

Entropy, a natural principle

Chapter 1

Tenkini could not keep the frustration from flooding her senses, what kind of mindguard was she? Certainly not in the league of Rackofan and forget Loane, the doubt continued to niggle away that Garvin had been forced into accepting her, woken hours as night passed the baton to early morning spent trying to convince herself that she was ready, though only in the absence of any other suitable candidates?

Stop it, she instructed herself, forcing her limbs to relax, feeling the capillaries slowly open, emptying her mind, her vision cleared. She did not need doubts as enemies, there were more than enough of those in the physical; Tenkini eased back her shoulders, the lactic acid draining away. Not just the physical, it seemed that the Pantogan were under siege from every sense that could be imagined or invented, her introspection broken by a voice, clear and decisive.

‘We leave, they want Amble, fine, let them take it.’ The Queen’s pose had not shifted; the sudden onset of greying hairs led her to resemble her mother more so each day. ‘The Pantogan, our people, are what is important, we will take back our cultural heritage at a later date.’ Elaina looked across to Tenkini. ‘Time to leave Amble.’ Certainty reinforced her words.

‘But, your brother? He has pledged to ride to our aid, the remnants of the army in Dlymton?’ There was little conviction in Tenkini’s words; she knew the answer before she heard it.

A slow, measured sigh. Queen Elaina looked amongst the mix of her people, a markedly diminished Royal Court. ‘Prince Tobin is under siege by a simple lack of numbers at Dlymton.’ She paused for a moment’s introspection. ‘If the time comes, it is a terrain he knows well and will manipulate to his advantage.’ Her eyes flicked to the high decorative architrave melding the stonewalls to the wooden beamed ceiling.

She swallowed the smile, there had been little time for house duties in the last year or so, a series of webs and the spiders had been petitioned to form their own glistening decorations, she would not wager on a fly’s lifespan in this Royal Hall; an ironical smile passed over her lips, glimpsed briefly.

‘The Prince distributes the veterans that he sees fit to train the younglings, we lack the men and women of fighting years.’ Her eyes flashed for a moment; no Elaina, focus on what you can achieve, what you have control over.

So few came forward for the Prince’s Army now, the majority choosing Armastad, no longer the boy, flying the flag of vengeance and blood letting. Less an army and more a force of death and destruction, laying waste to all they saw as standing against them and their increasingly narrow vision of the future for the peoples of Pantogan.

An unfamiliar movement in her peripheral vision, the Lady Anya stirring, matte black eyes absorbed any and all light around her.

‘Lady of the Craft, you would like to add something?’ Serena focused on the spirit held within the young girl to her front left.

‘Queen of the Pantogan, you are wise to focus on what you can maintain, please heed my previous words.’ Anya took a slow breathe. ‘Our generation knows civilisation, the next will be semi literate and unskilled, the third generation wild and lawless; we must not lose all we have learned.’ Lady Anya’s face and body language gave little away.

Serena nodded. ‘And the role of the Craft? The Arts and appreciation of the beauty that surrounds us gives little joy when the crops fail year on year in barren lands, weather and seasons are erratic at best and fires burn with little enthusiasm.’

Eye contact maintained between the two. ‘Does the Craft have any additional answers to the complete withdrawal of the Elementals?’

Anya’s lips pursed. ‘No, this was not to be expected. In a prior confrontation between the people of the Pantogan, Craft and Elementals an uneasy alliance was reached, not a complete absence of the presence of Earth, Wind, Fire and Water.’

She settled, crossing her legs at the ankles. ‘Whilst we call on the resources we can, we have no ready answers for you.’

Quiet settled across the court, the status quo returned, Tenkini shuffled slightly, bending to scratch at where the lower arrow pod strap was cutting into her left calf muscle, massaging at the muscle through the leather trouser leg. A swift series of movements, seemingly more natural than eating or drinking, arrow in place and bow string straining; noting the man whose figure had appeared she relaxed the tension. ‘Rake, you are late.’

‘Well met, mindguard.’ The man in light tan leather bowed deeply to those in front of him, a relaxed walking pace taken up to the small assembly at the head of the hall.

‘Rake, you are very welcome, I wondered if you had become lost in your playing?’ The Queen’s voice took on a curt tone.

Rake smiled an additional apology. ‘I lost track of the day my Queen, the younglings are far too enthusiastic in their study of the flute.’ His features held at the outburst to his left.

‘And this will bring coin back to Amble? How about food for the people, or better still a sword to handle or bow to search out the enemy?’ The man was beetroot red, large and overbearing at best.

‘Wistfelt, master guildsman, representative of the trades and merchants, I bid you welcome.’ Rake’s face held the smile in place.

Elaina’s eyes flitted between the two; very good Rake, always one to take the heat out of any fire, even it was at one person’s expense, still Wistfelt had been stoking his anger since the group had assembled. He could not blow his top at the Queen, and all were too afraid of Anya; Rake had become the natural target, he could look after himself, at least in verbal banter.

‘You patronising little musical pipsqueak, so you make the crowd dance and inject temporary happiness, what about gold and filling a belly with corn?’ Wistfelt was building a healthy head of steam.

Rake’s left hand subconsciously reached to his jacket pocket, stroking the flute through the lightly scuffed leather. ‘Practice what you preach Mr Wistfelt, your specialism is in cereals I believe, when was the last time you visited your crops? And as for your comrades, the Plume of Feathers inn can only host so many meetings before it starts to look like a social club, one with little faith in our monarchy.’ He gave a wink to the rapidly deflating merchant.

‘But, but, but... You dare!’ Wistfelt began to bluster.

A polite cough from the side. ‘I concur with the musician, less time spent on problems and more energy invested in proactive solutions would be advised.’ The grey waist coated man spoke quietly yet with a secure determination, few had noticed him up until now.

‘Woolaton, you turncoat, be gone with all of you!’ Wistfelt stood up with a flourish, his long cloak swept behind him and snagged on an iron hook, the velvet tearing, Wistfelt’s cursing grew louder as he stormed out of the chamber.

‘You bring us one form of entertainment or other, you are very welcome Rake. Please note I need the merchants with me, try not to annoy all of them.’

Elaina tried to maintain a scolding expression, little present were convinced.

‘Yes ma’am, I will bare that in mind into the future. So we are on the road once again?’ The laughter lines drained from his face, replaced by concern, Rake looked across to

Anya who gave seemingly no perceptible reaction, his eyes were drawn across to Tenkini, the lithe mindguard with the arrow pods on either leg, hands never far from the bow strung across her back. No sign of the courtesan now, a figure of muscle, sinew and scars, her eyes plagued by self doubt, the only competitor that came close was herself, what would it take to convince Tenkini that she was the equal of the past masters Rackofan or Loane?

He gave a playful wink in her direction, she pretended to ignore him but the slightest of twitches at the corner of her mouth betrayed her, he must find more time to catch up with the Queen's mindguard.

‘Mr Woolaton, analysis please.’ Elaina looked to her left with an open expression.

The only fitting expression would be bland, nondescript, and inconspicuous; nothing would please Woolaton more to be described as such, the former chief spymaster, he now accumulated knowledge for Elaina, in the past for her mother, a role he carried out with both tenacity, resourcefulness and determination.

‘My Queen and invited peoples of this court, we face conflicts on a number of fronts, the challenge being we would be unlikely to survive any singular threat, let alone all faced together.’ He gathered himself, looking around for signs of comprehension; seemingly assured he had pitched to his audience appropriately he continued.

‘We have the war between the young man known as Armastad calling our men and women to arms, to wage war against the Lake's people. Little is known about Armastad, only that his hate for the people of the Lakes leaves little to doubt, and he will not rest until genocide is complete. He has a strategic mind, the public use he makes of his legions of bronzed warriors, serving to inspire our next generation of men and women away from yours and the Prince's army.’ Woolaton grew silent, waiting for questions.

‘But surely, this is a good thing, he will rid us of one of our enemies?’ A female voice from the fifteen or so people assembled across the court.

‘Madame Bastilles, no, please do not view the conflicts as credit or debt as you do of our trading partners.’ Woolaton nodded. ‘Armastad seems to have little to no formal practical fighting training, of which he cannot so pass onto our younglings. As a result they are guided by little more than enthusiasm and the belief they are invincible and will live forever.’ A sip of water and subtle grimace. ‘The natural conclusion is a high cost of injury to our people, radicalisation of their attitudes to war and conflict, but also an improvement in the standard of the Lakes people as they learn techniques and strategy from their limited successes.’ He picked off specks of white from the worsted woollen waistcoat.

‘There have been sightings of the desert people growing in numbers, they eye the Lakes and surrounding fertile lands with envious eyes, it will surely only be a matter of time before they realise that we are not simply overstretched but our border troops non-existent.’

A look across to the Queen, she gave a curt nod to continue.

‘Following our triumph over the Elementals the very earth appears to have lots its nourishment to sustain crops, water leaches deeper and deeper rendering drinking water and irrigation a challenge, fire burns with little heat for either warmth or ability to cook food; seasons are simply guess work and the winds come and go as they please.’

Woolaton held the bottom of his lip between thumb and forefinger. ‘I share the concern of our Queen and Lady Anya, the risk to all the Pantogan have gained over the generations is in question. If we are approached by Armastad and his brigades, I would recommend a nomadic life for our people, to follow the animals as they track water and sustenance.’ He bowed his head at the shoulders, a half step taken back.

‘And that is not to say anything of the enemies and past rivals we have little intelligence over, biding their time, the once great Pantogan fallen low.’ A tall man, grey beard and hair, tiredness and resignation present in equal measure evident in both his eyes and features, Linkin pursed his lips.

Queen Elaina took a sharp breath. ‘Our people face many challenges, that is true, but the same could be said for any generation in the past, now we simply reflect on the positives and what was viewed as impossible at the time as logical steps taken.’

She appeared to make a conscious effort to relax her pose. ‘An opportunity to sharpen the saw, I see before me good men and women that the Pantogan can trust to see us through this and many other future challenges.’

‘My Queen.’ A deep man’s voice. ‘Have you not heard your own intelligence man’s thoughts, the time for the Pantogan is surely over.’

Elaina’s head whipped around, a smile on her face. The man with a blacksmith’s leather apron and large blackened hands looked confused at her reaction.

The Queen eased herself to her feet; Tenkini automatically fell into line with her.

‘Easy to lead when you have a mindguard by your side, I have two younglings at home desperate to fight for this Armastad, what do I tell them? That our once vaunted army is permanently penned in to Dlymton and we are to finish our time chasing around the plains, up and down dale? This is no solution.’ The blacksmith was struggling to meet Elaina’s eyes.

‘I mean you no disrespect, my Queen; you have proved your worth in previous battles, that is true. We all know the stories, not inflated tales of lore but based on fact; but this is the best we can do?’

The Queen turned to face her mindguard. ‘Your concerns are misplaced Tenkini, I see no threat here, I see no threat from any of my people except concern that nobody holds closer to their conscience than myself.’ Elaina stepped right up to the blacksmith, she was not a small lady and yet she only came up to the broad man’s chest.

A flapping noise from afar, a feather floating downwards, side slipping through the air, caught in a spiders web before gravity could complete its journey.

With a half smile she reached up to grasp the blacksmith’s shoulder.

‘Thank you, thank you for your honesty.’ Elaina began to walk around the surprised and shocked representatives within the Royal Court, the only one with a smile on his face being Rake.

‘Damn you are good.’ Rake whispered, sharing a glance with Anya, they both turned to leave, he gave one last glance towards Tenkini; she pretended she had not noticed.

‘Let us know what the Queen of the Pantogan wishes of the Craft, we will hear your requests.’ Anya stood next to Rake.

Elaina had seldom looked more relaxed. ‘If our people did not face such challenges, I would not need such leaders and representatives as yourselves. This is not simply about the Pantogan, surely we cannot continue to have such division across our lands.’

‘Now you are talking about conquering all, when we do not have the forces simply to hold our own?’ A strident female voice.

A sharp shake of the head, Elaina had not stopped slowly walking amongst the sitting people, those craning their heads to keep the Queen in their vision.

‘No, I want our generation to leave a legacy of peace, of those across the lands and Lakes living and working together, respect replacing death, trade instead of pillage.’

‘You sell the impossible!’ The female voice retorted.

Elaina stopped walking, crouching by the ladies chair. ‘Briar, if we still had the former vaunted brigades training in Dlymton would we really aim for a different goal? As our legal council surely you can see the fairness behind the vision?’

The lady’s face changed, confusion overshadowing the certainty of righteousness. ‘I, I...’ She spluttered.

The Queen slowly returned to stand next to Linkin, the grey haired man nodded respectfully.

‘I see the logic behind your words my Queen.’ He took a step backwards as the hawk landed heavily on her shoulder, taking its time to place its piercing vision upon each of those present, seemingly burning through their very soul with its yellow eyes, irises set to wide open.

‘We have been reactive for far too long, that will change, we move together.’

A shared glance between Anya and Linkin.

‘A plan comes to mind, my Queen.’ Linkin looked between the hawk and Elaina.

‘That I am glad of, now let’s leave before I lose all of my blood.’ Elaina whispered in discomfort, a train of red fluid starting to leach out from the hawk’s talons gripped securely onto her left shoulder. ‘At least on the move I can lose this Royal finery, back to the leather armour.’ The two shared a glance, the Hawk pushed off from Elaina, fighting for flight with powerful wings, the grimace eased.

‘Your requests, my Queen.’ Woolaton fell into line with Elaina and Linkin, Tenkini covering their exit up the wide stairs from the Royal Court.

‘Assemble the key players, request all that can attend be here before the end of the week.’ Elaina suddenly looked very tired.

‘Yes, my Queen, with your forgiveness I foresaw this need and summoned those you mention, the last will be with us the day after tomorrow.’ Woolaton began to move away.

‘Tobias and Tendle?’ Hope flickered across Linkin’s face.

Woolaton nodded. ‘They have been journeying back for some time, they will be in Amble tonight.’

Linkin nodded decisively, he stretched outwards, the smile slowly widening. ‘Good, maybe not such an inevitable demise.’

Elaina, Woolaton and Tenkini looked towards him with shared surprise in their eyes.