

Careful what you wish for – beginning hook

Chapter 1 - Two of Clubs

‘Hey, pin head!’ Mock sincerity filled out the young man’s tone, the words punched outwards. ‘Meat’s up Derec, water alone won’t fill up those pecs!’

‘That’s for sure Ascal.’ Swarthy arms uncrossed, a subconscious flex of pectoral muscles, the young lad enjoyed the luxury of a thin-lipped smile, glancing from his right to left, taking in his broad shoulders, three deltoid muscles clearly defined, biceps and triceps bulging outwards further down his uncovered arms.

Springing to his feet, a smack of his lips as the lad’s eyes focused on the wooden platters filled high with red meat, little fat to be seen around the blood-scarlet flesh.

‘Derec, we eat to our fill tonight.’ A lad with a similar stature to the first two of the Bronze warriors, Ascal and Derec, squatted in front of an overladen platter of dripping meat, quad muscles bulged as he rocked back and forth, his eyes focused front and centre.

‘Juicy thigh and rump, the Lake’s People have given generously tonight.’

‘That they have, that they have.’ Words spoken around succulent flesh chomped upon, a spurt of blood burst out of a chunk of the flesh being chomped down upon, landing on his left pec, the crimson fluid navigating its way diagonally downwards between the rippling muscles transitioning between Derec’s chest to his abdomen muscles mimicking the valleys and peaks of the gentle countryside surrounding the Pantogan capital, Amble. Two lads locking gazes, faces of boys superimposed upon men’s bodies, athletes in their prime rippling with muscles upon muscles, all raw energy, an impossible mix of brute, intense power allied to an endurance designed to run for hour upon unrelenting hour. Familiar words spoken around the two boys chewing enthusiastically upon the red meat, each lad still in their late teenage years, eye contact only broken and returning to the wooden platters of meat being refilled as they tore through the human flesh only recently slaughtered.

‘Predator or prey, I choose predator.’ Ascal and Derec muttered the words on repeat, subconsciously choosing not to lick their fingers from the oozing, viscous red fluid slowly clotting on their hands as they feasted upon yet another steak taken from a blood stained, ingrained platter.

A ripping belch uttered followed by an equally loud fart, a wince upon the young lad’s features, rolling sideways onto first one buttock, then the other, a shake of his head.

‘Damned Lake’s fuckers, that must be their revenge.’

‘You following through again, Gorran?’ A wide grin on a figure that could have been a clone of the lad sat to one side of him. ‘Go sort your guts out boy, don’t want no shitting in that Bronze armour of yours.’

A loud gurgle resonated from Gorran’s stomach brought his eyes to a narrow squint, emanating worry, then quickly up on his feet, racing out and away from the radius of illumination offered by the dim embers of the central fire glowing, light rays traversing between red and infra-red, surely the only mechanism that could soften, blur the outline of the five young men in their absolute physical prime.

‘We got enough?’ Ascal glanced across to Derek, his left hand jerked upwards, across a close shaven head to pinch from his neck a mosquito making the mistake of choosing an apex predator to prey upon.

Rolling the mosquito between thumb and forefinger, squeezing out the smudge of blood from the imploding insect, a sniff of his fingers brought a transitory smile.

Ascal’s left hand slow to unfurl in the direction of the glowing embers of the fire, wood having long ago passed on its chemical energy, now content to radiate out the last elements of heat and light, blackened lumps of charcoal in the making.

‘Yeah.’ Derek nodded, the Bronzed warrior’s head was of normal size but such was the width of his muscled shoulders stretching outwards either side of a comically large frame, truly his head did appear markedly shrunken.

‘We see the night out.’ Ignoring the gurgling of Gorran’s stomach, the lad had just returned to the circle around the firepit, quick feet and noxious fumes emitted as Gorran sprinted away once again, so Derek continued to speak in a quiet, monotone monologue.

‘We have earned the right to stand, to fight as the elite of the Bronze; to aspire to Infiltrate.’ A glance to the three other hulks of men faded into shadow, one space empty, Gorran yet to return.

‘In the morning, we deface the hours upon hours spent shining, polishing up our armour with the charcoal from this fire, dampen down our Bronze signature defensive breastplates, our mission we wait to hear...’

A less than subtle cough broke through the words of command, mock sincerity taking its place courtesy of Ascal.

‘Really Derek? Our mission, come on! Think about what we have trained for, each and every day, why else would those gristled old bastards have us running up and down dale hour

after hour, day and night, rain and shine? Damn, there may be five of us here and now.’ A bassy laugh pulsed outwards.

‘Well five of us if Gorran can sort his guts out, but how many lads and ladies started, and were fucked up, fucked over along the way?’ The bassy voice trailed out, quietened. ‘The flesh for us to gorge upon tonight?’

‘Aye.’ Derec had his eyes focused just on the last of the embers struggling to keep emitting light energy, a gentle pulse of red, twinkling on and off; a quick scan around the bulky, heavily muscled figures sat focused upon him, the sporadic glimmer of the embers absorbed in the eyes of his men, humanity for their enemies, their comrades lost in equal measure ground away so long ago. Shifting the chunk of delicate flesh in his mouth, a deliberate chomp downwards with his rear right molars, juice oozed outwards causing a slick lick of his lips; mental images of the four men, two women who had tried out for the honour to call themselves Infilto, for this mission amongst the Bronze flitted across his minds-eye, those six Bronze warriors who literally had not made the final cut to sit around the fire tonight, an ironic laugh peeled outwards, realising that the six were helping out in a certain way for this mission’s final preparation, lending their energies to those who would race up the Kirkswell pass for glory.

‘No Lake’s People on the platters tonight, we feast on those that fell along the way.’ His cheeks sucked in, struggling to nullify, negate a smile that became all the more pronounced, reaching out for another slither of dripping flesh from the now sodden, greasy platter.

Silence the only reply to Derec’s words, the infra-red glow of the fire rapidly replaced by the chill of early night, eyes of the young men present yet to adjust to the near gloom, darkness set out in front and every direction around and about them.

‘Through survival, through being sat around the charcoal that will dampen down the gloss of our armour, so we have the honour of racing up the Kirkswell pass, remove a squad of Pantogan sentries from the wall, further weakening those who would resist our, the Bronze’s inevitable march to the east, to go one better than camping in Amble’s grounds this time.’

‘Up the hill and back?’ Ascal’s voice clearly heard by all around the firepit now sucking in light. ‘Not one of Lord Armastad’s one-time suicide missions?’

‘No.’ Derec gave an involuntary shiver, shuffling closer to the fire yet though yet to feel any additional warmth. ‘Not if we do our job right, each of us as we have been trained to do, take out those sentries without murmur or cry from those who hold the wall, then we head straight back down west off the pass, only the fallen Pantogan bodies found in the ‘morn will

ever show we were there.’ His booted foot dipped into the matte black of the spent firepit, kicking out a lump of charcoal, fingers tentative on the lump of carbon that had been red-hot only an hour or so ago, now cold, crumbly to the touch.

A sigh mirrored, resonated around the fire pit, each lad remembering hour upon hour across so many weeks, months even spent meticulously polishing and shining up the bronze that made up their armour, now the rest of the evening and early morning would be spent scouring any element of gloss from across the bronze metal.

Kirkswell pass, sitting Pantogan troops.

‘How ya doing, Daniel?’ A rhetorical question pushed out, clearly the man ten yards or so away was unlikely to answer, traces of rheumy fluid oscillating as a pendulum from his chin, gravity slow to add the vomit to build upon the chunks glistening on the mix of soil and grass beneath his forearms, knees firmly planted on the earth in addition.

The chain mail skirt around the figure’s waist, doubled over, the smell alone told its own story, not just fluid emitted from his mouth but any given orifice.

‘Not feeling so good Corporal, not so good.’ A glance taken across in the direction of the voice directed at him, the pale, wan face attempted to try on a thin-lipped smile, Daniel offered a nod of appreciation at the wooden tumbler of water passed across to him, a tentative sip taken.

The stench of raw bodily fluid caught at the back of Basil’s throat, he held eye contact with the young lad lain out on elbows and knees, a battlehammer wielder for the Pantogan Queen’s army.

‘Our squad, we are on stag rotation, sentry duty late this evening to the early morning.’

A wince on the weathered, narrow and gaunt features; clearly a decision made.

‘You rest this one out, we’ve got a day’s leave coming our way.’ Basil held up his right hand, palm outwards, rebutting the soldier half in, half out of armour.

‘I’ll take your shift tonight, you can make it up, take one of mine when you have stopped squirting from both ends.’ A look of concern grew on Basil’s gaunt features at an ominous rumble echoing outwards from the Pantogan battlehammer’s stomach.

‘Thank you Basil, ah, Corporal.’ A grimace deepened on Daniel’s face quickly followed by a ripple through the horizontal, planted figure.

‘You better go.’

‘Aye.’ Basil averting his eyesight as Basil began to peel back his jaws, vomit heard rather than seen, pungent odour emitted completed the picture in his mind’s eye.

Steps taken carefully by Basil on the slurry of mud and churned up grass, no jewels of early-evening rain drops to be found formed on the crests of the reeds battered and interwoven within ground-up soil and gravel, compacted and either baked by the sun or further cemented through rain saturating the mix.

The veteran longsword man’s feet acting on auto pilot, Basil ignored the growing chill reaching down from his neck, across his shoulders, thick layers of protective leather armour

doing their best impression of a sponge, soaking and clearing the air of any surrounding moisture as the evening mist thickened upon the Kirkswell pass wall.

Figures he passed, most in uniform, some as support civilians, all exuded a common air of exhaustion, the knowledge that the ship was sinking yet none willing to voice the reality; surely just a matter of time before the Bronze warriors of Armastad crested the final defence the Pantogan had, an anteater brushing aside that final, pesky nest, before pouring their terrifying might of muscle and unwielding metal upon the Pantogan capital of Amble itself.

‘Corporal.’ A weighty hand slapped, squelching down upon the lanky longsword figure’s right shoulder, a gravelly tone of command barked outwards from the Sergeant who had command over the Pantogan wall fortifications.

‘Your squad Basil – tonight's sentry duty?’

A slow breath taken inwards; Basil was not short but the imposing figure of Sergeant Copel towered over the Pantogan Corporal.

‘The young battlehammer, Daniel.’ Basil shook his head. ‘Some form of food poisoning, maybe, who knows?’

The Corporal gave a shrug, the leather armour on his shoulders squelched, a film of water rose to the surface, slow to recede.

‘He needs medical care, a Lady of the Craft?’ Copel glanced across to the low-slung building those with the healing arts were housed within.

‘No.’ Basil gave a singular shake of his head, a pause and lick of his lips.

‘The reason you called me over, sentry duty tonight? We can cover the late night, early morning shift between the remaining squad.’ A long sigh exhaled, Basil set his features, looking ever so slightly upwards. ‘We’ll do just fine, Sergeant.’

Copel allowed his focus to move past the Corporal in front of him, filtering out the mist to the continuing movement of military and support civilians, the flow never ceasing.

‘Corporal, what’s on your mind?’ The creased brow furrowed, slate grey eyes scanned over the weathered, sun damaged features on the man opposite him.

‘You have been with us for what, a month now, transferred from the northern wall.’

A half-swallowed mix of belch and laughter. ‘Certainly the weather a little damper here.’

Basil raised half an eyebrow. ‘That you can say Sergeant.’ A deep exhale, shoulders sagged a touch, his eyes stared into his chain of command, decision taken.

‘Sergeant Copel, the rate of illness here on the Kirkswell pass wall; maybe the new lad Daniel has a stomach bug, maybe not, but the responsibility as the final line in the sand

between the Bronze and our homeland of Pantogan, the responsibility the longswords, battlehammers and bowsladies feel here...’

‘The final line in the sand.’ Copel nodded. ‘Keep going Corporal.’

Basil picked up speed, seemingly encouraged. ‘Those on the wall I see sick, numb through the prolonged stress, the relentless waiting for those Bronze cannibals of Armastad to launch an attack in the hundreds or so strong upon us.’ His cheeks blew out then deflated. ‘Sergeant, I am with you all the way, but those Bronze picketed out to the west of the wall, more the idea than the reality, just when they will flow right up and over us, not if.’

The Corporal’s eyebrows knitted together, the frown deepened as he followed Sergeant Copel outwards towards the silent, stationary massive statues of wood and steel, truly the Quivers making little sense when not in motion.

‘Corporal Basil.’ Copel paused, choosing his words carefully. ‘You were transferred to the Kirkswell pass wall based on your resilience, your mental toughness.’ The two men’s eyeline met. ‘That decision can be reversed.’

The swirl of mist, water vapour soaked up the early evening sunlight and ambient sounds from around them, Copel was the first to speak again.

‘The Quivers.’ The Sergeant nodded, to himself as much as his Corporal stood impassively at ease in front of him.

‘The Quivers.’ Copel started again. ‘Our first and foremost priority to keep them safe; the five Quivers will knock out any and all Bronze in little time, they are the Bronze’s primary, prize target.’

The tall Sergeant stretched out his arms, his hands. ‘The only reason the Bronze are still camped out to our west is neither longswords, battlehammers nor our bowsladies.’

A singular nod and puckering in of his cheeks.

‘Earlier in the year, yes the Bronze flowed up and over the Kirkswell pass, a battalion or more.’ Copel lifted a singular left eyebrow. ‘Damned lucky from our point of view, they were in a rush, flooding straight through, not choosing to grind us underfoot on their way.’

The Sergeant paused to scratch under his chin before continuing.

‘We had transferred all of our Quivers, pilots and engines to the northern wall, now we have equal numbers on both passes to the west, Bardian Hill as well as Kirkswell, as well as to the North, Quiver pilots and engines trained up to operate the mechanised giant semi-automatic crossbows.’

‘Simply put, the Quiver pilots and engines, we keep the Bronze off those and they will put a serious hole in any and all attempts to over-run this pass.’ A pause. ‘You with us Corporal?’

‘Aye Sergeant.’ Basil looked from the six seemingly random masses of wood and metal back to Copel, a solitary, staccato nod offered. ‘That I am.’

‘Now get yourself to the armoury, swap out the warm weather leathers you are wearing for something more suitable to this climate, before you come down with a cold or flu and are only good for sneezing on the Bronze.’ Copel returned the salute snapped out from Basil, noting a little more spring in the Corporal’s step as he moved away.

The longsword Corporal momentarily glanced downwards, and then back up to the six Quivers as he walked in the direction of stores, another nod of his head offered, Basil gnawed at his bottom lip; in reality the swirl of civilians, longswords, hammer and bowslady Pantogan soldiers served only to ensure the six mechanised, giant crossbow Quivers were given lead time to stand toe to toe with the six platoons of Bronze swordsmen picketed out at the bottom of the pass, his squad’s role to give plenty of time to alert Sergeant Copel and the rest of the Kirkswell’s pass Pantogan wall troops when the Bronze began their charge up the pass, time to get those Quivers up and spinning.

Chapter 2 - Three of Clubs

Muffled grunts echoed around the five figures as their fingers and hands worked on automatic pilot, muscle memory a given as they assisted each other in hoisting up and strapping into place the metallic sections, segments of bronze armoured parts to encase their torso and limbs.

‘Still seems strange Derec, seeing the armour like this.’ Gorran pointing downwards at his chest with a forefinger, his metal gauntlets yet to be locked into place.

‘Damn right.’ It was Ascal who answered, spitting out a lump of phlegm to rise and fall into the distance, vision on it quickly lost as the phlegm traced out of the revived bonfire’s limited range of illumination.

‘Don’t seem right somehow, not right at all.’ The giant of a lad, bald head shaking to himself, Ascal focused purely on checking and rechecking the straps and catches holding the armour in place over his body, yet to attach the final breast plate and helmet.

Derec nodded, his left hand ran over closely cropped hair, unintentionally mimicking his teammates by shaking his head, a rueful expression covered his features, a grunt issued as he aided Ascal in lifting and locking into place the slab of plated metal upon Ascal’s chest.

‘Can’t get used to seeing our bronze armour without it being polished to a sheen, certainly doesn’t seem right, not at all.’ Derec paused, a second check over Ascal’s breast plate, a closed fist pounded against the bronze in a hammer blow once, twice; the two young men locked eye contact for a moment, a single nod between the two.

‘Kick out some of the spent charcoal from the fire.’ Derec gestured towards the one source of illumination within their sphere of darkness.

‘Let’s look over one-another, any final traces of bronze or gloss, let’s cover them up, dampen any gleam way down and away.’

‘That can wait.’ A high-pitched voice at odds to the scarred, grizzled bear of a man puncturing the singular sphere of light, eyes dull even when facing inwards towards the fire, taking time to meticulously scan and re-scan over each of the five warriors now facing him, the elder man’s mouth dropped a touch at not being able to find a single item on his unexpected inspection of Derec’s squad to comment upon.

‘Sergeant Stone.’ Derec’s voice was a touch hushed, his eyes staring forwards, the Bronze warrior stood bolt upright, eyes and legs held at ease.

‘Infiltration squad in final preparation.’

‘That I can see, that I can see.’ The thumb of Stone’s left hand brushed against a scar that ran vertically down his left jaw.

‘Gentlemen.’ Stone ran his tongue over his bottom teeth, front teeth absent.

‘You are a go on your mission for tonight, the mission you have trained over the last three weeks for.’ The high-pitched voice so at odds with the size of the man that walked amongst the five, it had been Soho who had first tasted Stone’s blade, showing the slightest of surprise at the voice connected to their Sergeant, Soho literally butchered head to groin in front of their eyes for the perceived disrespect.

‘You were each and all recommended by your respective Warrant Officer’s from your previous squads, linked companies.’

When Stone uttered the word ‘officer’, derision was implicit. ‘And so the remaining five of you stand here today.’ The man a large mass of muscle now starting to turn past its best, Stone planted his feet in front of Derec, pungent breath from the broken, fractured and re-fixed fixtures vented outwards, tainted fumes breathed outwards.

‘You ready?’

‘Yes Sergeant, Sergeant Stone!’ Derec punched out the words, the young Bronze warrior met and held eye contact with their coach, their assessor and for those who fell along the wayside of training for this mission, their butcherer.

‘Infilro is ready!’

A wrinkling of a broken nose, Stone offered first a singular nod to first Derec, and then the four other Bronze warriors, all stood frozen in time.

For the five young men present wearing the Bronze armour, their world purely focused upon one of Lord Armastad’s original non commissioned officers, the short-range illumination offered by the fire spitting out light and crackling sound in equal measure, outside six feet from the fire held the purest of darkness.

‘Infilro, ‘shun!’ The command given, Stone barking out the two words in a high pitched whistle, the clang and slap of metal and leather as the five Bronze warriors in front of him immediately and in perfect synchronisation stood to attention.

‘Your orders, Infilro squad.’ Sergeant Stone focused his attention purely on Derec.

‘A stealth mission, eliminate the Pantogan sentries on the Kirkswell pass wall.’

A moment taken to gauge any reaction from the one Bronze warrior that Sergeant Stone was staring straight at, nothing measured so Stone continued.

‘Without being seen, being heard, make your way up the pass to the wall, remove the sentries, and then swiftly return; any questions?’

‘No questions, Sergeant Stone.’ Derec spoke on behalf of the four young men aligned to his left.

‘Then that will be all.’ Still facing the five, his features impassive, Stone took slow steps backwards for the darkness to swallow him whole, the gentle crackling of the fire over-rode his heavy steps, moving away.

‘And now?’ Ascal breathed out the words, glancing between the four young men, a touch uncertainly.

‘Who’s not ready?’ A wide grin peeled across Derec’s face spelling out raw anticipation. ‘Really, who’s not ready!’ A guttural whoop bellowed upwards, directed out and towards the inky black night sky. ‘Next stop, Kirkswell pass!’

Four men, their faces set with determination, purest of resolve worn, all nodding at one another, an urgency now to complete the final stages of armouring up, still the light of the fire yet to pick out any semblance of reflection from their eyes.

Kirkswell pass, sitting Pantogan troops.

The bowslady leaned to one side, her longbow ever-present in one hand, one single quiver of arrows affixed to her left thigh as a long, leather pouch; a pouting of her lips prior to speaking.

‘Corporal.’ The young lady’s voice spoke out inquisitively, tentatively.

‘The lads were talking in our squad, ah, you have a wife, a family back up north.’

A pause, drops of moisture swirling around and about, between the two on sentry duty on the Kirkswell pass, the moisture soaked up any reverberating sounds.

‘Yet you came here, to the insanity of the south-western Pantogan wall?’

‘Yep.’ Basil cleared his throat, a momentary clearing of his throat, closing and then re-opening his eyes; damn it was near on impossible to see any distance out from their position, the barest of a quarter moon was not generous in illuminating the landscape dropping away from them into the western pass. Any light that did fall upon the ground seemed destined to throw a series of randomised shadows, and with the swirling clouds and mist, Basil wrapped his lips over his front teeth, not good.

‘Most that come here, either the young who don’t know any better.’ The female Pantogan sentry continued. ‘That or those nearing their end of service years.’ The puzzle clear in her voice.

‘Bowslady Marilyn?’ An affirmative grunt from the young lady only set a few meters from him but difficult to make out even her outline in the dark of the night and weather conditions determined to make sentry duty a hideous experience this late evening and likely into the early morning.

Basil offered a shrug, rapidly leading to a sigh, the damp leather across his shoulders reminding him that he really should have taken up Sergeant Copel on his offer of a change of body armour better suited to the wet and blustery western wall.

‘Let’s just say I felt a call to carry out a tour of the Kirkswell pass.’ A self-deprecating smile formed over his features, seen by no-one in the scarcity of illumination.

‘Forget the persistent threat of the Bronze though, if I had known about the weather, I would have stayed up north.’

The two of them sharing muffled laughter, it was the bowslady who gave out a surprised squeal.

‘Mae!’ A whoosh of breath emitted. ‘I did not see you coming...’

‘Sorry Marilyn, I was just walking as normal, difficult to make anything out.’

The young girl's voice steadied. 'Char?'

'Absolutely, and likely a mug for the soaked Corporal as well over there, though add honey and lemon to his char for a little extra warmth.' Marilyn reached out gratefully for the steaming pottery mug of char with her left hand, her right hand holding the long bow vertically, an inhale of the spiced vapour led to a wide smile.

'Thank you Mae.' Marilyn nodded. 'A little late for you though, this time in the evening?' The young girl was walking slowly across to Basil, her eyes strained open to try and safely make her way forwards, the Corporal accepted his mug of char with a side nod of thanks, his eyes not straying from their continuous scanning of the valley descending steeply away and below them; Mae glanced back to Marilyn.

'Mum is unwell, a fever, the lady with the black eyes said?' A pause, leading to a genuine smile of one able to offer assistance.

'I said I would help out.' A quick scurry of short legs, momentarily standing alongside Marilyn.

'Wow, it's dark; can you see anything out there? Anything at all?'

'We see enough.' Marilyn indicated for the young girl to leave, picking up on the vibes of frustration emanating out from the Corporal stood a few meters away.

'Thank you for keeping us all safe!' A final beaming smile from Mae, the young girl turned to leave, quick steps taken, as fast as her eyes could process the ground in the low light, headed back to the distant oil lamps set back on the wall, a series of vague amber glow worms set to flicker.

Twenty feet back from the nice lady with the longbow, Mae picked her way between the sleeping figures of the other sentries that would take their turn on guard over the night into the early morning, Mae continued her steps back towards the main outline of the wall, easier to see where she was heading now with the glow from the oil lamps growing stronger with every pace taken.

Chapter 3 - Four of Clubs

Shadows moving within shadows, the clouds skittered nervously against a segment of the moon reluctant to shine, so shadows cast downwards upon the Kirkswell pass naturally pulsed in oscillation, lengthened and shortened at will.

If you were standing close by the warriors within the Infiltra squad, you might have had the slenderest of chances of noting possibly one or two. The time set early in the morning, evening transitioning sleepily to the early hours, the chance of your eye catching the motion of any of the five slow, smooth matte outlines forever trapped within their own shadow's boundary? The chance of you noticing one of the five figures would be remote if you were stood close by to them, the chance of seeing one of the five Bronze Infiltra penetration warriors from high up on the mountain pass wall dividing Kirkswell east from west; extremely unlikely.

Kirkswell pass, sitting Pantogan troops.

A scrunching of his eyes, Basil flexed the palms of his hands on the worn leather halt grip of his longsword. His eye's fluttered open and closed, damn he was tired and truly it was the last thing that he needed for the bowslady Marilyn and himself having to pull a double shift on sentry duty with the visibility so poor, the young hammer lad Daniel unwell and unable to be added to the sentry rota for this evening and early morning shifts just bad luck.

Basil's left hand moved off the wet, slick surface of his leather sword grip, his eyebrows raised in realisation, now the piece fell into place why so many of the Pantogan longsword men had swapped out their sword grips from leather to bone, for added grip when the weapon was wet; definitely a job to sort later in the week with the armoury during downtime off sentry or patrol duty for his squad.

The Corporal's left hand moved across to the whereabouts of the pottery mug, a swirl of the mug prompted only air to move within, no fluid left, a wince given to this reaction, hopefully one of the civvies would be back out soon for a refill; an exaggerated nod of his head to try and raise his level of alertness, sure if they didn't make a good char brew here out in the southwest.

A pulsed glance out to his right side, looking out for the familiar, vertical outlined figure of the bowslady Marilyn with him on sentry watch, his eyes snapping to return to scan the

valley descending outwards from the Kirkswell pass once again; wrinkles deepening on his forehead, something not right about the figure of Marilyn? Another, longer glance now taken to his right, usually Marilyn would have her long bow pointed upwards vertically, in fact didn't the shadowed image look a lot larger than the bows lady?

Basil's vocal chords engaged, to quietly call out to Marilyn, instead now choking on fluid, pain flooded to overwhelm his senses, a delayed realisation of the blade that had penetrated deep between and up through his shoulder blades, the Pantogan Corporal choking on his own blood; a vice like grip kept him locked in place, fabric stuffed into his mouth to muffle any gasps or cries outwards.

Singular words heard as his consciousness fell away, Corporal Basil's body spasmed once, twice.

'Know that you have failed, Pantogan, the wall belongs to the Bronze.' A man's voice with the volume turned down to a minimum, though no hiding the sense of triumph.

Chapter 4 - Five of Clubs

‘As our intel lead us to believe.’ A rounded, bulky armoured figure hunkered down.

‘Two Pantogan sentries on duty, four remained in the harbour area.’ Ascal looked between each of the four Bronze Infiltration team members in turn, still very strange not to have the gleaming, resplendent sheen of the bronze armour filling his vision, the armour now matte black, a huff of realisation that it would take hours to get out all of the charcoal they had methodically rubbed into their places of bronze that shielded their bodies.

A further glance out from the infiltration squad, four figures lying on their bed rests in the harbour area, all with their throats cut, silently killed in their sleep, this Pantogan sentry squad would not be announcing the arrival of the Bronze on the Kirkswell pass wall.

‘Good work all.’ A different figure now to quietly speak among the Bronze five, Derec attempted to nod his head, only limited movement allowed from the metal helmet locked into place as part of his armoured shielding.

‘Just as we planned, our mission complete...’

‘And yet.’ Ascal butted in, his armoured outline pivoted to face slowly away from Derec and the rest of the Infiltration squad, now towards the regular, spaced glow of oil lamps illuminating distant figures moving about, along the Kirkswell Wall pass.

‘The Pantogan.’ A hawking noise made inside his helmet, Ascal continued to speak.

‘The Pantogan, wide open now, we could take out their Quiver pilots and engines, truly leave them without their primary defence, us to return as real heroes, leaving the pass wide open for our brigade to take.’

‘Ascal, no.’ Derec’s voice had dropped a touch. ‘Every moment we stay here we risk being discovered.’ His armoured gauntlets flexed, realising that the three others in their squad were not looking towards him, but to Ascal.

‘We’ve completed our mission, time to return, we have our orders.’ A touch of desperation had entered his tone.

‘We have equal rank here.’ Ascal glanced towards Derec. ‘Join me.’ His limited peripheral vision through the slots in the bronze helmet took in muted nods from the three others.

‘Join us, join Infiltration squad for glory.’ Ascal’s vision left the large, armoured figure of Derec behind, focusing on the Pantogan wall only ten or so meters within reach; one step taken forwards and then faltered.

A small figure appeared in front of the Bronze five, the figure resolved into a youngling, a young girl carrying two mugs of steaming fluid.

Time slowing, truly a race now, the young girl's chest rose, lungs inflating; Ascal's broad sword pivoted horizontal, then to be powerfully thrust forwards.

It was Mae who won the race against time, a scream ripping from her body, high pitch and filling the air around them; the scream short lived as the sword staved in her chest cavity, Mae's life instantly extinguished.

Voices shouting out, initial surprise and shock in their tone, quickly turning to the bellows of command punched outwards, night turning to day as emergency lanterns, flares and bonfires took to fire; the five Bronze warriors quickly slotted into an arrow headed formation, Derec at the front, two of the Bronze either side of him.

'I am sorry.' Ascal could be heard grounding out the words, stood to the right of Derec. 'Derec, I'm sorry man.'

Derec checked and re-checked the grip on his broadsword, his feet stomped downwards to be sure of grip and traction, armoured boots displacing mud as his legs powered down, starting to accelerate his Bronze, armoured figure forwards.

The Infiltration squad's eyes taking time to adjust to the stark brightness of the emergency lighting facing them after so long spent in the near pitch-dark absence of illumination; words bellowed outwards together, as one.

'For Lord Armastad! For glory!'

Chapter 5 - Six of Clubs

An ocean wave, fluid oscillating upwards and down, a vast volume of water picking up speed, driven forwards by an ever-surgings wind, the sheer mass of water carried forward by its growing momentum, seemingly unstoppable to slam smashed to a sudden halt by a sheer face of rock descending deep into the ocean, a resultant huge explosion of sound energy at the impact between driven fluid and solid, the sea water surging upwards, cresting, and then retreating backwards, the headland of rock held strong.

The five elite Bronze warriors of Infiltrate squad raced forwards towards the walled platform, the fortifications of the Kirkswell pass, the bronze massed figures picked up a sprinting battle speed in little to no time, their voices bellowing outwards, broadswords held at a twenty-degree angle to the side of their armoured heads, moving towards the Pantogan defensive line in a perfect V formation.

Quickly assembling in front of the onrushing Bronze squad, more and more Pantogan battlehammer wielders taking up a defensive stance alongside and behind their peers, their numbers growing by the moment, clearly a very real opportunity to put into effect the endless drills practiced each and every day.

The Bronze, without their trademark gleaming armour, now dulled and sooty black smashed into the Pantogan defences, swords weaving and cleaving the air, blocked with each and every stroke by the two-handed hammer bearers.

‘They’re just defending, blocking with their battlehammers!’ A heavily breathing Ascal punched out the words, sucking in great lungful’s of air. ‘What are they waiting for? Why aren’t they trading back blows?’

The massive figure of the Bronzed warrior was smashing sword blow upon sword blow on the Pantogan warrior in front of him to little effect, each and every strike blocked or deflected away by a two-handed battlehammer.

‘Oh no.’ Derec connected the growing high-pitched whine with an emotion he was not conversant with, that of fear.

‘They’re spinning up the Quivers!’ A whooshing noise as the air in front of him was torn asunder, a sense of absence to Derec’s side, looking right and now no sign of Ascal.

Derec’s armoured gauntlets clenched around his broadsword hilt, preparing to put all of his energy, his strength into a horizontal strike at the heavily sweating Pantogan battle hammer warrior crouched in a purely defensive stance, straight opposite him.

His forward impetus and motion reversed, several steps taken backwards to arrest this sudden change of motion, Derec looked down with mild surprise at the gaping hole in his torso, bronze armour torn apart and thrust inwards clearly by a Quiver round unleashed at short range, as a youngling would pierce through paper with a pencil, the circular tubular gap in his torso rapidly filling with fluid and body parts, his consciousness fled, nothing.

Chapter 6 - Two of Hearts

‘You are tired already?’ Elaina glanced suspiciously across from the book on her lap, the Pantogan Queen’s focus now set upon her youngling son, his little hands placed behind his head, mouth stretched wide open in a silent yawn.

‘Not tired for sleep, mummy.’ The youngling twitched his nose, propping himself to sit upright in bed, eyes only for his mother, an all too serious shake of his head.

‘Bored of story.’ A pudgy forefinger of his left hand pointed to the book in the Queen’s lap, the youngling’s eyes brightened, he squirmed a little on his bottom.

‘I know, I tell mummy a story!’ His features open and attentive, impatient to wait for an answer.

Elaina suppressed a chuckle, though she could not help but allow a smile to blossom wide across her features.

‘Why not Jacob, why not.’ A slight shrug, the book on her lap closed with both hands.

‘You know of a bedtime story?’ A professional mask settled, the one she wore on a daily basis as the Queen of Pantogan, her features purely neutral, independent of her thoughts whirring away as her brain attempted to process her son’s words that followed.

‘I have better story.’ Elaina’s son nodded enthusiastically, mirroring his mother’s body language, sat bolt upright.

‘My story, a friend, a friend I keep hidden out of the light, in the, in the?’

A frown of frustration, pointing to the areas of darkness at the far side of his bedroom, where the puffing oil lamp’s rays of light struggled to reach.

‘Shadow?’ Queen Elaina’s tone neutral, her stance shifted slightly forward.

‘Yes, yes!’ Jacob’s features now animated, his little hands moving, the orchestra playing to his instruction, the story set to unfold.

‘A friend I keep hidden in the shadows, to keep her safe, so she can watch, help later maybe.’

The youngling’s features inquisitive, a pause, waiting on affirmation from his mother.

‘Go on Jacob, son of Holmrook, son of mine.’ While her features registered interest, her voice occupied a purely neutral tone.

‘Your friend, what is she watching, that you must keep her safe from?’

His tongue flicked in front of his teeth, eyes opened wide, so the youngling began to speak again.

‘A family; daddy and mummy, and two sisters.’ Jacob’s youngling whisp of eyebrows drew together.

‘The sisters, they look the same?’ His eyes blinking, fixed on his mother, drawing on her help. ‘If they look the same, they are called?’

‘Twins, the sisters, they are twins?’ Elaina slowly spoke the words.

‘Yes, yes!’ The youngling nodded enthusiastically. ‘The sisters, twins, not high, but...’

‘Do you mean young or tall?’ Elaina could not help but interject.

‘Not tall, the sisters, not tall at all.’ Jacob nodded, impetuous to continue.

‘Now, bad creatures, bad things.’

His arms moving in a wavy motion, back and forth, his features opened wide in a snarl, the motions repeated.

‘A snake?’ Elaina shrugged her shoulders, her eyes narrowed.

‘Bigger.’ A rapid shake of the youngling’s head. ‘Bigger, much bigger.’

Suddenly immobile, the Queen paused, taking a moment to say the word; surely not? ‘Serpent?’

‘Yes! Big therpents!’ His arms moved in the wavy motion again, Jacob began to speak once more, features animated.

‘Big therpents, they bad, break the land, lots of water, lots of water across the land, people and nice wolves under water, not good, not good for them.’ A look of sadness touched the youngling’s features.

‘Sisters, they jump into animals, from animal to animal, into grey owls to fly away...’

‘You mean white owls?’ Elaina locked onto her son’s expression, totally drawn in to her son’s words, her son’s story.

‘I haven’t seen a grey owl?’

‘No mummy, grey owls, grey feathers, definitely.’ The youngling nodded with certainty, he paused, reaching across to grasp his night-time glass with both hands, a sip of water taken.

Elaina safely returning the glass back to the youngling’s side table butted up against the side of his bed. ‘And the mummy and daddy?’ The words spilled out, genuinely wanting to know.

‘The daddy he gives in, gives up.’ A shrug. ‘The mummy, she tries to look after, to help her daughters escape.’ The youngling’s features lit up once again. ‘The mummy covers

daughters escape, the daddy chases and chases after the mummy, but only her body left for him, he very angry.’ Jacob shrugged, shaking his head, struggling to express himself.

‘Go on, my son.’ Elaina’s voice quiet, gently urging the youngling to continue.

‘At the end, the mummy leads the daddy away from the sisters to escape, the mummy takes off a, a.’ Jacob knelt forwards, touching a gold bangle on his mother’s left arm.

‘A bracelet?’ A sinking feeling in her chest, neutrality imprinted upon both her features and tone of voice, Elaina could not help herself take a deep swallow.

‘Yes, mummy takes off bracelet, a bird comes down, bird with red tail, like your bird.’

‘A red-tailed hawk.’ The Queen could only but nod.

‘Yes!’ Her son clapped his hands. ‘Bird with red tail flies away; daddy mad.’

The youngling shrugged. ‘My bedtime story.’ Jacob offered a wide smile.

‘My story much better than mummy’s story?’

‘Yes.’ Elaina offered a guarded nod, a gentle smile on her face not reciprocated in her eyes.

‘Yes, much better.’ The Queen’s mind racing. ‘Tell me Jacob, you see this story each night, the same?’

Yes and no.’ The youngling looking a little confused. ‘Story the same, but my friend, the, the.’ Jacob frowning again and then remembering the word. ‘Yes, shadows, shadows becoming smaller, harder for my friend to hide in.’ A touch of caution grew on the youngling’s features at the look of introspection across his mother’s body language.

‘You like my story?’

‘Very much so, I did.’ Warmth exuded from Elaina, slow to stand, tucking her son into bed, a kiss upon his forehead, the youngling nestling contented onto his side.

‘Tell me Jacob, your story, it has a name?’

‘Eggwidus.’ The weary youngling breathed out the singular word, curled up now on his side, already drifting towards sleep.

Her eyes strained open, as though the Queen had stood on pins, Elaina could not help but whisper, echo the word spoken by her son.

‘Equadus?’ A briefest of pauses, her words spoken softly out aloud.

‘My son speaks of Equadus?’

The Pantogan Queen’s mind racing, when had she heard that word, that name before? As the synapses fired in her core memory, so the lady reached out for a chair to sag into, yes twice before, once from Janick, Trevan and Tendle long ago when researching the oldest papers

within the Great Library of Amble, and separately, independently much later from Caluche of the Euclid mathematician tribe.

A pause and long sigh emitted, her vision settled on her son now gently mewling, a youngling's gentle snoring as he entered slumber, but into which realm did he pass into through his dreams?

A short breath pulsed out from her lungs, Elaina pushed herself upright, still shaking her head as she left her son's bedroom, legs walking on remote control, the Pantogan Queen's mind set to race.

Chapter 7 - Two of Diamonds

A stinging pain ran through his right hand, fingers tentatively unpeeled, unwrapped off the broom stick, his lips plastered against his teeth in a familiar grimace as the young lad surveyed a callous hanging limply off his palm, slowly weeping pink flesh exposed.

‘Mueller, take a break, even for a minute or so.’ Raw fatigue rippled through the whisp of her voice.

‘You cannot do all of my shifts forever.’ A young lady’s voice bereft of energy, of life itself trickled out from the corner, the attempt to inject even a minor vestige of enthusiasm simply acted to further undermine her message.

‘I’ll be fine.’ His lips remained wrapped over stained front teeth, a momentary close of his eyes as Mueller slowly re-wound a rag around his right hand, carefully positioning the rough wooden haft of the broom in the middle of the yellowed cloth, his fingers secured in an all too familiar hold.

‘I’ll be fine.’ The stalk brushes on the broom doing battle once again with the mix of straw, horse faeces and urine; his body gagged, feeling the bile rise and then subside as the lad disturbed the potent mass on the great stable floor, his muscles locked into an oh so familiar routine, driving the stable’s bedding to the far side wall.

Acting on remote control, often eyelids closed to attempt to shield his eyes from the irritating vapours nettling his eyes, ignoring the warning signs from his muscles, lactic acid shrieked out in his forearms, across his shoulders, Mueller only taking pleasure in the growing heap of waste accumulating by the far wall, a job for after lunch to remove; a slight shake of his head, worry about that then.

‘Hey, Mueller, brother of mine!’ Saya’s voice broke the trance he had fallen into. ‘Take a break, I’ve got some lunch for us.’

Looking ahead of his boots, only a few more feet of waste to push, Mueller shook his head, a glance taken up to his early morning’s work, a long sigh taken which he promptly regretted, acidic vapour inhaled.

‘Let’s get out, get some fresh air.’ His throat scarred, voice a touch hoarse, moving to unwrap the rag covering his right hand and then choosing not to, yellow fluid having seeped through from one of the callouses previously ripped off.

Mueller’s pupils instantly narrowed as he encountered sun light, lungs working hard to expel the dead air from inside the stable, reaching out to grab vast lungful of fresh mountain oxygen.

‘You can’t cover for me, forever.’ Saya took her brother’s left arm in hers, careful to ensure the meagre offer of chunks of bread and a flask of gently slopping water were secure to her right side.

‘What mother is asking us to do, near on impossible for two, let alone just one.’

Mueller stopped, slow to release Saya’s arm, a faint smile took residence on his features, smoothing the frown lines away.

‘You know, no matter the same day we experience each and every time past fastbreak, this view always make me smile.’ Both arms raised, his hands pointing outwards, first to the distant Kirkswell pass that could be seen atop the dip in the Caldedonian mountain range, and then back across and down to the village of Balfe, homesteads busy with antlike figures, humans taking on tiny proportions at this distance, the Gulls Rock inn and linked stables the largest of buildings to the southern village tip.

‘Our home.’ Saya passed across a chunk of bread, the flask of water passed between them, a moment of stillness as both simply allowed themselves to be in the quietness of the mountain surroundings.

‘Our home.’ Mueller’s voice grew rich in irony, a second glance taken down to the bread laid on the grass between them.

‘I’m sure there were only two chunks of bread for lunch, on the plate you took out?’

‘I may have borrowed a little more than our given.’ Saya’s pale features, dark lines under her eyes momentarily smoothed out.

‘I’m the quiet timid one remember, you are the curt, rebellious type they worry about.’

Gentle laughter shared between the two.

‘Still not sleeping?’ Mueller’s voice bereft of his usual sharpness, concern clear for his sister, a shift in body position to stare up at the distant pass to their west, too far away to make out the significant military force present; he sensed a shake of her head.

‘So, so frustrating, infuriating.’ Saya moved to lie on her back, her hands palm down, fingers slowly rustled over the blend of grass and yellowed leaves, kicking up the scent of wild onion and garlic flowers disturbed.

‘Oh, I have no problems falling asleep, but then those nightmares oh so vivid; more real than the two of us here sitting above Balfe, my senses sensitised, turned up to max.’

No longer a girl, Saya a young lady, her eyes blinking randomly as she turned to her brother, yet her focus set far beyond him.

‘I find myself permanently in the shadows, light cast around yet never directed upon me.’

Taking both of his fingers in hers, careful not to touch the palms of his hand with the wheeping, makeshift bandage wrapped around his right hand, a self-effacing bark of a laugh, Saya head cast downwards, a single word spoken with conviction.

‘Equadus.’

‘Equadus?’ Mueller shifted slightly on his behind, though careful not to lose the touch of his fingers on hers. ‘Equadus? ‘What does that mean?’

‘The nightmare, the play I find myself locked within.’ Saya looking straight at her brother, straight through her brother.

‘Night after night, the same actions taken, the same characters playing out their tragic roles, nothing for me to do but to observe, no part for me to play; only to watch, time and time again, each and every night.’ The young lady with the thin, willowesque frame took the longest of sighs, her chest quick to rise, slow to fall.

‘Maybe your part, your part in your dreams is yet to come about?’ Mueller’s voice only too clearly exhibited his disbelief in the words he uttered, unsure what else to say, noting the glassy texture now of his sister’s eyes, welling with tears.

‘I see.’ Saya’s eyes closed momentarily, tears squeezed outwards, drop by crystal drop bouncing off her cheekbones to be absorbed by her coarse fabric trousers.

‘I see serpents thrashing, people I feel I should know but do not recognise drowning in a great wall of water smashing all before it; a single man wearing dark green, kneeling in front of a vast wolf with flesh peeling off its bones, the man only ever offers a single word spoken.’ Her fingers gently released from her brother, planting both palms onto the ground between them, one word whispered.

‘Equadus.’

Brother and sister staring at one another, the young man frozen in shock, the young lady’s eyes rastering across his features at speed.

‘Mueller, talk to me.’ Saya licked her lips tentatively. ‘You asked for what I saw, night after night, in my nightmares oh so real, clearer than the here and now.’

Mueller closed his eyes, his jaw opened and closed, as if he was performing a mental reset, a shake of the young lad’s head, hands ran over his hair, ignoring the pain lancing through his right hand.

‘Your nightmares.’ Another shake of his head. ‘That I was ready, prepared for, thank you for sharing...’ His words limp, tone unsettled.

‘Thank you for sharing?’ Saya’s left eyebrow raised. ‘Really Mueller, really?’ His tongue flickered over his top lip, a brief hesitation, breath held before being released.

‘Saya, after you closed your eyes, before you spoke about this thing, this place, Equadus, whatever.’ Mueller’s broad shoulders offered a significant shrug.

‘Your eyes, when you reopened them, when you spoke of your nightmares you live within each night, your eyes were matte black, I mean really black, like those of the, the Craft.’

His words stumbled out, dropping and falling over each other.

‘Honestly I did not imagine it, as we sit here now, the sun glancing off the brown of your eyes, but for that moment in time.’ His usually tired and worn features wiped of any fatigue, the Mueller as a youngling from five, ten years ago now facing her.

‘I was seeing the darkest of dark.’ No, a vibrant shake of his head. ‘Not dark, not even black, your eyes, pure nothing.’ A pause, his gruff tone taking on that of pure innocence.

‘What does this mean?’

A strength she had not felt in her arms, her body, flooded back within Saya, grasping her brother forearms with her hands, eye contact made, a smile lit up her features.

‘It means I have a role to play, both of us, not just to shovel horse shit day after day, for our alcoholic mother attempting to keep the stable up and running...’

Mueller’s head lowered a touch eye contact with his sister maintained, the usual craggy, lined features returned to his face.

‘You know mum has had it hard, what with dad and all of that...’ It was his turn to be cut across.

‘Yes.’ A final squeeze on Saya’s brother’s forearms before one leg placed beneath her, pistoning upwards to force her body to stand.

‘Yes, but her past is not my, not our future.’

‘So, what now?’ The young lad turning, his eyes narrowed, the cloud level had descended upon the Caladian Hills, the Kirkswell pass taken from view.

‘What do we do now?’ Mueller repeated the same words.

‘We wait.’ Saya sucked in her cheeks. ‘For the play I view, the front row seat of my daily nightmare to change; we wait.’ That familiar rise of eyebrow witnessed, her cheeks blown out, a wan smile on her features mirrored the most uncertain of shrugs.

A glance down to his right hand, the central band of the discoloured cloth had hardened, Mueller simply nodded, slow words spoken.

‘You stay strong, as strong as you can, I’ll keep a shovelin’ in the stables.’

A long draught taken from the water within the flask passed across.

‘This won’t go on forever?’

‘No.’ Saya found herself facing towards the north. ‘No, I don’t know why, but no, I don’t think so.’ A pause. ‘We should be getting back, mum won’t be happy with the length of our lunch break.’

Only a shrug offered in return by the young man, handing back the water flask, both caught in their own thoughts, nothing more of value to add in conversation, quick steps taken back down the hill levelling out, the village of Balfe a touch hazy with the sun trapped way above the cloud layer, the largest number of figures in motion surrounding the Gulls Rock inn, horse arriving and leaving on repeat.

Chapter 8 - Eight of Spades

A singular lady walking with a metronomic, staccato stride through the scrub grass, her shadow of passage lengthened by the late afternoon sunshine, angular rays gave Darvan an accentuated, projected height not to be found if directly measured from the ground.

Three younglings raced towards the single figure approaching, their little legs and arms pumping as they raced to cover the ground between the haphazard settling of homesteads and the untilled land that separated the two parties set for an incoming course; no sense of joy in the younglings features, a blend of relief and desperation.

‘You are from the Craft?’ Her chest heaving up and down, one of the three younglings managed to push out the words interspersed by deep breathes taken.

‘Lady of the Craft?’

‘I am Darvan of the Craft.’ Her pale features swept free of emotion, the petite lady faced the three younglings though her eyes continuously tracked the landscape around them.

‘The Lady Anya asked me to hear your call.’

‘This way, this way please.’ Angular shaped features on the black-skinned youngling, her narrow face angled upwards. ‘I am Ishimwe, my, my sister.’ Pure globules of crystal fluid formed freely in Ishimwe’s eyes, quick to burst forth, tendrils of tears to run down from her high cheekbones. ‘Can you help her?’ Words of pure hope spoken with a youngling’s innocence, now Ishimwe and the Lady of the Craft did lock expressions.

‘Yes.’ A singular word punched outwards, Darvan lengthened her stride; the first of the homesteads coming into focus, a disparity of people present, either gaining in age or younglings, extremities of age, so true of many a village in the outer surrounds of Amble.

‘My sister.’ The tears had used the gentle breeze flowing around the valley to dry in matte ribbons from Ishimwe’s cheekbones down to her jaw line.

‘It was Gibbon and his friends, they, they wanted her to do something with them all.’

The youngling reached up for Darvan’s left hand, her matte black fingers encircled a singular pale white little finger.

‘Tarou, my sister, she resisted.’ Ishimwe looked up to study the Lady of the Craft whose eyes were dancing around the scene presented, taking in any and all details.

‘They.’ The youngling stopped, a swallow, rapid blinking of her eyes then continued.

‘They hurt her.’

‘I know; that is why I am here.’ Darvan brushed aside the welcome of the villagers as the three younglings guided her to the second homestead, a quick turn on her heel and dropping to her haunches, the matte black of Darvan’s eyes matched Ishimwe’s skin tone. ‘I ask you to release my finger now, so I can help your sister.’

Ishimwe slowly nodded her head. ‘My mother, she said you would come.’ The nodding of the girl’s head temporarily stopped. ‘But she said you would have one with you, so you are safe? A monkey?’ Confusion flashed across the youngling’s features.

‘Ah, your mother, she means an Arc’monk, not a monkey.’ Darvan gently unpeeled Ishimwe’s fingers away, a look of concern in the youngling’s eyes. ‘No.’

‘Then, how are you safe, not safe around Amble for you now?’ Ishimwe searched the Lady of the Craft’s features. ‘You stay here, at Cypress Gardens until you get monkey, to make you safe.’

‘Oh don’t worry about me.’ Darvan’s features flickered with a trace of a smile. ‘I have a wolf of the Faelan Forest to keep me perfectly safe.’

‘A wolf! What is a wolf? Where is he now?’ Ishimwe’s features open with the purest of interest.

‘She, my wolf is a she.’ Darvan was slow to stand, a final nod back to the youngling before following the beckoning hands of several adults towards a low-slung building, a door held wide open; the Lady of the Craft lips murmured, those around her struggled to pick out the words, a singular nod of her head as her eyes transitioned from the late afternoon sunshine to the gloom of the hut. An initial, cursory examination of the figure on the bed showed that indeed her services would be required.

‘The wolf that accompanies me, she is currently hunting down those young men who hurt your sister.’ Darvan glanced across and down to the youngling whose eyes were once again wide open, this time not to receive tears, but now in raw admiration.

‘Now leave me all.’ The light levels within the room began to diminish, Darvan’s features sucked into shadow, the petite figure placed her hands on the young lady lain prone on the elevated bed.

Twenty or so men, women, young and old staring as one at the single house, the entrance door pure darkness, the surroundings to the entrance seemingly pulling in light itself, a pounding of hooves upon the ground shifted all present’s attention to three horse moving rapidly along a valley contour line, one man jumped off his horse when the three had reached the outskirts to the village.

‘How is she, how is Tarou, my daughter?’ The large black man, his hair closely shaved, a right hand ran over his receding hairline.

‘A Lady of the Craft is with her.’ Ishimwe’s mother interceded, a singular hand held up, the tone of her voice and features broke no argument.

‘You will need to wait now, she is in the safest of hands.’

‘I came as soon as I heard.’ The male figure with riding leather jacket and trousers now flanked by his two companions.

‘Lady Tusk released us straight away.’ The father’s eyes flashed. ‘Where are they, where did Gibbon, Silvan, Derek and Tanner go?’ All three as one subconsciously patted short swords enclosed in canvas cloth strapped to their left thighs.

‘A wolf.’ A youngling’s singsong voice piped up, Ishimwe stared up at her father. ‘The Craft lady said a wolf was after them.’

Swift movements made by the big man as he scooped up his youngest of daughters, the scarred features, battered nose now face to face with the delicate skin of a youngling.

‘A wolf accompanying a Lady of the Craft, then that must be the Lady Darvan healing our daughter.’

The black man looked from his daughter, to his wife and then to his two white companions who were both sagely nodding.

‘And that makes the wolf Tendle.’ Respect shone through in his words uttered.

‘Can the wolf help them?’ Ishimwe staring straight into her father’s eyes, though his focus was out into the far distance, seeing straight through and beyond her.

‘The wolf will give them the chance to make a different choice in their next life.’ Swift movements made by the man dressed in light, riding leather, enwrapping his wife along with his daughter still in his arms.

‘Tarrow, you can stay?’ The wife speaking to her father, a single nod from the big man.

‘Yes, the Lady Tusk has given Isiah, Triva and myself as much time as it takes, so I can see that Tarou is on the mend.’ Tarrow paused. ‘The Lady Tusk, she understands the importance of family.’

‘She also understands how overstretched our troops are within Pantogan herself; while we are here we certainly can help by running patrols around the surrounding villages.’

A gruff voice from Isiah, one of the other male riders who had accompanied Tarrow.

‘Come, Triva, we should sort the horse...’

‘Triva.’ Ishimwe’s youngling voice cut through, addressing the female rider, the youngling figure still held in her father’s arms.

‘Up till now, I always wanted to be like you when I grow up.’ A beaming smile filled the youngling’s features. ‘But now, I want to be like her.’ Ishimwe pointed in the direction of the house with the open door exuding darkness, continuing to draw in light from the surroundings.

‘Is that okay dad?’ The youngling stared now straight into her father’s eyes, eyeline locked between them.

‘Nothing would make me prouder.’ Tarrow’s words rumbled, less volume and more bass; father and daughter embraced, both missing a flicker of concern register on Ishimwe’s mother’s features, quickly smoothed away.

Chapter 9 - Three of Diamonds

Leaning heavily on his stick, a tentative flex of an unwielding right knee, grey hair flopped back over a deeply engrained forehead, the man of senior years gave out a deep, unintended sigh.

Tuffle glanced upwards, the faintest flicker of a smile came and went as his eyeline sped into the distance, thickening inky clouds accumulating friends at a rate could only mean a storm would be rolling down and off the Caledonian hills in the next half hour, give or take.

The lead of the Pantogan armed forces shifted his focus from the amassing swirl of water vapour high up above to the squat, blackened timber building now only a hundred or so yards along the weed strewn track, no formal marker to note he had arrived at the village of Balfe; set amongst the matte black wood, a double door wedged open on an oversized set of hinges, residents of Balfe now reluctant to leave the inn at the edge of the village, others outside hurrying their way to sanctuary from a whipping breeze with just a touch of venom, pre-empting the rain loaded storm.

Adjusting his waxed leather jacket, the Pantogan captain took the weight off his right side with the ever faithful tapered wooden stick, Tuffle felt his eyes lose a little focus, seeing the Gulls Rock inn as she had been a decade ago, stood proudly twin stories back then, before being fired alongside the stables and a number of smallholdings within the village, near enough most of Balfe, as the Elementals made their way unhindered down off the western wall, headed east for Amble; damned if that had not seemed the end of Pantogan and yet, a rapid blinking of his eyes, Tuffle found his vision taken up and away, in the direction of the western pass sunken within a swirl of mist and cloud determined to rid itself of the fluid vapour held within in a self-destructive purge.

The rolling gait of feet and a single stick saw Tuffle move off the soil track, onto a mix of gravel and clay, only time before the storm would make cloying mud the common ingredient; a rolling, rhythmic movement, Tuffle ignored the Balfe residents who recognised the grey-haired captain, a twitch of his lips set as a thin lipped smile, wisps of smoke from the glowing embers at the centre of the inn were overwhelmed by a pungent aroma of cinnamon punching outwards.

‘Captain Tuffle!’ The distinctive sing-song accent marked out the bustling landlady not so far from her native home, Akilah’s place of birth one of the great lakes to their west. ‘Come, come!’ Waving her way through men, women, younglings turning with interest as they recognised the name given to the visitor framed within the wide doorway.

‘Too long, it has been too long...’

‘And I wonder why.’ A single eyebrow, blend of white and grey raised within lined, furrowed male features that bore the ravages of time, inclement weather and combat.

‘I wonder why at all; can’t say I like what you’ve done to the place.’ Tuffle offered a shrug, a gesture outwards to the blackened, ill-fitting timbers.

‘Well, if the most vaunted of armies had done their job to protect a simple mountain pass, then this fine inn would never have needed a rebuild.’ An earthy laughter rumbled outwards from Akilah.

‘The Gulls Rock inn, very much rising from the ashes.’

Tuffle starting on a retort, instead a whoosh of air expelled from his chest as the large lady moved in with more than a little speed, enveloping the Pantogan captain in a smothering bear hug, the two briefly touched foreheads.

‘Good to see you Akilah, very much alive and well.’

‘Good to be seen.’ The Lake’s people landlady careful when unwrapping her arms that Tuffle’s weight was safely shifted onto his secure left leg.

‘Join me for a drink and a little stew, you are staying the night?’ A chuckle bubbled deep from within Akilah’s chest.

‘The storm outside gives me a clue to your answer.’

‘If you have a room? I am due to meet Sergeant Lammi in the morning, for fastbreak.’

Tuffle’s voice low, a slow glance taken around the room, the locals had received the message clearly spelt out by the resident landlady, giving their guest more than a little space.

‘Yes, yes of course; Sergeant Lammi, lead non-commissioned officer of the Bardian Hill pass, I had not heard she had left her position to journey south.’ An exaggerated shrug of her rounded shoulders, Akilah smiled broadly.

‘But then what do I know about troop movements?’

A knowing gaze held for a little longer than necessary between the two, the landlady waiting on the Captain of the Pantogan armed forces to make a comment, Tuffle content to wait her out.

‘That stew you were talking about?’ A shrug out of his weather-worn leather jacket, the veteran longsword officer slid in behind a table, the cows hide on the seat of the chair expelled a little air as he took the weight off his feet.

‘Ah yes, forgive me for my poor hospitality, food before business.’

A sharp nod before wheeling away, the landlady snapped back into her customary bustle, sing-song accented commands fluted outwards.

The double doors to the inn now securely bolted closed, a faint glow, more infrared than emitting light given out by embers in the hearth at the centre of the low and wide great room, the fire had witnessed a series of logs fed to push out traces of warmth, while generous flames rippled to convert chemical energy stores into thermal, the chill to the air at this height was always going to be the winner.

‘You remember the inn as it was?’ Akilah took a deep sip from her mug.

‘This is good stew.’ Tuffle nodded appreciatively. ‘And how you make the spiced chai as you do?’ A shrug, the captain put down his bowl of watery stew, instead taking an appreciative gulp from the pungent, spiced drink. ‘Damn good.’

It was as if the man opposite her had not spoken, the Gulls Rock landlady continued her monologue.

‘Lake’s people, we know a little about fire and rafts – never a good mix, and quite the rush to put this inn back together.’ A glance taken around to focus upon the misshapen timbers bolted, strapped together to form the inn they sat within; a pause as she watched Tuffle excuse himself, a pronounced limp as the tired old man took his leave to the toilet, shortly to return.

‘Pantogan Captain, lead of your Queen’s armed forces, you may give the impression being a little tired, worn down over time?’ An enquiring glance saw their eyes meet, Akilah’s gentle playful wink reflected off his steely, narrowed eyes.

‘I think otherwise.’

Calloused fingers, palms held the tall mug in both hands, Tuffle took an appreciative sip. ‘Good chai; you want spiced chai then go to an inn run by one of the Lake’s people.’

A pause, the opportunity taken to stretch out his right leg.

‘That twinkle in your eyes, so once again you know more than me, correct?’ The Pantogan captain’s mouth pursed, chin jutted forwards.

‘Oh.’ A generous shrug offered, Akilah lent back in her chair, the leather squeaking a touch in protest.

‘Do we talk about the present or the past?’ No reaction from the man opposite her, the landlady continued.

‘Would you be surprised if Lammi, the ex-scout and now posted Sergeant with command of the Bardian Hills pass had not left south for the good village of Balfe?’ A gentle singular peel of laughter rippled forwards, no reaction from Tuffle.

‘I guess it will be a surprise to us both who turns up tomorrow to join you for fastbreak; how often have we both been caught unawares?’

‘You have a honing steel, wet stones?’ Captain Tuffle stretched his long frame outwards, breath held amongst popping noises from his chest, before deeply exhaling.

‘And you know I had it on good authority that Sergeant Lammi wanted a meet up, I guess that narrows down those who fabricated the order.’ Glancing away before squaring the landlady in the centre of his vision, a nod of thanks to the array of honing steels that had found their way onto the table in front of him.

Peeling off leather catches, no-more words offered, two stiletto dagger blades handed across to Akilah who began work on the edges, Tuffle slid back a touch from the table, balancing the blade of his longsword on his left thigh, slow circular movements made with a honing steel on the gleaming metal.

Captain of the Pantogan forces and the landlady of the Gulls Rock inn working intently with the range of whetstones and honing steels on offer upon the receptive, folded alloy, razor sharp weapon edges a result.

‘Here, I have made a start for you.’ Akilah glanced down from the stiletto daggers, neatly bound leather hilts.

‘There is a youngling with an infection of his chest, another poultice due.’ The large lady stretched out her arms, rising from the seat, her attention no longer on the whetstones and honing steels.

‘The Craft, they do not venture to Balfe, to this village?’ A deepening of the creases on Tuffle’s forehead. ‘Surely with Balfe not being so far from the Kirkswell pass, a lady of the Craft could be here within a day, to assist?’

The ripples of kindness wiped clear from her eyes, now a singular stare from the Lake’s Lady bore into the Pantogan officer.

‘We would prefer not to see the Craft here, very much a last resort; are we to really have this conversation again?’

Tuffle reached for an oily cloth to his side, slow and deliberate movements made with his hands, blades and sharpening implements now forgotten; a breath held before being released.

‘Truly Akilah.’ A shake of his head. ‘Your people’s pure hatred of the Craft I just don’t get and yes you have tried to explain this before.’ A pause. ‘Try one more time, for an old man?’

‘Then I will be back.’ Good humour had returned to her expression, a natural bounce away from the table. ‘To my rounds, and then we share a glass of currach, whisky of the lake’s weed.’ The landlady headed back from the nests of tables, raising smiles with her quips and indefatigable energy amongst those she passed.

‘How is the youngling?’ Tuffle looked up from the longsword being rubbed down, the two stiletto daggers out of sight; the landlady Akilah had returned, two crystal glasses half filled with a clear spirit placed onto the table a deepest of brown colours, aged timber that had escaped the firing of the inn so many years ago.

‘They will be okay, a little more time to recover, their fever has broken.’ The Lake’s lady nudged one glass with the other, a sip taken.

‘You know I hate this stuff, far too damn salty.’ Tuffle gave a look of pure distaste at the oily fluid within the small crystal glass.

‘And that is why I offer it to you.’ Akilah raised a single, manicured eyebrow. ‘More for me.’ Exaggerated shadows thrown by the puffing oil lamps, more soot than light to illuminate the two figures sat opposite each other.

‘I know I am a simple man.’ Tuffle spoke slowly, his vision dropped from the landlady set opposite him, ignoring her scoffing his words, the Pantogan officer’s focus on neatly folding the range of polishing cloths, sorting the whetstones and honing steels into respective piles.

‘But damned if I don’t get the Lake’s people.’ A singular shake of his head.

‘Your people’s suspicion, raw hatred even of the Craft.’ Tuffle continued as Akilah tried to interject, talking over her.

‘I mean, the Craft, they bring healing, truly if they weren’t a key reason we overcame the Elementals, including your Water Elemental, and can attempt to counter the Bronze...’

‘The youngling, the poultice I give her controls her temperature, keeps it high to drive off the infection yet not dangerously so.’ Akilah pushed across the second crystal glass towards the man, his features set to shadow.

‘Yes the Craft bring healing, but healing is simply the flip side of pain, don’t forget that.’

‘The process of healing, the Craft offer, I know from the past many a time it is never without pain.’ Confusion writhed over Tuffle’s features, his right hand reached out for the glass, a touch of the oily fluid to his lips, a shake of his head and wince of displeasure.

‘Still hate this stuff.’

‘You Pantogan, you look in terms of years, we Lake’s People look towards decades, centuries even.’

Akilah swirled the liquid in her glass.

‘This began with your people invading the homesteads way to the west, killing, drowning Pantogan younglings, don’t forget that.’ Tuffle pushed away the glass with a forefinger.

‘You’re going to tell me how that fits into your bigger picture?’

‘Come on Captain Tuffle.’ Sarcasm lit up her tone. ‘You are going to tell me all of the Pantogan are united in harmony under the Queen’s leadership? All of your troops will follow your commands to the letter?’ A shake of her head, the barbed tone fell from her voice.

‘Our Priests, a radical section holding influence within a section of our armed forces; we knew of the cycle returning, a plot hatched to release the great serpents from captivity.’

Another sip of fluid taken from her glass, a prod of Akilah’s forefinger to push the oily fluid back towards the Pantogan captain.

‘What a number of our Priests did was wrong, in attempting to appease our Water Elemental by drowning those Pantogan younglings that may have, may not have traces of the Craft, that we can only ever apologise for and live in shame over actions taken.’

Her words stopped mid-sentence, body language slightly hunched forwards, waiting.

Tuffle was slow to react, his eyebrows furrowed together, he spoke aloud, his thoughts verbalised.

‘And now you expect me to apologise? For defeating your people in conflict, for our warrior priests bringing back to this world the Elementals? For the Bronze preying on both Lake’s People and Pantogan?’

‘No.’ Akilah sat back. ‘The last decade all that Pantogan to all four points of the compass have known is war, suffering; the Lake’s People have been displaced, those that remain to the west are a food stuff for the Bronze.’

A pause, the landlady of the Gulls Rock inn turned to leave.

‘The catalyst, the spark for the inferno that threatens to engulf us.’ A dry laugh, briefly looking about the fire scorched timber. ‘No pun intended.’ Reaching down for the second crystal glass, upending and gulping down the raw, salty spirit.

‘If you can, for one moment put aside the atrocities, the appalling, desperate decision making; what we were aiming for was to work against the return of the Craft; the very group you idolise and put on that pedestal of healing from any and all ills.’

Her eyes closed, Akilah offered a slow shake of her head.

‘And you ask if I want to call on the services of the Craft, I say no thank you.’

‘I never could find out.’ Tuffle’s voice was curt, words punched outwards.

‘What was your role within the Lake’s People?’

‘Just a simple landlady...’ Akilah’s words accompanied by a slight curtsy, quickly interrupted.

‘Before, before all of this.’ A gesture of arms to signify taking in the inn around them, Tuffle sat back in his chair, a wince came and went as he adjusted his right leg.

‘Oh, this and that.’ Two steps taken backwards, illumination offered by the oil lamps falling short, only a generous outline of the lady from the western lakes, Akilah paused.

‘Yes we have had the rise of Shurikan and the warrior priests, then the Elementals, and now the Bronze to the west and the creatures to the north...’

‘And you want to add Lady Anya and her ladies of the Craft to the list?’ Incredulity filled Tuffle’s tone, shuffling forwards on his seat.

‘Captain Tuffle.’ Akilah spoke quietly, her words measured, another step taken backwards, her outline to be guessed at now.

‘You are the strategic lead of the Pantogan armed forces; don’t get so wrapped up by fighting the latest foe to forget what this time of peace was shattered over.’

Tuffle slowly shook his head, his tone of voice softened. ‘I wish I had taken up your offer of that final drink.’ A shallow laugh shared by the two still present in the inn’s voluminous room.

‘So Sergeant Lammi is not joining me on the ‘morrow; was this just a ruse so you could sew seeds of discontent into my mind about the Craft?’

‘Ironically no.’ A hearty, familiar laugh peeled out from the Lake’s lady.

‘I am as interested as you to see whom arrives to join you for fastbreak tomorrow morn; goodnight Captain.’

‘And you, Akilah.’ His vision strained, no sign now of the landlady of the Gulls Rock inn, what he did see in traces of light rays making their way back to his eyes were past

images of swordsmen, bowsladies, Charger pilots being attended to by ladies of the Craft, their bodies arcing in pain not from imminent death but entering into accelerated healing. Tuffle's nails dug into his fingertips, a shake of his head, his voice low as he pushed himself up and out of the chair.

'One thing I never have figured out, from this whole damn conflict right at the start, why the Lake's People attacked those Pantogan homesteads to our far west, their priests drowning our younglings; surely not due to few youngling's maybe, maybe not having the Craft.'

A pause, his vision strained against the final few photons on light energy still out there.

'Makes little sense, zero sense.' A final shake of his head, attempting to understand and make sense of Akilah's explanation, throwing out her interpretation of events each and every time.

Chapter 10 - Four of Diamonds

‘Mum.’ Words spoken in a gentle but persuasive tone, Saya shifted to sit next to her mother.

‘Mum, you know this is not the answer, this is not going to help any of us.’

An attempt to lift the glass of clear fluid from the lady slightly swaying on the slow stool, mumbling incomprehensibly to herself.

‘No, no!’ The lady tightened her hand on the glass, purely focused on the briefest of tussles for the fluid within the glass, amber liquid slopping from side to side with increasing amplitude.

‘No!’

‘Okay, okay.’ Saya slowly released her grip on the glass, attempting to be careful so her mother would not wrench the glass away, the young lady looked up and across to her brother.

‘Mueller, could you get Akilah or one of her staff please.’ A long exhale, her bottom lip bitten down upon, Saya’s expression full of concern.

‘Akilah.’ The glass now forgotten, the mother turned to face her two children, continuing to sway on her seat.

‘Akilah of the Lake’s People.’ Derision and hate jostled for position in her tone.

‘Akilah is the landlady of the Gull’s Rock inn.’ Saya paused, her arms open, ready to offer an explanation given to her mother at least twice a week.

‘You run the stables for her.’ The young lady ignored the snort from her brother to her left.

‘Akilah, she is good to us...’

‘Akilah, one of the Lake’s People?’ The mother cut in, a swirl of her upper torso to reach behind her, unintentionally backhanding the glass of fluid which upended, the aroma of pure alcohol fumes did not take long to reach the brother and sister standing in front of their cursing mother.

‘Ah, to hell with it.’ Rheumy yellow eyes closing before re-opening, a succession of blinks, struggling to focus on the two in front of her.

‘Where was I, yes, the Lake’s People, Akilah, yes.’ A ball of spittle chewed on, spat out at the wooden base between her feet.

‘Here we go, if I have to hear this one more time.’ Mueller screwed up his features, his left hand balled up in a fist, his damaged right palm kept open.

‘Hopefully this means she will get some rest when we work through her memories traced out on repeat.’ Saya spoke in a quiet measured tone, her words for her brother though facing her mother’s contorted, emotive features.

‘That day.’ The words spat out. ‘Facing up against the Lake’s People, answering the call of our border homesteads, our younglings being drowned by the Lake’s People priests.’ A shake of her head, the mother’s tone lost its bite, morphing to melancholy.’

‘Chargers, footsoldiers, archers all lined up by regiment, the might of the King’s Army, what a sight to behold!’ A moment of elation filled her tone, her features, oh too soon for the happiness to drop away.

‘Your father, my husband, Colour Sergeant Stewart at the head of his troop, me with my girls, a finer squad of bowsladies the Pantogan have yet to see on the battlefield.’

The mother’s head dropped a touch.

‘I remember your father saying, before we headed to our respective positions, “Dina” he said, “your arrows trace to the north my footsteps, keep me safe as I batter the bastard Lake’s People from our front.” Looking upwards, her yellowed eyes shining bright, pupils held wide open.

‘Our King slayed in front of our very eyes; on the call to charge, the ground itself rippled, tossed and fell, our Chargers, the battle horse reeling in agony, our forces shattered, the wind pushing and pulling at our arrows.’ Her voice fell, a long swallow, now taking in the images of her daughter and son in front of her.

‘I could not protect him that day as I said I would.’ Tears swelled in their mother’s eyes, the words repeated, her voice shaky, matching the increased trembling across her body.

‘I could not protect him...’

‘She’s going.’ Mueller took quick steps forward, reaching out with both hands, a wince of pain on his features as his damaged right palm took an equal share of the weight of their mother.

‘Let’s get her to bed.’ Saya shook her head. ‘We’re going to have to do a better job of hiding any and all spirits, no idea where she found this from.’ Her eyes scrunched shut for a moment, the intoxicating smell of the fluid from the spilled glass told its own story to its alcoholic strength.

‘That’s right, onto her side.’ The willowy sister allowed her burly brother to manhandle their mother into her bed.

‘We’ll sort her in the morn, let her sleep this off.’ Sister and brother reaching out together for a shared hug, nothing more to say or do, Saya leading Mueller out from their mother’s quarters within the stable.

Chapter 11 - Five of Diamonds

The pungent outpouring of scent courtesy of the mug of char set in front of him rendered his sense of smell to little use, Captain Tuffle's hearing registered the sounds of a village starting a fresh day, the residents of the smallholdings within Balfe sending shortened commands forth, male and female, young and old part of the aural mix on a typically cold yet so far wind-free start to the day.

Tuffle's side vision hardly needed to be alerted, still awaiting his fastbreak meeting, but the reaction of a mother and father briefly pausing for the merest of moments, recognising the two characters inbound, both making the right decision to haul a confused youngling away with them at speed.

'So, we replace one ex-scout for two, instead?' Tuffle sat a later straighter in his chair, losing a little of the trapped warm air under the woollen blanket, no real breeze to speak of early morning, but this high up in the Caladian hills, the sun was taking it's time to add warmth to its touch.

'Ex-scouts?' Derity nodded her thanks to her sister who had lifted across an additional wooden chair from a separate table for her to sit upon, a mocking note of confusion in her tone.

'Captain Tuffle, have we been released from the Queen's service?'

A gruffness to his tone, Tuffle lifted back his greying fringe with his left hand, his right hand lay resting on an armoured leather pouch affixed to his right thigh; a futile notion as all present knew he would get nowhere near releasing the stiletto blades held within the pouch before both the sisters now sat in front of him would have their own blades buried deep within his chest.

'I was never aware Queen Elaina gave you the freedom to freelance.' A relaxed shrug lowered the tension just a touch. 'There is a lot Elaina does not tell me.'

'Ah, Captain Tuffle, you have brought such welcome guests to my inn.'

The sing-song accent of Akilah had strengthened, her steps heavy on the mix of cobbles and mud outside the entrance to the inn, of the four tables available only one was occupied, extremely doubtful if anyone else who actually wished to enjoy a relaxing fastbreak would choose to sit down at any of the three remaining tables.

'Ooh look.' Akilah made mock-pretence at pointing up to a cloud in the sky.

'A lovely crisp morning spoilt by two grey clouds.' Her open features looked with innocence to return back to alternate between both Derity and Terbyl.

Tuffle had raised a single eyebrow, studying each of the three ladies in turn, little to give away on any of their expressions, Akilah who had significant standing amongst the Lake's People before the Elemental wars, a decade or so ago, and the two twin sisters Derity and Terbyl known as the dormice for their diminutive physical stature yet their role as elite scouts within the Queen's army, and later revealing themselves as the twin lead of the Grey. The Grey, an organisation with its own remit and goals ranging from intelligence gathering and assassination, a group long thought disbanded yet the reality had shown a thriving network to be found just under the skin across Pantogan.

A sigh from Derity, a blade flicked outwards to rotate across the back of her hand, then gone from sight.

‘We freed those we could.’

‘Amongst my people, if a blade is release from its holster, it is to be used.’

Akilah's words boomed outwards.

‘Well, first you are in Pantogan.’ Terbyl gave a slight shrug. ‘And secondly, blades are our playthings, not just for gutting fish...’

‘Stop it.’ Derity eyes flashed in the direction of her sister. ‘Akilah, we released as many of your people as we could, the bargains we drove, operations we ran.’

The small, squat lady paused, eyes fixed on the large lady towering above her.

‘The babies, the younglings left behind, for consumption, for breeding? Akilah was slow in mouthing the words before clearly orating them.

‘And you would have us done what, exactly?’ Derity had placed a forefinger of her right hand upon her sister's lower left arm.

‘Our parameters were clear, we had foodstuff, resources to trade for Lake's People lives, we were not on a military mission yet along with bartering for your people's lives, more than a few cages of your people may well have been released in addition.’ Her eyes shining, noticeably Derity had not blinked since starting to speak with the landlady of the Gulls Rock inn.

‘You!’ Akilah's features flushed, her hand pointing to first Derity and then Terbyl, the two dormice features held absolutely still. ‘The two of you, you brainwashed my people, they flock to your cause!’ Akilah's voice throttled back, the volume being replaced by bass.

‘So many of them.’ A swish of her head. ‘So many no longer answer to the name of the Lake's People, instead they openly wear the, your colours, those of the Grey...’

His left hand motioned horizontally, Tuffle offered a singular bark of laughter, rich in irony, mirrored by the tone of his voice.

‘Not the only ones, damned if it’s not these two of the Grey taking up Pantogan teenagers, or the religious types joining under Linkin.’ A pause. ‘And let’s not talk about the White of the Warrior Priests.’ The military captain drank the last of his chai from the dark green pottery mug.

‘You know, even after the Bronze churning up the mud and spilling blood around Amble, Armastad likely takes on more men and women than flock to the Queen’s colours.’

A deep breath taken in by Akilah, her features clearly back under control.

‘Really?’ Her eyebrows knotted together.

‘The Lake’s People, those from Pantogan, they want a sense of action, to take back the initiative.’ Terbyl offered a flourish of her right hand, always with the back shown to them, no surprises to what would be hidden within the palm.

‘That the Grey offers; not the dirge of defence, of always being on the back foot.’

‘My people have forsaken their heritage, their core values of the Lakes.’ Akilah spoke with resolution, her eyes narrowed.

‘The Grey do not actively recruit.’ Derity stared straight at Akilah, neither lady dropping their eyeline.

‘We offer what we all wish for, freedom to live out our lives as we choose.’

‘Absolutely.’ Tuffle gave an enthusiastic nod. ‘Freedom as you choose, on the same page as long as it is read from your book.’ He looked from Derity diagonally up to Akilah. ‘I know how good the Lake’s People are with a whole range of poisons, so rather than me risking eating something intended for my two good friends here, if I just take fastbreak?’

‘I only see one welcome guest.’ A final glower, Akilah turned on her heel and with a stomp marched away back into the inn.

‘So.’ Tuffle took a look down at the mug and with a sniff of regret realised he had already finished off the mug of chai.

‘Are you going to tell me how you infiltrated my communications network, the highest order of security between my sergeants of the two western passes, to bring me here?’

Terbyl looked to her left, a slight shrug of her shoulders as she appeared to consider the Pantogan Captain’s question.

‘Nah.’ A serious shake of her head, then meeting his stare, eyes locked together.

‘Little to report to the north west, though the Bronze continue to show a probing interest in the Kirkswell pass to our direct west, running assassination missions against the sentries on the wall.’ A pause.

‘Don’t let your fastbreak get cold, Captain.’

Tuffle's craggy features unfolded just a touch, looking away from the two diminutive figures sat across from him to the refreshed mug of chai and wisps of steam emanating from the full bowl of food.

'Fine.' The word picked out, almost tasted. 'You have my time.' The mug appreciatively sniffed before a long draught taken. 'What do you want?'

'A convenient lie.' Derity began speaking to the Pantogan military lead, his focus seemingly on the food being tucked into.

'My sister and my role, possibly not always on your mission book, but when you look back in time, we have been there or thereabouts around any and all hot spots, to lend a hand...'

'To ride to the rescue?' Terbyl interjected. 'Too dramatic?'

Derity ignored her sister, continued to speak in a voice sufficient for Tuffle to hear but not so loud that others could make out her words, her left hand danced in front of her features so none could read her lips.

'Queen Elaina has, in the past, made mention of our organisation beginning with the Lady Grey, our mother.' A shake of her head. 'The Grey have focused an interest on the interplay between the devils in black, the creatures found to the north and the Craft.'

The small lady wearing a blend of grey and green canvas clothes stopped speaking, her head angled slightly, a quizzical expression held sway upon her features as she read the features, body language of the man sat in front of her.

'So far, the only item I have spoken about, a linkage between the Craft and malevolent forces? This has peaked your interest?'

Captain Tuffle looked up from his food, pushing the earthenware bowl away, a glance to the mug by his side but choosing to ignore the remnants of the spicy drink.

'Let's just say you are not the first person, people.' The military man corrected himself.

'First people to speak in less than positive terms of the Craft.'

'Ah the wonders of a life ruled by orders, no chance to explore the big picture, to see past the immediate challenge to what could possibly underpin Pantogan being turned on its head and whistled around like a youngling's spinning top.' Derity continued with her calm, measured tone, ignoring the narrowing of Tuffle's expression.

'You are wasting my time, I was informed this would be an intelligence briefing, by Sergeant Lammi.' The briefest of pauses. 'As you have taken her place; update.' The Pantogan Captain sat upright in his chair, equal time spent focusing on the two short, squat ladies sat in front of him.

‘Ooh, an intelligence update.’ Terbyl shrugged nonchalantly. ‘You’re not going to finish the chai?’ No reaction from the man, the small lady reached across and took a sip letting out an appreciative sigh.

‘Let’s see, Lady Tusk and Sergeant Flee have returned back to the Tusk estate, quite the force of Chargers she is rebuilding there, Sergeant Narkuss remains at the northern wall, the Pyramid people have moved to return to their land; the Prince journeyed south to meet with the Lady Tusk to query her allegiance to the Queen over her focusing on the security of Pantogan as opposed to the creatures to the wall’s northern border.’

A pause, rapid blinking on Tuffle’s expression gave away his surprise.

‘Of course you don’t believe me, ask the good Prince how he lost his front teeth next time you see him, the Lady Tusk has a heavy left jab.’ Terbyl took the mug in both hands, another sip of chai enjoyed.

Tuffle folded his hands in front of him, head angled down with his lips resting on his fingers. ‘You are entertaining me, go on.’

‘Captain Tuffle; Prince Tobin is a good man and loyal to the Pantogan cause, though he worries about his sister the Queen’s judgement, so much on her plate, so many distractions, so many pressures, so many angles she is being played on; and just for one person to lead, to manage.’

Derity spoke softly, quietly. ‘There are question marks over the increasing number of Pantogan troops wearing the white feather, and one or two wonder about our intentions, as merchants in the information business which horse we will ultimately back – Bronze, Pantogan or our own.’

‘What do you want?’ Tuffle slid his head up for his chest now to rest on the back of his hands, his eyes flicked from one sister of the Grey to the other.

‘Pantogan is caught in a stalemate.’ Derity continued, not reacting to Tuffle’s interjection.

‘Ice to the north is melting despite Janick and Trevan’s best efforts from long ago, this process they can slow, but not stop and certainly not within their power to reverse; Akilah would be the best person to brief you on the serpent that destroyed the first great raft, acted as a catalyst to the Lake’s People ill-fated invasion of Pantogan and their deep concern for the Craft...’

His left forefinger tapped his nose, Tuffle stretched out his right leg, a deep sigh taken, reaching to his right for his ever-present stick.

‘I thought I asked for an intelligence briefing?’ The next name stilled his movement.

‘Tenkini, ah yes, love driving her to the icy heights of Sorn, certainly a different way for a Mindguard to find her end.’ Derity certainly had the direct attention of Tuffle now. ‘Sandro and the devils that haunt him, a man of Sorn driven to climb, a passion not for pacifying the masses but being true to himself, even at his one true love’s cost, Tenkini out of air, out of warmth, out of life.’

A look of genuine confusion accompanied by a shake of his head, Tuffle’s eyebrows knitted together. ‘Sandro? The climbing lad from Sorn, but he died a year or so ago? I remember Rake talking about Sandro not recovering from his fall, not far from one of the great western lakes?’

A moment of impasse from both parties, for the first time it would have been clear to an outsider observing the cut and thrust of the conversation that the two diminutive female twins, and the veteran Pantogan officer were truly on different wavelengths; the moment was quick to pass.

‘What do you want?’ The words growled from Tuffle now, his chest thrust forwards. ‘What do you really want?’

‘To recruit you.’ While it was Terbyl who spoke the three words, Tuffle maintained unblinking eye contact with Derity.

‘What?’ A singular bark of laughter uttered, Tuffle sat back, he now slowly scanned the features, the body language of the twins sat in front of him, the Pantogan Captain clearly incredulous.

‘You push too far, Derity, Terbyl.’ Tuffle’s words ground outwards, not for a moment dropping his eye contact alternating between the two ladies.

‘Not what we say, or how we say it, but what we stand for, Captain Tuffle; the reason we have always been present to aid your battles.’ An elongated pause.

‘That thought we leave you with to chew over.’

Terbyl spoke in an offhand manner. ‘Oh, and thank you for the last half of your chai, very nice.’

‘You are out of line!’ Tuffle had clenched his teeth together, his voice rose in volume, punching out the words.

‘Out of line! My allegiance is to my Queen!’ The Captain of the Pantogan closed his eyes as soon as he uttered the words.

‘We have a proud history serving with the Royal Family of Pantogan.’ Terbyl’s words could be heard loud and clear. ‘Let’s see if our goals better align in this day and age.’

Tuffle was slow to open his eyes, when he did the large figure of Akilah was stood next to him.

‘One of the twins, they took a sip from your drink?’ Akilah spoke wistfully. A deep breathe emitted and nod of his head. ‘Yes, Terbyl; why?’ Tuffle looked up at the landlady.

‘I knew I should have poisoned your chai, just on the off chance.’ Akilah’s shoulders rose and fell, the mug and bowl from his table collected, the lady slow to head back into the inn, clearly kicking herself for the missed opportunity.

‘But you would have killed me?’ Tuffle fired the question back in her direction, only to see Akilah’s wide shoulders offer a single shrug in response.

Chapter 12 - Six of Diamonds

‘I am so, so sorry.’ Akilah dropped to her knees next to the young lady, hands stretched outwards.

‘Do you mind?’

‘Go ahead.’ The young lady’s features flushed, tears running freely, Saya slow to withdraw from the side of her still, rigid mother’s body.

Two fingers jabbed into the vomit strewn crook of the prone lady’s neck, Akilah moving her fingers around, no trace of a pulse to be found.

‘You did what you could.’ The Lake’s landlady of the Gull’s Rock inn paused, a shake of her head. ‘Your mother will be with your father now.’

‘Thank you.’ Mueller grunted out the two words, his features locked in on his sister, both ignoring the glance of surprise from the large Lake’s People lady.

‘Yes, thank you.’ Saya stood, reaching out, taking Akilah’s hands in hers.

‘You gave my mother, us a place to be, to stay.’ A glance down to the still human form, vomit splattered over and around the figure, her mother lying on her back.

A shake of her head, tears bubbling up once more seen as fluid pinpricks within her eyes.

‘I still remember how they used to be, mum, dad.’ Clear fluid running freely down her cheeks.

‘This is not who she was, every since, ever since.’ A large exhale sounded outwards.

‘A lot of things now are not how they used to be.’ Akilah offered a generous shrug.

‘When your mother used to drink, I know the two of you would always place her on her front, on her side.’ A twitch of her nose, lips pulled back in resignation.

‘I guess it was only a matter of time, your mother rolled onto her back in her sleep, vomited; hold on?’ Akilah’s eyes moving, tracing out the room.

‘Why are there footprints leaving to the side door?’ Her second chin shuddered, eyes flickered; ignoring the wince, registering familiar pain from her knees, Akilah ran well practiced hands over the corpse’s body, prizing upper and lower jaws open to fish around inside the vomit crusted mouth, removing a wad of cloth.

‘No longer an accidental death.’ Her eyeline alternated between the sister and brother, shock and surprise a common factor shared between the two young people.

A knock on the side wall interrupted the atmosphere of tension between the three present.

‘Ah, Akilah.’ A man’s voice spoke quietly. ‘I am sorry boss, but you have two lackeys of the Merchants Guild insistent they see you, Karl and Tomas.’

‘About what?’ Akilah’s voice had deepened in her Lake’s People accent, the words snapped out.

‘About the lease on the stables.’ The man paused, his hands open, his features flushed at the reaction of his boss.

‘Honestly Akilah, honestly no-one has left the inn, no-one has talked of Dinah’s passing.’

‘Fine.’ The brown of her eyes flashed, Akilah looked downwards. ‘Fine.’

‘What is happening here?’ Tears now long forgotten, Saya’s eyeline on a pendulum between her brother and the Lake’s Lady. ‘Akilah, what is going on?’

‘I receive an annual grant from the Queen, for your mother to run the stables.’

A long inhale and then Akilah exhaled, channelling her breath slowly. ‘The Pantogan Queen is very good at supporting those linked to her armed forces in need, your mother was seen to be one of these.’

‘But, these two men; how do they know, so soon?’ Saya’s features pale, her body taking on a gentle tremble.

‘That could well be your answer.’ Akilah pointed down to the shoe prints lined in viscous fluid, leading away from the body, towards the side, exit door.

‘Let’s see what these two idiots want.’

‘Who let them in?’ Akilah shouted out the words, staring at the two men sat grinning at the table nearest the inn door.

‘No matter.’ Hands on hips, the Gulls Inn landlady stood square in front of the two men.

‘What do you want?’

‘Oh Akilah, you know us, always keen to take on an opportunity, link in with the locals...’ A wide smile on his features, arms initially opened wide rapidly criss-crossed across his body, Karl’s voice was punctured.

‘You keep talking, I will shove this down your throat.’ Reaching inside her pocket, the large lady pulled out a fabric of balled cloth, encrusted with drying yellow fluid.

One man quickly averted his vision, the other who had been speaking opened his mouth and then closed it, his voice rose up a pitch note.

‘What’s that?’

‘No, Mueller, no!’ The Lake’s Lady bearhugged the young man lunging forwards, it took another three within the inn to pull Mueller back.

‘You killed my mother! You killed her!’ Screaming at the top of his voice, still Mueller struggled at staff from the inn holding the young lad back.

Both of his hands pulled out the lapels of his jacket, Karl's right hand ran through slicked back hair.

'We are sorry to hear of your loss.' His attention focused upon Saya, quick to skirt over Mueller. 'The Merchant's Guild has shown an interest in Balfe's stables, linked to your inn.' Slowly confident grew once again in his tone, a self-assured glance given between both men.

'We know you cannot afford to run the stables without the Queen's grant, so we are here with an offer; Tomas.' The first man stepped back, gesturing to the thin, weasel faced man to his side.

'Karl, I am not interested in any offer you may or may not have.' Akilah stared between the two men, neither able to hold her eye contact for any period of time.

'The stables can be yours.' The man noted as Tomas spoke softly, directly to Akilah. 'We have authorisation from the Merchant's Guild, to offer you Akilah the licence paid in full for the stables.' An open shrug. 'Surprised?'

'How did you know Dinah had passed, had died?' The words shot back by the Lake's Lady.

'Gee, that's an amazing deal.' The first man to speak ignored the interjection. 'And what would we need to pay for the deeds to the stables?'

'Just her.' Another open shrug from Tomas, a thin arm pointed in the direction of Saya. 'One less mouth to feed, you keep the son, we take the daughter; the stable is yours...' A bassy knock on the heavy timber frame of the open inn door, sun light momentarily blocked out from the double width door.

'No, no, you stay outside.' A slight figure passed between the bulk of the man glowering; a petite lady, twin blonde pigtails slowly made her way inside.

'Too late, Craft bitch, we don't need your services.' Karl laughed uncertainly to Tomas, the two more interested in the large man shielding the entrance and exit to the inn, their eyeline naturally drawn to the matte black eyes set within the small, almost elven features of the lady, not a crease nor line upon her neutral features.

'Too late?' An elegant shrug rippled within the black robe worn by the lady of the Craft.

'Too late.' The small figure spoke again. 'For you, most certainly yes.' Karl was directly addressed now by the petite figure.

'I don't need no healing.' Karl gave another mocking laugh, an arm raised with open palm. 'Stay back now, stay back...'

‘Not from a broken arm?’ A dainty forefinger of the Lady of the Craft’s right hand stretched out to trace across his outstretched arm, a clear snapping noise shot outwards. ‘How about a broken back?’ Spinning on her feet, around the prone, transfixed man, the same finger prodded his back.

A scream of raw pain emitted from the greasy haired Karl, clutching first at his arm as it pivoted unnaturally downwards, then his body lurched at right angles, a crack resonated around the room, the body fell to the floor, a single spasm and then still.

‘Stay away! Stay away!’ Tomas screaming outwards hysterically, his feet backing up, the man significantly taller than the female figure only slightly taller than a young girl continuing to walk slowly forward towards him.

‘I don’t want to hurt you!’ Words screamed at the top of his voice.

A single rise of her carefully manicured right eyebrow, the Lady of the Craft stood momentarily still.

‘Oh, none of us think that likely.’

Tomas uttered another bellow, a round house blow aimed at the lady dressed in black, leading with a swinging right hand, the petite figure simply stepped inside his guard, a staccato prod to the right of his chest with an extended forefinger, before the lady neatly stepped backwards, turning away as her opponent’s body dropped, arms clasped over his chest, body contracting and then still, traces of scarlet blood leached outwards from Tomas’ mouth.

‘Olven of the Craft.’ Akilah uncharacteristically uncertain in her words. ‘The Lake’s people did not call on the services of the Craft.’ Her eyebrows knitted together, looking in confusion between the now still figures of Karl and Tomas; Akilah’s eyes momentarily closed, words reluctantly unpeeled from her mouth.

‘I have not seen you operate this way before.’

The petite lady simply offered a respectful nod to the Lake’s landlady, before turning to face the very pale Saya, clearly in shock.

‘A simple coincidence, that I could be of assistance.’ Olven offered the thinnest of smiles.

‘Saya, I have been sent by the Lady Anya herself.’ The petite lady paused, her twin pig tails dampened in their oscillations. ‘You are of great interest to the Craft.’

‘What does this mean, any of this mean?’ The young lady many miles from being in her depth, Saya looking first at her brother who simply shook his head and shrugged broad shoulders, Mueller’s expression unseeing, no longer needing to be held back, simply sitting now on the floor. Saya reached out for Akilah’s right forearm, her expression imploring.

‘What this means is trouble.’ The Lake’s landlady closed her eyes for a moment, and then cleared her throat, barking out the words as an unquestioning command.

‘Barricade up the inn!’ Akilah turned back to face the black robed petite figure, it was so difficult to judge an expression on one from the Craft with those pure jet black eyes.

‘Are you going to invite in the mindguard Tobias to help or not?’

‘Aye, think I just might join the party.’ The large figure chose to answer, a bassy voice linked to the man adopting a rolling gait moved in from the entrance, stretching out his large frame, a seeming age taken to survey the interior of the Gulls Rock inn.

‘Ale time first.’ Tobias stomped forwards towards the bar, a smile widened on the mindguard’s craggy, scarred features. ‘Let’s see what they’ve got on tap.’

Chapter 13 - Seven of Clubs

‘Hey man, I’m telling you.’ A glance out to the blend of people assembled, his voice easily projected to those lapping up his words.

‘I mean what do we have here, a sliver of a sliver of an estate, here on Easedale; could the Pantogan Queen be any more patronising in her offer to us Lake’s People...’

‘Oda, you quickly forget, we are lucky to have any land at all...’ A voice interjected, quickly shot down.

‘That’s just loser talk, that is.’ The tall Lakes man opened his hands wide.

‘Our people get torn up by first those Elementals, twisted and turned against us, then the Bronze can’t decide between wiping us out as a people or choosing us as their favourite snack to dine on.’ Oda was into his stride now, pacing back and forth, hands ducking and diving to reinforce the points he was making, the crowd of Lake’s men and women, boys and girls murmured in affirmation, the occasional stamp of feet or clamp of hands in encouragement.

‘And what do those oh so brave Pantogan do, with their armies, those huge war horse, machine crossbows I know not what.’ A mock smile and pause, Oda continued with his shouted-out monologue.

‘Oh yes, they trade corn and resources, yes they trade for our lives, like we are some kind of commodity, and then in the goodness of their heart we are put out of harms way here on a homestead, a single piece of land within this vast estate, to churn out food for the Pantogan and you want me to say thank you each and every day for this, this opportunity?’

His voice rising, now head held low, swaying from side to side. ‘Opportunity?’ The single word repeated, now more demeaning than a question.

‘At least we have a home, a safe place for us, our families.’ An uncertain lady’s voice shouted out.

‘You talk about a safe place?’ His head snapped upwards, long braided strands of hair shortly to follow.

‘A safe place?’ Oda on sure ground now, his voice bellowing, most had heard what would follow before, but none made to leave.

‘When you talk to a man who has lost his wife, his children.’ A pause, eyes momentarily closed before resuming. ‘Forgive me if I want a little more for my people, a little independence from the whole or have we forgotten our heritage of the great lakes, just waiting out there for us to re-join, to return to.’ His body marching back and forth, hands and arms animated, head now face down to the marks he was kicking up in the coarse grass.

‘I don’t remember being a Lake’s person meant living a life as a slave, being beholden to another’s agenda, and damned having to say thank you for the thinnest piece of the pie each and every day!’ Oda stomped to a halt, a narrow arm and finger pointing in the vague direction the ladies voice had come from before.

‘And I lost my family for this?’ A single, circular pirouette, hands raised up high.

‘So the few of us, of our people here can have food to eat, the extra we sell on but now I hear the Queen is levying an extra tax for Lake’s People goods – we’re doing too good a job, too damn productive.’ A wide shrug. ‘Who cares though, who is going to argue, petition for us?’

Oda’s arms spread wide, a mock confused expression filled his features.

‘Think about it, just think about it.’ Oda gave his characteristic wide arms, long legged shrug, a pause before striding away, the murmurs grew in volume as he left the crowd behind him.

‘Not bad.’ A man slotted next to Oda, one whom could have been a mirrored reflection except the long hair braids had been long fixed into one, singular dreaded mass of hair reaching long down his back. ‘That thin smile on your face does you no thanks though.’

‘Hot damn K’odi, I know I’m good.’ Oda reached across for the thin cigar his identical, twin brother had been chugging on, a swirl of smoke twisted about the two men once he had taken a long draught on the cigar.

‘You’ve got your crowd, got a core number of our people but that last comment, about the Queen and percentage on our crops?’ K’odi took back the cigar, a chew on the blend of tightly packed leaves.

‘Inspired I know, I needed to leave them with something fresh to stir the pot, horse shit yes, but...’

Oda wrapped his arms around his thin frame, the briefest of hugs given to himself, anticipating the reprimand from his brother.

‘Maybe, but remember we are working to remove this communal feel, replace it with the efficiency of business and competition; one of our goals we work towards.’

A haze of smoke temporarily obscured K’odi’s features.

‘Man.’ Oda rolled his head from side to side. ‘All you do is criticise, you’ve got the plan, I have the people, it’ll work out...’ Two hands grasped the front of his tunic, the tall Lake’s person found himself stopped, twisted to directly face his brother.

The words spoken with emphasis, slowly, slightly distorted formed around a cigar; their figures enveloped in a swirl of smoke, thickening with the two brothers now stood stationary.

‘Stick to the plan.’ K’odi stared directly at Oda, only an inch or so separating their faces, neither flinching.

‘Always will brother, always will.’ Oda’s nose wrinkled, the two brother’s right hands clenched and nudged in a series of moves, now no more words spoken, the two walked off, side by side, their steps locked in time together.

Chapter 14 - Seven of Diamonds

Mueller licked his lips nervously, hands crossed in front of his torso, a tick under his right eye distorted his focus on the barred door, secure timber beams rested within iron hooks, the oak biding its time and resting before it would inevitably be called into action to resist entrance into the inn.

The palms of his hands dug deep and ground into his eye sockets, Mueller glanced between his sister nestled within the sawdust on the inn floor, her knees pulled up tight to her face, hair splayed around to act as a form of curtain, Saya rocked gently back and forth, no words or music to be heard to the beat she kept.

Mueller blinked rapidly, the tick kicked up a notch as he steadied his vision on the petite lady wearing dust scarred black robes, the Lady of the Craft's matte black eyes sucked in his sight as their eyeline locked, Olven clearly prepared to wait the young lad out.

'Ah, er, your Arc'monk, the Mindguard Tobias?' Saya's brother glanced around, no liquid to be seen to quench his desiccated throat, Mueller started again, his tongue feeling twice its normal size. Tobias had left the inn a good thirty minutes ago, venturing out alone to leave Balfe behind with the two broken bodies, deceased messengers once from the Merchants Guild.

'I mean don't you need Arc'monks to keep you safe?' Words tumbling over themselves now, a stream bed sensed the change of seasons as it tasted the first of winter's melt water.

'What with Tobias gone and all that?' Mueller's hands splayed outwards, gesticulating wildly, fingers dancing to their own staccato tune.

'Arc'monks to keep you ladies of the Craft safe, so you can do your healing and all of that?' The young lad running out of steam in a hurry, a deep furrow indented his forehead at the slightest of smiles hinted at on Olven's lips, no sign of humour represented anywhere else upon her expression.

'Silly lad.' Olven offered a single shake of her head, though her pigtailed continued their rhythmic motion.

'Arc'monks are here to keep you safe.' A perfunctory pause accompanied a slight incline of her face, the two words reinforced, spelled out. 'Not us.'

'I, I don't understand?' Mueller's frown had entrenched itself, blinking rapidly once again, a glance from the lady dressed in black with all the time in the world, no sign of Akilah who must still be wrapping their dead mother's body in cloth; a clearing of a throat took his attention immediately to his sister, his spell of incomprehension broken.

‘We are leaving?’ Saya was still frozen in stance, sat with her arms around her knees, a foetal position but set upright, speaking through her splayed hair.

‘Safe as anywhere here.’ Olven’s eyeline was purely focused on the young lady. ‘We have your mother’s funeral to arrange, this we can enable once Akilah of the Lakes has washed and dressed the body.’ A single eyebrow raised and held on the pale, petite features, words fell from her lips.

‘Continue your trade with the horse and stables, if you run you will only tire yourselves once you are caught...’

‘Once we are caught?’ Mueller tried for a swallow, a shake of his head, his legs powered himself up and away, in search of water.

‘What does that mean, once we are caught?’ His voice scratchy, a little thin.

‘There is no point running.’ Lady Olven’s features remained purely focused on the young lady who had resumed her gentle rocking, Saya’s eyes cast downwards.

‘Your spike of raw power, Saya, will draw a number of parties to you, moths sucked into the gentle light of the moon.’ Olven took small steps forwards, her feet hidden within black trousers splattered and encrusted with dust and mud from the journey to the village of Balfe; Olven as one of the senior ladies of the Craft continued to speak without emotion or inference.

‘Not just ones sent by those of the merchant’s guild that Tobias is now disposing of.’

‘But they were bad, very bad.’ Mueller had found a carafe of water, his words interspersed with gulps of fluid.

‘Good or bad?’ Little to interpret Olven’s thoughts on either camp failed to make the journey to feature upon her expression.

‘Really depends on your point of view.’ Now the Lady of the Craft wrinkled her nose, a glance back to the barred entrance to the inn.

‘Unless you are parasites like they were – definitely bad.’

Olven shifted her position, small feet grinding a touch into the sawdust floor as she pivoted to her right, addressing Saya once again.

‘You have quite a unique calling to the Craft, a wormhole to the very past itself.’

A shake of the ponytails pre-empted Saya from speaking in return.

‘My role? To try to keep a fellow sister safe.’

‘Try?’ Saya tried out the word, now releasing one hand from enveloping her knees to part her hair in front of her face.

‘The spikes you have been punching up high into the realm of the spirits, likely to have generated a little more interest than just the usual.’ The two ladies expressions fixed, securely locked onto each other. Olven continued with a single word before pausing.

‘Dreams.’ This was the first time she appeared even vaguely human, the Lady of the Craft’s matte black eyes traced over the expression of Saya now sat still in front of her.

‘Dreams.’ She continued. ‘The tone of the spiralling, raw power – nightmares more like, but then you have one of Royal blood to protect you, shield you there, deep within that realm.

Olven’s head whipped around, while her pale featured face had sensed the arrival of Akilah, the inn keeper in Balfe, Mueller gave an involuntary jump at the sudden appearance of the large Lake’s lady.

‘Akilah.’ Olven’s mouth pursed together. ‘This is what we feared, an imbalance; truly why cannot the twin daughters and their mother see eye to eye?’ A slight shrug within her black cloak, the motion mostly lost within the heavy fabric.

Mueller looked from the petite Lady of the Craft, to his sister sat in a ball upon the floor, and now the significant figure of the inn keeper, none of the three noting his presence, a metronomic shake of his head, truly the lady in black could be speaking a completely different language, nothing was making any sense.

‘What my people looked to prevent through aiming to remove the Craft; misguided and oh so wrongly, but...’ Akilah scowled, her jaw clenched, eyeline dropped from Olven, snapped to stare upon the door as the wooden timbers reverberated under a heavy knocking impact, the oak beam braced itself against the iron hooks embedded within the dual doors.

‘Only me, your friendly Arc’monk.’ A lackadaisical voice boomed out. ‘Let me guess, the password? Ale?’

A pause, noting the sound as heavy timbers scraped along their enclosures, the dual doors being made free to swing open.

A loud sigh accompanied the massive figure as Tobias stooped to walk into the inn.

‘Must have guessed correct.’ Tobias took a moment to glance between each person present, and then longer than seemed necessary to scan out the interior of the inn itself once again.

‘Come on, tiny.’ The Arc’monk gestured lazily in Olven’s direction.

‘We need to go, mother and daughter of the desert to escort back into this happy camp, not to forget two from up north, the mindguard Kijani of the pyramids way south calling in a favour.’

Tobias’ eyeline settled upon the confused expression holding court on Mueller’s features, the young lad half intimidated, half in awe.

‘You know, t’was a damn sight easier to keep an eye on the church man Linkin, half of his time spent praying and all that...’

The bodies?’ Akilah broke into Tobias bassy drawl.

‘Buried down deep, scum they may have been but a place of rest they have.’

Tobias wide, muscled shoulders rolled forwards, a new face to speak to.

‘Take it nice and easy Linkin said, getting old I am he said, look after a nice quiet Lady of the Craft.’ A deep snort, glancing sideways to Olven who had not registered any of her Mindguard’s words spoken so far.

‘This role, not so much a caretaker, more like an undertaker.’ Now Tobias shifted his stance once again, choosing to focus upon Saya.

‘You know your girl Olven here, used to be such a nice, quiet lady.’ A wide smile filled his features, mirth touched on his eyes.

‘Don’t turn out like her.’ As if on cue, the humour fell away, hard features took their place on Tobias’ face, mirrored in his body language.

‘And in this mood, not so much a healing touch.’

‘I, I don’t know what you mean?’ Saya’s head slowly shook, a tremor ran through her body still wrapped up within her own arms, words falling from her lips.

‘Only an hour or so ago, we found our mother dead, an accident we thought, but no?’

The glistening of jewels at the side of her eyes, tears fought back but still the spheres of fluid fought surface tension to expand; Saya’s words falling flat, neither the mindguard nor the Lady of the Craft registering her spoken words, their legs in motion, both were headed for the entrance and exit of the inn, one and the same.

Saya took an involuntary gulp, another tremor pulsed her body into motion, a side glance transformed into a stare focused on the innkeeper.

‘Akilah.’ The young lady’s eyes narrowed. ‘Are you okay?’

The large Lake’s lady had sat heavily into a chair, her eyes cast skywards.

‘Why cannot the twin daughters and their mother see eye to eye.’ Akilah looked between the brother and sister present, looking without seeing; a peel of laughter dripping with irony peeled forth, the sing-song Lake’s accent had never sounded stronger.

‘Suddenly I’m a little less worried about those clad in Bronze, mustered in numbers to our west, maybe not our foremost problem anymore.’

The brother and sister exchanged a shrug and shake of heads, both focused back on the inn’s keep, no more words spoken by Akilah; silence diffused outwards, offering no clues of its own.