get too close. Even as a child, he had insisted on walking alone without help ever since he could stand. Illian was his only friend, and the distance cut between them from his wanting to stay in Nagah wasn’t bothering Kane nearly as much as he thought. Indecision lay hidden just beyond the horizon. It had first started with a struggle between soldiery and farming but now it was growing into an outright war. At Tinder, the fight would continue as he faced standing alone or letting someone approach the sacred depths of his heart. He couldn’t be both and yet wanted both. The tension of which path to choose made his chest feel stretched apart.

“You might be the wisest barbarian I’ve ever come across,” Kane said.

Griz laughed loudly and slapped Kane hard on the shoulder. Despite the padding of the cloak and armor, the blow still hurt.

“At least you have someone waiting for you back home. There’s no one out there watching from the walls of Gibeia hoping to see my face.”

“She might be the only one waiting for me. I ran away from my father and he’s not one to forgive impulse.”

“Now you’re just rubbing it in. How do you know she’s been faithful to you? The idea of marriage hasn’t stopped many women from fleeing to my arms.”

Kane pulled off his leather glove and showed Griz the dark red point on the tip of his forefinger. “We’ve exchanged blood, starting the process of our separate lives converging into one spirit. It’s a small representation of the blood sacrifices we used to make in order to join with the old gods. I’m already falling down the hill of being absorbed into her and her to me. It’s just a matter of how long it will take to reach the bottom.”

The sky paled with the setting sun. They ran at a friendly pace while shielding their eyes. Boil kept them within sight of the army’s old trail and looked ahead in an effort to see if they had caught up with the rest of the fleeing Tamarian army.

They lit no fire that night, instead lying bundled in their cloaks and clustered together while the cold pushed down on them.

Another two days passed with Kane speaking to Griz of all kinds of things. It was odd to consider their ancestors had once been bitter enemies. Illian didn’t speak, and instead sulked far from Kane, who guessed his friend had his own fears of returning home to Tinder.

During these talks with Griz, it became clear that their mutual respect came from the equally bloodied portions of their lives. While Kane had come to fight with Illian and earn their fireside stories together, they had earned the right to run alongside the other heroic figures of their group. Boil stayed focused on moving west and no one spoke of Callinday as it drew closer with every step.

Kane watched Illian at night, trying to figure out what to say or do to get them on speaking terms again. He had tried a question or two, but only got short answers followed quickly by silence. That cool attitude didn't bother Kane since he kept company with Boil and Griz. The world was full of people, and it became clear that it held other friends outside of the one he had grown up with. Sharing so many years together no longer seemed necessary to maintain their connection. Besides, after a time in Tinder they would have ample opportunity to get right with each other.

Chapter 24

The band continued to run west while their stores dwindled and the temperature fell. Many days went by of running and sleeping. A dull ache filled Kane's body that eventually grew numb while his mind just focused on endurance. By the time they reached the bend in the road where the Tamarian army first cut east towards Nagah, Kane had shaken the last crumbs of bread into his mouth. There had been no sign of the Mountainborne horde, dead or living, or the Tamarians. They had walked alone for so long that Kane started to wonder if the ghosts had been a Mountainborne trick to scare the Tamarians away, rather the actual dead returning to Aetheria in search of vengeance.

They gathered in an island of trees within sight of the road to Callinday. By now they instinctively huddled together at every stop to keep the cold out, their breaths sending spurts of steam into the air. The yellow grass made the world appear to be hibernating. Game was scarce and it sounded like each man's stomach took a turn rumbling while they waited.

Illian lay at the edge of the shade facing towards the north where low clouds obscured Callinday. He tried to get up when Kane sat down next to him. When Illian tried to get up and move, Kane grabbed the back of his friend's neck with a firm hand and pushed him down.

"Ow, ow, all right." Illian stayed put.

"What's wrong with you?" Kane asked.

"Nothing. I just want to be alone for a while."

"For almost two weeks? Do you remember how our fathers used to punish us?"

Illian looked ahead, "They kept us apart. I never thought three days could ever be that long."

"Serves us right for trying to joust while riding goats. Are you really that upset at me for wanting to go home or do you not want to see Tinder again? We've both fought very hard so you should be proud of your accomplishments. Would you have rather I died with all the others and leave you the honor of bringing back the news of my passing to Tinder?"

"Of course not."

"Then what is it? I'm trying to help and you're acting like a child."

Illian laughed, "Thank you, mother. I'll be sure to finish my soup and feed the animals after dinner."

"We never fought this much before. I think we should be happy to remain in Tinder. This world is dangerous even outside the battlefield."

“Perhaps you’re right. How has your innocence survived all this bloodshed?”

“You’re still as clean as I am in your heart, and that’s all that matters. You will return to your father’s house with a straight back and heroic spirit. It’s time we went back to being farmers, Illian.”

War had changed them. Illian looked older and Kane could only guess that he did as well. What had happened to add years their lives in a matter of months? Rather than settle on bloodthirsty warrior or peaceful farmer, would he simply be as lost between the two, drifting like the souls of the Breach?

“Farming and a family for you, but it’s not the life I choose.”

A snowflake drifted past Kane’s view. He looked behind him and saw that most of their group had vanished to look for food. Griz lay snoring in a curled up ball with his back to the west. It was just them for the time being.

Kane laughed, “We’ve got our health and plenty of stories, don’t you think?”

Kane patted Illian’s shoulder and stood up, “I’d trade all of this to be back under the distant stare of my father as long as there’s dinner on the table and a fire in the hearth.”

“Me too,” Illian said, but the flatness of voice and distant stare didn’t sound convincing.

More flakes fell and soon all the remaining color of the open grasslands before them started turning white. Kane’s stomach rumbled so powerfully he felt the tremor across his whole body. They were still at least a couple weeks away from home and the glimmer of rest seemed impossibly distant. He wondered if the cursed city of Callinday held any food or heat for them.

“Kane, what’s that?” Illian said, pointing.

A figure ran towards them from the north. Through the snow it was impossible to tell who or what it was.

Kane stood, drawing his sword. The handle felt cold and heavy in his hands.

The man came closer. Kane caught glimpses of exposed hands by tattered sleeves.

“What should we do? Does he even see us?”

Kane moved behind a tree. The stranger didn't appear to see them, but these trees stood alone as a refuge within sight.

“What should we do?” Illian asked Kane again.

“Watch. I don't think he's seen us yet.”

The figure was close enough to pick out small details now, clearly heading in their direction.

“He looks hurt,” Illian said, standing up and moving out from under the shadow of the tree.

“Get down!” Kane hissed, but it was too late.

The man stopped, standing upright and facing them. The man stood completely still as if frozen in place. Only the wind brushing his clothes gave any sign of movement.

Fear ran the length of Kane's body. What stood before them was not a man, but one of many searching eyes for the undead Mountainborne. He guessed the ragged creature before them was only a scout for the dead army wandering the plains in the snow. The black speck remained standing, oblivious to the cold as it watched.

Kane ran over to Griz and kicked him awake. He growled, ready with a knife.

“They've found us. We've got to go unless we want to be recruited into the ranks of the Mountainborne dead.”

“Where to?” Griz was already on his feet and ready to move.

“West towards the relative safety of the Empire.”

“Why are we still talking and not running?”

Kane ran first south in the opposite direction of the silent figure. He wasn't exactly sure if it was one of the many dead, but the inhuman posture and silence unsettled him.

The hunger was still there, as was the fatigue of stirring tired muscles to life again after pushing them so hard the past few days. Kane thought he would need a month to recover from all this fighting and running. He also hoped at least one of the others would see them and get the message that the enemy was upon them. On the other side of the trees Kane looked north again. Dozens of shadows appeared under the sheets of snow coming down across the plain. They ran with a slightly more human gait.

“Where are we going?” Illian asked between breaths while they ran.

“West, just as we have planned all along.”

“We might lead them to Tinder if we're not careful.”

“The Whispering Woods will protect us.”

It was one thing to be a part of a victorious army and entirely another to be alone in the wilderness and pursued. The excitement of battle might always have remained with Kane's memory, but this pursuit into exhaustion was a possible outcome he had never considered. He now appreciated the deer he and the other hunters had chased through the trees and fields until they either became exhausted or ran themselves to death. The yellow grass and accumulating snow crunched under their footsteps.

What felt like hours went by as the cold cut into Kane's skin, driving deep into his bones while his lungs burned in the frigid air. There was nowhere to hide as the trees and rocks were one or two variations amongst boot high grass which made running that much more difficult. They had to stick close to the road in order maintain any sense of direction.

Griz spoke up, “We should rest for a bit. I’m getting tired.”

“Fair enough. Where did you learn to run like that? I can’t tell if that’s a light coating of mist or sweat on your forehead.”

“Lots of practice. Live in your armor and you’d be surprised how light it gets after a while.”

They found a single tree growing out from between large stones, and all three huddled together under the tree’s low hanging branches. Kane felt sweat trickling down his back and soaking through his pants. Steam rose from his head and it was encouraging to see the same thing happening to the others.

He was hot with sweat which quickly cooled into a chill and he had no idea where they were, where their friends were or the location of the enemy.

“The living Mountainborne must be marching north towards Balthur,” Griz said. “It’s the first stop across the Empire. I imagine they’ll be looking for revenge for what happened at Nagah.”

“Won’t they stop for the winter?” Kane asked, “The campaign season is nearly over.”

“You’ve only spent two battles and a night with the Mountainborne. They live in almost a constant state of winter so this is nothing. At the call they probably didn’t stop running until we met them at that first battle somewhere around here.”

“The call?”

“Aye, from what I’ve heard, a disgraced chieftain named Zeraboul was exiled beyond the Worldgate Mountains and returned with a message from Carmil, one of the old gods. A call to arms and vengeance so loud that every smoldering ash of resentment towards us flared into a firestorm.”

“What do they want?” Illian asked.

“Centuries of slavery and exploitation breeds bitterness. They won’t stop until the whole Empire is consumed by their anger. We should have been more prepared to fight a protracted battle rather than thinking we could just slap them on the nose this time.”

“You call all that we’ve seen a slap on the nose?” Kane asked.

“The Order’s beasts were new additions, but the more land we take, the weaker the Mountainborne get. Their territory is vast and full of people who hate us. It would bleed the treasuries dry to try and subdue or eradicate them all at once.”

Now Kane really wanted to get home. They had fought on dry ground and he had never seen the ocean, but this sea of grass and the scope of the forces working around him made it clear that he could never understand the world. Every scrap he discovered tarnished the image of Aetheria and her people a little more. His assumption of goodness and wisdom in all people was gone. The desires and undercurrents of malice and cruelty which marked the Empire made him wish for the simplicity and safety of his hole in Tinder; to live out his time forgotten by the wills of men on distant thrones. This desire overpowered the thirst for battle still lurking deep within him.

“How much farther to the forest?” Griz asked Kane.

“Too far,” Illian replied.

“We’re all going to make it, but not tonight,” Kane said.

The snows from the west patted against them as the Kane and the others leaned forward into the buffeting wind. As the hidden light faded, Kane watched the now covered plains dim from white to gray and nearly black before they hid against the bank of a frozen stream for the night.

“So much for getting back before the first snow,” Kane said to Illian.

Chapter 25

Before Kane realized where he was, he wondered if he had died, frozen miles and miles from home. He lay in Uriel’s grove, enjoying the momentary relief from the cold and hunger which penetrated every waking moment. Unless he lay at the shore of the Breach, and the endless glass sea leading off into the universe was just the first step. Uriel wasn’t around. Only the tiger lay next to him, staring at Kane with those eyes of emerald fire.

“Where’s your mistress?” Kane asked. He didn’t mind her not being present immediately, but he did want to find out more about this ritual to find his grandfather.

The swirling planets ground on amongst the stars beyond the flat sea. Kane found the grove confirmation that home was close. It was strange to consider that this trek would be his last adventure out into the world, but considering what he had seen and experienced, disappearing into obscurity and letting the empire and Mountainborne go about their wars was a small price. He wondered what might happen to his bloody side, now that he saw things clearly, but he figured there was satisfaction in bringing in a good harvest or listening to the wind beat against the outside of his house while staying warm in a full bed. The rush of combat could easily be spread out over the rest of his life, rather than contained within scattered moments.

Kane turned to a rustling in the trees behind him and Uriel appeared. Her normally serene face looked surprised for the first time since he had been brought here.

“What are you doing here?” Uriel asked. Her tone sounded like that of a friend not expecting company.

“I don’t know how I ever get here.”

Uriel recovered her cheery appearance, “That is strange, but you are a pleasant surprise. Perhaps your spirit found its way here on its own. You must be very uncomfortable to wish so strongly for the peace of this place. The army’s not doing very well is it?”

“The plan was to winter in Nagah before pushing further inward, but Illian and I intended to return home within a few months.”

“But things didn’t work out that way did they?” Uriel asked.

Kane sighed, the weight of all the complications pushing him into the soft grass. “The army was surprised by an undead horde and routed. All this happened after I found out that Illian wanted to stay with the army. We’re fleeing home now, but he won’t stay and everyone will blame me for it.”

“It’s not your fault all these difficulties have passed your way. You cannot control the hearts of others so let them make their own choices.”

Uriel walked across the sward separating the tree line and shore. Her dress of leaves and vines swished across the grass and Kane noticed that her shoulders were covered this time around. Something was off.

“I’m returning home a failure to my family and ancestors. The outside world is cursed with mad spirits, greedy criminals and dead men stalking about. I never should have left Tinder.”

“Dead men? It’s very long since I heard of them.” Uriel didn’t look concerned, her face still shined with life, but now there was a hint of interest gleaming behind her bottomless eyes. It was enough to get Kane worried. This demigod hid something from him.

Uriel sat beside Kane outside of leaning range, “Perhaps the Breach is not as distant as I thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tahteem Hodchi created the Breach and was the first to suffer its consequences.

Perhaps he has found a way to control those lost in Callinday and seeks a way back to this world.”

“What will that mean for this world?” Kane asked.

Uriel shrugged, “I don’t know. He follows his nature now just as my mother followed hers. That means conquest and his soul has suffered the torment of the Breach the longest so it is impossible to tell what state Tahteem will be in if he steps from the spiritual world onto the dirt of Aetheria.”

Kane sat, anger smoldering within him. With the movements of gods and empires, the safety and continuation of Tinder sounded impossible. He believed Uriel cared for him and the others of his village, but this notion sounded as fragile and distant as the promises of security and prosperity made by the Tamarian Empire after they had subdued his people many years ago. The girl sitting next to him no longer was a secret friend and proof of his special nature, but an indifferent miller pushing the grindstone ever closer towards everything he held dear.

“Why did you invite me here?” Kane asked.

“I didn’t, which is also interesting. But since you are here, I believe there is a way to keep Tahteem from coming back and releasing hundreds of years of anger at his betrayal on this land. If someone got in contact with him, there must be a way to find others in the Breach. Even though my mother is gone, some part of her must still be hidden there or else all who died would simply cease to be. While many are lost in the Breach, the struggle along the broken road towards the next world is proof of Shasla’s splintered efforts to continue on as the Guardian Mother.”

She reached across and touched Kane's chest with her palm, "You and those like you are worth saving, but it doesn't mean you'll be saved. Find a way to reach out into the Breach."

"How is that even possible?" Kane asked.

"Ask your grandfather. If he is as strong as you say his spirit might be able to return to you."

"Wouldn't that act heresy against the Order ruin me?"

"I believe in your strength. The bond you and I share through knowing death is what has allowed us to meet, and I am a god. I will help you as best I can when we meet again. If that task is too much for you, awakening Carmil from under Callinday will be your last resort."

"Undead kings existing only for revenge, me teasing the Breach into giving up my grandfather and now reviving gods?" The peace of the shoreline now felt like a trap. He watched the planets move their silent course. He wouldn't have been surprised to see them crash into each other. In fact, he wished to see such a thing happen. It sounded like his fate was already finished along with everyone in Tinder, including Therise.

"Do not be angry with me, Kane. Believe in me as I believe in you and try your best. To do nothing risks all you hold dear."

Uriel sat straight, now looking frightened with wide eyes, "That song..."

Kane listened, and heard a flute playing the same high song from outside the walls of Nagah.

Kane woke to the shock of stiff muscles aching with cold. Griz and Illian had pushed their bodies into his to stay warm. Dawn lit part of the sky while they lay in a trough of snow. Kane tried to stir and felt the pain of sleeping upright while curled in a ball. The other two still slept, hair frosted over pale skin. The snow gleamed crystalline in the growing light.

The flute played again and Kane looked up to see Mazrath from the Dogs' camp and the one who had pulled him from the pile of dead many days ago. At first Kane wondered if Mazrath was simply an illusion brought on by the cold and death.

Mazrath looked like a crouched hawk on a branch. His clothes were still old and gray, with a brown shirt underneath a long jacket and black boots. The song he played sounded familiar from the horrid night in Nagah.

"Hello?" Kane asked.

The flute stopped. "Good morning, Kane. I'm glad to see you are all alive."

"So, we're not dead."

"Not at the moment, no, but you will be if you don't rouse the other two. Illian looks like he's had a bad night."

Kane stood slowly, letting each joint grind back into place before kicking at the other two.

"Wake up, both of you. Look who I found."

Kane turned to Mazrath, "What happened to you at Nagah?"

"I fled panicked like everyone else. It's quite fortunate to find you here. The Tamarian army abandoned Nagah quickly, pushing west through the dead Mountainborne. The living Mountainborne from the east either slaughtered those who remained or carried them off. I guess killing Tamarians is how you make Mountainborne friends."

Kane stretched, feeling life come back to his limbs. "Did you see any other Dogs?"

Mazrath shook his head, "I stayed with the Tamarians as long as I could. They hoarded all the remaining supplies to themselves so I figured I had a better chance on my own."

Griz was first up, "Who's this?"

“This is Mazrath, one of our comrades,” Illian said. He looked pleased to no longer be alone in the company of Kane and Griz.

Mazrath slid gracefully off his branch and landed on the snow, barely making any indentation.

Mazrath made an exaggerated bow, “I see I am in the company of worldly men. Proud to make your acquaintance but I think now we should go. I for one am starving and we are standing in the open where who knows might spot us.”

While Griz ran easily under his armor, Mazrath seemed to float beside them while they ran across the snow. His steps were light, barely glancing while they crunched along. The clothes looked thin but he kept his hands closed in the folds coat. A smile remained on his face, even while they ran through the cold air, surrounded by danger. The hunger grew painful and Kane searched the snow-covered plains around them for the slightest hint of food. Risking death at the hands of the mysterious dead or Mountainborne seemed like a worthy gamble in exchange for the smallest rabbit.

After many more miles Kane felt like he was about to collapse. While they breathed and steamed in the winter afternoon, Mazrath stood by, head and shoulders below Kane, with that same smile and looked like he had simply gone for a walk rather than cover miles and miles of snow covered plain. They found tracks occasionally, but no sign of beast, man or corpse.

“If we don’t find something to eat soon,” Griz said, “I’m voting we eat this guy first.”

“I remember passing through this way with a caravan.” Mazrath offered, “There should be a large patch of trees nearby if the Mountainborne haven’t destroyed them yet. We’ll find something there.”

“Lead on,” Kane said.

Mazrath led them over the rise. Just as he had said, several acres of thick evergreens and other trees sat beside them while the road might be off to their north, hidden under the fresh snow. No sign of the Mountainborne army.

Mazrath gently tapped Kane's shoulder, "If you don't mind, I'll take Illian with me to hunt while you and Griz stay here and watch for trouble. Your friend is the smaller of you two and we will make less noise than four starving soldiers crashing through the trees."

Illian looked surprised at the sudden favor. Kane wondered if being unappreciative towards his old friend was one of the reasons for the hostility flowing between them like an underground river.

There wasn't any wind and Kane watched Illian and Mazrath go into the small forest. The sun rose and provided some warmth. There wasn't much to say, as Kane was too tired to speak and Griz looked the same. At this rate his return to Tinder would be nearly the opposite of what he had originally planned. No riches and pounds lighter without anything to show for his foolish adventure. But he would return, and that was all that mattered. He wondered at Uriel's task of either contacting his grandfather or reviving Carmil the Builder from under Callinday. Both sounded dangerous, impossible and just foolish to contemplate. He also hoped that Boil and the other survivors were still alive. Nothing had gone as he had planned and the possibility that Tinder had been reduced to ashes in his absence entered his mind. Even if things were fine back home, he didn't want to face his father in this condition, proving that Ira had known all along the wisdom of staying home.

The weight of the great sword across his back felt more like a burden now than a symbol of accomplishment and prowess. But the steel would be the trophy and proof of his worth as a soldier, something only a few could say. After fighting for the empire and perhaps earning a

place of respect amongst the other villagers in Tinder, Kane found the whole experience terribly unfulfilling and empty, like his stomach.

“There they are,” Griz said.

A few hundred yards ahead of them Mazrath and Illian waved them in to the forest. “So, what have you got for us?” Griz asked Mazrath when the group reunited in the shelter of the trees.

“Let’s get a fire going while I prepare these rabbits. Come along, Illian.”

Illian stayed close to Mazrath, which made Kane suspicious of both of them. His friend seemed too easy with his favor and the way Illian acted reminded Kane of how Illian had responded to the Tamarian knights after seeing them charge into the Mountainborne. Mazrath didn’t appear to notice Illian’s glances or quick jumps to help with the smallest task.

With some work and careful breaths, Kane and Griz got a fire going. To Kane’s surprise, he forgot how cold his body was until the heat pushed out from the flames. He forgot his hunger and rested. A good fire solved lots of problems.

Griz grunted, pulling off his boots, “Well, I’ve still got all my toes. That’s a surprise.”

“I forgot there are other sensations beyond cold and colder,” Kane said.

“With this meal and a good night’s sleep, we could cover a lot of ground tomorrow.”

Kane had no idea how far they had actually come. Instead of resigning his life to spending his days running and starving, home became a real possibility. Home, where things were normal and he and Illian could revive their friendship. Everything would be fine once they made it back to Tinder.

The smell of meat stopped the conversation. Mazrath and Illian appeared with a skinned rabbit on a stick in each hand.

“The woods have been kind to us,” Mazrath said.

“Thank Uriel,” Kane said, willing to devour the uncooked meat at the first chance.

“The hardest part will be waiting for these to finish cooking.”

The wait proved difficult. They all sat in silence, watching their meals glisten and pop as the juices fell into the fire. Kane saw their greedy eyes and wondered if this wasn't some contest of wills to see who would hold out for the best cooked meat. He watched his and found his own resolve weakening. At last, he slowly pulled his dinner out of the fire and tore into it with a ravenous series of bites. The others started on theirs and within moments they lay beside the fire, their sticks thrown into snow. As soon as Kane got slightly comfortable, he slept.

Chapter 26

They reached the edge of the Whispering Woods after several more days of running. As the frequency of trees increased the closer they got to home, food and a warm fire ended each day's effort. When Kane had awoken during those nights, he usually saw Illian and Mazrath speaking in whispers on the other side of the fire. He spent the rest of the journey watching them, trying to figure out if he should worry for his friend or be threatened by Mazrath's shoving him to the side.

Achritia looked just the same as Kane had left it, besides the layer of snow covering everything. From the late morning they had to shield their eyes from the sun reflecting off the white all around them that at first looked clean and orderly, but soon became blinding. Deep shadows hidden within the Whispering Woods looked like shelter not just from prowling enemies and spirits, but the light.

What troubled him most was how quickly Illian had abandoned him for Mazrath. Kane and Illian hadn't shared more than a word yet those two constantly whispered to each other. Griz just ran alongside him, looking happy to have spent a night by a fire with a belly full of meat.

Inside the forest, things were hard to recognize. Patches of snow lay everywhere and the slim trail Illian had followed on their way out looked washed away from the fall rains. Illian ran ahead, appearing undeterred by the lack of direction. No tigers or animals crossed their path as they followed the frozen creek south towards home.

They continued pushing towards Tinder as the light faded to night.

Kane looked for any signs of Uriel. It would be nice to see her as in the real world, but he wondered if the mingling of gods and men were only possible in dreams. He might spend his days in Tinder and nights at the eternal shore if she actually lived in these woods.

Shadows from under fallen logs and hanging branches spread with the coming of night. Kane continued to look for any signs of familiarity, wondering if this forest was in fact the border of his homeland. Illian pushed on, much like he did when they had left months ago, but everything felt so out place compared to those scenes of return he had played out over and over again in his mind.

"Almost there," Illian said to Mazrath.

Out of the depths of Kane's mind came the desire to turn back and retreat into the shadows. He couldn't answer why, but if it wasn't for the three running ahead of him he probably would have stopped and spent the night in the woods, less than a mile away from home, before deciding what to do next.

Firelight appeared ahead of them. Several fires of an improvised camp spread out in a clearing near the temple. As the four of them stopped at the edge of the camp, Kane saw the

darkened stone ruins of the temple he used to hide in. Families sat huddled around the fires while a few figures hidden by shadows moved from one group to another. Judging by the number of people, nearly the whole village had braved the cold night away from the village. One of them stood up and looked towards Kane and the others.

“We don’t have anything else, you scoundrels, so just leave us in peace.”

Kane stepped forward, “Therise? It’s me. We’re home.”

Therise approached him, hair a mess and looking tired in the firelight. When she stood within arm’s reach of him, she stopped.

“Is it actually you, Kane?” She asked. “Where have you been?”

“Fighting in the east. The army’s been broken and so I came back home, to you, just as I promised.”

Therise slapped him hard across the face. “That’s it? You said two months and before the first snow. That day has long passed and I heard nothing of you, what you were doing or if you were even alive. How could you do that to me? Your family gave you up the moment you didn’t show up for the bonding ceremony and ever since then I’ve been the only one worrying that you would never come back. I tried to let you go every night when the snow came but I couldn’t and now this.”

Kane looked back at his companions in embarrassment. Therise grabbed his cheek to pull his head back to her. He wrapped his hand around her wrist and squeezed. The child who had been bullied by this girl was no longer a part of him. He hadn’t survived death, wandered far and lived only to see her again to be treated like a disobedient child.

“You’re hurting me...” Therise said, looking surprised.

Kane let go. “Therise, I’m sorry to have left you like this. Going off to meddle in business that is not Tinder’s was a mistake that I will not repeat. Things beyond my control prevented us from returning as planned. But, I am home. My friends are tired and hungry. I’ve thought of seeing you again at every spare moment and not strayed a step from holding true to our bond. You cannot expect anything more of me.”

Therise crossed her arms, “You are different than the child I sent off at the end of the summer. I have not forgiven you, and may not ever.”

“I understand,” Kane said.

Therise turned away, “You and your friends follow me. Dinner will be thin tonight but the fires are warm.”

Kane walked beside Therise. It felt strange that he had assumed the burden of a fighting spirit while she looked worn from carrying her own combative attitude during his absence.

“Why is everyone out here in the woods? Are there Mountainborne around?”

“We are besieged by our protectors. Your Tamarian allies stumbled onto our village and simply took over to eat and repair their wounded pride by oppressing us. I didn’t want to let them into the village but was ignored. No one remembers me being right on this. Once inside, they pushed us around and eventually threw everyone out who wouldn’t obey their cruel desires. If I hadn’t stabbed one and run, who knows what the devils would have done?”

“Sounds like some of ours,” Illian said.

“One of yours?” Therise asked, giving Illian a suspicious look, “What have you two been up to, besides recruiting your soldier friends as farmhands?”

Illian spoke of their adventures, mostly leaving Kane out of it. So much for their great partnership. His stories skirted so close to the edge of truth that it was impossible to simply call him out on a detail that didn't sound quite right.

Griz glanced behind him towards Kane, "Don't worry, lad, she's not buying it."

"Is that what really matters?"

"Oh, it is. Trust me," Griz said with a wink.

Around them the bare branches of the forest curled around the people of Tinder like hundreds of tangled fingers glowing in the light.

Therise continued, "We've been out here for four days, and if it wasn't for some provision by Shasla, we'd be starving by now."

Mazrath spoke up, "When did they arrive?"

"Around a week ago. They must have sprinted here or ridden their horses to death, I can't be sure."

"How many?" Kane asked, sounding manly.

"Around twenty or so. They're heavily armed and Tamarian. I think they're planning on gorging themselves on what little we have before rejoining the army. Give the rat a chance to be king for a few days. If they continue eating everything, we'll have nothing for the rest of the winter, much less anything to plant with."

"Twenty versus four," Kane said to Griz. What do you think?"

"Tamarians or not, I believe they stand between me and a hearty meal followed by a warm bed. I've been itching for a fight since we left Nagah."

"You too, eh?" Kane caught the eyes of Therise looking back at him.

Eventually they all arrived at a small fire on the other side of the camp. The air was cold, but it was getting warmer now that the initial shock of his return had started to wear off.

“Where are Ira and everyone?” Kane asked.

“Don’t worry, both of your families are safe and Ardom stayed in the village to use his Order authority to persuade them to leave. Despite his low position within the Order, he’s still a priest and Tamarian so they’ll respect him. Straton’s been busy keeping all the children from running off into the woods to get eaten and your parents are probably sleeping now.”

“It’s usually best not to wake, them. I’m guessing mother fussed while he sulked throughout this whole ordeal.”

Therise nodded. She looked quite pretty in the firelight. The braid she had cut off hadn’t returned, leaving just the one dangling beside her face. She constantly batted it away like a cat pawing a string and her pale skin glowed.

“What makes you think they’re Tamarian?” Griz asked.

Therise poked the fire with a stick. “Blue cloaks, haughty attitudes and quick to punish the slightest inconvenience or failure.”

“Great,” Griz said, “knights.”

“That bad?” Kane asked.

“They have lived in that high attitude for so long they bleed arrogance. I’ve gotten into fights with them a couple times. They rely on their friends to bail them out whenever they make a mistake. Bloodied a couple of them real good before they put the shackles on, though.”

“Did they hurt you?” Therise asked.

“No. Public humiliation is their favorite trick. They paraded me around the camp a few times painted up like a cow. What they didn’t expect is for me to drop my trousers in front of their tent and do what the cows do in the field.”

Kane cleared his throat, moving his eyes in Therise’s direction.

“Ah, yes. Forgive me, madam.”

“Why don’t you ever call me madam?” Therise asked Kane, “It’s so cultured.”

Their laughter drew glances from others around the camp.

“Those pigs aren’t worth the air they breathe,” Therise said.

“Have you seen your family yet?” Kane asked Illian.

“I haven’t looked.”

Therise stood up, “Don’t worry about it tonight. For some of you, welcome home and for others, simply welcome. Kane, would you help me gather some more wood ? It’s going to be a cold night.”

Even in the winter air, Kane felt heat rush to his face. This was an important decision and not one to be taken lightly. He chose his words carefully.

“Yes.”

Griz slapped Kane’s back, “Well done.”

Chapter 27

They didn’t go far. Therise guided him through the quiet woods, her steps light against the snow. She found a fallen tree beside a frozen pond where the moonlight reflected off the ice, making it shine like glass. Now that they had gotten away from the fires, Kane’s vision adjusted

to the darkness. Right above them through the naked branches sky looked dusted with diamonds. It was funny how everything seemed clearer in the cold.

Therise dusted off the log and sat down. “What are you waiting for?”

“You’re not going to stab me with anything are you?” Kane asked.

“I’ve done my stabbing for the week. For a mighty warrior, you sure are a coward.”

Kane sat down. Therise shivered and he pulled her in closer, wrapping them both in his cloak. It seemed like the thing to do and she didn’t resist him, which was strange for the person he remembered from that night behind his parent’s house.

“You smell like a rotting pig.”

“Should I get used to this incessant nagging?”

“Shut up.”

It was strange to think the imagined reunion had suddenly dissipated into the inevitable progression of time. He had never really thought much beyond the final moments before arriving, as if with their joyous meeting the story would end, relieving him of the responsibility which had made him flee in the first place. She was beside him now, and he felt her warmth, her beating heart, heard the sound of her breath and smelled flowers in her hair. Her waist felt smaller and Therise grew limp in his arms from exhaustion, sleep or simply relief. Here in his embrace was the clear trail of his life from here on out. Unfortunately, he realized, there wasn’t the swooning rush of emotion or dropping of dignity at the sight of her. She felt more like a large cat curled up beside him than someone who he was obligated to share all things with. That was the point of the bonding and yet Kane still held on to his independence like a king hiding behind the impenetrable walls of his castle. How could he be there for someone while he remained detached and fortified within his heart? What about his task of finding his grandfather

in the Breach or reviving a god to keep his world intact? This moment of peace by the frozen pond felt crushed underneath the unknowable future.

Kane continued holding Therise close, while she appeared content to just lie against him. The same impassable distance within his heart now reminded him of the same dulled expression Ira had with his family. Would it be fair to her to spend their life together trying to drag this vibrant life down to his detached outlook? Or should he endure, hoping that proximity would eventually bring down those walls he had built over his life, pretending to love as he was apparently doing now, hoping that the farce would eventually become reality? How did everyone else survive bonding?

Therise stirred against him. She certainly felt, sounded and smelled nice, so making the sacrifice might be easier than he thought. Doubts remained, but he kissed the top of her head anyway. Kane had survived enough strange and dangerous things to know that he could survive. If Therise required this all night, then he would stay up all night and every night afterwards to keep her happy. His memories of her pushing him down as a small child, bossing him around as a larger child and doing both as a young man made it clear that keeping her happy might result in more nights like this. He approved of his current situation, and remained aware that he might be just as approving of sleeping under a tree in the summer.

Kane sighed. Therise stretched, her yawn ending in a small squeak. “You’re different than before, not as afraid of me as I imagined you would be.”

“I changed quite a bit out there.”

“Everyone wondered about you two after the first weeks past. Some doubted you both would return at all.”

“We might have been gone longer if we hadn’t been forced to retreat.”

“That sounds dangerous, but nothing close to standing alone in front of the entire town while everyone wonders where your bonded had run off to.”

“Did you keep my secret?” Kane asked.

“Of course. When Ardom wondered where his bonding knife had gone or what had happened to my braid, I told him to mind his own business.”

“I still have it.” Kane reached into his pocket and pulled out the nearly ruined favor she had given him.

“You continue to surprise me. I figured you would have traded it for a trinket or discarded it to hide your bondage.”

“I remained loyal.” Kane thought of Illian as he said this. His obligation to keep his friend’s deeds hidden weighed on his own conscience as if he had committed the acts.

There was more to do here with his bonded, but Kane was exhausted from the journey and Therise seemed happy to rest against him. Even though they trembled in the cold while looking out over a frozen pond, the scene felt more alive and constant than the planetary scene with Uriel.

By the time they returned, the village slept. Somewhere in the shadows Illian and Mazrath spoke quietly, but Kane didn’t care. He caught a glimpse of Illian as he looked back. Curiosity still remained as to what they spoke of with such intimacy, but having a pretty girl was certainly better than whispering with a stranger. Griz lay beside the fire with a satisfied smile on his face and winked at Kane as he and Therise settled down to sleep. There were no inquiries as to the lack of firewood they had supposedly gone into the woods to find. He slept on his back by the fire with Therise beside him, happy that the world, for the moment lay at peace. Tomorrow and the Tamarians would bring their own troubles.

In the morning, the four sat around the fire while Therise cooked something heavenly in a black pot hanging over the fire.

“What do you think?” Kane asked Griz. He had decided last night that the Tamarian would be his public friend since Illian had found someone else to confide in. Illian ignored the comment and struggled through small talk with Therise. It was amusing to see she still enjoyed a fearsome reputation in public.

“We can take ‘em,” Griz said, looking at the boiling contents of the pot, “after a full meal, of course.”

“Four of us versus twenty of them, sounds manageable,” Kane said.

Therise looked over at them. “Now you two are just showing off. They’ll be gone soon enough and we can move back in. It’s not the first time the Tamarians have ransacked an Achritian’s house.”

“Who said all four of us are going to participate?” Illian asked.

“You told me we were going to fight to keep the war from reaching our homes. Well, the war has come. What I don’t want to do is spill unnecessary blood,” Kane said.

“That’s a smart move. The Emperor’s Wave is a close knit bunch. The best we can hope for is shaming them into silence. They won’t talk to their friends if they get ousted by a bunch of peasants.”

Illian raised his hands, palms out, “I still don’t want to fight them, and Mazrath is against it too. He told me so last night.”

“You afraid to fight your idols?” Kane asked. “They are invaders into our land, however well they dress or fight. I doubt they’re better behaved than the Dogs.”

Mazrath came out of the ashen colored woods beside their small site. “I said I wouldn’t fight, but I am more than willing to help. Tricks are more my preference rather than outright violence.”

“I bet you made a lousy fighter,” Griz said.

“I’m still alive, so I can’t be that bad.”

Kane smiled, “We won’t beat them head on, so let’s get a plan going. I’m going to reintroduce myself to my family and get celebratory harrumph from my father.”

Winding through the huddled families, Kane nodded to those who looked surprised to see him. Children ran by, paying more attention to a small dog trying to escape their clutches than his triumphant return. He sidestepped a few times to keep the tip of the large sword strapped to his back from hitting them. His family sat on the other side of the camp. No one stood to greet him, as Straton was feeding soup to a chubby boy while his wife stared at him like a stranger. Ira didn’t move at all, just kept on stirring his pot.

“Smells good,” Kane said, having a seat.

“Did you get all the adventure you could handle?” Straton asked. He didn’t look too pleased and sounded like their father in the steady tone weighted with disapproval.

“It’s good to see you too, Straton. I’m alive, as you can tell and it seems like I haven’t missed much.”

“Just the harvest and the takeover of your village,” Ira said, not looking up.

“At least everyone is alive at the moment. We beat the Mountainborne a couple of times out east and I’ve been outside the forest, if you’re curious at all.”

Ira shook his head, “what happens out there is no concern of ours. If you hadn’t gone, they wouldn’t have come.”

It was a push, one of many that Kane had yielded to throughout his life. But he had seen the outside and the same pattern didn't fit him anymore, while his family dug into the ruts cut by the previous generations. They were afraid, and found their old routines comforting. It was irritating to watch them gang up on him.

"I'm sorry I lost the war for you, father. I'll try better next time to defeat the entire Mountainborne race and be back in time for supper."

"You left your bonded to fend for herself for months without any help. We had to pick up so many of the shards of your life while you went on this joyful romp. What have you to show for this abandonment of your family?"

Kane stood, "It seems my family is waiting for me on the other side of the camp. I may not have built Therise a home, but I will win it all back for her. What is left for the proud Brennan family will just be accidental."

Only Straton showed any emotion at this statement, he looked ready to say something but remained silent. Ira and his bald head went back to stirring the pot.

Kane turned away, "Straton, your family is welcome any time."

To push back felt liberating, like Kane had become an independent man and able to take care of himself. He hadn't returned with treasure, but his new sense of independence meant he didn't need to endure the scorn of his father any longer. Now he wanted to fight and Tinder lay less than a mile out of the forest.

Kane's group, including Therise, spoke in quiet tones around the fire. "Well, that didn't go as well as I had hoped."

Therise handed Kane a wooden bowl full of stew, "They'll come around, especially after things settle down."

Kane ate while he listened to all the ideas being thrown around by Griz and Mazrath. Illian ate his food quietly, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

The sound of approaching horses caught their attention. Kane was up and facing the north when five knights wearing only their padded undercoats and armed with swords rode in. Illian's face immediately formed into an expression of wonder and Kane couldn't blame him.

All of the knights looked like they belonged to the fighting elite of the Tamarian army. Each rode atop a large gray warhorse which casually kicked aside flaming logs and cookware as it trampled into the middle of the camp. Its white mane matched the color of snow all around them. In another world, the knights' horses should have belonged to some mountain god.

The knights all handled their mounts while they stamped around. A blue tunic with the white moon and sea fluttered over their cotton undercoats. They wore black leather boots and gloves with deep blue cloaks similar to the ones Kane, Griz and Illian wore. Young faces thinner and sharper than Griz's looked about them with total disdain through bright eyes under mats of blonde or brown hair. Kane had never seen nobility and had no interest to, but he guessed the four in front of them were as close as he might ever get.

"We require women," the leader said. "Our beds are warm, there is plenty of food and I promise you all, any girl of class will be treated like a baroness of this filthy province. What say you? Who wishes to leave this pathetic existence behind and be elevated to our company?"

No response. Either the girls and women of Tinder were too afraid or the Achritian resistance bred into them still remained.

"It sounds like you'll only have horses for company tonight," Griz said.

The four sets of pride-filled eyes all focused on Kane's side of the camp.

When they saw the weapons Kane carried and the same deep blue cloaks, the leader dropped his mouth in surprise but immediately regained his composure.

“So we have thieves in our midst, in addition to harlots and cowards.”

Kane bowed, “At your service. I believe you owe us a village.”

The blonde haired leader waved a dismissive hand, “Your hovels are being used in the service of the Emperor, but it seems some of you do not desire your earned reward. What are you doing with the emperor’s cloaks? Do you not know it is forbidden to impersonate one of the Emperor’s Wave, the crime punishable by death?”

Kane felt Mazrath slip into the woods behind him while something furious brewed in Griz. This was the fight he was looking for. He smiled, slowly drawing out the great blade strapped across his back, making sure the sound of metal rang across the camp.

The leader’s second leaned forward in his saddle, “We should have brought the men-at-arms.”

Kane laughed, “Wait, wait. It’s just you four and the rest is nothing more than common soldiers? And here I was worried for the safety of my comrades and village. Leave now before you are embarrassed in front of your pig-eyed fiends, you lecher.”

“Not bad,” Griz said quietly beside him.

“My first noble insult,” Kane said.

“Spoken like a true gentleman.”

The handsome face contorted in embarrassment, confusion and rage. He whirled his horse around, nearly trampling an old woman who sat too close.

“We’ll see about that, slime! Go and arm yourselves, we return with blood on our minds.”

The four horses galloped back through the underbrush towards Tinder.

“Well, that was interesting,” Griz said.

All of Tinder now looked at them, clearly confused by what had just happened and putting all their fear on the newcomers. Clearly it was fight and die at the hands of the knights or be torn apart and offered to the invaders as payment.

“What do we do now?” Illian asked Kane.

Kane started towards Tinder, “Attack, of course.”

Chapter 28

While most of the villagers began panicking at the thought of confrontation with the Tamarians, Kane led Griz and Illian up towards Tinder. They ran along the trail just used by the Tamarians and soon ran across the long yellowed grass toward Tinder. The village looked black against the gray sky while the eternal green of the bonding tree stuck out above the houses. It was good to see home again, despite the circumstances.

“What’s the plan?” Griz asked, looking happy just to be going into a fight.

“I imagine they’re going to get properly equipped to show us peasants some respect, so they won’t be ready for us to attack. We can get in and throw off their plans and hit and run on the way back to the safety of the forest.”

“That’s a lot of assumptions,” Illian said.

“We’ll have to move quickly and keep the knights off balance or else they’ll cut us to pieces. Are you with me or not?” Kane asked.

“I am, but don’t blame me when things fall apart. I can’t speak for Mazrath but he’s probably up to something on his own.”

“Three on twenty. Here’s that story you wanted, Illian. No one will ever forget this.”

No men patrolled the small fence around the village and Kane slipped over the meager barrier, thankful no one had bothered to reinforce it during his absence. The others followed and the hunt began.

“Try not to kill anyone,” Kane whispered, “Just scare them out.”

“Should we set fire to anything?” Griz asked.

“Not if we can help it. We just need to scare the horses and make them think there are a dozen of us.”

“I’m with you,” Illian said. Kane looked over and smiled.

There was nothing like a common enemy to give life to the cinders of their friendship.

Kane went around the nearest house, listening for sounds of activity. The sound of curses came from across the street while two of the gray warhorses stood tethered by the open door.

“Damn you, Mulin, have you never buckled straps before or has all this merriment swollen your fingers?”

Kane looked back at Griz, who nodded back. After a quick check of the middle road, he sneaked across and undid the leather reins of the pair of horses standing in the street. Two of the knights occupied the house across from Kane’s old house while the other pair stood nearby. Griz moved silently despite his size but Kane worried the great Tamarian’s heavy armor would make too much noise. Griz did the same with other horses and after a silent count Kane slapped the flat edge of his sword hard against the back leg of one of the horses.

The massive horse whinnied in pain but just looked at him. More effort to scare the horses away failed as the massive beast stared down at him as if he were a squirrel.

The blonde haired leader of the knights, his companion and five soldiers spilled out of the small doorway. While the two knights were partially armored, with only their greaves and breastplate strapped on, the soldiers were all dressed in the same half-plate that Griz wore under his cloak.

The blonde haired knight didn't look surprised to see Kane and Griz standing before him. "I see you couldn't wait to fight. I'll bury you both and be drunk before lunch."

"You don't belong here, and the real war is to the north. You have no business with us."

"So it is, but there won't be much fighting or moving with the snows like this. The Mountainborne march for Balthur and we are, for the moment, powerless to stop them. By the time reinforcements arrive, it will be too late. Now is the time to lie low and return at our leisure."

"Stop talking and start fighting," Griz said. Soldiers and knights had emerged from their stolen houses and formed a loose circle around the confrontation. The knight looked around and sighed.

"I can if you wish, but understand I have fought my whole life and defeat is simply not acceptable in my family."

"Is that why you've chosen to run away and hide your shame in this hole?" Kane asked.

"Ha! You know nothing of my life and I have a very good idea of yours. To save the skin of your friends, I'll just fight you. You have the size and I have the skill, which sounds even enough. If you defeat me, we'll leave and you can get your homes back."

"You have no idea what I'm capable of," Kane said.

"How lucky do you feel against my comrades and their footmen, rather than just me? I'll even let your friend here join in."

Kane looked behind him, to see only Griz. Illian had vanished. After Kane finished with this runt he would track down Illian and...he didn't know what. He never had to consider this situation before. Rather than rise and fall together, Illian had truly abandoned him. Just like with his family, he knew his capability to stand alone while all others fell away from him.

"That hardly seems fair," Kane said. Griz shrugged at the idea. He was probably pleased to fight one or ten, as long as someone got bloodied in the effort.

"I'll decide what's fair. What's your name, dog?"

"Kane Brennan. Who are you?"

"Teague of House Shindal."

The knight drew a flawless sword with a gold embossed and jeweled hilt. Kane withdrew his long sword and hung his Tamarian cloak on a nearby fence. The cold air immediately soaked his skin. The knight walked forward while Kane and Griz retreated towards the middle of Tinder's only road. The circle of soldiers followed.

"Whenever you clods are ready."

Kane raised his sword, "We don't want to hurt you."

Teague smirked, "You won't."

Kane went in first, charging forward with his sword coming around in a wide stroke. He hoped that even if Teague blocked the blow before it cut him in half, the force would give Griz enough time for a flank attack.

Instead, Teague deflected the attack with an upward strike of his own blade. The two swords sparked and Kane's attack went from confident to clumsy as his heavy sword seemed to pull him forward and up as it continued up past Teague's unchanged face.

Immediately after, a knee flew up into Kane's exposed ribs. With his air and balance gone, Kane stumbled into the circle of Tamarian soldiers. He felt strong hands slow his fall for a moment before tossing him back into the circle. A few toothed smiles from under steel helmets blurred by as he fell.

Kane hit the ground on his back, trying to find his breath. Through his blurred vision, he saw Griz lying on the other side of the improvised ring. His Tamarian ally looked unconscious on his stomach with blood trailing out of his mouth. Kane's own sword was out of reach and before he tried to get up, a heavy boot slammed into his chest.

Teague looked bored, his hair dangled around a face shaded by the overcast sky. The face blurred in and out of focus while Kane tried to figure out what had just happened. Rather than stand triumphant through his own natural prowess and size, a smaller, weaker opponent had felled him like one might push over a newborn kitten. The sound of laughing rang around him. He understood the Tamarian's desire to avoid public humiliation clearly now. Everything that had happened in the last few seconds was the free fall from pride and he had now landed. Hard.

"What happens now?" Kane asked, slurring his words.

"I extract my prize. You're a strong fighter, so the Empire still needs you in fighting shape. But, I do require something for my effort."

The knight drove a fist into Kane's face, numbing his body. Steel flashed across the Kane's narrow vision and a burning pain ran down the left side of his face. Heat poured out while cold pushed against the liquid now flowing across his cheek. Kane knew it to be blood, his blood without tasting or smelling anything. He closed his left eye out of reflex, rather than control, as the freed blood pooled in the socket. Another cut started above his right eye, cut across the bridge of his nose and went across his already cut cheek to under his left ear.

The pain stung while his body fought to regain control. Instead of fighting back, muscles stood frozen while panic banged against the conscious part of his mind. Another blow came, shutting the end of the tunnel in darkness.

Snaps and pops brought Kane's mind back to the world. He thought Teague had slain him. He had nearly died so many times before that surely this was the final shame, after surviving so much to die in the streets of his beloved Tinder.

The sky remained a dark gray while rain came down in misty curtains. A pillar of smoke swirled across his vision.

His whole body refused to move at first. Griz remained down in the same spot, but the circle of Tamarians was gone. Teague and his knight brethren were nowhere to be found. Kane's mind struck the idea of everyone being in danger and it sparked life to his muscles. He sat up and tried to stand, nearly falling into the muddy pool before a burning house. Around him Tinder blazed into the early evening.

His senses snapped back as disbelief took over his mind. Every house in Tinder burned as thatch roofs collapsed into rooms of flame. Rafters like torched ribs stuck out from smoking rubble. There was nothing left. Soot choked the air while a wind whipped along switching from hot to cold. Only the bonding tree looked untouched ahead of him, which was of small consolation now. There was so much to do that he stood looking back around for a bucket or going back for the inhabitants of Tinder and keep them from the clutches of Teague. When the stinging air brushed across his face, he realized that his left eye was still closed, sealed shut with clotted blood.

His fingers traced a grisly “T” cut across his face, the mark stinging into his skull. He touched the crusted edge of a cheek split by a deep cut. His teeth felt the open skin inside his mouth. He had been outmatched, beaten, and branded like some piece of livestock. He coughed and fell to his knees as blood spilled from his mouth and the open wound. If he had lain any differently he might have drowned in his own blood.

A house collapsed behind him, sending up a swirl of sparks and cinders against the light rain. Cold, wounded and now a total failure for his people, Kane collapsed to his side. He looked at his mud-covered palms. To face his family, Therise and all the others whose lives were dependent on the shelter Tinder provided, was impossible. As his village burned around him, Kane decided that he would simply walk north towards Alton, surely Teague’s destination, and murder him.

Griz stirred, “Ugh, I’ve had hangovers worse than this, but not many.”

Kane turned his head farther than normal to see Griz through his unblocked right eye. When his red-haired comrade looked over with a sardonic smile, the momentary disappointment and warrior empathy flashed across Griz’s face.

“I see he was less considerate with you. And now your village is burning. Stand up, Kane, things could always be worse.”

Kane rolled to his back to laugh, and felt a punishing sting rack the left side of his face, sending the horrific world back towards darkness.

“I can barely speak,” Kane said carefully.

“Then don’t. Let’s get you back to your people.”

Kane wanted to scream, cry, yell, wonder, joke, plead and curse Griz, Teague, Illian and the rest of the world all at once. The threat of pain pushed his rage deep inside his heart.

Vengeance would be his, but not at the moment. He had been let down by Illian, betrayed and left with nothing. The outside world proved its cruel indifference and for the first time in his life, Kane felt something permanent had been done to him. His tears stung down his cheek as Griz practically dragged him back to the forest.

Chapter 29

At least the villagers of Tinder looked untouched, but all eyes went between him and the rising smoke as Griz led him towards the edge of the woods. Through the leafless trees, Kane saw the downtrodden inhabitants of his home looking out from amongst the branches and yellow grass like rabbits. It was still difficult to open his eye as any movement across his face was immediately met with pain. His one eye darted from face to face, seeing mothers cover their children's curious eyes. Therise appeared from his left.

"You really make this hard on me, don't you?"

"Easy, girl, your man has had a rough day."

"Illian," Kane said. The word sounded foreign, unpleasant even as he mumbled it. At least Teague was kind enough to leave the lips intact.

"He's gone," Therise said, "But you are staying here."

"It's not that bad," Griz said, guiding Kane to their corner of the camp. "I've seen men live on after having their jaws taken off by a hammer or skulls caved in like an overripe peach."

Kane grunted, not really sure what could possibly be meant by the noise.

Their corner of the camp was abandoned and the only one without a fire going. Rather than tear him to pieces, the people of Tinder seemed intent on withdrawing further into themselves now that their homes were gone. They had already retreated to the perceived safety

of the forest, now the only reasonable path to survival was hunker down here and endure through with silent perseverance and rebuild as they had done for generations.

Kane's world lay in shambles. He already felt the nauseating recovery beginning within his mind. Even though he was cold, hungry, shamed, abandoned, a complete failure to Ira and the rest of Tinder, a clod and now a grotesque figure, he was still alive and mostly intact. As much as he hated to think it, Griz was right as the great Tamarian came back and built a fire. Therise sat next to him, shivering.

"I'm sorry," Kane said slowly through the blades he felt jabbing his face.

"You're such a pansy," Therise said, "While everyone else here wanted to hide, you fought. Granted, you lost, badly, and at great cost, but here you are. Let's get you patched up." She kissed his uncut cheek and Kane fought to keep the tears inside. The emotions swirled up as if he might die should they not be released. His turmoil felt like the opposite of drowning, where he need to exhale rather than take in fresh air.

Therise vanished into the darkness for a few moments before returning with small pouch, needle and thread. She guided Kane's head to her lap with his swollen and wounded side up. His jaw felt stuck against the side of his mouth where clotted blood gathered. He wouldn't be able to speak for weeks.

"What will you do now?" Griz asked Therise, stoking the fire. "There's not much food left and winter will only get worse from here."

"We'll figure something out. This isn't the first trial endured by our village. Alton is only a couple days away so perhaps we can go there."

Kane felt trapped within his own mind while so much needed to escape. This intense rage towards Illian and Teague was something unfamiliar, but the warmth of Therise against

him, the gentle fingers stroking his hair and her gentle humming while she worked eased the war inside him. The sting of the needle felt like it might cause his face to burst like an overfilled water skin, but he endured because of her nearness. Even now, with his world destroyed essentially by his blundering hand, his face burning and aching as it swelled, there was still hope. The relief of this truth and proximity of friends calmed his spirit though his flesh punished him.

Mazrath must have taken Illian with him and together they abandoned him. This would not happen again, because Kane might just kill his friend, or leave a mark three times worse than the one which now left his youthful face a shattered remnant. He wondered if Therise would still put up with him, or if anyone could ever look at him the same way again. His great wound came not from the glories of battle, but from overconfidence.

“Done. You can hardly tell.” Therise smiled up at him. Griz stifled a laugh and she yanked his beard. Both laughed and while Kane kept his eyes on the flames.

“We need to get you something to keep that swelling down.”

Cold snow pressed against his burning cheek, causing rivulets of water to flow across his lips.

“To properly clean that wound, you should drink lots of wine,” Griz said.

Kane sat up as Therise went to work on the hanging pot again, picking up odd bits of food from outside the circle and throwing it into the center. A block of ice hissed as it melted into the mix. “Sorry we can’t be more hospitable, but at least now we can survey the damage tomorrow. I imagine a lot of our food will be untouched, as it is kept underground for the winter.”

“No worries, girl. We accomplished our mission today so I’m satisfied.”

“How?” Kane risked asking. The pain was still there, but now it didn’t feel like the left side of his face would split open anymore.

“We went into your village to chase out the invaders. No one said anything about keeping it from going up in smoke.”

“That’s something, I suppose,” Therise said, “I doubt the whole village will move north and even if we did, there wouldn’t be room or enough to last the winter. We’ll have to rely on this forest more than ever this winter.”

Through his good eye, Kane surveyed his current family and felt all the madness swirling around him like a storm winding down and dissipating into peace. These were all good people he had found through his chosen path and worth the struggle so far. The cold water dribbled down the wounded side of his face, clearing away the clotted blood and allowing him to see clearly again. When he looked across the fire he saw the eyes of Uriel’s tiger gleam at him in the distance and knew their goddess would protect them.

Huddled groups of villagers picked through the charred remains of Tinder under a clear sky the following day. Kane found the name of Tinder strangely appropriate as he helped Ira and Straton dig through the old Brennan house. Much more of the village had survived the burning and already the sound of hammers against wood clapped through the morning air. What was impossible to get rid of was the overwhelming odor of smoke. Teague had also been kind enough to leave behind several animals and soon many forgot their sufferings. Like ants, they simply went to rebuilding what had been destroyed.

Ira and Staton barely looked at him while others just stared. The wounds had swollen to the point that speaking was impossible and his left eye had shut. The bruised and reddened skin felt cool and stiff to the touch. At least the stitches held tight.

He tossed aside another scorched rafter. It rattled against the others in the salvageable pile. A gaggle of children ran by. Outside the fence, a farmer guided his cattle along to graze amongst the snow covered grass. Conversations started up and Kane looked back to Therise who sorted dishes with another family. Griz laughed somewhere beyond Kane's sight. Despite all the destruction, there was something so hospitable about the scene. All that had happened before was not his true return, but now, standing in the ruins of his old house, it felt like home. Even his father and brother's silent disdain towards him was comforting in its familiarity.

Things looked bad now, but soon enough things would turn around and get better. Tinder would survive this and the thought of resting in the warmth and privacy of his home while snow blew against the walls was his next vision to strive towards.

He looked over at his brother. Straton's normally wide and vibrant face had withdrawn, with his scalp showing through thinning black hair already cut short. Ira's wrinkled countenance showed the same displeasure that had probably frozen his mouth into a perpetual grimace. They were all tanned from days in the field, but its accumulated effects showed on Straton's face. Just looking at them as they moved out armfuls of debris made Kane feel tired.

Kane ran a hand through his own blonde hair, wincing as the fingers broke through one tangle after another. Even though Teague had taken his weapons away, Kane felt the burden of their presence lifted. His desire to flay Illian had also abated as the good work soothed his soul.

"You going to stare at us all day or help out?" Straton said, still trying to sound brotherly. The joke had a sour edge to it.

Kane nodded and went back to throwing rafters out through the burned out hole in the back of the house.

By the end of the first day, construction had already started on a long western facing house which would stretch from the north end of the village to the south. Rather than each family scramble for leftovers, a communal home to survive the winter made the success or failure depend on everyone.

At the end of a long day, the village settled down for another night, the lights of their flames highlighting the great branches of the bonding tree. Kane gathered from the conversations throughout the day that as long as their bonding tree survived, Shasla was still with them and if it could survive the winter, so could they. He didn't bother correcting them that Shasla's daughter ran things in her mother's stead. The decision to push on lifted all the faces of everyone as talk and laughter bounced around. There had even been a small bit of gossip regarding Kane and Therise going around. Part of the reason for this joyful attitude was due to the uncovered jars of ale someone recovered. Under a speckled night sky, it looked like there was nothing wrong with them or the Empire. Mountainborne, ghosts, war, were all just distant troubles to be dealt with by distant armies.

Kane sat between Griz and Therise while a boar on a spit roasted over a warm fire. Rather than a couple dozen families huddled together, four large groups sat near each other with a large meal cooking in the center. The remains of Tinder were used as benches and tables while the unsalvageable pieces were burned. Therise sat on his left with Griz on his right. He held a dribbling block of ice wrapped in a cloth to his wounded face, occasionally running a finger from the unblemished skin to the hardened edge of the bruise and wound.

"Don't pick at it," Therise said, bringing up her hand, swatting at his fingers before wrapping his hand around hers.

“Since you can’t speak, I will talk for both of us. You will not leave me again, is that understood?”

Kane squeezing her hand.

“Second, we’ll get fully settled when I see fit and that won’t be until after the thaw and Tinder is rebuilt. I want chickens so you’ll have to build a pen out back and keep them protected. I’m assuming since you’ve slain so many enemies, you can protect a few birds.”

Therise went on about her plans and Kane listened, but more than anything he marveled at his life. Now the course was mostly set and this time he felt none of his previous apprehension. He still didn’t know what the future held, but here was the person he could spend time with. All that remained was finding his grandfather and sealing the Breach. A difficult task, but after all he had survived this was not impossible.

Therise went on about her plans for their life together. After a while she ran out of things to plan and seemed content to sit quietly and enjoy the scene.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of feasting, dancing, eating specks of cut meat, and ending with a satisfied sleep near the warmth of the fire.

Weeks passed and the long house went up like a sprout from the ashes of the rest of the village. Uriel didn’t return to his dreams and Kane wondered if the stress of going to war had distorted his thoughts. The gods were absent so it made sense that they wouldn’t engage in the fate of one mortal when there were millions of others out there to call. He had wanted to see or hear his grandfather again but life did not wait on the dead.

The weather grew colder and colder with storms passing by but never hitting the village directly. Kane knew it was just a matter of time before the full brunt of winter on the open plains

would come and they had to be ready. He worked with others and joined in the feeling that the race was on to hide when the great blizzards finally came sweeping in to their doorstep.

Thoughts of war faded quickly, though Kane still dreamed of battle, feeling the excitement and fear rolling through the distorted images of bloodshed and chaos, a stark contrast to the peace and open space of the day. He and Therise took frequent walks around the outside of the village during the few respites they got from the work. At other times she sat with Therise's father to talk of fighting. Kane still played the part of a bonded man but felt more and more at ease in Therise's presence. It remained difficult to feel connected with someone, especially since he had never really been very fond of any girl. The lure of freedom and threat of enslavement had driven his actions throughout his entire life, so now to consider giving it all up was hard to comprehend. Just as the world dwindled away under the threat of winter, Kane's own sense of his life was dying away, being replaced by the girl on his arm and in his thoughts.

Griz began to look restless, his normally bright eyes slowly dulling while the smiles and laughs became more forced. He still worked well, hunted better and seemed excessively cheerful, but Kane knew his friend was growing impatient with getting back to the war. The swelling and stitches were gone, replaced by a thick pink scar. In time Kane forgot that he even had it, until he caught glimmers of his face reflected in water or glass. Then the mark stood out as his most distinguishing feature. The dots from the thread were barely discernible. He nearly looked like himself again, but it disappointed him to see the scar remain throughout the passing days. The chores of the village kept him busy and sleep passed quickly. When a detachment of Tamarian mounted sergeants appeared along the road one wintery day, Kane felt his stomach drop. The war had found him again.

Chapter 30

His heart scrambled to find all the mental and emotional requirements to suffer and kill in distant lands. From his position on the roof of the longhouse with an armful of thatch, he just watched the blue men ride closer along with all the other villagers. Griz was the first to react by dropping the fork he used to pass more straw up to the roof and ran for the interior of the house. Kane swung down through the unfilled hole in the roof and nearly landed on a dog as all the children and women shrieked in surprise and then laughed. Their smiles faded quickly when the sound of approaching hooves hit their ears.

Therise ran in, "What is happening?"

"I don't know, get everyone inside. They're either here to execute us for desertion or the war requires more flesh."

Her face paled at the thought, then the tight lips and furrowed brow of her defiance against the world appeared.

Kane squeezed her arm, "There's the girl I know. Don't worry, we'll figure it out. There's not much here to send to war besides food we don't have. Find my brother and bring him here with you."

By the time the sergeants arrived on their horses, Kane opened the small gate on the north side and let them in. Without a word they thundered by and ran one circle around the bonding tree.

At least they were Tamarian. The horses breathed shots of steam from under the deep blue padding which covered them. From their backs, men with eyes numbed by war squinted down at Kane and the rest of the town. Their clean shaven faces were red and dry from the wind.

"What place is this?" The leader in a steel helmet shouted more than said.

“Tinder, sir. There is nothing of value here except a few jars of ale and some meat. As you can see, we are still recovering from a recent disaster and might not survive the winter.”

The sergeant looked to the other soldiers, “This is the place he spoke of.”

“Pardon me?”

“Lord Teague recently quartered here during the retreat. He sent me out to find a man marked for war. With calmer weather than expected, we’re pushing back against the Mountainborne rabble and throwing them out of the Empire before the first thaw. Gather up all your men and return to me quickly. There isn’t much time and the longer we tarry, the farther you have to run.”

Griz emerged, his armor shining and weapon ready. “Amon, is that you?”

Amon leaned down as he looked at Griz, then reared up with a laugh, “I’ll be a dog’s fifth leg. I figured you had been killed at Nagah.”

“Almost. I fled with a few survivors south and missed the army cutting a way back west, been here too long hiding out. You heading back into the scrap?”

Amon nodded, “Why we were sent here for one man, I have no idea, but you are welcome to come along. The more butchers like you, the better.”

“Where are we heading?”

Amon leaned down again, so low that he hung on to the saddle to keep from sliding off. He whispered something in Griz’s ear.

Griz’s easy going demeanor changed to one of resignation. “Good enough.”

“What’s happening?” Kane asked Griz.

Griz laid a hand on Kane’s shoulder, “What do you think? Our mutual friend has requested your presence in the army. We’re going back in.”

Kane sighed, feeling his new world collapse around his feet. His taste for war was gone, but he would fight again if he had to. The possibility of avenging his honor against Teague was the best reason he had to follow the Tamarians back against the Mountainborne. “Where are we going?”

“Callinday.”

Chapter 31

Therise slapped Kane hard across the right side of his face and then stormed off at the news. He knew better than to follow her, though this parting felt oddly similar to their first exchange outside his father’s house. Straton brought him a wool cloak which he wrapped over a donated fur coat and his own retrieved armor. Others brought him some food for the journey. He refused what tools some offered as weapons since they were needed to finish the longhouse. After some brief goodbyes, Kane left Therise a note with her father and he stepped back out into the cold day for his second departure. He placed a hand on one of the great tangled roots spreading out from the Bonding Tree. It was the symbol of unity, survival and reliance for Tinder and Kane felt the weight of all those things now. He had gone to war once and returned. He could do so again.

Amon looked disappointed, “Is this him?”

“Get off it, Amon. This lad fights like twenty men. Your master will be satisfied.”

“His command was certainly strange so hopefully this satisfies him. We need to hurry before the army leaves.”

Griz looked at Kane, “You ready?”

Kane turned around to see all the villagers of Tinder gathering around him. No waves, no shouts of encouragement, just stares. But, to his satisfaction, pride flickered beneath the eyes of his kin as they watched one of their own march off to war. The struggles of the plains made them forgetful of his hand in the burning of Tinder, so now they only wanted him to fight and return home safe again. A few nodded and smiled as Kane's eyes drifted across them all a final time. Despite his wish to stay, if Uriel wished him to be Tinder's champion in this fight, then so be it. He waved and turned to the north. In the far distance he thought he heard Therise crying.

The running started out the gate as the unplowed fields and last sight of Tinder slipped away behind the folds of Aetheria.

They went north at an easy pace. Clearly there wasn't that much of a hurry.

"You all right?" Griz asked Kane.

"As well as can be expected, I suppose. Why the sudden call to war again?"

"The Emperor demanded an assault so we are assaulting the Mountainborne inside Callinday. What Teague has in mind for you, I have no idea. He likes to collect those who have made an impression on him," Amon said from atop his horse.

So, Teague had decided to continue the torment after burning his village and marring his face. Kane's scar stung in the western wind as it blew cold across the barren snow-covered grasslands. What point could his summoning back to war serve beyond amusing this spoiled child or a noble? The anger sparked in Kane's heart as he thought back to that horrible day when he first returned home. Perhaps it hadn't been wise to challenge a warrior raised from birth to single combat, but Illian and Mazrath had still left him behind. Rather than share everything together and despite Kane's efforts, Illian had left him behind. If he ever ran in to either of them again, accounts would be settled.

The four sergeants rode two in the front and two in the back of the small group. It seemed strange to send out four Tamarian soldiers to round up one man. What a waste of effort, though he saw no signs of frustration on the faces of Amon or the others. Satisfaction in obedience, perhaps. Griz didn't look happy, despite his signs of restlessness in Tinder.

"You don't look too pleased to be leaving. I imagine you were praying for a chance to get back into the war."

"That's true, but not to Callinday. I never wanted to see that place with my own eyes, much less fight the Mountainborne there."

"We have information that the Mountainborne are camping there, as well as a map to the old king's treasure within the castle."

"By what means was this information obtained?" Kane asked.

Amon shrugged, "No one knows. We've been told the Order has convinced the Emperor of this campaign and with this information, we can bypass the curses hiding there."

"Nonsense," Griz said. "We go to die for the chance of ancient trinkets."

"Perhaps, but such is our lot, Griz. We'll be sure to get good and drunk as much as possible before then."

Kane spoke up, "I'll join you on that."

"Spoken like a true warrior," Amon said.

"What have you heard about Callinday?" Kane asked.

"Prosperity, greed, the wrath of the old gods, madness and death covers it. What I don't get is why we're going to such a place as the heavier snows are surely on their way."

Griz shivered before continuing, “That whole area is a pit where men simply fall in and never return. It’s the gate to hell, as far as I’m concerned. Give me a man to cleave, but don’t get me sick or fighting spirits or gods.”

Kane agreed. All he thought about in terms of gods and spirits was Uriel. Her forest slipped away as the last signs of Tinder and the Achritian province. Only a few birds still flew overhead. Here they were, going back into battle while it was time to rest in preparation for the spring planting and summer harvest. Perhaps that was why she didn’t show herself while he was so close to her; she slept with all the other creatures while the snows blew. He pictured her white face and silver hair, complete with mischievous smile and airy demeanor which seemed unusual compared to the earthly attitude of Tinder. He brushed the thought of her away.

By the setting of the sun, Kane saw signs of Alton. The untamed open plains became spotted with farmhouses and fields. A fence lined one side of the road with cows huddled together under a few bare trees. The dirt road became paved and soon lights appeared in the shadowed horizon. At first Kane thought they were spread out too far, then he realized that they were approaching a camp surrounding the orderly lights of the town.

Their easy run slowed to a walk. Amon looked back over his saddle, “Welcome to our provincial recruiting camp. We move out tomorrow and won’t leave much behind. You can follow me inside.”

“That’s it?” Kane asked.

“Pretty much.”

As they got closer, tens of shadows became hundreds, which became thousands as the surrounding plains boiled with life. Small tents, improvised shelters and shops appeared on the side of the road as the group moved further into the stationary human mass. It wasn’t the

Tamarian army, only a fraction of it he guessed, but overall the scattered and disorganized camp looked like the Dogs if they had expanded tenfold. These were recruits, not soldiers waiting to be pushed east.

Kane felt eyes staring at them as they walked towards the front gate of Alton's palisade. Thick logs with pointed tops concealed most of the city, but Kane caught a glimpse of stone streets and buildings lining the main road in. A small door opened and a Tamarian helmet shined in the darkness.

"Who's there?" asked the guard.

"Amon, my men and a couple others. Quit dodging and let us in."

Cobbled streets ran between blocks of two-story buildings divided by alleys. Even in the darkness Kane felt heat and noise push against him once inside the gate. The Tamarian guard gave him an odd look but didn't question why he was in the company of other soldiers. Taverns rang with songs and the smell of cooked meat made his mouth water. Compared to the neglected outside, food and drink appeared plentiful. As they walked along, Kane glanced in one window after another to see Tamarian soldiers carousing with barmaids or singing off key songs with mused words. The sound of coins clinking on tables marked a strange rhythm. Kane had lived his entire life near Alton but had never been deemed old enough to go. Now he could see why. As long as the coins flowed, it seemed like all the doors and arms of Alton remained open for the wealthy occupiers. He couldn't help but remember Nagah and the chaos that followed after it fell. The scenes here were a strange parody of that experience.

"Here we are."

A sign of a laughing sun with "Sunstroke" painted underneath dangled over the double door entrance to an old wooden building as full and loud as the others. Amon and the other

soldiers tied their horses to the front and went in. The noise spiked at their entrance and got higher when Griz strode in. Kane wondered if there was room in the poor camp outside the walls. Despite the warmth and smell of food, the town felt stuffed with noise and the odors of too many sweaty bodies jammed together. If he wasn't so hungry and been exposed to this situation before, the scent of spoiled salt would have made him gag. His hardy warrior stomach kept him strong as he followed Amon and the others in. The only people not arrayed for war were frantic servers and barmaids carrying plates of food and mugs of ale through the throng focused on dodging grabby hands and overhanging sheathes. In one corner was just enough room for him to fit.

Kane wedged himself between the armored plates of Griz and Amon. He tried to hear the names of the other soldiers at the table but instead he tried to contain the panic spilling across his mind. Being jammed so close to strangers and the noise pushed against him made it difficult to breathe. He took small bits of air and put all his effort into looking calm in the company of soldiers bearing scars similar to his. Besides Griz, their tunics all had the images of a wolf howling towards a near full moon. Kane guessed this to be the emblem of Teague's family. He took solace in knowing he inched closer to paying that arrogant brat back for the injustices against Tinder and his face. Knowing this he calmed slightly, but still the crush of voices, clanking glasses and rattle of metal made him long for the relative peace and solitude of the street just outside a grime-crusted window. What made the stifling air and punishing noise around him tolerable was the company.

Kane found just sitting in the company of veteran soldiers immensely satisfying. After a time and few drinks that got less bitter with each gulp, he noticed everyone spoke loudly while everyone watched their lips move. Griz kept putting his hand on Kane's shoulder as he talked

about the journey from Nagah and the slaying of the great beasts of the Order. He went about evading the dead and how they eventually survived the return to Tinder.

When Amon pointed out the scar and Griz nodded, shame rushed to Kane's already hot face. Then Amon showed a mark running down his neck and into his armor. "Training," Amon said. Other words came, but Kane had a hard time reading as things started to swim around him. The noise got more tolerable, even fun as he found the soldiers around him fellow victims of Teague's cruelty. He dismissed Amon speaking of Teague's high expectations but fair behavior as the consequence of years of service. Teague was a monster in Kane's mind, and had to remain so.

Time sped up as the drinks and laughs continued. At one point he chugged down a glass to the chants of his tablemates and nearly broke the thing when he slammed it onto the table as they cheered.

When Kane woke on the floor of the tavern huddled with Griz, Amon and the others, the first thing he did was scramble outside the Sunstroke to throw up in the nearby gutter. A headache unlike anything Kane had ever experienced quickly followed the relief of emptying his stomach. He nearly passed out again from the pain and dizziness but instead dropped to a knee.

Griz walked out as if coming from a good night's sleep. "Time to go, lad. You owe me twenty kola."

"I've never even seen that much money in one place," Kane said, wiping his mouth.

The streets of Alton looked like the aftermath of a battle, with armored soldiers lying in various poses all over the place. All the windows in the buildings around them were dark and a light mist wafted around them.

“Find me something nice in Callinday and we’ll call it even. I’ve never seen a farm boy drink that much.”

“Neither have I,” Kane said rising uneasily to his feet.

All around him the apparent dead rose to their feet and silently the soldiers of Tamaria gathered to their units in preparation to move.

“I’ll be back. I’ve got to go do...something” Kane said. His brain felt twisted upside down in his head.

Griz looked at him a moment, “Teague won’t be happy that you’ve been lost in the pre-march chaos. You can find me with the house troops of the Falstone family. If you can remember nothing else, remember storm clouds over the ocean. Got it?”

“Storm clouds on the ocean. Got it. I’ll see you on the march.”

Kane shook Griz’s hand before they went their different ways, the parting of soldiers and friends on their way to war. Without looking, Kane hurried towards the now open gate of Alton. He knew exactly where he truly belonged in the Tamarian army.

Chapter 33

The Tamarian camp looked larger in the morning light. Kane had only seen fires the night before and now it appeared like a dozen men had lay hidden when he had passed by. More tents, more recruits and more soldiers moved around and past him while he looked for the trademark banner of the Dogs. Unlike the first time Kane had seen the Tamarian army, the camp surged with activity in preparation for the move against Callinday. This strike against the Mountainborne looked to use all the available strength of Tamaria. Callinday, the City of Bones,

must be important to risk so much. A mass of unsure recruits walked by, following a cart loaded down with old weapons of all sorts. Kane joined in the line, hoping he knew its destination.

Tamarian soldiers guided the mass of dull-eyed peasants into an open space by the main camp. Kane quietly fell in with the mob and his mood shot upwards when he took in the sight of the shredded excuse for a banner. His war home still existed but now he stood in the company of hundreds of unfamiliar faces. Since Illian and Mazrath had left him, the only person left to find was Boil and the two remaining brothers, but he didn't even know if they still lived.

His concern was short lived as a familiar voice called out to him. "Is that who I think it is?" Boil said, looking as gnarled as ever, "and look, the pup's got his own mark now. How'd you get that?" The leader walked up fully dressed in his patchwork tunic and random assortment of armor. The man still looked like a mash of metal, cloth and flesh.

"You look better than me," Kane said, "Is anyone else still around?"

"Kind words, but you look like a true man of war now. Where are your friends?"

"Gone. Where's Chubs and Jarp?"

"They're out introducing our new litter of pups to the finer points of killing. It's going to be awful," Boil said, his words sounding like a grim joke. "Come along and tell me what you've been up to."

Kane, feeling very relieved at this familiar sight, sat down and recounted his story of going home and the humiliating defeat at the hands of Teague. He went over his brief return to Tinder and the sudden wrenching back into the world of war and death. He relayed how he knew that warfare was not his true place, but a peaceful life tucked away from the horrors of the world. As he spoke Kane took solace in the knowledge that Teague still would have come if he had stayed or gone. But, because of his leaving, the chance to undo the injury to Tinder

remained. Eventually he finished and Boil just looked at him with his usual scarred and beaten expression that seemed trapped between satisfaction and cruelty.

Boil's one good eye gleamed, "Well, I'm glad you're back at least. With all these new faces running around, it feels like every prison and farm in Tamaria is filled with timid girls. There wasn't much here when I first joined up a while ago, but now it's just getting bad. Rather than fight as a sleek hound, we're a bloated mongrel."

I've had enough of being pushed and pulled around by the Empire. I want to set my own course," Kane said.

"We'll see. The nobles are silent about what we're doing besides moving to Callinday and pushing the Mountainborne out. My only guess is the presence of our enemy is enough evidence for them to invest their strength into that cursed place. When we get there, make sure you stick with me. I don't want to go more than a single block in from the outer wall if I can help it. You know there are sewers and excavation tunnels riddling that place?"

"The City of Bones sounds more and more exciting with each new bit of information." Judging by Boil's blank expression, Kane guessed his leader had missed the sarcasm in his voice.

"We're talking ambushes, fighting underground, collapsing tunnels which might suck a building into darkness at the snap of a finger. No one's lived there for years and yet we plan on marching in as if there's food sitting on each table and a bed made up for every warm body. This campaign is madness, especially before the middle of winter."

"What are you going to do?" Kane asked.

"Be the first rat off the ship if she lists. There's enough trouble with the living around there that I don't want to pile the dead and trapped gods on top of them."

“When will we get there?” Kane asked. He felt the current of his life picking up, dragging him and thousands of others towards dangerous straits.

“Within the week if we keep a good pace, which is unlikely. At least the road is unobstructed and the Mountainborne are content to let us meet them at the city. I wonder what the Order’s got cooked up for this assault. Think of five or six Nagahs jammed together with taller buildings and smaller streets. It’s going to be a nightmare and most of these idiots have no idea what’s coming. They’re all thinking open field of battle.”

Like the waking of some great beast, the Tamarian army eventually moved out towards Callinday. Kane wondered why the grisly legends and reputation surrounding the city were suddenly ignored. To him it sounded like the Tamarians wanted to hold Callinday simply because the Mountainborne had moved in. He had seen children go through the same process of wanting something simply because someone else possessed it.

Behind them Kane saw a dark gray cloud which looked like a wall stretching across the horizon. Perfect timing. It felt like all the uncontrollable elements were getting stacked against him as he continued to march in the endless line of troops and supply wagons. Boil strode beside him with his unreadable face but Kane felt dread coming from the Dog’s leader. Going to fight with all the worst weather coming sounded like the worst of all possible outcomes. It all was madness to Kane, but he knew nothing of military strategy and assumed the overseers of the Tamarian army knew what they were doing.

By week’s end, word spread through the ranks of their arrival at Callinday on the following morning. They all had stopped where they were, gotten some cold watery soup and bread from a passing wagon before lying down for the night. The air was cold and blew bitterly. Kane lay next to Boil and huddled amongst dozens of others as they crowded together like sheep.

Those around them tried to sleep, but most nearby turned and rolled over each other in their disturbed sleep. A few cries of seeing things beyond the Order's green flames were quickly shushed.

Kane sat against a side of one wagon while Boil slept calmly. Shapes formed and eyes blinked in the darkness around them. He wondered if these were more spirits driven mad on the mortal plain, and Kane hoped his imagination conjured up the forms lurking and floating just outside the lights of the Order's flame. He wondered if the wet eyes shining the darkness were either Uriel's tiger or some monstrosity, frightened by the Order's flames but still curious if the mass of beating hearts might save them. The danger he felt at their presence was unlike any other time away from Tinder. The army truly was a large bubble of order in a vast and wild land on the road towards the unknown.

He had seen no trace of any spirits since leaving Nagah but tonight nearly a dozen disturbed the shadows around the army. An ethereal creature the size of a horse scuttled close to the flames, a once human face stretched a long, mouth open in an endless and silent scream of anguish at the end of an insect-like body of black chitin.

If Uriel would help him find his grandfather in the Breach, what shape would he take upon returning to the physical world? He had heard so many tales of the dark storms, hidden dangers and the pain of moving from one world to the next that it might be cruel to force the one man in Kane's life worthy of rest and reward back into Aetheria.

Some snored, and others woke suddenly while Kane watched the needlepoint stars shine across the open sky. The distant moon became clouded over by the chasing storm. All he thought was how terrible the next day would be. He felt warm enough but couldn't move and the road never got warm, so his rump felt sore and chilled. When the last stars winked out from

black clouds piling across the sky, he imagined that the primary reason to fight the next day was to hide from the snows and wind.

The morning came windy and cold and Kane couldn't see beyond the dozen men around him. Blinded by punishing snow beating at their backs, the advance into Callinday became a line of men following blindly behind those they could see. Of the spirits from the previous night, Kane saw no trace.

By the time Kane reached the walls of Callinday, visibility had dropped to ten paces. Like sheep, they kept pushing on where the other had pushed, following a trail of quickly obscured prints in the snow. Forging had been difficult and there had been no breakfast but Kane guessed shelter filled the mind of each man around him. Callinday's reputation didn't seem so bad compared to the very real threat of the storm. His boots still kept his feet dry, but his limbs froze as he trudged forward. Frozen bodies of Dogs and soldiers who had succumbed to the cold littered the approach.

Slowly the dark gray outline of Callinday's walls came into view as a jagged form wider and taller than anything Kane had ever seen. Above the howl of wind and the pain of ice biting into flesh, the sight demanded notice. It looked like the colossal wreckage of ship washed hundreds of miles inland. The point of the western gatehouse stood tall into the white sky while holes in the giant wall looked large enough for soldiers thirty wide to march through. There was no horrific assault taking place to capture or defend the wall as there really wasn't much of a wall to fight over.

The trail of men wound through large chunks of blackened stone stuck out from white flowing all around them. It looked like the walls had been pushed out from the inside of the city. The trail of rubble went on for two hundred more paces until Kane passed through the wall so

thick it seemed impossible they had been built with human hands. It made the walls of Nagah look like the fence of Tinder. Passages in the wall lay exposed as they went up several floors until it vanished in the storm.

The remains of the city inside appeared clearer as parts of the wall blocked the snow. Blackened multi-storied houses lined each block. Holes in walls, roofs and broken windows made most of the rooms useless as a place for shelter. Kane ran by the body of a dead Tamarian recruit whose only protection was some rags. Someone had already stripped him of outer clothing and Kane only pushed on with the survivors. At least Kane had his green cloak which kept his face and head protected from the worst gusts of wind pushing snow down the streets in walking dunes.

All semblance of order was gone. Boil ran with Kane as they followed the crowd to the nearest building that looked stable. Some walls had collapsed on the men hiding behind them. Small rooms untouched from the great catastrophe filled quickly with shivering soldiers. Others went into the walls but not too far. Despite the desire to hide from the blinding white cold, the stories of disappearing men and spirits of madness stalking the streets of the City of Bones still lingered.

Kane and Boil took residence in the second story of a burned out house. With an intact section of the great wall behind them, the worst of the storm stopped and they hid in what might have been a storeroom. Kane's nose was stuffed and his breaths came out through chapped lips. What surprised him most was the noise of the storm, a great rumble of wind that blew constantly against them. In the safety of the small room, the outside howled as if it too was some mythical spirit raging against its fate. Broken pottery, upturned chairs and the wispy rags shook and twisted in the breeze outside their hiding place. With one entrance in, Kane figured they would

at least see the face of anything coming to kill them. Boil's scarred face looked worried. At least Kane gathered as much from the clear eye staring out from their doorway.

"Not much of a war so far, is it?" Kane asked.

"Not yet. Tomorrow's going to be hell."

"That's what you said yesterday."

A whoop cut through the rumble of the storm. The source of the sudden noise sounded like it sat on the other side of the wall of their room. It was short, loud and sounded more like the incoherent cry of madness rather than a call to war or buffeting wind. The Tamarians had Callinday's attention.

"I don't like this place," Kane said.

Boil sighed, "just wait."

Chapter 34

The storm went on for the rest of the day. Kane and Boil switched between watching and trying to sleep since there wasn't anything else to do. The curtains of fine snow eventually propped up the rocking shards of pottery as it piled around them. Kane had seen spirits, hidden from them and killed them but this was something entirely different. It was just impossible to tell where his awareness ended and the strange workings of this haunted city began. While Boil snored, he watched the hypnotic blowing of the snow switching between a comforting doubt that something entirely different had ended Callinday and the myth had been broken, and an itching curiosity at what truly lurked around them or slept in the tunnels underneath the city. He felt like a child hiding from a storm underneath a blanket, hoping to avoid attack by blinding himself to the threat. Still, after the whooping noise there had been other sounds. Boots running along the

street below them, the sounds of laughter in the far distance and fingers scratching against wood which might have also been the noise of ancient ruined buildings settling against the weight of unexpected visitors. How blind was the Tamarian command to these lurking dangers?

Kane didn't think about sleeping while Boil took his turn at watch. He leaned against the cold wood wall of their shelter and closed his eyes to give them rest. Despite the covering of the storm, it felt like everything shined, even the clouds and charred ruins seemed too bright. The terrific cold also made it difficult to sleep and the noise of wind whistling through the countless cracks and gashes in the houses around them made it sound like the whole city thrashed in agony, only held in place by ice and stone.

Apparently Kane eventually did fall asleep, as the roar had softened to a constant rush. Late afternoon came and his first thought the Mountainborne when he awoke. Boil looked over from under the hood of his cloak, its patchwork of clothes and colors like every other aspect of the man. Boil's eyes held a smile in the creases lining his face.

"Sleep well?"

"How long have I been out?"

"A few hours I say. It seems the storm's winding down. I've been summoned to meet with the Tamarian council's representative about tomorrow's attack. The Mountainborne have a presence in nearly all the city."

"Shall I come with you?"

Boil stood up lightly as if years of war and age were only an appearance while Kane struggled to his feet. A few weak rays of sun cut through shredded clouds; nothing moved as if frozen in place.

They climbed down from their perch to find empty streets cleared of debris but full of men and animals huddled together with braziers of flame lighting a trail towards the council. Most slept as so many nights before, Kane noticed, but others stared at the flames as a drowning man might watch his last breath bubble away. Compared to the cold of Boil's chosen hiding place from the storm, the actual street felt considerably warmer. Moisture glistened on scorched wood and worn stone and it appeared that all the snow had melted from the crowd of man and beast in the confined area. No one looked up as Kane followed Boil in what appeared to be an endless process of stepping over legs and bodies as they slowly made their way towards the only building that looked intact.

Only age had done damage to the house on the corner. The trail of resting soldiers continued and Tamarian soldiers silently patrolled, having the same difficulty of moving over outstretched legs.

A sign hung from a black iron spike over the door. A Tamarian guard in full armor and blue cloak stood beside the door with his face hidden behind a full helmet. Boil nodded at him but didn't get a greeting in response. The door creaked as they entered. Lamps burned from old hangings around the walls and pillars. Four stern Tamarian faces looked up. It was clear to Kane that they weren't the high command of the Tamarian army, but lower officers preparing their roles in the fight ahead. Their trimmed hair and clean armor, each wearing plate and blue tunics emblazoned with the Tamarian cresting wave, made Boil look like a clown rather than a military leader. Except for the bar, loaded with a simple dinner of meat and bread, every other piece of ruined furniture was gone, being used to warm the weary troops outside. The room at one time could have fit nearly a hundred seated and standing customers, but now only held six and the light on the Tamarians was hardly enough. Kane looked into shadows along the wall, in every

corner and broken doorway. What was once a grand staircase in the far corner had collapsed, leaving a wide and impenetrably dark hole to the second level.

To Kane's surprise, all three of the commanders smiled and gave Boil the greetings reserved for old comrades. Handshakes with met eyes and gripped shoulders initiated the conference. Kane remained on the fringe of the light, feeling very out of place. He wondered what possible reason Boil might have for dragging him along, but after looking outside the cracked and smeared window to the cold outside, he accepted the kind gesture.

"Kane, come over here," Boil said, waving him over.

Kane walked to the table, suddenly thinking of Teague and the day he received his scar in Tinder. Each pair of eyes held the same professional distance. The men before him were not evil, just numb to their duty and they looked like he might after enough time in the army. This was not some act of kindness at all, but something else entirely.

"Is this Jarp's replacement?" An officer with a thin brown beard and cropped hair asked. He leaned against the table with both mailed hands outstretched.

"That he is. No one else wanted the job so here we are."

"What job?" Kane asked.

"Why, my second in command, of course."

"Impossible," Kane said, heat rushing to his face. The faces around him didn't change, but he saw the Tamarians and Boil share a humored glance.

"Relax, son. You're more symbolic than anything else and considering all the idiots Ormig here decided to fill my ranks with, you're also among my most experienced fighters."

"Blame the Emperor for that, Asheroth protect him," Ormig said, looking back to the map.

Boil gently pulled Kane closer to the table, "I know this is a lot to bear when home only fills your mind, but this is exactly how I started; an offered opportunity for greatness. How much better will your fireside stories be when you tell of leading men, rather than following them? You'll get better equipment and a new sword, I assure you."

Another glance between Boil and Ormig made it clear to Kane that this promise would be kept.

"You expect too much from me," Kane said.

"All that is required is looking the part, for now," Boil said. "Most men care about only fighting and looting. We soldiers are mostly bullies and fearless as long as victory is certain in our minds. When things get tough or at least look bad, that spirit goes from a lion to a mouse very quickly. If something like that happens, that is when I'll need you to dig deep and find that heroic spirit I know is hidden somewhere within you. You've proven to be a survivor, which also helps your case. Now, shall we quit wasting the time of these fine gentlemen?"

Ormig placed a finger on the map of Callinday. It looked as beaten and worn as the city itself. Burn marks, torn edges and stains marred its already discolored surface. Someone had recently traced over the faded lines with new ink, otherwise the thing would have been useless.

"Shall I begin?" Ormig looked at Kane with a mocking smile.

Kane nodded. Paying attention proved difficult, even though he knew he needed to. A chance for a higher station, with all its responsibilities and dangers, needed to go perfectly and he didn't know why. He looked up at Boil as they pointed and moved pebbles from one part of the city to another, his ruined face speaking and shifting without any shame of the burns, scars, and discoloration that made him look created in a dungeon rather than the battlefield. Still, this person Kane greatly admired for his effortless control of so many brigands and thieves saw

something in him. Ira never paid any attention to his accomplishments back in Tinder but assumed failure at every turn, nodding in approval of only his own low expectations whenever one of Kane's plans fell through. The desire to please Boil filled his chest.

Ormig pointed around their section of the city. Callinday's streets and gardens looked like one giant maze of blocks of buildings and clearings complete with dead ends and paths which turned into circles. Each of the eight districts was marked in fresh ink, with the narrow towers of the central castle acting as the central hub for all of them. He was disheartened to see the pebbles they used were very small compared to the large and filthy map which nearly dangled over the edges of the banquet table. Ten thousand looked too few to hold the city, much less to force the Mountainborne out. The estimated enemy strength in small rocks was spread out across the other side of the city; the setup for a game rather than war. Kane leaned in for a better look at what might be coming for him in the days to come.

Ormig went on, gently pushing the rocks out from their side of the city into a cautiously expanding circle, "Windred has more men coming in for the fight so we'll gradually get enough to expand out from where we are now. We've started blocking up the breaks in the wall as best we can to keep the wind and any ambitious attempts to trap us kept outside. It's something for the men to do to keep moving and warm, since containing anything in this cursed place is pointless with all the avenues of escape and entrance in the wall outside our current position. That's why we're going to build and expand while scouting out signs of the enemy. I know there's over a mile of tangled streets, canals and ruins between us and them but the winter weather won't make moving through the streets impossible. They might not know we're here yet, but having any surprise is doubtful."

Boil sighed, "It's going to take us years to clear this place. I doubt we'll make it out of this block by the end of winter. By then it won't matter, since disease should finish us off. What spawned this foolishness?"

"New information from an unexpected and secret source, but our duty remains to obey. To waste this force would mean leaving the Empire defended by militia and peasants, which is too insane to contemplate. We'll push out in force over the next couple days to give us more room before scouring every inch of our territory to make sure there aren't any shades or hungry spirits hiding about. The Order says they've got enough of moonsalt to keep things away, but almost every one of those soldiers out there has heard the stories by now."

A bald officer wearing a leather cap much cleaner than Boil's laughed, "I can't wait to fight something besides wind and legends here. So we'll move out to this courtyard and square tomorrow and push out from there?"

"Yes, we'll have units all around us so don't worry about being cut off. Keep a watch for those around you and stay within your assigned section. Jumpy courage will be our biggest threat tomorrow. If we do get into a fight, and the gods help us if it happens, make sure we are ready to fight. Spears up front with smaller weapons just behind. I know the Dogs will be fine because this is their territory."

Boil nodded with a grin before looking at Kane, "We'll be ready."

The Dogs' representative mark amongst thirty smooth pebbles was a bent and rusted coin. Kane studied its position, seeing their path forward through buildings rather than streets like all the others. The inches on the map felt like miles and their path ended just beyond a wide garden. Another block of buildings marked the edge of a main road going straight towards the castle. Kane tried to see any place to use as a guide to make sure he didn't lead the Dogs off

track but every faded row blended together. The only sign of going the wrong direction would be an easy track along a street rather than pushing into dark and empty houses, each one a potential risk of collapse, ambush, or something worse.

Kane felt the table tremble underneath his hands. All noise outside and talk within the empty tavern stopped. It became so quiet he heard the flames inside the lamps around them flicker.

“What was that?” Ormig asked slowly.

Something stirred beneath the surface of Callinday. He recalled the now absent Uriel’s talk of those old gods who once walked the world of men. Most were lost, but some lay hidden underneath the earth. Carmil stirred. None of the experienced soldiers said anything for a moment, listening again. Someone screamed outside as if suddenly bitten but was quickly muffled by the other soldiers outside.

Boil looked over and spoke with a voice forced into calm, “Kane, would you go check on that for us?”

Chapter 35

Outside no one else looked in a state of panic, but every eye snapped to Kane when he stepped into the cold night. Those who slept now sat up with blankets wrapped around them and joined in staring. Kane wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do so he stood at the doorway and waited. Hushed talks and whispers echoed down the street while he looked along the trail marked by fires down the line of restless men and halted Tamarians. When the eyes on him began looking around in fear, Kane realized the whispers just within hearing were not in any language he knew and also not coming from any of the soldiers around him.

An invisible choir of spectral voices passed along the street, pushing the flames in the braziers outward as the jabbering spirit went by. Kane wasn't sure if he actually saw something rippling in the air. One soldier in its invisible path fainted in a heap, his clattering armor sounding like shattered glass. The invisible source of the jabbering continued on, not lost so much as insanely wandering with no direction in mind. Some began to pray. Others tried going back to sleep, hoping this disturbance in their rest was just a part of their scattered dreams. Kane turned around and went right back into the tavern.

“Well?” Ormig asked.

“Something is out there which ignored the moonsalt of the Order. It caused a man to faint and the troops are worried. The sooner daylight comes for us the better.”

“If they're not killing themselves or each other then that's all we can hope for. If our scant reports are even partially correct there will be plenty of killing to distract them soon enough. Nothing gets the mind back on track like combat. Any questions before we retire for the evening?”

Kane followed Boil back over the sprawled bodies, though most were awake and pulled their legs in to make passage easier. Making it back to the Dogs took no time at all and the same frightened eyes followed their approach.

“What's wrong with you cowards? This isn't the first time you've slept outside in the dark is it?” Boil spoke loudly to no one. A few weak smiles and chuckles responded.

“I hate new blood. They don't know when to be afraid.”

Boil pushed a couple Dogs aside and they joined the rest of their comrades along the now quiet city street. It felt barely past midnight and Kane wondered how long it would take for the sun to rise. He watched the flames nearby dance in different directions, pulled from one side of

their iron grate to the other with no breeze guiding them. The others did the same but without any pattern between them. Kane looked around to see most had already gone back to sleep and those who stayed awake didn't seem to notice the strangeness happening right in front of their eyes. Was he going mad? Had the idea of Callinday and now its presence made everything around him questionable? His grip on the world, already loosened by everything else he had seen, slipped a little. What he believed to be true was now upended in the scattered flames that tried to escape from their iron cages.

Kane watched the sky brighten and spent every moment of the sunrise wishing light would come faster to the ruined city. The fires burned their terrified patterns. Units slowly formed together as men wandered in crowds with weapons in one hand and a pitiful breakfast of bread in the other. Some chewed on unblemished snow while others waited for a scoop of water. Kane marveled at the childish nature of the inexperienced members of the Dogs. Each face looked about with dull understanding, trying to figure out rules that didn't exist by seeing what everyone else, who was equally lost, did. Boil took him through the crowds towards the Dogs' starting point for their advance into the city.

They stopped again at the tavern where the meeting had taken place the night before. This time Ormig had a polished shirt of scale armor with shoulder plates waiting for him. It fit over Kane's padded jacket easily enough and the added weight didn't restrict his movement too much. Now he looked like a soldier. A simple Tamarian sword and belt was also given to him.

"Take care of these," Ormig said. "Boil doesn't usually call in favors."

Outside, Kane walked upright with confident steps as he rested a gloved hand on his new sword's pommel. It was probably a simple gesture, but the trust Boil had in him was the greatest reward and motivation to fight now. The Dogs made room for Boil and Kane to pass through.

Kane kept his eyes down at the pressure from their following eyes. How much simpler to be another blade in the crowd rather than the one whose shoulders bore the responsibility for success or failure.

Looking back, Kane watched as most of the lost and poorly armed new recruits instinctively followed Boil. He guessed his scars and equipment showed some experience. A clear blue sky sparkled the snow covering every broken beam and splinted building around them. In the gap between the city and wall, the air filled with the breaths of the experienced men ready to fight. Hundreds, if not thousands of sweaty bodies with minimal organization made the street a cesspool of stink. Kane pulled his cloak up to his mouth to keep the odor out, but it was too late and the taste settled in his mouth. Their staging area now smelled like an open sewer and the anticipation to move was more fueled by escaping the smell than advancing towards victory.

While he would rather be home in Tinder, Kane hoped for a fight. So far he felt teased by Callinday, with all its creaking buildings and passing voices. To establish some sense required him putting his sword into the belly of an actual enemy. On the eyes of the experienced core of the Dogs, he recognized the same excited look as the whole group gathered by one particularly large breach in the giant wall facing west. Ahead of them lay a burned out pile of wood with a view of the three blocks beyond. One way out remained, but all bodies looked further into the City of Bones where death and terror lay.

Kane noticed familiar faces, greeted Chubs and Slick, but didn't know many other names. As the Dog's second, he should know more about the men he led but that time would come. Illian's absence was reassuring, as it gave him one less person to worry about. Without that tether of concern, getting fully lost in the thrills and violence of battle was possible. Across the broken pavement and through the now empty shells of homes, glory and excitement lay. It

wasn't the constant joy of peace before him at this moment, but the impending rush of conquest and physical exertion waiting there. Kane smiled and made sure to stick close to Boil as he pushed to the front. While not the king of this vagrant crew, he felt himself a prince in their small and strange society. No one appeared to notice his new equipment or close proximity to Boil, but Kane figured his new station as second in command would be known soon enough.

The wait gnawed at Kane's patience. The Dogs stood around and hushed conversations started up behind him. Fighting on the open plain at least gave the illusion of freedom to move and flee while being trapped in the confines of a city, especially this city, would crush a man's mind. Boil looked over at Kane and winked. A father of a favored son and in that moment Kane wanted nothing more than to make Boil proud. For much longer than he wanted, the only sound filling the air was the shuffle of feet and the sound of men coughing behind him.

Finally, a shrill whistle blew and the advance began. Kane moved forward but not in front of Boil. The ruins they crawled over disintegrated under the weight of hundreds of footsteps. When they crossed into the second street, Boil slowed to stay in line with the Tamarian units to their sides.

The formations spread out until Kane saw Tamarian soldiers with spears and swords within arm's reach of the line of Dogs. Kane moved through the remains of one house after another. Running between ripped open rooms and through tunnels of fallen timbers. The shifting light and dark stirred more memories of passing trees in the clean and peaceful forest. Instead of being alone amongst the trees in Tinder, Kane saw thousands of others advancing alongside him in pursuit of a hidden enemy. With every break across an overgrown street, Kane looked up to see the spires of the central castle looming in the distance. Four narrow towers

surrounded a thicker main keep and it seemed impossible that something looking that fragile could have survived the city's destruction and the years after.

All around him Tamarians and Dogs ran along towards the road. Kane guessed they would reach their objective soon at their current rate. Moving forward filled his lungs with unsoiled air and the thought of fighting again powered his muscles. He gripped his sword tighter and pushed through a rotting door. The army searched for a fight and Kane's muscles tensed and released with every step, his new armor shifting easily across his body while the clean blade of his sword flashed in those few moments of sunlight between rows of destruction. Thousands and thousands of people must have once occupied the place they now fought over. A fight over the scraps of a distant age rather than protecting the present and future.

Seeing the remains of so much death, reminded Kane of the summoned corpses they had fought at the walls of Nagah. Surely this massive crypt must have been their source and yet no sign of any body passed his view. Bones lay in scattered heaps and picked clean. He shuddered to see little bite marks on the ribs and skulls he passed. At least that part of Boil's story appeared true, which meant the other aspects of the survivor's tale could also be real.

A cry went up to Kane's right. Contact. Suddenly the endless rows of ruins and charred remains of buildings let out into an open courtyard, the goal of the previous night's meeting. A final block of empty stone buildings over an arched passage stood between them and the main road to the castle. Before the halfway mark of the day, they had reached the middle point of the city.

When Mountainborne soldiers emerged from the shadows of the buildings on the opposite side of the street, Kane smiled and increased his jog to a sprint, raising his sword. Men who had filtered through the broken streets of Callinday in small groups reformed into units as

the two sides collided in open space of the courtyard. Yellow grass and unblemished snow became stained with blood. The long silence of the city erupted into the cacophony of metal against flesh and screams brought on by gruesome combat. Noise in its most chaotic state quickly overwhelmed all thoughts as they consumed the senses.

Kane lost himself in the melee. The Mountainborne came out with their skull and leather helmets and covered in sewn furs. Black war paint covered their faces and from the shadows of their eyes, Kane saw the eternal hatred that could only be expressed in violence and annihilation. The suffering and fear of the previous weeks loosed itself through broad strokes and unhindered movements purely designed to destroy.

Kane didn't care who stood beside him as he poured his wrath on the enemies immediately to the front. He ducked a wide blow before coming up from his crouch, driving his sword to the hilt in the Mountainborne's chest. The dying enemy spat blood and died on the blade. It slid out and went whirling through another enemy's arm. Blows punched against his armor like hail in a storm of attacks and counters.

He pushed through a group and cut down two who had a Dog on the ground before pulling the struggling soldier to his feet with one hand. More Mountainborne poured through across the street and into the stone courtyard where bodies quickly piled up. Flashes of similar scenes played out on edges of Kane's vision as glimpses of an overall battle for the road appeared to be happening all along the line. The more involved, the stronger Kane felt. He stood alone against the enemy and yet their presence and energy pushed him up, made him weightless and each blow an easy gesture.

After slinging the body back into the wall of oncoming Mountainborne, Kane roared, tasting the blood of conquered foes on his lips.

The battle between armies swirled into a dance of madness as the countless pairs sought to kill their partners. Hundreds of small duels became thousands across the courtyard and Kane worked his way through one enemy after another. He felt cuts on his legs and face grow cold as his blood slipped out, but he slew many in exchange for each light wound. He fell into his bloody urges, his free hand grabbing fingers to twist, gouging eyes or throwing a fist into the faces of the enemy.

He let a long stabbing attack go between his body and free arm. Kane trapped the Mountainborne's forearm in his elbow and punched with his sword hand. Before the enemy could recover, he yanked up on the trapped arm, the snaps of bone and muscles sounding over the din of battle. Kane kicked the crippled attacker backwards and slashed into the enemy's numerous companions still spilling out from the other side of the street.

Bodies piled up and Kane cared little where he stepped, if something moved under his foot, he simply pushed it harder, feeling bones and insides buckle under his weight. It became difficult to move anywhere as the two sides butchered each other into the afternoon and the once empty gutters and sewer grates ran with fresh blood. The salty metallic odor of sweat mixed with the sickening smell of chopped meat which powered Kane's strokes.

The wounded tried to crawl away, with some making it back to the other side of the courtyard while others were run down by pushing Mountainborne or trampled underneath Tamarian reinforcements.

Kane's arms ached while his legs burned with fatigue, driven far beyond their comfortable limits by the thrill of walking the edge between life and death on the battlefield. He would fight until his muscles burst in the rush of battle.

Something swished by Kane's head as he cleaved through a Mountainborne's chest. An iron bolt from a crossbow appeared from a burbling wound in a nearby enemy's throat.

Behind the battle line crossbowmen moved into high positions overlooking the courtyard. Kane began a fighting retreat to give the shooters more targets that weren't so close to his exposed back. More shots came but still the Mountainborne pushed forward.

Tamarians rolled with Mountainborne on the ground, biting, jabbing, twisting at every exposed opportunity to inflict pain. Kane kicked hard into an attacker's groin, dodged a blow from somewhere beside him and dispatched them both with deep cuts. The weight of his sword grew with every movement and besides the crossbowmen picking off dozens of Mountainborne, there didn't seem to be nearly as many Tamarians as before. Kane couldn't see Boil in all the carnage as those who continued to fight were now covered in blood, glistening red in the afternoon light.

A wall of silver appeared from the side of the battle closest to the gate. The Emperor's Wave hacked from their armored horses as they cut into what Kane only hoped was the final push of the Mountainborne assault. The knights pushed in, sewing panic and death throughout the ranks trapped between soldiers and knights with a steady stream of bolts raining down on those in the middle.

Those interlocked in the battle separated as the Mountainborne pulled back and Kane saw the same look in every one of the enemy's eyes. Fear fueled every heart under each skull helmet more so than hate. As the gap between him and the attackers grew, Kane struggled to remain on his feet as he experienced the painful return to a human body pushed to the brink of collapse. The Mountainborne broke, pushing into the knights who cut nearly all of them down as they ran

into the now bloodied Wave. Bodies lay two or three deep along the entire courtyard. Kane sat heavily onto the edge of a central fountain where blood pooled at its center.

It looked impossible to tell which side had inflicted more casualties, as the mangled lines of bodies became indistinguishable under the deep red color covering everything. None of the heavily armored nobility of the Mountainborne had appeared for this fight. Superstitious ignorance drove them, perhaps. Kane wished Illian or Griz was nearby so they could discuss this strange possibility. Instead, there was only Boil, and Kane spotted him with other Dogs making their way through the piles of bodies, finishing off any surviving Mountainborne and looking for still living Tamarians. He had just fought in a small part of what might have been a full scale assault and the war had been won. The Wave still pushed on, but now only unblemished knights riding on armored steeds all dressed in blue marched by, their weapons sheathed.

A horn sent three sharp calls across the suddenly cold afternoon. Boil looked up from his duties and looked around for someone. Kane stood up.

“Let’s go,” Boil said. “This war might be ending much sooner than I thought.”

Chapter 37

Boil walked along the wide street and Kane followed, avoiding the Mountainborne bodies littering the way towards the central castle. The paved road went straight in from the gatehouse to the castle, just as the map had shown. Compared to the narrow streets choked with ruins with block after block of remains, the main street was vacant of debris. Across the four lanes with overgrown divider of the causeway stood the buildings of the Mountainborne side of Callinday. To his right the knights continued on as scattered remnants of the Mountainborne

scurried back across the street. Some of the distant figures made it while others were added to the bloody path cut by the Wave.

Boil didn't seem worried about walking exposed to the other side where the Mountainborne must surely be watching them. As they walked towards the castle, the size of the thing became even more obvious. It stood over a mile away and the black stone grew hazy as it seemed to push into the clear sky. Kane felt like an insect compared to the massive black towers. Boil kept looking to his left, scanning each break in the ruins for a passage back towards the Tamarian side. It was difficult to tell, as most of the Tamarian units they passed were redressing their ranks and tending to the wounded. Instead of the noise of battle, Kane listened to the indistinguishable chatter echoing out to them as they walked by. The smell of hot stew wafted out over the stench of death. It was a strange thing to suddenly have an appetite while walking along a trail of bloody dead but Kane's stomach rumbled at the thought of food.

Boil turned down one of the smaller streets which fed into the main road. Crossbowmen took up positions while armored Tamarians with unstained blue tunics and shining plate began moving debris into a makeshift barricade. They ignored Kane as he followed Boil through the crowd. If Griz was still alive and nearby, Kane couldn't see him as most kept their helmets closed, sending out steam through the holes in the steel with every breath. Some stared at the two bloody Dogs wandering through their temporary home without paying the proper respect to the true sons of the empire. Kane found the insult of looking into soldiers' eyes and not bowing to those passing by quite satisfying, especially in his bloody state. Compared to their clean appearance, he looked like a ghost of battle, a representation of each of their ends as he followed Boil through the crowd.

Soon they came to an square bordered by a tall building similar to the one he had just left. The same table and familiar faces were there looking at the same map again. This time a man in gold trimmed armor stood with them. Kane's thrill of walking upright through the new frontline faltered at the sight of who he could only guess was the head of the army, General Windred Shindal. A sharply trimmed golden beard and hair surrounded a pair of dark green eyes. Even leaning down, he seemed at least a head taller than all those around and Kane followed Boil's example by bowing before approaching the table.

"I see you've had your fill of slaughter for the day," Windred said.

Boil looked nervous and spoke with his eyes focused on the map, "It was nothing we couldn't handle, sire."

Kane imagined a wolf of the forest paying homage to a tiger, the true king and ruler of a wild kingdom. Seeing Boil's confidence falter twisted Kane's insides at the thought of making a mistake in front of such a prominent figure, and, worse, disappointing his own leader.

"A smaller force and easily repulsed. They seemed intent on trying to drive a wedge between our lines."

"That didn't work out so well for them when the Emperor's Wave showed up."

Kane wanted to look into Windred's eyes, but found no resolve to challenge the impressive figure. Instead, he saw the head of the Tamarian army, the leader of the best fighting force in the world, standing with them as a normal man. An expectation lingered in the air, but of what and how to please this man, Kane had no idea. He just stood behind Boil, now feeling dirty and soiled rather than accomplished in the recent fight. In fact, all he wanted to do right now was sleep, and he stifled a yawn. In the aftermath of combat it felt like he had been up an entire week without rest.

Boil struggled with the words, “We’ve established the new line, beaten back the Mountainborne and there’s still plenty of daylight left.”

Windred spoke up, and Kane felt certain every ear and eye within a mile was waiting for each word. “We prove the folly of superstition and legend,” he said with a calm voice. “The army is here not only to push the Mountainborne out and claim Callinday’s treasures for the Emperor, but to prove the foolishness of old legends. Something happened here, but that was long ago and we have come far since then. The army will winter here and new settlers will arrive in the spring. Our Emperor has decreed it so. Your required supplies are moving up as we speak. Prepare your men and your positions for a long stay. The light of the Empire will chase away all darkness.”

The officers bowed and Kane followed their example. The gesture felt awkward in its insignificance. There was something intangible about the commander and Kane had no idea what it was. Judging by the looks others sent over to the table, Kane saw the same confused adoration and fear from everyone around them. It was very strange to be in the presence of such a person. If he wanted to, Kane could reach out and touch the golden armor, but he felt like he might turn to ash or be slain with the gesture. When the general suddenly turned around, Kane looked up to catch a glance at Windred’s unscarred and tanned face as a smile came across the general’s face.

“Ah, Teague, you’re here. I trust you had a good ride.”

“We did, father, as you can tell. I doubt the Mountainborne will be back for some time.”

Kane stared and Teague barely stopped speaking while he glanced across the table. First into Kane’s eyes, then at the scar, then back again.

“Is your meeting going to be finished soon? We’ve got our quarters set up nearby and the meal is nearly ready.”

“Sounds good, I’ll be there,” Windred said.

Teague kept his eyes on Kane, the same arrogant smile curling the edges of his lips and souring each word. “Why don’t you invite these commanders to dine with us? It’d be good to get a lower perspective on how things are going.” Teague looked as if he had waded through the battle rather than swim in the fight. His boots looked soaked like Kane’s whole body, while the blood specked his armor, leaving his head and yellow hair shining in the afternoon light.

“If you like, Teague. Go and tell the cook to set the table for five more. Gentlemen, follow me.”

Conversation stopped as the five followed the armored Windred through the furious activity of camp setup which stopped as he approached and continued after he passed. Kane stayed at the back of the line, hoping to stay out of sight but it clearly didn’t work.

Teague fell back beside Kane, “So, you’re not just some clod slogger from Achritia province, are you?”

“I should kill you where you stand,” Kane growled.

“Now, now. That’s not very polite. I think we started our knowledge of each other rather poorly, so consider this meal a sign of peace between us.”

Kane pointed to the left side of his face. He was certain even under the blood which caked over the old wound its pink lines remained clearly visible. “You do this and think a hot meal will wipe away this insult? I’d rather eat on the other side of the street.”

“Such anger. You clearly needed a lesson in reality back then and I see it hasn’t stuck.

You're not the first and I hoped you might have gained some understanding from our last encounter. Being with the Dogs is such a disappointing station."

"Why pull me away from my home? You won. Am I nothing but a toy to you?"

"When I left you there in the muddy street, I had a feeling there was something special about you. I saw your love for a fight and knew at some point your heart would pull back towards the battlefield. You didn't see then, and clearly the truth still eludes you, but you are marked with blood now, and a life of peace is not what you truly want."

"You're wrong, and I'll prove it to you once we leave this place."

"That won't be for a while yet, Kane. The Mountainborne are still out there and we must secure every block, clear debris and get ready to restore the glory of Callinday. Your girl will have to wait a bit longer than anticipated."

"You bastard," Kane said.

Teague smiled at him with eyes dulled from a life of ritual, horror and suffering. Kane looked up at the back of Windred as they walked, wondering if this villain beside him was merely the product of his father, a created monster like the souls trapped in the abominations of the Order. Was he in the company of seasoned soldiers fighting for the Emperor, or madmen?

Kane was trapped. Teague just walked beside him, smiling. Whereas Kane had worked and struggled for everything, Teague looked ready to do anything to get what he wanted, and lived confident that every desire would eventually be met. His goals went beyond wealth or love, but thrived on control.

Windred doted on Teague while Kane and Boil cleaned themselves up as best they could in a provided washbowl. It seemed to take an hour to fully wash away the blood hiding in every crack of skin on his hands and face. They ate on the ground floor of an intact mansion cleared of

broken furniture. Kane focused only on his meal, letting the more experienced officers speak of small matters while stew and roasted chicken appeared before them on white glass plates. They sat in a single line on an empty floor, looking out through window frames onto the busy camp outside. Tamarians watched and patrolled, stealing glances towards the unusual visitors who dined with the commander.

Kane's hunger took over and before he had a chance to blink, his food was gone. He looked over at the others and decided against licking his plate and sucking on the bones. The others took far too long in finishing theirs and Kane just sat quietly looking out. Servants went silently about their work and Kane wanted to be back with the Dogs. There was something to be said for living in the filth with other filthy people, but even after such a grisly afternoon to be snatched into such high society made him feel even more out of place.

When a servant switched out his empty plate with another holding a partially eaten chicken, Kane looked around and saw Teague on the opposite side of the table raising a glass.

Kane stared at the picked meat of the chicken and fought with every muscle against flipping the table and pushing through all the servants and soldiers to punish Teague for the trying to feed him like some trained animal. Before him were Teague's scraps tossed down to his side of the table. Kane's mind pushed through the hate and into new awareness. This was a game, just as marring another's face or summoning him back to war had been. Rather than fight against it, why not enjoy the favor, however twisted it might be, and let things play out? Kane raised the seasoned meat in a mock salute and went to devouring it.

Teague chuckled, and nodded before sipping on his wine. It wasn't a knife to the throat, Kane thought as he tore into his second meal, but there would be plenty of chances for revenge in the future.

Chapter 37

Something was terribly wrong. Kane sat up on the shore facing the eternal sea. As all the times before, he saw the same planets follow their silent rotation beyond the crystal ocean. But now there was a breeze pushing against his back. In the days and nights of Aetheria, this wasn't unusual. But here, in such a quiet and detached place, a mortal process of wind seemed very strange. The grass he lay against felt prickly and dry rather than the lush softness he had grown used to.

He stood up and called for Uriel. Even the tiger was nowhere to be seen. Instead, it appeared as if a cold autumn had suddenly struck the once verdant grove by the eternal coast. A great rustle preceded a gust from behind him, sending out thousands of leaves floating towards the now rippling edges of the eternal sea. Kane started out in one direction, hoping to find Uriel. Dead and curled leaves floated by, driven by what felt more like breaths from the forest rather than an actual breeze.

After a brief walk, Kane found her sitting at the edge of a small outcropping which jutted out into the sea. She was all dressed in silver now, and it was impossible to tell where her hair ended and clothes began.

She didn't turn around when he got near and remained silent when he sat down beside her. Her pale feet grazed the surface of the water as she absent-mindedly dangled them over the rocky edge. Kane sat with his arms around his knees. The trees rushed in the breeze behind them, making the normally supernatural scene appear faded, belonging more to scenes in Aetheria than worlds beyond.

“What is happening?” Kane asked.

“Tahteem, the godkiller, pushes forward from the Breach. Can you feel his anger preparing to consume your lands? The blood of your dead feeds him as it falls into the abyss underneath the city. He wakes and we are powerless to stop him.”

“What do you mean? I thought if I found my grandfather in the Breach...”

“It’s too late!” Uriel snapped, grabbing Kane’s arm. The god no longer looked the part of his guide. Her silver hair was frayed and tangled while her eyes, normally vibrant with life, were wide and frightened. “He wakes...”

Kane could not grasp her words. To think of gods and men, the strange distance that existed between them and for the stories to come alive in all their terrible expression sounded impossible to contemplate. The gods of the past were mostly dead, according to the stories Kane remembered as a child. Man was their creation and their destroyer. Above all else, to think the first destroyer, the one who created the Breach, might return in the form of a maddened spirit to conquer this land, was almost too much.

“Tahteem promised you all so much before you buried him, and now he’s gone mad with grief at the failure of his dream to unite all peoples under one banner. He no longer views your kind as worthy to share his plans. Punishment will consume the entire city, starting with your armies, and spread out across the land until there is nothing left.”

“Are you sure? How can that be?”

Uriel’s small hands dug into Kane’s arm. Pain shot through his arm and yet he did not wake. Perhaps this was not a dream after all.

“If things had gotten this serious, why have you not found me until now?”

She pointed an accusing finger at him, “Because you abandoned me at the first night home. You got what you wanted and left the rest of the world to die. Now you will have

nothing because of your complacency. Fire and death come for your village and its people, Kane. It's just a matter of how long it takes for the flames to reach them."

"What about reviving the god under the city, Carmil? Can he stop this?"

"Only if you act quickly. The Breach has not been broken yet, so perhaps there is time. The Mountainborne seek to raise him since they believe Carmil is their god. Though you are enemies, you both seek the same goal. The Tamarians wish to enslave him as a tool for more conquest and that must not be allowed to happen. Your allies will use the one hope of saving this world for their own purposes."

"How do you know this?" Kane asked.

"How have you not seen the greed in the Tamarians' eyes? The arrogance? They worship control and will do all things to maintain and expand their dominance. The Mountainborne live only for revenge but lack the means to carry it out."

Kane looked into her now golden eyes, wondering what he had done to be put in such a situation. Fighting was one thing, but being assigned the responsibility and task of saving thousands of soldiers, both Tamarian and Mountainborne, sounded far beyond his ability. He wanted to doubt, to question the foolish idea that he, Kane Brennan of Tinder, had somehow proven his worth to stop Tahteem, the Godkiller, from ruining his home.

The ground shook underneath them.

"The sea grows fat with the passing of lost dead," Uriel said.

Like a small fleet, the leaves floated along towards the sea's horizon, pushed along by the pulsing wind. Some sank into darkness, others, by chance, continued on. Kane fell back onto the prickly grass. It didn't seem fair that he had to shoulder all this responsibility.

“What can I do?” Kane asked. His first thought was simply to run away from Callinday much like he had done in Nagah when the dead attacked. This time the stakes sounded too great to run away from. He wondered what his grandfather Liam would do in this situation. Kane searched his memory and saw no evidence that the one man he admired above all others would flinch from this responsibility. Stopping Tahteem from breaking through into the mortal plain and keeping the Tamarians from enslaving Carmil, the sleeping god, were just tasks that would endanger Tinder at some point. Therise’s safety was in jeopardy and that was all that mattered.

“People don’t know that Callinday was built to keep Carmil trapped underneath. It was only after centuries of ignorance did they forget, blinded by wealth and power to the secret lying beneath their streets.”

“By Shasla,” Kane said, forgetting he spoke to the dead god’s daughter.

“Go and stop the Tamarians before they trap the one chance of stopping Tahteem from breaking through.”

“How can I do this?” Kane asked. The situation sounded more and more hopeless with every word uttered by Uriel.

“You must ensure the Mountainborne are successful in freeing Carmil before the Tamarians execute the binding ritual.”

“You’re saving me from all that’s happening right now, aren’t you?”

Uriel smile weakly, “I’m not, but Liam is,” she touched his chest. “You are the bravest man I’ve encountered in many years, Kane Brennan. The life of peace you seek is waiting for you just beyond this night, if you are willing to reach for it.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, and Kane felt the tug on his heart, pulling him back to the living world. Fear slowly gripped his mind as the gray and dying grove, along with

the teary eyed Uriel, swirled away into the blackest night Kane had ever seen. Callinday writhed around him as the Tamarian and Mountainborne armies pushed against each other with all their might.

Kane looked out from his hiding place where he had bedded for the evening. He was near the southern edge of the city. A battle in the darkness between thousands of desperate and confused soldiers stood between him and the castle.

Sticking to the shadows, Kane headed north towards the castle. He hid from the passing skirmishes or reinforcements running blind through the night. Small fires and burning houses lined his way to the castle like a grim trail. Piles of dead lay illuminated by the flames in a sickly orange glow. Kane crept along the street behind the main line. He didn't wander too far, as the total darkness of the rest of the city crawled with enemy forces.

Kane trusted the strength of this grandfather within his breast. Uriel's warning about the Tamarians made more sense as he thought about it. Teague lived only for control, dragging Kane out to this chaotic battle just because he could. Their intentions to bind Carmil somehow sounded more like a deed to validate their pride and assert their authority as Kane stopped in some blackened ruins to let several Mountainborne troops run by.

Kane couldn't help but hold a grim smile on his lips while he ran. He had to let the Mountainborne succeed to save Aetheria from forces contained with the Breach. This was treason just by consideration and yet here he was, running towards the abandoned castle with no plan to actually accomplish this lofty goal.

From the nearby glow, Kane caught sight of General Windred's quarters. The servants and guards were gone to join the fray engulfing the city.

In the darkness Kane couldn't tell, but something tugged at his legs while he ran. With the thought of thousands of lost and desperate spirits stirred clawing up at him, trying to drag him into their depths, he ran faster. If those trapped within Callinday were reacting to the coming of Tahteem, the dead hordes seen at Nagah must not be too far away. All the forces of the world brought to this cursed city had created a storm of slaughter and terror.

When he made it halfway past the house, he heard sane voices stick out from the litany of screams and bellows echoing throughout the city.

"We move now, before it's too late. Are you ready, son?"

Eight shapes stepped out into the street where Kane stood, heavily armed and carrying torches. He dove into an alley before they spotted him. Weapons appeared with steel glinting from the flames.

"Do you have the book?" A voice asked a thin shadow.

"Of course," Mazrath said.

Kane's resolve hesitated at the sight and sound of that man. If Mazrath was nearby, he could only guess Illian stood amongst the Tamarians.

"Can we trust him?" Teague asked Windred.

"I didn't stake the fate of the Tamarian Empire on heresy," Windred said, starting towards the castle, "Mazrath's ritual is authentic and true. If we didn't have use for him the Order would be flaying his skin as we speak."

Mazrath spoke, "Your trust is not misplaced, sire."

Kane, remaining hidden, followed the Tamarians as the blood of thousands spilled around them.

Chapter 38

A wind preceded the arrival of the Mountainborne dead. Kane glimpsed their staggering forms pouring into the battle, attacking all in their path. They came from the east and turned the fight between hated enemies into a battle for survival. Both Tamarian and Mountainborne fell by their hands and Kane focused on following Windred and the others towards the castle.

After running for several more minutes, leaping over fallen wagons and winding through Callinday's remains, the Tamarians arrived at the outside castle wall. Now in the darkness, the sheer height and size of the place was fully realized. A pillar of black capable of holding an entire city by itself vanished into the dark heights of the clouds. The burning city and clamor of the fighting seemed distant but rapidly approaching Kane's position. The glow of fire under the night sky reminded him of the grass fires in Tinder that sometimes flared up and swept across the plains.

Kane stayed behind the formation as they went to work against a small side door. It had no handle and appeared to be locked from the inside. One of the hooded guards brought a wide-bladed battleaxe against the door, splitting iron bands and smashing apart the wood rotted from years of neglect. After several strikes, the other guards pried the door off its hinges and let it drop to the ground with a crash. Kane looked behind him, expecting to see a horde of deranged soldiers, but none came.

The Tamarians went inside, their torchlight swallowed up by the darkness of the passage. Kane waited for a few moments before following them in. Cobwebs layered with dust and a dank odor filled the corridor in each direction. The party used their torches to clear the way. Kane stayed just out of sight as the sound of moving armor.

The Tamarians came out into an open chamber. Their steps echoed across the deathly silent space of what appeared to have once been the royal court. On one side sat two tarnished high backed chairs of gold that were covered in cobwebs. Facing the thrones were a pair of raised seating areas separated by a central walkway. Kane imagined at one time the ruler of Callinday held court here, arguing across the room against the councilmen seated on the other side of the room. Even under the layers of dust covering everything, the signs of wealth stood everywhere. Precious metals caught the Tamarians' torchlight, making the room glitter. During its high days, the entire castle must have shined.

The party stopped in the room's center. Kane stayed inside the hallway.

"What now?" Windred asked Mazrath, his voice echoing through the empty room.

"We go down. Carmil sleeps there. When in their greed the miners disturbed his sleep, he lashed out and caused all that has befallen this city. We must hurry."

"Wait!" Teague said. The sound of approaching footsteps seemed to come from everywhere at once as the noise grew.

"What in Asheroth's name is that?" Windred asked, sounding more irritated than alarmed.

The dead Mountainborne, long absent since their initial attack on Nagah and pursuit west, burst through the double doors opposite the tarnished thrones. They came in a quiet mass. In the torchlight Kane caught glimpses of dead women and children amongst the invaders.

"Go!" Windred bellowed and the Tamarians turned to run for a door behind the thrones. Kane didn't see what happened but only heard and felt the presence of a thousand empty husks of flesh rushing past him.

Like a ominous breeze, the air inside the throne room pushed out into the hallway, sending cobwebs and dust floating around while Kane remained hidden. When he risked a glance back, he saw the body of two Tamarian soldiers broken and bloody on the floor. To Kane's relief, one of their torches was still lit. He waited for his heart to slow its frantic beating before sneaking out and grabbing the precious source of light. No dead pursued him when he retreated back into the relative safety of the hallway.

After his winding entrance that went through several doors and hallways, Kane realized he had no idea where to even find a way into the depths of the castle where Carmil slept. He continued on, randomly choosing which corridors to duck into, hoping to find anything besides a seemingly endless stream of tunnels and empty rooms.

Cobwebs stuck to his clothes while he ran across an open room with rows of simple beds. Some had collapsed with time while others still held skeletal occupants, their empty sockets and toothy smiles reminding Kane of how many must have perished here when the dragon god first stirred.

At the end was a store room full of dusty crates and plain cups. He retraced his steps, hoping to find a stairwell or entrance to the castle's depths. The suffering and terror lingered in the air and had soaked into every fiber of the place. Kane didn't think about all the suffering that happened here. Preventing Tahteem from breaking out of the Breach and killing everyone he cared about spurred him on.

He didn't have time to be scared. The only thoughts crossing his mind while he went on through the choking dust, seeing bed frames, closets and cupboards, the remains of humanity that once lived out their lives in these walls. They probably had no idea that this was the end of their legacy; all their hopes and possessions left to rot in darkness.

The frantic search continued on as Kane ducked under raised iron gates, across empty kitchens, even what looked like a nursery, their occupants long dead before given a chance to truly live. He heard the sound of muffled steps occasionally but no shadows found him. His meager light shined on thick iron and wood beams overhead, casting an orange glow on family portraits and joyful pastoral scenes hidden under dust as he rushed by.

He emerged into a massive reception hall. The main doors stood a hundred paces from where he stood. Between him and the castle's main entrance was a huge fountain gilded in gold surrounded by jeweled fish seemingly hung in space as they swam around emerald strands of sea grass.

If the castle was built with any sort of symmetry, Kane guessed a similar passage down would be on the opposite side of the hall. He found an iron door with rusted hinges and stood before it, wondering if creating such a noise would be wise.

Before testing it, he went over to one of the stained windows which haloed the massive entrance to Castle Callinday. A terrible scene unfolded outside. The undead thralls of the dragon god dragged wounded Mountainborne and Tamarians to the castle's central square where the victims had their throats cut and left to bleed into the fountains all around the castle's garden. The drained bodies were tossed into burning pyres which lit up the square as the smoke bellowed up into the impenetrable night. With every moment he waited, lives spilled themselves out. This must be the massive sacrifice required to bring Tahteem and so many back from the Breach. The dead summoning the dead.

With that possibility in his mind, Kane unlatched the iron door and pulled it open. The rusted metal screeched at its moving. He quickly pulled the door shut, preparing a mental trail to follow for escape back to the main hall and hopefully out through the main door. The slaughter

going on outside on the terrace would be dealt with when the time came. Kane prayed that by freeing the sleeping god below him, the madness and unholy life in the dead might both be undone.

The air stank as the passage descended. The stone walls and stairs still held the sharp cuts and smooth texture of the rest of the castle as he went two stairs at a time downward. Still, he sheathed his sword for a free hand to hold his cloak against his mouth. The webs burned away from the flames of his torch. If he didn't hurry, the Tamarians would trap Carmil and let Tahteem loose on the world.

He gathered up other splintered sticks and wrapped them in tattered cloth, hoping to prolong his light as long as possible. With the sounds of his hurried steps bouncing off the narrow passage, it was impossible to tell if anyone or anything followed him. He ran down a hallway surrounded by other rooms and passages. Looking back into the shadows, Kane's spirit sank at the impossibility of remembering how to find his way back through the darkness. Every choice behind and before him looked exactly the same. The only difference now was the stone walls and had grown rougher.

Gems appeared in the walls. Some were rubies, while others were made up of topaz, emerald and sapphire. Their colors shined as each line of stones set into the rock wall wined off to separate trails. A small relief came to Kane as he realized that the inhabitants of Callinday's twisting mines and tunnels could get easily get just as lost wandering through the web of passages underneath the castle. On impulse, he chose the emerald trail as it seemed to lead further down into the castle's depths.

The green trail continued down, passing through intersections and always with a gentle slope. Cut stone gave way to natural rock walls and looked more like a mine than a castle. He crouched under some low hanging rocks and froze.

Chapter 39

The entrance to the mine was clogged with abandoned mining equipment, smelters, forges, racks of picks, rows of carts and everywhere, skeletal remains. It looked as if the entire population of Callinday had tried to crawl into the rock underneath the city out of animal instinct, not knowing they died running to the source of their terror. Kane stood on a balcony, his torch feeling like a match against the night sky. The scene of chaos frozen in time was by far the largest room Kane had seen so far in the castle. Dripping water echoed from somewhere in the massive space. He followed the trail down to the ground floor, jerking his head at every sound. The torch he carried would make him easy to spot across such a vast space.

Most of the mining carts were at least half full of gleaming gems. Kane stopped to look at the thousand reflections of his light against the uncut surfaces of raw green, yellow and red chunks of precious stone. He thought for a moment of taking some of the smaller rocks with him but decided against it. There would be plenty of time for a little harmless greed at the end of all this. The air became stagnant and Kane wondered if he would cough up dust for a month after tonight. With a glance back across the mine's opening, he plunged onward.

Kane shook his head occasionally while he followed the massive tunnel further into the darkness underneath the City of Bones. How was it possible that he, of all people, had ended up trying to save the world? Pulsing air pushing against him which felt like the breaths of Aetheria.

This strange mission was not for the safety of the untold thousands who would die if he failed, or for Uriel. He charged on, for Tinder; for Therise.

The only direction Kane knew to go was down. The shafts he passed looked increasingly haphazard and the regular supports and beams further back became more spread out. Eventually it looked like the miners had gone at a furious pace in their pursuit of hidden riches as the main tunnel began to shrink.

The clanging of metal sounded behind Kane so he ducked into a improvised storeroom and waited, trying to keep his torch hidden. He couldn't believe he had outrun the Tamarians after taking so long to find a way down. When a dozen armored Mountainborne chiefs rushed by, Kane decided the Tamarians were ahead of him. At least the fighting elite of the Mountainborne would give him time to stop the ritual and somehow free Carmil.

Back in the passage, Kane saw a glistening trail leading down the shaft. Upon closer inspection, he discovered it was blood flowing towards Carmil's resting place. He had to be on the right course and if he hoped to escape the confining darkness of the mines, he needed to hurry.

After Kane rounded a corner he spotted other lights farther down in the gloom of the sloping tunnel. He heard the concentrated sounds of fighting. Kane tossed his torch aside and crept along the slick tunnel floor after them. He didn't need the light with the Tamarian torches. Veins of blue light also shined from the stone around him.

“Keep them back!” Windred ordered. “Hurry with your unlocking, Mazrath.”

“Don't worry about me.”

As Kane crept along the cavern floor, he felt something beat against the ground. The Tamarians fought against the Mountainborne. The best both sides had to offer in one final duel

for the fate of Carmil and Aetheria. Though outnumbered, the Tamarians held their ground at the narrow end of the chamber. Behind Windred and the others crouched Mazrath working at a circular stone door marked with runes. The air was cold and clean, though the trickle of blood flowed as if some force pulled it along.

The pulse felt like the heartbeat of a colossal beast. Thick ice formed on the walls and Kane saw the breaths of the battling Tamarians. Kane stayed low and several paces away as the Tamarians hacked away at the Mountainborne. Runes glowed weakly yellow while the blue light shining through the cracks in the stone wall became increasingly brighter. The Mountainborne pushed forward though they became hampered by their own dead clogging the approach. The trickles of blood gathered into a single thick stream which slid between their feet.

Kane had no idea what he should do, but guessed Mazrath was the link which held the Tamarian plan together. From his vantage point he saw Mazrath reading from a book while he undid the seals on the stone door.

“Mazrath unlock this door, now!” Windred drew his sword and plunged into the attacking Mountainborne.

The sounds of joined battle clattered in the confined tunnel and made it impossible to hear anything. More dust shook from the fragile foundations around them as the Tamarians fought with their backs to the glowing door while Mazrath chanted away and pressed his hands against the runes. The door opened slightly and stopped with just enough room for two men to pass through.

“Get in!” Mazrath shouted. Kane watched the Mountainborne push the Tamarians through the door and the fight continued on inside the chamber. The heartbeat of the dragon god Carmil quickened, sounding like giant drums reverberating throughout the mines of Callinday.

The Mountainborne attacked into the breach, failing to notice Kane.

Kane waited for the entrance to clear before moving through the glowing door. He still didn't know what to do, but something needed to happen at this critical moment. Whatever role Mazrath had in this ritual, it needed to be stopped.

Beyond the door was a colossal domed chamber that went around a massive block of glowing ice surrounded by a frozen lake. A walkway of stone went around the outside with a pier sticking out to the base of Carmil's prison. Six Mountainborne and four Tamarians fought on the ice, some slipping to the ground and grappling with knives. Several dead Mountainborne and five of the six Tamarian guards lay dead around the entrance.

The cold of the room cut into Kane. It took effort to move with any quiet as his teeth wanted to chatter. Every sound became amplified over the booming pulse of the creature stirring within the towering cone of ice. Blood flowed down into an abyss or dripped from the ceilings. The droplets hit the glowing surface and were quickly absorbed.

On the far side of the domed chamber, Windred, Teague and the remaining Tamarian stood guarding Mazrath while he began preparations for the ritual. It was four on one, and Kane knew what would happen if he tried to fight either Windred or Teague on even footing. He picked up a dagger from one of the fallen Mountainborne and started moving carefully along the path of broken ice towards the group. There was simply nowhere else to hide and the decisive moment approached.

"What are you doing here?" Windred asked, his voice booming across the chamber. Kane was still a hundred yards away from where he wanted to be. Mazrath went about his business, drawing out his designs on the stone platform and sprinkling glowing moonsalt.

"Go kill him," Windred said.

As Teague approached, Kane stopped on the stone walkway. “Stop this, Teague. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Niether do you, by the looks of things,” Teague looked ready to strike.

“Mazrath is tricking you and all the other Tamarians fighting on the surface.”

Kane wasn’t close enough to throw his dagger and his previous fight with Teague hadn’t ended well.

The pieces suddenly fit within Kane’s mind. “Mazrath will summon Tahteem-Hodchi and bind his spirit to Carmil’s. It will mean the end of the Tamarian Empire if you don’t stop him.”

Kane saw the trivial impact of his words on Teague. The Tamarian knight laughed and came charging at him. His wisdom challenged the Tamarian’s arrogance rather than appeal to Teague’s reason. Kane drew his sword and readied himself to block or deflect a blow when the ground shook violently. Great chunks of ice broke free and smashed into the walkway.

Teague lost his footing and tumbled onto the frozen lake a few feet below the walkway, his body going limp when he hit the ice. Kane hurried along towards the remaining Tamarian between him and Mazrath.

“What was that?” Windred asked, his voice echoing across the chamber.

“No idea. Don’t worry though, I’m almost done,” Mazrath said. “Say hello, general.”

Kane looked to the mountain of ice at the chamber’s center and saw vapors of breath pushing through the melting ice. Glittering silver scales shifted slightly as they twitched with movement.

The second Tamarian pulled off his helmet. It was Illian.

“Stay back, Kane.”

“I can’t. Mazrath has tricked you. He’s tricked us all. Ruin will only come from you helping him.”

“He made me a knight of the Emperor’s Wave. I’ll be a noble in charge of Tinder and all the other villages once this is done. What have you to show for challenging us?”

“You don’t belong here,” Kane said, advancing towards Illian but keeping his blade down, “We don’t belong here.”

“My home is with them, now. I’ll prove it.”

Illian attacked Kane, blade high. Remembering the lesson Teague taught him in the streets of Tinder, Kane sent the blow wide with an upswing. He tripped Illian and they fell against the stone walkway. Kane’s blade lay against Illian’s neck, drawing blood.

“You are a fool, Illian. The gods have brought me here, not your greed and desire for an easy road. We are going home, even if I have to bury you.”

Tears formed on Illian’s eyes and he went limp under Kane’s weight.

“I’m sorry,” Illian said.

“It will all be over soon,” Kane replied, heading towards Mazrath as more ice fell from the ceiling, creating gaps in the frozen lake.

Mazrath was within throwing range. Another great tremor rippled across the chamber.

Windred stood before him, sword raised.

“You don’t know what you are doing.”

“Neither do any of you,” Kane said. “Man was not meant to tinker with his creators.”

“We are no simple men. When Mazrath came to us with Tahteem’s journal and we learned of this location, we couldn’t pass up the chance to rid the world of the Mountainborne and establish the Tamarian Empire across the world. We’ll bind him and all to our will.”

“You’re a fool,” Kane said, drawing back the dagger for a perfect throw into Mazrath’s back. A lane to Mazrath opened as Windred thought the knife was for him. Regardless of what happened, Kane felt all the favor bestowed upon him by Uriel, the love of his people and the greatness of the task before him.

Then a sword blade appeared, sticking out of his chest.

It was a strange sensation at first. Terrible pain rippled through his body. His limbs shuddered and went numb. He thought he heard the clattering of the dagger as it hit the ground, but he wasn’t sure. The icy chamber was nothing compared to the cold slicing right through the deepest warmth in his heart.

Many things seemed to happen at once. With a final rumble, both fire and ice seemed to burst forth as Carmil escaped his prison with a deafening roar of triumph. Mazrath tried to execute the binding ritual but found his body trapped in ice while the outstretched hand ready to cross the final mark vanished in a gout of flame. The entire world exploded in light and water. A crash that made lightning sound like a raindrop brought the domed ceiling down. Kane was lifted off the ground with all the others before they fell back onto stone. The Mountainborne and Tamarians fighting on the frozen lake were lost as the ice shattered and fell into darkness.

Kane landed somehow on all fours, trying to breathe, but only gore poured from his mouth. Steaming blood pooled on the ground as it slid down the sword’s blade. Everything slowed to conserve his last precious moments before he fell into the Breach. As his life drained away, and all senses dimmed, Kane couldn't believe his end had arrived. Death came for so many others on the way to this final point. A tear formed. Therise would probably never know of his true fate or of his final failure. Everything was lost. Carmil was free, narrowly escaping

the fingers of Mazrath and Tahteem. Kane fell to the floor on his side. Tinder and Therise was safe.

Illian appeared in his foggy vision. How did he survive the dragon's wrath?

The same youthful face, brown hair and insecure eyes looked deep into Kane's as the light around them became blinding.

"You made me do this," Illian said.

Kane had no energy to speak, no energy to strangle his betrayer or at least pull them both off the edge into the pit below. He somehow smiled instead.

"Curse you," Illian said.

Somewhere Kane felt Illian drag the blade out. It hurt, barely. Without the blade to stop him, Kane rolled onto his back and marveled at what he saw. Daylight.

Through a giant curtain of fresh ice he caught glimpses of the morning sky. The frozen pillar coiled and twisted upward like a wave stuck in time. Debris fell around them, cracking against their glistening shield of water before tumbling into the depths below.

Illian's silhouette appeared in the gleaming light above them. Kane felt the blade punch through his chest again, and again. Illian screamed something while he jammed the blade into his body, but his hearing had left him. Instead, Kane focused on the light coming down on them, his last thought marveling at the beauty of the world. Would Therise be proud of him for leaving her behind? How would she ever know of his fate? Kane knew his grandfather would be proud of him and Uriel must be happy that he kept Tahteem away from Aetheria.

As Illian's face and the blade punching into his chest faded from view, Kane drowned in sadness. The one person he wanted to please above all others would be disappointed, forever waiting by the golden fields of Tinder for a reunion never to happen.

For Kane, his reward was darkness. He fell into the Breach, an ocean of black terror that suffocated and choked him even as the last lights of Aetheria faded away.

THE END