Spellweaver : a novel

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Spellweaver

A novel

Cyrus Newcomb

A thesis submitted in fulfilment

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

Honors Thesis

This is to certify that the Honors Thesis of Cyrus A. Newcomb has been approved by the Examining Committee on April 23, 2013 as satisfying the thesis requirement of the University Honors Program

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For Sam,
The best friend I have never met
Chapter 1

Cole Travers strode into the Chimera's Tail as if he owned the place, and this upset Stanton Letherben, the man who actually did, more than the usually genial barman cared to admit. After serving on the front lines during the end of the Wars of Annexation, Stanton had purchased the Chimera's Tail with the last part of his meagre soldier's commission. He had been injured during his tour of duty, returning to Thertan with a bum knee, a broken arm, and a face like a squashed gourd. A bit of healing magic had saved Stanton from dying but it had not been able to make him handsome again, and Stanton's betrothed had left him after seeing his scarred and grotesque body. Now, Stanton invested all his time in the Chimera's Tail and took a fierce pride in what he had created. Being a working class man, Stanton did not know the name nor the reputation of the man who had entered his establishment, but if he had he no doubt would have ejected the man from the bar immediately.

The tavern was a simple one-room affair, and the walls were hung with mementos from Stanton's time in the Royal Army, serving on the mainland, fighting against both the necromancers of Úruush and the elves of Felviar. His trusty flintlock rifle Betsy hung over the bar, her metal bits polished to a coppery sheen. Stanton did his best to keep the place in order, but he was getting well into his sixties, and his injuries prevented him from cleaning as much as he would have liked.

Stanton had just finished serving a round to a group of rather thuggish men sitting in the corner when the door of the tavern was flung open. Bright light flooded in around the tall, slim figure of Cole Travers, and Stanton had to blink several times to get a good look at the man. The new arrival was dressed well in a pair of black slacks, a handsome dark knee-length coat. There was a straight cane clasped in the man's hand, and Stanton believed he saw the glint of a golden chain on the newcomer's breast as Cole turned to close the door. Stanton grimaced. The man was obliviously part of the gentry, young, foppish, and no doubt completely self-absorbed. Odds were good he was lost, something no one, least of all a wealthy individual, wanted to be in this quarter of town.

Cole crossed the room in three quick strides, and Stanton was able to finally get a good look at his face. The man appeared to be in his mid-twenties, with strong cheek bones, and thick jaw bones that tapered down to a thin chin. He was clean shaven, an oddity itself, with long black hair that fell to his shoulders and rather pale skin.

What really bothered Stanton was how the man looked at both the Chimera's Tail and its patrons. Cole seemed to be judging everything, from the tavern's hard lacquered bar, to the long double-pane glass window Stanton had installed in the western wall. Those windows were his favourite feature of the place, and he paid a street urchin twopence a week to keep them clean. Even though the Chimera's Tail was located in a slum, squatting down an alley way between Walker Street and Trader's Lane, but one couldn't tell that from looking out those windows. Outside was a fantastic view of the mighty Mallar river, its banks swarming with merchants, pedallers, and street performers. Indeed as long as one did not tilt his back and see the massive chimneys and smoke stacks vomiting billowing clouds of ash into the sky, one might think he was in one of the nicer quarters of Thertan, capital of the Achlish Empire.

Cole continued across the room, sweeping past the sleeping form of Jessa, one of Thertan's many women of ill repute. The man completely ignored the other patrons, and even the way he glared at the tavern's new gas-lights annoyed Stanton. Stanton had spent a good deal of money having those lamps installed. Of course, he would have like to have purchased ever-burning mage-fyre lamps, but magic was an expensive commodity for the common man. Besides, the salesman had promised him that gas was the next great up and coming innovation; before adding that such an investment would require Stanton to sign a six year contract to buy gas for the lamps.

“Somethin' I can get for ye lad?” Stanton smiled doing his best to sound genial, while at the
same time making it clear the newcomer did not belong. The man fidgeted under Stanton's gaze, hand playing about the high collar of his fine dress shirt. "Or are yuh by chance looking fer soom directions? Or ken I help ya with something?"

"Your assistance would be most welcome," said Cole, in a deep timber Stanton would not have expected from one so young. The young man smiled, revealing a row of dazzling white teeth, and Stanton noticed that the smile did not seem to reach up to the young man's icy blue eyes. Stanton usually found the gentry spoke with a sneering contempt for the lower classes, but Stanton did not detect a hint of malice in this man's voice. On the contrary now having heard the youth speak, Stanton felt an odd compulsion to help him in any way possible. "I have come here on business. Have you, by chance had a Mister Quintan grace this fine establishment with his patronage?"

"No sir," Stanton replied before the other man had finished. This new arrival was trouble, Stanton could just tell. "Should he 'ave sir?"

"You would remember him if he had," said Cole. "Mayhap he shall arrive later."

"Would ye like something ter drink?"

"Perhaps later, when my acquaintance arrives." Cole looked about, his cold, emotionless eyes, lingering on the thugs drinking in the corner. "For now, I shall acquire a table, and wait."

Stanton smiled and watched as the young man crossed the room, sweeping past the sleeping Jessa, and seating himself at a table in the shadows. Stanton went back to his work.

"Simple minded fool," Cole breathed more than said. His private thoughts often tumbled out like this, uttered so quietly only he could hear them. Indeed, the barman had been very simple minded, and very easy to dupe. There really had been no need to use magic to charm the man. *Still it's always fun to break these idiots with magic when I get the chance*, Cole thought as he crossed the room.

Cole got a certain perverse rush from using magic to compel people to act against their better judgement The real reason Cole had dipped into his magical talents was so he could get a feeling for the room's atmosphere, especially its patrons. No sooner had he begun to tap his magics, when one of the men sitting in the corner looked up. Cole smiled, and the man had taken the bait. Only another touched by magic could sense when such powers were used. Cole was not usually so careless, but when it came to the hunt, finding one's prey often required a bit of recklessness.

Cole sat quietly for a few minutes before reaching into his coat, and grasping the golden chain Stanton had glimpsed earlier. The Telethium that he removed from his coat pocket appeared quite similar to the standard pocket watch; it was round, gold, and fit perfectly into the palm of a man's hand. The Achlish Phoenix, its eyes made of small rubies, was etched into the Telethium's cover while the release clasp was set with shimmering mother of pearl. Cole pressed the release, and the Telethium sprang open, revealing an internal face that was most certainly not that of an average pocket watch.

The Telethium was a product of the brilliant tinkerers on Crafter's Row. Each had his own design, but every tinkerer started with the same basic design, a pocket watch. The centre of the Telethium was still a clock, but it was surrounded by a variety of other gadgets. A thin glass tube, filled with a viscous green liquid ran along the inner edge of the Telethium, while a small glass bead floated within, resting against a series of marks that recorded the temperature to the nearest degree centigrade. The Telethium also contained a compass as well as several other gauges that recorded depth and pressure. When taken outside, a small spindle on the side of the Telethium could also measure air speed and direction. Like a watch, everything was contained under a single piece of glass, with the facing side nothing more than a simple polished piece of gold, perfect for scrying if one had such magical talents.

Cole pretended to study the Telethium, but then caught his reflection in the device's glass face. He frowned, reached up, and ruffled his hair, tossing the part in his silky black hair over to the left. Every few seconds, he would glance up and watch the men at the other table. They looked to be
common street thugs, a prevalent sight in the poorer areas of Thertan. The only thing that really set them apart was that one had noticed Cole's subtle use of magic. All of them were dressed plainly, either in the baggy clothes of a dock-hand, or the slightly more refined dress of a factory labourer. A diverse array of moustaches, beards, and mutton chops adorned their faces, and they all looked rather rough and weary.

The man Cole suspected of being a mage had a truly glorious moustache, stretching out several centimetres from his face, before curling back in over itself. The man had mousy brown hair, and a weak chin. He didn't look like a wizard, but not looking like a wizard was the best defence a fugitive Spellweaver had. Cole noticed that one of the men was looking at him, and he went back to staring at the Telethium. None of the men appeared to be carrying a firearm, and Cole was confident enough in his own abilities that the clubs, dirks, and cudgels he saw hidden on their persons would not present much of a threat.

Cole continued to study his targets for a good ten minutes before finally deciding on a course of action. From the few scattered words he had heard, it seemed the group was discussing a shipment of some sort or another. As he watched, one of the men stood up and staggered away from the table, heading towards the commode. Cole snapped the Telethium closed, rose, swept past the slumbering whore, and stepped up to the bar.

"It would appear my friend has been delayed," Cole said to Stanton. "So tell me, what do you possess in the way of wines?"

"Uhhh." Stanton scrunched up his scarred face, trying to recall what exactly he had in his cellar. He didn't usually go down there, since most patrons of the Chimera's Tail preferred either hard liquor, or the cheap, thick ale he purchased from a brewery just outside of Thertan. "I think I gort a bottle or two of Pedeo."

"I'll pass," Cole sniffed. Achland's domestic wines, regardless of region, were some of the worst in the entire civilized world. He replied as his eyes drifted back to the men at the table. One of them had withdrawn a bent cigar from his pocket and was now futilely trying to strike a match against the table. Cole smirked and sauntered over. "Might I render assistance?"

Cole reached into his coat and withdrew a simple unadorned lighter from his pocket. He flipped the cap back and flicked the flint a few times before a flame sputtered into existence. The man held his cigar out, and Cole bent forward, touching the flame to the tip of the cigar.

"Thanks." The man took a long drag from his cigar, and turned away. The others eyed Cole suspiciously, before turning back to talk amongst themselves. He stood behind them for a moment, before the man with the cigar turned back to him. "Can I help ye with somethin?"

"Well, I could not help but overhear your discussion," said Cole. "I was thinking I may...."

"You with the Consortium?" Grunted one of the men.

"No, I'm...."

"A recruiter here to drop a coin me drink then clap me in irons and ship me off to the front?" said one of the others. "I know plenty about how you Queen's men work, trickin wokin men like us into military service."

"I take offence to such accusations." Cole slid into the empty chair, sitting down between two of the largest men. One wore a slightly dusty bowler hat, and had the largest mutton chops Cole had ever seen. The other had pockmarked skin, and his hands were dyed a dark green colour, most likely from time spent working in a dye shop. The men all glared at him, but none raised any objections. "I own a free trading company who's ships are harboured oop north," Cole lied, tweaking his accent just enough to be believable. "As such, I am not a fond of the Consortium. From what I have heard, neither are any of you. Today might prove to be rather fortuitous for both of us, I am currently seeking to employee the aid of several able bodied man such as yourselves."
“We don't need ya, ye bleeding oaf,” said the suspected Spellweaver. Cole smiled, up close it was unmistakable who the man was. Braden Mchone was a former Achlish soldier turned criminal after the war, who ran a tight group of pickpockets, strong men, and other rascallions. The moustache had thrown Cole off, but the small scar along Braden's jaw was a dead give away.

“Why would you so swiftly refuse such a generous proposition?” Cole cocked his head to the side, and he sniffed the air. The men themselves smelled of sweat and dirt, but Braden smelled different. He smelled burnt with the slightest touch of brimstone. As Cole sat there, he could feel an unnatural aura emanating from Braden, almost like a low pitch resonance that made Cole's molars ache.

“The Consortium consumes more small companies every day. Then there are foreigners from Esparta and Felviar to contend with. I am proposing that the small independent traders form a union to challenge this threat.”

“And how's you plannin to do that?” Braden studied Cole for a moment. “You haven't told me your name stranger, but even if you had, I have a feeling I wouldn't know who you were. All you private little merchants are the same, thinking yer some big name when ye ain't.”

“Does it matter if you know who I am? Come now, we are all aware that the world progressing rapidly. Gold is the power now, not the Crown, not magic, and certainly not the Consortium.” Cole paused to savour the drama of the statement. “I am offering you a very nice partnership.”

As he spoke, Cole probed each man's thoughts in turn. He could see their thoughts in his mind's eye. One was yellow, nervous, and fidgety. Braden's thoughts were grey, tinged with the slightest hint of red. The others were all green, perfectly at peace. With a silently muttered incantation, Cole began to exert his power upon those calm thoughts. Slowly, fingers of dark blue began to creep through the green, twisting and digging in as Cole slowly brought one of the men under his control.

“Only fools believe that the Weavers will ever surrender their power,” said Braden. The man on Braden's right staggered to his feet, left eye twitching. “The strong always find ways to exploit what they have. Have you heard the stories? How a single man could twist the minds of others and bend them to his will? Why would anyone give up the power to weave spells?”

“They won't,” Cole smiled, a feline, predatory smile.

“Oh, here I thought you might actually be here to offer me work,” Braden looked up, past Cole. “Good to see you back Jaime.”

Cole glanced back just in time to see the brutish man who had left the table step up behind him. An odd hush fell over the room as the man drew a cudgel, and swung it down at Cole's head. Cole threw his right hand out, and conjured a wall of blue-black energy between him and Jaime. The cudgel crashed down, striking the shield. A single sharp note rang through the tavern, and Stanton's head snapped around, fearing that his precious windows had shattered. A spider web of cracks spread along the indigo shield. The barrier held for a moment, then shattered under the weight of the blow, exploding into a thousand thin, shimmering shards.

Without looking, Cole flicked his wrist and the shards of energy exploded outwards, tearing into Jaime's face, arms, and chest. The large blond man screamed as blood welled out from his wounds. Rubies of blood fell to the floor, and Stanton flung himself down behind the bar.

Braden chuckled. “You've lost none of your charm Cole.”

“You might say I have gained some.” Cole's fingers twitched. The man under his control reached for the dirk sheathed at his waist.

The short stubby blade flashed in the tavern's dim light as it whistled through the air, rushing towards Braden's back. With the slightest of movements, Braden twisted to the side, but the blade still nicked his chin, drawing a single bead of blood. Braden casually reached back and grabbed the back of his assailant's head. The table shook as Braden drove the man face first into the table, causing a tankard of beer to crash to the floor. Pain flashed through the thugs mind, expelling Cole's influence. The room
erupted in chaos.

Green Hands was the first to spring into action. Without looking, he swept his massive green fist horizontally across the table. Cole ducked beneath the blow, smirking as it ploughed directly into Bowler Hat's face with a satisfying crunch. His chair tottered back, and he rolled with it, bringing his legs up to his chest. He tumbled over and came up in a standing position, once again facing Braden from across the table. Green Hands slowly began to stand, just as Cole bashed him full in the face with his cane. Braden had not moved, but the thug on his left had begun to reach down into his jacket. Cole whipped his cane around in the man's direction, and depressed a small button on its surface. There was a sharp snap, and the cane extended out from both ends, the complicated spring works causing it to grow from a simple walking stick in to a full staff. Cole whipped the man with the staff before he had time to withdraw his concealed pistol.

With a few muttered words, Braden punched the air sending a fireball hurtling across the table. Cole batted the fireball away with his left hand, the magical wards that protected him manifesting as a swirling indigo nimbus around his skin. The heat was intense, but he managed to deflect the blast with his own magics before any lasting harm was done. The fireball screamed through the tavern, hurtling over Stanton, before blasting through one of the man's beloved windows. The fireball passed cleanly through the glass, leaving behind a large, dripping hole to mark its passing. Outside, people began to scream.

Cole pressed a second button on his staff, and it collapsed back down into a cane. “This place is rather cramped for such displays don't you think?”

“It is,” Braden agreed.

The force of the blast hit Cole like a bull. He was lifted off his feet and thrown backwards. The room whizzed by as he reached out with his mind, wrapping himself in a cocoon of mental energy. Cole was blown through the window and hurled out into the street. He slammed into the cobblestones, and even as protected as he was, the force of the landing drove Cole's breath from his lungs and stars danced before his eyes. Cole groaned and rolled over on his side. A crowd began to gather as he slowly stood up.

Well, at least it wasn't fire he hit me with, Cole thought wryly. He glanced around at the crowd, hoping to see a grey-coated constable somewhere. He spotted one standing off to the side, or thought he did. The man stared at him for a moment, then turned and ran, red scarf flapping in his wake. Cole cursed under his breath and turned back to face the wall.

A jet of flame exploded out of the shattered window and arched out over the bystanders, showering them with molten droplets of glass. Some screamed and ran, but the vast majority stayed, forming a lose semicircle around the wall of the Chimera's Tail. Braden followed the fire out, casually vaulting over the lintel before dropping to the street a yard below. As he did, Cole reached out and probed Braden's mind. The only thing Cole found was a wall of red rage, focused on one thing, Cole. Braden raised his right hand, and with a quick utterance, flames between to dance between his fingertips. A gasp swept through the crowd, and Cole heard them take a collective step back.

Braden struck first. Quick as a snake, the larger man lobbed a fireball at Cole. Instinctively, Cole dodged to the right, throwing himself into a clumsy roll. Braden let out an inhuman bellow and began to fling fireballs at a frantic pace. Cole ducked under the first, dodged the second, deflected the third, but the fourth came so quickly that he was forced to erect a shimmering shield of energy to protect himself. The fireball splattered around the edge of shield like an egg, fire splashing up and away from Cole. The force of the blast was so great that Cole was forced back several paces and when he regained his balance, he saw his discarded cane lying less than a yard from his left foot.

There was a momentary lull in Braden's attack, and Cole seized the initiative. He drew the energy of his shield into the palm of his hand, forming it into a shimmering orb that he then hurled at
Braden. Braden raised his hands, fingers spread wide, and flames burst forth from them. There was a muffled explosion as fire and pure magical energy collided. Flames danced around the combatants, licking over the cobblestones and starting several small fires. Flames rushed towards the crowd, and Cole did his best to shunt them away, erecting several small magical barriers to do so. The flames settled, and the two combatants began to circle around one another.

“You never were much of a fighter,” Braden taunted. Cole had to concede that point. His chest was heaving, and he was exhausted from the amount of magic he had used. “You lacked stamina and power if I recall correctly. You were always better with the more subdued schools, so tell me what bloody idiot hired you to kill me? The Faith wouldn't hire a Spellweaver, they have the Inquisitors for that. Can't be the military, they wouldn't have you after you deserte....” Cole attacked, launching a flurry of indigo energy bolts at Braden. The other man danced away, narrowly avoiding the attack. “Must be a government job then eh? Though why they would care about me...”

Cole broke into a gale of laughter. “You?! The Watch doesn't have time to spend on the dregs of society. You're nothing but a thug with an inflated sense of self-worth.” As he spoke, Cole felt Braden's focus break. A single chartreuse fracture of self-doubt split the wall of rage, and Cole plunged into the breach, planting a seed of blue in amongst the red.

“Then why come after me at all heh?” Braden cocked an eyebrow. “Unless you have a death wish, and if so I am more than happy to help ya.”

Once again, Braden struck without the slightest warning. The fireball, its centre pure white, rocketed through the air. Cole reacted a second too late, and the blast caught him square in the chest, instantly incinerating him. Braden smirked, and then Cole struck. The single kernel of influence Cole had planted in Braden's mind had been enough, and Cole had used it to trick the other man's eyes into seeing a shadowy doppelgänger. As the fireball hurtled towards him Cole had moved, grabbed his cane, and closed in on Braden. Still under the effects of Cole's phantasm, Braden did not see Cole approach him, and, with a sudden surge of brutality, Cole swung his cane straight into Braden's knee.

A sickening pop rang out over the street as the joint shattered. Braden let out a demonic howl, and his head snapped around. Braden lunged and hooked his good leg around Cole's instep. Cole gasped as Braden's fingers clenched around his right forearm. Cole screamed as fire erupted from those same fingers. Braden released Cole's forearm and then swept his legs out from under him, causing the other man to collapse at his feet.

“You always were good with illusions though,” Braden wheezed, shifting his weight off his injured leg. “I should have seen that coming I guess. So now tell me, who sent you to kill me. Talk fast, and I won't burn you to death.”

All Cole could see was Braden's feet and his shadow, turned into a grotesque thing by the magefire that still burned around the edges of the battlefield. Already exhausted, both from pain and the mental exertion of battle-magic, Cole once again reached for his powers. Braden's shadow twitched and a ripple ran along its surface. The crowd pressed in as Braden circled around Cole. The crowd was eager for blood, and both men were more than happy to oblige them.

I always love an audience, thought Cole, gathering his energy for one final assault. Braden reached down as his shadow exploded into a writhing mass of blue-black tentacles. The tentacles shot up out of the ground, wrapping themselves around Braden's arms and legs. Braden tried to scream as the shadows snaked over his face and neck, and then his head was wrenched back as the shadow-stuff dragged him to his knees. Cole staggered to his feet and looked down at Braden. Down on his knees and bound by shadows, the only thing Braden could do was look around. Cole watched as Braden's eyes widened, and, with a casual flick of his wrist, he commanded the mass of shadow-stuff to plunge itself down Braden's throat. Like sand filling a hole, the shadows rushed in to fill the void. Braden screamed, but no sound came out. Cole clenched his fist, and Braden died. He smiled as a cheer
ran through the crowd.

_The paupers fear and hate us, yet here they are cheering for bloodshed, fools._ Stanton stood at the window, watching as Cole gave Braden's body a contemptuous kick.

Cole broke into a cold sweat and slumped against the wall of the _Chimera's Tale_. Magic was draining, and he rooted in his pocket, searching for something to eat. He withdrew a hunk of jerky and bit into the dried meat, savouring the salty taste. The world spun as he straightened up and staggered over to Braden's corpse. Cole knelt down and had to fight to keep from collapsing entirely. Hands trembling, he began to rifle through Braden's pockets. Weeks of planning, months of research, and years of anguish were all about to be made worthwhile. It only took a few seconds for him to find what he was looking for.

The medallion was small, silver, and flecked with an emerald patina. It was round, with a strange nine-sided geometric form etched into the metal. Cole studied the medallion for a moment, shivering as he remembered the last time he had seen another like it, pinned on the collar of a traitor. He had only caught a glimpse of it then, but now he could finally study it in detail, and learn more about his quarry. He rifled through Braden's pockets a second time, removing several pieces of tattered paper and small short handled knife, before shoving the all the various odds and ends into his pocket.

“Sorry about the destruction.” Cole looked up at Stanton, then reached into his coin purse, meaning to retrieve a couple of pence. He decided against it and, instead, ripped the coin purse off his belt and flung it up to Stanton. “That should cover the damages.”

The shrill call of a beadle's whistle echoed over the water while Cole slunk off, disappearing into the crowd, fingers clutching the small brooch that he hoped would finally let him lay the past to rest.
Chapter 2

Armel had spent the day sleeping in a warehouse down on the wharfs. It had been easy enough to break into and the building had provided a relatively safe place to sleep. It had not been comfortable sleeping wedged between two crates in the rafters, but at least it had been a place indoors. Armel stood, cracked his back, and crept barefoot along the rafter, occasionally poking his head out to spy on the workmen below. He had entered the warehouse in the dark, slipping in through a hole in the roof, and as he watched the burly dock workers, he decided that might be the best way to leave as well. At fourteen, Armel was still small and wiry, but he was a fast runner, which was good when one wasn't human.

Armel tiptoed back towards his hiding spot, stopping to recover his belongings. His shoes were little more than rags, but it was what was inside them that Armel really valued. Bundled up in a piece of cloth were a collection of torsion wrenches and tumbler picks. He had collected them over the years, receiving them as gifts from his fellows rogues, or plucking them off the bodies of the dead. A thief was only as good as his tools, and Armel had quite an impressive array. In addition to the picks, he also carried a short dagger, and a finger razor. The small blade was mounted on a finger length dowel, and a small piece of leather hung down from the end. Wrapped around a thief's pointer finger, the razor allowed him to slit a man's purse, and pull it away all in one slick motion.

Armel stowed his tools into the small satchel he wore over one shoulder, slipped on his shoes, and made ready to leave. The workmen below took no notice as the elven street urchin jumped from one rafter to the next, quickly making his way back towards the hole in the roof no one had bothered to repair. Armel grabbed a protruding board and hauled himself out of the warehouse. Once outside, he straightened up and looked out over the bay of Thertan.

The warehouse, like many around it, had been built along the mouth of the Mallar. The mighty river cut a path straight through Thertan, flowing from east to west along the Achlish countryside. The river was a vital trading nexus; wide enough to allow ships to sail further inland, but narrow enough to be defensible in times of war. Entire businesses flourished from the trade the Mallar brought in. Even now, as Armel watched, he counted at least thirteen ships coming up the river.

Incoming ships had to be careful. In addition to the various river barges and naval ships plying the waters, great prison ships floated upon the Mallar. With the prisons overflowing, most criminals were now sentenced to time in one of Achland's many penal colonies. Prisoners were loaded onto the ships, but never set sail at all. On clear, quiet, nights, one could hear the screams and howls of prisoners as they sat bound and chained below decks, slowly dying on the rotten hulks.

Armel drew a deep breath in through his thin nose. The river-front was always alive with smells. The river itself stank of sewage and industrial run-off from both the alchemical labs on the high streets, and the factories farther down. The scent of fish and salt wafted up from the bay and mingled with the stench rising up from the river. Not all the scents were foul. When he sniffed again, he could smell baking bread and roasting meat.

From the rooftops, Armel had a clear view of the entire factory district. It wasn't pretty. Like the river, this region of Thertan was marred by industrial waste. Soaring smokestacks clawed at the grey sky, while workers scuttled along the cramped streets. Everything here was dirty and battered, forgotten by the country at large. The factory district was a dismal place that few escaped. Even death offered little reprieve, as many were too poor to even afford a proper burial.

Armel looked out over the Mallar one last time, and imagined he could see the lights of the Felvian coast. Achland was an island nation, and only a few hundred kilo-meters from continental Tereth. On clear nights, one could see the mainland from Thertan, but not Felviar, it was to far south. Still, Armel liked to imagine he could see the elven nation, if only because it gave him a destination to
some day escape to.

Through conquest, Achland had annexed large swaths of the mainland, adding them to the ever expanding empire. Even with all its military might, Achland's interests on the mainland were still opposed by Felviar, Úruush, Espasta, and a dozen other smaller nations in the east, and the great Ottlur Empire in the west.

Armel had often contemplated stowing away on a ship bound for the mainland, or perhaps even attempting to swim the Achlish channel. There were elves in Achland true, especially the northern regions and neighbouring Ketlic, but even so, elves would always be in the racial minority in Achland. If Armel could make it to Felviar, at least be among his own people. The elves were a violent people though, conquering vast swaths of the mainland, and often warring amongst themselves. The most recent war, or the Felvian Incursion, as the Achlish called it had lasted ten years, and only ended when a group of outcast nobles had taken advantage of the situation and attempted to seize power. The act had resulted in a civil war that was only now ending as the country consolidated under the rule of several powerful warlords.

Armel's stomach rumbled, and he shimmied down the side of the warehouse. Once on the ground, he meandered along the waterfront for a time, before turning north, and heading up Turrin Row. At this time of night, the docks were mostly deserted save for a few workers still hovering around the warehouses. A bloated dirigible chugged by overhead, its spotlights turned solid by the choking smog that clung to the rooftops.

Armel reached into his satchel, retrieved his finger-razor, slipped it on, sand slowly began to slink through the crowd, sizing up any potential marks. He continued up Turrin Row, crossing the poorer parts of both Crofters and Bankers street on the way. The narrow streets were packed with people, horse-drawn carriages, and even some Steam-mobiles, all overshadowed by low hanging bays and gables. The working and middle classes of Thertan were just as chaotic and diverse as its streets. Armel spotted a dozen separate fashions, some dating back at least fifty years. The richest workers managed to dress themselves in cheap imitations of the rich elite, while the working poor dressed in whatever they could afford.

Thertan straddled the Mallar like a lover, following the river all the way to the coast, with the poorest districts hugging the coast, and the richest sprawled out to the west. Anything from Assemberg down to the Bay of Thertan was considered part of the “Poor Quarter”, and it showed. Factories, warehouses, and slums dominated this part of the city. Once away from the docks, the roads turned to dirt and mud. The poorly constructed buildings leaned over the streets, lending an air of claustrophobia to the proceedings. So far it had been a warm autumn, with only a small amount of sleet, but when winter arrived, the grey snow would make life here even more unbearable, especially when it began to melt.

The only part of the waterfront not considered poor was the area around the House of the Assembly and the Citadel, home to both the Thertan Watch, and the Royal Military. North-western and south-western Thertan were the “Rich Quarter” alive with light, police patrols, and cobbled streets. Great town-houses soared over the winding streets of south-western Thertan, while in the north Castle Brastrode sat atop a low hill, affording Prince Consort Alfred and Queen Odetta Ellery an unbroken view of their divided capital.

Armel continued north, heading away from the wharves. The streets along the waterfront were stone, but here the roads were dirt, a river of liquid filth ran down the centre of the streets. People huddled close in against the buildings, hiding from the refuse that was tossed out windows without the slightest warning. Shanty houses and shacks, built from scraps of wood and metal festered in allies. Tenement houses, factories, and brothels, all built from the same dark brown stone lined the street and soot fell from the sky like snow, mixing with the fog that rolled in off the bay.
Even though this area was impoverished, plenty of well-to-do gents still floated down the streets, checking on their various business ventures, mingling with the common folk. Armel set to work releaving them of their dangling coin purses. It really was astounding how vulnerable some people left themselves. He slipped along the street, bumping into his marks without drawing the slightest bit of attention.

The sun had almost fully set, and Armel knew he would need to move quicker, especially if he wanted to stay on Feggin's good side. He turned to cut down an ally when he sniffed at the air. The sweet smell of fresh bread wafted out over the streets, and he tuned back to look longingly at a store-front. He weighed the small amount of coin he had in his pocket, and decided it would be enough to at purchase a small loaf of bread, and odds were good Mrs. Haversham would slip him something extra.

Armel dashed across the fetid street, ducking under a rickety horse-drawn carriage, and only just diving out of the way of a speeding open-top Steam-mobile. The Steam-mobile had only recently come into vogue. Powered not by horses, but by some convoluted mass of brass tubes, thundering pistons, and advanced steam engines, it was both a thing of beauty and a testament to the rapidly changing world. Like the airships that lumbered over the city, Steam-mobiles were just another reminder of the ingenuity of the Achlish people, and the power they wielded. Achland needed such technology to wage its wars, especially since its Spellweavers paled in comparison to those of elvish blood.

Armel wandered along the walk out front of the stores, dodging in and out of the crowd. Small shops, run by owners that scraped by on meagre profits lined the way, catering to patrons just as poor as they were. Armel passed Fleet's barber and found himself outside Mrs. Haversham's bakery.

The bakery windows were grimy, and Armel caught the briefest glimpse of his own dirt-smeared face in the glass as he pushed open the door. Out on the streets dirt and soot got everywhere, especially in one's hair and no matter what he did, Armel's normally flaxen hair was always coated in grime. He would not have minded, but the dirt made his eyes stand out all the more. It was easy enough to hide his pointed ears, but elven eyes were another matter altogether. Armel's emerald eyes, like all elven eyes, lacked any whites, instead appearing as one solid colour. Such strange eyes were easy to spot at a glance, and marked him as a target for all sorts of trouble.

Armel entered the shop, and bell sounded somewhere in the back of the bakery. Several men in cheap business suits lingered around the counter, while Mrs. Haversham dashed back and forth, passing wrapped bundles to those waiting. A pair of well-worn tables stood in the middle of the room, and a few patrons sat at them, enjoying various hot cakes, strudels, and meat pies. Some of the men were reading copies of the evening Gazette, while others talked amongst themselves. Armel waited patiently until the counter cleared, then stepped forward.

"Ahh Armel good ter see yahr still around," cried Mrs. Haversham. The woman's dark hair stood on end as though she had been struck by lightning, while her dark, heavily lidded eyes clashed violently with her pale skin. "Haven't seen yew fer a while. Figured somethin' might 'ave 'appened. Feggin got yew workin' 'ard eh?"

Mrs. Haversham's voice was tinged with a touch of class, but for the most part she sounded like every other low-born citizen of east Thertan. They all had a penchant for pronouncing their a's too long, dropping letters from the middle of words, and misplacing r's after a consonant. Their speech pattern had a rather melodic quality and tended to be very hard to follow if the speaker spoke too fast.

"Not too hard," Armel replied in his boyish falsetto. "Got anything I can," he trailed off as he stood up on his tiptoes, trying to peer over the counter.

The shelves were lined with a dozen small bins, each holding all sorts of delicious looking confections. In addition to sweet rolls and some lumpy sour-dough loaves, Armel spotted several iced pastries. Above those was a whole roll of pies, with small tags clipped in front of them describing what
they contained. Mrs. Haversham's skill in baking was unrivalled, but because she was a woman and her husband was dead, many shunned her establishment.

“Ye got some coin then eh? Well let's see shall we.” The doorbell tinkered again and Mrs. Haversham looked up. “Wow, lot ov ye comin' in tonight.”

A pair of workmen sidled up to the counter, stinking of cheap liquor and hard work. Armel eyed the two, taking special interest in their bulging pockets. Before the door could close again, another man slid in, a constable. The law-man was young, with a large rugged jaw, dark brown hair, and hard brown eyes. His grey trench-coat hung loose on his shoulders, concealing what appeared to be a pair of revolvers, and he had a bright red scarf draped over one shoulder.

What really impressed Armel was the device strapped to the man's arm. The Thertan Watch carried all manner of strange clockwork devices, but only a select few were issued a Grappler. Forged from bright copper, the device looked like a large gauntlet that ran all the way up the forearm, stopping just below the elbow. Along the inner facing was a series of small levers and gears, used to control the much more interesting outer side. Running along the outer forearm was a series of pulleys, cranks, and flywheels. Thick, durable cable was spooled around the mechanical pieces, connecting to a small crossbow like contraption directly above the users' wrist. With a single practised manoeuvre, a bolt could be shot from the Grappler-gauntlet, and used to snag a fleeing criminal, or grapple to a far-off roof top.

“Ya gort so' customers aiting,” said one of the workmen, as he pushed past Armel, knocking the boy to the side.

“Ya, I heard ya” Mrs. Haversham replied. “Aarmel, I found a nice fresh loaf an' a day old pie ..”

“Why you serving the kid? We's the one's paying.”

“He was 'ere first, so I'll serve 'im first,” Mrs. Haversham replied. Armel stepped around the man, gently brushing against him, and reached to retrieve the food Mrs. Haversham was offering him.

The man glared down at Armel, and a flicker of anger swept over his face. “The kid's a bloody elf!” He bellowed. “You let them's kind in here? And give 'em food? He's probably a goddam Felviar spy!” The man back-handed Armel, sending him sprawling to the ground. “I fought and killed enough o' his kind in te' war to know the look. I'll tell ya now, if those pointed-eared bastards hadn't started killin' each other ye can be sure we'd all be dead now or at the least enslaved. Now I hear they's rallying around some warlord. This kid is probably the head of te invasion force! You!” the man thrust a chubby finger at the constable. “Arres' him!”

The officer stayed silent for a moment, coolly glaring at that larger man. “And why should I do that? What has he done wrong?”

“He's, what's the word, he's conspiring to over through te Crown. Just cause he's an unda fed runt don't mean he ain't dangerous.”

Aarmel staggered to his feet, just as the officer stepped forward and placed himself between Armel and the drunken workmen. “Well I guess you have a point then.” The officer reached up to the counter and grabbed the food Mrs. Haversham had prepared for Armel. “I'll have to confiscate this as evidence though.” The officer winked at Mrs. Haversham before rounding on Armel. “Am I going to have to cuff you? Or will you come quietly?”

“I won't run” said Armel, putting a sickly simper into his voice. “I'll be good sir, I's swear it.”

The officer led Armel out of Mrs. Haversham's shop and down the street, every once in a while placing a hand on the boy's shoulder to ensure he was not going to run. They turned down a side street, and the officer let out a deep sigh.


“No,” Armel replied.
“Pfff figures, there are so many of you orphans on the street. Well here.” He passed Armel the loaf of bread and the pie. “You try and stay out of trouble kid.”

“I will mister...” Armel stopped; he did not know the man's name.

“Carlow.” The extended his hand to Armel and they shook. “Kurt Carlow, I...”

There was a howl of rage from down the street, and Kurt spun around. Screams echoed from Turrin Row, and Kurt ran back the way they had come. Armel followed close behind, already suspecting what they were going to find. Instead of dashing around the corner, Kurt stopped short and poked his head out, left hand resting on the butt of his revolver. Armel peeked out as well, a smile spreading across his face as he watched the worker who had assaulted him run through the crowd, screaming like a lunatic.

“Where is the blighter who slit me fooking purse!” The drunk man bellowed. “I know it was that elf!

Kurt suppressed a snigger and turned back to Armel. “I'm suspecting you had something to do with that?”

“Not me sir, 'onest,” said Armel, watching the drunk man turn down a different street.

Kurt laughed. “Right of course.” He moved to rustle Armel's hair, but when he saw the lice, he stopped. “I would say take care of yourself, but I think you can do that just fine.”

Officer Carlow disappeared into the crowd, and Armel turned down a side alley. The bread was still somewhat hot, and he wolfed it down before starting on the mince pie. The meat was gristly, and the filling congealed, but it tasted better than nothing. He licked the grease off his fingers, and set to work again, hoping that, at this rate, he would be able to take most of the night off. Presenting Feggin with such a large sum all at once would certainly make the “business man” happy, and when Feggin was happy, so were all the pickpockets, thieves, and orphans he “employed”.

Armel worked quickly, relieving several more distinguished gentleman of their pocket books. He had stopped to count his “earnings” when the *pop* of small arms fire echoed down the street. Armel folded the five half mark bills up, and shoved them into his shoe, just as a second *pop* rang down the street. Curious, he set off down the alley, following the sound to its source.

Armel turned a corner and found himself standing on the edge of an open yard, overlooked by several balconies. Two bodies lay prostrate in the dirt, while a third man stood over them, smoke trailing out from the nose of his revolver. One of the bodies was finely dressed, while the other looked like that of a common street thug, and Armel guessed the thug had attacked the other man, only to be shot moments later by the constable.

Armel crouched down behind a barrel, then crawled forward so he could get a better look. The man holstered his gun, and from his vantage point, Armel could see that it was officer Carlow. The man had done away with his red scarf, but there was no mistaking that thick jaw. Kurt looked around nervously, dropped to one knee, then began to rustle around in the pockets of the finely dressed corpse. Armel crept through the shadows, watching as Kurt removed something, a small silver medallion from the dead man's pocket. He held it up to the light, and Armel saw that the medallion was not entirely silver; instead, its surface was marred by some dark discolouration.

Finished with the first corpse, Kurt stood up, and walked over to the other one. Once again, he rifled through the man's pockets, then he pinned the medallion to the thug's chest. Armel was perplexed; it seemed a rather random act, and he could think of no reason to switch the pin from one corpse to the other. Once his grisly task was complete, Kurt retrieved his red scarf from where he had stowed it behind some crates, and set off down the street.

Armel poked his head out and watched the constable draw a silver whistle, blow one short blast, then dash off. Without thinking, Armel turned and fled. The whistle blast would bring more officers to the scene, and he did not want to be caught alone, hovering around a pair of corpses. As an officer of
the law, It was odd that Kurt had left the crime scene, but Armel was not about to remain here be
blamed for the murder. Even if there was no evidence to link him to the crime, he would probably still
be arrested just for being an elf.

Armel dashed down a side alley, blindly stumbling along. Night now gripped Thertan, and a
thick mist had rolled in off the bay, obscuring the streets. He had just turned onto a street lit by a single
flickering gas-lamp, when shadow fell over him, and the butt of a cane was slipped in between his feet.
Armel pitched forward, twisting about so he fell on to his back, instead of his face.

“Cor, a bit late, you are, boy,” Feggin grunted, speaking in the same sing-song accent as Miss
Haversham. The man poked Armel in the stomach with his cane, and glared down at him, a smirk
spread over his doughy features. “The o'rs be missin ya.”

Feggin was squat, unshaven and dressed in a motley collection of clothes that made him look
more like a clown than a felon. His trousers were too short, but his black shoes were polished and
immaculate. A faded bowler cap sat askew on his head, hiding his receding hairline. He wore a raggedy
gentleman’s jacket over a stained white shirt, and he had tied a chequered cravat tied around his pudgy
neck. Feggin, dressed in such finery, was the perfect mockery of the “distinguished men” he stole
from, lied to, and cheated.

“Sorry sir, I was....” Armel began.

“Stealin' food again you are, git up, we got wo'k ter do.” Feggin reached down and grabbed
Armel by the ear. The boy yelped, but Feggin ignored him. “I should be puttin' you onter sweep with
t'other runts, or pahaps you should be shovelling horse shit in da street.” Feggin flung Armel into a
wall. “But I can use youse elsewhere. You at least did some work tonight eh? Or did you spend all the
jangle already?” Armel grimaced and removed his shoe, handing over the folded had lifted from his
marks and the drunk in Mrs. Haversham's bakery. Feggin snatched them from Armel, held one up to the
light, and then pocketed them. “Well at's a start and more en I expected. Up-town’s waitin though,
plenty ter do. Get movin' yew poin'y eared runt, yew gort a lot ov work needs doing .”
Chapter 3

Even though Cole was burned, beaten, and starving, he still swaggered through Thertan's most prestigious neighbourhood, taking pride in the fact that he attracted the gaze of almost everyone he passed. Located just east of Castle Brastrode, the unimaginatively named Castle District was a monument to Achland's excess. Sprawling mansions and gardens lined the streets, intermixed with banks, legal firms, and some of Achland's most expensive boutiques. Soaring over the opulence was the gilded Cathedral of Enlightenment, a monument of unrivalled beauty. The sun had set only an hour earlier and the cathedral was now illuminated by hundreds of shimmering lights, hidden away in various nooks and hollows. During the day, light would stream in through the cathedral's stained glass windows, bathing the faithful in the “divine” light of their god.

“We have been given a divine gift!” Screamed a man in sackcloth, who stood at the top of the stairs, outside the cathedral. A large crowd had gathered around him, and several other ragged men, dressed in a similar fashion, stood on the steps working to further incite the crowd. “Our intellectual and spiritual progress has facilitated our ability to create a great nation. Man's ingenuity is what has allowed this, not his reliance on arcane and mystical arts! We must throw off the shackles of apathy and let the god-granted natural abilities and genius of man guide this nation.”

The crowd cheered, and Cole used a hand to hide his laughter. Across the street from the cathedral was Elthiar, the mage college, and the real driving force behind progress in Achland. The mob could stir itself into whatever frenzy it wished; the college's high golden gates and stone walls would repel any attack. As the crowd grew, Cole saw several members of the Thertan Watch begin to move in. All wore Grappler-gauntlets, and several carried firearms, though it was clear from their relaxed manner that none of the men intended to use them.

“Our beliefs have made us strong,” continued the man. “But that is not enough. The Lord asks us to bring our light to the darkest corners of the world! Our great Empire shall continue to thrive as we convert all peoples the faith. The Vice Chancellor now faces a tide of opposition! Will we allow godless men to take control of our government?”

“NO!” The crowd roared.

Cole mounted the stairs of Elthiar just as Thertan's great clock tower struck nine. The college itself had stood for almost four hundred years, and scores of Achland's finest mages had been instructed within its hallowed halls. The college sprawled over several acres, and, in addition to the lecture halls, the complex also was home to seventeen libraries, six dormitories, three swimming pools, and several amphitheatres used for the practical application of magic.

The architecture of the campus was an anarchistic combination of every imaginable style, including old Gothic flying buttresses, soaring eastern domes, and classic Ronic columns. All who possessed the necessary talent were encouraged to attend, but only Achland's richest could afford the cost of tuition. Those who could not afford the costs were shipped off to academies housed in old castles scattered across the countryside to be instructed.

The “college” was really less a place of academic study and more of a place for Spellweavers to horde their knowledge, away from the prying eyes of the scientific community. Only those born with the gift of the Weave could work magic, and the it was a fickle thing. It adhered to no rules, yielded to no master, and required years of intense physical, mental, and emotional training to truly master. True, some disciplines, especially that of ritual magic, allowed one to work the Weave through pure analytical and rational skill, but magic was for the most part enigmatic. Yes, practical theory could be applied to the Weave, but anything approaching the realm of “science” failed to adequately explain or quantify just what forces a Spellweaver commanded.

What Cole sought tonight was what lay beneath Elthiar. Buried deep below the city were
hundreds of miles of old streets. Thertan had been built upon the ruins of an ancient Ronen city, and the magistrates of Elthiar had excavated parts of it, using some for study of the ruins while turning the rest into vaults to store their magical tomes. Cole, being a 'graduate' of the academy, had free access to these secret archives. Oddly enough, he had never thought to consult them in his hunt, but, of course that had been before he had found the strange pin in Braden's pocket. Now though, Cole had actual concrete evidence, instead of basic conjecture.

Rolling the medallion around between his fingers, he thought back to the war on mainland Tereth, the Felvian Incursion, when he had first seen a similar pin on the chest of a traitor. The man, Garret, had been a soldier, fighting alongside Cole, and his betrayal had not only caused the death of hundreds of Cole's compatriots, it had nearly cost Achland the war. Garret had traded information to the elves, betraying the secret Achlish garrison at My'thren to its elven enemies. Cole had failed to kill him then, so the hunt had begun. For six years he had agonized over finding the traitor, and now with the pin in hand, he finally had solid evidence that he was not simply chasing a shadow.

By the time he reached the top of the stairs, Cole was out of breath. Already tired from his magical exertions earlier in the night, Cole steadied himself against one of the towering columns and drew in several deep breaths before turning to face the college's monumental doors. Both were carved from a single block of grey stone, twenty feet wide and nearly fifteen tall, and when the gates were closed, it was impossible to find the seam between the blocks. Silvery symbols and ruins, too intricate to have been crafted by hand, were carved into the gates, glowing faintly under the light of the full moon. Depending on the mood of the administration, the artwork shifted and changed, allowing different students to showcase their magical talents.

Cole rapped on the door, sending a pulse of magic deep into the stone. The shock-wave would strike a series of tubes within the stone and alert the doorman that a student or graduate was requesting entry. He waited several minutes before knocking again. Granted, it was late, but someone should have responded within seconds. He stood there, idly inspecting the figures carved into the various niches around the gates, when the doors swung open. The doorman who opened them was short, bald, had oddly twisted ears, and was dressed in a dark robe the same colour as the western sky moments after sunset.

“Well, it's about time.” Cole swept past the doorman and into the main hall. “I've been waiting for ages.”

The hall itself ran for nearly two hundred yards, and the ceiling rose so high that it became lost in shadow. Looking at the building from the outside, it was clear these dimensions were impossible. Much of campus was constructed in a similar fashion, appearing to break the laws of physics when, in all reality, it was really cleverly crafted architectural illusions enhanced by simple spellwork. At a rough guess, Cole would have placed the entry hall at fifty yards, and maybe thirty tall, but even that was only a guess. In his younger days, he had once attempted to map one of Elthiar's dining halls, only to end up wandering through endlessly shifting corridors for two days, running out of paper for his map, and then opening a door to find himself in the same room he had started in.

“You have not,” called a man, his voice echoing down the hall, magnified by the magic of the place. “I can always tell when you're lying, Cole.”

“Well, it's late, and I'm cranky.”

Gareth was a plump older man, with a magnificent white beard and sparkling eyes. While some Spellweavers tried to distance themselves from the stereotypes placed upon them, Gareth embraced them. Flouncing about the grounds, dressed in bright green robes and faded red cap, he looked ridiculous. He was, of course, allowed to look as ridiculous as he liked; Gareth was one of Achland's longest lived and most powerful wizards.

“Then why come at all, eh?” Gareth called back, as he walked up, examining Cole's attire with a
critical eye. “Back in your dark period are you? I don't seem to recall burnt ever being fashionable, but then again I am an old man. Reginald, you may leave.” The doorman nodded and disappeared down a side hall. “Now tell me, what brings you to the college so late at night.”

Gareth motioned to Cole, and the two men began to walk along together. As they walked, Cole looked down at the floor and was transported back in time. This floor had always been his favourite part of the academy. It was cold to the touch and had the appearance of marble, but its surface rippled with a river of ever shifting colours. Right now, the floor was a deep crimson red, flecked with gold, but waves of green were slowly working their way across the room.

“I need to do a bit of study,” said Cole. Gareth sniggered and turned to an open door leading away from the entrance hall. “I’ll admit I wasn't a fantastic student, but there are several questions I need answered and I hope to find those answers in the archives.”

“If my memory serves, you were an atrocious student,” replied Gareth. “And to think all those times you came to the college gates as a boy, begging to be let in. After showing such dedication, one might have thought you would actually apply yourself. I must say, Cole, many at the college still believe you only manifested your magical talents through sheer force of will. Considering how old you were when your powers emerged, well, it’s not beyond the realm of possibility, I guess. Magic works in mysterious ways.” Gareth's voice grew wistful. “You were so eager in those days, and you actually tried to make friends, instead of driving them off as I hear you try to do now.”

“I had friends? Odd, I remember being an outcast because I was so old.” Cole shrugged. “Before that, I was bullied for wanting to have magic, well and because I was better than everyone else. Then, once I did make a few friends here, I learned to control my gifts, and was sent off to war. Are you still doing that, turning your pupils into weapons? Or is it only the poorer schools that force conscription now?”

The pair turned again and found themselves in another hallway, though this one was still decidedly larger than it should have been. Portraits of famous teachers and graduates hung upon the walls, making the walk feel more like the home of some kindly old woman than a school. To some, the sudden change in proportions would have been disconcerting, but Cole had long since learned the one should not question the workings of magic too deeply.

Gareth sighed. “Cole, we were at war and the legions needed all the able-minded Spellweavers we could produce to combat the elven forces. Yes, we placed some of you into situations we would rather not have, but only because we trusted your abilities. Is it possible for you to move past your self-pity?”

Cole stopped to consider the question. “Nope.” The pair emerged out onto a balcony overlooking a staircase that plunged down into the earth.

“And you wonder why people avoid you,” Gareth let out slow sigh. “Anyway, the archives are down those stairs, as you well know. Are you looking for anything specific?”

“You know, I am not entirely sure.” Cole began his descent, but turned back to look up at Gareth.

“Well do try not to cause too much destruction,” Gareth shouted down to him. “The last time you entered the archives your...exploits left something of a mess behind.”

The spiralling stairs wound down into the darkness, and Gareth's face soon disappeared from view. The darkness grew thicker and Cole was forced to summon a glowing ball of light to illuminate his passing. Soon, Cole came to a golden gate barring the way against further passage. This would just be the first of many tests Cole encountered, unless, of course, Gareth had disarmed the wards. Anyone seeking entrance to the lower levels would have to prove himself worthy before an increasing number of magical seals and puzzles. The wards not only ensured the safety of the college's most valuable and ancient writings, they also ensured that students would not discover secrets of the Weave they could not
handle.

Cole reached out and touched the gate, which was oddly warm to the touch, a stark contrast to
the cold hallow he found himself in. He let out a deep breath and released a pulse of magic. The metal
gate shuddered and swung open. He had passed the first ward. Cole continued his descent past the first
level of archives, plunging deeper and deeper into the earth.

These upper levels contained little more than the collected writings of magical philosophers and
scholars. These dealt little with the practical application of the Weave and, instead, delved into the
history and moral implications of magic. As the stairway continued downwards, more landings began
to branch off, each leading to a different section of the archives. During the day, the upper levels would
be crowded with young apprentices researching various subjects their professors had set for them,
while those whose studies were more focused would continue downwards. Cole could have waited
until the morning to conduct his studies, it would be warmer then, but he preferred the quiet.

Cole continued downwards, constantly rolling the strange medallion he had found on Braden's
body around and around in his had. He had a few guesses as to its origin and meaning, but without
further research, he could not be sure. His hunt for Braden had taken the better part of five months, and
it had only been the first step in a much greater search for Garret. The two men were loosely connected
through a small mercantile business, as well as the odd pin, and Cole hoped to exploit that connection
for all it was worth.

Cole passed seven landings before turning off to face a simple stone archway. He had passed
through two more gates similar to the first, but had encountered no other resistance. Now though, he
could feel his way blocked by some other force. The archway was carved with all sorts of animals, and
as he stood there, the stone began to ripple and change. A woman with feline features and dark fur
pulled herself free of the stone. She was human in build, though her legs were oddly shaped. The
Sphinx's feet were very long, and she stood on tiptoe, her heel several inches off the ground. Dressed in
a wispy white shift that barely covered her body, she oozed sensuality. The Sphinx smiled at Cole and
beckoned him forward with one long, clawed finger.

“So you return,” she growled, her amber, cat-like eyes glimmering in the light cast by the
glowing orb that floated at Cole's side. “I must say I have missed you, my sweet.”

“I don't have time for this.” Cole snapped. “I need to....”

The Sphinx pressed her body up against Cole's. “You could make time,” she whispered. “I know
you would enjoy it.” Flustered, Cole pulled back from the Sphinx, just as she began to run her fingers
through his hair. “Maybe I would, but for now I need you to help me with something. Do I have your
permission to enter the archives?”

The Sphinx smirked and leaned back against the archway she had emerged from. “I suppose.
Things have been rather boring around here lately, and your company has always been rather...nice.”

“Thank you.”

Cole and the Sphinx stepped through the archway, and he flung the globe of light high into the
air. The orb cast a steady, even blue light out of endless book shelves, honeycomb-shaped wall niches,
and storage bins. There was too much here to work through on one's own, and that was why the
magistrates had bonded the Sphinx to this place. She was its guardian, as well as its archivist, magically
linked to every tome, book, and scroll on this level, serving the Spellweavers of Achland in the same
manner as she had served the Pharaohs of ancient Misr centuries ago. They walked along together
through the stacks, and Cole caught the Sphinx staring at him several times, obviously still looking to
seduce him in some way.

“So tell me, mage, what wild pursuit are we going on this time, hmm? What tomes of lost lore
are we digging through, hoping to find an answer to whatever it is you seek?”

Cole dug in his pocket and produced the odd patina-covered pin. “I am searching for any
information relating to this pin, possibly in relation to the Ronen Empire or any documented cults.”

“Ohh, we actually have some solid items to identify, instead of just mere speculation, that is... *exciting*. Give me a moment, and I shall search through the archives.” The sphinx closed her eyes and her body grew rigid. For a moment nothing happened, then her eyelids began to flutter, and her entire body convulsed violently. Cole reached out to catch her, just as the Sphinx’s eyes snapped open. “There are thirty-four works containing information you may find relevant.”

“Thirty-four?!?” Cole had hoped for maybe one or two. “What categories?”

“The majority involve the Ronen empire,” explained the Sphinx. “Twelve of the works are discourses on several ancient pantheons including Ronic, Misrin and Batilar. Seven on Ronic cults, and six are works relating to the fall of the Ronic empire. Of the remaining works, six are tomes on ritual and spell practices the Council has deemed forbidden, including blood magic and other fouler arts. Included in these are several grimoires that are expressly forbidden, both to you and me. The others, indeed the most recent, detail the various orders of Üruush's necromancers.”

“Might as well start with those, then.” Cole scratched his chin. He had not expected Üruush to be involved, but it was possible. Achland was after all the world's greatest empire, and faced opposition from nearly every other country. Üruush, Felviar, and Achland had been fighting each other for generations, and perhaps Garret and Braden had been Üruushian infiltrators. The fact that neither had not been converted into a biological monstrosity by the necromancers was odd, but then again the plots of the vampire lords had always been inscrutable. “Seems I will be in for a long night.”

“At least you have me to keep you company, but please, restrain yourself. It took me weeks to clean up after last time.”

“Stop trying to imply that that was something it wasn't,” Cole snapped. “The collapse of the ninth level was hardly my fault. If Morna had not startled me like that, I never would have lost control of that weaving.”

The tomes proved to be ponderous reading. Cole quickly worked through those dealing with Üruush, and while he did discover several symbols in the text that resembled the pin, none were an exact match. Disgruntled, he turned to those on the Ronen empire. Before Achland had spread out across the world, Ronen had ruled an even greater expanse. Her legendary legionnaires, backed by elite warrior-mages, had brought law and order to a world in turmoil. It had been a mecca of culture, magic, and technology, a shining beacon in a world of darkness.

The Ronic legions were unmatched on the battlefield, and after two centuries of brutal war, the empire had ruled everything from the Near-East to the island of Achland. Ronen's rule seemed unchallenged. Then, she fell. Scholars still fought each other endlessly, debating the exact nature of the fall. Rebellion had been common, indeed, Achland, led by the mythical King Aldos, had broken from Ronen rule in the year 332. In addition to rebellion, political strife, bickering, and multiple foreign threats had come together in a perfect storm to destroy Ronen, plunging the world into a dark age for several centuries. At the same time, stories of strange cults and occult involvement in Ronen's fall continued to circulate, and such theories had become something of a favourite literary genre for writers looking for cheap and easy readership.

As Cole leafed through the musty books, he began to find something odd. It seemed that the medallion he had discovered had been the calling card of various anarchistic groups, warlock covens, and cabals of Spellweavers, who had dabbled in blood magic and other fouler things. Some were connected to Üruush, but the majority of the groups were ancient. Most of the documents were pure conjecture, with the clearest linking the pin to a group of warlocks working against Ronen's autocratic government in the early third century.

There was no cohesion to any of the writings, and Cole was forced to constantly flip between several books and loose scrolls, but slowly he began to get an idea of what exactly the pin meant. From
the texts, it seemed that a cabal of magic users, their names and purposes lost to history, had in some-
way been responsible for the fall of the Ronen empire, at least the Western kingdoms. Other authors
refuted this claim, stating that the strange geometric symbol had been reused by so many occult groups
and strange religious cults over the centuries that any relevance it may once have had was lost.

What Cole wanted to know was why such a symbol would have reappeared after such a long
time, and more importantly, why both Braden and Garret might have had it in the first place. The events
that had transpired in Felviar still haunted Cole, but finding this pin on Braden now afforded him with
at least some idea of what Garret had been doing. If they men truly were connected to some ancient
group of anarchists, it was highly probable they were conspiring against the Crown. Cole had long
suspected Garret of having such connections, but now he saw that he stumbled upon a conspiracy far
larger than he had first thought.

Cole's eyes were beginning to grow heavy with sleep, and so he opened the last book. It was a
thin leather-bound journal that detailed an account of fighting on Ronen's western front just before the
empire's complete collapse. He skimmed the text, reading of the heroic defence led in part by a noble
Ronen tribune and the host of barbarians who had joined him. The book appeared to be an old officer's
log, detailing the legions' adventures both before and after the empire's fall. As Cole flicked through the
pages, he found something that caught his eye, a description and translation of some odd text
apparently found upon a man with a tattoo of a nine-sided geometric figure burned into his flesh.
Intrigued by the cipher, Cole began to copy it down, but found it to be rather tedious. Instead, He
decided to take the entire journal with him. Cole glanced around, looking for the Sphinx. She was
nowhere to be seen and so he slipped the journal into the sleeve of his jacket. He then gathered up the
remainder of the books and began to replace them on the shelves.

“You don't have to leave, you know,” said the sphinx as she appeared from around the corner.
“There are plenty of other books you could check, and when we get bored with that.....”

“No,” Cole growled. “Maybe some other time, but for now I have a great deal of work to do.”
Chapter 4

Thomas strolled down Harding Court, glad to finally be away from the bustle of Upper Crafter's Row. Thomas had been amazed at just how crowded the Row had been. It was only a few minutes past ten and already Crafter's Row was crowded with shoppers going about their business. It had come as a welcome relief to spot the golden gate that marked the entrance to Harding Court. The gated residential street wound its way north from the Row, gently sloping up and away from the Mallar river. Like most of south-western Thertan, Harding Court was home to some of the city’s finest estates. Elegant town-houses looked down over the wide cobblestone streets and gardens bloomed year round, supported by the magic woven into the very air. The buildings were spaced far apart, creating a feeling of openness and tranquillity that was rare in Thertan. At night, Harding Court came alive with the light of mage-fyre, the magic flames flickering in a hundred different colours.

Thomas continued along, doffing his top hat in greeting to those he passed. He was a common enough sight here, even though he lived down along the southern part of Crafter's Row. He had often thought about moving to Harding Court: he was affluent enough to do so, but leaving his workshop behind would be difficult.

The people here were friendly enough, but even if Thomas did buy a house and workshop here, he doubted the neighbours would be happy. This was an affluent upper class neighbourhood, and while he had earned good deal of money from his work and been bestowed several titles by the Crown, he did have hereditary titles, nor the lands, necessary to be considered part of the gentry. While he was a tinkerer and inventor for the Crown who commanded a modest thousand marks a year, and was well known in upper class social circles, the gentry would still look down on him for the simple fact that he was not one of them.

Worse, Thomas was not Achlish, instead his family hailed from the north, from Gelishar. Like the eastern island of Ketlic, Gelishar had once been an independent kingdom. Unlike Achland, the clans of Gelishar had not submitted to Ronic rule, instead waging a bitter war that forced the ancient empire to abandon any thoughts of conquest. Indeed, the Achlish islands had only unified in the last two-hundred years. Before that, both Gelishar and Ketlic had been separate kingdoms, albeit the first “colonies” that Achland established.

“Thomas,” rotund Mrs. Pearson called from her second floor balcony. “How are you?”
“Good,” Thomas shouted back, sweeping his hat off his head and bowing to the older woman. “And how are you?”
“We're good, George is feeling touch ill, but he always is this time of year. How is Clarissa?”
Thomas beamed. “Good, we're going to be married when I return from Kaldry.”
Mrs. Pearson laughed. “Well that is good news! But why are you leaving? Are you not working on the World's Exhibition with his highness the Prince Consort?”
“I am,” Thomas replied. The Exhibition, born from his majesty's passion for industry and science was to be a grand event, and work had already begun upon the so called Glass Pavilion; a massive structure the size of a small palace that would house the entirety of the Exhibition. The event was meant not only to acquaint the Achlish people with the advances in society, but to show the entire world the empire's might. “The Exhibition is not for another year. I'm just going to Kaldry as a consul, so I won't be seeing any serious action. Should only be couple of months, no more than five.” Thomas placed his hat back upon his head. “If I was gone any longer, Cole might cause some serious damage.”
“I'm scared that you're leaving at all,” replied Mrs. Pearson. “Twenty-four and still completely unsettled, it’s scandalous. Always coming home late, or running out at odd hours and all the women he brings back with him. Fine enough to be sure...but...ohh he is so improper! Just so you know I am blaming you if Cole turns this entire row into a smouldering crater while you are gone.”
“I doubt he will do anything that catastrophic,” Thomas sighed. “But you know how he is.”
“Yes I do. Please return quickly.”
“I will, I will.” Thomas waved goodbye to Mrs. Pearson and continued down the lane, soon coming to the “court” in Harding Court.
Arranged around a large open park were seven houses, the richest in the district. The park itself was full of happy children dashing back and forth and chasing each other through the pollards. Exhausted governesses sat together on the park benches, always ready to spring into action should their charges come to harm. A constable circled the park counter clockwise, exchanging furtive glances with the youngest of the governesses.

Thomas turned away from the park and towards Number Three Harding Court Park, the Travers residence. After a falling out with his father over the Felvian Incursion, and the death of this mother, Cole had emancipated himself from the rest of his family, though he still commanded a sizeable fortune of five thousand marks a year. He had claimed the Travers' Thertan estate during the legal proceedings, but the rest of the family, including Cole's estranged father and sister Erika, had retained control of the Travers' country estate of Pine Haven. Cole's house itself was well maintained, with a rod-iron fence closing in a small, well tended garden. Daffodils bloomed along the front walk, and butterflies flitted here and there among the colourful flowers.

Thomas swung the gate open and walked up to the front door. The house was painted a rich brown, with a bright blue door. Upon the door was a gold knocker in the shape of a hawk's talon, gripping a rounded piece of black and gold granite. Thomas knocked four times, and the door swung inward, answered by the Cole's butler, Winston.

The doorman was tall, with powerful cheekbones and a hook nosed that flared when he was angry. Being a childhood friend of Cole's, Thomas had known Winston for years, and yet the man never seemed to age. Besides a slight recession and greying of his hair line, Winston still looked as well kept as the day Thomas had met him. Even the man's clothes, grey pinstripe trousers, white shirt, and faded black morning coat, had remained the same.

“Ahh master Atkin, I was wondering when you would come round,” said Winston as he shut the door behind Thomas. “I had not seen you for a few days and so I was beginning to wonder.”
“Been a bit busy actually, I proposed to Clarissa yesterday,” said Thomas, handing Winston his hat, coat, and cane, but not before removing the daily paper from his coat pocket. Winston took them and hung them both on a slender coat stand in the foyer.
“Well, congratulations sir,” replied Winston, though he sounded as deadpan as ever. “At least that gives you something to look forward to while you are serving overseas.” Winston chuckled as the two men walked through the foyer leading into the house proper. “I am so happy for the both of you. It's always nice to see young love turn into something that lasts. Now if only he could find someone.” Winston nodded his head towards the upper floors. “At least then I might be able to set my mind at ease.
“Yes, it would be nice if he settled down,” Thomas agreed. “At least then he would leave Clarissa and me alone. Actually, Cole's antics are why I am here.”
“I expected as much, this way.” Winston led Thomas the foot of the stairs and then motioned for him to stop.
To their right was the house's main sitting room. Thomas had always liked this parlour, mainly because it overlooked Cole's garden, through a majestic bay window. The room was bright and colourful, with large, plump armchairs, and a fully stocked bar. The moulding was decorated with all manner of fantastical beasts, each hand painted in garish colours: dragons pranced about, followed by sphinxes, griffins, and chimeras. The walls were blue, lined with delicately crafted mage-fyre lamps, and several glass front display cases housing a collection of mounted insects. Shelves filled with all
manner of oddities ran up the far wall, documenting a life of adventure and time spent abroad.

“Speaking of Cole, where is he? I was expecting him to meet me for breakfast, but he never arrived.”

Winston sighed. “The master returned home late last night and immediately went up to his library. His coat was burned and tattered, but there was a wicked gleam in his eye. He then proceeded to lock himself away and I have not seen him since.”

Thomas rubbed his chin. “Did he say anything to you at all?”

“No, I left his supper and mail outside the library door about an hour after he returned. Sometime later I heard some agonized wailing. When I went to check, the master had taken the letters, though he left his tray of food untouched.”

“Hmm, curious indeed.” Thomas craned his neck to look up the stairs. Cole's library was up on the third floor. From down where he was, Thomas could see that all the lights up there were out, even those that lined the landing. “He's probably just in one of his moods again. I'll go up and see if I can't persuade him to come out.”

“I would be most grateful for the help, sir. You'll need this.” Winston handed Thomas the library key. “I dare not intrude on the master’s affairs but you...”

“I'm his friend,” said Thomas as he mounted the stairs. “If he kills me it's your fault.”

“Why ever would you say that, sir? The worst Cole has ever done is just slightly singe your jacket.”

“Regardless, be on alert.” Thomas began to climb when he turned back to Winston. “If Cole is in one of his moods it's very likely he has not eaten yet. Besides, what you call singing I recall as 'setting ablaze'. ”

“Should I have Erma prepare something?”

“Yes,” Thomas stopped to think. “Scones, hot water for tea, and some of that excellent honey if there is any at hand. Ohh and some of Erma's cucumber sandwiches would be rather lovely as well.”

“I'll see what I can do.”

Thomas nodded to the butler and then began to climb. Outside of Thomas' visits, there were not many visitors; in fact, there were none, besides the women Cole brought home with him. The neighbourhood shunned Cole for the most part, which Thomas guessed was why they were so friendly to him. Thomas was Cole's only regular respectable visitor, and thus the only one to offer any sort of news on the house’s enigmatic owner. The staff only really kept the ground floor sitting room, drawing room, and Cole's library and bedroom open.

While The Travers flat was a lavish three-storey affair, with its lacquered-wood handrails, deep maroon carpets, and the crisp portraits that hung on the walls in gleaming gold frames, there was also an air of neglect about the place. Most of the lamps were extinguished, their glass panelling covered in dust, the drapes hung limply on silver rods that had begun to darken with age, and all the doors on the second storey landing were boarded up.. As Thomas climbed the stairs, clouds of dust puffed up out of the carpet. While the staff still maintained the place, it was clear that the owner did not truly care.

Thomas stepped off on the dark third-floor landing and turned to his left, walking past two shut doors before stopping at the entry way to Cole's library. It was located furthest off the street, with windows that looked out on the home's back garden. The garden was mostly grass, with several medium-sized oaks providing sufficient shade. It was common to find Cole out in the garden, not maintaining it, of course, that was too dirty. Instead, he would be out reading under a tree, writing ballads, or entertaining pleasurable company. To Cole nature was an escape, and the garden was his answer to the “harsh and crippling reality of strenuous city life,” as he phrased it. Thomas knocked on the library's double door. There was no reply. Thomas sighed, knocked again, and then put the key into the lock, and turned the brass knob. The door swung open on well-greased hinges.
The lamps in the library were lit, but dimmed, and Thomas had to blink several times before his eyes adjusted. Thomas sniffed the air. The overpowering scent of old parchment struck him first, followed by the scent of well aged wood.

Running around the entire room were ceiling-high shelves crammed with leather-bound ledgers. Without looking, Thomas knew that these volumes contained all banking records of the Travers family for at least the last two hundred years. The elder members of the Travers family had kept meticulous notes, documenting all the family’s expenditures, and personal business earnings. The shelves were only broken by several windows, their dark curtains drawn. Free-standing shelves containing even more books marched along through the middle of the room. Some contained historical and scientific texts, while others contained travel journals and novels.

“Cole,” Thomas called as he stepped into the study. “Cole come on, I know you are in here.” He began to pick his way through the stacks. Everything in the library appeared perfect, untouched “Cole?”

“Ohh it’s horrible,” Cole's voice echoed around the room. “Simply terrible.”

“Cole where are you?” Thomas began to walk between the shelves, making his way towards Cole's voice. Thomas found him collapsed face down on a desk, his dark hair wild and free, surrounded by stacks of books and mountain of papers. “Cole...are you all right?”

“Of course not.” Cole pushed himself up from the desk, and turned to face Thomas. His trousers were burned in several places, and he had rolled the sleeves of his white dress shirt up. Cole's eyes were bloodshot and puffy, and there was a large burn on right forearm. Cole was usually meticulous, to the point of obsession about his looks, so to see him in such a dishevelled state clearly indicated that something was wrong. Cole held out a piece of thick, folded paper, and Thomas took it. “Here....look.”

“Cole, what happened to your arm?” asked Thomas.

“Nothing.” Cole turned away and hastily rolled his sleeve down.

Thomas glared at his friend for a moment; Cole enjoyed acting as morose as possible, and such theatrics were common, but something seemed off. Thomas pushed the feeling aside, and reached for the monocle he kept in the top pocket of his waistcoat. Thomas held the monocle up, squinted through it, and began to read. Cole had handed him a letter, written in a looping and artistic style. Every letter was formed perfectly, and each word was spaced just far apart that they were still readable, even though the handwriting was flowery. Thomas skimmed the letter and let out a heavy sigh.

“It’s just horrible, isn't it?” Cole flopped back down onto the desk, “How could she do this to me?! How could she leave me!”

“Cole, I know we all said you needed to meet someone but...ohh, does every relationship of yours require this much melodrama?” Thomas shook his head, set the letter and the daily paper down next to Cole, then turned and wrenched open the curtains.

“She was my one great love!” Cole wailed and threw his hands up, trying to shield himself from the light.

“Don't feed me that line, you knew her for a week and a half.” Thomas glanced over Cole's shoulder, trying to read the papers strewn about the desk. “If this is how you acted when you were with her, well I would have left you as well.”

“Fine, fine, you are most likely right....as usual,” Cole sighed, his mood shifting instantly between self-pity and bitter humour. From the start, Thomas had known Cole was only acting. Thomas hadn't been trying to snap Cole out of his foul mood; instead, he had wanted Cole to admit his real motives for acting so strange. “She was a roaring fire when it came to love making, though.” Thomas blushed, and Cole cocked an eyebrow before chuckling evilly. “Ohh darling, are my exploits embarrassing you? It’s charming how prudish you can be.”

Thomas lifted his eyes, sighed, and went back to investigating the papers on Cole's desk. Mixed
in with the pages was a map of Thertan, marked in several places, an old battered journal, and a strange silver pin, marred by a thin patina. The medallion was small, a touch larger than a pence, and when he looked closer and saw that the medallion seemed to match a design drawn on a page of the journal. There was a nine-sided geometric form, its centre filled with intersecting lines and strange curves, etched into the metal, partially obscured by the patina. As he studied it, Thomas felt there was something off about the dimensions of the symbol, though he could not be sure what.

“Ohh, by the way you made the cover of the Gazette,” Thomas muttered, hunching forward to continue studying the medallion.

“I what?!” Cole snatched the paper off the desk, flipped it over and began to read. Cole's eyes buzzed back and forth, sweeping over the page, before tossing the paper down in disgust. “Ugghh no picture, what kind of reporters are they?! A wizard’s duel in the street and they don't even get pictures! They don't even come round to interview me!” Cole looked down at the article again. “They don't even name me! How am I to maintain the persona of genius magical recluse if Gazette is too lazy to even name me! Honestly, these are the same writers who, on three separate occasions, wrote columns detailing that whole scandal involving Natalia and me, including all sorts of lurid lies, though they did get some of the details right. But this....this is an outrage!”

“You should be happy,” Thomas muttered, still staring at the geometric form. Doing the calculations in his head, he also concluded that the angles were too wide, the lines that appeared parallel but then would later intersect, in complete violation of all accepted mathematical theorems. The strangest part was that all this complex geometry fit on the small surface of the medallion. The implications of the figure made Thomas' head hurt, and he instead picked up the paper and refocused his attention on Cole. “Says here that the constable would like to find whoever was responsible for this.”

Cole threw his hands into the air, “but I was the one who was attacked! Wait, no, it's part of the conspiracy! But, how do they know I am hunting them?”

“Wait, what are you talking about?”

“It's a massive and secret plot,” Cole shouted back over his shoulder as he dashed away, tripping over a stack of books. Thomas leaned back, watching as Cole gathered an arm load of papers from one of the other tables. He dumped the papers onto the desk and began to leaf through them. “See look here, here, and here.”

Thomas put his monocle on again and looked at the documents Cole handed him. They were a mix of shipping, banking, and excavation records, with a whole series of notes scribbled in the margins. Thomas flicked through the pages, finding nothing that would indicate any sort of plot or conspiracy.

“What exactly are you showing me?” Thomas placed the documents back down, smoothing them down to read Cole's untidy handwriting.

“The work I have spent the better part of the last five years on.” Cole swept a stack of books onto the floor to make room for the other books he had just retrieved. “Ever since the events in Felviar I have been tracking Garret.” Cole's voice cracked and he stopped for a moment. “I believe the traitor is still alive....and I intend to catch him.”

The war with Felviar had been hard on all the young men of their generation. Both Thomas and Cole had served on the front lines during the Incursion, fighting to keep the elves of Felviar at bay. Cole rarely discussed what had happened in Felviar, unless he was drunk, or in one of his many neurotic moods, or both. At the height of the war, Thomas had been called away, asked by the crown to put his engineering skills to use somewhere other than the battlefield, narrowly escaping the massacre at My'thren. Thomas and Cole had lost many friends that day, including Cormag, the third member of their boyhood pack.

“Cole you've been raving about this for years,” said Thomas. “There is no evidence to support...”
Cole put a finger to Thomas' lips. “Shush, just keep listening. I had hit a brick wall, but then I found that pin and that journal. Those were the clues I needed! I now have proof that I wasn't imagining things! Garret was involved with some dark cult.”

“So, the Felviar are involved in a plot to overthrow us and have conscripted some of our own, that is nothing new,” Thomas chortled. Cole might be fabricating this entire thing, but Thomas had to admit that listening to him rave about his theories was always entertaining.

“You have it all wrong!” Cole shouted as he tossed more books onto the floor in a mad dash to grab a different stack. “Come now, those pointy-eared bastards would never willingly work with a race they consider inferior. No, no, this is something much more sinister. At first, I was simply trying to find Garret. See, I began tracking him several months after I returned from Felviar.”

“You mean ever since you deser...” Thomas stopped. The look in Cole's eye was to parts anger and one part anguish, and all three warned Thomas that it would be best if he stopped talking. “Sorry to interrupt, please continue.”

“The trail was cold after I uhh returned,” Cole began slowly, avoiding Thomas' gaze. “I eventually found that he had connections to some private trading company. I began researching them and one thing led to another. Braden was involved in some form...and I found that pin on his body. The last time I saw Garret, when he was fleeing My'thren, he was wearing a similar pin...medallion...thing on his chest. That led me to this journal which describes an odd cult that was working against the old Ronic empire. They were also excavating old ancient ruins, which is the same thing this little trading company Garret was involved with doe...”

“Cole,” Thomas interrupted. “This...”

“Is genius?” Cole laughed. “Of course, it is! Before I thought I was just hunting a traitor but now....hahaha NOW I have discovered a conspiracy against the Crown. You see this cabal of...of...of warlocks is working to seize power. Not only will I finally catch Garret, I will be remembered throughout all time for stopping them!”

“This is absolutely insane!” Thomas shouted.

“It is NOT!” Cole countered indignantly. “I am hunting Garret so that I might revenge myself upon him in honour of all those lives lost in Felviar on his account”

“Don't give me that excuse again,” Thomas snapped. “You've been hunting him for years, and not for revenge, but for glory. Either you just want attention or this is some sort of pathetic attempt to keep me from leaving.” Thomas stopped. “No...no, please tell me you are NOT going to be cavorting around chasing some delusion while I'm out of the country.”

“I wouldn't dream of it.” Thomas fixed his friend with a flat stare. Cole was lying again, he could tell. “And it's not a delusion!”

“Well, whatever you are planning on doing, see, it doesn't involve your running around killing people!” Thomas shoved the paper into Cole's arms. “Remember that story I mentioned? The one with the fighting and the murder. Look at the paper, it says that the man who was killed was one Braden Mchone. That isn't the same Braden we served with in Istanbul, is it?”

“No,” Cole replied slowly. “Of course, it isn't. And even if it was I didn't murder him! I am innocent, I tell you. It was self-defence.”

“Riiiggght,” Thomas let out a breath. “Since when have you ever been innocent? Cole, I know you well enough, whatever happened, you manipulated that man into attacking you. At least it explains where that burn came from.”

Cole turned to his friend. “Burn? What ever do you....”

“That burn,” said Thomas as his hand closed on Cole's forearm, and he yelped in pain. Thomas released him a moment later. “You were trying to hide it.”

Cole pouted and rubbed his arm, “Yes, I did not want to worry you unnecessarily.”
“Cole you have to get that treated, I'm sure a healer....”

“Ohh I don't trust them!” Cole wailed as he dropped back into the chair. “You can do it though, I don't mind you touching me. Besides it just needs to be cleaned, after that...well, I am touched by the Weave, my magic will heal it at some point.”

“Fine, fine,” Thomas grumbled. “Though you do know I am not a doctor.”

“I know, I know,” Cole muttered, proffering his arm to Thomas.

“I am going to need to go get some supplies,” said Thomas after he finished inspecting the burn.

“Well, hurry up then,” said Cole waved him off. “Bring a bottle of ’14 up with you as well, I need a drink!”

Located directly beneath the study on the first floor, Cole's kitchen was one of the few rooms that saw constant use. It was small, with dark green floor tiles and white walls. Large, shuttered windows let in plenty of light, and the room gave off a warm and welcoming air.

Erma was hunched over the counter busily preparing a platter of sandwiches. Even though it was rather cramped, the kitchen was outfitted with every modern convenience: cast iron stove, self-priming pump, and a Thermal-Insulation Box, powered by a miniaturized steam compressor, all of them done up in hard wood and bronze. Thomas nodded to Erma and crossed to the pantry to retrieve a bottle of hydrogen peroxide, bandages, and several other medicinal items.

“Is he going to be okay?” inquired Erma as she crossed to the TI-Box and retrieved a block of cream cheese. The Thermal-Insulation Box was a relatively new invention. Using the ice boxes of old as a base, Theodore Gadstun III had improved upon the design, mainly by attaching a thermal recycling unit and steam engine. Thus the TI-Box functioned on the same basic scientific properties as Achland's front line war machinery, with a few major differences. Mainly instead of using the thermal recycling system to draw excess heat from the delicate machinery, it was used to keep food fresh and edible. A few simple tweaks, and the introduction of the miniaturized mage-fyre steam engine, had made the Thermal-Insulation box a highly sought after household commodity.

“Of course,” Thomas smiled. “Just his typical moodiness.”

“Yes, we could hear him all the way down here,” said Erma, as she began to spread cream cheese onto slices of crust-less white bread. She was a thin, wiry thing, with a long horsey face, wispy brown hair, and a thick northern accent. Erma had also been the only member of the Travers family staff to stay after Cole inherited the house. Thomas suspected it had something to do with unrequited love. Thinking further on it, Thomas concluded that Cole most likely knew how Erma felt, and only kept her around as a way to massage his massive ego. “He's lucky to have a friend like you, innit he, sir?”

“Sometimes I wonder if it’s even worth the trouble.” Thomas placed the items he had taken from the pantry on to the tray Erma was preparing and then crossed to the wine rack. Thomas knew he shouldn't be allowing Cole to drink so heavily this early in the morning, but it was unwise to refuse Cole anything, especially in his own home. “I'll take it,” said Thomas as he took a bite out of one of the finished cucumber sandwiches. “I'm going back up anyway, so might as well.”

“Do you really need to take that bottle up, sir?” Erma asked as she handed Thomas the tray.

“He's already gone through two o'uhm since last night.”

Thomas winced. “Cole's having a rough time, uhh....what ever her name was doesn't want to see him any more, so now he's drinking....again. Typical Cole, eh?”

When Thomas returned to the study, he found Cole seated at the desk again, completely absorbed in the papers and books around him. A large leather tome that Thomas had not seen before lay open on the floor, and Cole was constantly leaning over to consult it. Thomas placed the platter down on the top of a shelf and went to retrieve a chair. When he returned, he found Cole seated at a makeshift table made from a stack of books, sipping wine from a crystal goblet and nibbling on a scone. Thomas
sat down and poured himself a cup of tea a well.

Cole grabbed one of the sandwiches, shoved it in his mouth and then extended his arm. There was large scar on Cole's palm, running straight across his hand. He had gotten that as a boy, though Thomas had never heard the story behind it. The scar was rather abnormal; darkened veins spread out from the gash, not curving as they normally did, but instead making sharp angular turns. No doubt the wound was the result of some old magical injury that Cole had received.

The burn started about halfway up Cole's right arm, and wound was actually rather severe. Thomas was amazed that Cole had not been complaining about it. The burn was in the shape of a clenched hand, most likely from the scuffle Cole had gotten into the previous day. In some places, the skin was red and raw, but in others it was actually blackened and flaky. Blood and puss leaked out around the flakes, and Thomas set to work dressing the wound. Right now, Thomas was only concerned about treating the wound for infection. Unlike normal men, Spellweavers could regenerate scar tissue, effectively healing even the most gruesome of wounds over the period of several months.

“Also in case you’ve forgotten, Mrs. Talbit is having a party this evening.” Thomas finished with Cole's arm and he reached to take another cucumber sandwich.

“Is her son going to be there?”

“Yes,” Thomas replied, somewhat confused by the question. “Laura Talbit is going to be there as well. She is both pretty and rather fond of you. She is actually respectable though so...”

“Are you trying to imply I treat women poorly?” Cole arched an eyebrow. “Come now Thomas, I find that insulting. I suppose I can attend, though.” As Cole spoke, his eyes wandered back to the papers scattered over his desk. Thomas thought he saw a glint of something almost mischievous in his eye, but he could not be sure. Cole set his cup back down on the platter and straightened up. “Will Clarissa be joining us this evening?”

“No sadly, she is not feeling well. Probably something to do with the fact that I propos......”

“That is a shame,” said Cole without even the slightest hint of interest. “It will be almost like old times again, though. Cole and Thomas, two devastatingly handsome men out on the town. But what should I wear? I've found I have been wearing red too often, maybe a blue vest, and gold cravat. Hmm, that might clash with my hair though.” Cole ran a hand through his hair and wherever his fingers touched Cole's hair changed colour, fading from dark black, to a light ash-blonde. “That's better,” said Cole as he shook his hair out. “Also, I am sorry I missed breakfast. Was there something you wanted to talk about?”

“No,” Thomas lied. “Nothing at all. It's not as if I was going to tell you any exciting news about Clarissa and me.”

“Oh well, that's good.” Cole smiled weakly, as he nervously ran a hand along his bandages. “Uhh, this thing is going to get in the way.” Cole waved his hand over them and the bandages vanished. “Much better. Also, your telescoping cane proved to be very useful. Sadly, I think I may have damaged it beyond repair.”

Again all Thomas could do was roll his eyes and let out a heavy sigh. Grudging forgiveness was really the only way one could stay sane around Cole.
Chapter 5

As night fell over Thertan, the city came alive with lights, flickering candle-lamps in the economically depressed districts, and ever burning mage-fyre lamps in the more affluent neighbourhoods. All the mage-fyre lamps cast the same amount of light, but in vastly different colours, some red, some blue, others green or purple. Cole's horse drawn carriage turned into the Tinkerer's District, distinguishable by its cool azure lighting and a gentle haze in the air. The Tinkerer's District was situated just south of the Houses of the Assembly and the Citadel. Achland's mechanical and technological achievements had seen it through the Felviar wars, with the ingenuity of the country's inventors and tinkerers meeting and defeating elven magic. This union of technology and warfare had seen the creation of the Tinkerer's District. Any inventor worth his salt was now at least partially financed by the Crown, as both a way to control them, and to ensure Achland's military superiority over her enemies.

Cole's eyes fluttered open as the carriage shuddered and stopped. He yawned and sat forward, sparing a glance out the window. Thomas' house was along the outer edge of the district, farther off the river then most, but still close enough that Cole could catch the slightest stench of the fetid waters. Even though it was close to the Mallar and by extension the poor quarters, the Tinkerer's District was peaceful, and the houses were large; in fact, most were a good deal nicer than Cole's own. Thomas' house was modest compared to the others, a simple two-storey affair, but without the pleasant gardens Cole's residence possessed, though it did have a single storey workshop running along the side. A door opened in the front of the house, and light spilled out, surrounding a man as he hurried down the walk.

"I have my own means of transportation you know," said Thomas. Cole opened the door for his friend. Thomas removed his top hat and climbed into the carriage. He wore a fine suit, with a red and grey tartan cloth draped of his right shoulder, a visual reminder of his Gelish heritage. Thomas' light brown hair was slicked back, and his small handlebar moustache was waxed to a brilliant sheen. Thomas' face was rather square and a bit more round compared to Cole's angular features, but it made him look strong as opposed to Cole's rather feline look. "Why you insist on picking me up I cannot fathom."

"This is better," Cole replied simply. He rapped his knuckles on the roof of the carriage. The driver let out a short shout, cracked his whip, and they set off again. "Besides, your vehicle is so classless."

"Steam-powered vehicles are the wave of the future, Cole," Thomas replied. "Mass produced lumps of metal is what they are."
"They don't require horses for one thing."
"Ohh, another strike against them then," said Cole.
"You hate horses, though," Thomas corrected.
"True," Cole shrugged.
"Plus without the horses the general level of cleanliness will increase. Do you know how much excrement horses produce? Plus production will create work for hundreds, if not thousands."
"But they will still be ugly," said Cole. "A big beautiful cab like this? It commands respect and it looks oh so mysterious. A steamobile? It's nothing but an open top carriage with an engine strapped to it. Even worse, those cars are so damn cramped! I can barely stretch my legs in one of those things."
"You're just scared because the Steam-mobile is the first invention to feature an engine that does not rely on mage-fyre."
"The Council of Spellweavers provided you with a variety of minor spells to analyse," Cole replied. "Why you insist on pushing the bounds beyond that is beyond me."
"Because science is about discovery and rational application of knowledge, unlike spellwork,
which seems to involve a good deal of self gratification,” Thomas countered. “If the Council had not refused access for more scientific study of the Weave out of fear for losing their power, the scientific community might have been satisfied studying what you provided. I hear some engineers in the Western Colonies have managed to create a miniaturized steam-engine that does not rely on mage-fyre to function.”

Cole's eyebrows shot up. “Those jingoistic warmongers are doing something else besides slaughtering natives? Pff, that's new.”

“At least they are no longer in open rebellion,” Thomas added. “I see you changed your hair back.”

“I debated back and forth about it,” Cole rifled his fingers through his loose black hair. “The blond would look good, especially with my eyes.” Thomas fixed Cole with a flat, unamused stare. “But it clashed with most of my wardrobe.”

“Cole, just so you know, Colonel Howe is coming to Mrs. Talbit's party,” said Thomas. “He asks after you often, so please do try and behave.”

“Speaking of the Colonel, I assume he is the one who extended the invitation to you?”

“What are you implying?”

“Nothing,” said Cole. “Just that the Duchess doesn't usually invite people of your social...standing.”

Mrs. Talbit, really Duchess Anita Talbit, was well known for throwing lavish parties. Her husband had died five years previously, and Duchess Talbit had emerged from his shadow as a sophisticated society lady who enjoyed summoning society's upper crust to her estate. The parties were less about those invited and more of a chance for Anita to meddle in the affairs of others. The party tonight would not be taking place at her estate; instead, it was to be held at a school for impoverished children that Anita was funding. Tonight, the rich would all descend on the school, dine on succulent food, bask in the warmth of monetary excess, feel as though they had contributed, and then leave.

The carriage rumbled along the streets; even at this hour the smoke stacks and factories were still running, and clouds of smoke and soot clung to the tops of buildings like a lover. This part of Thertan was filthy, but shining in the middle of it all was Duchess Talbit's school. A pair of iron gates swung open to admit the carriage, and it bounced up the gravel drive. The school grounds were well tended, with oaks, laurels, pines, and plenty of shrubbery planted about the four-storey, H shaped building.

“Remind me again what Laura Talbit looks like,” said Cole. The carriage slowed, drawing up to school's front doors.

“Why?” Thomas scoffed. “You were just raving about her a few hours ago.”

“Yes, well...” Cole let out a heavy sigh, “when you have had as many women as I have, it becomes hard to remember them all. It's a curse, really.” The carriage stopped, and the driver hopped down. Cole glanced out the window and let out an annoyed groan. “How did I let you talk me into coming to this? There is Lord and Lady Pendalton, I hate them; actually, I think I hate everyone here; they are so simple-minded, and obsessed about such silly things. Dress, who is marrying whom, petty idiots all of them. Of course, they all hate me as well. Uggghh, it's so hard being the only genius among these people”

“Stop being so melodramatic,” said Thomas. “They don't hate you.”

“Well, they certainly don't like me. Actually, I believe a good number of them fear me,” replied Cole. The driver opened the door, and Cole and Thomas stepped out, proceeding up the gravel walk. “Most of them won't even talk to me.”

“Good, means you'll leave early then,” said Thomas. “Or you'll go stand in a corner and leer at me like some scorned lover.”
The doors of the school swung open on their own accord, bathing the front walk in bright light. Cole blinked for several seconds, letting his eyes adjust to the sudden change. Dozens of people crowded around in the soaring entry hall, mingling around the central staircase. It was very apparent that the school had been done up for the occasion. The walls were still white and pristine, the balustrades gleaming, and portraits of famous Achland military and industrial heroes had been hung upon the walls. A butler stepped forward to take Thomas' hat and cane, and then waited to take Cole's coat. Cole ignored the man, and stepped into the entry hall, summoning up a gust of wind as he did so. The magically charged breeze swirled around his coat, causing it to snap and dance. Cole smiled as he directed the wind to blow out over the crowd.

_Perfect entrance_, thought Cole, as the whole room grew silent and turned to face him.

The crowd settled back into their conversations, while Cole and Thomas began to make their way around the room. The various party goers greeted Thomas warmly, while barely acknowledging Cole. Those that did acknowledge him spoke only a few terse words, avoiding any deep discussions with him. It was obvious from their eyes what they wanted to talk about, but they were all too polite to discuss Cole's service in the Felvian war in his presence. He held himself in check as best as possible, but he could not suppress a rising sense of disgust with the entire affair. Everywhere he turned, he saw the same simpering, forced smile, the same self-congratulatory smugness, or the barely contained revulsion.

The air was thick with sickeningly sweet perfume mingled with fresh paint. The normal drone of polite conversation was magnified by the entry hall's high ceiling, and Cole quickly felt himself becoming overwhelmed.

"Have you finished the latest Downing novel?" One woman inquired of her friend.
"I could not put it down!" exclaimed the other woman. "I knew Mr. Barker was the Duke's long lost son, and that he and Elizabeth would finally get married in the end."
"Whoever invited that man should have all his lands and titles revoked. Have you heard the stories? His magic is tainted, it's _dark_. Even worse I heard that during the war he abandoned his fellows and fle...."
"The question isn't if the Felviar are going to invade, but when," declared a man with a moustache large enough for two. "It has been almost thirty years since they disposed of their monarchy, and they have finally rallied around this new Emperor of the People. They will invade soon."
"But they still have to worry about Úruush to the north," said another. "When you look at it, we really need to be worrying about the Úruush instead of Felviar."
"There is also the Kaldry to worry about. I highly doubt the Consortium will be able to keep order there. That entire country should be written off as a failed experiment. We tried our best to civilize those savages, but we just have to accept that some peoples are inferior. Their Trade Princes, the Ra'kala, were civil enough...but those others..."
"Yes I had heard rumours about his service, why he's allowed out in polite...."

Cole gently massaged his temple as he swiftly made his way around the room, slipping into a classroom that had been hastily converted into the main supper-room for the party. The room was painted in a putrid salmon colour, with dark brown furnishings that clashed horribly. Most of the dressings had undoubtedly been brought in for the gala, and upon further inspection, Cole could see where several bookcases had been shoved together to hide a blackboard. Two long tables ran along the length of the room, groaning under the weight of several heavy golden serving dishes. A raven-haired girl stood in one corner, and Cole winked at her, before Thomas appeared and dragged him away from her towards the buffet tables.

Cole accepted a glass of Port from a domestic, noting that the glass included several chunks of
ice, and then turned to the food. Based on the smells alone, it was clear the Talbits had spared no expense. The centre piece was an exquisitely crafted baked confection. The cake rose up seven storeys, each layer supported by spindly, spun-sugar vines. From the slices that had been taken out, Cole saw that the layers alternated between vanilla and chocolate, each with its own fruit filling. Arrayed around the cake were all manner of small, easily nibbled deserts, and a tray of rout-cakes topped with almonds. Further down were bowls of fresh fruit, then a ring of salads. At one end of the table, a suckling pig lay, apple in mouth, ringed with potatoes and onions, and accompanied by a large bowl of white soup. A stuffed pheasant roosted at the other end of the table, with leeks and other greens forming the bird's nest. More "ethnic" dishes from all corners of the Empire filled in the remaining space, including herb stuffed capons from the central territories, Kaldrien curries, lobster tails from the north, pepper crusted grouper fresh from the western islands, and several truncheons of Dwarven hummus and flat bread.

Anita's children, Laura and Clayton, slowly moved counter clock-wise around the table. Cole gave his order to one of the Duchess' domestics, while occasionally glancing across at Laura, before meeting her gaze over a hearty chicken pie. The two siblings looked very similar. Both were blond, though Laura's hair was much paler, while Clayton's was a rich golden colour. Clayton was also rather hooked-nosed with angular cheeks, while Laura's face was a good deal more rounded. Both had delicate hazel eyes, though Laura's were a shade darker, creating a stark with her dress.

Cole smiled at Laura and quickly rounded the table, glancing back and forth to make sure Thomas would not suddenly appear. Cole took Laura's hand in his and bent to kiss it. “My Lady Talbit, I must say you are looking breathtaking tonight.”

“Why, thank you, Mr. Travers, you are too kind,” said Laura. Cole straightened up, eyes locked on Clayton's chest instead of Laura's. The younger man wore a smart suit, similar in cut to Thomas',but it was not fashion Cole was concerned with; instead it was the small silver pin Clayton had on his lapel. He would have recognized its like anywhere, it was a perfect match for the one he had found on Braden's body, and seen drawn in the tattered Ronic journal.

“Really? Oh, you are too kind, my lady,” Cole released her hand. “That dress is exquisite.” Laura spun about. “It is, isn't it? Some of the other women gave me somewhat disparaging looks, though I think they are jealous. Their dresses make them look like some sort of lace demon, and they can barely walk about.” Laura began to laugh, a high-pitched, tittering laugh that set Cole's nerves on end. “But have you seen Mary's dress? Her shoulders aren't even covered! Well, they were, she had a jacket, but she seems to have misplaced it. Rather scandalous if you ask me.”

“That is absolutely horrid,” Cole chuckled. Achlish fashion was conservative to the point of repression, with high collars, and full sleeves. Woman wore no make-up, though many wore so much perfume Cole thought they must bathe in the stuff. “I agree, though, the rest of them do look rather silly, don't they? “But then again, wearing that, none of them could ever be as beautiful as you are, my dear.”

“Now just one moment.” Clayton turned towards Cole. Cole looked at the other man and noticed that a low-pitched buzzing or resonance just like the one Cole had felt around Braden now filled the air. “Don't think I haven't heard about you, Cole. Sister darling, this man abused his position and his father's money to end his tour of service early, and yet he was still awarded a medal for bravery. He is also a scoundrel, and if the papers are to be believed, he has seduced many women, some of them married. What's worse is you leave most of them in just a couple of days!”

“Uhh, my word, are you always so impolite, Clayton?” Cole asked keeping his tone conversational. “Your mother invited me to this party, and my family has always been on good terms with yours.

“I do not deny that my family has strong ties to the Travers line but your exploits during the Felvian Incursion have certainly harmed that relationship,” said Clayton. Cole glared at the man, knowing exactly what he was going to say next. “Really, Cole, we cannot be seen fraternizing with a
man who deserter...."

"COLE MY BOY!!" Colonel Erik Howe exclaimed, his voice several orders of magnitude louder than anyone else's, or anything else, in the vicinity. "How fantastic it is to see you!"

Colonel Erik Howe, dressed in his military best, pushed his way through the crowd towards Cole and the Talbit siblings. Erik was a portly gentleman with broad shoulders, a bulbous nose, and a wide double chin. It seemed both Erik and Thomas had decided to grow the same bristling moustache, though the colonel had added a pair of bulging mutton chops. Erik's dark hair had turned ashy, but his green eyes were still as bright as ever.

"Colonel Howe, it is great to see you," Cole lied, rather glad the man had interrupted Clayton. If Erik had not appeared, Cole was certain he would have attacked the other man. He extended his hand and Erik clapped in both of his and shook it vigorously, causing Cole's entire body to shake. "Thomas is here somewhere as well."

"He is?!" Erik bellowed. "Smashing, simply SMASHING!! I had hoped he would come, some of the other boys are here as well." Erik motioned to a dimly lit adjoining room. "We were just swapping war stories. Why don't you come and join us, eh? Ohh, Clayton, how are ya, lad?"

"I am good Colonel." Clayton shook hands with Erik. "As I understand it you are to be heading up the Kaldrien expedition, that I and Minister Tenning proposed."

"I am, I am," said Colonel Howe. "Some of my men are here as well and is that...THOMAS!!"

Cole breathed a sigh of relief as Thomas stepped into the room. Howe pushed Cole out of the way, and dragged Thomas into a massive hug. The younger man returned the hug with gusto, slapping his hands against Erik's back.

"I thought I heard your voice, Colonel Howe," said Thomas when the two broke apart.

"How could you not," Cole muttered, attempting to slink away. Thomas placed a hand on his friend's shoulder and turned him around.

"Ohh, it's so good to see both of you boys together again." Erik motioned towards one of the domestics stationed around the table. "I was already telling Cole and Clayton that some of the rest of the old brigade are here. Let me just get a drink, and then we can all sit down. Cole you must hear some of the stories; you missed them of course uhh...leaving as you did. I nearly had my head blown clean off by those smug point-ears! Thomas shot him before he could lob a fireball though, and boy, let me tell you, that was one shot in a million!"

The "war" had started when Felviar invaded the land Achland had annexed on the Teneth mainland. Squashed between Üruush to the north, Felvia to the south, and several other countries to the west, the Annexation had been carved out during the Third Felvian War sixty years before. Felviar had attacked the border several times, but the "Incursion" as it came to be called was the first major military clash between the two nations since the war of 1713.

Cole and Thomas had both served under Colonel Howe during the Incursion and it was there Thomas had made the connections that would lead to his career working for the Crown. Young Thomas, barely a day over eighteen, had found a way to extend the uranium-coated "Cold Iron" bullets the platoon was using, giving them an actual fighting chance against the magically superior elven army. After that, Thomas had left the service, and Cole, Cormag, and the others had gone to My'thren. The garrison had assembled in secret allying with the elven population there a first for both peoples, and would have remained hidden, if not for Garret's betrayal.

Cole drained his glass, refilled it, and resigned himself to a night of misery, though he did notice that Laura followed him into the card-room. Unlike the other rooms, this one was dark, and the walls were bare. Several well-stuffed chairs were dumped in the room, as well as a chaise lounge, and rickety coffee table. At a corner in the back a few men sat smoking foul smelling cigars and playing whist. Erik seated himself between two other men in military dress and motioned for the new arrivals to take a
seat. Cole and Laura sat down together, while Clayton took a seat in an armchair opposite the couple. There was nothing romantic in Cole's pursuit of Laura; indeed, he never pursued anyone romantically any more, nor allowed himself to love. Instead, he only desired the thrill of the hunt and the “fame” that resulted from his many affairs.

“Well then, this is a pleasant surprise,” said sandy-haired Matthew. The man stood and shook Thomas' hand, while completely ignoring Cole. “Thomas, I hadn't expected to see you here. I figured you would be spending all your time with Clarissa. Did she come with you tonight?”

“No, she was not feeling well,” Thomas explained. “She also apologizes for missing your sister's wedding. I know she would love to talk to Amanda about it. It was such a lovely event.”

“It was, wasn't it!” Erik thundered. “That was the last time we were really all together wasn't it? Well, except for Cole.”

“I had other things planned for that day,” Cole muttered, favouring Thomas with a quick smile. “Seems like you always do,” Matthew sneered. “First you dodge the draft, then you luffed about during the actual fighting. But how could I forget the height of your failure, deserting in the middle of carnage that was My'thren! Why you weren't imprisoned I will never know, any normal soldier would have faced a court martial at the very least.”

“Ehh why are you complaining, you lived didn't you?” Cole shrugged, then took a large swig from his glass, hoping to get smashing drunk before the night was out, because, at least that way he might be able to deal with Matthew's attacks on his character without snapping entirely. “Besides, I did not dodge the draft, I sat it out on principal.”

“Principal?!” Matthew scoffed. “Since when do you have those?”

Since the warmongering fools took power, thought Cole.

Erik laughed. “Ahh now you can't blame Cole for his reasons for sitting out the war. Besides, what happened in My'thren was not his fault.”

“Not his fault? He turned and fled like a bloody coward,” Matthew hissed. “I'm sure someone with Cole's morals would never misuse his father's position in the military in order to sit the war out and still receive honours for his service.”

The man's tone was acidic, but Cole had grown used to this sort of thing, especially the petty slights against his honour. In truth, he had deserted, but not because he was a coward. He had left the battlefield in pursuit of Garret. No one believed him of course, it was easier for them to simply label him a coward or an oath-breaker. Matthew's jab still stung, but only barely; he had buried that pain with heavy drink and a libertine lifestyle after the first year of backhanded remarks. His anger still festered up from time to time like some foul monster screaming for blood, but he managed to suppress it for the most part. Cole had always suffered like this, first for espousing his unpopular beliefs, then for his magic, then for his perceived cowardice.

“I always believed that better integration amongst the units, Weaver and serviceman, would help to sort out this sort of animosity,” sniffed Clayton in an attempt to dissipate the mounting tension. “Though I was too young to serve; I always felt keeping the Spellweavers sequestered meant they never formed any sort of camaraderie with the rest of the unit, and there have had several well documented cases of them abandoning their fellows.”

“Speaking of integration, Cole you really should enlist to join our expedition,” said Erik. “I could give you an excellent recommendation and well...we need someone competent.” There was an awkward silence as Erik glanced over at Matthew. “Especially now that well...Major Acker has died.”

“What... he has?” Thomas' moustache flared. “I had not heard anything about that.”

“It was in the paper,” Erik explained. “They captured his murderer almost immediately. According to the reports, he was a rather odd man; apparently he was stark raving mad, and his pockets were completely empty save for some odd silver pin.” Thomas glanced at Cole and cocked his head
slightly in Clayton's direction.

“Oh, so you want me to fill in for a man that was murdered by a mad man?” Cole smirked.

“You case is compelling, I'll go to pack immediately. I have always wanted to go to a foreign country full of savages.”

“The don't need you,” said Clayton, glaring at Cole. His hostility seemed rather unwarranted, but Cole forgive him since he was after all making romantic advances upon the man's sister.

“It would be good for you Cole,” said Erik. “Get you up and around...”

“You could run away when we need you most,” interjected Matthew, prompting Cole to take another swig of brandy.

“So, what exactly is happening in Kaldry?” Laura asked. “Clayton has been ever so tight lipped about it.”

Her question was greeted by an awkward silence. Clayton cleared his throat, “my sweet sister what is happening in Kaldry is rather sensitive information that shouldn't be shared...”

“Oh sod it all,” Erik shouted. “The public will hear about it in a few days anyway, besides I find the society of silence that surrounds Achlish Colonialism to be rather outdated. You see my dear, Kaldry is currently administrated by the Consortium. Good chaps, but Minister Tenning, your brother, and a majority of the Assembly feel they are not doing their job properly.”

“It has to do with how the colony is being run,” Matthew explained. “The Consortium has made deals with the high caste of Kaldry, the Ra'kala, but the lower castes have long opposed the Consortium rule. There have been small skirmishes and several insurrections over the years. The Kaldrien Uprising ten years ago one of the largest. The Consortium came down hard on the tribal castes and since then things have settled...somewhat. The Assembly had petitioned to have the Consortium removed, but there was a great deal of push back. Things have been tense between the Assembly and the Consortium for years.”

“But now things are going to change,” said Erik. “The Assembly has voted, and the Consortium is going to be replaced by an administrator who answers directly to the Crown. The Lord-Protector shall guide the colony, while me and my boys are being sent in first to reinforce the garrison there. Colonel Walsh is having a hell of a time with it, especially since the Consortium is none to pleased to be losing one of their major holdings.”

Erik continued to talk for several minutes, explaining the complex Kaldrien caste system to Laura. While humans did comprise part of the populace, they were a minority in comparison to the dark skinned, pale eyed, Kaldriens, who shared more physical traits in common with the elves of Felviar than they did with the humans of Achland. One could be an ethnic citizen of Kaldry, but not of the Kaldrien race.

Though rather derogatory, the term “kelf” had come to be the accepted term for these non-human indigenous of Kaldry, and those of similar racial descent spread across the world. The caste system only further confused this naming convention, with both humans, kelfs, and the other native races falling into various castes based both on racial heritage and ethnic standing. All of this was further compounded by various religious tensions, with some Kaldriens following the countries original religious beliefs and others following Yslan beliefs blended with portions of the original Kaldrien beliefs.

“But why exactly are we there?” asked Laura.

“Because we want money,” Cole drawled, taking another swig from his glass. “The Consortium is a bunch of greedy bastards. Kaldry is rich in Cold Iron, coal, and other precious metals. We strip the land bare to power our economy. The coal especially. We might have perfected the mage-fyre steam engine, but it's usually reserved for military purposes. Our factories, trains, and a dozen other commodities still consume massive amounts of coal. This hunger for more forces us to mine more and
more coal. At the same time, their textiles are of the highest quality, and they also have access to many bright dyes that cannot be acquired otherwise.”

“Cole misses the point my dear sister,” said Clayton. “Yes, the Consortium might pursue profits, but we as a nation are there for one reason. We have a god granted duty to the lesser people of this world. As white men, we must go into these poor, uncivilized countries and bring them out of the darkness of ignorance and into the light.”

“Course the Consortium has not exactly shouldered that burden well,” Cole exclaimed, unable to contain his loathing for the Consortium any longer.

“Why do you think I put forward a motion to have them replaced?” Clayton cocked an eyebrow. “My heart bleeds for these poor devils, and the Consortium has failed to provide for them. The Consortium has abused its power. The Crown shall take charge of things in Kaldry, and in doing so we shall uplift Kaldry, turning it into a shining example of Achlish ideals. Our other colonies shall remain colonies, but just like the annexed territories on the mainland, Kaldry shall be made a part of our Empire. The nation of Kaldry will be dissolved, and her people shall become Achlish citizens. Well, as much as such dark skinned savages can become citizens. In your self-assured arrogance Cole, you forget that without the Cold Iron and coal mined in Kaldry, we would lose the war with Felviar. The consequences of our mining may not be entirely palatable, but it is a necessary evil. Without the Cold Iron from Kaldry, there would be no way to stop the elves from overrunning the entire world.”

Clayton was right, Cold Iron was essential to the war effort. The inhibitory properties of Cold Iron were valuable, allowing Achlish soldiers to survive direct assaults from Felvian Spellweavers, but it was weapons coated in the substance that were truly necessary for warfare. Because of their connection to the Weave and its regenerative properties, elves were effectively immortal, to a degree. Without Cold Iron coated weapons to disrupt their magic, it was almost impossible to truly kill an elven soldier. While Achland had countered Felviar with technology, Úruush had gone down a darker path, focusing on plague warfare, and the necromantic arts. Common scholarly theory held that the elves genocidal tendencies, and continual desire for war was a result of their longevity, mostly as a solution to maintain a steady population.

Cole ignored the rest of the conversation, instead focusing his attention on Clayton's pin. If Clayton really did have that much pull in the Assembly, it meant that the warlocks were far more insidious than Cole had guessed. The discussion soon shifted back to the Felviar War. Laura politely excused herself at this point, and Cole let her leave, but not before kissing her hand again. Laura blushed violently, while Clayton scowled.

Somewhere off in the other room someone struck a fork against a glass. Cole craned his neck. Anita Talbit now stood with her children in front of the table. Her dress was similar to Laura's, though it was more modestly cut, as well as being a dark green. Anita and Laura looked very similar, though Anita's cheeks were somewhat sunken, and her hair was short, white and curly.

“Hem, hem, everyone, everyone please gather round.” Anita struck the glass again, using her own magic to enhance the sound. “That includes those of you lingering in the hallway and you gentleman hiding in that back room.” Erik shrugged and they all stood, moving to join the rest of the party. “Good now that we are all together I would like to thank everyone for coming tonight. Thanks to your generous donations, and support, I, along with the Consortium of Eastern Trade, have been able to build this school house and surrounding apartments. Now those employed by the Consortium can rest assured that housing, jobs, and education for their children is guaranteed.” Anita paused as the crowd broke into polite applause. “This has been a dream of mine for several years, and I hope to continue building up our ailing communities. In the years to come, I hope to expand this operation into all of the colonies, bringing the light of our glorious Empire to all those who need it. Thank you.”

The crowd broke into another round of applause. Erik joined them and said. “She does like her
Newcomb 40

crusades, our Anita. Though how she finds the time to finance them, I will never know.”

Cole ignored Erik and instead watched as Clayton turned and swept out of the room. “Well, I
think this calls for a toast, Thomas, come, help me.” Thomas followed, and the two men wandered over
to the bar. Cole leaned in and began to whisper in Thomas' ear. “I need you to provide something of a
cover for me.”

“Cole, please don't go making a fool of yourself. Matthew can be a bit...tempestuous, yes but it's
nothing to get worked up over.”

“I don't care about Matthew,” Cole spat. Thomas fixed his friend with a piercing stare.
“Cole, can we just allow one night....
“No,” Cole interrupted. “I think I have a lead on something I have been investigating for some
time now.”

“Ohhh, so you are not going to get raging drunk for once? I'm actually amazed you lasted this
long. their muttering and veiled insults usually get to you before now.” Thomas stopped. The look on
his friend's face was one of both rage and pain. “Does this have something to do with the pin in your
study resembling the one on Clayton's chest?”

Cole frowned. “Possibly, just cover for me, and I swear I will tell you everything.”

“Hmmpf, of course you will. Fine go, just don't take forever. I don't think I can stomach many
more of Erik's war stories.”

“Why do you think I'm leaving?”

Cole darted away before Thomas could respond, following Clayton out into the entry hall. He
arrived just in time to see the front doors close as the other man walked out. Cole waited several
seconds before following Clayton. The night was dark, and Cole had to blink several times before his
eyes adjusted. Clayton had left the party at a brisk walk, and Cole spotted him disappearing around the
gate at the end of the walk.

Clayton looked back over his shoulder, and Cole shrank back, using his magic to weave the
shadows around himself. Clayton seemed nervous as if something had set him on edge, and he kept
fiddling with the pin on his lapel. Cole dashed out from his hiding place as Clayton left the grounds.
Cole reached for his magic, swathed himself in shadows and then leaped up onto the wall, landing in a
low crouch. Hidden as he was, Clayton did not see Cole, even though he passed by several inches
below. Once Cole was sure Clayton was out of ear shot, he dropped down to the ground, and set off
after him, following the other man down Thertan's dark, twisting streets.
Chapter 6

Armel slunk along the edges of the crowd, avoiding open areas if possible. The crowd had gathered around a street circus, and hundreds of people of all social standings had packed into Drathgan Square to see the performers. The circus provided the perfect distraction for Armel's activities, as most people were too busy watching the acts to pay any attention to the small elf boy picking their pockets. Armel had already pocketed five half-mark notes, several guineas, and close to thirty copper pence. Feggin would only have expected Armel to collect a small fraction of what he had, so he was rather pleased with himself.

As Armel shoved his way through the crowd, he decided to stop and watch some of the acts after all. There were three rings, made from bulky bags stuffed full of sand, spread around the square. While the main acts occupied the rings, various side acts, including a rat and dog fight, were hosted out of rickety wagons, or inside hastily pitched tents. The crowd was pressing in so close together that some had taken to climbing the towering statue of Sir Drathgan, a legendary knight of Achland. Acrobat soared through the air overhead, diving from wires tethered to the buildings facing the square, while a troop of painted clowns played wild, cacophonous music on instruments made from metal pot lids, old bottles, brass tubing, and other common refuse.

A low fence had been erected around the centre ring and exotic animals paraded about. A man wearing a sparkling vest, simple slacks, and nothing else, shouted at the crowd, explaining what everything was and where he had “tamed” it. More cages waited outside of the ring, housing the more dangerous animals. For now, the man chased a group of miniature horses about, flailing his arms wildly in an attempt to rile them. When the crowd began to boo, the man herded the horses out, and brought out a flock of peacocks. There were oohs and ahhs from the crowd, as the birds strutted about, tail feathers held high.

“Ahh, come on, we've seen all these already!” A man shouted. “Show us somefing exciting!”

“Ya,” a young woman shouted. “You said you's a had what did ye say, exotic animals. These birds ain't that different from what the local Menagerie has.”

The crowd began to shout, and the beast master swallowed. It was obvious he had been saving the more exciting beasts for later in the night, most likely for after the crowd had thrown some money into the ring. The crowd's shouts grew in intensity, and the man quickly swished the peacocks back into their cage.

Standing back from the ring, the beast master flung his arms in to the air. “People of Thertan, I give to you what you have never seen before, unless you've travelled far. I bring you a beast of great majesty and mystery! From the darkest heart of savage Ethenia I bring you a griffin!”

Armel, caught up in the crowd's excitement, shoved his way to the front, just as eager as everyone else to see something so rare. The beast master wrenched the doors open, bent down into the cage, and grabbed a large, metal chain. He tugged at it once, and then stepped out of the cage. The griffin that followed the beast master could hardly be called majestic; it was barely three feet tall. With the head and wings of some noble predatory bird, and the rear legs of a great feline, gryphons were among Ethenia's most deadly predators, and it was often said that they would swoop down and carry off grown men. This one, though, was pathetic. Its wings were clipped short, and there were large patches of fur missing from its hindquarters. Armel felt rather bad for it, but the crowd didn't. As soon as the beast emerged, a scream of ecstasy went up, causing even more onlookers to come rushing to the edge of the ring.

As more people crowded around the animal pen, Armel fought to untangle himself from the press of bodies. It did not take long for Armel to free himself from the crowd since most were more than happy to let him out, so they could move in closer. With the crowd so distracted, he took the
The men wore costumes that gave them the appearance of great birds, billowing outfits that had gaily coloured streamers hanging from their shoulders, elbows, and forearms. The “birds” all stood on a series of platforms coming out of some massive machine. The platforms slowly rose and fell, while the “birds” jumped back and forth, performing intricate flips and dives. Occasionally, one of the platforms would drop swiftly before shooting back up and tossing its occupant into the air. The man would hurtle into the air, spin about, and then dive onto a padded mat, before bounding up to rejoin the performance.

The men were spectacular performers, but it was the women that attracted Armel's attention. Unlike the men, they wore very little, and what they did wear was very tight. Instead of jumping and bounding through the air, the women were contorting themselves into all sorts of strange shapes, some even wrapping around each other. One, a girl only a few years older than Armel, was engaging in a series of flips that caused her already tight outfit to stretch even tighter across her limber body. As he watched, Armel could feel an odd sensation in his groin. No doubt the church Inquisitors would soon arrive, accompanied by several constables to shut the entire affair down, but for now the lurid show was allowed to continue. While Achlanders liked to brag of their morals, it would no doubt still be some time before any action was taken. Armel quickly shuffled away to the other ring, sparing one glance back at the contortionists before leaving.

Armel shuffled along towards the last ring, passing a series of merchants hawking cheap merchandise and housewares out of the back of rickety covered wagons. Not all the vendors were human; indeed, Armel spotted several dwarves and even a fox-faced Vitzen mingled in amongst the rest. While Armel might be considered a second-class citizen in Achland, the furred and tailed Vitzen were considered second-class citizens wherever they went. Looking something like anthropomorphic foxes, Vitzen had no home land, instead preferring to travel in small, nomadic groups. They were often considered vagabonds and thieves, working odd jobs to support themselves, facing discrimination wherever they went.

Armel passed a man selling fried fish and husky, thick-sliced potato chips, wrapped in wax paper. The smell of the food was intoxicating. Usually Armel could not afford such luxuries and had to either rely on Mrs. Haversham's kindness or his own ingenuity to sate his hunger. Now, pockets full of plunder, Armel decided it might be wise to at least try the vendor's food. The man glowered at him when he saw he was of elf-blood, but brightened considerably when Armel paid him with a crisp half-mark note he had “acquired” earlier in the night. The fish was overcooked and the chips were rather oily, but Armel did not care; it was good to have something hot that was not Mrs. Haversham's cooking.

The final ring was bare, save for a single man; it was also a good deal larger than the other two. While the animals had attracted the most attention, and the acrobats the least, the man attracted a modest crowd somewhere in between the two. The man stood in the centre of the ring, dressed in a fine suit, top hat, and cape. The man's audience was very quiet, as though they were anticipating something. Armel made his way to the front, just as the man flicked his hands about and began to chant in a deep, echoing voice.

There was an explosion of light and then hundreds of flower petals began to rain down into the ring. The flower petals swirled through the air, and with another flick of his wrist the man set them aflame. Bright green fire flashed all about, illuminating the man's face with eerie light. As the flames struck the ground, vines sprang up, overflowing the ring and creeping out into the crowd. Everyone drew back, as the vines began to twist and spiral around themselves, growing higher and higher until they stopped, their tops studded with swollen bulbs. The bulbs blossomed into flowers, three feet around and of the same shade as those the Spellweaver had conjured several moments before.

The crowd broke into wild applause, and Armel joined them. The wizard swept his top hat from his head, and dropped into a low bow. Armel had always been fascinated by magic, and this had been
one of the greatest displays he had ever seen. As the wizard straightened up, he tossed a handful of gold
and purple sparks into the air, and all the vines exploded into a puff of smoke. The sudden explosion
caused Armel to jump back, and he slammed into an even younger boy who had been standing behind
him, attempting to pick his pocket.

“Imma sa sorry, I din't mean ta...” the boy stammered, shrinking away from Armel. The boy
looked up, and the colour drained from his face. “Oh, spirits please don't hurt me, don't curse me mister
elf, sir!”

Armel glared at the boy, who couldn't have been older than seven. “Were you trying to steal
from me?”

“Ye...no, no,” the boy wailed. “I wasn't I swear, don't hurt me.”

Armel frowned; the kid was just as ragged and dirty as he was, though much skinnier. There
were hard, black, puffy abscesses on the boy's cheeks and arms; plague scars, that when scratched or
punctured, would crack open and leak a dark, vicious ichor. While Felviar was Achland's greatest foe,
the necromancers and plague-masters of Üruush were just as dangerous, and their handiwork still
lingered among the poor of Thertan. Brought home by soldiers, the magical plagues spread among the
lower classes, lingering not only on organic material, but also corrupting inorganic material as well,
corrupting anything that came in contact with it.

Armel dug into his pocket and removed a few coins. “Here, get something to eat.”

“Really?!” The scarred boy replied.

Armel dropped the coins into the boy's upraised hands, careful not to touch his skin. “Yeah,
and next time you're stealing from someone, do it when they are completely engrossed in what they are
doing. But if you do get caught, run away instead of crying like that.”

“But you's an elf, my mum's always a tellin me bout how they can make your head explode by
just looking at ya. Elves got all sorts of magic.”

“Maybe it skipped me, then,” said Armel. “Now get out of here, I have work to do.”

The boy scampered off, and Armel went back to work. The wizard had resumed his act and was
now filling the air with hundreds of small multicoloured explosions. Armel deftly opened a few more
pockets with his finger-razor, quickly replenishing the money he had given to the scarred boy.

Somewhere to the north, a clock began to toll ten. Armel, pockets already very heavy, decided it might
be a good time to go looking for Feggin. He wove his way through the crowd, stopping for a moment to
watch as the beast master led a scraggly lion around and around. When Armel looked back, he thought
he saw a man following him, but the crowd was so dense he could not be sure. Once out of the square,
Armel darted down a side alley.

Now that he was away from the square, Armel realised how dark the night really was. Away
from all the lights and people, he felt very alone. He stopped for a moment, ears pricking up at the
sound of footsteps coming down the alley. He ducked around a corner, hand resting on his dirk's
handle, watching as two men started down the alley. They were moving slowly, deliberately checking
in every corner and crevice. Armel crouched down and began to slink along on all fours, sticking to the
shadows as much as possible. The two men didn't see him, and Armel scurried along, breaking into a
sprint only when he was sure the men were too far away to catch him. He dashed around a corner and
slammed straight into another man.

“Well then wha' we gort ere?” The man grabbed Armel, fat fingers digging into the boy's bony
shoulder. “You look awfylly famila.”

It was the workman from Mrs. Haversham's shop. He was a very large man, especially
compared to Armel. The man's face was broad, piggish, and his eyes shone with a ravenous glee.
Again, the man stank of liquor, and there were food stains all over his shirt. The two men who had been
searching in the alley turned the corner while several more appeared behind the Armel's assailant.
“Thinking ye could steal from me?” The man asked as he violently shook Armel. “That's a mighty stupid notion. Youse friend the cop ain't ere now to save ya, and even if he was, I don't think he'd cause me boys too much trouble. Now, afore I gut you, I'm goin ter give you the chance to return what's it you took.”

“You going to let me go?” Armel fingers crept towards his dagger. The man clamped down even tighter, and Armel cried out in pain.

“Now, if I was ta do that I'd be lookin weak.” The man's friends began to laugh. “Plus, your kind don't belong here with us decent folk. I think one o' ese buildings ere might look good with an elf body hangin' orf em. Well part of a body anyway. So do we....”

Armel's hand flashed out as he sliced his finger-razor across the man's forearm, laying it open to the bone. Blood gushed out, and the man roared in pain. Armel wrenched his shoulder free and spun, drawing his knife in one swift movement. One of the men from the alley, a tall, wiry fellow, made to grab Armel. The knife blade flashed in the dim light, ripping a gash in the man's chest. Even bleeding as he was, the man made a clumsy grab for Armel, managing to catch a handful of the boy's hair. Armel yanked back, tearing himself free from the man's grasp, and dashing back down the alley.

“Git im you lazy blighters!”

Armel ran down the dark alley, easily outrunning his drunken pursuers. A loud click echoed down the alley, followed by the thundering of a gun. Bullets whizzed through the air all around Armel, blowing chunks out of the masonry. He skidded around a corner, and started down another alley. He spared a glance back and saw the men collide as they tried to follow. Armel laughed and put on another burst of speed. He knew that there was a low wall coming up, one that he could easily clamber over. If he could just make it there, he should be able to lose the men. Armel continued to run, listing to the heavy footfalls of the men chasing him. The alley grew narrower, before dead-ending in a brick wall.

Without slowing, Armel ran directly at the wall, jumping to the side at the last possible moment. He kicked off the side of a building, pushing himself into the air, before grasping the top of the wall. Armel's feet scraped against the bare brick as he fought to pull himself over. He hadn't gotten a very good start, and his fingers were beginning to slip. He clamped down on the wall, and pain shot through his hand. The razor strapped to his finger had shattered, slicing open his palm. Armel shut the pain away, and hauled himself over the wall, just as a pair of shots blew through the space he had occupied several moments before. Armel dropped to the ground, rolled to the side, and continued to flee.

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What Armel had not considered was that the wall he had climbed was part of a closed courtyard, and the exit was on the far side. The wiry man who had grabbed him earlier dropped down over the wall, knife in hand. The man lashed out at Armel, who ducked under the clumsy swing. Armel twisted about, drew a second knife from where it had been concealed up his sleeve, and deftly parried the man's next two thrusts. Growing up an orphan on the street, Armel had learned a great deal of knife play, and while he was not very strong, his size and speed gave him a decisive advantage. The wiry man slashed downward, holding the knife in a reverse hammer grip. Again Armel twisted to the side, dropping to the ground, the blade passing within inches of his exposed back. As he moved, Armel saw that a second man was already coming over the wall. Before the wiry man could recover his footing, Armel thrust upwards, driving the point of his dagger straight into the man's stomach, then tearing to
the side. Blood and bile gushed out over Armel's hand, and he spun away, ripping open the wiry man's stomach, spilling his guts all over the ground.

The next man dropped down from the wall and levelled his revolver at Armel. Armel hurled his dagger. The blade spun twice, and the handle struck the man in the chest, bouncing away without any noticeable effect. Armel was already running, as more bullets exploded through the courtyard. He dashed down another alley, and now having totally lost his bearings, he was just running without any sort of plan. The alley ended on a wide deserted street. Armel spun about, futilely searching for some sign as to where he should go. He could hear the heavy breathing of the men pursuing him. Armel turned to the left, slammed into another man and crashed to the ground.

“You have to watch were you’re going lad,” said the man, bending down and offering his hand to Armel. The man was young, with hazel eyes, and golden hair that was pulled back close to his head. “Something wrong?”

“Nothing . . . I,” Armel panted, trying to catch his breath. “I just have to...”

“There ya are! Thought ya could bloody me, then knife one o me boys? I must thank ya sir, you caught the runt before he could cause any more trouble.”

“And might I ask, why you are chasing this boy?” The man, interposed himself between Armel and the drunk workman. “What has he done to warrant such a pursuit?”

“I just told ya, he knifed one of my men, and da day before that he stole from us. Sides he's an elf, don't really need any more reason than that to want to kill him.”

“So, you are saying no one would miss him?” The young man raised an eyebrow. “What about yourselves? Is there any reason you shouldn't be put down like the wretches you are?”

“Well no...”

“Good.”

The man snapped his fingers. A sickening crack echoed down the deserted street, followed by a blood chilling scream. The men who had been pursuing Armel collapsed to the ground, their arms and legs twisted just like the acrobats Armel had been watching earlier. This time, though, he could see white bone jutting out from the skin, shining faintly in the pale moon light.

“Well, now then, it seems that is all taken care of. What is your name?”

“Armel, sir...did you kill them, sir?”

“Clayton, call me Clayton, and yes I did.” Clayton rested his hand lightly on Armel's shoulder, revealing a small silvery medallion pinned on his lapel. Armel had the strangest sense he had seen a similar pin before, but his panic addled brain was preventing him from thinking clearly. “No need for any witnesses after all. Do you have any family Armel? Anyone who would come looking for you?”

“No,” Armel replied. Something about Clayton felt wrong, and a small voice in the back of Armel's mind was telling him to run. As if he could read Armel's mind, Clayton's grip suddenly tightened.

“Excellent,” the man said, more to himself than to Armel. “I think you will be the perfect candidate for tonight's sacrifice.”
Chapter 7

For the second time in so many days, Cole found himself doing something he was completely unaccustomed to doing, walking the streets of Thertan. It had been necessary when hunting Braden the previous day of course, but it was still something he did only rarely. When he did go out, it was often by hansom or cab. The only time he did just go out walking was when he went out around the more affluent parts of the city, and even then only for a few blocks at a time.

After leaving the party, Clayton had quickly vanished into the night. Cole slunk along behind the man, ducking in and out of shadows to maintain his veil of invisibility. The school had been located in one of Thertan's poorer districts, and after several sharp turns, and a good mile of walking, he had found himself in a region of Thertan he had never set foot in before. Many of the street lamps were out, and a thick fog had come in off the bay. The streets were unpaved and eerily silent. These poor districts were the heart of Thertan, the region that the author Heinison had imbued with a sense of premature antiquity in his novels, and a strange allure that evoked nostalgia in the people of Thertan, even though these districts were not yet a century old.

Cole had only seen two other people out walking, but at least that made following Clayton easy. For all his stealth leaving the party, once Clayton was out on the streets, he had dissolved into a nervous wreck, constantly glancing back over his shoulder, and jumping at the slightest of sounds. Cole had followed close behind, penetrating more and more deeply into the dark underbelly of Thertan.

Cole had heard stories of lurid religions from foreign lands lingering in these squalid districts. Foreigners from the annexed mainland or other further countries, emigrants from Ketlic and Gelishar, dark skinned slaves from Ethenia, all of them crammed into these sleazy neighbourhoods, bringing with them all their strange beliefs and customs, then intermingling them with those of their neighbours. If the strange patina-crusted pin Cole had found on Braden's body and seen on Clayton's lapel really did link them to some demonic cult, it was entirely possible this entire district was festering with more of their vile followers, just waiting to attack him as he ran along.

This has to be wrong, he can't be part of the coven, thought Cole. He's too nervous, it's too obvious he's up to something.

Clayton turned to the right, and Cole made to follow, when a woman wearing a tight corset and lacy black skirts detached herself from the shadows. Her blond hair was tousled, and her thick eye-liner was running down her pudgy cheeks.

“Hey love, yo leekin fo some entertainment? Handsome man like you, course you is?”

“Err,” Cole paused, trying to collect his thoughts.

“I got everything you need right ere,” continued the woman, squeezing her heaving breasts together.

“No, that is uhh...I mean...no” Cole stammered, backing away, his cheeks flushing red. While he was less prudish than some, he still had some measure of propriety. “I'm fine, got everything I need...I'm fine...completely fine.”

Cole turned and ran, leaving the prostitute standing alone in the darkness. In those few seconds that she had distracted him, Clayton had vanished. Cole ran along, using his magic to bend shadows back, hoping to spot Clayton fleeing down a side alley. The fleeing warlock had to be close, Cole had only talked to the prostitute for several seconds, but it was dark, and clouds of smoke from Thertan's many factories billowed down the streets, obscuring anything more than a dozen feet away. He stopped, wondering if he had perchance gone the wrong way. If he had, odds were good he would never find Clayton. Cole spun in place, wringing his hands, trying to decide on the best course of action, when a sharp cracking sound pierced the silence. He whirled about, and began to run again towards the sound. It had come from up ahead. It could have just been a gunshot, or a coach breaking an axle, but he felt it
was something else.

As Cole drew closer to the source of the sound, he could see something lying in the streets; bodies, at least three of them, blood pooling around their shattered limbs. He surveyed the grisly scene, then dropped to one knee next to a man who was still breathing. He pressed his finger to the man's jugular. It took several seconds, but he finally found the man's pulse. Reaching out for the shattered-man's mind, Cole confirmed that he was in fact alive and alert. Applying just the smallest jolt of energy to the shattered-man's body, he brought the injured man back to consciousness.

“Who did this?” Cole asked, cradling the shattered-man in his arms.

“Te derned oy,” the man wheezed. His speech was slurred, both with drink and pain “Tha damf eph. Knowed he wa troubler. Den him friend...proper ookin chap...”

The man slumped back. Cole waited for him to continue, but he did not. He slapped the man, hoping to rouse him again. “The man...what did he look like? Where did he go?!”

The drunk man's eyes rolled about in their sockets. “Ran up da street, went in a building up thar.”

“Thanks.” Cole stood up, dumping the man to the ground.

The shattered-man groaned in pain, but Cole ignored him, and ran towards the building the he had indicated. Cole slowed, and ducked into an alley. The building appeared to be a warehouse of some sort, though he could not seem to locate a door. The warehouse squatted at the corner of two streets, squashed between a pub on one side, and tenement house on the other.

During his investigation, Cole had noted that the warlocks had imported dozens of slaves, but never sold any. He had also tentatively linked them to several disappearances. Braden had certainly been involved in smuggling people around; Cole's probing into the man's organization proved that much anyway. He still wasn't entirely sure what he had really discovered, though. The link between the so-called warlocks and such acts certainly seemed to hint at the possibility of human sacrifice, and he wondered if by following Clayton he might end up becoming the group's next victim.

Light, music, and heavy laughter tumbled out of the bar and into the dark night. Cole stroked his thin chin. It appeared that the warehouse and the tenement house were conjoined. The tavern did have a second level, so he could use that as a way to infiltrate the warehouse, but that would require him to be seen by the establishment's patrons, something he would rather avoid. Cole darted down the other street, using magic to pull the shadows in close around him. He surveyed the tenement house. Candle light flickered in some of the windows, but it appeared deserted for the most part.

Gathering his overcoat around him, Cole stepped into the tenement house. The interior was dank, and stank of something that may have been pigs. The floor was covered in refuse, and Cole carefully picked his way through the mess, doing his best to keep his clothes clean. A rickety staircase led up to the next floor, and it creaked loudly underfoot. Cole ascended quickly, using his magic to snuff out any lights he passed. The staircase narrowed the higher he climbed, and he soon found himself on a small landing. The air was hazy here, heavy with the scent of opium.

For a moment, Cole was lost, and he turned around several times looking for a way out. He quickly regained his bearings, then set off down a tight hallway, finding that it dead-ended in a window overlooking the warehouse. He paused for a moment, contemplating his options. The roof of the warehouse looked relatively intact, but in the darkness he could not be sure if it would support his weight. A door on the other end of the hallway swung upon, and Cole shrank back against the wall. Two men staggered out, then disappeared down the stairs, carrying a third man between them.

Well enough stalling, Cole thought, inspecting the window again.

It was just a single pane of glass, loosely set in a dull, wooden frame. Cole rooted around on the ground, searching for something to protect his hands. He found a tattered rag, half soaked in some sort of foul-smelling liquid. He gingerly spread the cloth over the window, holding it in place with his left
hand. He punched the glass out, then used the rag to remove any remaining chunks of glass.

The night air was welcome change from the stuffy hallway, and when Cole poked his head out
and looked up, he could see several stars peeking out through the clouds and smoke that hung over
Thertan. The drop down to the warehouse roof wasn't far, only several feet. Cole heaved himself up
into the window sill, then jumped, landing lightly on the roof. The wood creaked loudly, but held.

The boards were crudely nailed down and did not fit together well, allowing small chinks of
light to shine up through the cracks. Cole dropped down onto his stomach, wedged his fingers in
between two boards, and pulled them apart, widening the crack just enough for him to peer into the
building.

Cole could not see much, but there appeared to be a balcony directly below him. He could also
sense the tingle of magic in the air, most likely a protective charm put in place to warn of intruders. He
sat up and began to concentrate, using his magic to probe at the charms protecting the building. Cole
felt rather than saw the tendrils of pulsing energy that snaked their way through the wood, infusing
every part of the building. Ever so slowly, he began to pluck at the tendrils, gently pulling those closest
to him apart. With one last muttered incantation, he dispelled the charm and then waited, hoping he had
not tripped the alarm.

When no one came running, Cole decided it was now safe to enter. He grasped the boards again
and wrenched them up. The rusty nails groaned, and the wood splintered as he tore open a hole just
large enough for him to pass through. What he had first thought to be a balcony, revealed itself to be a
thick rafter, and he dropped down onto it. The rafter held Cole's weight, and he scuttled along the
beam, taking refuge in a shadowed corner. The warehouse was fairly open, and from his vantage point
he was able to survey the entire room.

The floor itself was clear, save for a massive geometric form inscribed upon the dirt. Braziers
full of sickly sweet incense burned at various intervals around the pentagram, and he wondered how he
had not smelt them before. Cages lined the far wall, containing dogs and several birds, as well as
several people, including a gangly flaxen haired elf boy. The animals were anxious, always moving and
making noise. In contrast the people seemed comatose, just standing or laying on the ground, probably
the result of some spellwork on the part of the warlocks.

What really interested Cole was the four cloaked figures that stood together in the corner, all
gathered around Clayton. From where he crouched, he could not hear the conversation. Gathering his
courage and weaving a cowl of shadows around himself, he began to crawl along the beam, slowly
drawing more closely to the warlocks. As he did so, Cole could feel a slight resonance in the air, and
his teeth began to ache, just as they had when he had drawn closely to Clayton earlier in the evening.

“...he obviously knows something,” Clayton rasped. “Killing Braden was not a random act.”

“Could this endanger our plans?” The voice was deep, masculine, but nervous, almost servile.
“Things are now in motion, we can't allow for any interference. We have been advised to wait, but he
doesn't know things have changed. Should we wait and let our fruits in Kaldry ripen and then move
against our enemies? Or act immediately?”

“I believe the best option would be to kill this interloper, this Cole,” hissed a woman. “We know
where he lives, better to remove him now. He has obviously been planning this, how else would he
have deduced Braden's identity? He was smuggled into the country years ago with no one being any the
wiser.” As she spoke, Cole shimmied along the beam, trying to get a better view of the symbol etched
into the floor. “Kill him now and prevent any complications.”

“Better to let the guard take care of that, Muriel,” advised a third man. “Feed them what we
know, let them sort it all out. If the papers are to be believed, Cole fought Braden directly, which to me,
would indicate that he is a good deal more powerful than Clayton seems to believe.”

“If we have the Watch arrest Cole, he'll just use his father's influence to wheedle his way out,
we have to kill him,” said Clayton. Cole was only half listening, instead he was studying the glyphs inscribed around the edges of the pentagram. Translating the arcane scrawling, he deduced that the symbol on the floor was a ritual circle, drawn to focus the magic of a group of Spellweavers. “He knows too much about us as it is. I think we should let the lesser members deal with him. There are plenty of followers of the old ways here in Thertan. Let one of those degenerates deal with him.”

“And risk further exposure?” asked the servile man. “Impossible. Besides, if what Muriel says is true, Travers would tear through those wretches apart without a second thought!”

“I still can't fathom how Cole might have so easily dispatched Braden,” said Clayton. “The Travers line has no affinity for magic, and Cole's powers manifested themselves later in life. We studied together at Elthiar, though Cole was a few years older. Still, he never struck me as anything more than a whiny, angst ridden, playboy.”

“Bugger Cole and his magical affinity. We need to kill him and dump his body in the Mallar,” Muriel spat. “We have bigger problems.”

“Kaldry?”

“Yes,” she exclaimed. “We have to be ready here as well. The soldiers leave on the morrow. Everything must be in place by then.”

Soldiers, Cole mulled the word over. *Thomas, they are talking about Thomas and Colonel Howe, but...how are they involved in all this?*

“Kaldry is fine,” said Clayton. “He has everything under control.”

“Yes, but what about Mr. Ackers? His death complicates....”

“Muriel, he has plenty of experience in these matters and he will respond appropriately,” said Clayton. “If you remember, he was involved with the operation in Felviar those years ago. His work with the savage tribes in Kaldry will succeed and...”

Cole repositioned himself on the beam, craning in to hear, and eliciting a groan from the beam. Clayton stopped and his eyes shot up, scanning along the roof. Cole cursed his carelessness, and drew back into the shadows. He desperately hoped Clayton would continue, especially since he had mentioned Felviar. Cole knew of only one man connected to these warlocks who had been in Felviar, Garret. Cole's investigation had yielded no sign of the traitor, and any clue to the man's whereabouts was invaluable.

Clayton turned back to his fellows, and they began to converse in hushed tones. Cole repositioned again, but still could not hear the warlocks' conversation. From this new vantage point, he was able to see that there were two pentagrams drawn onto the ground, instead of just one. The smaller was even more complex than the larger. The scar on Cole's palm began to itch, and he scrapped it against the cross beam.

Of all the forms of magic, ritual casting was the most dangerous. Normal magic itself required a great deal of concentration. When one was manipulating and weaving the very fabrics of the universe, any distraction invited a potential disaster. This was the reason most Spellweavers expecting to engage in combat had to undergo such rigorous training. Mental focus was paramount when it came to spellcraft. Ritual casting, drawing power and direction from multiple Spellweavers, only magnified this problem. Based upon dwarvish mathematics, the complex patterns of ritual magic tapped into the very heart of magic, twisting and amplifying it to create spells of great power. From the complexity of the ritual circle, Cole predicted that any break in the warlocks' concentration, or any disturbance of the lines and curves of the ritual pattern itself, would result in the destruction of the entire district, if not all of Thertan.

The group had stopped talking, and Cole took the opportunity to sneak more closely. “Calm down Muriel,” Clayton whispered. “Someone outside may hear you.”

“Whatever happens we have to keep our heads down,” muttered one of the other men. “We can't
risk discovery now when we are so close to laying the first blood seal.”

Cole shifted his weight, and felt the beam shudder. He ran his hand along the beam, and found that part of it was dry-rotted. He began to withdraw back along the beam, just as a crack reverberated through the room. Clayton's head snapped up again, eyes sweeping along the rafters, searching for what had made the sound. Still cloaked in shadows, Cole managed to evade notice.

Clayton motioned to his fellows, and they spread out around the room, eyes alert for any motion. Cole, not confident that his glamour would hide him from any scrutiny, stopped moving, instead focused on reinforcing the wall of shadow he had gathered around himself. He drew in a deep breath, watching as Muriel passed by beneath him. The beam shuddered and then split.

*Crack!*

Splinters exploded outwards, and beam dropped. Cole tumbled through the air, flipping about and landing heavily on his feet, overcoat billowing around him. He now stood fully revealed, surrounded by five warlocks who had been plotting his murder several moments before.

“Oh, don't mind me.” Cole smiled at Clayton, relishing just how dramatic his entrance had been. “I'm just passing through, feel free to get back to your virgin dismemberment. I won't stop you.”

For a moment no one moved; then the room exploded in a flurry of spellcraft. Cole rolled to the side, avoiding a bolt of energy, before throwing a mass of inky shadow into Clayton's face. The shadows clung to the other man's flesh like some strange gelatinous mass, congealing around his mouth and nose. One of the warlocks clapped his hands together, creating a concussive shock wave that threw Cole back. Cole slammed into the wall, the protective wards he maintained around his person preventing any serious injury.

Cole shook off the blow and reached for his own magic, using it to animate a pool of shadow at his feet. The pool of darkness flowed along the floor, clawed hands reaching up and grasping the warlock who had conjured the shock-wave. The man screamed, and tried to wrench away from the avaricious hands, as they dragged him down and began to tear at his flesh.

Muriel, her hood thrown back to reveal a mash of dark hair, rounded on Cole, bright green fire dancing between her fingers. Muriel cackled loudly and began to pelt Cole with fireballs. Muriel's attack was weak, and Cole batted them aside, not even needing to refocus his wards to insulate himself from the heat of the conjured flames. He swept his hands through the air, hurling a handful of indigo energy at the woman. Muriel jumped back, and Cole dashed behind a cage, watching as Clayton staggered around the room.

Muriel hands glowed red hot, and she began to scream wildly. Then, Clayton slammed into her, breaking her concentration. There was an explosion of light and heat, lifting and hurling Cole across the room and into a wall. His head slammed into the wood, and he slid down the, dazed, his magical wards shattered by the force of the impact. His head was pounding, and his knees were shaking, but he still staggered to his feet. Cole's vision cleared, just in time for him to see one of the warlocks walking towards him.

“You have caused quite the ruckus, you know that?” Green flames licked along the walls of the warehouse, and Cole saw that the explosion had blasted apart all but one of the cages. Charred corpses were scattered around the room and the air stank of burned flesh. The only cage that hadn't been blown open was the young elf boy's, though the bars were bent and twisted.

“Ehh wasn't me, your friend there sort of exploded,” Cole muttered, trying to buy himself a few more seconds to focus his thoughts. As he spoke, he heard two short whistle blasts, followed by a final longer one, the call of the Thertan Watch. “Seems the bobbies are coming out now, going to be a problem for you lot.”

“You think you can escape that easily?” the hooded man chuckled. “I would like to let you leave, but you've killed a good deal of my friends Mr. Travers. I'll make this short...”
Before the man could finish, Cole thrust his hand out and impaled the warlock with a spear of blueish-black energy. The bolt sliced cleanly through the warlock's chest, passing through flesh, bone, and cartilage without any resistance. Cole turned and ran, while the warlock collapsed to the ground, blood seeping from his wound. Emerald flames swept through the warehouse, turning the building into a hellish inferno. One of the walls had been blasted apart, and Cole moved to dash through the hole, but stopped. The fire was spreading quickly, and the young boy was still trapped. After a moment's hesitation, Cole waded back into the flames, using his magic to ward away the heat.

The cage was nothing more than a set of simple metal bars pounded into the floor. There was no door, and Cole figured the warlocks must have used magic to open and close the bars. The kid was curled into a ball in the corner of the cage, doing his best to avoid the flames. Cole dug deep into his magic reserves, and extended an aura of cold out around the bars. He waited for several seconds, allowing the flames to reheat the metal, then chilled them again. Cole reached out and pulled at the now weakened bars, ripping them apart by using a small burst of magic. He broke out several bars, then reached out for the boy.

"Come on kid!"

The boy looked up, and Cole saw that he was an elf, his bright emerald eyes hinting at a noble heritage. Most of those noble elven bloodlines had been killed during the Felviar Revolution three decades earlier, though several pockets of Felvian nobles were still hidden around the world. Cole and his fellow soldiers had manipulated some of them into fighting their brethren during the Incursion, using the conflict to buy Achland time to retake its territory on the mainland. Whoever this kid he was, he was filthy, dressed in tattered clothes, clearly unaware of his heritage. The boy grasped Cole's hand, and Cole pulled the kid out of the cage.

A rumble ran through the warehouse, and Cole turned just in time to see part of the roof collapse. He flung his arms up, summoning a shimmering indigo shield around himself and the elf-boy. The flaming beam slammed into the shield, and the elf-boy stumbled into Cole, knocking him off his feet. The two fell to the floor in a tangle of limbs. Flaming cinders swirled around them, as Cole did his best to keep them from being incinerated. He threw his hands out scattering the flames just as the elf-boy sprang up and ran. Cole rolled to the side and pushed himself up.

"Wait kid, come back!" Cole screamed, the smoke causing his throat to burn. He chased the boy out of the warehouse, and then lost him in the darkness outside. "Fine, DON'T thank me for saving your ungrateful arse!"

Cole ran from the burning warehouse, as high-pitched emergency whistles echoed down the street, signalling the approach of both the Thertan Watch and a fire response crew. He was in no mood to tangle with the Thertan Watch. They were a zealous bunch, and would most likely detain anyone they found suspicious. Now that he was not following Clayton, Cole was lost, and he wandered through the dark streets, doing his best to retrace his steps. It took the better part of an hour, but he found his way back to Anita's school. From the sound of things, the party had moved out into the garden, and Cole was able to silently slip back over the wall, rejoining the party without much fuss.

"Where the hell have you been?" Thomas demanded, when he spotted Cole. "I couldn't even think of an appropriate cover, so I just said you went home. Good heavens! What happened to your clothes?!"

"I uh...fell," Cole smiled weakly. "Where is Erik?"

"He left," Thomas replied. "He and a few of the other commanders had to return to the Citadel; they had to prepare for our departure on the morrow. Don't change the subject, you still haven't answered my question."

"Blast," Cole cursed, ignoring Thomas' inquiry. How long ago did he leave?" Cole rooted in his pocket, searching for his telethium, but he could not find it. "I needed to talk with him, I just hope I can
catch him at the Citadel. What about Clayton, have you seen him?”

“No, he disappeared around the same time as you did,” Thomas stopped. “Cole no don't tell me....wait is that the constable I hear?”

“Possibly,” Cole replied, falling silent for a moment. If one listened closely, they could just hear the shrill whine of the constable's whistle.“How would you feel about leaving?”

“Now?”

“Yes, go grab your personal effects, and be quick about it. I'll explain when we are safely away.”

Thomas hurried off leaving Cole alone. The young raven haired woman Cole had attempted to speak with early passed by. He smiled at her. She glared at him, before scurrying off, obviously offended at his beat and battered appearance. Thomas returned a moment later, hat and cane in hand, and Cole signalled to his driver. The carriage rumbled up, and the two men clambered in. Cole slumped back into the padded seat, breathing a deep sigh of relief.

“Cole, what happened?” Thomas demanded, as the coach bounced along. “You look as though you've been attacked.”

“I have. I tracked Clayton to a warehouse where I was attacked by a cabal of the warlocks I told you about. Before that, I overheard some of their plans. I believe they have agents in Kaldry, including Garret. They are plotting something big. They mentioned a blood seal and seemed to be preparing for some sort of ritual.”

“Cole this is nonsense!”

“Nonsense?” Cole laughed. “You heard Clayton; he was the one who proposed the initial measure to appoint the Lord-Protector. It's part of their plot... it has to be. Worse, I think Tenning may be involved. Why would he work with Clayton? They are of opposite political views, unless they were allies. I don't yet know why Brigadier Acker was murdered, but if I had to guess, I would say his appointment was at odds with the warlocks’ plan, and so they had him murdered. Either they hoped no one would replace him, which would no doubt cause a great deal of chaos, or they hoped to install one of their own agents in his position.”

“Please, tell me you are not considering...” Thomas began.

“Considering?” Cole laughed again. “Thomas, I am already in the planning phase. I am accepting Erik's invitation. I am going to Kaldry.”
The dark wooden carriage thundered along the streets of Thertan. At first, Cole had thought it best to be cautious; he was after all being hunted, but he had decided haste was necessary. Of course, now, the warlocks were either all dead, or else being detained by the Watch, so there couldn't be that much to worry about. They might have conspirators elsewhere, though, and the more Cole thought about it, the more nervous he grew. From the snatches of conversation he had overheard, it seemed as though the renegade Spellweavers had only just discovered he was hunting them. After thinking on it further, he commanded his driver to increase their speed.

“Cole, please tell me you are going to reconsider,” implored Thomas. “I think Erik was being facetious when he asked you to join the expedition to Kaldry.”

“He wasn't,” Cole replied, sounding angrier than he had intended. He wouldn't admit it, but he was worried. Thomas was one of the few people he could genuinely call a friend. They had been through a good deal together, and even if Thomas thought he was insane, Cole felt an odd sense of duty to ensure his friend did not come to harm. If the warlocks were indeed targeting Erik's expedition and Kaldry in general, then Cole had a responsibility to ensure his friend's safety, which took precedence over his own desire for revenge. “I already showed you my notes, Thomas. Clayton was one of the warlocks I told you about. He was conversing with others of his ilk. They are targeting Kaldry and implied Garret is there. I have to go.”

“Cole, I don't doubt that you got embroiled in something, but I seriously believe you are blowing this out of proportion.” Thomas shook his head. “Really now, what could they want with Kaldry?”

“I don't know, but they mentioned some sort of blood seal… that they had plans for the soldiers being deployed, and they were working on some sort of ritual.” Cole stopped for breath. His hands were shaking, and he felt horrible. The Weavings he had performed earlier in the evening had taken their toll, but when he reached into his jacket pocket, he could not find the cured meat he usually kept there for just such an occasion. “Besides, we know they murdered Major Acker; clearly they have plans for Kaldry.”

“I will admit, that was an odd coincidence,” said Thomas. “Perhaps they wish to disrupt things there. Lord knows that colony has always been chaotic. The Major was going to serve as an ambassador and intermediary for the Lord-Protector before he arrives.Murdering him would certainly upset the balance of power.” Thomas scratched his chin. “I still feel you are blowing things out of proportion.”

“I'm not.”

The carriage hurtled around a bend and began to speed down Tinkerer's Row. At this late hour, the streets were mostly deserted, and the azure lights flashed past in a blur. It did not take long to reach Thomas' house, and the other man stepped out quickly, glancing nervously at his own door. The house appeared exactly as they had left it, though the lights had been extinguished. There were no signs of activity, but Cole was tempted to walk Thomas up to his door just to be safe. Thomas climbed down out of the coach and turned back to Cole.

“Cole, I would tell you to reconsider coming to Kaldry, but I know you,” Thomas sighed. “So please, just don't go making a fool of yourself.”

“I won't,” Cole promised. He watched Thomas walk up to his front door and waited for the other man to safely enter his house. Only when Thomas shut the door behind him, did Cole motion for his driver to leave. He gazed out the window as the buggy began to move again, wondering if he really should go to Kaldry, after all. Thomas might be right. He could just be jumping at shadows, but what if he wasn't. Cole sat back, closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he was not alone.
The man who had taken Thomas' seat wore a finely tailored purple suit, white shirt, and tiny bowler hat. His face was thin, with unblemished skin, and perfectly white teeth. Still, there was something off about him, something Cole could not quite put his finger on. The Well-Dressed Man's chin and nose were unnaturally long, and the smile that played about his lips made it appear as though he was constantly leering. He wasn't old, but he wasn't young either, and his features were tinged with otherworldly beauty. The Well-Dressed Man sat, fingers clasped tip to tip in front of his face, staring off into the corner. The man's fingers and arms, just like his face, were out of proportion, oddly stretched. At a glance, he looked normal enough, and it was only when Cole focused on him did the man's peculiar proportions become apparent. The Well-Dressed Man slowly turned his head about and smiled at Cole. The movement was just as unnatural as the man's appearance; it was overall too smooth, as though the muscles in his head moved independently of those in his neck and shoulders.

“Well, seems you've caused a good deal of destruction tonight,” the man purred. He slurred his words slightly, speaking in an oily cadence reminiscent of a street hustler attempting to broker a deal he knew was crooked. His voice was not deep, but it was rough, and something slimy lurked behind the man's dead eyes. “Been awhile since you did something like that eh?”

“I didn't mean to,” Cole shrugged. “Sorry.”

“No, no, I like the chaos, and I am glad to see you are ahehehehe warming up to the idea.”

“Ehh, you know me, I like to keep an eye on my investments,” the man shrugged, but only his shoulders moved. “Especially ones who are so keen on getting themselves killed. I mean really Cole, Kaldry? You are not seriously considering going are you?”

“Beats doing nothing” Cole replied. “Who knows, maybe I'll end up helping someone.”

“The Well-Dressed Man laughed, the carriage shuddered to a halt. “Either that or you are deluding yourself. See I know you Cole, I know how you operate. You would never do something for someone else; this is all about you and your revenge. You're going to Kaldry to make yourself look better; you want to be the centre of attention. You want the fame, but really deep down, you want their respect, you want them to genuinely accept you. Well, what happens when you do find that acceptance huh? What will you brood about then?”

“That will be difficult,” said Cole. The driver opened the door, and he turned to go. “I think my life might actually be perfect then.”

Cole looked back. The coach was empty.

“No one, just rehearsing a part for a play.”

“Ahh, excellent, sir,” the driver held out his hand. “Is it going to be happening soon sir?”

“No,” said Cole, ignoring the man's pathetic attempt to beg for a tip. “That will be all for tonight.”

“Yes, sir,” the man grumbled. “Uncaring rich twat.”

“What was that?”

“Uh, nothing, sir,” the man snapped a sharp salute. “When should I be returning, sir?”

“Be back within the hour.”

The driver moved so fast Cole thought he had evaporated. One moment he was on the ground, the next he was back in his seat, whipping the horses into action. The carriage rumbled off, and Cole
looked up at the Citadel. He had arrived at the fortress' southern gate and already a pair of guards were walking out to meet him.

The Citadel stretched almost a full league, running along the Mallar's northern bank, shielding both the Houses of the Assembly, and the surrounding neighbourhoods from any aquatic invaders. The walls around the Citadel were solid stone: the outer were thirty feet thick, while each successive inner wall grew thinner, until one passed through the third wall, and into the fortress' main sanctum. In addition to multiple weapons emplacements, the Citadel also maintained two standing garrisons, two rigid frame airships, and thirteen smaller rotor-craft. The Citadel was the centre of Achlish military might, a shining beacon for all the world to see and fear.

“Ahh, good evening gentlemen,” Cole called out cheerily to a pair of guards standing at the gates.

“What business do you have here, guvnor?” Grunted the first guard.

“Well, I am here to discuss a matter of some importance with Colonel Howe,” said Cole. “I do believe he will be in charge of a regiment that is being deployed to Kaldry. He offered me an officer’s position, and after some consideration, I have decided to take him up on that offer.”

The two men exchanged a quizzical look. “Right, sir, your name, sir?”

“Travers, Cole Travers.” The men had a right to be suspicious Cole supposed. Here he was, showing up in the middle of the night, to enlist for what was most likely a classified operation, dressed in fine party attire that was severely burned. “If you can pass my name along, I'm sure that would clear things up.”

The men muttered between themselves for a moment, before one turned, and walked back into the guard house. The guard returned several minutes later, bringing with him another man. This new arrival embodied everything one would expect of a soldier and officer of the Thertan Watch. He was young, with dark hair, and a thick square jaw. He wore the overcoat of the Grey Guard, similar in cut to those that Cole favoured, and around his neck the young constable had wrapped a bright red scarf that offset his dark eyes.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Travers security is somewhat tighter than it was in your day,” said the man as he shook Cole's hand. “I'm Inspector Carlow, if you would please follow me, I've arranged your meeting.”

Inspector Carlow led Cole up a short flight of stairs, and together the two men marched into the compound, passing through several heavy portcullises, before emerging out into a large inner courtyard, where a platoon of men was drilling in formation. They skirted the edge of the parade ground, before turning, and entering a domed rotunda. The building was much brighter than Cole had expected, and he had to blink several times before his eyes adjusted. The two men stood together on a balcony above a great circular room. Winding staircases set into the walls led down to a floor that bustled with activity. Officers, pages, and assistants-- all swarmed around a great circular table, its surface a perfectly painted representation of the entire world. Small miniature ships and miniature figurines representing soldiers slowly moved along the table's polished surface, corresponding to actual troop movements throughout the Achlish empire. No one was moving the figures, instead, they moved of their own accord, dragged along by magnetic forces under the table. The system received the tracking information from magical transmitters carried by every currently deployed unit.

From the balcony, Cole had a god's eye view of the entire world. The map was brightly painted, with national borders clearly defined, turning the world into a patchwork quilt. He ignored much of the world and instead focused his attention on continental Tereth and the Achlish isles. His eyes drifted down, south, to the mainland, settling on Felviar. The elven nation spread inland, running south across the continent to touch the great inland sea, the Meluar. Esparta lay to the south of Felviar. Üruush bordered Felviar on the east and comprised much of central Tereth, stretching both north and east for a
great distance. On the mainland to Achland’s immediate east was the Annexation, which drove inwards like a wedge between Felviar and Üruush. A bevy of smaller nations, including the Prince Consort’s native Pravia, surrounded the Annexation, protected by Achland’s power.

Üruush south-eastern border touched part of the Meluar, while more of the nation spread northward. Below central Üruush was the Ronic Remnant, a loose federation of free cities spread across a boot-shaped peninsula. The lands beyond Üruush, including the frigid northern tundras, belonged to Ruster, while the entire south was ruled by the Ottlur Empire. A nation of vassal states, Ottlur had formed from the eastern half of the Ronic Empire, and its military rivalled that of its western neighbours. Across the Meluar, to the south of the Remnant, was the continent of Ethenia, while to the east, beyond Ottlur, were a dozen other nations, including the sub-continent of Kaldry.

“Impressive,” Cole muttered, only half aware of what he was saying. His eyes had once again come to rest on Felviar, and disturbing memories of his time serving during the Incursion had begun to bubble up out of his subconscious, unbidden and unwanted.

“When it works, it is impressive.” Inspector Carlow led Cole down a side hallway, away from the command room. “Of course, it rarely does. Ahh...here we are.”

They had stopped at an entirely nondescript door. Carlow opened it, then motioned for Cole to enter. The room appeared to be a private office. A strong oak desk sat in the centre of the room, an armchair on either side. The desk was completely clear, save for a single fat folder placed squarely in the centre. The walls were decorated with framed nautical and topographical charts of Thertan and the surrounding provinces, interspersed with several glass cases containing mounted insects, jewelled beetles and painted butterflies, though he also spotted several arachnids mixed in as well. The room’s sole other occupant stood with his back to Cole. He was bald and wore a spotless white officer’s jacket and trousers. The man’s epaulettes and accompanying tassels were bright crimson, marking him as a recipient of the Phoenix’s Blood, Achland’s highest military honour.

“Thank you for seeing to that so quickly Kurt, you may go.” A shiver ran down Cole’s spine; he knew that voice. “And Cole, please, take a seat.”

“Commander...”

“Its Grand-General of Internal and Foreign Intelligence now,” corrected Benedict, turning to face Cole. With an average height and build, and a completely nondescript face, Benedict was an entirely forgettable man. His cold, piercing blue eye, were the only thing that really stood out. He was also a master of manipulation, deception, and stealth, in short, the perfect spy. “Please sit down.”

The corner of Cole's mouth began to twitch, as he fought to control his emotions. Joy, hate, anger, regret, happiness, guilt, he felt all of these and more. It had been almost six years since he last saw Benedict, after he had fought by his side during the Felvian invasion of Achland's annexed holdings on the mainland. The situation had quickly escalated into all out war. Many young men had shipped out, promised glory and honour if they helped to defend their country. At the height of the conflict, Benedict had led a small detachment of soldiers, including Cole, who had only been eighteen at the time, behind enemy lines, and into border city of My'thren. They had seized the city, and after some tense negations had discovered that its inhabitants were more than happy to ally with Achland.

“Well, congratulations,” Cole replied, aching with the guilt of emotional wounds he had long suppressed. Seeing Benedict again had summoned up all sorts of unpleasant memories about the friends and the lover he had lost in Felviar, and the traitor that had escaped justice. “I must have missed the announcement.”

“My promotion was never announced publicly. Internal Intelligence does not officially exist, after all.” The older man sat and folded his hands in front of his face.

“How could I forget,” said Cole, with a twisted smile.

Once they had taken My'thren Achland had set up a small garrison, and had planned to use it as
a staging ground strike at the very heart of Felviar. During their time there an uneasy alliance, the first of its kind, had been formed between the elves and the soldiers. It was during these few months that Cole had discovered Garret's duplicity. The had formed a secret alliance with other Felvians, and when Cole had presented this information to Benedict, his commanding officer, the man had ignored his warnings. Three weeks later the garrison and the citizens of My'thren were massacred in a surprise attack. Garret had fled and Cole had chased after him, catching sight of a strange, patina crusted pin upon the man's jacket, before the traitor disappeared.

“Now tell me, why do you wish to join Colonel Howe's regiment?”

“Well....he asked me to, for one.” This sudden confrontation with Benedict and the man's blunt question had thrown Cole off balance, and he was struggling to regain his composure. “Apparently one of their top officers was killed, and they need someone competent to replace him.”

“You have got no idea, have you?

“No, not really.” Cole shrugged, settling back into the normal swaggering attitude.

“So, you just reckoned you would attach yourself to this division at the last possible moment and without a proper briefing?”

“Yes,” Cole replied. “When Colonel Howe asked me I felt that it was my civic duty to...uhhmm.”

Benedict drew in a slow breath. “Cole, sometimes you worry me, especially when you lie. You're not doing this because Colonel Howe asked you to, you're doing this out of some twisted sense of vanity.”

“No, not at all,” said Cole, feeling rather annoyed with Benedict. Of all people, he thought the Grand-General might understand, or at least sympathize with him. After all, Benedict had been the one to allow Cole to receive the accolades and service medals he had forfeited when he deserted in order to bring Garret to justice. While he had considered the prestige he could garner from stopping the warlocks, it had never been his chief concern, nor had he fully considered what assuming Acker's command would do for his reputation.

“Well, I am glad to hear it. Still, with your personality and.....temperament as well as several other...incidents, prevent me from allowing you to accompany the Colonel.”

“Incidents such as?”

“Your involvement in that slaying outside the Chimera's Tail,” Benedict flicked open the folder on his desk. “Yes, I know it was you, and judging by your current appearance, I can deduce that it would not be hard for me to find evidence linking you to a warehouse fire earlier this evening that claimed the life of Clayton Talbit. I also have several reports filed throughout the years about your drunken debauchery, as well as several,” Benedict paused, “interesting newspaper articles about your romantic exploits. Based on the evidence, I should be arresting you. These actions are either a desperate cry out for help, a sign of a disturbed mind, or the attempts of a vain man to gain attention. Why should I allow such a man to be assigned to such a delicate operation?”

“Because you need me,” said Cole.

Benedict began to drum his fingers on the desk. “Cole, tell me what you know of the situation in Kaldry?”

“I know things haven't improved. The Consortium has still not delivered the peace it promised.” Cole shrugged. “It's unbelievable really, who would have suspected that the mercantile company who started colonisation efforts so it could turn a profit off of the natives various textile and agricultural products would be inefficient at running said colony, especially when it comes to keeping the natives in line. The support of the ruling elite and oppression of the lesser castes has resulted in several bloody revolutions, and their response to those situations could be called nothing less than butchery.”

“Well, you are opinionated as ever, I see. Good, though I could have done without you hiding
behind your sarcasm. No one here is going to judge you for speaking your mind. I am just glad to see that someone is able to see the truth of what is happening in Kaldry. Not many people are able to take the propaganda the papers spew out and twist the truth out of it.”

“What can I say, I learned from the best.”

“Flattery is not necessary Cole, but it is welcome.” Benedict smiled. “You are correct, Consortium rule in Kaldry is failing, in no small part due to its inability to realize their racially biased policies are creating a growing rift between the Kaldrien people. Armed conflicts between the lower castes and the Upper Castes, not to mention Achlish and Consortium Forces, have increased almost sevenfold in the last year, especially because of the recent famine that has swept through the northern tribal regions. The Consortium is only barely holding onto its power and has refused to take any action that might mitigate the effects of the famine. Furthermore, its administrators continue to ignore orders from the Assembly wilfully and constantly antagonise any overseers the Crown sends out. Cole, do you know what the repercussions of losing Kaldry would be?”

“The Consortium loses a bunch of money, then Achland spirals into debt because we have invested so much in them?”

“Close, but no.” Benedict stood and began to pace back and forth across the room. “The Achlish Empire now stretches from one end of this world to the next. Our colonies are everywhere, our ideas are everywhere. Our expansion has guaranteed our power. We have contained the threat of Felvia. We have more colonies than the nations of Üruush, Espasta, or the Free Cities combined. We have made peaceful contact with the Far East, with Xian’tu and Jartow, and conquered the west. But we are still vulnerable. It's been eight years since the war with Felviar, but war is brewing again. All these alliances on the mainland are dangerous. If one country goes to war, no doubt they all will, and Achland will be dragged into the conflict. We need to secure our power.”

“What threat does Kaldry pose though?”

“We are a shining beacon of human ingenuity and a bastion of hope in a dark world,” replied Benedict. “But that does not mean we can grow complacent. Kaldy's continued opposition to our rule is problematic. There have been two major rebellions already, and we only maintained control of the colony through sheer determination. If they were to rebel again, the consequences would be dire. Achland would appear weak. The peace we brokered with the Western Colonies in the previous century was a fluke, they could still break away at any time. If Kaldry rebels, many others will follow. If that happens, Felviar or Üruush might attempt to retake their lands that were annexed. Our hold on those lands is weak as it is, with anarchists and other traitors plotting against us. Our Empire is threatened, and so by extension is all of humanity; that is why Colonel Howe and his men are being deployed.”

“Ohh… they're not going for tea and crumpets then? A pity.”

Benedict ignored Cole's remark and continued on unperturbed. “Things in the nation are getting desperate. Both the Assembly and the Peers of the Realm have called several meetings. They have decided that the best course of action for Kaldry is to replace the current power structure with one more loyal to the crown, as well as one with stronger military backing. Kaldry shall become a full Achlish colony. The King and Queen shall be named High Emperor and Empress of Kaldry, respectively, and a Lord-Protector shall be installed to adjudicate the colony once the Consortium is removed. The process has already begun, it has been strenuous, but both the Consortium and the Kaldrien ruling caste, the Ra'kala, have agreed to help us.”

“Yes, Colonel Howe had mentioned something like that,” said Cole. “I don't think the Consortium's administrators will be happy being replaced.”

“They aren't,” said Benedict. “Still, if the Consortium stays in power, it risks both its reputation and its profits. We are still several weeks away from the Lord-Protector's public appointment, but in the mean time to maintain order in the colony, Colonel Howe and the Fifth Legion are being reassigned to
Cole was rather amazed that the Consortium would so willingly give up its power. It had been the driving force behind Achland's expansion for years, and by all accounts its executives enjoyed the profits and power that afforded them. Either things in Kaldry had spiralled out of control to a disastrous degree, or something more sinister was stirring behind the scenes between the Consortium and the Assembly. Clayton had insinuated that it had been his involvement that had forced the issue to a vote, which would indicate that the warlocks did indeed have plans for Kaldry.

It was also interesting that the Ra'kala were involved. From the small fraction of Kaldrien history Cole remembered that the country was engaged in a bitter socio-religious caste conflict, and had been for centuries. Indeed, the only reason that the Ra'kala and the other upper castes had agreed to peace with Achland was because it allowed them to suppress both their more “savage” and “barbaric” lower caste brethren, both human and kelvish. Much of the upper castes power was derived from their alliance with Achland, especially since most would not hold that power had Achland not driven out the Ylsan, a religion at odds with the native one, and one that was adhered to by much of the middle east.

“From what I gather Minister Tenning is involved.”

“Yes,” replied Benedict. “The entire Progressive party is behind the motion, though its architects with Minister Tenning and Talbit. The Assembly was stalemated for some time, until Vice Chancellor Sutlen had a change of heart.”

“Rather odd that the leader of the Conservative party, and someone so tied to the Consortium would support a motion to remove them from power in Kaldry,” said Cole.

“Sutlen is a smart man and a shrewd politician,” said Benedict. “He only supported the motion because Tenning agreed to allow him to appoint the ambassador who would prepare the country for the arrival of the Lord-Protector. A wise move, to be sure.”

Except that man ended up murdered, thought Cole. He had already suspected Tenning of involvement with the warlocks, and the fact Sutlen had been the one to appoint Major Acker only further strengthened this suspicion. While he had not yet determined what it was the warlocks wanted with Kaldry, it was clear they were working to upset the balance of power in the country.

“Well, that sounds about right for the Assembly,” said Cole. “They love their squabbles, and political games, don't they? Still, the amount of debate seems excessive for such a simple matter.”

“I doubt it will be as simple as you like to think,” said Benedict. “Acker's murder certainly made it more difficult. The Assembly is panicking to replace him”

“Why should they when Erik has already offered me the position?”

“Do we need to start this discussion again?” Cole glared at the man. “I mean no offence by it Cole. I must confess it does seem like something you would be well conditioned to handle. Our experiences together in Felviar prove that much at least, especially your efforts to reconcile the Felviar proletariat and the nobility. Those are the sort of negotiations we need to have happen in Kaldry, though I doubt one man can change a thousand years of racial infighting. Besides, there have been complications that I don't think many others could handle.”

“Yes, Acker's murder would tend to complicate things.”

“That, and there have been several odd happenings as of late, tension between the Consortium and Achland, not to mention the lower castes rallying around some sort of so-called Masked Prophet.” Benedict cleared his throat, though Cole suspected there was a great deal more than simple “tension” in Kaldry at the moment. “Such a posting should be filled by someone intelligent, skilled, and tactful. Two out of three is not bad, and being gifted with the power of the Weave certainly has benefits when it comes to personal safety, so keep your eyes open.”

“Wait, does that means I am going?”

“Of course,” Benedict replied. As he spoke. a smile flashed across the older man's face, so brief
that Cole barely caught it. It took him a moment, but he realised Benedict was smiling because of him, obviously impressed because of something he had done. At the same time, Benedict's smile made him very uneasy, as though the other man was congratulating himself on manipulating Cole in some way. “Colonel Howe and his staff are meeting in the Citadel parade grounds ten sharp tomorrow morning, so do try to be on time.”

“I wouldn't miss it for the world.” Cole stood and stretched. “Still, we could have avoided all of this debate and you could have just agreed to my assuming the position in the first place.”

“I needed to be deduce your motives.”

“Ahh, so this was all some secret test of character.”

“Would you expect anything less?”

“Of course not.”

Benedict smiled, pulled open another drawer, and produced a small gramophone, barely four inches square. Instead of a recording cylinder or turntable, there was a single, multifaceted crystal clamped just beneath the fluted horn. The gramophone used a series of electrical currents, powered by a magically charged transistor to record sound on the crystal. The main benefit of such a system was that the same magic that infused the crystal also allowed the recording to be played back without any external apparatus, though the sound quality was rather poor. Kristopher Trachenberg, a Spellweaver of considerable skill, had invented the device, becoming fabulously wealthy over night, as well as being excommunicated from the magical community, then murdered some time later by a still unknown assailant. Since then, no other Spellweaver had attempted to capitalise on his own talents in a similar manner.

“Cole Travers, you are to serve in the position of ambassador for the Crown to the colony of Kaldry,” said Benedict, the gramophone recording the entire conversation. All military orders were recorded in such a fashion, only later would the orders be transcribed onto paper. “Your orders are as follows: facilitate the transfer of governance in the colony from the Consortium to the as of now unannounced Lord-Protector. You are free to act in any manner you see fit, but your primary concern must be the preservation of Achlish power in the colony. Do you understand your orders?”

“Yes,” said Cole, before he turned to leave.

“Cole,” Benedict called, just as Cole opened the door. “About what happened in Felviar....I....I would like to apologise for...”

Cole held up his hand, and the other man stopped talking.

“Save your breath sir.” For a moment Cole could smell the sweet scent of jasmine and feel the warmth of Lissete's lips upon his. The elven woman had been Cole's first and last love, and while he may have escaped Felviar alive his heart had been ripped in two, one part left to die, and the other left to bleed for all the years that followed. “I wouldn't forgive you anyway.”
Chapter 9

Armel was amazed; the Watch was even more incompetent than he could have imagined. All these years he had dodged patrols, thinking that if he was ever arrested he would be killed on sight for just being an elf. Apparently, he had been wrong. The constable who grabbed him outside of the burning warehouse had not even bothered to remove the manacles his captors had put on him, let alone make any mention of Armel being an elf. He had been searched, poorly, then flung into the back of a windowless Steam-van.

From outside, Armel could still hear the shouts as the guard tried to put out the fire. The inferno had consumed the adjoining tenement house and was now threatening to set the entire neighbourhood aflame. Armel didn't care, at least he had escaped before burning to death. He had also managed to steal a nice gold watch from that insane Spellweaver who had dropped from the ceiling. Armel had hidden it away inside of his manacles, sliding it in into the slight gap between wrist and metal. The constable hadn't seen it, and as long as he wasn't searched again, he was confident he could keep it hidden, at least until he needed it to bribe the guards or his fellow inmates. The stories that circulated on the streets about Thertan's prisons were frightening, especially those that involved young boys incarcerated with the general populace.

Armel was tempted to remove the odd gold watch and inspect it, but he was not alone. Sitting on the van's rickety benches were two prostitutes the watch had arrested and one of the hooded men who had captured Armel. The man, hood thrown back, hands shackled to the wall, sat in the corner glaring at the elf boy. He was a pudgy man, with large protuberant lips, and dark eyes. He smelt faintly of brimstone, and there was just something off in how he held himself. The prostitutes sat against the van's doors, as far away from the hooded man as possible.

They all sat in silence for a few minutes more; then, the van's steam engine chugged to life, causing the benches to shake and the chains holding them up to rattle. Armel just closed his eyes and waited the ride out, doing his best to count the distance they travelled. The warehouse was on Barrow Street, which placed them several blocks from the Mallar. The van took two right turns, before continuing straight for several minutes. If he had to guess, they were most likely out along the river-front now, which meant they were taking him to the Mallar Incarceration Centre, or as it was called on the street, The Sludge.

Armel had seen The Sludge from a distance enough times to know that it was a flat ugly place lingering in the shadow of the Citadel. Though The Sludge did not house the Thertan's most dangerous criminals, it was still a vile place. While some of Thertan's prisons were little more than holding pens, The Sludge was different: it was built to house repeat offenders, and so had something of a reputation in the criminal class. The general opinion was that the place was best avoided, if possible. Being so close to the Citadel, the guards were more watchful, the cell bars thicker, and the food foul. At least in The Sludge, Armel could rest easy knowing he wouldn't be raped to death, or stabbed in his sleep, or at least he hoped so. The guards there were brutal, and as a result, the inmates tended to be more subdued. As Armel pondered on which guard would be best to bribe, the van shuddered to a halt, and a moment later, the doors swung open.

"Everin out," ordered a pug-faced officer. They all rose, and the guard levelled his pistol at the hooded man. "Not you, you's going ter the Spire."

"What?" The hooded-man baulked, his voice shooting up several octaves "Why are sending me there?! I can't go there!"

The guard smiled, revealing a row of cracked brown teeth. "Sorry ter tell ya friend, but ye is. Enjoy ya time there."

The hooded-man let out an enraged howl, cut short when the guard slammed the door shut, and then turned to Armel. "Opefully he's a touch smarta than some o' te other Weavas we've
picked up. Some of dem dumb blighters try and burn er way oot.”

“What's so bad about that?” Armel asked, as the two walked up the stairs leading into The Sludge.

“They run out of air,” the guard replied simply. “Da entire van is lined wit Cold Iron, 'sides de walls is three feet o' solid steel. Ain't no magic that can get through that, least not fast enough afore the fire eats up all da breath'ble air.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Armel watched as the van pulled away, taking the rogue Spellweaver to the Spire. The stories told about Thertan's regular prisons paled in comparison to those told about the Spire, a place whose infamy only grew with each telling. The Spire itself was the tallest of the Citadel's towers, a gleaming white needle, thrust up into the sky. For years, it had been used to house dangerous political rebels and nobles convicted of heinous crimes. Any public executions the Watch carried out were performed outside of the Spire, and it was an accepted fact that the ghosts of the executed went on to haunt the Citadel. The worst stories were those told about what happened to Spellweavers sent there. The lucky ones were confined to windowless cells at the base of the Spire. The unlucky ones were taken to the highest point of the tower and then stripped of their powers. Rumours swirled as to how exactly the Watch carried this out, but from what Armel had been told, it was incredibly painful, and more often than not, the unfortunate Spellweaver died.

Once inside the prison, Armel's jailer seemed to tense up. They marched down a grey, featureless corridor, while the screams of the imprisoned echoed all around them. He looked up and saw that the roof was riddled with small holes, no doubt constructed to amplify the screams of the prisoners confined above. Armel found it to be an effective intimidation technique, and he immediately began to plot his escape.

The prison seemed simple enough. After the entry gate came a small guard post and a thick portcullis. The hallway of screams led into an open air courtyard ringed with cells. Armel was led around the edge of the courtyard and then up a flight of stairs, noting that the guards here were all on alert. If he had magic, he could have escaped easily, and he found it odd that the guard was putting him in with the general populace. Most Achlanders knew all elves could weave magic, so perhaps there were more defences here than Armel could see.

“Come on, let me out of here! I did nothing wrong!”

“Ohh, look at that elf boy! E's pretty innit he?”

“Guards! Guards! Help! They stabbed me!”

Armel's escort marched straight past the cells, ignoring the jeers and catcalls. They turned down another grey stone corridor before passing through another portcullis. Prisons certainly are boring, Armel mused. The guard led him into yet another courtyard, though this one was indoors, instead of exposed to the elements. While the previous cell block had been noisy, this one was almost completely silent. Armel could hear idle chatter coming from the cells, but for the most part the inmates seemed well behaved and subdued. Guess they toss the trouble makers in outside cells as punishment.

The started down another corridor on the ground level, and the guard motioned to a cell. “This uhn ere'll be yours. Perps in ere won't give ye too much trouble. Boy like you wouldn't last long in with the o'ers, so I'm doin' ya a bit o mercy. Be good and you'll be back on the streets soon enough. We ain't plannin to hold you long, just long enough for the 'vestigation of that burning to get finished.”

The guard dug around on his belt and pulled out a ring of keys. Armel saw the men in the cell draw back from the bars as the guard motioned to open it. From all the stories he had heard, he would have expected the prisoners to come rushing out to brutalize the guard, and effect an escape, but it seemed his future cell mates were well behaved. The guard reached back and grabbed Armel's manacles. Armel panicked, trying to think of the best way to hide the watch. The guard fitted a key into the hole and jiggled it about. The lock did not release. He muttered under his breath, then tried another,
and another.

“Damn thing innit working,” complained the guard, trying another key. “What bloody idiot put these on you? Bugga it, get in there. I'll send someun round later.” The guard dragged Armel along by his chains and flung him into the cell.

Armel would have fallen, if one of the other prisoners hadn't caught him first.

“You'll have to excuse Dwain...they've been putting him on doubles, and it causes him to get a bit ornery,” said the man, helping Armel to his feet. The man smiled, then held out his hand. He was young, perhaps in his mid-twenties, with fine, pale skin, and silvery-white hair. “Names Chester, and you?”

“Armel.” They shook.

“Well, good to meet you, Armel. Welcome to cell 33, our own little slice of home.” Armel had expected a petty criminal confined to The Sludge to talk like Feggin, but, in fact, Chester was very erudite, his speech peppered with the smallest hint of a southern accent. “You already met the turnkey, though seems he wasn't able to really live up to his name, eh? Hahahaha. Earl, get down here! got some work for ya.”

Earl dropped down from a bunk hanging from the wall and staggered over to the bars. For the most part the cell was dark, but it matched the descriptions Armel had heard. It was rectangular, with six pallets hanging from the walls. Thin cots and stained sheets were haphazardly tossed on the pallets, and a pail for slops was shoved in the far corner. Earl had the same pale skin and hair as Chester, so Armel figured they must be brothers.

“Dwain couldn't get uhm off im, think you might be able to?” Chester motioned to Armel, then seemed to notice the boys pointed ears and elven eyes. “Or can you blast these off? You're an elf after all.”

“No I can't get them off,” Armel said sheepishly, dreading the question he knew was coming. “Cold Iron eh?”

“No...I can't uhh...weave any magic.” Armel felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“Well, put a suit on me and call me a proper gent,” Chester swore. “Never, in all my years, have I ever met an elf who couldn't weave magic. Well, that only slightly derails my plans. 'Course', it wouldn't matter if you could work some magic. Soon as you do, all the alarms would be a going off, which would stop any sort of escape attempt rather quickly. Earl, think you can get these off im?”

Armel held his hands up and slipped the stolen watch down his sleeve. Earl pulled a monocle out of his pocket and bent forward to inspect the manacles. “Shouldn't be too hard, let me grab my tools.”

Earl went back to his pallet, while Chester introduced the three other men in the cell. There was Large Neil, who contrary to what Armel was expecting, was actually large, so large, in fact, that his head brushed the ceiling of the cell. In addition to Neil, the cell was also home to Nick and Lenny, a pair of swarthy men, obviously not native Achlanders. Armel guessed they might have been from Northern Ethenia, or perhaps from Ottlur Empire, or even further east. After the introductions had been made, Earl returned, carrying a set of lock-picks. It took the man a few seconds to assemble the right tools and get them into place, but it then only took a simple twist to free Armel from the manacles.

“Well then, what do you have to pay us for springing you?” asked Chester.

“What? I...”

“Ahh, don't worry kid, I'm just having a go at you,” Chester laughed. “In fact, hehe you've actually given us something rather useful here.” He took the manacles from Earl. “Most of the time, the turnkey'll take those from us, but now...now we got something we can use to affect our escape. Nick, see if you can get a hold of Chett, we'll need him. Neil you take these.”

One by one the prisoners set to work, each setting to work on Chester's as of yet unspoken plan.
Neil took the manacles from Chester, yanked on them, testing the chain for any imperfections, nodded and then dropped down in front of the bars. Armel watched while Neil looped the chain around the bar closet to the wall and began to tug. Metal squealed, as Neil used the chain to bend the cell bar back. Once he had bent the first bar enough so that it was noticeably out-of-place, Neil stepped back, inspected his work, then moved to the next bar and repeated the process there, this time bending it in the opposite direction.

While Neil was working on bending the cell bars, Nick had begun to fiddle with a brick in the back of the cell. Once it was free from the wall, Nick reached into the hole and removed several rough home-made shivs and a long hollow pipe. Chester took the shivs and began to pass them out, giving Armel one that looked to have been fashioned from an old spoon. Nick took his shiv and began to tap on the pipe. The tapping created a high pitched sound and while not loud, it was still very easy to hear. Nick tapped the pipe several more times, then stopped. The entire cell grew quiet, and even Neil stopped his work bending bars. They all waited, then, a sharp whistle echoed down the prison block.

“Haha, perfect,” Chester slapped his knee, while Nick replaced the brick. “Well, Armel I just knew there was something about you that I liked. Now, tell me, how good are you at picking locks?”

“Why?” asked Armel. Neil bent down and began looking back and forth between the elf boy and the bars he had bent, judging the gap he had made.

“You gave me everything I needed to brek out'o this place. We'd been plotting for a while now. See, all of my boys are too fat to slip out. Guard'll be changin' here in a few minutes, and you should be able to slip through them bars there. Once your out it’s, just a matter of pickin te lock and then scurrying off to spring Chett and his boys. It'll be an ass-picious day.”

“But why should I hel....”

“You'll do it because I said so,” growled Chester, his previously friendly demeanour melting away, giving way to sudden fury. “I'm sick of rotting in this hell hole. They dump ya in here, saying you'll git out soon, then they forget about you. Easier for them that way. I never even saw a dammed judge, not that they care about court proceedings or justice 'o any form. It's the principal of the thing though, so that's why we brekin' out. You helping, or do I have to persuade you?”

Armel nodded his agreement, and Chester broke into a wide smile. Earl handed Armel his set of tools, including a pair of tension wrenches, a hook pick, an s-rake pick, and a half diamond pick. Armel slipped the tools into his pocket, and used the same motion to covertly slip the stolen watch in with them. Once he was ready, Neil helped Armel to squeeze through the bars he had bent. It wasn't hard, and soon he was standing out in the hallway, completely exposed to any passing guards. For a moment, Armel considered leaving the other men in the cell, but rejected the idea just as quickly. He might be out of the cell, but there was no way he could get out of the prison without help. He glanced around, and when no guards appeared, he set to work.

The cell's lock was very basic, and, at a glance, Armel guessed it had maybe five pins at best, if not fewer. He threaded the hook pick and the larger of the two tension wrenches into the keyhole, then began to fiddle with them. He wasn't concerned with opening the lock at this point; he just wanted a general idea of how the pins were set. Listening for the slightest of clicks, Armel concluded that the lock had three pins. After that discovery, it was just a simple matter of setting the pins to the open position and turning the tension wrench in the right direction. Armel had the lock open in thirteen seconds.

“Damn, you are good,” Chester muttered, slowly opening the cell door. “You should stick with us when we get out of here. I could use someone like you. Now come on.”

Chester and Armel slunk along, darting down the cell block in the direction the whistle had come from. While some prisoners came up to the front of their cells, most just ignored the two men. Chester pointed to a cell, and Armel set to work picking the lock. Now that he was familiar with The
Sludge's lock system, it only took him nine seconds to spring the lock. Chett turned out to be a man not much taller than Armel, though he was a good deal heftier. His “boys” could all have stepped on Armel and not even have noticed.

“So we have a plan?” asked Chett, while Chester sent Armel to work on some of the surrounding cells.

“Not much of one,” Chester admitted, slipping into Chett's cell. “The back gate is too close to The Citadel for my liking, but that don't matter too much, it's probably a bit less guarded.”

“What about the river side?” asked Chett, his voice echoing down the now silent cell block. While before the prisoners had been rowdy, once they noticed some of the inmates were being free, they had gone quiet. Armel set to work on his third cell, setting another band of hardened criminals free. The men didn't come out; instead, they stayed inside. Armel was the only prisoner out of his cell, and he was beginning to get worried.

“Risky, but it might work, long as we don't...” Chester was interrupted midsection by the sound of the portcullis at the far end of the cell block being raised.

Chett slid his cell door closed, leaving Armel out in the open. Three guards began to march down the hall. Armel froze, desperately hoping his magic would manifest itself, so he could melt away into the stone floor. He was completely exposed, and any second now the guards would see him. He slowly began to creep to the side just as the guards drew level with his old cell. Without even the slightest warning, Neil's hands burst from the cell and wrapped the throat of the closest guard. The man was wrenched back against the bars, and his head slammed against the metal. The other two guards whirled to face Neil. The brutish man grunted and flung the dazed man at them. The guard spun about twice, before slamming into his fellows, and the three men went down in a heap.

“RIOT!!” Bellowed Neil. He stepped out from his cell, grabbed the stunned guard, and lifted the man over his head “RIOT!!”

The entire cell block erupted in shouts and screams. Cell doors were wrenched open, and those men that Armel had set free rushed out. Neil hurled the guard into the wall, then bent over the other guards and came up with the key ring and a revolver. Chett and Chester were already, running down the hall in the opposite direction the guards had entered. The occupants of Cell 33 followed them, and Armel fell in line. Neil passed Chester the revolver, and the man slipped it into the turn-up of his trousers. The portcullis at this end of the hall was sealed, but it only took Earl a moment to unlock it with the keys. Neil grabbed the bottom of the gate and hauled it up just far enough for his friends to slide under. Neil tossed the keys out behind him, then heaved the gate up even further, before sliding under himself.

“This way,” Chester ordered. “The idiots will come down on the block rather hard; we just need to make it down this hallway.”

The inmates ran together. From the other end of the hallway, Armel could hear shouts and gunfire. By now, the riot had grown out of control, and in the distance a siren began to wail. No guards impeded their progress, and soon the escapees turned to the right. Up ahead, Armel could see a sliver of night sky through an open door. Before they could get any closer, two guards rounded the corner, rifles raised, bodies blocking the escape route entirely. Without hesitation, Armel flicked his wrist, flinging his shiv at the guards. It spun once, before piercing the man's throat. The guard toppled back. Chester fired once, killing the other guard.

“Kid, I really am going to have to offer you a job when we get out of here,” said Chester. They emerged out into the night and found themselves standing on the top of one of the prison's walls. The other prisoners quickly set to work stripping down the two dead guards, grabbing the rifles before heading off down the walk. “How good are you with a gun?”

“Never really fired one so I gue...”
BANG.

Earl's head exploded, spraying them all with blood and brain matter. The dead man stood there for a moment, before his body toppled over the railing. More gunfire erupted all around them. Armel dropped to the ground, dragging himself along on his belly, and back into the shadows. The gunfire was coming from both the open courtyard below, the towers above, and the walls of the Citadel. A bullet grazed Neil's chest, and he ducked back into the hallway. The wall ran along the bank of the Mallar, but it was still close to a forty foot drop to the dark swirling waters of the river. There was a break in the fire, and Chested dashed from his hiding spot, diving over the wall. Armel listened for several seconds before hearing something heavy hit the water. The gunfire resumed, and Armel watched as Chett tried to emulate Chester, with little success. The first bullet hit him in the thigh, while the second punched straight through his chest. The next four took him in the head.

Armel, now covered in blood and brain matter, began to drag himself along. There was another lull in fire, and he stood up, pausing to look out over the lip of the wall. The Mallar was dark, and he had no way to judge how deep it was, but it was the only way. Taking a deep breath, Armel hauled himself up over the wall.

BANG.

The bullet pierced Armel's right arm, and he lost his balance, toppled over the wall, and fell into the dark rushing water of the Mallar.

Armel struck the swirling waters feet first and plunged down into the murky depths. Even though the Mallar was horribly polluted, many of the cities' poorest children often swam in the river during the hot summer months, and Armel had often joined them. The water was icy, and Armel could feel it beginning to sap his strength. The bullet hole in his arm bled freely, and his arm was already going numb, making it very hard for him to swim. Fully clothed, Armel continued to sink. He struggled for a moment; then, his feet touched the soft bottom of the Mallar, and he sank down into the muck. He thrashed about, trying to free himself, but to no avail.

Armel's feet fumbled around in the mud, and found something hard. He drew his feet under him and kicked off the rock, shooting up through the darkness. Armel burst up out of the water and drew in several short breaths, before being dragged along by the Mallar's powerful current.

Armel did not fight the mighty river's pull; instead, he surrendered to it, letting it sweep him away from The Sludge. Dark foam churned around him, and he fought hard to keep his head above water. It was more difficult than he would have thought, but somehow he managed to stay afloat. Once he was past the Citadel, Armel began to swim towards shore. He passed several docks and walls, before finding a small sandy beach. He trudged up out of the water, then collapsed down onto the sand. He lay there for several minutes, before sitting up, and inspecting the gunshot wound. Thankfully, the bullet had only grazed his arm, and already the wound had stopped bleeding. Armel had always been a fast healer, but he still tore a shred of fabric from his trousers to bind the wound, and prevent it from being reopened.

After making sure he could stand, Armel began to inspect his surroundings. He had no idea what part of town he was in. It appeared to be part of the factory district, with billowing smoke stakes, and broad windowless buildings. Armel ran down an alley, and poked his head out into the street. Workmen stalked down the streets in the grey gloom of the morning, heading in for a hard day's labour at the hands of brutal taskmasters who paid them a few copper pence a month.

"You've led me on quite the chase boy," the voice hissed. A hand dropped down and grabbed Armel's shoulder, dragging him back into the shadows. "But now I've got you."
Chapter 10

Thomas sat and watched in abject horror as Cole and the orphan boy he had brought with him devoured any food that was set in front of them. Cole had arrived on Thomas' doorstep just a few minutes past nine, with the elfish youth Armel in tow, and invited him to breakfast at The Arborium, a disgustingly expensive restaurant, on Upper Bangcroft Lane, the most affluent neighbourhood in all of Thertan. Most regular patrons made their reservations several months in advance, but Cole had just barged in, using his powers to persuade the waiter to find them an open table on the balcony. Thomas was the only one dressed for the occasion, while Cole and Armel were still wearing the remains of their clothes from the previous evening.

“Cole, did it ever occur to you that I might have wanted to spend my last morning with Clarissa?”

“Nooff” said Cole, shoving a scone laden with strawberry preserves into his mouth. “Yogff havdg all...” Cole swallowed. “You had all last night to say goodbye, but you just had to go to the Duchess' party. Maybe I wanted to treat my best mate to breakfast before we both shipped out for war again.”

Thomas drummed his fingers against the side of his head, “that was why we were going to meet yesterday morning. Or have you forgotten?”

Armel say quietly watching the two men bicker, content with his kippers and eggs.

“Ah yes, but that was before I decided to accompany you on this insane venture.” Cole reached across the table to grab another rasher of bacon, almost knocking over the teapot as he did so. “Now that I am coming to Kaldry...well we needed to make an occasion of it.”

Thomas sighed, took out his pipe, and lapsed into a moody silence. Cole knew he should have been embarrassed eating as much as he was and looking as he did, but he simply could not help it. After the fight in the warehouse last night, his meeting with Benedict, and his capture of Armel early this morning, he was stressed and famished. If anyone took offence to his appearance or mannerisms, he would gladly go tell him to go bugger himself. Tracking the elf boy who had stolen his Telethium had been simple enough, especially since all he had to do was follow the magical resonance signal he had placed upon all his belongings. Cole had difficulty encouraging the boy not to run, but the promise of a hot meal had made it a good deal simpler.

Cole tossed another sugar lump into his cup of black tea, then took a swig. The black bergamot tea was bitter, but Cole was not a fan of cream or lemon, so instead he used sugar to sweeten it, something that most Achlanders would consider a cardinal sin.

The spread The Arborium had provided was extensive. It included eggs, both hard boiled and poached, kippers, bacon, corn muffins, sausage, toast, flat rolls, curds and whey, multiple flavours of marmalade, and plenty of fresh fruit including cherries, oranges, and limes. It was a wholly extravagant affair, but Cole justified it as a going away present to himself. Benedict had been vague on the details, and Cole was not entirely sure on when he would be returning to Thertan, so he thought it best to enjoy what luxuries he could before he set out for the savage corner of the globe that was Kaldry.

“Well, if Thomas is going to be all grumpy maybe we should all just leave,” said Cole loudly. Some of the other clients had looked up hopefully. Cole smiled at them and waved. “Or we could stay and enjoy breakfast. What do you think Armel?”

“I'd rather stay if it's all the same to you, sir,” squeaked the elf boy, causing several of the other patrons to glower at him.

“Come now, call me Cole,” said the Spellweaver, before he helped himself to a second serving of eggs and toast. “See Thomas, at least Armel has the proper attitude and appreciates a free meal. Now then, Armel, how long have you lived on the streets?”
“About ten years sir, maybe more, don't remember much past that. I ran away from the orphanage when I was six or so.”

“Your command of language is quite impeccable,” said Thomas. “Who taught you?”

“The orphanage was run by some nuns of the Order of Perpetual Sorrow and Misery. Oddly enough they were always rather happy.”

Cole burst out into a round of fully belly laughter, “that is perhaps one of the funniest things I have ever heard! Members of the Faith....happy!?" He snorted and wiped tears from his eyes. “Oh...that is good...that is good.”

“They were though!” Cried Armel. “They were very nice, even taught me a bit of my letters so I can read and write a touch.”

Thomas sucked on his pipe for a moment, while Cole nibbled on another sausage, swallowed and then continued questioning the elf-boy. “Do you have someone to take care of you?”

“Not really, no,” replied Armel. “Could you pass the honey?”

“Certainly,” said Cole. He passed the fine china bowl across the table, again almost knocking over the teapot. In all honesty Cole couldn't care less about who had instructed Armel, was just glad the boy did not speak with a Felvian accent. While some found the accent alluring, Cole did not, at least not after the events in Felviar, not after the death of Lissete. “That is fresh clove honey and it is excellent.”

Armel pulled the spoon up out of the thick, golden liquid, and drizzled it over a raspberry scone, before taking a quick bite. Thomas puffed on his pipe for several more seconds, glaring at his table-mates as they continued to eat, debating if he should simply leave.

“What about magic?” Thomas asked. “You're of elf blood, you should be able to work the Weave.”

Armel's cheeks flushed red. “I can't...I can't work magic.”

“Really now,” said Cole, lounging back in his chair. “That is not very surprising actually. Magic does not usually manifest itself in any concrete manner until one reaches puberty.”

“Ahh so that explains why you were so late in manifesting your powers,” Thomas interjected.

“Yes, yes, I was a scrawny runt.”

“Who probably should have kept his opinions to himself,” said Thomas. “If Cormag and I had not been there to save you, I have no idea what those bullies would have done.”

“Cormag was freakishly large though, even as a boy, so it really wasn't that much trouble for you,” Cole replied with a heavy sigh. He had been a smart boy, smarter than his peers, and had never once let them forget it. Their response had been violent, and Cole saw such “oppression” as the source of his cynicism, his disdain, and his slightly warped morals. “Now, as I was saying before I was interrupted, magical ability does often manifest itself at puberty. Of course there are other reasons you might not be able to manipulate the Weave. Thertan is protected by several powerful Weavings, all of which were put in place to hamper elven Spellweavers. Perhaps if we get the time while we are out of the country I might begin instructing you in the ways of the Weave.”

“Out of the country?” Thomas chomped on his pipe. “Cole, what are you implying?”

“Mister Cole has offered me some work,” said Armel.

“Oh really,” Thomas turned to his friend. “And just what might that be?”

“He said he was going to be going abroad and the he could use some help with his things and such.”

“He did, did he?”

“Yes, I did.” There were still several scones left on the table, and Cole was debating with himself, trying to decide if he wanted another one. “Considering I will be serving in something of a prestigious position, I figured it might be a good idea for me to bring an aid along, you know someone
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to act like a squire or something.”

Thomas blew several smoke rings, his colour slowly rising. “Cole, you are flippantly discussing bringing a young boy into a war zone.”

“Yes, your point? The boy is damn fast with his hands. So fast I barely noticed when he pick-pocketed me.” Cole leaned forward, grabbed another scone, then dunked it into the honey for good measure. “He also escaped The Sludge, no small feat. Besides, in every novel and story the hero always ends up getting help from some street urchin he picks up before he leaves on his grand adventure.”

“Cole, you are aware that stories are fiction right?” Thomas arched a brow. “All those adventure novels we enjoyed as boys, all those adventure novels you still enjoy. The Lord Weatherbong books and the like are not real. They. Are. Fiction.”

“Yes, and we are going off on a grand adventure,” Cole said simply. “Best to be prepared I think.”

“So, what exactly are we going to be doing in Kaldry?” Armel asked meekly.

“You are not going anywhere, boy,” said Thomas, jabbing at the air with the stem of his pipe. Someone down the street someone had begun to blow a horn. “You are staying right here in Thertan, and Cole will see to it that you are housed appropriately.”

“No, he is coming with us,” said Cole, as someone began to beat together a pair of improvised cymbals. “No one ever looks out for the little orphan kids anyway. If there are,” Cole glanced around at the other guests, “things to be discovered, various occult happenings as it were, Armel could very well discover things we could not.”

“Cole, please do not go on with this silly warlock nonsense. I agree, there have some interesting happenings but...dear lord what is that noise!”

Cole twisted about to watch as a band of women came marching along the street. Some carried banners strung between long wooden posts, while others carried various musical instruments. All the women were well dressed, wearing what appeared to be their church best; frilly dresses, long white gloves, and flowered bonnets. As the women marched, more poured out to join them and soon they blocked the entire street.

“Oh, just wonderful,” Cole muttered as the brightly coloured banners bounced past the balcony. “Protesters.”

“They're protesting for women’s rights. Mainly voting rights, but some inheritance and business-related rights, as well,” Thomas explained. “Right now only men are able to vote for the Assembly and the House of Peers. Also, when a woman's husband dies, she inherits all his property and incomes, but when she remarries, her new husband gains complete ownership of all her accounts. They've been protesting like this for several months now.”

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“Nutters the lot of them,” said Cole. “Women don't need to vote, and they shouldn't be running businesses. I've heard rumours that the army has allowed a few women to join in consult and command positions. It is utterly preposterous. At least, they aren't out on the front lines.”

“I wouldn't let them catch you saying that,” Thomas warned. “Those women are apt to rip you limb from limb.”

“I would like to see them try,” said Cole, peering out over the balcony. “My word some of them are wearing trousers! That is utterly scandalous. Speaking of scandal did you see Mary's shoulders at the Talbit affair? They were exposed!”

They finished breakfast without any further incident. In the end, Cole had eaten three plates of scones, seven sausages, half a bowl of porridge, a dozen strips of bacon, and assorted amounts of fruit. Armel had almost matched him plate for plate, while Thomas had eaten comparatively less. As they left, Cole could not help but notice the relieved looks of both the staff and the other patrons. He considered some sort of vindictive action, but since Armel had already nicked a good deal of
silverware, he decided it was best he didn't. Cole still had an appearance to maintain after all.

“Well, it was good having breakfast with the both of you,” said Thomas, sounding a good deal more relieved that breakfast was over rather than thankful that Cole had invited him at all. “I shall return home and see you around noon I suppose.”

“Something like that. Say goodbye to Clarissa for me.” Cole winked, a wicked gleam in his eye. “I have to go home and pack.”

“Cole, this is a military operation, you are part of a regiment now,” grumbled Thomas. They walked up the lane, passing by the fine shops and parks of upper Thertan. “Everything you need will be supplied for you.”

“Oh come now Thomas, I'm going to Kaldry as a diplomat, not as a soldier. I can't be caught wearing any of those dreadful uniforms.”

“Don't be so sure,” said Thomas. “I'm only going as a mechanical and engineering consul, yet Erik still seemed to think it best that I dress like the rest of the enlisted men. You know to show solidarity. We will be representing the Crown after all.”

Cole fixed his friend with a flat stare. “The uniforms are still horrid, especially the craftsmanship. Ughhh the colour of that undyed cotton!”

“You'll find some way to manage,” Thomas reassured his friend, before he turned and walked away.

“Well, that's that I suppose,” said Cole to no one in particular as he flagged down a carriage. Armel seemed utterly enthralled by the ride, and it was rather obvious the boy had never been treated so well in a long time. Armel had said he had few memories of his childhood, and Cole had to agree that anything before the age of three or four was fuzzy for him as well. The real question that nagged at him was how the boy had ended up in Thertan in the first place. Felviar wasn't the only elven nation, nor were those people confined to one region; in fact, Ketlic was home to a small pocket of elven citizens, who had found a home amongst the native faire peoples. There had been a great diaspora out of Felviar after the revolution a century ago, so running into an elven orphan on the streets was not uncommon, but it was clear Armel was no common low born urchin.

Now that he was able to observe the boy closer, Cole saw that his eyes were brighter than he had first thought. They were almost metallic in fact, like glimmering emeralds, a trait only known to be found in the purest of the exiled royal elven bloodlines. Whoever this boy was, he did not have the blood of a commoner flowing in his veins, and Cole had already begun to plot how he might use that knowledge to his advantage.

“So, when we arrive at my residence, we shall get packed and leave,” said Cole. The driver stopped before Cole's townhouse, and the two disembarked. “We may have time to grab a quick bite of something as well. Will you need anything specific for the trip?”

“No,” said Armel distracted by the scenery. “This is a nice neighbourhood.”

“It's okay.” The two started up the walk, and Cole noticed several of his neighbours staring at Armel. “It looks nice enough, but my neighbours are all rather boring. Also, before you start planning any heists, do remember that most of these houses have multiple security measures that you will not be able to force your way through.”

Cole knocked on the door of his flat, and Winston answered. The normally unflappable butler glanced at Cole's burnt and dishevelled clothes, before fixing his gaze on Armel. Winston let out a slow sigh.

“I was just about to send the search party out for you, sir.”

“It wouldn't have done any good,” said Cole. “Or they would have found me immediately; I was at the Citadel, you see.”

“Please tell me you were not arrested again, sir.” Winston snapped about. “Shoes off please,
young man.”

“Ehh, right.” Armel bent down, and began to remove his shoes, dumping dirt all over the floor. Winston clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Sorry.”

“Ohh not to bother,” said Cole, hanging his shredded jacket on the coat rack. “Winston will clean it up. Also, draw the boy a bath.”

“You're adopting this....young man then I take it?”

“Yes, of course not,” Cole replied. “We shall be leaving in several hours for Kaldry. Armel is coming along as my squire.”

“Squire, sir? Don't you think that term is a bit outdated?”

Perhaps.” Cole began to climb the stairs, then turned back. “Hurry up; we only have a few hours before we have to leave.”

“ How long will you be gone, sir?”

“No clue yet,” Cole called from the top of the stairs. “Couple of months maybe.”

“Wonderful,” Winston muttered under his breath. “Perhaps without all the stress you bring, my ulcers will finally settle down.”

Armel snorted, trying to suppress a laugh. In all actuality, Cole did feel rather bad for putting the old man through so much, but it simply could not be helped; this was who he was, and he was not about to change. Armel followed Cole up the stairs, and the two turned off on the second floor. When the rest of the Travers family had lived here, Cole had shared this floor with his sister, with their parents keeping their quarters up on the third floor. Erika’s had faced out onto the street, while Cole had been stuck with a view of the alley. Neither room had seen use in years, and Cole wondered if Winston ever bothered to clean them.

“Well, Armel I’m not entirely sure, but I think you might fit into some of my old things,” said Cole. He grasped the tarnished door knob and opened the door of his old room, or tried to, at any rate. The door would not budge. He through his weight against the door, and it creaked open.

The room was pitch black, so Cole summoned a small mote of swirling cerulean light. With a flick of his wrist, he sent the pulsing orb soaring through the air to alight on a chandelier covered in cobwebs. The room was just as Cole remembered it, bed in one corner, desk surrounded by book shelves in another. Painted figurines of mystical creatures, Achlish soldiers, mythical heroes, and their foul enemies lined the shelves, standing vigil in front of a whole library's worth of books. Geodes, hunks of granite, and other minerals were scattered around the room, a testament to a boyhood hobby. Cole had always liked rocks, especially since, unlike people, they were quiet. Everything in the room was covered in a thin layer of dust, and the dark blue wallpaper was peeling from the walls like basilisk scales.

Cole flicked his fingers, and the mote of light shifted colour to a dull orange, casting a brighter light around the room. He began to roots in the standing wardrobe, pulling out various items that were at least a decade old. All of Cole’s clothes had been tailored to fit him specifically, but Armel was small, so they should fit him well enough.

“Who is this?” Armel pointed to a series of dusty photos on the lintel.

“Who is who?” Cole wandered over. The pictures had faded, and the golden frames were tarnished, but in the half light he could just barely make out the images. “Some of my old friends.”

“Like Thomas...and that other boy he mentioned Cor...Cor...Cor-something?” Armel asked.

“Cormag,” Cole corrected, picking up the picture.

The three boys, Thomas, Cormag, and Cole, were frozen in time, sitting arm in arm and smiling for the camera. Cole could not remember when the picture had been taken, but he guessed they had been around twelve years old. Cole was the smallest of the three, while Cormag was at least a foot taller than the other two.
Already mature for his age, Cormag was the largest boy in the year, and was mocked for his size. Cole and Thomas, social pariahs themselves, befriended Cormag, and he became a protector of sorts, picking fights with those that attempted to bully the two smaller boys. On the surface, Cormag appeared slow, but when they got to know him, Cole and Thomas found a friend just as smart as they were. The three had become inseparable. Then, Cole found his magic. With no formal training, and anger festering in his heart for slights, both imagined and very real, Cole had used his magic to unleash years of pent-up rage upon those boys who had tormented him.

The boys all lived, but only because of the swift intervention of their elders. After that incident, Cole had been sent to Elthiar and except for holidays, he did not see Cormag or Thomas again until the three were grown men, serving together on the front lines during the Felvian Incursion. Thomas and Cormag had both enlisted, while Cole the young man opposed to the war, had been conscripted, forced into service because of his magic.

Looking back on the entire affair, Cole had to admit that he had at least been partially responsible for the bullying. He had been opinionated, always ready to speak his mind about his opposition to the war with Felviar and the colonization of Kaldry and Ethenia, but it had been his arrogance that truly attracted the other boys' ire. Most would have ignored him, or agreed with him, had Cole not constantly reminded them how intellectually superior he was.

“Cole, are you all right?” Armel asked, his voice wavering.

“I'm fine,” Cole replied. He put the picture down and turned away, not wanting Armel to see the tears that had formed in the corners of his eyes.

Cormag's death had hit Cole hard. Not as hard as Lissete's of course, nothing could affect him that deeply, but losing a close friend, and not knowing the exact details, had been hard. At eighteen, both Cole and Cormag had thought themselves immortal, then all of that had come crashing down once Garret betrayed them. Cole had fled, thinking to revenge himself upon Garret, and to prove the skinny young Spellweaver how many looked down upon for his opposition to the war could do something great. He failed of course, and so scorn was the only thing he received from his countrymen. But now that he had found the pin, he had another chance to prove how his own superiority.

“Interesting pile of books you have here,” said Armel as he walked across the room. “Bit of a mess. What are they for?

“What are what for....” Cole muttered, slowly turning to look up from the fading pictures. “Get away from there!”

Armel had been standing over a pile of books that lay piled in the corner. The floor where the books lay had been stripped of carpeting, and upon the bare wood was a faded pentacle. The chalk markings had long since faded away, but the burn marks were still fresh. Cole pulled Armel back from the exposed wood and dropped to one knee. He couldn't feel any residual magic, but he had to be sure.

“What is all that?”

“Nothing.” Cole tried to scrub the burn marks away with the heel of his shoe, but to no avail. “Magic, not something you should be messing with.”

“Magic! I know I saw you said something earlier.....but could these books start my instruction? “No.” Cole continued to gather up the books, while also retrieving a rusty, blood stained knife from where it lay hidden in a corner. “I shall have some time during the voyage to instruct you in the ways of the Weave. Odds are good we are sailing to Kaldry, so we will have plenty of time. Of course, I do get rather ill out on the ocean, so we shall just have to see how things go. Anyway, I need to take these up to my study. See if any of those clothes will fit you.”

Cole left Armel alone, and went up to his own study. He dumped the books and the knife on the floor. The books flopped open, revealing a detailed illustration of an intricate ritual circle and a diagram of a human hand, the palm of which had been slashed open. Cole did not bother to straighten the books;
instead, he set to work preparing for his imminent departure.

At first, Cole thought it might be a good idea to bring all of his notes, but when he saw the sheer number of books that would entail, he decided against it. Instead, he ripped apart several of the thicker volumes, condensing them into one single bundle, before incinerating the other pages with a puff of magical flame. He used a piece of twine and the cover of an old book to bind the bundle together, then took it, and the old Ronen journal, into his bedroom. After he had inherited the house, Cole had taken up residence in the third floor master bedroom, directly across from the study. It was a grand room, with a high ceiling, adjoining bathroom, and windows that looked out on the park. Cole kept the blinds drawn most of the time.

Cole stripped down, and showered quickly, taking plenty of time to scrub the dirt out from his hair and nails. Once done, he donned a robe and set to work packing. He was not entirely sure what he would need to bring with him to Kaldry, but it could not hurt to bring a little of everything. It took him awhile, but he finally found the old battered suitcase that he had hidden away in a storeroom.

The leather was beaten and worn, and the letters BT were barely visible on the brass name plate. Cole had tried to scratch them out, but it was one of the few traces of his father's presence that he had not been able to expunge from his life. He packed swiftly, but still took the time to fold everything he packed neatly. Wrinkles were the bane of any well dressed man's existence.

Once he was done packing, Cole set to dressing himself. Thomas was probably right about dressing to match the rest of the men, so he pulled out his old grey knee-length army coat. The watchcoat was of good make, heavy enough to keep a soldier warm in the winter, but at the same time the inner lining could be removed, so it could be worn comfortably in warmer climates. A small removable cape, made from waterproof material, was draped over the shoulders, and the coat's collar could be turned up as well. For all the complaints he had about military life, Cole had to admit that the watchcoat was a wonderful piece of clothing, and conformed to his own peculiar love for long jackets and coats.

Cole dressed quickly, pulling on a pair of grey pin-stripe trousers and a dark green button-down shirt. He considered adding a tie and waistcoat, but reckoned it would clash horribly with the watchcoat. Now that he was packed and dressed, he conducted one last sweep of his room to ensure that everything was in order and that he was not forgetting anything. Satisfied, he turned the mage-fyre lamps down and closed the door. As he started down the stairs, he could not help but feel somewhat melancholy. A feeling of dread nagged at him, but as to its cause, he could not be sure. Cole was sure it was nothing, probably just nerves.
Chapter 11

The Citadel bustled with activity as the gates swung open to admit the horse drawn carriage. “Impressive, isn't it?” Cole asked. The carriage drove through the parade grounds, passing by a host of soldiers drilling in formation.

“Sure,” said Armel. Cole could sense that the boy was nervous. Living out on the streets had probably taught him to fear the Watch more than most, at least that was how Cole saw it.

“Well, depending on how we travel to Kaldry you may be in for an even greater adventure,” said Cole. “We might take a ship, but with the timetable I was given I believe we will be taking an airship, possibly with a rotor-craft escort. Have you ever flown before?”

“No,” said Armel, a hint of longing in his voice. Cole figured that was normal, most young boys dreamed of flying high over their peers; Cole had anyway.

“Oh, well, then you are in for a treat,” Cole said. The coach glided to stop outside the Citadel's Office of War and Foreign Affairs, and the two disembarked. “Much smoother than going by sea, safer, and the views, ohh, the views! You soar over the mountains and watch as the sun turns their peaks to gleaming glass, while the clouds are dyed every hue imaginable.”

“I never took you for a poet, sir,” the coachman commented.

Cole glowered at the man, and he scampered off, busying himself with their luggage. As they walked along, Cole slipped on a pair of tinted glasses to protect his eyes from the midday glare. While he had meticulously picked his clothes for the maximum amount of visual effect, Armel had dressed in a simple pair of dark slacks and a mauve button-down shirt. The shirt was of plain make, but the dye was incredibly expensive, being one of the few synthetically produced by Achland's chemists. The coachman piled their bags on the ground and then sped off.

“Well, I wonder where they are hiding the battalion,” said Cole. He turned in place, searching for any sign of Thomas, Erik, or the airship that should be docked overhead. “They are not out in the yard. I suppose we should go into the command centre.”

Armel complied without a word, and the two of them quickly ascended the stairs leading into the Office of War. The Office of War was built from the same white stone as the rest of the Citadel, though the architecture was slightly archaic, with soaring ionic columns reminiscent of the old Ronen empire, instead of the more modern building style used to construct the Rotunda where Cole had visited Benedict the previous evening. Soldiers and civilian support personnel dashed about up and down the stairs. Once again, Cole used a touch of magic to set his coat flapping, even though there was no wind. Cole and Armel drew plenty of looks as they swept past the crowds and through the building's wide oak doors, but he ignored them.

The interior of the Office of War was laid out in a similar fashion to Thertan's Grand Train Station, with soaring archways that led off to various offices and meeting rooms. People bustled over the polished wood floor, ignoring Cole and Armel as they walked along. He took long loping strides, clicking his heels loudly against the floor. They had almost reached the back wall, when a man detached himself from a crowd and dashed over.

“Mr. Travers, glad to see you finally arrived. I am Private Tanner.”

“Good to meet you.” Cole he removed his glasses and studied the man with a critical eye. “I was expecting a committee to meet me, or at least a few men to still be out in the yard. Am I horribly late?”

“Yes sir, you are.” Private Tanner stopped and stared at Armel.

Cole gave him a moment, actively enjoying how unnerved the man was. “This is Armel; he is a friend of mine, and will be serving as my assistant during the entire Kaldry expedition.”

“Right, sir...I uh...I will see to it that the proper documents are filed.” Private Tanner glared at
Armel for several more seconds, then motioning for Cole to follow him. “The rest of the Kaldry Expedition command personnel is back in the officer's lounge, just making their final preparations before leaving.”

“I take it we are flying then,” Cole grumbled. “How exhilarating.”

“No, sir,” said Private Tanner, as they turned off the main entry hall and started down a long corridor. “There has been a slight delay. I'll let the Grand-General of Intelligence explain.”

“Delay?” Cole asked as Private Tanner held open a door for.

“Yes, there has been...”

“Ahh, so Mr. Travers finally decides to arrive,” sneered tall, handsome Minister Tenning, his dark hair was salted with grey.

“Sorry, I am late Minister, I was...”

“Yes Cole, we know, you were delayed,” Benedict snapped, motioning for him to take a seat in a rickety wooden chair next to Thomas' plump arm chair, while Armel stood quietly behind him.

Cole looked about the room, but he could think of only one way to describe it: posh. With its low tables, hard wood panelling, and cushy armchairs, the room felt more like the smoking lounge of one of Thertan's many clubs, instead of a place for the country's military greats to meet. Erik nodded to Cole as he sat, and Cole returned the greeting. Erik sat on Thomas' left, with Matthew on his right, while two other military men Cole did not recognize filled in the remaining seats. Minister Tenning stood in the centre of the room, while plump Vice Chancellor Sutlen sat in a chair on the man's right.

“Minister, please calm down,” said Benedict. “Cole's appointment was necessary for this operation, which you created, to continue. Colonel Howe extended the invitation to him when you and the rest of the Assembly failed to appoint someone to replace Major Acker.”

“Perhaps we should have delayed this operation, then,” snifed Vice Chancellor Sutlen. “The entire thing has been horribly rushed, and Colonel Howe's choice of replacements is rather...unsatisfactory.”

“Cole is an excellent soldier, Vice Chancellor,” said Erik. “His military record is extraordinary, except for a single incident, and I feel he would be a great asset to this operation.”

“We cannot delay any longer, Vice Chancellor,” said Benedict. “As you all are aware, we have one month before the Consortium begins to withdraw, at which time the Lord-Protector will assume full control of the colony and begin arduous process of integrating Kaldry with the rest of the Empire. We must have our soldiers in place in time to prepare for his arrival. Two weeks after his arrival, Her Majesty will be crowned High Empress of Kaldry. We expect a good deal of opposition from the indigenous, though the Ra'kala assure us they can control the lower castes.”

“What kind of support can we expect from Ra'kala?” Matthew inquired. Cole had hoped he had seen the last of Matthew at Duchess Talbit's party last night, but apparently he had been wrong. “More importantly, what kind of support will the Consortium be willing to commit?”

“Sadly I cannot give you any concrete information,” said Benedict. “The Consortium and the Ra'kala both command a sizeable force, and Foreign Intelligence believes both will respond accordingly should any threat arise. Sadly, negotiations with the Consortium on this matter are strained, and I believe they will not volunteer any of their forces unless the situation grows dire. The Ra'kala are a wild card, of course. They rely upon the Consortium to maintain their power, so we need to reassure them that the Crown and the military are ready to assume that burden.”

“The Consortium will no doubt resist you at every turn,” said Tenning. “I agree with Benedict, but we cannot allow this mission to proceed with someone as compromised as Mr. Travers placed in such a delicate position.”

“Compromised?” Cole quipped. “That certainly is a bold claim. Do you have anything to back it up?”
“Your military record speaks for itself,” Tenning retorted. The man's hostility was at least partially justified, though Cole still thought the men a fool; they all were. Pondering about it, Cole saw that perhaps both operations had been influenced by the warlocks. It made a certain amount of sense, and though he could not confirm Tenning's connection to the coven, the fact that two lesser members had been involved in both incidents certainly seemed to indicate the Minister's involvement with the warlocks. “Now, I would like to see Brigadier Hug....”

“Now, wait just a moment,” said Sutlen, his heavy Ketlic accent causing a slight slur in his speech. The Vice Chancellor's involvement in this confused Cole. The man was the leader of the Conservative Party and had heavy ties with the Consortium. Tis true he had been the last member to support the operation, but from what Cole found out only two other Conservatives had supported the measure. The fact that Clayton had close ties to the Vice Chancellor was suspicious, so perhaps he had been bewitched, though from Cole's understanding important party officials were warded against such influences. “I still have the final word on any nomination to fill this position. That was, after all, the bargain Mr. Talbit arranged with me. Without that concession, I will remove my support of this motion.”

“You cannot do that,” Tenning exclaimed. “The motion has already been passed. We **must** deploy this unit, **now**.”

“Well, I will not have Mr. Travers forced upon me,” cried Sutlen. “As a matter of faith, I cannot allow one tainted by the Weave to assume such a respected position. If you want this operation to proceed, you must allow me time to appoint a suitable replacement for Major Acker.”

“Gentleman, please, stop this bickering,” Benedict barked. “We do not have time for this.”

“We shall make time,” said Sutlen.

“Vice Chancellor, Mr. Travers is my choice,” said Erik. “Neither you nor the Minister ever consulted me before you appointed Major Acker.”

“We did not need to,” said Sutlen, sounding rather defensive. “The man is a proven soldier, a good, god-fearing man. He would also have respected the Consortium, something, I hear, Mr. Travers has never been able to do.”

Cole glared at Sutlen for a moment, deciding on the best way to proceed. “I apologize if my personal beliefs offend you, Vice Chancellor. One cannot deny that the Consortium has overstepped its bonds in Kaldry. Achland has a duty to the local people, one the Consortium has not lived up to. It is my sincerest desire to amend that.”

Thomas glanced up, fixing him with a stare that said. “I know you are lying.”

“An honorable motive to be sure,” said Tenning. Something in the Minister’s tone disturbed Cole, as if the man was beginning to formulate a plan. “Perhaps I misjudged you, Mr. Travers.”

“Perhaps you did.”

“I will not allow this,” Sutlen interjected, now sounding almost desperate. “Appointing an ambassador who holds such deep rooted **hatred** of the Consortium will only harm the peace process. We must delay.”

“Why do you keep arguing for delays?” Thomas inquired. “Vice Chancellor, is there something you are not telling.”

“No...no of course not,” Sutlen stammered, and it finally dawned on Cole. The Vice Chancellor wasn't bewitched, he was simply a pathetic politician working to his own ends. His opposition to Cole was not personal; it was just a means to an end to ensure his own interests in Kaldry were secure. “I just want to be sure we have chosen the proper man for the job. I also need to ensure that both sides of the argument have a say in this.”

“They will, Vice Chancellor,” said Benedict. “Do not forget, the Consortium will not be fully removed from Kaldry at this time; it simply will not be mediating the colony's daily affairs. The Lord-
Protector will assume that responsibility. So, can we agree on Cole's appointment?"

“Yes,” said Tenning. “Though I would rather have someone else appointed to fill this position this operation must proceed with all haste.”

“Yes,” Sutlen grumbled. “Yes...I suppose if I must, I can support Mr. Travers. But first, we should at least bring his nomination before the full Assembly. It will only take a day.”

“We do not have time.” Tenning enunciated each word clearly, putting as much weight into the words as possible. If Cole had not suspected the man of having some ulterior motive before, he certainly did now. Perhaps, it was merely political, but Cole thought otherwise, especially since all the evidence seemed to implicate Tenning in the warlocks plot. “I believe that concludes this negotiation. Benedict, have you anything further to add?”

“Just that I would like to remind all of you that you will be representing Crown and country during your time in Kaldry, so show the world your best.”

“We will, sir,” said Erik. He stood and saluted Benedict, fingers to his temple, hand open, palm to the front. “But, before we begin, I have a bit of a tradition I would like to indulge in.” Erik removed a silver cigar case from his jacket and began to pass cigars around the room. “It shall be a pleasure serving with you all.”

Erik passed his lighter around and each man lit his cigar, including Benedict. Cole waved the lighter off and lit his cigar with a crack of his finger and small spark of magic. They all stood in silence, puffing on the cigars for a moment. Erik had not changed in the slightest since Felviar; whatever happened, he always wanted to share one last moment with his men before shipping off for parts unknown.

“Now then, before we proceed, I do believe some introductions are in order,” said Erik. “Cole, this is Major Groves, who will be in joint command with Matthew. Captain Miller will serve as our logistics officer”

“Good to meet both of you,” said Cole, as he shook hands with each in turn. Major Groves was about Erik's age, though tall, and willowy. Major Groves was no doubt a well decorated veteran, but advanced in age, and that was why Cole suspected Matthew was sharing command with him. Captain Miller, on the other hand, was short, shorter than everyone else in the room, with jet black hair and a wispy beard.

As they smoked, Cole learned that Miller had only just returned from a tour of duty in Kaldry. In his opinion Achland should pull out entirely leaving the “blighted savages” to their own devices, though he did concede to the fact that losing the colony could have devastating consequences to the security of the Empire. Major Groves turned out to be a veteran of the Western Rebellion and had lived for many years in the Western Colonies. Groves shared the belief of many in Achland that it was the empire's holy duty as white men to uplift all the “lesser” races. After several minutes of free discussion, Benedict gathered everyone back together.

“You all ready to get cracking?” Erik asked, as Benedict opened the door.

“Speaking of cracking, how are we getting to Kaldry?” Cole asked. The group turned down another corridor, heading further back into the building. “I'm going to guess we are going by air, but I don't see a dirigible in dock.” Erik and Benedict exchanged glances.

“You'll see soon enough,” replied Benedict, a mischievous gleam in his eye.

Private Tanner rejoined the group, and together they began to trudge down a staircase leading down into the heart of the Citadel. As they walked, Cole noticed that both Mathew and Major Groves shot Armel furtive disapproving glances. Cole loathed Felviar and her people as much as the next Achlander, but he could just not comprehend the hate these men directed towards Armel. He was only a boy, after all, and even if he was of noble stock, he was in no way responsible for the crimes of his people.
The air grew progressively colder as the group continued down the winding staircase. In the end, they walked for ten minutes, before Benedict stepped off of the staircase and turned down a side hall. As they continued to walk, Cole noticed the walls were no longer stone; instead, they were now dull riveted metal, and he felt as though he was walking through the belly of an iron-clad warship. The group stopped suddenly, as Benedict turned around.

“Behind me is one of our most deadly weapons,” said Benedict. Cole craned his neck to the side, trying to see past the older man. It appeared as though the hallway had just ended, stopping at a grey metal wall. “We have to keep it down here, mainly because we do not wish to jeopardize Thertan, but also because it could be disastrous if our enemies knew we had it. Stand back.”

The group drew back, as Benedict ran his hand along a groove in the wall. The sound of clanking chains and the constant thrump, thrump of a steam engine reverberated through the hall. The sound, magnified by the metal, made Cole's head ache. Slowly, the wall began to descend into the floor, accompanied by great billowing clouds of steam. The puffy clouds swirled around Benedict's feet, as he stepped over the descending door. Cole and the rest of the group followed him and emerged into a large, domed chamber.

“What the hell have you done?” Cole gasped.

In the very centre of the room was a collection of massive stone slabs plopped down on a circular metal plinth that rose up out of the floor. Some of the rocks stood upright while others leaned against each other. The slabs were massive, with some easily standing fifteen feet tall. They were arrayed in a lazy circle, and great globs of dirt still clung to the base of the rocks. Cole recognized the formation as a rudimentary ritual circle. Such stone circles were dotted over the Achlish countryside, with some of the largest and most famous in the north country. The monuments drew great crowds of low-born fools who had no clue as to the structures’ real function.

But it was not the magic, or foolish superstition that worried Cole; it was what ran under the plinth. A whole host of copper tubes, pistons, boilers, as well as flywheels, cranks, and all sorts of miscellaneous mechanical bits, clustered under the plinth like barnacles. Even with his limited knowledge of such things, Cole knew a complex steam engine when he saw one.

“What we have done is improve upon a power long believed lost,” said Benedict, as he descended into the pit surrounding the plinth. Cole watched as a whole host of technicians and engineers tinkered with the values and gauges that sprouted out of the engine.

“But, but it's not possible,” said Cole. “The Weavers of old Ronen created these gates as a way to travel between two fixed points instantly, without using their causeways. These gates revolutionized their system of transportation, but it required massive amounts of magical energy so they were never really practical. There is no way you can have improved them; Achlish weaving is primitive compared to the...”

“Trust me, they have improved them,” said Thomas, a hint of smug satisfaction in his voice. “I've been down here several times and watched them shoot people half way round the world. Nine times out of ten, they are fine.”

“Oh, well then that's just ducky,” said Cole, as the others began to admire the shiny copper piping and the complex mechanical systems. Whatever his opinion was on the entire affair, Cole had to admit that the sheer ingenuity needed to facilitate such a project was amazing. It also made him uneasy. Magic functioned on different properties than the physical laws of reality, and to see it “mastered” in such a way disturbed Cole. Except for a few choice inventions, Cole found any mingling of magic and science degraded magic, making it just another subject to be dissected and confined by rules.

“Does this system provide all the power that you need?” Asked Matthew, as he wandered around the plinth.

“Most of it,” replied Benedict. “We do need a little kick start from a skilled Weaver to get it
started. Most of the time, one of our resident mages is happy to oblige, but perhaps Cole would like to lend his talents this time.” Cole glanced at Benedict, and the Grand-General shrugged. “The few who have gone through said they felt safer knowing their magics had started the entire process.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll do it,” said Cole, as he watched the small band of officers step up onto the plinth and into the centre of the stones. “Do I have to sign a medical release?”

“No,” replied one of the engineers, as he led Cole away from the plinth and towards a far corner of the room. “All we really need from you is a kick start. Just a little magic, so we can feed it into the gate to get it started.”

“Oh, is that all,” said Cole, as they stepped behind a large metal wall. Running up the wall was a mass of mechanisms, many of which would not look out-of-place in the cockpit of a locomotive. “I guess this is just for show then?”

“The gate could overload,” said the engineer. The man shrugged and began to fiddle with a series of levers and gears on the wall. “We’ve had that happen once or twice. Nothing major. Even if it did explode, the city would be fine. I know it’s hard to believe, but we are under the Mallar right now. If we blow, up the river will drain down here, flooding the whole place. Should contain most of the blast.”

“Oh, lovely,” muttered Cole, as the engineer tapped at a gauge which appeared to have stopped moving. “So, how exactly is this going to work?”

“Glad you asked; you’re going to grab that pair of poles there,” said the engineer pointing towards a pair of free standing poles. “Grasp uhm good’n hard, pour a bit of magic in and your good to go. I have the hard job.”

“I was talking in a broader sense,” said Cole, as he stepped up to the poles. “How exactly did you manage to get this whole thing powered up?”

“You know how Cold Iron inhibits magic?” Cole nodded. “Well, it does so because it is absorbing the energy of magic. Basically, Cold Iron leeches a Spellweaver’s power, and that is what inhibits the magic. I won't go into extensive detail, we don't have the time, but suffice to say, we have mastered a process wherein we can get the energy back out. You dump in a little magic and get back almost double that in energy. O'course that would have all sorts of practical applications....if the whole process wasn't prone to explode.” The engineer chuckled. Cole smiled thinly, not as keen on helping as he had been before. “Basically, we hollowed out the rocks, filled 'em with a couple tons of cold iron and a core of orichalcum. You give them a kick start, and then the machinery provides the remaining power. It's the formation of the rocks, not the rocks themselves, that is important to ensure that the gate opens correctly.”

Cole poked his head around the wall. “Thomas, is this chap right? You're using Cold Iron? I get the basic idea behind this, but how the hell do you transmit the power? Steam-engines can't do that, neither can mage-fyre ones.”

“They are using my prototype electrical wiring system,” Thomas shouted back, still sounding incredibly smug. “Top of the line, took all my genius to get it working. Want to know how I did it?”

“Not really,” Cole called back, before returning to his post “So, I just grab these poles then?”

The engineer glanced over, “yea, from what I have been told, it shouldn't drain you too much. We did have one Weaver go a bit faint, but he insisted on opening both sides of the gate.”

“You mean this is an actual linked set?” Cole asked as he grasped the left hand pole. The metal was cold to the touch, and as he held it, Cole could feel a slight electrical discharge.

“We couldn't use uhm otherwise,” replied the engineer. “Found the other one out in the mid-east, buried deep in the desert. You don't want to hear the stories about what happened a'fore we got
them aligned properly. Dwarlkeen helped us dig it out and set it up, you'll be seeing them in a few moments.”

Cole slowly moved his right hand toward the other pole. Small sparks danced up the metal as his hand drew closer. Cole tried to pull his hand away, but some invisible force drew it in closer and closer to the metal. He could feel an odd pulling sensation in the pit of his stomach and could feel a slight drain on his own energy. He drew in a slow breath, and let the pulling sensation overwhelm him. It started gradually; first, he felt his knees grow weak; then, metal grow hot. From some far off corner, Cole could hear the chugging of a steam engine and could smell something burning. Slowly, the draining sensation built in intensity, and Cole tried to pull away.

Cole struggled against the sensation, but could not pull his hand away. Visions of ending up a withered husk danced before Cole's eyes as he continued to struggle. With one last surge of effort, Cole ripped his hands free. There was a loud bang, and Cole wheeled back, stumbled, and slammed straight into Benedict.

"Easy there," said one of the engineers, as Benedict helped Cole to his feet. "I know it can feel a little odd the first time, though. You gave us just the kick we needed; indeed, you gave us more than we needed. Actually, he gave us enough power for your trip Gene...."

"Good," Benedict cut the other man off. "Come along, Cole; you don't want to miss this.

Together, the two men walked around the steel barrier. Cole's jaw dropped; the slabs of stone sitting on the plinth had begun to glow. The light that emanated from within them was bright blue, shining through the cracks and pits in the stone. The steam engine and machinery clustered beneath the stones groaned like a great beast gasping for breath. Steam roiled over the floor, obscuring everything, while the groaning sound grew in pitch, eventually reaching such a tone that it sounded like metal being dragged along the strings of a piano.

"Better hurry," said Benedict. "You don't want them to leave without you."

Cole put a hand up to protect his eyes and stumbled through the steam clouds, doing his best to avoid the churning piston arms that emerged from beneath the plinth. Cole hopped up onto the plinth and walked under a rock archway, noting that the rocks were no longer touching each other. Instead, they were floating several inches away from one another, gently rocking back and forth as if they weighed no more than a feather. As Cole passed through into the centre of the monument, the steam cloud cleared immediately, as though the circle of stones kept it at bay. The others stood in the centre of the stone ring, staring at the floating rocks in awe.

"You ever try this before?" Cole asked nervously, watching some of the smaller stones began to lift off from the plinth.

"Are you daft? Of course not," Thomas replied as the larger stones began to rise. "Think of all the things that could go wrong."

"I am," Cole muttered. The floating stones were moving now, beginning to orbit around the party gathered in the centre of the plinth.

The orbiting stones began to pick up speed, whizzing about faster than Cole would have thought possible. He tried focusing on one, but found it impossible, mostly because the stone had split into three separate, yet identical pieces. Cole blinked. He didn't remember the stone splitting, or hitting anything, and it seemed to be the same size as before, but now there were three of them. Colours began to blur, and the stones began to spin faster. Cole tried to turn in place, but found his feet rooted to the ground. Breathing became harder, and soon he felt a pressure gathering behind his eyes.

Cole waggled his head back and forth, trying to clear the pressure, and, all at once, his vision cleared. He gasped; he was no longer on a metal plinth surrounded by floating rocks; instead, he was now flying down a street. For a moment, Cole thought it was Thertan, but something was off. The roads were wrong, but he could not tell how. Moments later, Cole shot up and over the city, and for just a
second, he could clearly see Thertan, the Spire rising high above the smoke stacks of the city's grimy factories. Soon, his vision began to blur, and Thertan grew fuzzy. Cole tried to focus, but found the skyline completely changed.

The Citadel and the Houses of the Assembly had vanished, yet the Mallar remained. Further up the river, there was a building with a large clock tower, overlooking a bustling bridge. Cole had never seen the building before in his life, yet it looked oddly familiar. Cole fought to focus as Thertan swam back into view, yet even as he tried to focus, the image split before his eyes. Just like the rock before it, Cole watched as the city fragmented into a great multitude of cities. As he hurtled through the air, Cole's perspective shifted and changed just as the cities below him continued to multiply. Sometimes, there were no cities at all while at other times, strange, shining steam-mobiles sped along silver bridges that passed directly through buildings. Cole's mind reeled as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

Without warning, the city caught fire, or at least appeared to. The vision was still broken, and Cole could not see clearly. Sometimes, the cities just collapsed while at other times, they exploded outwards. Regardless of what happened, every city Cole had seen fell into ruin. A sudden explosion rocked the world, and Cole tried to throw his hands up but found that he no longer had hands, or arms. He had become an incorporeal spirit, floating through a nightmare.

As the infinite city dissolved, a new one sprouted in its place, twisting up out of the ground like some strange plant. The buildings, if they could even be called that, were covered in chitinous growths, that pulsed with some dull purple light. The structures bulged up out of the grown like cancerous growths, twitching as if they were alive. More buildings that appeared to have been hewn from a single block of some strange dark basalt, were mingled in with the others, there sharp angles forming a stark contrast to the organic forms that surrounded them. Bands of blood red stone ran through the dark rock, pulsing in time to the movement of the other buildings.

The entire city shimmered under the light of a dying sun, like some beached sea monster, and Cole felt his bile rise just looking at the horrid vista, while his mind sputtered as it attempted to make sense of the inscrutable horrors that were spread out beneath him. The land around this new city was thick with rot, while tentacles pushed their way up from the pale grey soil, wriggling about and grasping at the sickly red sky. He could feel his mind spinning as it tried to make sense of the city far below. Strange music coloured the air, while a rhythmic pounding, sounding almost like the breath of some great beast, assaulted all his senses, causing his teeth to ache.

Strange bipedal monstrosities, putrescence dripping from their slavering maws, moved through the eldritch city. The creatures' limbs seemed as if one with the earth, extensions of the very ground upon which they walked; limping down streets that had no discernible beginnings or endings, instead looping around in maddening circles and blasphemous patterns. Even the sun that shone overhead seemed to be connected to the ground by the rays of light that radiated from its roiling surface.

Cole felt his stomach drop, and soon he was hurtling towards the ground. One of the unearthly creatures turned to watch him, its face a mass of melted wax. Cole plunged down towards the city of madness. As he fell a single figure detached itself from the misshapen crowd. The Well Dressed Man smiled up at Cole and doffed his hat, watching as the other man plunged down towards the mad city. Cole screamed as the ground rushed up to meet him, but the sound caught in his throat. Cole struck the ground, falling through it and into darkness.
Chapter 12

The first thing Cole noticed was the heat. It wasn't the wet, humid heat of summer in Thertan; instead, it was a dry heat, oppressive, capable of causing lips to crack and bleed within minutes of exposure. The second thing he noticed was that someone had removed his shirt and laid him down in a soft bed. The sheets felt silky, but did not hold heat like silk was accustomed to doing. Cole groaned and felt his lips begin to crack. He forced himself into a sitting position, then opened his eyes.

“Well, it took you long enough,” said Thomas.

Cole quickly took stock of his surroundings. The room was circular, with a domed ceiling, and its walls were painted a dull brown. Thomas stood off to the side, while Cole was lying in a free standing bed in the centre of the chamber. Out of a circular window, he could see a stretch of blue sky, broken here and there by tall palm trees and brightly painted minarets. A dry breeze wafted through the room, carrying with it a potpourri of foreign scents and sounds.

“How long was I out?” Cole asked, rubbing sleep from his eyes and pushing back the disturbed dreams of his time and Felviar and his failures there.

“Just a few hours.”

“Well, it feels like days,” Cole replied.

“You certainly took the worst of it,” said Thomas. “There is always one in every trip. Oddly, it took you a bit longer to come through as well.”

“Interesting,” said Cole. He threw off the sheets and swung his feet over the side of the bed. “Speaking of interesting...did you see anything odd while going through the gate?”

“The multiplication effect is normal,” Thomas replied, averting his eyes from Cole's sparsely clothed form. Cole stretched his arms out, checking to make sure everything was okay, then touched his toes. His shirt, trousers, and coat were laid out over the back of a chair. “The theory is that as the gate activates, you are seeing the world in multiple parallel phases and then slip between them. Of course, with magic, you can never be entirely sure can, you? Some of our test subjects also described a feeling of flying, as well as seeing an odd parallel Thertan. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” Cole began to dress. “Where the bloody hell are my shoes?” Cole knelt down and found them under the chair. “I just...well never mind.”

“Cole, I know when there is something bothering you, but if you don't want to talk about it very well,” said Thomas. “Have you finished dressing yet?”

“Yes,” declared Cole as he stood up.

“Good,” said Thomas. “We are leaving in a few hours. We would have departed last night, but then you fell ill.”

“Speaking of which, where are we?”

Together the two men stepped out onto the balcony, and Cole saw the city of Morinar for the first time. It was smaller than Thertan, though, of course, most cities were. There were no smokestacks, or ugly factories; instead, the buildings of Morinar were all built from the same dull brown sandstone. The buildings on the outskirts were all perfectly square units, stacked upon each other like so many bricks. They clustered together like oysters, fighting for space along the city walls.

Rising up above these homesteads were grand domed buildings, painted in bright blues, reds, greens, and golds. Minarets thrust up like fingers, reminding Cole of the tentacles he had seen undulating in that strange city. Looking down on Morinar, Cole could see that every street was perfectly laid out, each coming together to create an ordered geometric figure. Cole was confident that if one was to take measurements of the entire city, the results would show every angle and every inch was sound, both mathematically and architecturally. What the Dwarkeen lacked in magical talent, they more than made up in mathematical, scientific, and architectural genius. In fact, much of the world's
scientific community still conducted experiments and computed mathematical equations based on formulas that the Dwarkeen had devised centuries ago.

In the courtyard below, Cole could see several regiments of Achlish soldiers going about their morning drills. The barracks building was made from the same dull sandstone, and yet there was something off. As Cole looked around at the other buildings walls, he spotted it what it was. The barracks had been built after the rest of the city, and its shape broke the flow of the street, bulging out farther than the surrounding buildings. Morinar was built on a high plateau, carved out from the very rock, and overlooked the rest of the desert.

Even from such a relatively low vantage point, Cole could see for miles in every direction. The desert was a shifting ocean of dull, yellow-brown, but what really entranced Cole was the sky. All one ever saw of the sky in Thertan was an inky smudge, grey rain clouds, dirty smoke, and the occasional quick flash of blue. Here, the sky stretched clear and unbroken for kilometers, with nary a cloud in sight.

“So, is there any real point to this layover?” Cole asked, leaning back against the balcony. “Or are we just killing time?”

“The battalion that we'll be serving with has been training here for several months,” Thomas explained. “Well, actually they have been here for several years, helping to clear up some local issues.”

“Ahh yes, hunting down those horrid anarchists,” Cole shook his head. “I'm so glad our empire got embroiled in such a ridiculous quagmire.”

“You do know that the situation in Kaldry isn't much different?”

“Yes...I know,” Cole sighed. In the yard, the soldiers had affixed bayonets to their rifles and had begun a new round of drills. “Thomas, what's happening to our country? What happened to those hopes we had as boys? Things were so simple then; now though, it's as if Achland has become the parent of the world. Well okay, we've been barging into other countries for almost two centuries now, but it's only gotten worse since the Incursion and Annexation. We have to be everywhere, control everyone, or the world spirals into chaos. It bothers me, but I know it shouldn't.”

Thomas smiled. “That's what growing up is, isn't it? Learning not to worry about such bothers. We both had to grow up so fast we didn't really have the time to stop and consider what was happening. But as you said, it's our duty, both as citizens and as a country to shepherd those wayward souls of the world, if not for our sake, then for the sake of peace.”

A moody silence fell over the pair. Cole stood and continued to watch the soldiers at their drills. Now that Cole was here on the cusp of going to Kaldry, he felt lost. What if this plot he had uncovered, really was no more than a wild lie he had created for himself? What if Garret really wasn't in Kaldry? For all his melodrama, Cole never really stopped to consider his actions; instead, he just plunged forth into the unknown, doing his best to stay active and ignore his depression.

“Ahh, my friend you are up!” Called a voice. Cole turned to see a short, stocky man climbing the stairs up to the balcony. The man had bronzed brown skin, bright black eyes, and a wiry beard. “We were all worried. You are all recovered, yes?”

“I'm fine,” said Cole. “Just enjoying a touch of fresh air.”

“That is good, that is good,” said the dwarf, though Cole would never call him that to his face. Dwarkeen were touchy, especially with regard to cultural titles and racial politics. Dwarves, they said, lived up in the mountains of the north, mining, crafting, and busying themselves with other worthless tasks. The Dwarkeen saw themselves as a race apart, one of scholars, theologians, and the conquers of the great deserts of the Middle East. Achland did its best to rule both, but, in reality, the Dwarven people were more commonly thought of as allies, instead of subjects, unlike the Kaldriens. “The Colonel just sent me to check on you and bring you down to the main floor.”

“Thank you, Ali,” said Thomas. “Also, were you able to acquire that item I asked for?”
“Yes, I did,” replied Ali, with a twinkle in his eye. “The Elders are granting you three hours access to the Hall. Not the archives or the workshops mind, just the Hall.”

“Ohh, that doesn't matter at all!” Thomas exclaimed. Cole chuckled. He hadn't seen Thomas as excited since he had been accepted into the Fraternity of Engineers. “With three hours, I could...well I could take a lot of notes anyway. I suppose I should ask Erik just to be sure; we can't leave till the sunsets, so we have plenty of time.”

“I'm sure you'll be fine,” said Cole. “Now the most important question, how close are we to meal time?”

As it turned out, Erik was more than happy to accommodate Thomas' visit to the Dwarlkeen halls of learning. Cole would have preferred to leave immediately; the heat was almost unbearable. Cole left the Achlish base and found solace in a small local eatery, situated just off of one of the more popular bazaars. When he told the owner he was with the Achlish military, the Dwarven server shuffled off to find Cole a table. The serving staff showed an equal amount of respect, and Cole was soon feasting on rice, beef stuffed grape leaves, Tabbouleh, Falafel, yoghurt, and an assortment of olives. Cole's server also brewed a pot of very light cardamom spice coffee to accompany the meal. The coffee was very aromatic and had a slightly smoky taste. It was certainly something Cole would never had tried before the visit, but he found it to be excellent, but sadly it would most likely be prohibitively expensive to have imported to Thertan. The Consortium kept a tight grip on imports, especially since they had lobbied for the Assembly to levy heavy tariffs on all other mercantile companies.

Cole's table was situated under a brightly covered awning, just off the street, and from there he was able to watch the crowds, which showed surprising diversity. Cole spotted a good mix of humans of all skin tones, Dwarlkeen, several elves, their dusky-skinned Kaldrien, or kelvish relatives, and several other minor races, all commingling without the slightest hint of racial friction. There were even several of the nomadic fox-like Vitzen mixed into the crowd, striding along on tiptoe, the digitigrade looking utterly bizarre in contrast to normal bipedal legs. Cole nibbled on some dates while watching the crowd; then, he saw Armel wandering along, stopping at various stalls and chatting with their proprietors.

The elf boy seemed to have a natural talent for making friends and would often stop for long stretches to talk with people he had just met. Whoever this kid was, it was clear he had learned plenty out on the streets. Armel was also rather good at using those conversations to distract people as he robbed them, a habit Cole figured it would be best to break the boy of, lest it get them both into trouble.

As Cole paid for his meal, he watched a fully armed and armoured Dwarlkeen and a rust-furred Vitzen make their way through the crowd, heading directly for Armel. Cole handed over his money, nodded to his server, and then set off after the pair. The Dwarlkeen grabbed Armel and spun him around, shouting something that Cole could not hear over the din of the crowd. Cole began to push his way through the crowd as the Vitzen snarled something at Armel.

“Is there a problem here?” Cole asked as he approached.

“None of your ruddy business,” the dwarf spat. “Kid is out here stealing, falls under my jurisdiction.”

“Ohh, did anyone see him steal anything?”

“My coin-purse is missing,” the Vitzen hissed, her pointed canines flashing in the late afternoon light. “This pup bumped into me; it was only sometime later that I noticed it missing.”

“A Vitzen, accusing someone else of theft, that is hilarious.”

“As you can see, this is none of your concern,” said the guard before reaching for a large knife sheathed on his belt. Armel went white as the man raised the knife, obviously meaning to remove a finger, the common punishment for theft.
“Cole....now would be a great time to help,” said Armel as he tried to pull away. The guard readjusted his grip and pulled the boy closer.
“You know this boy?” The dwarf lowered the knife. “Son?”
“No,” Cole replied aghast. “He's elf blood, you fool, besides we look nothing alike. I do know him though; he's my apprentice.”
“Take his finger as well,” ordered the Vitzen, now standing at her full seven foot height. “Teach both of them a lesson. Show this arrogant human he can't cower behind his empire.”
“Adina, be quiet,” growled the guard. “This man is with the Achlish military; we owe him some manner of respect. If I release this boy to you, do you promise I won't catch him stealing again?”
“You won't,” said Cole. “We'll be gone by tomorrow, anyway.”
“Good, saves me a mess of trouble.”
The Dwarlkeen released Armel and stalked away. The Vitzen stayed a moment longer, her bushy tail lashing back and forth. Cole smiled at the fox-faced humanoid and then turned to Armel, well aware that the Vitzen was still staring at him.
“Come on,” Cole ordered. “I think it best we head back.” Cole put a hand on Armel's shoulder and steered him down a side alley. “You have very nimble fingers, you know that?”
“Out on the streets if you don't steal, you don't eat,” Armel replied with a smile.
“Well, there is no need for that anymore,” said Cole. This feels so weird, Cole thought as he turned to look back down the alley. For a moment, he thought he had seen something. What am I, this boy's father? I hate my father, and we barely talk. Yet, here I am acting fatherly. I don't have time to be teaching him life lessons. For one thing I have more than enough money and influence to keep both of us fed, as a matter of fact it attracts unwanted attention.”
“You don't say,” muttered Armel before they emerged out of the alley and into another open market. “The Vitzen is still following us.”
The Dwarlkeen released Armel and stalked away. The Vitzen stayed a moment longer, her bushy tail lashing back and forth. Cole smiled at the fox-faced humanoid and then turned to Armel, well aware that the Vitzen was still staring at him.
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“You don't say,” muttered Armel before they emerged out of the alley and into another open market. “The Vitzen is still following us.”
Cole had to admit it, Armel had a good eye. Vitzen were stealthy hunters, and Cole hadn't even noticed she was there, but now that Armel said something, Cole was able to find her easily. The Vitzen had crammed herself into an open doorway, but light still shone off of her red-gold fur. She probably wanted revenge. Cole steered Armel right through the thickest part of the crowd, hoping to lose their pursuer. She was actually rather clumsy, and Cole had no trouble breaking her line of sight. Once that was done, it was just a simple manner of remembering the way back to the barracks.
By the time Cole and Armel arrived back at the Achlish base, the sun had begun to set, painting the sky with a swirling mix of blues, purples, and golds. As the day had worn on, a few clouds had emerged, speeding across the sky. Now, at the sunset, those puffy white travellers turned blood red, contrasting against the deep navy colour of the sunless sky. The base was quiet, and Cole soon discovered the reason why: everyone had crowded into the main dining hall, enjoying one last meal before shipping off to Kaldry. Heaping plates of lamb, couscous, rice, and steamed vegetables were laid out on low tables.
“Cole, glad to see you up,” said Erik as Cole and Armel filled in the two empty seats at the colonel's right. “I tried to find you earlier, but I guess you went for a walk. Good idea, it's not every day you're in a foreign country. I myself visited several of the museums and natural rock formations scattered around the city, studying minerals and the like. It was absolutely magnificent.”
“Glad to hear,” said Cole, reaching across the table for a leg of lamb. “So we are leaving in the early morning, then?”
“Of course not,” said Matthew as he scowled at Cole. “If you had bothered to attend the officers’ meeting, you would have known that.”
“Sorry,” said Cole, through a mouthful of grilled peppers. “I was incapacitated. I know it's hot in the desert, but it can't be that bad.
“Yes it can,” said Thomas. “When one is traveling by train, it's necessary to travel at night. During the day, some stretches of the desert grow so hot that the tracks deform. There is a reason they call the expanse between here and Kaldry the Hellfire. In some places, the temperature shifts between night and day are so great that steel will actually shatter. Of course, nothing lives in those areas anyway, so it’s not as though we need to lay tracks there.”

“Speaking of such things, how was your time at the Hall of Gathering?” Asked Erik, as he passed a tray of flat bread and honey around the table.

“Fantastic!” Thomas exclaimed “I was actually drawn in to help with one of the more complex theoretic calculus equations they were working on. It was dealing with...”

Cole tuned out the rest of the conversation. He had never had a stomach for math, much less for Thomas' discussions of it. They passed the rest of the meal in relative peace, though Cole did notice that everyone in the room was rather distant when dealing with either him or Armel. The meal ended with cups of chilled milk, rice pudding, and fried dough rolled in powdered sugar. Slowly, the room began to clear as men left to finish their packing. Cole and the rest of the officers stayed for perhaps an hour longer, making their final plans, before leaving to collect their belongings.

The departure from the barracks was a sombre affair. The soldiers formed into tight ranks and marched four abreast out of the wide gates of the building. Crowds parted to allow the soldiers through. As the men marched, they began to sing, each division choosing their own slow marching tune. Slowly, the soldiers settled on a single song. One man started whistling it, and then the others joined in. Cole did his best to resist singing, but soon found himself humming along with the rest.

_Onward Achlish soldiers, onward now to war._
_They tell you march for glory._
_They tell you march for fame._
_Still we set out early, each soldier dressed the same._

_Onward Achlish soldiers, onward now to die._

The song contained dozens of verses, each more depressing than the last. Cole would have expected the mood to be more upbeat, but the late hour and heavy meal had had most likely made everyone sleepy. In all, three hundred men were being deployed, with an additional twenty engineers and mechanics accompanying them. It took nearly an hour for them all to reach the station.

The station was a grand building located along the edge of the plateau. The tracks spiralled down on a narrow shelf cut out of the sheer rock. The soldiers piled into the cars at the back of the train, taking all their possessions with them. Erik, Thomas, Cole, and the rest of the command personnel had three cars in the middle of the train completely to themselves, not counting the private dining car.

As they began to board, Cole noticed Thomas staring at the engine and sauntered over. “What's going on?”

“This is a Bringer-2-2-7, top of the line,” Thomas replied, mouth agape. Cole had to admit it was a pretty locomotive, streamlined, with a high, thin smokestack, and painted a fetching crimson. “I thought they were just confined to the major Achlish rail lines. I wonder how one ended up out here.”

Cole shrugged, “who knows, long as it gets us to Kaldry safe and sound it doesn’t bother me much.”

According to Cole's telethium, they left the station at eight thirty seven, Thertan time. He had no clue what the local time was; he hadn't bothered to ask, or to check. The combination of stress, travel lag, and heavy food had had a soporific effect on Cole, and he didn't even bother undressing or inspecting his room before flopping down on his bunk. The gentle rocking motion and the clickty-clickty sound of
the wheels soon lulled Cole into a light sleep. Cole's dreams were disturbed, and he often found himself waking up, only to realize later that he was in fact still asleep. Dawn came swiftly as the train raced into the mysterious east, carrying Cole far away from everything he had ever known.
Chapter 13

The long train ride to Kaldry provided Thomas with something he had not expected, a break. Between working with the old Ronen gate, basic wedding planning with Clarissa, and preparing for this trip, Thomas had had very little time for anything. Clarissa and He would not be married until he returned to Thertan, but they had already begun to plan. Now that Thomas was confined to a single small space for several days, he found that he actually had the time to work on some personal interests he had neglected.

Thomas spent the first days of the journey exploring the train. The officers' cars were well furnished and split into four private rooms. Thomas shared his car with Cole, Thomas, and because of Cole's insistence, Armel. The cars were all painted with the crimson and gold colour scheme of the Consortium, which lent a noble air to the otherwise cramped space. The dining car was finely furnished, with its plush leather arm chairs, duvets, and gently flickering mage-fyre lamps. Thomas spent a good amount of his time sitting in one of the comfier chairs, fiddling about with small clockwork device of his own invention, or just reading.

In addition to his lounging, Thomas also visited the engine, where the portly, bearded engineer gladly let him inspect the various workings. Apparently, the Consortium owned several Bringer 2-2-7's and used them regularly, mainly because Achland had built such an efficient rail system in the subcontinent. Airship travel, the engineer told him, was restricted to military operations, and, as such, there had been none to spare since there had been several skirmishes between Achlish forces and the lower castes recently. Thomas did not mind the travel arrangements; he liked trains.

“Things are bad there rit now,” said the engineer, while Thomas inspected the cabin. “The more tribal peoples are whippin' themselves into a bit o’ a frenzy. Seems ter be some sort of prophet is leading them now.”

“Oh, really,” said Thomas as he watched the speed gauge of the train. On flat ground, the Bringer could easily reach speeds of 90 miles an hour, and the wastes were nothing if not flat.

“You're going to be interesting to see how things resolve themselves,” said the engineer. He motioned for his crew to begin shovelling coal into the furnace of the engine. The Bringer's engine, like much of Achland's other technological wonders, ran as a combination of both magic and rudimentary science, and its dual coal mage-fyre engine was a perfect example. “Colonel Walsh'll straighten it all out though. I'm just glad I ain't getting sent out there like you, poor bastards.”

“You are going out there now,” Thomas pointed out. “And this is a Consortium train.”

“Your right on that fact,” the engineer smiled. “Thankfully, I don't run the Kaldrien line. I was co-opted to come to pick you'll up. You soldiers are walkin' into a primed power keg in Kaldry, guess that's why you're bringing all the weaponry.”

The weaponry the engineer referred to included two Bryer-39 Auto-Loader rifles for each man, double as many Hather-27 pistols, forty fully automatic belt fed machine guns, as well as six cars full of bronzed Steam-armour. While they travelled through the desert, it was too hot to go back there, but Thomas suspected he would need to do some maintenance on the armour before they arrived in Kaldry. A soldier, fully dressed in Achlish Steam-armour, was a terror on the battlefield, and a headache in the workshop, especially when the armour needed repairs.

While Thomas enjoyed his few days of down time, Cole certainly didn't. When Cole wasn't pacing back and forth like a caged animal, he was staring out the window, watching the rolling sand dunes flash past. Nervousness rippled off of Cole, and Thomas felt certain it had to do with both the cramped quarters and the hostility Matthew maintained towards his friend. Cole was something of a joke in the Achlish military, especially since he had deserted. Thomas could see that Matthew's off-handed comments at Mrs. Talbit's party had hurt Cole, even if the other man wouldn't admit it. Thomas
of course knew the truth about why Cole had deserted, but his friend had forbid him from telling anyone else.

According to Armel, Cole also muttered in his sleep. Armel did not catch anything definite except for the names Garret and Lisette. This revelation did not surprise Thomas at all. After they had returned from the war, Thomas and Cole had lived together for a short time, sharing a flat just north of the Castle District. The apartment had been small, since Thomas had only just begun his work for the Crown, and Cole had not yet come into his inheritance, though the motion was before a legal house. Thomas remembered several nights when Cole had awoken screaming, muttering incomprehensibly about the horrors he had lived through in Felviar. The war still haunted Thomas, but not to the same degree.

When Cole wasn't stalking back and forth in the dining car, or hiding in his room, he was poring over the tattered Ronic journal he claimed proved his wild theories. When Thomas asked Cole about it, the other man grudgingly agreed to lend him the book, but had asked that he not share it with anyone else. The journal proved much more interesting than Thomas had expected. Most accounts of Ronen military activity were rather dry, detailing rations and troop numbers in excessive detail. Some, such as the Conquering of Achland and the Gelish written by the first Emperor were more interesting and considered cornerstones of western literature. Most Ronic works were impersonal, though, recounting broader events instead of focusing on a single commander or legion.

The journal turned out to be a personal journal, kept by one legionnaire stationed at the very edge of Ronen lands during the collapse of the empire. The author never spoke about himself, instead writing about his Tribune, Octavius Lucianus, the rest of the Sixth Legion, and the various trials and tribulations they had endured on the front. The journal even detailed the immediate aftermath of Ronen's fall, discussing how Octavius had married a barbarian princess and created his own small empire.

Thomas also read the passage Cole considered crucial to his argument about the warlocks' conspiring to destroy Achland, even so it still seemed that Cole was grasping at straws. The passage only really stated that the legion had encountered a man with a series of odd tattoos, who had been conducting strange magical experiments and working with a secessionist group attempting to tear down the Ronic rule. What struck Thomas as odd was how quickly the passage ended, stopping mid sentence as if the author had forgotten to finish it.

After three days of barren desert, the land slowly began to change as huge slabs of rock appeared on the horizon, the roots of the Hithowa mountains, which contained some of the highest peaks in the known world. It was revealed hours later that these slabs of rock were actually several hundred feet tall, and soon they passed into an unnatural twilight as the train entered the valley. By the fifth day, plant life began to emerge in and around the rocks, and Thomas noted that the temperature had dropped significantly. Before the week was over, they had left the desert behind and crossed the border into north-western Kaldry. They were heading ever higher into the mountains, still they still had close to a week's travel left before they arrived country's capital of Al-katal.

Once over the Kaldrien border, the train pulled into a small station, sequestered high in the mountains. The station sat just on the edge of a bridge, overlooking a wide vista of mountain peaks shrouded in white mist. Everyone piled out onto the platform, and Erik had the men run several laps along its length. Thomas and Armel both joined them, while Cole remained aboard, complaining that he had developed a horrible headache. He had been acting strangely ever since they crossed the border, but Thomas just ascribed it to another one of Cole's moods. A small group of bald-headed Kaldrien monks tended the train, the bright orange robes contrasting sharply with the green of the jungle. They worked quickly with a sort of reverence Thomas had never seen in Achlish workers; they never spoke a word. Once water, coal, and food were resupplied, everyone re-boarded for the final leg of the journey,
a harrowing descent out of the mountains, down into the jungles, then across the plains of Kaldry to Al-katal.

By now, everyone had settled into a regular routine. Erik had taken to sitting in the dining car, studying regional maps of Kaldry, as well as working on a catalogue of various native plant species. Matthew spent most of his time with the men, discussing tactics and swapping stories about the conflicts they had served in. As the days wore on, Cole slowly began to lounge more, often sleeping in the dining car while Thomas worked. While Cole had settled down, Armel seemed to grow more restless. The elf boy clearly did not like being confined for such a long time and finally, on the tenth day, Cole seemed to notice this fact.

“Armel, will you please sit down,” Cole hissed, even though he kept both of his eyes shut. Thomas had thought him sleeping, but apparently he wasn't. “You are pacing again, and it is getting annoying.”

“How can you see that?” Asked the boy as he flopped down in a chair opposite Cole. “Your eyes aren't even open.”

“I know,” said Cole. “But I can hear it. I am sorry that this is all very boring but...”

“You said you would teach me magic during the trip,” Armel whined. “Yet all you've been doing is sleeping and avoiding all the other soldiers.”

“You have to admit he's very observant,” said Thomas. He set his work aside and turned his seat towards Cole. The three of them now sat in a rough circle in the far corner of the room, far removed from where Erik sat flattening leaves down, before placing them into his a leather bound journal. Thomas was rather interested in the conversation; even though he had no magical talent, Thomas had read a great deal on practical magical theory.

Cole opened a single eye, “yes, yes he is.” Cole pushed himself up, stretched, and yawned. “Well, I guess, there is no better time than the present to start. You haven't had any sort of training at all, right?”

“Well, there was the one time some other orphans decided to set up a magic school in the sewers,” said Armel. “We accidentally blew up half the city.” Cole looked confused for a moment and then began to laugh.

“Well good, means I won't have to break you of any bad habits,” Cole arched his back, and it cracked several times. “Now, magic is as much an extension of one's mind as it is of one's emotions. You are bending the forces of the universe with nothing but your own force of will. It's dangerous, and concentration is paramount. Most young apprentices are put through rigorous physical and mental training to prepare them. We don't have a pool for you to swim laps in, so we shall skip that.”

“Glad to see you're committed to this,” said Thomas, before he reached over a grabbed his sketch book off the top of a nearby table. The train was just beginning to come down out of the mountains and enter the vast Kaldrien jungle, and Thomas had spotted a large, vine-covered ruin rising up out of the trees. The train was still far enough away that Thomas figured he had time to make at least a basic sketch of the breathtaking vista.

“Well, considering I am just going to teach him the basics, I think it's fine,” said Cole. “Besides, you only really need to focus on all that if you expect to end up fighting someone. Now then, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, magic is completely based on your own force of will. Contrary to what most of the plebeians believe, there really are no set rules for magic. If you want to create fire, you just...create it. If you have the gift, you'll be able to reach into your own life-force and do it. That is where the trickiness comes in. All magic is powered by your own endurance; that is the real reason for any physical training. You have to have the inner strength, or you are going to die.”

“So, there are no spells or incantations you have to learn?” Armel asked.
“Nope,” Cole replied. “Of course, you'll hear Weavers chanting things, but most of the time that is just for show. Lesser mages will still use words to focus their minds, but it doesn't really matter what you say, or what motions you make, all that matters is your force of will.” As he spoke, Cole's eyes began to glow, and the lights in the room dimmed. “See...simple. The energy you are tapping is inside you. All you need to do is learn to draw upon it, so you can manipulate the energy of the universe. Only a small handful of humans are naturally born with this ability; all elves are born with it, after that it varies by race. Kaldriens, at least the kelvish population, as an offshoot of elves, are all born with the skill, though most can't manifest it, so instead it becomes something that enhances their physical prowess, without their ever being aware of it. There have been no accounts of Dwarlkeen manifesting the Weave, but they have found a way to manipulate the forces of the universe through their mathematical works and the massive geometric figures they create. Takes them a long time, but the effects they can create are many times greater than anything Achland or Felviar has ever achieved.”

“They've done more than that,” Thomas added. “They are literally using their mathematical and geometric formula to manipulate the powers of the universe. In order to create something, they have to calculate it and measure it. Their geometric figures are literally works of art, as well as magical glyphs. Their magic is slower, more subtle, but many times more powerful. In addition, they had mastered these techniques while our entire continent was busy building castles and running about conquering each other.”

“Yes...well that is great,” Cole said.

The lesson continued for several hours as Cole instructed Armel on the finer points of magical history. Thomas listened to parts but also continued to sketch. They had moved away from the ruin, so Thomas began to draw Cole and Armel. The pair were very good studies, with Cole's dark hair providing a sharp contrast to his paler skin and Armel's angular features creating fine, clear lines for the sketches.

“So, then it’s really just a matter of knowing what forces you need to manipulate in order to create the desired effect,” Cole continued. “Mage colleges don't teach spells, they teach how to think and focus. I prefer Weavings that target the mind, using them to befuddle and confuse. I can read minds as well.” Cole let out a heavy sigh. “My powers really are a curse at times. People's minds are such horrid things, full of base thoughts and evil intents. I hope you never develop those talents Armel.”

Cole slouched back, let out another sigh, and closed his eyes again. For a moment, Thomas thought he had fallen asleep, but then Cole bolted upright, his melancholy and self-pity vanishing in an instant.

“At the same time, I also find my talents particularly suited to drawing upon and manipulating energy, usually by animating shadows.”

“Well, where does the energy come from?” Thomas asked as he began to cross-hatch his sketches. “I mean surely you can create fire, but would it not be simpler to move the heat around?”

“I guess,” Cole shrugged. “Theoretically that would work, but the amount of time it would take would be far greater; one's enemy could react in time to kill one before one ever landed a single blow.

“One would be conserving energy, though.” Thomas closed his sketch-pad. “Besides, if done right, the other Weaver might not even notice one was doing it. You talked about knowing which force you need to manipulate in order to work magic, wouldn't moving something, even if it's just heat, be relatively easy in comparison to creating it?”

“Well...yes...I guess,” said Cole rather sheepishly. “Still, it's not very impressive.”

“Actually, it might be more so,” Thomas said, twisting about to readjust his sitting position. “I mean, surely it might not be flashy, but really, consider the basic thermodynamic laws. The heat movement would produce all sorts of options. You could use direct incineration or even transfer the heat directly into a person. It's a gruesome thing to be sure, but just imagine the effects of raising a person's temperature several degrees. Moving heat like this would also produce an effective layer of
cold air...”

“Thank you, Thomas, but who is teaching this class?”

“Ohh, offended that I am doing a better job, are you?” Thomas chuckled. “Apropos, do they just not teach scientific law to Weavers? It seems that would be rather useful. Just think if you had the energy to manipulate gravity!”

“They teach plenty of sciences,” said Cole. “One gets an entirely balanced curriculum. The real focus is learning to master one's gift, as well as how to use it in a proper and ethical manner.”

“You must have missed a lesson then,” Thomas smiled. “Really, Cole, our age is one of rational thinking and scientific discovery. If you applied basic scientific processes to the Weave, well, just think of the possibilities! If magic was to be studied, dissected, and put to work, all of mankind would benefit!”

“Put to work in the same fashion as the factory-men?” Cole snorted. “I've seen what happens when magic is put to work. Go down to the factories, see for yourself. Achland has certainly put Spellweavers to work, and they are all non-human. The fairy-people of Ketlic, elves like Armel here, any Weaver unlucky enough to be born non-human and in poverty is sent away to die in a factory. Don't talk to me about analyzing magic. The world at large hates my kind, and your talk, while well intentioned, only has one logical progression, enslavement of all Spellweavers, regardless of race.”

Cole muttered a quick curse under his breath, then went back to focusing on Armel. Under Cole's guidance, Armel went through an entire series of mental training exercises designed to help him to find that nub of energy that would enable him to perform magic. Thomas also tried to follow along with Cole's lessons, thinking that maybe this time he would discover that he too had the gift. After another hour of careful instruction, Cole finally deemed Armel ready.

“You'll want to do something simple,” said Cole. “Focus on creating a small flame or a shard of ice.”

“Right,” said Armel as he closed his eyes.

“DON'T CLOSE YOUR EYES!” Cole shouted. “What if you were to create a fire-storm! You have to stay focused.” Cole took Armel's arm and pulled his hand out, palm to the ceiling. “Focus on creating a small flame, right here.” Cole tapped the centre of Armel's palm.

Armel nodded, his face red with embarrassment, and then took a deep breath. Cole grew quiet as he sat holding his pupil's hand. Thomas watched as nothing happened. Seconds passed, and still no fire materialized. Cole leaned forward, squinting at Armel's palm, but there was still nothing to see. Even though he wasn't the one working the magic, Thomas could feel his own heart pounding with anticipation. More seconds passed, while a light breeze ruffled Cole's hair. Cole released Armel's hand, began to straighten his hair, then stopped.

“Thomas,” Cole whispered. “There aren't any windows open right?”

“No,” Thomas replied, still intently watching Armel's palm. “Besides that little gust of wind blew up from the floor.” Thomas stopped. “No...it....”

“Came from my palm!” Armel shouted. He sprang up and ran around the car, hooting and hollering. Armel collapsed back into his chair, a large smile spread over his face. “I did it, and you know, for a moment there, I really could feel something as well. I could almost see the wind.”

“Good, you've taken your first step into a larger world.” Cole slumped back into his chair. “You did something at least. You didn't do it since it was to create fire, but you have at least got the basics.”

During the last two days of the trip, Armel's magical aptitude increased at an alarming rate. He went from creating small puffs of wind from his palm, to being able to create tiny localized hurricanes in the air around him. Cole continued to drill the boy, helping him to set up a series of words and phrases he would use to focus himself. Cole had wanted Armel to use the Felvian language for his Weavings, but when it turned out Armel did not know the language, Cole set out to teach him, using a
collection of books he found on a shelf in the dining car. While Armel learned his people's language, Cole sat nearby, reading some other books he had found on the shelf. Thomas found it somewhat ironic that with only a day or so left on their journey, Cole had finally found something to snap him out of his foul mood.

Just as Cole's mood had changed, so to had the scenery. Once out of the jungle, they emerged into the lower plains of Kaldry, the dry brush wavering in the breeze. The train began to pass through dozens of small villages, and as Thomas watched out the window, he saw natives, both human and Kaldrien, marching along dirt roads just off the tracks. Rickshaws, donkeys, and horse-drawn carts trundled along the roads, transporting people and ideas between the small hamlets. As they drew closer to the Kaldrien capital, the cities grew larger, changing from mud-brick shanties, to something resembling houses in the slums of Thertan. Then, Al-katal appeared on the horizon.

Built over the centuries, Al-katal was an ugly city; built from adobe and red brick, it had been wrested from the jungle in a fierce war of attrition. Like Thertan, the city was divided along economic lines, with the poorest living in slums clustered along the outer wall. The wall was built from white marble containing vibrant red and gold swirls. Once past the outer wall, the standard of life dramatically improved. Behind a second, even higher wall, the upper castes of Kaldry ruled their brethren with an iron fist, backed by the Consortium and Achland's military.

“Well now, that is impressive,” said Erik as the train passed through a tunnel running underneath the first wall. “Certainly gives Thertan a run for her money. I've heard that this city has stood for almost five hundred years. It is the seat of the Ra'kala caste’s power and certainly deserves its spot among the natural wonders of the world. You'll see what I mean when we get on the other side. The farthest part of the city is completely unoccupied. It’s all made from the same marble as the walls and serves as a massive mausoleum for the entire country. The pictures alone are breathtaking.”

“It's not the original capital of Kaldry, though,” Major Groves remarked as they emerged from the tunnel. “In fact, Kaldry is really several nations that the Ra'kala caste forged into one after the fall of the Ronic empire. It's rather amazing when you think about it. These people have been fighting each other for centuries over various spits of land and petty slights, and now it's our duty to help to sort it all out. A very noble calling if I do say so myself.”

The train glided along the tracks, quickly approaching Al-katal's Grand Terminal station. As Thomas watched, he saw almost a century of mechanical and locomotive history lumber past the window. It seemed that every train ever commissioned and still able to run was in service along the Kaldrien railway. He saw locomotives with rusted smokestacks and rickety wheels, chugging along next to gleaming behemoths that could haul seventy or more cars at a time. The station put them all to shame. Looking like a massive overturned bowl, the station was an architectural marvel and one of the largest domes ever built, but what elevated it to legendary status was the ceiling.

As soon as the train passed inside of the dome, Thomas craned his neck back, staring at the beautiful hand painted ceiling. The station had originally been a place of worship, held sacred by one of the lower castes; then, Ra'kala had adopted it for their own purposes. Even though they did not share the same religious beliefs, the Ra'kala had allowed the jewel coloured frescoes to remain. There were monsters and gods, drawn with such skill and painted in such bright colours on that ceiling Thomas thought they might come alive.

Soon, the train began to slowdown and ease into the station. Through the steam, Thomas could see that the platform was covered with people awaiting their arrival. He spotted several soldiers in full military dress, as well as several Kaldrien men dressed in bright silk finery and multicoloured turbines. The Ra'kala waiting on the platform were an eclectic mix of humans and kelves, with the humans slightly outnumbered. Standing apart from all of them was a woman, her bright red hair contrasting the dark green of her uniform. Whoever she was, she was obviously someone important. Dark Green was
the colour used to distinguish the highest ranks of Achland's military, both those who served in combat and in logistical support roles.

“Ahh, I see they have rolled out the welcoming party,” said Cole, as the train hissed to a stop. “Very well.”

The doors to the officers’ dining car were opened by a pair of kelvish men wearing crimson sashes and bright blue fezzes. The group of dignitaries stepped forward and began to greet the new arrivals. Cole bounced forward, eagerly shaking hands with the host of military commanders and Kaldrien nobility. As they mingled, Thomas noticed that the woman had not joined in welcoming them; instead, she remained aloof, standing farther down the platform. Slowly, the other soldiers began to unload, grabbing their bags and forming into tight ranks on the platform. Erik, dressed in his military whites, with accompanying pith helmet and monocle, marched down the rows, correcting soldiers’ posture with a quick crack of his short handled commander's crop, though he never actually struck any of the men.

“Interesting to see a woman as a logistics officer,” Whispered Cole. The two men fell into line, and Thomas smoothed his coat, watching as the woman began to walk down along the platform, eyeing the troops. “I guess Captain Miller will be replacing her. I must say it is entirely unorthodox to see a woman anywhere in the military.”

“It is good to see all of you,” exclaimed the woman, her voice ringing out over the noise of the station. “I am Colonel Fiona Walsh and together we shall ensure the safety of our great empire.”
Chapter 14

Cole stood on the platform watching as Colonel Walsh paced back and forth lecturing the assembled troops. Whoever this woman was she wasn't the Colonel Walsh Cole knew. Logan Walsh had been a graduate of Piers Military Academy. A large burly man with flaming red hair he had spent the years immediately following his graduation off hunting in darkest Ethenia. During one of the hunts his face had been maimed by a Cape-Buffalo. The beast had charged young him, trampling him and dragging him along for several yards before Logan it stabbed in the eye. After that Logan enlisted and soon rose through the ranks, quickly gaining a reputation as a ruthless, but efficient commander.

“I know some of you will not be serving in combat roles, that is fine,” said Fiona. “Your contribution is still valued.”

Cole had met Logan once, but never knew that he had a daughter. Fiona had his auburn hair and his height and from the way her uniform fit Cole deduced she must be extremely well toned and in terrific shape. Fiona had a large prominent jaw, and a very hard, but not unattractive face. Even though Fiona appeared to be several years older than he, Cole still found her rather attractive. Still, she was someone Cole felt it would be better not to anger.

“Now then, those companies that will be seeing active combat will be lodged in several barracks buildings throughout the city,” Fiona continued. At this point Cole was wondering if the Colonel would ever stop talking, she had gone on for a good ten minutes now. “I know you are tired from your journey so front line service will be delayed for several days.” A series of whispers ran through the crowd.

“Yes, I said front line service. Several hotspots have emerged in the last seventy-two hours and we have had to scramble our forces in order to deal with them. Company dismissed.”

The troops Cole had arrived with formed into tight ranks and marched along the platform leaving the officer core alone with the Ra'kala dignitaries and Fiona. The kelvish skin tone ran the gamut of colours. Some of them were pale, but not entirely white, others were swarthy, and some were as dark as the slaves taken from Ethenia. All had pointed, elf like ears, and very pale irises, commonly blue or silver, though they could really be any normal eye colour, even ranging into tarnished gold.

Meanwhile the humans tended to have lighted skin tones, but were still dark. All the Ra'kala wore almost identical outfits, long sleeved silk shirts and trousers, with brightly coloured sashes. Cole saw that each wore a different colour, most likely denoting clan or family, with the human members of the Ra'kala caste wearing a slightly thinner sash and acting somewhat subservient to the kelves. Their turbines were equally garish, bedecked with gemstones and peacock feathers. Most wore a full beard, either braided in some ridiculous fashion or hung with beads and other finery.

_Humans bowing to non-humans, now I've seen everything_, thought Cole.

“We are very pleased to have you,” said one of the younger kelves, stroking his comparatively small beard. “I am Satesh, son of the High Vinish Essar Al-Ethat, lord of the eastern provinces. My father would have been here to greet you himself, but his health is not what it once was. Welcome to our city.”

“It is a lovely city.” Erik dropped into a bow. “We humbly beseech your grace to allow our troops lodging and allow us to fight beside you on the plains of glory.”

“I accept your oaths.” Satesh signalled for Erik to rise. “But it is my father you truly need to pledge yourself to, I am but a humble servant. But now that the formalities are out of the way I must say your troops conducted themselves splendidly Lord Howe. The men currently stationed here could learn a good deal from them.” It was only the smallest of glances but Cole caught Satesh glaring at Fiona. The look wasn't exactly disapproving, but there did seem to be some tension in the air between the two.

“I should hope so,” said Erik. “They have been training for several months for the honour of
“Oh now enough with all the pleasantries,” purred a pale Achlish man with a curled black goatee. He wore a fine three piece black suit, with large spiked shoulder pads, and a straight cane clutched in his hands. The suit would have been garish in Thertan, but against the Ra'kala's garb it seemed perfectly normal. “We all know what a long journey you have had.”

“Ohh thank you...sir?” Erik stopped, waiting for the other man to supply his name.

“Brisbridge, Allen Brisbridge, Senior Adviser to the Consortium Administrator Daniel. He will meet us when you reach the High Vishen's palace. Things in the colony have been troubled of late and his mere presence seems to be enough to incite riots.”

“And why is that?” asked Matthew.

“The Administrator has been working with the Ra'kala for years and that sort of power breeds resentment, especially with the mongrel castes. But we should not be concerning ourselves with such dark matters yet.” Allen tapped his cane on the white marble platform. “I suggest we leave now so that you will have time to unpack and acquaint yourselves with your lodgings before the welcome festivities begin. The lower castes may not think much of Achland and her people, but the Ra'kala certainly do.”

Allen led the multiracial group on a sweeping tour of the station before they left. From what Cole saw the station seemed to serve a multitude of purposes, being both a stop for trains, a bazaar, and a home for the poor. Thousands of humans, kelves, and dwarves, crowded around the tracks, creating a vibrant, pulsing atmosphere. Of course most of these people were kept away from the new arrivals by a full regiment of armed soldiers. Cole found that rather silly. They had not come thousands of miles just to be segregated from the people they would be fighting for and alongside. Indeed Allen and Satesh seemed to be doing their best to draw eyes away from the crowds and instead turning their attention to the artistry of the station’s ceiling, which according to them required thousands of hours of work to maintain.

While they marched through the station, Cole watched hundreds of people go about their lives. The station itself really didn't look much different from any of those in Thertan. Beggars gathered in the corners, creating small shanty towns away from the guards. Vendors pushed carts laden with all manner of goods, screaming at that top of their lungs in a dozen different dialects. Cole watched a man ladle soap into bowls and then begin to distribute them to a hungry crowd, a small monkey with a tin cup followed him, collecting money from those he served, while another man played upon a wood flute, charming a glimmering black cobra out of a woven basket. But what really resonated with Cole were the smells.

After being cooped up on a train for close to two weeks, Cole had grown all too familiar with the various smells of the cars; the mothballs, leather, and the musty smell of men crammed together for long lengths of time. In comparison the station practically roiled with smells. The scent of roasting meat wafted through the air, threatening to edge out the noxious fumes from the trains and the malodorous stench of the unwashed and homeless masses. The loamy smell of the jungle flitted through the air, blown in by the late afternoon breeze. Lingering just on the edge of all these scents was the fetid smell of human waste.

The party passed through a grand arch, and stepped into the blinding sunlight. For a moment Cole's senses were overwhelmed. The scents and sounds of the station mingled with those of the city proper, made all the stronger because Cole could not see. The noise in the station had been oppressive, but here, outside, the sound turned into a pulsing heartbeat. While Thertan was alive with the sound of engines and the stench of industry, Al-katal was alive with people, animals, and life. Money changers and vendors screamed at the crowds, while rattling carts rumbled by hauled by braying donkeys and trumpeting elephants, and under all the noise the gentle sonorous chanting of the pious assembly for the
first afternoon prayer.

Cole blinked several times, before he slipped on his tinted lenses. The bazaar that had started in the station had spilled out into the streets, turning into a market that sprawled out in all directions. Every stall boasted a different selection of goods; brightly dyed rugs, woven in intricate patterns, hung alongside meats curing under the sun, while gleaming copper pots lay along the ground. The crowds split, allowing a herd of elephants bearing latticework litters, howdahs, upon their backs to trundle pass.

Cole drew in a deep breath. “Ahh now this is a city! Teeming with life...and gorgeous foreign women just waiting to be uplifted by our great society.”

Thomas scoffed. “Cole I don't think they are...”

“Nonsense,” Cole waved him off, watching as the herd of elephants turned towards them.

“Have you not read Lord Huntington's journals of his time in the Eastern Colonies? The native woman were falling over each other in pursuit of him.”

“With your looks you could have all the women in the entire country coming after you,” said Satesh, who now that Cole got a better look, was actually very young, perhaps even younger than Cole himself.

“Please don't get him started,” said Thomas. The elephants stopped in front of the group and a their riders jumped down to help the new arrivals up into the howdahs. “His head is already swelled enough, if it gets any bigger his neck won't be able to support its weight.”

Satesh laughed in a high falsetto that set Cole's teeth on edge. “You are very funny, sir.” Cole hoisted himself into one of the litters, followed by Armel, Thomas, and Satesh. “Regardless, Mr. Travers if you ever find yourself having trouble in your feminine pursuits you must come and visit my father's palace. My harem girls are some of the most beautiful and nubile in all of Kaldry and would be happy to...receive you.”

“Errr, thanks,” said Cole, not entirely sure on how to respond to such a proposition, especially since he considered the pursuit to be the most engaging part of any romantic encounter. The elephant's rider remounted, settling into a saddle on the beasts neck. The rider then picked up a pair of curved metal hooks, and jigged the animal into motion, using the hooks to steer.

“No thanks are necessary you are our guests, it is only proper I offer you the hospitality of my house,” replied Satesh. As he spoke Cole noticed that Satesh had a series of bright beads sewn into his beard that bobbed up and down as he spoke. The effect was actually rather distracting and Cole found the best solution was to just not look at the man's mouth when he talked. “So what do you think of our capital? Does it match the splendours of Thertan?”

“Ehh not really,” said Cole as he lounged back on the plump pillows, watching the crowds with a steady eye. Kaldrien fashion was very strange, bright and casual, a stark contrast to the conservative fashions of Achland. The men were baggy trousers, bright vests, and a variety of turbans. The women were even more diverse; some veiled or hooded in dark colours, others wearing strips of cloth that left nothing to the imagination. “At least the air is somewhat cleaner.”

Cole massaged his temple. The headache he had been suffering since crossing into Kaldry had returned with sudden fury. It was an odd feeling and Cole could not determine what was causing it. In fact it almost felt as though there was some magical pressure in the air causing his head to hurt.

Satesh laughed again as the herd of elephants marched along, passing through the wide, crowded streets. The wonder that Cole had felt upon exiting the station had faded quickly, replaced by something resembling apathy. The city really wasn't that different from Thertan, with slums holding the poor at bay, while the rich hid themselves away behind high walls. Indeed even the streets were similar, with wide avenues, open squares, and narrow, labyrinthine alley's connecting them together like blood vessels. Balconies and oriel's hung out over the streets almost kissing when the streets narrowed. As
they travelled through the city, Cole caught crowds stopping to stare at them. They were not hostile, but still Cole felt as though something was wrong. There was a nervous energy in the air, something he could not quite place.

“My father is responsible for the air quality,” Satesh explained. “He has staunchly opposed any action that would lead to our country becoming, how do you say...industrialized, like your Achland has. Personally I think he is a great fool to turn away such power. We could bring great change to Kaldry, we could revolutionize the entire country.”

_Bloody git,_ thought Cole. Satesh and Thomas began to talk, ignoring him completely. _Course he is a sub-human, so he can’t be expected to function on the same intellectual level. He is just like all the rest back in Achland though, ready to destroy the world and enslave people for profit. Why must my genius suffer these fools?_

Thomas and Satesh began to talk in hushed tones, ignoring Cole. The column of elephants continued up the street, passing through several bazaars. Some of the crowds parted for them, while others had to be forced out of the way by armed Consortium soldiers. The mercenaries were brutal, and Cole watched as one of them struck a kelvish man with the butt of his rifle, leaving the man bleeding in the street. Shouts of, “down with the oppressors” mingled with cries for food, and the crowd surged forward towards the elephants.

“Deal with them!” Satesh shouted. Kaldrien and Consortium soldiers fanned out, beating back the angry crowd. Cole baulked at the brutality of the soldiers. The stories about Achlish rule in had been troubling, but he had never guessed how true they had been. “I am sorry you had to witness that,” Satesh muttered once the crowd had been beaten back. “The lower castes can be rather bothersome.”

“Are there concerns legitimate?” Cole inquired.

“Come now Mr. Travers, all lesser people always complain about the same things,” Satesh sniffed. “Taxes are too high, famine ravages the land, the upper castes only work to further their own cause, it’s always the same. We do our best to appease them, but the truth is the lower castes will always be a problem, their unruly nature is of course the reason your Assembly is replacing the Consortium. A fool hardy notion. The Consortium is what has allowed the Ra'kala to maintain their power. Replacing them will severely cripple our ability to maintain order.”

“Yes, very foolish,” said Cole.

The elephant's passed through the thirty foot wall that separated outer Al-katal from inner Al-katal, and Cole noticed a sudden change. The slums had vanished as had the crowds and now they had entered into a world far removed from that outside. Buildings on this side of the wall were spaced far apart, with native jungle plants filling in the remaining space. So removed from the slums was this new district that Cole felt as though he had entered some strange facsimile of reality. Even the sound of the rest of the city was dampened by the thick stone walls and the soft sound of flowing water.

“Industry might be good for Kaldry,” said Thomas. “Think of how many lives would be improved by bringing an Achlish style of living to Kaldry. Our medicine and our learning would benefit many. We have been leeching this country of its textiles for a long time, if they were to build their own industry Kaldry might one day rise up as an ally, instead of a colony.”

“I say sir, you have a fantastic mind! What was your name again?”

“Thomas, Thomas Atkin.” The two men shook hands briefly. “I for one would also be interested to see what sorts of scientific and mechanical knowledge your people could bring to the field. For to long has Achland ignored the advances of other peoples, especially when together we can further expand our collective knowledge.”

Cole rolled his eyes and tuned the men out as they launched into a discussion of various topics he had no interest in discussing. Even if he had paid attention Cole knew he would have not understood anything anyway. Cole instead spent his time attempting to place the various architectural styles he saw
represented in this portion of the city. Kaldry, was a nation forged from conflict and each successive
conqueror had left their own distinct mark through architecture. Here and there amongst the more
modern styles Cole could see old Ronen buildings, mixed in with styles resembling the domes and
arches of the Dwarlkeneen. While the outer city was an amalgamation of mud, brick, and stone, all
lumped together to form a sprawling metropolis, this portion was a study in architectural history, so
clear and definable breaks between the centuries and the people's who built them.

As the herd rounded a particularly splendid double domed mansion Satesh sat up, “and here is
the jewel of the city, my father's palace!”

The palace was indeed grand, mixing red brick and marble to highlight the perfectly
symmetrical building. The palace was perfectly square, with a towering pillar at each corner, and built
on a low hill, overlooking a series of rectangular reflecting pools. The pools were spaced in such a
manner as to reflect the palace's intricately carved architecture. *I guess looking down on your subjects
is a thing among royalty,* thought Cole as they began to mount the hill, before the elephants turned to
the right, heading down a short drive and away from the palace.

“We would host you in the palace,” Satesh explained. “But the Consortium preferred you stay in
lodgings they had appointed. They have a modest set of bungalows just off the palace grounds, as well
as a larger command building within their compound. You will be staying there, but are welcome to
visit at any time. I have collected a good deal of mechanical contraptions from old Ronen sites that
might interest you Thomas.”

“Are there lots of Ronen ruins here?” Asked Cole as the Consortium compound came into view.
“Ohh there are a fair amount,” Satesh replied. “Like Achland was once ruled by the Ronens. We
did not rebel in the same manner as your people. Indeed, after the empire's collapse, a good deal of the
Ronic people joined with us and the human population integrated with our own, forming what could be
considered the first kingdom here in Kaldry.”

The Consortium compound was a loose collection of buildings spread out over an acre of clear
land. The buildings blended Achland's penchant for sharp, perfect angles, with the rounded style
preferred by Kaldrien builders. The result was buildings that did not look like either culture and were in
fact rather more pleasing to the eye than the traditionally hard and reserved Achlish style. Cole also saw
that the bungalows, as Satesh had called them, were really modified garden mansions, with tall open air
windows allowing the owner to step directly out onto the veranda. While most of vegetation in the
inner city was wild and free, the plants around the Consortium compound were planted in straight rows,
perfectly manicured and featured plenty of non-native species, including flowering rosebushes.

The Achlanders disembarked, while kelvish porters swept forward to take their luggage. The
Ra'kala said their farewells and the elephants moved off, taking each ruler to his own estate. Allen
rapped his cane against the ground several times as the porters took the bags away.

“Now I know several of you may be wondering why you are staying here, instead of in the
military compound in the main city,” said Allen as they marched down the broad, cobblestone avenue
that led into the compound. “You can relocate if you wish, but time has shown that most in your
position would rather remain here, instead of bunking with the troops, especially with how primitive
active deployment can be here. Even so Colonel Walsh and several of her command staff prefer to keep
residences in both places.”

“I find that service men respect their commanders more if said commanders are willing to
endure the same hardships,” said Fiona as she saluted a group of soldiers marching in the opposite
direction.

“Yes well its still rather odd. Those three there will be yours,” said Allen as he pointed at cluster
of bungalows with his cane. “The Administrator will no doubt wish to meet with all of you soon, but he
also understands that you have had a rather long journey. Take as much time as you need and then we
shall reconvene in the courtyard here when you are finished. Satesh and the other Ra'kala have prepared a rather splendid party and none of you should miss it!”

The bungalows proved to be well furnished, with plenty of comfortable chairs, brightly lit sitting rooms, and indoor plumbing. Cole claimed a room on the west side of the middle building, since all the other views had him facing either another bungalow, the Consortium office, or the Ra'kalan palace. He lazily unpacked, taking special care to hide away Braden's pin and his notes in the dark corner of the room’s wardrobe. The room only had a single bed so Cole had instructed his porter to acquire another one for Armel.

“Well this is grand,” said Cole as he pulled open the rooms curtains. The sun hung low in the sky, inching ever closer to the high wall that surrounded them. The oddly cat like call of a peacock echoed through the gardens as Cole watched the eastern sky begin to darken. “What do you think of our hosts?”

“That one...Satesh...he was...odd.”

“I don't like him,” said Cole just as Thomas entered the room.

“Do you have a concrete reason?” Thomas asked. “Or perhaps he's connected to this whole conspiracy.”

“He could be, you never know,” said Cole as he hung up the last of his shirts. “Even if he was just to trying to be friendly.....it was weird.”

“He is a member of the royal caste and he was welcoming members of an occupying force to his nation, of course he is going to be friendly,” said Thomas. “Considering you are going to be working as an intermediary between his people, the Consortium, and the Crown, I think it best you try to get along.”

“I'll see what I can do,” said Cole. “At least he was better than Miss Military and all her talk of duty, honour, and all sorts of other stuff. Did we really need that? I mean seriously most of us know why we are here, we know what we are supposed to be doing, we don't need useless expository welcome speeches. I am just amazed a military dullard knew so many fancy words.”

“You're jealous,” said Thomas. “Fiona intimidates you and so does Satesh.”

“No they don't,” Cole replied all together too quickly. “It doesn't matter anyway, we have more important matters, specifically this party. I just can't seem to decide what I should wear. I know the Ra'kala like to think themselves to be just as cultured as we are so do you think they will wear Achlish styles or styles that conform more to their heritage?”

“Cole you know there's more to life then your wardrobe,” said Thomas as Cole began to hold up different shirts.

“Yes, I know,” said Cole as he settled on a plain white shirt. “If I am going to work with these people I need to impress them. I also have to impress the various Consortium officials. I guess a regular suit will do then. Now the real question.....red tie or blue?”

Cole finally settled on the red, feeling that it provide a nice contrast to his eyes. After dressing Cole left his room and wandered around the compound, getting a feel for the layout of the place. There really wasn't much to it. The Consortium offices were housed in a squat, ugly, two-storey building, surrounded by palm trees. There were a few other small buildings on the east side, and then the bungalows on the west. Now finished with his walk Cole saw that a small group had assembled in the courtyard and Cole decided it might be best to join them.

“Ahh Mr. Travers,” Allen called. “We were just waiting on you. May I introduce Daniel Geraldo, Consortium Administrator of the Kaldrien Colony.”

Daniel was a short man, with olive skin, brown eyes, and short curly hair. He flashed Cole a polite smile and held out his hand. “Very good to meet you Mr. Travers. Allen has told me a good deal about you.” The two men shook quickly. “You are a fascinating man if I do say and your record of
service with the military...”

“Well I am glad to know my reputation proceeds me,” Cole said venomously as he snatched his hand away. Simpering fool, at least I'm here to dispose of you, and I think I might enjoy doing so. “I hope that my experiences will prove useful during this time of change.”

“Ohh don't worry, they will,” said Allen. “Anyone with any sort of military experience is going to be valuable.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because Mr. Travers, momentous occasions such as this rarely conclude peacefully,” said Daniel. “We had hoped that the transfer of power from Consortium to the crown would be easy, now though it appears we were wrong. Not only will I be stepping down, but it seems Essar, the High Raj, has taken ill again. He has been a great ally to Achland and this is not the first time he has taken ill. There is dissent among the people. The common people love Essar, so his illness is troubling, especially since he has been able to keep the castes more or less at peace.”

Together the two Consortium members, the military elite, Cole, Thomas, and Armel began to walk down the pathway leading away from the compound and towards the palace. By now the sun had almost fully set, though Cole could still see fairly well. In the distance the Palace glimmered like a gem, illuminated by several bright spot lights.

“Daniel why do you lay these concerns on our guests tonight,” said Allen as he flung his arms out. In the fading day light Cole saw a glint of silver nestled deep within the other man's coat. Allen caught Cole looking at him and flashed him a quick smile. “Tonight is a night for us to relax and forget our worries until the morning. Tonight is a night to celebrate the expansion of our empire.”
Chapter 15

The river rock pathway leading to the high Vishen's palace was illuminated by a series of floating orbs that slowly changed colours, cycling through the spectrum from red to blue. Cole found the effect to be rather tacky, but he could not fault his hosts for trying.

“Those orbs are magic right?” asked Armel. The boy had dressed in a fine black linen shirt and slacks, which perfectly complemented his shimmering, pupil-less emerald eyes. Cole had left the Consortium party far behind, walking quickly so he would not be bothered by them.

“Of course they are,” Cole replied. “The Kaldriens are not capable of producing such a wonder in any other way. Of course they would have to have human natives perform the weaving.”

It was a well documented fact that kelvish Spellweavers were weak, especially when compared to their elven relatives. Most struggled to match the prowess of Achland's junior mages. Extensive studies by some of Achland's most learned scholars had been unable to determine an exact cause for the phenomena. Their work showed that in theory all peoples, be they human, elven, dwarven, Vitzen, or any other, should be able to weave magic, but they had eventually concluded that some sub-races were just inferior. Some had said they found the entire thing to be in rather poor taste, especially in the terminology it used to describe non-whites and non-humans, but most Achlanders had just taken it as confirmation of their own racial superiority.

“But, how do they accomplish it? I can feel the active effect, but wouldn't it be tiring for someone constantly control it? Wouldn't you have to focus to keep it going?”

“Not entirely,” said Cole. They passed a group of humans and kelves. Cole looked back and saw that their cheeks were decorated with brightly inked diamond tattoos, marking them as Ra'silre, a religious sub-caste of the Ra'kala. “It's a complex process and it involves practices I would rather not teach you yet. In the simplest of terms, it is possible to imbue an object with a magical charge that slowly decays over time. This skill is what allowed Achland to reduce the size of its steam engines. We used this imbuing to create a heat source that could easily replace the main bulk of a steam engine. A Weaver creates a small flame that will burn for a predetermined amount of time. We can then use it as a power source or as a light.”

“Oh, come on Cole you're going to confuse the poor kid,” said Thomas.

“Which is why I said I didn't want to teach him the technique yet,” Cole replied, somewhat perturbed with Thomas' continued interruptions.

“Your compassion is commendable,” Thomas remarked. They passed under an ornately carved, free standing marble arch and Armel glanced back to stare at the craftsmanship. “Personally I am just surprised you know so much about the machinery we use.”

“I know plenty.”

“Riiiight, tell me what is the driving force behind the new electrical current theory?”

“Uhh...magnets?”

Thomas let out a heavy sigh. “An electrical current will seek the path of least resistance and so we need to create a pathway that is conducive to...”

“Science talk, don't care,” Cole replied, cutting his friend off mid-sentence.

They passed under several other archways as they walked along. They all shared the same base, with legs carved in the shape of a typical tiered Kaldrien temple. The arches began to diversify the higher up the column one looked, with each taking on a different theme. One was decorated with animals and plants, while another showed armed warriors engaged in a pitched battle. Upon a third was a pair of skeletons so perfectly carved Cole could have sworn they were real. Niches in the very centre of the arches housed a series of humanoid figures. Each sat cross-legged, clutching a small glowing orb. Some had animal heads, or body parts, while others sported multiple arms or legs.
“Are those supposed to be kings?” Armel asked as they passed under the last arch. The figure seated in the niche was almost entirely human, save for the reptilian head and the finely carved scales that covered it's body.

“No, they are gods,” said a kelvish man Cole had not seen approach. He was middle aged, dressed in a fine Achlish suit and violet sash that Cole remembered seeing mixed in with the others at the station. A boy Cole assumed to be the man's son walked beside him. Both were brown skinned, though fairer than most kelves. “Each depicts a separate god and their various domains.”

“Interesting,” said Cole. “From my studies I had been led to believe depicting the gods in any fashion was a taboo.”

“It is, these reliefs are merely carved in the image of their avatars, individuals whose Veth reached a such point of enlightenment they came to literally embody their chosen deity. Ahh, where are my manners!? I am Mohan, and this is my son, Mohar.”

“A pleasure,” said Thomas. Everyone introduced themselves, though Cole caught Mohar glaring at Armel. The two boys appeared to be around the same age, though Mohar may have been slightly older.

“No, no, the pleasure is all mine,” said Mohan as he inclined his head to Thomas. “For almost a century Achland has been a friend to the Ra'kala. Your intervention prevented Felviar from oppressing us after we had won our freedom three centuries prior and you have also contributed greatly to the Ra'kala's continued power. Ahh and now who is this?! Mohan held his hand out to another Ra'kala lord. This man was older, kelvish, and dressed in a woven shirt and black turbine. His sash was a bright jewel green and his silvery beard was hung with several small feathers. “Bhaskar my friend, how are you?”

“Good,” replied the other kelf. Mohan pulled Bhaskar into a tight embrace and the older man patted him on the back. “This must be the ambassador, a pleasure to meet you.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Cole replied as he inclined his head to Bhaskar instead of shaking the man's hand.

By now, they were close enough to the palace that Cole could hear both music and the chatter of the guests. Cole recognized the music as Lerwit's Fifth Waltz, though instead of being played on more traditional instruments, it was being played with Kaldrien drums, sitars, and horns. A pair of wide doors was flung open and in the light Cole could see a line of people waiting to be admitted. They joined the queue, though Cole noticed that Mohan positioned himself and Mohar so they would enter the party ahead of the Achlanders he so admired. Bhaskar seemed to disapprove of Mohan's actions towards Cole, but the elder Ra'kala said nothing.

“Vishen of the Southern Province, Mohan Xardesh,” called the herald in a high crisp voice as he pounded his heavy staff on the floor. The man moved his entire body, turning the announcement into a full theatrical performance. “Accompanied by his son, Mohar.”

“What title should I use?” Cole asked himself more than anyone.

“Does it matter?” Thomas hissed, before leaning into converse with the herald. The man announced Thomas as High Engineer of the Fraternity and Consult to the Achland Military before turning to Cole. “Ambassador Cole Travers, heir to the lands of Castle Edmartin,” Cole told the man. “Accompanied by his apprentice Armel...Na...Fe...Fau...Fauchere.”

As the herald announced their titles Mohan turned around. “Your apprentice, this boy....he is a Fauchere?”

“Of course,” Cole lied.

“Hmph,” Mohan sniffed. “I had been led to believe that the royal bloodlines had all been extinguished during the Felvian Revolution.”

“He was taken as a ward during the Incursion,” Cole explained, keeping the details simple so he
would remember them later. “Turns out several of the nobility had allied with the common folk who had displaced them, they rose up during the Incursion. If that had not happened, well Achland would have lost. The nobles all died, but several defected, coming over to join Achland. Armel is a good lad, loyal to Achland and ready to serve his Queen and Crown.” Mohan smiled. Cole's story was not entirely untrue, there had been a civil war in Felviar at the time of the Incursion, though it had been Achland that started it, thanks to the efforts of Cole and Benedict.

“Vishen of the Northern Province, Bhaskar El'urun,” called the crier. Bhaskar nodded to the man, whispered something in his ear, and then followed the others in.

Cole stepped over the threshold and onto a balcony overlooking a biologically diverse botanical garden, dug into the ground. The palace radiated splendour that made Cole somewhat uneasy. Both the walls and the marble pillars were covered in delicate gilded gold, patterned to look like vines. The chandeliers that hung from the ceiling were bedecked with what appeared to be diamonds, as opposed to the more common glass. The opulence on display clashed violently against the traditional Achland philosophy of decoration that exemplified both form and function, a style that had become rather prevalent in the current age.

The crowd was more racially mixed than Cole had expected. He would have thought that there would be more Kaldrien natives in attendance, but he in fact saw that the crowd was an almost even mix of lighter skinned Achlanders and their native human and non-human hosts. Cole actually recognized a handful of the Achlish guests, most of whom where either minor lords, or influential Consortium members.

“Cole!” Exclaimed Amelia, Countess of North Haverton. The plump woman dripped with pearls, including a necklace wound so tightly around her neck Cole thought it might burst at any moment. She waddled over, on hand clutching a goblet covered in lipstick. “I thought I head the Herald announce you, but I couldn't be sure. It is lovely to see you child.”

“Wonderful to see you as well,” said Cole, as he began to search for an escape route. “Are you really here as an ambassador?” Amelia asked. “Because if so I have several people you just must meet, my daughter Emma among them. Oh hello Thomas.”

“Countess,” said Thomas with a curt nod.

There was a moment of tense silence between the two. While Thomas had a good deal of influence in Achland, especially because of his profession, he had never been a wealthy man, a fact that caused a small amount of tension between Thomas and Cole's noble peers. Such an upending of the social status was something they were not prepared to cope with. Cole found the entire issue laughable and would more often than not use Thomas to annoy people he did not like. Cole found it hilarious how prickly the rich could become when confronted with a man who had power but little wealth.

“Yes, I am working as an Ambassador,” said Cole, doing his best to sound both tired and distracted. He stood on tiptoe, eyes sweeping over the crowd. He spotted Erik and several other military men meeting with a group of Ra'kala on the far balcony. “It's a thankless job...and requires a good deal of consultation with my superiors. I have to go and...”

“Nonsense,” Amelia exclaimed. “You all only arrived this morning. I watched the procession from my apartments. Why they insisted on loading you onto those smelly pachyderms, I will never understand. Now then where is that girl...EMMA!!”

“I believe its called local flavour,” said Cole. “We have to get acquainted with the local customs after all.”

“Ohh poppycock. I've been here for close to a year now and not once have I ever had to do such a thing. My driver takes me everywhere.” Thomas flashed Cole a sympathetic smile before slipping off into the crowd. Cole moved to follow him but Emma grabbed his shoulder, her finger nails digging into his flesh like the talons of a hawk. “Now speaking of getting acquainted there is someone you just have
to meet, oh wait look who it is! Father Bently! Over here!”

Father Bently was a tall man, with a jiggly double chin, and a pot belly. The robes he wore rivalled even the palace walls in sheer ridiculousness. They were green, or might have been. The robes were embroidered with so much golden thread that Cole could not be sure it they cloth, or actually gold with cloth accents.

“Ahh, is this our ambassador then?” Father Bently asked. An aura of lavender perfume hung around the priest like a cloud and Cole had to fight his gag reflex. “Daniel told me that the Crown had appointed someone, but he was not entirely sure who.”

“This is Cole Travers,” said Amelia, obviously pleased that she was introducing the two. Her vice like grip dug into Cole's shoulder, preventing his escape.

“Personally I am glad the Crown is finally taking an interest in Kaldry,” said Father Bently. “Daniel is a wonderfully devout man, but he does not understand the real situation. He only sees this colony in terms of profit, instead of people. There are so many souls here that must be saved. It is distressing walking down the streets and seeing souls who have not yet received the lord's light. Cole, if it is not too great an imposition, might you bring up this wholly distressing matter when you begin discussing how plans for Kaldry's future.”

“I am not entirely sure I will be able to,” said Cole. Just wait till this fool learns I can weave magic, then he won't be so friendly. “I have not truly discussed the details of my appointment yet, so I do not know how much weight my word will carry. I believe my real role is more to facilitate a smooth transfer of power between Consortium rule and that of the Lord-Protector, then to lobby for any sort of missionary work.”

“Ahh, I see,” said the priest. “Well when you have a better grasp upon your role please let me know. I have been able to make a good amount of headway with some of the Ra'kala, but turning them from the devil worship of their ancestors is trying at times.”

“Oh, now that is hardly fair,” said Satesh as he slid through the crowd. “My people do not worships devils!”

“Ahh, Satesh,” Father Bently pulled Satesh into a tight hug. “This man here is an excellent example of the power of faith. He has embraced the true lord and turned from the darkness of false idols and...”

“I merely had my eyes opened, it was nothing as dramatic as you make it out to be, Father,” said Satesh. “Now if only the lower castes could receive the same gifts I have, then we could make some headway.”

“Ohh, the stories I have heard,” said Amelia. “Do they truly practice human sacrifice?”

“Some do no doubt,” said Satesh. “With the proper spirit I believe we can turn them away from such barbaric practices, just as the Ronics turned the higher castes. We did not adapt all their religious practices, but because of their intervention the religious practices of the civilized castes transcended such things.”

“Isn't this just a lovely party,” said Amelia, ignoring Satesh explanation of the religious practices of Kaldry. Cole had only a passing knowledge of the religious dogma of Kaldry, though he did know the core religion was the same, but fragmented into at least four separate belief systems, with some even dictating caste. In the distance the herald shouted the arrival of another guest. “So many exciting people to meet. My word did you hear who was just announced?!”

Cole turned to see a young girl of perhaps fifteen, step into the room. She was dressed in a very frilly periwinkle gown, that could easily have weighed twenty pounds or more. If the girl noticed the weight, she didn't show it, moving with grace and poise only someone born and trained for such events could master. A tall man, looking something like a lion with his thick blond beard and rather flat nose, followed close behind. Armel was staring at the girl, utterly entranced at the sight of the light playing
off her alabaster skin.

“Who is that?” Armel asked, positively breathless.

“That...that is Princess Helen,” Cole stammered, doing his best to maintain his composure.

“Third in line to the crown....and now she's here....in Kaldry. Why do I get the distinct feeling I should have been told about this a long time ago?”

“How did you not know?” Asked Amelia. “It was all over the papers several months ago. She is here as a show of good faith between Achland and Kaldry. rumour has it she is really here to marry one of the younger Ra'kala princes. Though that may just be idle chatter. The young man seems rather taken with her.”

“I...uh...” Armel stuttered. Cole smiled, he remembered well the fury of first love.

“We must introduce you!” Amelia cried. She released Cole and sunk her claws into Armel. “I would much rather see our princess marry someone of royal elven blood, than one of these savages! But wait, first Cole, here is my daughter Emma!” Amelia shoved the girl towards Cole and then dragged Armel off.

No doubt you would rather she marry your grandson before an elf, thought Cole as he used the momentary distraction of Emma's arrival to slip away from Father Bently. The man positively glowed with religious fervour and Cole thought it best to avoid him before he delivered the no doubt inevitable tirade against magic and those that practiced it. Emma was pretty, with thick eyelashes, large breasts, and shapely hips.

“I am glad to make your acquaintance,” said Cole, bending to kiss Emma's hand.

“Mutual I'm sure,” Emma replied, her voice squeaky, like nails being drawn down a chalk board.

The band Cole had heard earlier had broken into a lively native number and he saw that a makeshift patio had been erected on the far side of the garden. Cole pointed towards the dance floor and Emma smiled. Cole wrapped an arm around her waist and the two set out, chatting amicably. Emma turned out to be rather dull and her voice was very annoying, still he would put up with her if he must.

“Well, this is a fun party,” Armel muttered, appearing at Cole's right.

“Things pear-shaped already?” Asked Cole, as the trio skirted the patio, his arm slowly massaging Emma's back. The girl giggled and Cole rolled his eyes. “You must excuse me for a moment my dear, my apprentice needs me.”

“I never even got close to here,” Armel explained once Cole had disentangled himself from Emma. “Mohan was...”

“Oh piss on him,” said Cole. “Better yet set his hair on fire.”

“Isn't that exactly what you told me not to do?”

“When pursuing love you are allowed to use any weapons at your disposal,” Cole replied.

“Besides, it would be nice to see Mohan taken down several notches.”

“Cole...what did he mean when he said the royal bloodline was dead, just what was the name you used to introduce me?”

“I simply used a name common among the Felviar Nobility,” Cole whispered back, not wanting Emma to hear. He needn't have bothered, Emma had wondered off, lost in her own private little world. “You look like you could belong to one of those blood lines, so it was a simple lie. If you learn nothing else, remember this, if you can give the impression of power, do so.”

The party continued on for several more hours. Cole and Emma danced for a time, thought it soon became clear that the only way to get her to stop talking would be to kill her. Cole broke away once the band stopped playing and struck out on his own. He spotted Thomas several times throughout the evening, but he was always deeply engaged in conversation with Satesh. Dejected Cole decided the
best course of action would be to raid the banquet table. Of course he could set about ravishing Emma, but Cole didn't feel particularly aroused at the moment.

The banquet table was well appointed, with the most prevalent dishes being rice, drizzled with various curries, and served with meat. Cole also saw many seafood dishes, including something he thought may have been shark. Kaldrien cuisine had a reputation for being somewhat outlandish, including things such as monkey brains and live snakes, but the spread appeared normal enough, and Cole loaded his plate with a little of everything, before grabbing a cup of sweet red wine. Cole took his plated and ducked into the shadows, taking special care to avoid Emma's line of sight.

Meanwhile, Armel had found himself at Helen's table. The boy had seated himself at the princess's left, while Mohar was at her right. Both boys appeared to be competing for her attention. Armel appeared to be losing, so Cole caught his eye and flashed the boy a quick, reassuring smile. Cole found a table far removed from the rest of the party and settled down to eat.

At first Cole thought he was alone, but he saw that an old kelvish man, his dark skin so wrinkled it looked like aged leather, was sitting at the table to his right. The man's purple sash and turbine implied that the man was one of the Ra'kala caste, so Cole found it rather odd the he was not mingling with the other guests.

"I find it interesting that a man as finely dressed as you would sit here in the shadows," said the old man. "Especially when he is supposed to be mingling with my peers."

"Funny people your peers," said Cole. "I found that they have already formulated their own opinions of Achland. Most of them seem ambivalent enough, as long as we help them retain their power I think they will help us."

"Which is no doubt my fault," said the man. "You know I had the opportunity to break your country's hold over us. During the rebellions I could have easily expelled your people and made peace with the other castes."

"But you didn't," said Cole. "Achland was to valuable an ally to lose."

"You see more than most Mr. Travers," said Essar, the High Vishen of Al-katal. For a man rumoured to be on his death bed, Essar looked remarkably healthy, though Cole did note that the skin around his eyes was rather sunken. "We are very similar in that regard, both of us wearing masks to conceal past shames we cannot deal with."

"I'm nothing like you," Cole replied.

"No, you are not," Essar agreed. "You still retain some honour. I was just a boy when my father sold Kaldry to the Consortium. He was the first Vishen to support them in the Caste war. Others followed soon after, but he was the one who opened the gates to the Consortium. We accepted their assistance, but at what cost?"

"You retained control of your country," Cole pointed out.

"My father sold Kaldry to the Consortium and I have never opposed that decision," replied Essar. "Power corrupts and it is far easier to perpetuate a regime that grinds the lower castes under foot with oppressive taxes and violence."

"Things may yet change."

"Pff, do not place your faith in this Lord-Protector," Essar snapped. "Come the morning both of us will be forced to sit down with people we would rather avoid and begin discussing how exactly my kingdom will be divided. My son and many others will argue that the Consortium should retain their power and that this Lord-Protector become nothing more than a figurehead. Meanwhile, Achland would see us become the figureheads for them, which in all honesty we already are, though for the Consortium and not the government. You've gotten yourself into quite the mess Mr. Travers."

"Well then, let us hope he stays to see it through," said Daniel as he seated himself across from Essar. "Did you know that his man is a recipient of the Bronze Star of Bravery as well as the Star of
Sacrifice? He only served for..."

“Three and a half months,” said Fiona, stepping up behind Daniel just as the band resumed playing. She was dressed in proper military whites now, accented by a golden epaulettes and several medals pinned to her chest. "Still, it's a bit time more than you served, isn't it Daniel?"

“Ohh, Colonel you always cut directly to the point don't you?” Essar chuckled. “I must thank you Daniel, I knew nothing of Mr. Travers' military record. Having such a decorated gentleman serving as a liaison between myself, the Consortium, and the Achlish Crown makes me feel that this transfer of power may yet succeed.”

“Anything to help with that,” Daniel replied with a nervous grin. In that moment Cole decided he liked Essar and hoped the cantankerous old man would cling to life for a while longer.

Fiona smiled politely. “If you are done with Mr. Travers, I would very much like to speak with him.”

Cole rose, nodded to Daniel, then Essar stood and pulled Cole into a tight hug. Between the force of his personality and the large robes he wore, Cole had expected Essar to be a hardy man, but as he pulled Cole in close he found that the man was thin, almost skeletal. Whatever sickness Essar was battling, it was clear he was doing his best to put on a strong face for his people. Even though Essar was frail, Cole could feel strength radiating from the other man. Cole returned Essar's embrace warmly and bowed to the man, before leaving with Fiona.

“You have impeccable timing,” said Cole, as the pair threaded their way through the crowd.

“We military dullards have a way with such things,” Fiona replied in an entirely conversational manner. “When residing in a bungalow whose walls are almost non-existent Mr. Travers, it is often better to speak with propriety.”

“Is this a lesson learned from personal experience, sage wisdom, or a threat?”

“We'll leave that for you to decide,” said Fiona. She stepped onto the patio and Cole followed.

“Do you dance Mr. Travers?”

“I suppose I could make the time,” Cole replied. He didn't see Emma anywhere so that was good.

Cole took Fiona's hand in his, and placed his right hand against the small of her back. By now the band had changed songs again, shifting into a slower, more sombre piece. The dance floor was clear as most guests were off eating or gathered around tables talking with one another. Cole led Fiona in a slow, clumsy waltz-step, that only barely kept time with the music.

“You are absolutely terrible at this,” Fiona observed. Cole spun her out and then drew her back in close. “Here I was expecting better, especially after watching you earlier.”

“Ohh, you were watching me were you?” Cole smiled. “Well, you see between my looks and my charm, I found that I never really needed to add dancing skills to my repertoire. Though I notice you haven't bothered with them either.” In fact Fiona seemed to be struggling even more than Cole was and he wondered just how ridiculous they must look together, the Colonel and the ambassador, staggering about in public.

“I have lived in Kaldry for most of my life, and military service leaves little room for dancing.”

“Oh, I am very sorry to hear that,” said Cole. “You're doing well enough.”

“Are you making a pass at me?” Fiona inquired, as they twirled in place. “Because if you are it's not working. Besides, I do believe it is rather improper for a commander to become involved with one of her subordinates.”

“Ohh, so that is all I am?” Cole cocked a brow.

“No,” said Fiona. “You are someone who wants to be someone, which is why your pursuit is doomed to fail. I'm no one, just the first female Colonel the Achlish military has ever seen. You on the other hand are vain, prideful, and completely out of your depth here. A word of friendly advice, go
home before the Consortium decides they no longer need you.”

As they spun Cole saw a man in full military garb approaching. He had the rugged yet still handsome look many women desired, with short cropped hair, and dark eyes. His uniform bore the Consortium's seal, instead of the Achlish Phoenix, and there were several service metals pinned to his chest. Troubled by Fiona's “warning” Cole studied the new arrival closely, noting the pistol holstered low on the man's right thigh and the man's rather large muscles.

The Consortium soldier tapped Fiona on the shoulder, then leaned in to whisper something in her ear. Fiona released Cole's hand and stepped back. “I am afraid we must pick this conversation up another time, it seems a situation has developed that requires my urgent attention.”

Cole stood alone in the centre of the dance floor watching as she strode away, auburn hair flashing in the light. I am going to need a stiff drink after all this is done, thought Cole. The band struck up a more lively song and couples began to pour out onto the dance floor once more. In the resulting bedlam Cole saw Thomas and Satesh seated at a table with Erik and the rest of the military commanders. Cole started towards them, but soon realised there were no empty seats.

Cole stalked off the dance floor, meaning to rejoin Essar, but the old Ra'kala nobleman had vanished. Instead Cole visited the bar again, this time grabbing a goblet of wine as well as a shot of Kaldrien brandy. Cole downed the brandy in a single gulp before he flopped down into an empty chair, feeling utterly disgusted. The night was turning into a total wreck. He had hoped that he might be able to get some sort of bead on the conspirators. Cole had figured they would be just as overt as Clayton had been, but it seemed he was wrong. It was possible Allen was one of them, Cole had glimpsed some sort of pin hidden away on the man's lapel, but he could not be sure. In fact things were even more muddled than Cole would have ever suspected. Not only was there tension between the Consortium and the military, it appeared the Ra'kala were bickering as well.

Cole swirled the wine in his goblet, attempting to sort through the convoluted machinations of the various factors in play. When he looked up, he saw that Armel had successfully wooed Helen, or at least asked her to dance. The young couple danced in the centre of the patio, though it appeared Helen was leading. Cole smiled and took a sip from his glass. Whatever insanity was happening in Kaldry at least young love was flourishing, that was something worth preserving.

“Good going kid,” said Cole. He raised his glass to Armel, then promptly drained it down. “You just keep dancing...I'll go for another round.”

Cole rose from his seat with the intent of fetching a second glass, when he saw Allen and Satesh leave the party together. Satesh looked worried, like a child who knew they were being punished. Allen muttered something in Satesh's ear and the two men began to argue, though Cole could not hear them over the music. Cole moved to follow them, just as Emma reappeared, a smile spread over her rather wide face.

“Ohh, good you are free again,” she squealed. Emma grabbed Cole's hand and dragged him off in the direction of the dance floor. The girl had her mother's iron grip and Cole found himself unable to break away. “You know Mr. Travers, I've heard rumours from some of the other girls that you are a bad man. You aren't really, are you? Mother speaks very highly of you.”

“She does?” Cole was barely paying attention to the girl, instead watching as Allen grabbed Satesh by the shoulder.

The younger man flung Allen away, causing the other man's coat to flap open. Cole focused his thoughts and pulled a Weaving in around his eyes, bending the light in such a way as to magnify the pin on Allen's lapel. There, gleaming under the lights of the party, was a silver pin, its surface covered in a dull green patina. Emma continued to talk, while Allen grabbed Satesh and dragged him out of the party.

“Mother often speaks of proper matches,” said Emma. “She is always going on about it. But
maybe I don't want a proper match, maybe I just want someone handsome and daring.”

“Ohh, you have to be careful around those sorts of men,” said Cole, a plan all ready percolating in his mind. “They can lead you into all sorts of trouble.”
Chapter 16

Cole continued to dance with Emma for several minutes, but his thoughts were elsewhere. They were off following Satesh and Allen, wondering as to what the two men were discussing. They were off hoping that eavesdropping on Allen might reveal where Garret was hidden. There was also a part of Cole's mind that was back in Felviar, remembering a similar party where he had danced with an elf girl he had come to love and had lost only a few short months later.

“This party is becoming rather boring don't you think?” Cole asked, placing his hand on the small of the girl's back. The girl blushed and he leaned in closer. “Let's adjourn to somewhere more private.”

“You are a very horrid man for trying to seduce me like this” Emma planted a quick kiss on Cole's cheek. “But then again we aren't in Achland and you are very handsome.”

Cole pulled Emma into a kiss, then put a hand around the girl's waist and led her off towards the dark hallway Allen and Satesh had vanished down. Before leaving, Cole led Emma past the drink table, where he managed to convince the girl to join him in a quick shot of potent Kaldrien liquor. Cole could have used magic to cloud the girl's mind, but that would be too easy. He liked the thrill of the hunt, especially since it numbed the void left after the events in Felviar. Besides Emma's hands had already begun to roam along Cole's thigh, so he didn't think any magical persuasion would be necessary.

Slightly dizzy from the amount liquor he had already imbibed, Cole guided Emma along the hall, alert for the sound of voices. The further from the party they went, the more amorous Cole grew. He kissed Emma several times, and instead of resisting she kissed him back. In the distance Cole could hear voices and he broke away from Emma, dragging her further into the darkness.

“Why was your father at the party?” Allen growled from somewhere farther down the hall. Cole tossed Emma up against a wall and began to kiss her again. “Daniel is busy telling people he is bed ridden, yet he turns up tonight!”

“Only a few people saw him,” said Satesh. Emma wrapped her hands around Cole's back and pulled him in closer, crushing her voluminous breasts against him.

Cole was more interested in listening to the two men talk than in romancing Emma, but he went through the motions anyway. Even if he was trying to “work”, he was not going to ignore his own urges. He would never allow himself to become emotionally attached to her of course, that part of his persona had died six years ago in Felviar. As they continued to kiss, Cole slipped his hand into Emma's blouse and began to massage her breasts. He expected the girl to pull away, or perhaps slap him, but instead, Emma moaned and Cole pulled her into another kiss, hoping her vocalizations had not alerted the two men to the lovers' presence.

“He talked with the ambassador!” Allen shouted. “You were supposed to be keeping him under control!”

“Wasn't the ambassador supposed to be one of your friends?” Asked Satesh. “Considering how paranoid Daniel is becoming I would really hope he is. Sadly Mr. Travers doesn't seem to be the type you favour.” Cole drew back so he could listen clearly. “Has something gone awry on your end? I hope not considering how many of your...friends I have secreted across the border.”

“Acker was murdered,” said Allen. “Though if the papers are to be believed his murderer was also one of my...friends. Don't worry about Daniel, we both know the Crown will never really replace the Consortium. Even so do not discount his paranoia, he could very well be right. Help him if you can. Find proof that they really are trying to replace us. This needs to be kept under control.”

_Acker wasn't a friend of the warlocks,_ thought Cole, _he was murdered by them. What's happening? Have I missed something?_

Emma's hand slipped around to the front of Cole's trousers and he pushed her away. He could
not afford any distractions now, he needed to hear what the two men were discussing. From the way it sounded, Acker had been in league with the warlocks. Also, Allen wanted Daniel to be paranoid about being replaced. Cole knew that through Clayton and Tenning, the warlocks were at least partially responsible for the Lord-Protector's appointment, but he had always figured they had done so in order to rule the lower and tribal castes. Now, it appeared that Allen was working to turn Daniel against the crown.

“Seems you are having problems keeping your people under control,” said Satesh. “I have invested heavily in helping the Consortium, don't make me regret that decision. I pray my faith has not been misplaced.”

“It hasn't,” replied Allen. Cole was doing his best to pay attention to the conversation, but it was becoming increasingly difficult, especially since Emma was now dragging his hand up her thigh, and but he found it easy to resist her advances. Cole had very particular physical tastes, and Emma conformed to none of them, though she certainly was eager. “Daniel knows who his friends are. As long as the Consortium retains its power, so shall you.”

Cole forced Emma up against the wall and pulled his hand out of her blouse. The girl smiled at him, mischief in his eyes, and began to fumble with the buttons of his shirt. Cole forced her hand away and began to kiss her again. Emma cried out again, and this time Cole failed to muffle her cries.

“What was that?” Allen called out. “Who's there?”

Cole ignored him and focused on Emma, intending to at least create some sort of plausible cover. He slid his hand up the girl's thigh, mind focused on making the situation as awkward as possible. Cole sensed that Allen was already suspicious, so having the suspected warlock catch him in such a compromising situation might cause the main to reconsider and write Cole off as just a silly womanizing fool. It wouldn't be that hard, most Achlanders seemed to think that about him already.

“What's going on here?” Allen demanded.

Emma let out a cry, one part pleasure and one part shock, while Cole squeezed her breast one last time. He turned to find Allen standing a few feet away, looking rather confused. Cole smiled awkwardly and pulled his hand out of Emma's gown. Even in the darkness, he could see that Emma had gone bright red.

“Nothing...nothing,” Emma stammered, smoothing down her skirts.

“We thought no one was down here,” Cole lied. “We just had a bit to drink...it got a little hot.”

“We have provided you with a room for such things,” Allen sniffed. “Perhaps you should use it.”

Allen turned on his heel and stalked down the hall, leaving Cole standing there with Emma in his arms. Satesh stood there for a moment and Cole got the sense the man wasn't really confident in how things were playing out. Satesh nodded to Cole then set off after Allen. What was clear was that the Consortium was going to make a move of some sort, possibly in order to prevent the appointment of the Lord-Protector, but how that would benefit the warlocks Cole was not entirely sure.

Cole was still puzzled over how the warlocks fit into this at all. He had overheard them speaking about plans for Kaldry, but it hadn't been clear exactly what those plans were. It was possible they were connected to the Consortium's plot, especially since Allen was apparently one of them. Some of their actions seemed to fit with the information Cole had gleaned from the Ronic journal, especially since a war of any kind in Kaldry could very easily lead to the destabilization of the entire Achlish empire. What Cole could not figure out was what they were really after though. Achland had no shortage of enemies and there were far easier ways to destroy a nation then through such intricate subterfuge. Even if Achland did collapse, the gains would be paltry at best, since the power vacuum left by Achland's fall would undoubtedly cause Felviar and Üruush to go to war with one another.

Cole and Emma stood there together for a moment, awkwardly staring off after Allen and
Cole began to straighten his hair again.

“Yes, I believe that would be best.”

Troubled by what he had learned, Cole escorted Emma back down the hall. By now the band had begun to pack up and most of the guests had left. Cole spotted Thomas talking with Erik, while Armel sat at a table nearby. There was no sign of Helen, though that was to be expected. No doubt the princess had a curfew and was being kept under tight surveillance. What troubled Cole is why he, as an ambassador for Achland, had not been informed of her presence, in fact that was just one of many questions Cole had for Benedict.

After wishing Emma a pleasant night, Cole left the masquerade, and struck out across the grounds outside the palace, alone. Now that the sun had been down for several hours the early autumn night had grown cool and he began to shiver, wondering if he should go back for Emma. Having a warm body in bed would be nice, especially if the night would stay this cold. As he walked Cole pulled out his telethium and checked the time. If he was going to contact Benedict, he might as well be polite about it and call the man at a time convenient for those in Achland.

As Cole strode through the gardens, he got the distinct impression he was being followed but he didn't see anyone. The glowing orbs that had illuminated the walk had faded and the moon had passed behind the clouds. Shivering slightly, he summoned a globe of energy to ward off the darkness. Long shadows flashed and danced as he walked back towards the Consortium compound. He nervously spun his telethium around in his hand, lost in thought about the warlocks and their plans. He turned down another path, and the garotte descended, wrapping around his throat.

Cole gagged, and began to struggle as he was dragged up against his assailant, his summoned mote of light winking out and plunging them into darkness. The man was large, and ignored the blows and buffets Cole rained down upon him with his elbows and feet. With a grunt of effort, the assassin lifted Cole off his feet. Cole's lungs screamed for air and stars danced before his eyes. He tried to weave a spell, but he could not focus. Feet thrashing, he continued to struggled, trying to break the larger man's grip, or slip his fingers between the wire and the flesh of his throat.

Pain lanced through Cole's body, and he began to twitch as he choked to death. The strangler pulled the garotte tighter, and Cole drew in one last, gurgling breath. The man grunted again, then slumped forward. Cole struck the ground face first, crushed beneath the weight of his assailant. The assassin released the garrote, pinned Cole to the ground with his knee, and whirled about, just as a gleaming dagger ripped open his throat. Blood sprayed across the grass, and in the moon light, Cole saw Armel standing over him, dagger in hand.

“Thanks,” Cole coughed, still struggling to draw breath. “I cough would be dead now. How did you sneak up on him?”

“He was sort of distracted,” Armel replied. The assassin let out one more rasping breath, and then died, releasing his bowels in the process. “I also used a bit of magic.”

“Glad to see that paid off then.” Cole gingerly rolled the assassin over with his foot, only using his toe to avoid getting blood and waste matter on his fine shoes. He spotted a flash of silver, and bent to find a small brooch, covered in mossy green patina, pinned inside a fold of the man's robe.

On closer inspection, Cole saw that his assailant was Achlish, though his skin was ruddy and darker than most. Cole knelt down and plucked the pin off the man's cloak, noting that the garment was of Kaldrien make, rough spun, though very strong. He summoned another mote of light and inspected the pin, finding it to be an exact match for the one he had picked off Braden's body and seen pinned on Clayton's jacket.

“What are you looking at?” Asked Armel.
“This pin.” He held it out and the elf-boy leaned forward.

“Strange, I've seem something like this before.”


“In Thertan, a few days before you met me.” Armel quickly explained how he had seen a man with a red scarf removing a small pin from the corpse of one man, and planting it on the body of another. He hadn't gotten a good look at the object, but remembered the strange patina well. “I had sort of forgotten about it really. Is it important?”

“Maybe,” Cole muttered, lost in his own thoughts. Now that he thought about it, he remembered that Officer Carlow, Benedict's lapdog, had sported a red scarf. “Go find Thomas, have him come to my room.”

“What if you get attacked again?”

“Go fast.”

Armel nodded and ran off, back towards the High Vishen's palace. Cole, more troubled by the discovery of the pin then the attempt on his life, set out again, now using his magic to search for any life in the surrounding bushes. Armel's revelation that Inspector Carlow had moved the pin from the body of Major Acker to that of his assailant was a disturbing revelation, and confirmed what Satesh had insinuated earlier in the evening. Acker being part of the coven would seem to indicate that the warlocks were indeed attempting to sabotage the entire peace process. This revelation also implied that the warlocks were deeper ingrained in the Assembly than Cole had previously believed. Acker had been nominated by Sutlen, not Tenning, which mean the coven was manipulating both sides of the political spectrum.

Cole reached the Consortium compound without further incident, and headed directly for his bungalow. As he walked to his room, he could hear Mathew and Major Groves discussing battle tactics in hushed voices.

“If the city comes under siege I don't believe we can hold it,” said Matthew. “The lower castes...”

“Won't be a problem,” said Groves. “Between our military forces, the Consortium's and the Ra'kala's we can hold the inner city. But in what strange world do you see such a thing happening?”

“I think it's very likely,” replied Matthew. “The Ra'kala don't really care who holds power, as long as they keep theirs. The lower castes though? They most likely see this shift in government as the perfect opportunity to liberate themselves from their perceived overlords. Many Kaldriens resent us, even the humans. If this was going to be a simple affair the Crown wouldn't have deployed a secondary force such as ours.”

“I am still amazed the Assembly decided to appoint Duke Lowell as the Lord-Protector. He's done well enough administrating things in Southern Ethenia but he's not exactly an intimidating man,” said Major Groves. “What Kaldry needs is a firm hand and I don't know if Lowell is up to the task. If it were up to me.....”

Cole entered his room, but could still faintly hear the discussion. Fiona was right, he thought as he pulled off his shoes. These walls are ridiculously thin, the open balcony probably doesn't help matters either. Cole had not heard the new about Duke Lowell, so that was a genuine surprise, and just one of the many things he would need to discuss with Benedict. No doubt the announcement had been made within hours after their arrival. He could have discovered the information for himself, but that was too much trouble. Cole tapped his magical ability and set up a barrier to block any sound entering or leaving his room. Once he was sure he would not be overheard, he flipped open the telethium and prepared to contact Benedict.

Scrying was a simple enough skill, but still many Weavers struggled with it. Using a specially prepared scrying surface, a mage could both view events happening in far off places and by using more
advanced techniques could project an image of themselves onto a similarly prepared surface. The need for a specially prepared surface limited the effectiveness of scrying to simple viewing or communication. In theory one could scry through any object, though the effects were mediocre at best, returning images that were often garbled and distorted.

Cole waved his hand several times over the reflective inner face of the telethium and began to summon up the appropriate magics. A ripple ran across the surface of the gold, as Cole reached out across the world, searching for Benedict's spirit. Cole's mind raced as images flashed past, windows into different worlds. Each was different, and without focusing Cole saw nothing more than a swirling mass of colour. For the first time, Cole actually had to fight to control the scrying, as though some unseen force was opposing him. The images slowed and then stopped as Benedict's face swam into view. For a moment his features flowed together like wax, before settling. Even attuned as they were the image reflected on Cole's telethium was not perfect, it was too bright, like an overexposed photograph. At the same time it was hazy, soft, as though multiple images had been laid on top of one another.

“Ahh Cole, I was wondering when I was going to hear from you,” said Benedict. His voice sounded tinny, small, and his words did not sync up with the movement of his lips. “Is everything...what happened to you?”

“I was almost murdered,” Cole replied doing his best to sound genial, though he guessed the dried blood on his clothes might indicate otherwise. “My would be assassin was wearing a rather interesting pin, that from the reports, matches the pin that was found on the body of Major Acker's attacker. But that's not right is it?

“Cole, what do you mean?”

“You bloody well know what I mean,” Cole shouted, more annoyed that the spymaster had not commented on the blood more than anything. “You had Inspector Carlow move the pin off Acker's body and plant it on the body of his assailant.”

“Do you have proof to validate your claim?”

“Armel saw it happen,” Cole growled.

“Ahh, well that is unfortunate,” said Benedict. “I had hoped we could avoid this confrontation, but it appears you have forced my hand, you shall have the truth.”

“Or at least the parts you think I can handle,” Cole sneered. He sat down and placed the telethium on the desk, careful to not shake it too much.

“I'll tell you want to know,” Benedict replied calmly. “When the motion to appoint the Lord-Protector was brought before the Assembly by Minister Tenning it was met with a great amount of push back by various members known to have ties to the Consortium. As you know, the Vice Chancellor opposed the measure at first, but he later relented, with the stipulation that he would be allowed to chose the man who would be sent to Kaldry to mediate talks before the Lord-Protector arrived. This deal was made entirely in secret, brokered by Mr. Talbit and the Vice Chancellor. Acting on suspicion, meeting was called between myself and several other high placed military officials. We decide that the Consortium would no doubt attempt something, though what exactly we could not be sure.”

“You haven't to me anything new,” Cole interjected, wiping a drop of blood off his brow.

“Glad to see your years of debauchery have not dulled your ability to deduce the obvious,” said Benedict. “Of course I don't trust the Consortium, the have done nothing to gain my trust. Remember, I warned you to stay vigilant. That is why I passed you that note on to you. I hoped it might serve as a reminder to what I told you, and that it might make you think before acting. Now Cole, tell me what you know of Brigadier Acker.”

Cole stopped to consider the question. “Not much, he fought in the Felvian Incursion, but we all did that.”
“Precisely, he is a relative unknown,” said Benedict. “Sutlen appointed Major Acker immediately. He insisted that his own office had conducted a full investigation into the man's military career, and waved off any further investigation. The Assembly voted to uphold this measure. You can see how this would be troubling. Unbeknownst to them, I began a full investigation into Acker's military service and revealed several interesting and rather alarming inconsistencies in his personal records. For one, the man was not Achlish by birth, but Úruushian. His immigration papers had been forged. We conducted a search of his residence and found several other oddities. One moment.” Benedict disappeared and Cole could hear the man rooting through a stack of papers, returning a moment later clutching a familiar silver pin. “This pin our intelligence suggests proves that Mr. Acker may have had even greater connections with Úruush than suspected. It is not a perfect match, but several of the necromancers' uses a similar pin in their clandestine operations. That was....a problem.”

“And so you had him killed.”

“Don't sound so disgusted by it,” Benedict replied. Cole had to hide his shock, he had not expected Benedict to answer so bluntly, nor to answer at all. “After our time together in Felviar, I would hope you know the levels we must descend to in order to preserve our empire. Now do you understand why I said in my note that I cannot investigate on my own?”

“Of course.” Cole considered telling Benedict what he knew involving the pin, but decided against it, mostly since it felt good to know that for once he knew something that Benedict did not. “So, tell me did you actually have someone in mind to replace Mr. Acker?”

“Actually, I had hoped someone competent would be appointed to replace the man,” Benedict smiled. Lying Bastard, thought Cole. “Instead I got you.”

“Then, why let me go at all?”

“Because, Inspector Carlow spotted you on the street removing a pin similar to the one found in Major Acker's apartment from the corpse of a wanted criminal,” Benedict explained. “Upon further investigation, it was revealed that the connection between Acker and Mr. Mchone ran far deeper than we thought. Not only was Mr. Mchone connected to a large, independent trading company, but there are also several members of the Assembly, including Mr. Talbit, who are involved with it. I had just begun a full investigation, when you swaggered onto the scene.”

“Well, I apologize for upsetting things,” Said Cole. The fact that Benedict had been able to uncover the same conspiracy that he had uncovered validated all of Cole's beliefs about the warlocks. Of course Cole was not about to tell Benedict what he knew about that secretive cabal, mostly since he rather enjoyed knowing something the elder spymaster did not. “Why did you not inform me of this earlier?”

“Because I am being watched,” replied Benedict. “These operatives with in the Assembly prevent me from taking any further action. It was hard enough to conduct the investigation into Major Acker's affairs.”

“If it's so dangerous, why is Helen here?”

“The situation in Kaldry is delicate enough without outside forces attempting to infringe upon it,” said Benedict. “The princess' presence there helps to calm the situation. You have a right to be worried, but I assumed you knew, it was in all the papers after all. There are still many details to be hammered out, but the Assembly has decided that it would be in Achland's best interest to have Helen marry into the Ra'kala caste. Doing so ensures that we keep them as allies, when we might other wise lose them.”

“Has she had any say in this?” Asked Cole. He wasn't thinking about Helen of course, he was thinking about Armel and his own plans for the boy's future. Putting a “lost” Felvian noble together with one of the crown princesses would go a long way to securing peace between the two age-old enemies, even if most of Felviar no longer acknowledged the old noble bloodlines. Plus, if he was the
one to facilitate such a match, well it would go a long way to elevating him above his peers.

“Do the royals ever have a say? This is how things have to be. You no doubt disagree, but you've always been difficult concerning tradition.”

“Well, if you were concerned about the Consortium or the Ra'kala breaking faith with us that would certainly solve the problem,” said Cole. “Or would've if Duke Lowell hadn't been appointed as Lord-Protector. Seems you might have slipped up again. You going to have him killed as well?”

“You need not worry yourself about Duke Lowell,” Benedict smiled. “He is a good man, but he will only hold the office temporarily.”

“Ahh, so you are plotting another murder,” Cole exclaimed. “How exciting. Should I kill him this time?

“No,” said Benedict. “This has all been planned and calculated. Duke Lowell is competent enough to hold Kaldry together, but not if the Consortium, or someone else makes a move.”

“Ahh, so you are using him to draw our enemies out into the open,” said Cole. “That's cold, even for you.”

“And how is that different from what you are planning to do?” Cole whirled about, a nimbus of pure, dark blue energy swirling around his hand. Thomas stood in the doorway, completely at ease watching as Cole prepared to attack him.

“Is that Thomas I hear?” Asked Benedict. “Hold me up.” Cole complied. “Tell me, Mr. Atkin, what exactly are you implying when you say that?”

“Cole has his own theory as to what is happening here,” Thomas explained, dragging a spare chair over to the desk. “Before you ask, Armel found me and sent me here. I entered your room several some time ago and stood here listening. Considering what happened earlier, I thought you might take some precautions, but it appears I was wrong.”


“As I said, I was attacked,” Cole sighed. “Your attention to detail is certainly beginning to slip. Also, you may wish to begin tracking our pin wearing friends, it was as one of them who attacked me.”

“I hardly believed Armel when he told me that,” said Thomas. “Honestly Cole, if there was some secret plot against us all, why would it's architects and agents all wear such an easily identifiable symbol?”

“Because it's secret.” Cole rolled his eyes. Thomas could be very thick at times.

“Because what is secret?” Asked Benedict. “Cole, what do you know about these men? Explain yourself, now.”

Cole did so as quickly as possible. When he mentioned Garret's name he saw Benedict stiffen. Obviously Cole was not the only one still troubled by the events that had transpired in Felviar, though he found it odd that the other man had not connected the two events before now. The Grand General was usually much more observant that that, and if Cole hadn't been as tired as he was, that fact might have bothered him. Benedict asked several questions, but remained silent for the most part.

“So, that is why I suspect you told the papers Mr. Acker was murdered by someone wearing a pin very similar to this one,” Cole concluded, head hurting as he tried to figure out if he had included all the details. “Either you would find his conspirators, or someone who knew something would step forward.”

“Well, I cannot fault your deductive reasoning” said Benedict. “Though your methods could use work.”

“I suppose I shall take that as a compliment,” said Cole.

“I suppose you could,” Benedict replied. “I will need to time to compile this new information you have provided. For now, stay alert, try not to die, and don't act without consulting me.”

“That will be hard for Cole,” Thomas quipped. “What about the situation with the tribal
castes?"

“They are another matter entirely,” said Benedict. “I have several plans in motion to deal with them, but so far it is too early to tell how successful those will be.” Benedict let out a heavy, tired sigh. “If it comes down to it we cannot allow rebellion to consume this colony. If a solution cannot be devised you must side with the Consortium.”

“First, you tell me to be wary of them, now I am supposed to work with them?” Cole laughed. “Here I thought you would have a plan for everything.”

“Makes you wish for simpler days doesn’t?” Benedict flashed Cole a sad smile. “I hate saying it, but maintaining peace in the Kaldry is more important than anything else. If you have to work with the Consortium do it, our Empire cannot afford a rebellious colony, in any form. Others will rally to them and it will spell doom for us all. If the Consortium attempts to break away, suppress them. If the tribals rise up, remind them just who wields the power here.”

The image on the telethium went dark. Cole sat there for a moment, grappling with what Benedict had told him. The man had always been a master manipulator, but this was something new, worse almost. Benedict murdered Acker just to discover what connections the man had, it was a cold, calculated plan, one that left little room for error. Cole understood why Benedict had done what he had, but for some reason he couldn't believe it. At the same time he was struggling with his feelings he couldn't help but agree with Benedict's motives, after all he had murdered Clayton to further his own agenda.

“Well, that was illuminating,” Thomas said dryly, before he reached over and flipped the telethium shut. “At least my hunch was correct, though I'm sad to see that you somehow got Benedict hooked on all of this. Still, it's probably best I stay involved, someone has to keep you under control. I have to agree with Benedict, what happened to the easy days of fighting Felviar?”

“We won,” Cole said, his voice cracking slightly. “We won and then inherited the world's problems. We halted Felviar's advance, we hold Üruush at bay. It's our duty now to prevent the world tearing itself apart.”

“Cole,” said Thomas as he placed a hand on his friends shoulder. “I know we don't often discuss what happened in Felviar but...do you need to talk?”

“No,” said Cole, bowing his head so Thomas would not see his tears. “Felviar is behind me.”

Cole wrenched his eyes shut, but that only made the visions clearer. Cormag, muscle bound, always ready to plunge directly into the action. Garret, the traitor, dark haired, with amber eyes and wolfish features, skilled with Weavings that manipulated metal. Benedict had found the man rotting in a Felvian prison, freed him, then drafted him into service.

There were many others, elves that Cole had counted as allies and had in the end betrayed when he fled My'thren. He had been closest to Renaud, a young soldier who had defected from the Felvian army, coming to My'thren to join the gathering army of disposed nobles. This secretive army had begun to gather in order to reclaim their country from the military regime that had overthrown them. Benedict had seen the advantage in courting their favour in order to secure peace between Achland and Felviar. That notion had been destroyed along with most of those living in My'thren.

Then there was Lisette, his first love. It was her death that hurt the worst. Cole could have saved her, he should have gone back, but he had failed, instead only heeding his own selfish desire for revenge. Even with such a disaster looming over him, Cole had still not managed to change his nature. He still thought of himself first. Indeed the events in Felviar had only hardened his resolve and part of him despised the self-centred man he had become. After Felviar, Cole had promised he would never involve himself in Benedict's machinations again, now here he was, drawn back into the insanity.

Thomas left without another word. For a while Cole just sat there, then he stood and began to amble around the room. Lost in thought, he began to poke around in the various cupboards and
drawers. Cole soon discovered that the room had a fully stocked liquor bar. He rooted about and came up with a bottle of Ketlic whiskey. He uncorked the bottle and began to drink, forgoing a glass. Sadly the liquor only made things worse. He sat in a stupor and before long he had emptied the bottle. Instead of going to sleep, Cole stumbled over to the bar and started another, hoping that it might be able to banish to ghosts he had been unable to deal with for the past six years.
Chapter 17

The sun was rising in the east, a blazing corona of red and orange to crown the new day. In the west the fires that had consumed Lalthetta were just beginning to die, leaving the once bustling garrison town nothing more than a smouldering ruin. Looking down on the destruction from the command deck of the airship, Queen's Fist, Fiona began to calculate exactly how the attack had been conducted.

The invaders had come from the north-west, toppling the wall, before swarming in through the breach, then lighting a series of fires that had left the southern portion of the city more or less intact. The garrison had not been so lucky. The invaders had ignited the garrison's power magazines and the once square building had burst from within, now nothing more than a scorch mark in the middle of the parade grounds.

"They hit this place pretty hard didn't they?" Asked Captain Lawrence, ruffling a hand through his short hair. "Where did these savages get the fire power to take down that wall?"

"We'll have to find out won't we," said Fiona. Lawrence had a point, the tribal castes, Utel, Selther, Guchas, and to many others to name, often fought with bows, arrows, and other primitive weapons, rarely using firearms. Over the last few years that had begun to change, but still Fiona had never known them to assault a target of this size before. "Once we are on the ground move away from the city. Whatever took down the walls could easily take us out of the sky as well."

"I'd like to see them try," said Lawrence. He turned back to Fiona, a smile on his boyish face. "Queeny's got some o' the thickest armour in the whole armada. Even if we did get hit, my flying'll keep us in the sky."

"Of course it will," said Colonel Jenkins of the Consortium Guard, as he stepped onto the bridge. "Oh wait, if we're going down, I don't think we will really be able to stay in the sky will we?"

Lawrence held up a hand. "Sir, I feel that my work environment has turned hostile, might I transfer to a different regiment?"

The rest of the flight crew laughed, but Fiona scowled. "Keep it professional gentleman or I will reassign both of you. I doubt you would enjoy that."

"You've got no power to reassign me," Jenkins retorted. The man was right and he would no doubt scamper off to his master after this was done, telling Daniel how Fiona had once again "attempted to seize control from the Consortium".

"I follow your orders sir," said Lawrence, saluting Fiona. "Though it would be nice to get a bit of time off."

It had taken Fiona awhile to decide if she actually liked Lawrence or not, especially since he treated even the most serious of situations with nothing more than mild shock and levity. Lawrence's skill with wisecracks was only matched by his skills as a pilot. Lawrence was a civilian pilot, who through a convoluted series of events involving a botched smuggling job, had ended up employed by the Achlish military in Kaldry. They needed good pilots and Lawrence had dropped into their laps, almost literally when his stolen craft had been shot down. While he was competent enough flying the larger airships his real talents lay in his ability to fly the smaller rotor-craft and assault skiffs. Fiona had seen Lawrence perform stunts and landings that would have killed a lesser pilot, including one harrowing landing during a category three typhoon.

"What would you do with time off?" Asked Gunnery-Sergeant Beckman. "Its not like you could really go anywhere."

"I'd take the Colonel here somewhere fancy," said Lawrence, batting his eyelashes at Jenkins "You'd like that wouldn't you?"

"Beckman, you have command while I am gone," said Fiona. She left the bridge and descended
into the heart of the *Queen's Fist*. Jenkins followed close behind, the mocking laughter of Lawrence and the rest of the crew echoing down the corridor behind him.

The perfection of the airship had been one of the greatest moments in Achland's military history. Between it, and the smaller rotor-craft, Achland was able to achieve complete aerial superiority, that in turn allowed them to rule the battlefield, at least in so far as direct strength of arms was concerned. Achland was still woefully inferior when it came to magical warfare. Indeed, the driving force behind Achland's industrial drive had been the centuries long war with Felviar. Practically every invention had been created to in some way neutralize the elves superior magical abilities.

The airship had resulted from the logical progression of Achland's naval force. There had been other dirigibles throughout the years of course, but most had only seen light military use, mostly being reserved for reconnaissance, or civilian transportation. What had really created the airship was the birth of the iron-clad steamship. Indeed, most modern airships were built from the same frame work as a naval ship, albeit scaled down significantly, with a massive rigid cloth covered frame, filled with helium, attached where the upper decks ought to be. The original designs had used hydrogen, but that had proved explosive. In Kaldry the airships most prominent use was as a mobile command and staging centre, especially since much of the country was dense jungle.

“I wish we could have arrived earlier,” said Jenkins. The two colonels descended into the belly of the ship, ducking under the various tubes, pipes, and brass-ware that stuck out from the bulkheads.

“If you did not insist on being involved in every minor fire fight, I would not have needed to waste time coming to the party.”

“Wouldn't have gotten here in time anyway,” Fiona replied.

Fiona tolerated Jenkins and the rest of the Consortium soldiers as best as she could. They weren't bad men, but they just didn't have the same values as the rest of Achlish military. Jenkins and his soldiers, like the rest of the Consortium, only saw things in terms of profit. Most were little better than mercenaries, though there were retired soldiers among the ranks of the Consortium Guard. Fiona tolerated the Guard because without their support and numbers, Kaldry would have descended into chaos long ago.

“How can you say that?” said Jenkins, as they passed by a group of soldiers Fiona did not know. Up until about a year ago Fiona had known every one of her troops by name. That was of course to be expected, since the entire division, some one-thousand men, had all continuously served with her since she had taken command six years prior. It wasn't that there were more of them, the Assembly would never commit more troops than it thought necessary to Kaldry, no it was simply that most had been taken from her and replaced with new, green recruits. Apparently Üruush was placing more pressure on the annexed mainland colonies and experienced soldiers had been required to help hold the front. The only soldiers who had not been taken were those on the Consortium pay roll.

While on the official records Kaldry was under military control, things on the ground were very different. The Consortium Guard outnumbered standard soldiers three to one, another imbalance that the Assembly had meant to fix, then had never bothered with, since it was easier and cheaper to just allow the Consortium free run of any armed conflict.

“None of the ships in the fleet travel fast enough to respond to something like this,” said Fiona. The pneumatic door to the bomb-bay hissed open and the two stepped into the lowest level of the ship.

“Commander on deck,” called sandy-haired Corporal Hutchins.

The twenty man squadron all stood up and saluted Fiona as she entered. Half of the men wore Consortium fatigues, while the other half wore the Achlish Phoenix upon their breast. The men were all career soldiers and had seen service on dozens of battlefields. Fiona noticed that the Consortium men broke their salute to her a second faster than her men, but at least this time they had saluted.

“At ease,” said Fiona, returning the salute.
“We going full or half plate?” asked Brigadier Thompson.

“Only half,” said Fiona. A technicians-officer stepped forward clutching a riveted metal breastplate. Fiona spread her arms out and let the men begin arming her. “This is to be a reconnaissance mission only. We are to look for survivors and gather intelligence, nothing fancy.”

“Besides, I don't think the savages are enough of a threat to necessitate full plate,” said Jenkins. Like the airship, the armour Achland's front line soldiers employed had been born of necessity. Before the advent of steam technology, soldiers had gone into battle dressed in full plate mail to protect themselves from Felvian Spellweavers. In those days Achland had held most of the main land, including territory now lost to Üruush. The wars in those days had been bloody, with thousands dying to secure the border with Felviar. As technology advanced the basic plate mail had evolved, eventually becoming a hulking steam-powered suit that both protected a soldier from magical effects and enhanced his physical abilities to such a degree that Achland could match the elven legions in open combat.

The design of Achland's current armour was simple and had changed little since the first Felvian wars. The armour still included the basic Cuirass, Cuisses, Fauld, Spaulders, and Greaves, but recast for comfort, coated in Cold Iron, and forged from the strongest steel known to man. Years of development had both decreased the weight and increased the range of motion a soldier had in their armour. At the same time the armour was growing more comfortable, it was also growing larger. Soldiers in full Steam-armour weighed several hundred pounds, and most stood close to seven feet tall. Going “half plate” meant forgoing several pieces of excess armour, specifically the bulky, domed Pauldrons that fitted over the Spaulders, and the three-pound cannon built into the left shoulder. This afforded the wearer great mobility, at the coast of some protection and fire-power.

“Think we'll find anyone actually alive?” Hutchins asked. The youth buckled on his heavy steel Greaves, noticed he had them on the opposite legs, and flipped them around. “Last time well, I don't like to think about last time.”

“If any of the soldiers were still alive they would have set up a flare as soon as they caught sight of the Fist,” said rusty haired Bernard, whose eyes were the same clear blue as the ice he conjured. Even though he could weave magic, Bernard still donned just as much armour as the rest of his unit. No matter how many magical wards a Spellweaver might maintain to protect themselves, distractions were prevalent on the battlefield and bullets were still lethal.

“I just don't get how the tribals do it,” said Hutchins, picking up his gun, a standard 42-Revolver Rifle, one of the two main workhorses of the Achlish military.

A relatively long barrelled carbine, the 42 could hold sixteen 10mm rounds in its revolving barrel. Cheap and quick to reload, the 42 was also highly accurate. It was the choice of sharpshooters and infantry men looking to remain at a distance, instead of getting dragged into the fray of close range combat. The other common Achlish rifle was the Bryer-39 Auto-Loader. The Bryer was a blunt nosed carbine and featured an impressive 7mm thirty-nine round magazine. What really made the rifle unique was the gas-powered reloading system. This system used the high pressure gas released by a bullet's cartridge to drive the reloading mechanism, ejecting the spent shell and reloading the chamber all in one swift, automatic motion.

“What, slaughter entire villages?” asked Bernard

“Your answer is in the question,” said Jenkins, as he hefted his belt-fed, 12.7mm Smithson Machine gun. Thanks to the dampeners built into his armour, Jenkins would be able to wield the rotary cannon, usually mounted on aircraft or as turret emplacements, as easily as he would wield any other weapon. “They're savages. I put good money on them being cannibals as well, especially with all the weird religious practices they have.” Jenkins spun the gun's barrel once and then gave the belt feed a tug to ensure it was properly positioned. “Consortium squad you're with me, we're establishing a one
The bomb bay doors opened as the *Queen's Fist* dipped low enough for them to drop from the ship.

“My unit, we're doing a clean sweep of the town,” Fiona shouted over the roar of the turbines. “All of us are going up over the eastern wall. Jenkins will set up the perimeter and we'll start in the garrison.” Fiona turned to shout into a brass tube that ran up and out of the room. “Lawrence, we'll signal when we are ready for pick up! Have a medical team on alert as we may have wounded. If we come under attack ascend to two hundred metres and hold there until I send up a flare. Keep a weather eye on the horizon. I don't want any surprises.”

“Will do,” said Lawrence. “Gunners division wants to know if you have any special orders.”

“Yeah,” said Fiona, as she pulled on her helmet. “Don't blow us up when you open fire.”

“Man with the most rounds remaining in his gun at the end'o all this buys the first round!” Screamed Jenkins, before he leaped out of the ship.

The *Queen's Fist* hovered over a clear patch of jungle just a few hundred metres east of the city. Fiona leapt out of the bomb bay doors, leg braces absorbing the force of her landing. The rest of the men slammed into the ground around her, riveted-bronze armour shining in the light of the rising sun. They picked their way through the forest, weapons at the ready, armour belching clouds of steam. Bernard brought up the rear, his armour covered in hoarfrost that left dripping icicles on any flora he touched. They reached the wall of the Lalthetta, the used their armour's built in Grappler-gauntlets to haul themselves up over the low wall. The air was thick with smoke and the stench of burned flesh.

“They certainly did a number on this place,” said Jenkins, before he dropped down off the wall into the garrison's parade ground. “Men, sweep down the main streets, we'll meet at the breach.”

The Consortium Guard clomped down the hard-packed streets, their armour chugging, and their footfalls ringing out through the peaceful morning. Fiona's soldiers slowly moved through the ruins of the garrison. Most of the bodies were badly burnt, though here and there Fiona could see signs of more violent deaths; men peppered with a dozen arrows or slashed and hacked apart, their wounds still oozing partially congealed blood. The devastation at the garrison provided few answers, so they moved out into the city proper. A few fires still flickered, but the Steam-armour's thermal-insulator units protected them from the worst of the heat.

The majority of Lalthetta's population was Mowsha, a lesser caste, and one complicit with the Ra'kala rule. Even before Achland had arrived, Kaldry had been a mess of native politics. The caste system was an archaic, multi-tiered, partially religious institution and it permeated every aspect of Kaldrien life. Caste determined everything, social standing, profession, and place of worship. The Ra'kala had only come to power because they had proven to be the most calculating and because they had led the revolution to oust the previous highest ranking caste four hundred years ago.

“Lot of civivies dead,” said Hutchins. “From the looks of it though the soldiers didn't even try to defend them. If I was a cynical man I would say the garrison abandoned them.

“Considering the time of the attack most of the garrison was probably asleep,” said Bernard. Bodies lay sprawled out along the walk, some hanging out of the doorway of the adobe houses, others dragged off and dumped in piles. “Probably a handful of dead soldiers over by the breach. Course the garrison was also only made up of Consortium men, so your cynicism might be justified.”

The soldiers spread out, continuing their search. They did find a few soldiers mixed in with the corpses near the breach, but not as many as Fiona had hoped. In fact most of the bodies they did find gave evidence to the fact that the soldiers had been fleeing the battle, instead of standing their ground to protect the civilians. Like those at the garrison the soldiers' bodies had been looted, their attackers taking any firearms the men had been carrying. Fiona crouched down and began to inspect the breach. The walls had exploded inwards, but there were no trace of explosives. Instead the explosion seemed to
have torn the rock wall apart from within. The corpses here were also burnt and twisted like those at the garrison.

“Sir!” Hutchins called. “We've got a live one here.” Fiona ran over and found Hutchins crouched over a dark skinned kelf just clinging to life. He was covered in red war-paint and there was a dirty tourniquet around his right leg. “Seems he bandaged it himself. He's babbling a bit but...well.....”

“The Prophet is coming.” The man's voice was husky, strained, but he spoke in plain Achlish. “Our liberation is coming, no longer shall we bow to Achland, or to their dogs the Ra'kala.

“Yeah, well for now you need medical attention,” said Bernard. He pulled back the man's tourniquet to inspect the wound. The kelf had been lucky, the bullet had missed his artery, but he was still bleeding hardly. Bernard glanced at Fiona for a moment, then placed his hand on the man's thigh. A golden nimbus of energy enveloped Bernard's hand and slowly spread throughout the man's leg. Flesh knitted itself back together and the wound vanished. “I've only closed it, so he could still be bleeding internally, but that will at least ease the pain a bit.”

“Send up a flare,” said Fiona. “Doesn't seem to be much here.”

“Right,” said Hutchins. He drew out his flare gun and fired. Overhead a cannon boomed, signalling that the Queen's Fist had seen the flare.

The flare bloomed into a flower of sparks high over head and Fiona could hear the drone of the Fist's engines as the ship began to descend. Jenkins and his men rejoined them and together they began the march back through the city. The Fist emerged from the clouds and began to descend when a voice rang out.

“You come like moths to a flame!” The voice came from everywhere and yet from nowhere, issuing fort from the very stone of the destroyed city. “The chains of the oppressors shall be broken and Kaldry shall be set free. I am the Prophet of your damnation!”

“Well, that can't be good,” Hutchins muttered.

Bernard reached down, grabbed the wounded native, and began to drag him along. “The ruins of the garrison should provide us decent cover,” Bernard grunted. The soldiers ran down the broad avenue, weapons raised and ready. “We should be able to.....”

“What are you doing you fucking idiot?” Screamed Jenkins, as he and his squad came running towards them down a side street. “Leave the savage and go!”

The soldiers reached the parade grounds just as a scream of rage rang through the dead city and a horde of armed kelves rushed down the packed dirt street. Jenkins spun the barrel of his rotary cannon to start it, then stepped out into the open. Arrows and spears clattered against his armour as the machine gun tore into the oncoming host. The continuous spray of bullets ripped the attackers apart, slicing through flesh like a hot blade. Jenkins held the entire south-western avenue on his own, cackling with sadistic glee, while his men covered his flank. Fiona and her men took the northern side, while Bernard dragged the wounded kelf back into cover. The fighting quickly decayed into a frantic fracas as the attackers darted from house to house, cleverly using them as cover. The soldiers were slowly losung ground, then the Fist opened fire, blasting apart a building with her eighty pound cannons.

“Just a bit more,” said Jenkins, as he ducked around the wall of the barracks. “I'll come out last and....”

A sudden clap of thunder cut Jenkins off mid-sentence. Then the eastern wall exploded inwards. Chunks of rubble hurtled through the air, raining down on the embattled soldiers. Dust swirled and when Fiona looked up she saw a man striding calmly through devastation. He was huge, at least six and a half feet tall, dressed in tattered robes, his head hidden beneath tightly wound linen strips. Upon his face there was a mask. It was white, without any hint of human facial features save for a pair of empty holes were eyes should be, flames danced in those hollow sockets, turning the blank visage into that of a demon. Hidden behind those flames Fiona could feel a piercing gaze, burning with a searing hatred as
intense as the flames that fountained forth from the Prophet's hands. More armed kelves and several humans swarmed in behind the man, screaming as they rushed across the parade grounds.

Jenkins opened fire again, gunning down dozens, while Bernard showered the attackers with a spray of razor sharp icicles. The Masked Prophet swept his hand through the air and a gout of flame consumed the parade grounds. Even with the thermal insulators in her armour, Fiona could still feel the heat. Jenkins dropped his rotary canon and ducked down behind the rubble, narrowly avoiding being consumed by pillar of fire the Prophet had conjured.

“Bernard, looks like you’re up,” said Jenkins, grabbing a fresh Bryer rifle from one of his men. “We’ll do our best to keep them off your back.”

Bernard waved a hand and burst of frost dampened the flames. “So glad you can volunteer me for that.”

The Fist fired a second salvo. The parade grounds turned into an inferno as the airships cannons repeatedly hammered the native force. The smoke cleared, revealing heaps of twisted bodies and still the Masked Prophet walked along, his body wreathed with flame, completely untouched by the cannonfire. Jenkins popped out of cover and began to fire on the survivors, while Fiona and Hutchins covered the western approach. The Kaldriens continued to gain ground, rushing towards the trapped Achlish soldiers. Fiona's rifle jammed, so she tossed it aside just as the first of their attackers hurled himself over the low wall. Fiona clenched her right fist and a foot long blade sprang from the top of her gauntlet.

Fiona jumped into the fray, gauntlet-blade easily slicing through soft flesh. She cut down one, two, three men, before spinning and engaging her left hand blade, using it to hamstring a fourth. The Prophet had almost reached the walls of the garrison and with a simple sweeping motion he created a jet of flame that consumed two of Fiona's men. Their screams rippled through the air and then cut off suddenly as the flames seared their lungs black. Hutchins tossed Fiona a rifle. She caught it, bashed the butt into a man's face, then shot him point blank. Gore splattered her armour as Fiona dropped to one knee, coolly gunning down three more of her attackers.

Fiona ducked under an axe and looked up in time to see Bernard hurling spears of ice at the Masked Prophet. The axe wielder drew back and Fiona twisted the rifle's barrel, releasing the telescoping bayonet. She slashed the gleaming blade across the man's belly and it split open, spilling his guts onto the stone. Bernard launched another spear of ice at the Prophet, just as wall of fire erupted around the hulking masked man. Bernard used the momentary distraction to rush the Prophet. As he ran across the open ground, Bernard engaged both of his gauntlet blades. Ice crackled along the blades surface as he leapt at his enemy. A fireball erupted from the Prophet's fist and Bernard batted it aside, the Cold Iron in his suit repelling the magic. The Masked Prophet spun away from Bernard, dodging the man's swinging slashes. Bernard went on the offensive, punching and thrusting with his ice-covered blades. The Masked Prophet was incredibly agile for his size. He moved like smoke, never remaining in the same place for long. A fourth salvo from the Fist drew Fiona's attention. The airship now hovered low enough for the soldiers to withdraw. Fiona watched Jenkins and the Consortium Guard launch their Grapplers, the bolts latching onto the Fist and hauling them up to safety.

The Masked Prophet ignored the Consortium Guard, instead focusing his attack on those soldiers still on the ground. Corporal Benner, a new transfer to the unit, fired his Grappler and was hauled upwards. The Prophet punched the air, sending a fire ball hurtling towards the fleeing corporal. Bernard swept his blades around in a large arc, creating a wall of ice that consumed the fire ball. A crack ran through the air as the wall of ice shattering. Shimmering glass-like shards rained down on the parade grounds. All the attackers, save for the masked prophet fell back to avoid being impaled by the foot long shards of ice. Hutchins and the rest of Fiona's squad seized the moment and repelled to safety.

“Bernard, break off now,” Fiona shouted. She looked up, searching for an attachment point, but
could not find one.

Bernard nodded and hurled another spear of ice at the Prophet. The man batted it aside contemptuously, then turned to watch as Fiona began her ascent. The polished surface of the mask reflected the flames that danced around the Prophet and the man raised his hand, finger pointed directly at Fiona's tether.

The lightning bolt lanced through the tether and Fiona began to fall. Bernard tackled the Masked Prophet, driving one of his frosted blades deep into the man's thigh. Fiona twisted around and fired her left hand Grappler. The bolt pierced the side of the ship and held. Air whistled through Fiona's ears and then the cable snapped taut, almost wrenching her arm out of its socket.

Fiona spun herself around and drew her revolver, trying to get a clear shot at the masked man, but Bernard was always in the way. Bernard drew his blade from the Prophet's leg and stood, blade positioned for the killing blow. Fire erupted from the Masked Prophet, tossing Bernard up and away. Bernard was struggling to stand as the Prophet stalked towards him, ignoring the dripping wound in his thigh. Fiona emptied her entire clip at the Prophet, but flames puffed up around him, absorbing every one of her shoots shots.

The Prophet began to batter Bernard with flaming whips, driving the Achlish Weaver around the open grounds like an animal. Bernard erected a wall of ice and then fired a Grappler bolt at the Queen's Fist. Before the winch could even start, the Prophet blasted Bernard's ice-wall apart with a second bolt of lighting, then consumed the other Weaver in a jet of flame. Then it happened, something Fiona had never seen before. Bernard's armour began to melt. The solid metal plates, coated to resist magic, liquefied, flowing like hot wax.

Hutchins hauled Fiona up into the bomb-bay. “Don't worry, we'll get Bernard out, gunnery will...”

“I will show you the price for your arrogance!” the Prophet screamed. The hulking man whirled his hands through the air, creating a tornado of flame that consumed Bernard.

Bernard stumbled out of the flames, trying to distance himself from the prophet. He moved awkwardly, the half-melted armour plates had begun to congeal, slowing him further. Bernard attempted to retaliate, but the Prophet dashed forward and grabbed the other man's helmeted head, his hand fully covering Bernard's covered face. The Prophet groaned as he slowly lifted Bernard off the ground. Bernard screamed as the Prophet clenched his hand and flames erupted from his palm, melting flesh, bone, and steel, together into a single solid mass. Without a word, the Prophet hurled Bernard's body away, sending it crashing through the wall that surrounded Lalthetta. The Fist fired another salvo, but the Prophet batted it aside and turned his flaming eyes on the fleeing airship. As the bomb-bay doors swung shut Fiona watched the man Bernard had healed shakily stand up and walk to stand next to his “prophet”.

“Lawrence, make full burn for Al-katal,” Fiona shouted. “The rest of you, meet me in the debriefing room.”
Chapter 18

Armel ducked just as a green ball went whizzing past his right ear. Some of the other children cheered, as Kishan, one of Armel's team mates, caught the ball and lobbed it back down the court. Armel's heart skipped a beat when he saw that Helen was among those cheering for his team. The game of Maethin had raged for almost twenty minutes, but was now entering the final round, and the crowd of children screamed their approval.

Maethin was a deceptively simple game. Four teams of twelve players each assembled on a court divided into separate zones. Each zone was broken up by a series of walls, randomly placed around before the match started. The goal of the game was to hit other players with a variety of multicoloured balls, though the balls a player was allowed to throw or catch was limited by both his position on the field and the colour of his team. Armel only really understood the basics, but he had done well so far, committing only a single foul that had been rescinded rather quickly.

Armel's team, the yellow, had taken an early lead, knocking out more than half of the blue team and claiming most of their territory. The early movement had proven necessary, since the arrangement of walls in yellow's starting zone had been pathetic. The shift also allowed them to use both blue and green balls, in addition to the yellow they had been allowed at the start. Green had then crushed the remainder of blue, but then lost all their previously held territory to red. The current field had red, captioned by Mohar, leading with six players, against yellow's four, and green's three.

The ball Kishan had thrown struck a green player in the chest and the crowd cheered again. Armel ducked under a red ball and dove behind a wall, searching for a ball to use. From his hiding spot Armel watched as Mohar and one of his younger team mates methodically pummelled the two remaining green players into submission. From the way Armel understood it, there were supposed to be rules to prevent that sort of thing, but the boy overseeing the game was one of Mohar's cousins, and had already ignored several previous rules violations. Decked out in his vibrant yellow armour, small Charles jumped out and hurled a single ball at the backs of the exposed red players. It struck one, bounced, and then hit another.

There was a sharp whistle blast. “Double strike on red, game tied four-four, all others eliminated.”

The other children applauded, as Kishan pitched a ball to Armel. Armel caught it, used it to deflect Mohar's shot, and then the yellow team advanced into the remainder of green's territory. Red lost another player to Armel, while Mohar knocked both Charles and Rohit out of the game in a quick volley of shots. Armel skittered back while Kishan scored another hit.

For a single moment the game was tied again, then Mohar pegged Kishan in the face, leaving Armel ball-less, exposed, and flanked by the two red players. Mohar smiled as he slowly bent to pick up another ball. Ever so slowly, as though he were savouring it, Mohar drew his arm back and threw the ball. Time seemed to slow as Armel watched the ball rush towards him. In that single moment Armel panicked and reached for his magic. Without even meaning to, Armel summoned a small gale, and when the ball struck the whipping winds, it careened off in a different direction.

Armel scrabbled away, narrowly avoiding the ball thrown by Mohar's remaining team mate. Sweat dripped down Armel's face as he dashed along the court. In one fluid motion Armel swooped past a ball, grabbed it, spun, and hurled it at the enemy. It struck Mohar's team mate and the crowd roared their approval. Armel caught Helen's eye and she smiled. Armel's heart melted, while further down the court Mohar took aim.

Armel wasn't even looking in Mohar's direction and yet he could sense the shift in the wind as the ball hurtled towards him. He pivoted on his right foot and spun about, just as the ball struck his face. Already unbalanced by his pivot, Armel fell flat on his back.
“I WIN!!” Mohar bellowed, his dark skin glistening with sweat. The boy threw his arms up and the crowd cheered.

Armel's heart sunk when he saw that Helen was clapping and cheering for Mohar. The children and young teens in the stands were a motley bunch, most were kelves, though there were also children of Consortium executives and military personnel as well. Kishan limped out onto the field and helped Armel to his feet, while Mohar continued his show-boating.

“You did really well,” said Kishan. The boys skin was darker than Mohar's, but not as dark as some of the kelves in the crowd, and he was the same age as Armel. “I've never seen anyone come that close to beating Mohar before.”

It may have only been a simple ball game and yet Armel could not help feeling depressed. “Considering he committed a bunch of fouls.....”

“Don't say that,” Kishan hissed as the two walked off the field and into the changing rooms hidden away beneath the stands.

“Why?” Armel removed his heavy pads and tossed them into a basket in the corner. Armel pulled off the rest of his gear, whipped the sweat off his face and turned to leave.

“He's Ra'kala,” said Kishan. They left changing room and walked up into the stands, easily finding a pair of open seats since there really weren't that many kids, in fact most had been playing Macthin the whole time, only taking a seat once they had been eliminated. “They are a higher caste, you can't talk about them like that.”

“You're Ra'kala as well though,” said Armel, looking into his friend’s pale green eyes. It was just past noon and between the heat and his own sadness Armel wanted nothing more than to find a dark corner to curl up in.

“No I am Rankala,” Kishan corrected. “My father is a warrior of the highest caste, but that does not make us Ra'kala, no warrior can be Ra'kala. No Kaldrien can change his caste, from the Hak'en serfs, to the Zetra tribals, we are all confined to the caste we were born in.”

“That's stupid,” said Armel. “So if someone is richer than you and in a higher caste, they are always right?”

“Yes,” said Kishan. “Is it any different in Achland?”

Armel thought about that for a moment. “No, it's really not.”

Now that the game was over the stands slowly began to empty. Most of the children were heading for the tiled pool on the far side of the court. Many stripped down to their undergarments and dove into the water, but some just sat down under the shade of the trees. For a moment it looked as though Helen and the gaggle of kelf girls that swarmed around her were going to disrobe as well, but they only removed their shoes and dipped their feet into the water.

“You like here her don't you,” Kishan stated more than asked when he noticed Armel watching Helen.

“No,” Armel screeched.

Eventually the two boys stripped down and joined the others in the pool. The water was cool and clean. Armel swam several lengths, before joining some of the others in a crazed wrestling game. Mohar won again, mostly because he was older and stronger. Whenever Armel looked at the older boy's more developed body he felt inadequate. Mohar was only about a year older, but it still made a difference.

In the end Armel gave up and he Kishan swam off on their own, whispering about the only thing boys their age whispered about when they thought no one could hear them; girls, sex, and other things done in private. Kishan was especially audacious, not only in what he talked about, but in how he stared at the few kelfish girls who had decided to swim topless. The boys always shifted to tamer topics when they drew close to the others, mostly to avoid embarrassment. Armel had to admit the
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conversation did make him feel both awkward and excited, especially since the traditional Achland views on things were prudish to say the least.

“You did really well in that game,” Helen called out. Those simple words were enough to cause Armel's heart to race and he did his best to keep his face neutral as he looked up at Helen. “You danced well too.”

“Th-th-thanks,” Armel stuttered.

“I taught him everything he knows,” said Kishan. The kelf swam over and pulled himself up onto the wall so he could sit next to a kelf girl with pretty pale-silver eyes.

“I heard you were Mr. Travers’ apprentice,” said Helen. “Is that true? I have heard some interesting stories about Mr. Travers, is he really as eccentric as the papers say he is?”

Armel shrugged. “He's actually pretty vain.”

Helen giggled. “Let's hope that doesn't rub off on you, you're so nice.”

“You should come into the water,” Kishan said to the silver eyed girl, while Armel sat down next to Helen.

“I do what I can, you're really nice yourself,” said Armel, scooting closer to Helen, but doing his best to avoid getting her wet.

“It's hard,” Helen replied. “Most people just think I'm some spoiled princess, you must know what that's like though, being a Fauchere.”

“A what?” For a moment Armel was confused, then he remembered the lie Cole had told about his heritage. “Yeah it is hard sometimes...I uhh.”

At that moment Mohar turned and saw Armel and Helen talking. “Hey everyone,” he called. “Now that we've cooled off who wants to play a game of Seeker?” There was a great cry of agreement and everyone began to climb out of the pool, racing to get dressed again. “Armel should be seeker first,” said Mohar as he pulled on his shirt. “Since he lost the last game it's only fair.”

“I think the oldest should start,” said Kishan. Mohar scowled at him. “You won the game of Macthin so you should get the honour of being seeker first.”

Mohar ground his teeth together. “Fine, but I'm going to start counting in five seconds so you better get going.”

The children scattered, while Mohar closed his eyes and began to count. Armel froze for a moment, then Helen grabbed his hand. Armel's stomach clenched at her touch and for a moment he thought he might vomit, then they were running through the trees together, closely followed by Kishan.

“Don't you think he'll be a bit of a give away?” Kishan nodded his head back towards Helen's bodyguard, Ian. He was tall, with tawny hair, and a full beard that made him look like an old lion. Dressed in safari khakis, with his hunting rifle slung over one shoulder, Ian tended to stand out, and not just among the children.

“He won't be hard to lose,” promised Helen, putting on an extra burst of speed. Armel was still dazed, mostly because Helen still clutched his hand.

They ran barefoot away from the pool, dodging through the Macthin court, and then rushing through an open pavilion. The trio ran through some sort of Kaldrien social function and then disappeared into a grove of palms. Chests heaving the three of them ran through the gardens, before taking refuge under a towering durian tree. The stinky fruits lay littered around the ground. Kishan picked one of them up and held it close, inspecting its spiky surface.

“Think if I hit Mohar with this he would notice? He's sort of thick headed and...”

“Shh, he might hear us,” Helen whispered. “Plus if you hit him you might mess up his face, which would be a shame, he's so handsome.”

“He is not,” said Armel, crossing his arms over his chest. “His face is rather flat really.” Kishan winked at Armel. “This isn't a good hiding place though, come on.”
Together they left the grove of durian trees and dashed across the open space around one of the palace reflecting pools. By now they were so far away from where they had started, Armel figured they had to be safe so he slowed the pace. Armel really wished Kishan would leave so he could be alone with Helen, but it was pretty obvious the other he wasn't going to. They wandered into another garden, this one full of blooming orange trees. The smell was intoxicating and Kishan shimmied up one of the trees, deftly picking a handful of the bright fruits. Armel and Kishan quickly tore into the oranges, filling the grove with even sweeter smells.

“Ohh, I can't get mine open,” Helen cried. Kishan snickered and Armel gently reached out and took the orange from her, peeled it and handed it back. “Thanks, I'm so used to having servants do everything, still I'm not helpless.”

“I never said you were,” the kelf replied. “It's not that hard to peel an orange though.”

“Come off it Kishan,” said Armel. “I've had to do stuff like that all my life so.” Armel stopped, not wanting to reveal too much information that could spoil Cole's carefully crafted deception.

“My father always says a man should only be shown something once,” said Kishan. “After that if he doesn't learn it's his problem.”

“That sounds rather harsh,” said Helen, as she bit into her orange, completely ignoring the fact that the juice ran down her chin.

“Not really,” Kishan replied, wiping his mouth off with the back of his hand. “As a warrior you have to experience things, or you'll never learn.”

“Well, hopefully one day you might learn to play Macthin,” said Armel. Kishan turned and whacked him on the ear.

Once it became clear Mohar wasn't going to find them, the three youths set out exploring the garden. It was filled with weird and wonderful sites. Odd trees brought from foreign lands that twisted and moved as you watched, flowers that bloomed in every colour imaginable, and small bonsai trees from Xian'tu, tenderly trimmed into intricate patterns. Like the gardens in Achland, the gardens here were maintained by magic, and bloomed year round. In one corner Armel found a shrine of statues identical to those on the arcs leading to the palace. Kishan explained that those were the older gods. Most of the upper castes still honoured them, but had switched to a newer interpretation of the old religions. As they drew closer to the palace Armel thought he could hear voices and he held up a hand indicating the others should stop.

“What is it?” Helen whispered, her lips brushing against Armel's ear.

“There are voices coming from up there,” he replied, doing his best to keep calm and not run screaming in joy at Helen's touch.

“...he's messing everything up,” said a man's voice. It might have been Daniel the Consortium Administrator or his adviser Allen, but Armel really wasn't sure, both men sounded similar.

Armel and Helen crept through the trees, drawing up against the smooth marble wall of the palace. Armel craned his neck up and thought he could see shadow's moving in a second story window. Armel began to search for a tree to climb so he could get closer. When he found one, and Helen followed him up, the two balancing on an outstretched branch a few feet from the open window.

“How could.....let ....get away.” Now that he was closer Armel identified the voice as belonging to Allen, but even so he could only make out a few words at a time.

“I did what I had to do,” said another voice that sounded like it might belong to posh, rich, Achlander. “The plan was for me to reveal myself, not ki....”

“.......es, yes I know the plan,” Allen hissed. “We are working on a tight schedule.”

“Your schedule is of no consequence to me,” said the posh man. “We both have thin....”

A breeze shook the branch and Helen let out a quick shout. Armel grabbed her leg to steady her and she blushed. For a moment the conversation in the room stopped and Armel panicked, wondering if
Allen was about to step out and discover them.

“Do not berate me,” the other voice barked. “I told you not to underestimate Cole.”

“Yes, it would appear your advice was,” Allen stopped, “necessary.”

Curious Armel motioned for Helen to stay still, then summoned a small gust of air. Kishan watched from the ground, waving as Armel jumped from the branch to a ledge just below the widow. Years spent running around Thertan’s rooftops had given Armel particularly strong climbing skills, but it was still nice to have a safety net of magic to reach for should he fall. Armel crouched down just under the window, pointed ears pricked up to eavesdrop on the conversation.

“...ow let this happen? I informed you to avoid Travers at all costs,” the other man continued. “I told you that Travers and I had a history together. I told you he was hunting us.”

Armel reached up and peered over the corner. Allen, dressed in a flamboyant emerald suit appeared to be talking to small hand held mirror. There was something on the glass, but Armel was too far away to see what it was.

“Yes, that is why I sent one of our men after him.”

“Based upon the tense you used, I suppose your assassin has failed,” said the voice. “We cannot allow for any more errors.”

“Like yours with the Colonel?” Allen broke in, twirling his goatee between two fingers. “I now have to correct your error, so that might make things difficult.”

“Remember your place,” said the posh voice. “You are new to the order, do not make me resent my decision to induct you. My error shall correct itself, as long as you follow the plan, things shall proceed accordingly. How long now?”

“Any day, maybe even less,” said Allen. “The old man is barely clinging to life. You'll hear about it, don't worry.”

“You may be required to sacrifice one of your pawns,” said the other man. “But his sacrifice shall net us a queen. For the time being, leave Mr. Travers alone. As long as you conform to the plan, Cole Travers is of no consequence.”

“Yes, but what if he kills me?” Squeaked Allen. “He already killed Braden and many others. I have not yet been given the gift of the Bond Ones as they were, I cannot fight back!”

“It was your error that alerted Mr. Travers......”

Armel ducked down and began to search for a way down. He could jump back to the tree, but it was probably safer just to drop. Using a small gust of breeze as a buffer Armel dropped to the loamy ground just as Helen jumped out of the tree.

“They are talking about Cole aren't they?” She asked. “That was Allen of the Consortium, he always made me feel rather weird. I've caught him leering at me before.”

“Yeah, he did say something about Cole...and something about fooling him and some sort of plan.” Armel stopped, trying to figure out all he had just heard.

“Since when can you weave magic?” Asked Kishan. “That's what you were doing right? You should have used that in the game, we might have won!”

“Shush,” said Helen. “Aarmel....should we go find Cole, warn him or something?”

“You need to get back,” said Armel. Cole had talked with Armel at length about what he expected to find in Kaldry and they had talked for a few hours this morning as well before Cole had dashed off to some special meeting. Cole was already suspicious of Allen, but now it seemed the other man knew Cole was on to him. In fact if what Allen said was true he wanted Cole to know. “I will find Cole.”

“I'm coming with you,” said Helen. “I am your princess after all.”

“Fine,” said Armel, excited that Helen had called her his, even if she was only talking in a general sense. “Uhh....I really don't know where he is though. Maybe back at the bungalow?”
“He's in the council chamber,” said Kishan. “My dad was talking about it earlier. Apparently all the Rankala honour guard are going to be in attendance. They have to be in full garb as well.”

“Think you can get us in?” Asked Armel, as they picked their way through the trees.

“We'll see,” said Kishan. “At the very least I'll show you where to go. Then we can wait for your friend to come out.”

“So is this what it feels like?” Helen asked when they emerged from the trees.

“Is this what, what feels like?” Asked Kishan.

“Having friends?” As she said it Helen glanced over at Armel at smiled.

“Don't look at me,” Armel replied, his heart racing. “You're my first friends as well.”
Chapter 19

It took awhile, but Cole finally decided that it was the humidity that he hated most. Morinar and the surrounding wastes had been hot, true, but it had been a dry heat. Kaldry's heat on the other hand was wet, thick, and oppressive. It was certainly a change from the Kaldrien night, which had been a touch cool, though not as bad as autumn in Thertan. The heat and humidity, combined with the tight quarters of the council chamber were making Cole's head spin, though he supposed it might also have been the hangover and lack of sleep that were making him so miserable.

“I am not saying we should completely abandon the southern cities, but it may prove necessary,” said Daniel. “Once the Lord-Protector arrives I have no doubts the Consortium will reassign a majority of my forces to our other colonies. I wish I could help, but I doubt there will be anything I can do.”

_Idiot_, thought Cole. _There is plenty you could do, you just want us to lick your boots and bow before you._

“Will Achland be able to provide us with more soldiers?” asked Akeem, a kelvish Vishen from southern Kaldry. The southerners, both human and kelvish, were on average shorter than and darker skinned than the rest of their countrymen.

“It’s possible,” said Cole, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “You’ve already seen that the Assembly is willing to increase the number of soldiers stationed here. From what I understand, the plan is to create a bi-racial military force that would be able to patrol the entire country. Achland will supplement this army, but we want Kaldry to take responsibility for its own security.”

“Mr. Travers....is there any way you might be able to offer us a concrete answer?” asked Akeem. “Right now it seems your purpose here is well, hmm it seems you don't really have one.”

Cole’s temper flashed red hot and sparks of magical energy danced between his fingers. How dare this savage insult him so openly. Did Akeem not know who he was dealing with? One single snap of his fingers, and Cole could incinerate the arrogant kelf where he sat. He could just as easily make it so this poor fool's country never crawled out of the darkness it wallowed in

Cole took a deep breath. “My purpose here is to facilitate the preparations for the Lord-Protector's arrival. If you would prefer I leave, I will do so, I just hope you can deal with the consequences. Your country is about to rip itself apart and all I am trying to do is prevent that.” _I also want to find those responsible for forcing it apart_, Cole thought.

The council had convened at nine this morning and wasn't showing any signs of progress. There were thirteen Ra'kalan Vishens in attendance, as well as several prominent members of the minor castes. They all sat arrayed around a circular table in the centre of the chamber. The council “hall” was located at the top of the palace's south-western tower and afforded a perfect view of the grounds, as well as the city beyond the wall. During slow periods in the debate, Cole had amused himself by watching the crowds out in the city, trying to imagine how nice it must be to not have to deal with the political quagmire he found himself enmeshed in.

“What the ambassador is saying is that Achland expects us to shoulder the burden of their own inequity,” said light-skinned and human, Nilam. Hailing from the east province that bordered Xian'tu, Nilam shared many of that countries physical qualities, chiefly the paler, almost yellow skin, rounded eyes, and flatter face. “They would let the south consume itself, while re-establishing their own power here, then use my people to shield themselves from Xian'tu and the mongrel horse-lords that raid the wastes between that country and Üruush. I personally do not see why it is necessary that the Consortium be removed, they have kept order here, and fought our enemies.”

“I am sure Achland will be able to provide us with enough men,” said Bhaskar from across the round table. “They have just as much of an interest as we do in keeping this country prosperous and her
people defended. We would all suffer if Xian'tu or Üruush were to invade, or the lower castes to rebel.”

“Ahh but it is Achland's foolish notion to replace the Consortium that has caused the recent rebellions,” interjected Akeem. “They are taking advantage of the power void and Achland has failed to respond in an appropriate manner.”

“The lower castes are rebelling for a variety of reasons,” replied Bhaskar. “They were in open rebellion before it was announced that the Consortium was being supplanted and they shall continue after the Lord-Protector assumes control.”

That sparked another round of debate that Cole could barely follow. The meeting had run for close to two hours now and relatively little had been accomplished. Worse, it seemed what he had told Benedict last night was wrong. Before it had appeared that only Satesh was interested in siding with the Consortium, but after watching Daniel at work it seemed that the man was determined to convince as many of the Ra'kala to support him as possible. The majority of the south had made it clear they backed the continued Consortium rule. Bhaskar and several of the northern Vishens seemed to oppose them as did Mohan, but even they had expressed reservations about the transition from Consortium rule to that of the Lord-Protector. Cole really couldn't blame them. The Consortium mishandling of the colony, including the oppressive taxes and slow response to the three year famine, may have caused a slew of rebellions, but its soldiers were valuable, and they kept order well enough, even if that order involved the mass killing of anyone that opposed them.

Count Oscar, Amelia's husband and Emma's father, cleared his throat. “Gentleman as a personal friend of Minister Tenning, the man who put his political career on the line to appoint Lord-Protector Lowell, I must say you are all being unfair to Mr. Travers. Even Vice Chancellor Sutlen supports this motion, though rather half-heartily. Yes the withdrawal of Consortium forces will be taxing, but together we can manage. Minister Tenning has agonized for many long years over the atrocities that have taken place here in Kaldry. His proposal was approved because it would make you citizens of the empire. We wish to lift you up, make you our equals, not keep you ground under the heel of a private mercantile company.”

“Funny to see how Achland's stance has changed,” said Akeem. “Before they were perfectly happy letting us wallow, now you want to make us equal subjects? You people have a very interesting way of doing things.”

That comment started another round of squabbling. Satesh supported Akeem's position, though he argued that the Consortium should still retain their power. Others opposed this, wanting Achland to withdraw entirely, or at the very least send its soldiers out to die crushing the lower castes and leave the rule of Kaldry to the Ra'kala. Mohan seemed to shift his position at every turn, though he always opposed Satesh and Cole felt that there was no hope of getting the two men to agree on anything. Mohan's only concern appeared to be Mohan and how he might acquire power. At first Cole thought Mohan might have been a good ally against the Consortium, but now he was supporting Daniel's position. Cole bitterly hoped they would all just agree on something before Duke Lowell arrived.

“If the Consortium does withdraw their forces, I can assure you the Church would be more than happy to appoint an Inquisitorial task force to help maintain the peace,” said corpulent Father Bently. Daniel snorted. “Does the church really have that much of an interest in Kaldry?”

From the looks several of the Ra'kala exchanged Cole thought it clear they would want little to do with any military force lead by the church.

“Thank you for the offer father,” said Satesh. “Perhaps after the Lord-Protector's arrival.”

Argg these people are just tossing around witless talking points, thought Cole as he leaned back in his chair, fighting to keep his eyes open as the council continued to argue. Everyone likes talking about Achland's power and its colonies, but no one does anything about it.

Cole's eyelids were just beginning to droop, when the chamber door opened and Fiona strode
into the room, followed by Allen, and the man Cole had seen talking to Fiona at the party. There was a
nasty burn on Fiona's right cheek and from the way she held herself Cole could tell something had
happened. The council stopped its bickering, watching as Allen whispered something in Daniel's ear
and then handed him a pack of papers. Daniel motioned for Fiona to take a seat, then turned to those
gathered around the table.

“Gentlemen,” said Daniel, laying the packet of papers out on the table “It appears we have a
situation, though perhaps Colonel Walsh would like to explain.”

Fiona rose, then began to pace back and forth across the room. “At approximately twenty-one
hundred hours local time the garrison at Lalthetta, in the north-west, came under attack. This morning
Consortium-Colonel Jenkins and myself led a small task force to determine the nature of the attack.
There were no survivors, save for a single kelf. From his language and dress, I would hazard a guess
that he was from one of the north-eastern tribes, possibly of the Inse'tra caste, though reports have also
placed a band of Selther in the area. Before securing the village we came under attack from
approximately two hundred armed natives, lead by a Weaver who refereed to himself as a 'Prophet'. He
burned several of my men to death and in the end Bernard stayed behind so that the rest of us could
withdraw, he was killed soon after. This is not the first time an attack like this has happened, but it is
the first time I have seen the tribal castes so well organized.”

Cole sat up. “This Bernard, what forms of magic did he prefer?”

“He tended towards ice,” replied Fiona. “He was also a skilled healer. Now if this threat...”

“You said this mage used fire, correct?” Cole asked, mind racing. Garret had been a talented
Spellweaver and had proven himself a skilled manipulator during his time in Felviar. Perhaps Garret
had taken up the mantel of “Prophet” to further the warlocks' plan.

“Yes,” Fiona replied, obviously annoyed that Cole had interrupted her.

“Pfff, you must really be overstating his abilities then,” said Cole. “Fire is one of the most basic
attacking elements. It's simple to create and wield, but also simple to counter. I'll give Bernard credit
for mastering the more difficult ice-magics, but a Spellweaver of his experience should have easily
survived the encounter with this so called prophet.”

“This man's attacks melted Bernard's armour,” Fiona stated.

Count Oscar laughed. “Such a thing is impossible, a soldier's steam-armour is impervious to all
but the most brutal magical assaults. Even Felviar's Weavers have trouble cracking it open.”

Allen leaned forward and whispered in Daniel's ear.

“Unless the soldier in question was not fully armed,” said Daniel as he waved Allen off.

“According to Colonel Jenkins' report these men were not fully armed, instead only wearing a small
percentage of the necessary armour. Why did you issue such an order?”

“I made a tactical decision based on the information I had available,” said Fiona. “There was no
evidence to suggest the presence of hostile magic and based upon previous skirmishes it's been proven
that the mobility provided by lighter armour allows our men a greater freedom of movement, without
sacrificing defence. In addition, it has been proven that the tribal castes possess very few weapons
capable of puncturing our lightest armours.”

“She is right,” said Satesh. “Our primitive brothers are rarely a threat, and Colonel Walsh has
proven herself incredibly competent in the field. No doubt any other commander would have reached
the same tactical conclusion she reached, based upon the information available.”

Allen looked annoyed and for a moment Cole thought he was going to offer a rebuttal. Curious,
Cole decided to probe the other man's mind to at least get a reading on his feelings. Cole reached out
and found the other man's mind hidden behind a solid grey wall of indifference. Even the most
powerful Weavers had a hard time shielding their emotions, yet somehow, Allen, a normal man, was
shielding his thoughts from Cole.
Confused, Cole tried again, attempting to breach the man's defences. He scouted along the mental wall, but could not find any cracks or imperfections in which he could plant his influence. Sweat ran down Cole's brow as he tried to puncture Allen's defences. He could force his way in of course, but doing so might alert Allen to his presence.

“Cole are you well?” Satesh asked. “Your face is all contorted.”

“Wha...sorry,” Cole shook his head. “Most have dozed off.”

Fiona glared at him, then went back to discussing the attack with the other members of the council. The news caused even more debate. Cole could feel his eyes beginning to grow heavy again and fought to pay attention. He really needed to keep listening, especially so he could gather more news on this self-styled “prophet”. Allen had appeared almost bemused by the news that Lalthetta had been razed to the ground. That combined with the pin Cole had spotted the previous evening and the conversation he had overheard about a Felvian operative working with the tribals was all the proof Cole needed. Allen was working to degrade the alliance between the Ra'kala and Achland, while Garret was working to incite the lower castes to revolt, causing even more tension and bloodshed.

“This confirms some other reports I have heard,” said Bhaskar. “This so called prophet has been uniting tribes for close to a year now. The mask you described is that of...”

“SATESH!!” The door banged opened and Mohan ran into the chamber, screaming at the top of his lungs. “SATESH!!! Your father....he's...he's dying.”

Satesh sat blank faced for a moment, then let out an ululating wail of agony. The chamber erupted into panicked chattering. Satesh stood up and dashed out of the room, Mohan following close at his heels. Several of the Ra'kala stepped away from the table and began to talk amongst themselves. Bhaskar dashed out of the room after Satesh, nodding at Fiona as he passed. Fiona set off after them and Cole glanced around, then ran after her.

The tower's staircase spiralled downwards and Cole tumbled into the walls several times as he ran along, clumsily taking the stairs two and three at a time. Satesh’s cries of agony echoed through the halls as he ran along, ripping and tearing at his garments. Cole caught up to Fiona and the two exchanged a quick glance.

“How bad will things get if Essar really is dying?” Cole asked as they turned a corner and began to run down an open air hallway.

“It's hard to say,” Fiona replied. “He's one of the few Ra'kala who actually tried to help the lower castes. The people love him. His death will unbalance the peace process. Worse, the Vishen will have to gather to elect the new High Vishen.”

“You know there is something that has bothered me for a while now,” said Cole. They jogged along another corridor, passing that tattered remnants of Mohan's sash and turban. “How is it that a woman in the Achlish military, and commands all of our forces in Kaldry?”

Fiona was quiet for a moment, her eyes grew misty and it seemed she was not going to reply.

“It was during the second Kaldrien uprising,” Fiona began. “We had been pushed back to the outpost at Tereth. Our scryer was dead, but we still had telegrams coming in. Orders came, they were meant for my father....but....but by then he was already dead. We were so out manned at that point that anyone who could hold a gun was up on the walls fighting. The chain of command had pretty much dissolved so the men...the men just pretty much promoted me on their own. My father had been one to push for the integration of women in the military, so I already held the rank of Lieutenant, though that was pretty much in name only.”

Fiona was quiet for a moment, her eyes grew misty and it seemed she was not going to reply.

“Really? That is not what I expected,” said Cole. By now they had crossed into the inner palace and where running along the balcony overlooking the garden were Cole had met Essar the previous evening.

“I'd grown up with a lot of these men and my father had me training with them as soon as I was
of age. I had proven myself so the men followed me. Besides without a Walsh to approve and issue the order there would be no order.” Fiona shrugged. “More orders came down for the now 'Colonel' Walsh and so, I became my father. We could have replied that he was dead, but we didn't have the time, it was faster for me to just issue the orders. It wasn't hard, even after the siege around the outpost was broken I simply maintained telegraph communication and no one was any the wiser. I owe everything to the men who served with me there.”

“So you took command through deception? How very womanly.” Fiona rounded on Cole and he flinched, thinking she was going to hit him. “What happened when you were found out?”

“I was dragged before a tribunal,” Fiona replied. “The soldiers I had served with were brought up as witnesses and defended me, so did the Consortium. I suspect Daniel hoped that by supporting a woman, the Achlish military power would be diminished against that of the Consortium. Sadly for them, the Walsh family does not just roll over. In the end it would have been more of a hassle for the Assembly to replace me. I had the support of the man, and of the Consortium, so I was promoted, for real this time.”

“Daniel must be an even greater fool than I thought,” said Cole. “Anyone who talks with you, even for five minutes, would quickly realize you are not someone to be trifled with.”

Fiona shrugged. “Daniel has never been a great intellectual, and Allen has never been the best adviser. Indeed he was the one who pushed Daniel to support me.”

Allen that snake, thought Cole. He wanted a weak Achlish Colonel in charge so he could further his own plans. But that means the warlocks have been plotting this for close to a decade. Between him and that Masked Prophet, this entire conspiracy is much bigger than I thought.

“Wait, if your father died during the Kaldrien revolution....you must be old!”

“Is there some problem with me being older than you expected?” Fiona laughed. “Mr. Travers, do you ever read the paper, or pay attention during polite conversation?”

“When it's about me.”

“Ahhh, there is your problem. I will repeat myself, my father died during the second Kaldrien uprising, the one that happened four years ago. Just to put any further questions to rest, I was twenty-two when my father died. I hope you ego-centric nature has not interfered with your mathematical skills.”

Cole sighed and shook his head, eliciting a wry smile from Fiona. They turned another corner, entering the residential hall of the palace. So engrossed in his conversation with Fiona, Cole almost slammed into a group of children who had stepped out into the hall. Cole twisted around, just dodging past the blond hair boy, the girl, and a kelf-boy.

“Cole!” Armel called. “Cole, I have something I have to tell you.”

“Oh hello Armel,” said Cole, turning around and running backwards. “Your highness, and little brown boy I don't know.”

“I have a name,” Kishan shouted.

“Yes, but I don't know it,” said Cole, before he stumbled into a free standing vase. The vase teetered and Cole grabbed it, ensuring it would not fall over. “If you haven't noticed I am sort of busy right now.”

“Cole, it's about Allen,” Armel began. “He's...”

“I know, I know, later, somewhere in private.”

Cole left Armel standing in the hallway with the other two kids and began to run again. Well he seems to be doing well enough thought Cole, watching Satesh skid to a halt outside a plain dark-wood door. By now Satesh's clothes were shredded in a dozen places, hanging off of him like rags. The Kaldrien man flung the doors open. Mohan, Cole, and Fiona followed, keeping back far to give Satesh some privacy.
Essar's room was on the second floor, overlooking one of the palace's many gardens. Like the council chamber the room was round, but it was also surprisingly sparse, unlike the rest of the palace. Essar lay in a plain canopy bed, surrounded by several attendants. One man wiped Essar's brow with a wet rag, while others chanted prayers. Death hung in the air, an invisible and unwanted guest.

“Father,” Satesh cried, dropping to his knees at the head of the bed. “Father, please no.”

Essar said something, but Cole could not hear him. Last night the man had seemed strong, powerful. If someone hadn't told him otherwise, Cole would have expected the man he had met at the party to live for another twenty years at least. The man who lay in the bed was not the man Cole had met last night, at least not any more, he was now a withered husk.

The leathery skin hung limp and Essar's eyes had sunken in. The sad smile that had played about the elder's lips was gone, replaced by crusted drool. Essar lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, and even from this distance, Cole could see that Essar's once sparkling eyes had dimmed. Essar's bare chest heaved up and down. Cole could count the man's ribs. The entire room smelled of death and Cole was thankful for the open balcony.

“I saw him last night,” Cole whispered to Fiona. “He seemed well enough then.”

“Essar was a master at concealing his sickness and age,” said Fiona. “He turned one-hundred and nine last year. I am not surprised you thought he was younger. I saw the two of you talking, if he made the effort to meet with you well, he must have thought there was something special about you or what you are doing.”

“Could someone have done something?” Cole inquired. Satesh continue to moan in agony, his wailing reaching such a pitch that Cole thought he might need to excuse himself. Not familiar with the native mourning customs, Cole could not be sure if Satesh was overeating or if such overt signs of grief were expected from his caste. After the conversation between Satesh and Allen that Cole had overheard, he would not doubt that the man may have had a hand in his father's sudden demise.

“No,” Fiona, shook her head.

“Someone summon a Holder,” said one of attendants.

Seeing that Cole was confused Bhaskar stepped over. “Our people believe that one's soul does not truly die,” he said. “The body fades, but the memory does not. A Holder will take the soul of the deceased and add it to the others he holds within his mind. These souls, the Veth, are then passed onto our young when they come of age.”

The attendant left, just as Father Bently and Allen entered the room. The priest swept past the mourners, almost knocking Fiona over as he dropped to his knees behind Satesh.

“My child, I am so sorry,” said Father Bently, laying a hand on Satesh's bare back. “Your father goes to join the father of all.”

“If we do not hurry his Veth will be lost to us all,” said the Bhaskar. “If Essar's Veth is not guided into the afterlife, all that he is, all that he learned in life will be lost to us. If his soul does not join with those of our ancestors his life is meaningless.”

“Satesh, you have come to the light of the faith,” said Father Bently. “You shall rule when your father passes. You can bring the light of god to your brothers. Allow me to give your father the last rights of the one true god.”

Satesh looked up from his father's tortured form. “But if I do not follow my ancestors....”

“No,” Bhaskar stomped his foot down on the ground. “I will not allow you to....”

“My father will be given the rights of the faith,” said Satesh.

“Satesh think about what you are doing,” said Mohan. Bhaskar turned to leave and Mohan grabbed the older man's forearm. “While our religions differ, all those of kelvish blood believe the rites of Holding are sacred. If you do not ascribe your father's Veth to the rite, the chaos that will result could
be catastrophic.”

“Then we don't tell anyone,” said Satesh. “The people will believe his Veth has been given to
the Holder, but my father's soul shall be enlightened. He shall be taken up to paradise to live with the
eternal father.” Satesh looked around at those in the room. “I trust that all of you agree? My father's
soul shall be saved and we shall keep this secret in our hearts.”

Bhaskar glared at Satesh for a moment, then the dark skinned northern Vishen turned his back
on Satesh and walked out. Through the gap in the door, Cole saw a small kelvish man with a bright
green turban talking with Bhaskar as the two walked away. After it became apparent that Essar was not
going to die within the next few moments, Cole left. Armel was waiting for him outside. Cole nodded
to the elf boy and they set off towards Cole's bungalow.

As Cole and Armel walked through the inner city, a bell began to toll. Cole looked up for a
moment, guessing that it signalled the end of Essar's life. The coming days would certainly prove
interesting, especially since it seemed a rift was forming between Bhaskar and Satesh. Without further
evidence Cole could not be sure, but he thought Bhaskar might prove to be an effective ally against
Satesh and Allen.

Once back in their room, Cole used his magic to erect a series of sound dampening wards and
turned to Armel. “So what is it you wanted to tell me?”

“I caught Allen talking about you,” said Armel. “He was talking with another man. They were
talking about plans...and queens and things. Allen was nervous about you following him the other
night....and he was the one who sent the assassin.”

“Well, at least that is one mystery solved, I guess. Of course I still don't have any concrete
proof, but at least my theory about Allen was confirmed.” Cole scratched his chin. “Did you see who he
was talking with?”

“No,” replied Armel. “He was holding some sort of mirror or something. Who ever he was
talking to sounded really posh. I missed quite a bit of it. Something about people escaping and then the
other man yelled at Allen for allowing you to discover his involvement.”

“Hmm, Allen must have been scrying with someone,” said Cole. “Someone must have
contacted him though since I can't sense the Weave on Allen. Anything else?”

“Yeah, the posh man said something about having a history with you.”

Cole's eyebrows shot up and he grabbed Armel by the shoulders. “Really?” Cole shook the boy.

“Anything else...any names...anything?!?”


“It's just......I've been following someone I think is connected with these warlocks,” said Cole.

“Go on, get out of here. Find Helen and your friend. I have some work to do.”

Armel left and Cole began to root through his notes. Back in Thertan he had overheard the
warlocks make mention of someone who was familiar with inciting rebellion being sent to Kaldry.
They had even implied that said person had been in Felviar. Cole had guessed it might be Garret, but
now, now he was sure it was him. The man had never spoken with a posh accent, but perhaps he was
putting on an act. What really caught Cole's attention was Armel saying Allen and this mystery man
were discussing “someone who had escaped”. The Prophet was working with the warlocks, and Cole
was sure it must be Garret. Sure it might be dangerous confronting him, but stopping Garret would not
only satisfy his obligations with Benedict, it would finally provide closure to those events that had
transpired so long ago.
Chapter 20

The funeral procession stretched for nearly a mile, while thousands of mourners crammed the streets to mark the passing Essar Al-Ethat, High Vishen of Kaldry. News of Essar's death had travelled fast, and the three days leading up to his burial had seen close to a million Kaldriens pour into Al-katal. The burden placed upon the Achlish armed forces was so great that they were forced to recall nearly ninety percent of their fighting men. If reports were to be believed, the outlying villages were in chaos, and Cole wondered if all of this might have been part of the warlocks' larger plot.

The planning for the funeral had been agonizing. Not only had it destroyed any sort of progress Cole had made with the Kaldriens, it had created even more tension. Thankfully, it seemed no one had mentioned Satesh's decision to consecrate his father's spirit to the lord almighty, instead of honouring him in the traditional Kaldrien manner. Cole had spent several sleepless nights talking with Benedict about the exact details of Essar's death, and had spent several more nights poking around Satesh's belongings. It wasn't hard, in fact it was very easy, since Kaldrien custom decreed both spouses and children must remain at their deceased's side until they were buried. He had not discovered anything of consequence, though he still suspected the Satesh of having a hand in his father's demise. Cole had also investigated both Daniel and Allen's quarters while they were gone one day, but had come away empty handed.

Cole marched along with the rest of Achland's dignitaries, somewhere in the middle of the procession. Princess Helen and her dour guardian, Ian, led the Achlish mourners, followed by Fiona, Erik and several other top officers, all dressed in their military best. Daniel and the rest of the Consortium executives followed them, accompanied by Colonel Jenkins. Cole, Thomas, Armel, and the other minor Achlish nobles came next, followed by Matthew and the rest of Achlish soldiers, all dressed in their bright blue trench-coats. They were followed by the red-coated Consortium forces, and a host of armed Kaldrien soldiers, all ready to leap into action should a riot break out.

Essar had been entombed in a gleaming marble coffin, which had then been loaded onto the back of an elephant. Satesh followed, his head bent, clothes immaculate. The procession wound through the city, slowly making its way to the towering sepulchres of the Nal-katal, the dead city. Thousands of women, dressed in black face-concealing shawls, followed the coffin, wailing and gnashing their teeth as they marched along.

In the three days leading up to the burial there had been thirteen riots, several of which necessitated armed intervention. Even with so many soldiers present Al-katal seemed ready to tear itself apart. Cole, dressed in his smartest black silk shirt and trousers, watched as the crowd rushed forward again, desperately reaching out to touch Essar's coffin. The soldiers surrounding the procession closed ranks and presented the mourners with a wall of bayonets. The crowd shrank back and the procession turned down another street.

“I don't like this,” Thomas muttered. The street they had turned down was narrow, and people leaned out the windows to watch the funeral column march past. “To close in here....if something were to happen.”

“It won't,” said Cole, gently massaging his temple. His headache had returned, worse than ever, and all the wailing was making him irritable. “The jackboot of the military will ensure it doesn't.”

“I hope you're right,” Thomas replied. “I still took the Colonel on her word, you bring a gun?”

Cole clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “A gun, really my friend? Do you doubt my abilities?”

“No,” said Thomas. The procession turned again, heading up a broad avenue and Thomas let out a sigh of relief. “I just doubt your ability to restrain yourself. You enjoy a spectacle and the attention a scandal brings. The last thing we need is hundreds of civilian casualties.”
“If a riot starts, I doubt me killing a few people I didn't intend will be the biggest concern of ours.”

The procession had entered into the final stretch. After marching around the entire city they now began to ascend the hill leading to Nal-katal. Like the city below, the city of the dead had been built over the centuries, crafted by a thousand hands, all striving to build something greater than themselves. Unlike the city below it was all built from the same white marble, instead of the sprawling mess of styles that comprised Al-katal. The first tomb, built by a Kaldrien warlord to house the earthly remains of his beloved, had been erected in the second century of current reckoning. Since then the monument had grown, with each successive dynasty trying to outdo its predecessor.

Unlike their ancestors, the current Ra'kala did not build separate tombs for each family member, instead constructing massive citadels that they expanded with each passing generation. Work had already begun on Essar's monument, but for now he would be laid to rest in an antechamber just off from his father's tomb.

Before the party had gone a hundred paces, it turned again. Cole groaned. For a moment it looked as though the march might finally end, but apparently not. The procession began to pass through an open bazaar and even more mourners stepped forward to pay their respects. Cole's stomach grumbled as they passed the bazaar's food carts. The funeral procession had begun a few hours after dawn and it was getting close to midday.

The elephant leading the procession had just reached the edge of the bazaar when a cry went up. “The heathens have corrupted our people! The Ra'kala forget the ancient ways!” Cole turned to see a single unarmed man shoving his way through the crowd. Soon others began to take up his shouts.

“Oh bugger,” Cole muttered.

For a moment everything seemed calm, then a shudder ran through the crowd. There was a sharp intake of breath and then an Achlish soldier was struck by an impromptu missile. The force of the blow sent the man reeling and he collapsed to the ground, blood pouring from a wound on his head. In the same instant, Colonel Jenkins stepped forward, drew his revolver, and shot the perpetrator at point blank range. The bullet blasted the kelf's head apart, drenching the crowd in spray of blood, bone, and brain matter. For a moment everything stopped.

Bang!

A second gunshot rang out and an Achlish soldier dropped, hand clutching a bullet hole in his chest. The crowd erupted into a flurry of violence as a group of natives tossed aside their heavy shawls, revealing a glimmering array of pilfered firearms. More gunshots split the air as Jenkins began to fire indiscriminately, gunning down mourners weather they were armoured or not. The crowd that had been mourning the passing of a beloved leader only a moment before turned into a violent mob in the blink of an eye.

Cole grabbed Armel and pulled him down behind a stall, while Thomas fired several warning shots into the air. Further up the walk Fiona and her men had closed ranks around Helen and were falling back into an open store front. More rioters poured into the square, brandishing any weapons they could find. Cole watched as Father Bentley attempted to flee, only to be trampled by the mob and then bludgeoned to death.

“Blast it I'm out,” said Thomas, sliding his revolver back into its holster. “Couple of sharpshooters up there on the roof.”

“Yeah I saw them,” said Cole. He watched the men on the roof methodically gun down some of Fiona's soldiers, deciding on the best course of action. The men took aim again and Cole stood up, flinging a bolt of indigo energy at one of them. “You could have shot them you know, instead of wasting bullets firing into the air.”

The lance of energy pierced the rioter's chest and he toppled off the top of the building, his hood
flopping open. Cole looked down and saw that the man was dark skinned, but human.

“I didn't think it would get this bad.” Thomas had always been something of a pacifist, even
during the Felvian Incursion he had preferred to stay back working on his machines, instead of fighting
on the front. “I think Matthew and some of the others are holed up on the far side.” Thomas reached
down, and took the dead man's pistol. Thomas cracked the gun open, found it was empty and tossed it
away. “I didn't see what happened to Erik.”

“We have to rescue Helen,” Armel shouted. “We have to get to them! We have to keep her safe.”

“She's safer then we are right now,” Cole muttered. By now the rioters had begun to attack each
other, as well as the soldiers, and Cole watched as Kaldriens, both human and kelf, fought amongst
themselves, while another group of armed attackers streamed into the plaza. “Someone arranged this.
They are all too well organized.”

“Or perhaps they are just taking advantage of the situation,” said Thomas. “How many hundreds
of thousands poured into the city earlier this week? We know the lower castes have been attacking the
outlying settlements for the last couple of months. Do you really think they could resist sending a
statement like this?”

“No,” Cole replied, watching as another contingent of armed savages poured into the bazaar. As
they jostled about, Cole spotted something he did not expect, a kelvish man flinging bolts of energy.
Cole's mind raced. Could this be the prophet? Could this be Garret in disguise? Whoever this
man was he was dangerous, but he was also anachronistic. He shouldn’t be there. Kelf blood was weak
in magic, with some of their most notable Spellweavers struggling to even match a human child. Cole
felt something odd, that same weird resonance and dull ache in his teeth that he had felt when in the
presence of both Braden and Clayton. Somewhere in the back of his mind Cole felt that this man may
have some of the answers he was seeking regarding the warlocks. Even if he didn't have any answers
this Weaver was a threat that only Cole could handle.

“Both of you, get to Fiona,” said Cole. “Go through the stalls over there.”

Thomas nodded and rose. “Where are you going?”

“I'm going to go have a little chat.”

Cole ran across the plaza, ducking and diving through stalls and doing his best to remain
unseen. The Weaver had focused his attention on a small pocket of soldiers the natives had cornered.
Cole reached out, twisting the Weaver's shadow. The man was readying a second assault upon the
embattled soldiers when Cole struck. Grasping hands burst forth from the Spellweaver's shadow,
wrapping around his arms and dragging him to the ground.

The enemy Weaver responded with astounding celerity. Even as the man was wrenched back,
he flung a series of bolts at Cole. Cole dodged the barrage as he commanded the shadows to restrain
the man. For a moment it seemed to work and then the mage countered Cole's weaving by creating a small
source of light directly over his shadow, destroying it. The kelf sprang to his feat and threw another bolt
of energy at Cole. Cole caught it and his fist crackled with azure energy, his defensive wards
manifesting themselves around his entire body.

There was an explosion from the other side of the bazaar and Cole looked back just in time to
see Matthew and his men dash away. One of the natives had climbed up on the roof and was now
lobbing improvised grenades into the crowd.

“Take him down!” Matthew roared.

Cole hesitated, the grenadier had distracted him, and when he looked back he could see the
enemy Weaver fleeing down a side alley. More explosions ripped through the bazaar and Cole found
himself faced with a dilemma, help Matthew and the other soldiers, or attempt to get some answers.
This Spellweaver was certainly involved with warlocks, of that Cole was sure and his capture would no
doubt provide Cole with information he needed, as well as a great deal of renown. Right now Cole
could end this entire shadowy conflict, showing the world his true potential or he could stay and help a small band of soldiers. Cole turned, abandoning Matthew, and ran after the fleeing warlock.

The man had set off at a furious pace, and Cole struggled to keep up. The riot that had consumed the bazaar had spread to the rest of Al-katal and Cole had to dodge past hundreds of native attackers in his pursuit of the fleeing Weaver. The man dashed down an alleyway and Cole tore after him. Just as Cole turned the corner, the warlock turned and flung something small and shiny at Cole. As it spun through the air the metal shard grew in size.

The sliver of metal sliced into Cole's left shoulder and he staggered back. Hot blood welled up out of the wound. Tentacles made of metal began to worm their way into Cole's flesh, wriggling their way under his skin. More blood seeped out of the wound and Cole could feel his left arm beginning to grow numb. Cole growled and ripped the quarrel from this shoulder, remembering all the times he had seen Garret perform a similar weaving upon the elves of Felviar.

Temper flaring, Cole raced along the alleyway. The man he was pursuing wasn't Garret, he was too large, broader in the shoulders, and somewhat bow-legged, but he clearly knew Garret, or had at least been tutored by him. The warlock continued to flee, running down the alley with Cole hot on his heels. Cole flung several bolts of energy at the fleeing warlock's back, but the man twisted to the side and dashed down another street.

The warlock was a crafty one, he had lead Cole out into another bazaar and Cole spotted the man fleeing along the outer edge, knocking over tables and rubbish bins in order to impeded Cole's progress. Rankalan guards charged across the plaza, sabres flashing as they clashed with another group of rioters. The shadow of an airship passed by overhead and in the distance Cole could still hear the muffled report of small arms fire.

The warlock dashed down a dark side street and Cole broke into a broad smile. In the open the other Spellweaver may have had the advantage, but now he was in the shadows, Cole's territory. Cole dashed after the warlock, using a simple weaving to silence his footfalls. The alleyway was very narrow and the high, multi-storey buildings cut the bright blue sky to nothing but a sliver. The warlock was up ahead, Cole could hear the man breathing. Cole slowed, wreathing himself in shadows so that the other Weaver would not be able to see him.

Cole struck just as the warlock turned a corner. A mass of shadow-stuff wrapped around the man's torso, dragging him back into an open doorway. Before Cole could close on the man, the ground under his feet began to shake and pillar of rock burst forth. Cole leaped to the side, but wasn't fast enough. The fist of rock clipped the side of his head and Cole could feel his cheek bone snap.

Concentration broken, Cole released his hold on the shadows and the warlock rose, hands whipping through the air. Still stunned from the blow he had taken to the head, Cole stumbled back, just as the warlock ripped a chunk of rock from the surrounding buildings. The jagged missile hurtled through the air, rolling end of end. Cole smirked, raised his hand, and blasted the boulder to pieces. Hunks of rock hurtled through the air and one of them struck the warlock. The man grunted and staggered back.

Cole took advantage of the momentary confusion and once again wrapped himself in a veil of shadow. The warlock, fear pouring off of him like sweat, glanced around and then slammed his fist straight into the ground. A ripple ran through the ground and Cole was flung into the air. The warlock struck, clapping his hands together and causing two massive bricks to rip themselves free from the surrounding buildings. The bricks came together, crushing the shadowy double Cole had summoned.

“You'll have to do better than that,” Cole hissed. The warlock glanced around, trying to find where Cole had hidden himself. Cole struck just as the man turned his back, wrapping a lash of shadows around the warlock's throat and yanking the man off his feet. “You'll have to do much better.”

The warlock fought against Cole's magic, digging his fingers into the ground in attempt to gain
some traction. Using his magic the warlock was able to anchor himself in the stone, but only for a moment. Cole yanked the lash again and one of the warlock's fingers snapped, the sound reverberating down the alley. The warlock rolled along the ground, coming to rest sprawled on his back at Cole's feet.

“I really do have to hand it to you, you put up a decent fight,” said Cole as he placed a foot down on the man's chest. Cole looked down at the man and saw that his skin was running, melting, revealing white beneath a mask of dark brown make-up.

“I'm glad you enjoyed yourself Mr. Travers,” the man wheezed. A bubble of blood formed at the corner of his mouth, then popped. “I'm just sad I won't get to see him break you.”

Cole reached down, grabbed the man, and slammed him into a wall. Now that Cole looked he could see that the man was wearing a pair of glass lenses to change his eye colour, making them paler to match those of the elves. Cole was well acquainted with such things. During the planning phase of the Felvian operation, Cormag, Cole's brutish childhood friend, had suggested the idea of using similar lenses to change their eye colours to better blend in with the elves. The trick had worked for the most part and the Achlanders had successfully infiltrated Felviar. Clearly Garret and the warlocks were employing a similar technique.

“Who is going to break me? This Masked Prophet?” Cole chuckled. “You really think he's a match for me?”

“So confident,” the man smiled. “Or are you just hiding behind your bravado?”

Cole's smile faded. “So tell me, what's the end plan eh? Allen has infiltrated the Consortium, but what was your part in all this?”

“Allen, I don't know who you're talking about.”

“Oh really, a friend of mine caught him talking with someone. I've seen the brooch he wears. He's one of you!”

“One of who?” The man coughed again, bloody phlegm splattering Cole's face.

“Where is Garret?!”

“I'm afraid I have no idea who you are talking about.”

“YOU DO!!” Cole roared. Shadows flared up around Cole, their edges jagged. Cole reached out with his magic and pressed against the glass in the man's eye. With a simple effort Cole broke it and drove the small shards deep into the man's cornea. Blood leaked out as the disguised warlock screamed in agony. “TELL ME NOW!!”

Cole tore into the man's mind, shredding the feeble defences the other attempted to erect. The man's thoughts flared with fear and Cole sank indigo needles deep into the man's subconscious. Images, memories, thoughts, all swirled past Cole in a confused jumble. He picked up a name, Patrick O'Brien. Cole saw battles, front line service during the Felviar Incursion, mixed in with bouts of drug use. Patrick's mind was a wreck, a horrid thing that even Patrick could not make sense of.

Patrick tried to shield himself from Cole's assault, pleading for him to stop, but that fear and helplessness only excited Cole, reminding him of the power he had over his captive. Cole withdrew from the man's mind for a moment, refocused himself, then redoubled his assault, forcing his way deeper into Patrick. Cole's mental spear pierced Patrick's mind, violating his deepest thoughts. Cole fought through a layer of reptilian fear, then he found another memory.

Cole saw a dark chamber, Patrick kneeling before a shadowy figure, surrounded by hooded men. Cole recognized Clayton and Garret in the crowd before the memory shifted. Patrick was standing, surrounded by natives, head bowed, while a voice spoke to him, commanding him to ensure Cole failed.

“A servitor is never told more than he needs to know...” Patrick tittered, his mind snapping under Cole's assault. “We serve the Bound One and soon...soon we will be free, as free as our master. If you're lucky you may meet him some day. That is if you don't flee like you did in Felviar. I would hate
for you...”

Cole's protective wards manifested themselves once again, forming into a blade of solid, psychic energy. Cole stabbed Patrick, once, twice, three times. Hot blood sprayed Cole's face as he continued to stab the warlock, breathing heavily as he vented his anger into the man's corpse. Cole withdrew the blade, intending to stab the man another dozen times, then stopped. Cole dropped to his knees, tears welling in his eyes.

Patrick slumped to the ground, leaving a trail of blood down the wall. The man was a pawn, nothing more. Cole pushed away the memories of Felviar, doing his best to forget how it had been his fault that Lisette had died. It had been Benedict's fault for leading them into such a hopeless situation in the first place, and how it had been Garret's fault for betraying them to the Felvians in the first place. Cole ground his teeth, stood, and began to pick through the Patrick's pockets. Cole found the silver patina crusted pin, exactly as he expected. Covered in the other man's blood Cole limped back down the alley, thinking that whatever these warlocks were after, they were closer to accomplishing their goals than Cole was to discovering what those goals were.
Chapter 21

Fiona's initial report had called for eight hundred soldiers, but after seeing how many mourners had flooded into Al-katal, she had upped that estimate to fifteen hundred, calling all the men under her command. At Allen's insistence, Daniel had decided he would only provide Fiona with two hundred of his men, giving Fiona just over a thousand troops to command. Allen argued that having so many Achlish soldiers on duty was treading dangerously close to usurping command from the Consortium. Daniel had foolishly agreed with his adviser. When Fiona persisted, things had gotten even worse.

"With the recent unrest I just don't believe we should pull as many of the Consortium Guard off the front lines," Daniel had told her. "We have to protect our investment, especially since most of our staff is currently leaving the colony so that the military can replace them. Besides the natives need to get used to the idea that the Consortium Guard will no longer be here and that they must solely depend on the Achlish military to maintain order."

Fiona sighted down the barrel of her Bryer-39 Auto-Loader, she sorely hoped the mob would kill both Daniel and Allen, it would save her the trouble. Even before the screaming kelf had stepped up, Fiona knew things were going to go bad. The crowd's furtive, guilty glances had given them away. By the time the funeral procession turned and entered the bazaar, Fiona had not only identified thirteen armed Kaldriens, she had also determined where, when, and how they would attack.

Apparently Ian had known as well. Just as Jenkins opened fire, Helen's tall, Gelisharin bodyguard grabbed a merchant's table, flipped it over, and then dropped it down, forming a makeshift barricade for the princess and himself. A moment later Ian opened fire with his rifle, gunning down three of his attackers in rapid succession. The leonine man's quick response not only saved Helen's life, but Fiona's as well. In the ten seconds since the battle had started, Fiona and Ian had turned the space around the barricade into a killing field.

"We are going to need to move soon," said Ian, his golden eyes sweeping over the battlefield. "Think you and your men can secure that store front?"

Fiona didn't even have to look back to know which shop Ian was talking about. When Fiona had analysed the crowd she had also determined the exact tactical value of over a dozen positions within the bazaar. In a perfect world Fiona would have assigned two hundred soldiers to patrol Al-katal's rooftops, but she didn't have the men for that. As it was Fiona had given the order to clear the crowds back two hundred feet, and positioned forty snipers on top of key buildings. Contrary to Achlish beliefs, Kaldrien bazaars were actually very organized, with straight, narrow rows and well spaced shops.

"Hutchins, O'toole, Conrad, fall back three hundred paces," Fiona barked. By now two minutes had elapsed since the beginning of the riot. True to their training, Fiona's men had fallen back to defensive positions, providing covering fire for the fleeing civilians. The Consortium Guard, on the other hand, had charged head long into the crowd, killing without mercy.

"Ma'am, what about the Administrator?" O'toole shouted.

Fiona glanced over to where Daniel and Allen were hiding. They had taken refuge inside a relatively sturdy looking stall and appeared safe for the time being.

"Our loyalty is to the Crown, soldier," Fiona shouted back. "Relay the orders down the line, all our men are to fall back and set up defensive positions. See if you can't get the Consortium men to listen as well."

Fiona cocked the rifle's lever action and stood up, firing several quick shots as she did so. Ian rose, his high-calibre rifle thundered once and a rioter's chest imploded. The rifle was designed for hunting big game, elephants, buffaloes, and the like, but Fiona could not discount its use here. Fiona paced backwards, firing as she did so. Helen had already dashed back several yards, taking cover in
another stall already occupied by several Achlish soldiers.

“Doing well so far,” said Ian, vaulting over the top of the stall and dropping down next to his royal charge.

Fiona nodded, watching as Hutchins and his men dropped down behind the position Fiona and Ian had abandoned several seconds beforehand. Fiona tapped Ian's hand, nodded, then dashed across the remaining open ground between them and the shop front. Bullets whistled through the air and Fiona dropped into a roll, abandoning her rifle and drawing her revolver. Through the smoke and haze Fiona saw that several natives had taken up positions in the store-front.

Fiona slid to the side, rising with her back to the store's outer wall. There was a break in the attackers' gunfire and Fiona dove around the corner. The three kelves were young, with one barely older than sixteen. All three were dark skinned, most likely northerners. Fiona shot the closest through the head as the man brought his flintlock-rifle to bear. The second had time to fire a single shot, but underestimated his weapons recoil. The muzzle-loader bucked wildly and the shot only grazed Fiona's shoulder. The boom of the gunshot reverberated through the confined space and the man released his weapon. Fiona shot him in the leg and he collapsed screaming in agony.

The youngest of the attackers drew a short curved sword and rushed at Fiona. She ducked under the first swing and then drove her knee into the youth's stomach. His entire body convulsed and he released the blade. Fiona pistol whipped the boy in the face and he collapsed.

“All clear,” Fiona called. Ian ran into the store, dragging Helen along with him.

Corporal Hutchins ran across the open space, bending down to grab Fiona’s rifle as he did so. The young, sandy haired soldier tossed the weapon to Fiona. She caught it, dropped to one knee, and fired four rapid shots, killing two men that had been pursuing the corporal. Ian dropped down next to her and with Hutchins help they formed a rudimentary firing line, providing covering fire for the next batch of Achlish soldiers as they came rushing into the store-front.

“Ma'am, do you want me to kill these men?” O'toole asked. Fiona and Ian rolled a heavy stone table in front of the door, forming a makeshift barricade. “Or are we going to interrogate them?”

“No,” Fiona slumped down against the makeshift barrier, chest heaving. She knew what O'toole meant when he said “interrogate”. There had been plenty of reports of soldiers using enhanced techniques to extract information from prisoners. Indeed Fiona had heard rumours that Jenkins engaged in such practices and she would not stoop to his level. Information gained through pain was useless and it not only violated the dignity of the victim, it destroyed the dignity of the interrogator. “Keep them tied up, they'll be detained along with any other captives.”

Fiona reloaded her rifle and pistol, then took stock of their situation. Matthew, Erik, and several other men were pinned down on the far side of the square by a group of well armed rioters. The attackers there appeared to have several revolver rifles, most likely taken from the garrison at Lalthetta.

Further along the square, Fiona could see Thomas and Cole had taken cover as well, ducking down behind a low wall. In fact most of Fiona's soldiers seemed to have fallen back and were no longer directly engaged in the riot. Much of the fighting was being carried out by the Consortium Guard and the R ankala. Obviously the men had not heeded Fiona's orders, which meant she would have to talk with Daniel once this was all cleared up. Jenkins only held the position of “Colonel” in a nominal sense and his rank carried no real military authority. In combat Fiona was supposed to be the undisputed commander, but things rarely happened that way. More attackers streamed into the bazaar and Fiona watched Cole break cover, narrowly avoiding being shot.

A grenade exploded in the centre of the courtyard, blasting apart the barrier Ian had erected earlier. Soldiers and parts of soldiers, sailed through the air, just as an explosion of magical energy tore through the air around Matthew and his troops. Fiona looked up scanning the rooftops for the grenadier. There was another flurry of explosions and Fiona saw Thomas and Cole's apprentice, the elf boy
Armel, rushing through the smoke, while Cole ran out of the square in pursuit of a single man.

Another explosion rocked the bazaar, and Fiona watched as a bullet pierced Thomas' left thigh. The tinkerer collapsed, then began to crawl. The elf-boy drew a thin dirk and flung it. The blade spun end over end, before burying itself in the gunman's chest.

“Ian, third building on the right, second story,” said Fiona. She checked that her weapons were reloaded and then vaulted out over the stone table that blocked the door.

“Easy shot,” said Ian, steadying his rifle atop the barricade and taking aim at the grenadier.

Fiona twisted her gun's barrel, engaging the bayonet and charged. By now the battle had degraded into a close range scuffle. Most of the Kaldriens were using old, single shot rifles, which had not seen use in the Achlish military for almost one hundred years. Many of those rioters had run out of bullets and were using the guns as clubs, to rather poor effect since most of the guns were not designed for such stress. Fiona fired several shots, then skidded into the stall where Thomas had taken cover. Out of the corner of her eye Fiona saw the grenadier topple out of the window, his head blasted into a pulpy mass by Ian's bullet.

“You okay?”

“Just a scratch ma'am,” Thomas replied. “Ran out of bullets, then Cole went running off, figured we'd be safest with you.”

“Right, can you still walk?” Fiona asked, handing Thomas her pistol.

“Yes,” said Thomas. He levelled the gun at Fiona, then fired. The report was deafening and Fiona felt the bullet whistle past her ear. Fiona turned and watched as a man, sickle sword in hand, dropped to the ground, the back of his head blown away by Thomas' shot. “I can still shoot as well!”

“You are beginning to sound like your friend Cole,” Fiona screamed, her ears still ringing from Thomas' shot. She really hadn't heard what Thomas had said, but she could read lips well enough. “Not the best personality to adopt I think, especially since he seems to have run off.”

Thomas smiled thinly. “Don't insult Cole. Whatever he is off doing, its most likely important.”

Fiona scoffed. “Do you really believe that?”

“No,” said Thomas.

“Can you make it back to the barricade on your own?”

“I could,” Thomas rose, his left leg shaking. “Where are you going?”

Fiona drew her cavalry sabre. “I have some men in trouble.”

“Then that is where I am going,” Thomas cocked back the hammer of his borrowed revolver, bent and picked up Fiona's rifle. “If you're going to charge in like that you need someone covering your back.”

Coat-tails flapping, sabre flashing, Fiona plunged into the mob. She hacked and chopped her way through the crowd, lopping off any offending limbs that happened to impede her progress. By now the riot had collapsed in on itself. Fiona's blade, forged from the same steel as the steam-armour worn by Achlish soldiers, was razor sharp, its edge maintained by hundreds of spells woven into the scabbard. The lower castes, already divided over a hundred different social issues, had begun to attack both each other and the soldiers. Thomas followed closely behind Fiona, rifle in his right hand, revolver in his left, both guns thundering as he covered Fiona's flank. Once it was clear the pair was a threat the Kaldriens fell back, allowing them to reach Matthew, Erik, and several other haggard soldiers.

“Good to see you Colonel,” said Erik, passing her a fresh rifle. Fiona inspected it, noting that it was both newer than any of the rifles her soldiers were using and that the Consortium seal was burned into its stock. “Looks like things are settling down.”

Fiona nodded as an airship sputtered by overhead. Now that Fiona and Thomas had cut a swath of destruction straight through the centre of the crowd, the Kaldriens had begun to disperse. The rioters
still pummelled and beat each other, but for the most part the crowd seemed to have moved out of the bazaar. Even so, gunshots still echoed through the city, but for the most part things in the bazaar seemed to have calmed considerably. The elephant that had carried Essar's coffin had rampaged through the far side of the bazaar, leaving behind a wide trampled bodies and twisted wreckage.

“Form patrols,” Fiona ordered. “We'll need to set up a perimeter, the inner city should still be secure. First patrol will head for the inner walls, the others will meet up with the patrols the barracks should have sent out. We need to regain control of the city.”

“I'll take the patrol to the inner gates,” said Erik. “I'm getting to old for this shite.”

Fiona took a detachment of soldiers, including Matthew, back down the broad avenue the procession had turned off earlier. Thomas accompanied Erik and the others to the inner city, guiding Helen back behind the safety of the high walls. The fighting in the outer city was still fierce and Fiona's men fought for every inch of ground. Eventually, they were able to break the rioters’ lines and rejoin several dozen dispersed Achlish soldiers. Among the wounded, there were very few who had actually been shot, which Fiona attributed to the natives’ odd aversion to industrialized technology and weapons. What really bothered Fiona was the lack of Consortium or Rankalan guards in evidence in this part of the city.

Together Fiona and the handful of Achlish soldiers fought their way down the broad avenue, slowly but surely, clearing the streets that led away from the inner city's gates. From where she was, Fiona could see that some of the other city wards were burning and she could hear the boom of cannon fire rumbling through the city.

The soldiers made one last push, and the rioters broke, fleeing back down the wide street. Over the cheers of her men, Fiona heard the whine of a rotor-craft’s propeller. The *Spitfire* as it was called was shaped like an oblique, rounded wedge or horseshoe, with the curving bulge forming the craft's “nose”, effectively minimizing the amount of the ship that would be exposed to direct fire. Weapon emplacements clung to the craft like barnacles, while a large rotor, capable of angling to accommodate the airship's motion, rested in between the ship's swept back “arms”. A second series of rotors, nestled in the curved arms propelled it forward, while the larger rotor held it aloft, creating for an agile, aerodynamic craft, that served as both gunship and deployment vehicle for the Achlish military.

The Spitfire hovered for a moment and some of the fleeing rioters stopped to watch. Without warning the airship opened fire. Rotary-cannons spat hot death, while the ship's twenty-pound cannon blasted hundred foot gouges in the stone walk way. Body parts flew through the air and the crowd fled. The ship's cannons continued to fire for several seconds, before stopping. The airship shuddered and then settled down onto the walk.

“What the hell do you think you are doing!” Fiona screamed. “The situation was under control, there was no need to use heavy ordinance against lightly armed....”

“Oh I think there was,” Jenkins popped the hatch and dropped down to the ground. “After that display them savages will think twice about attacking us. Besides, I don't exactly agree with your evaluation. You may have secured a perimeter but the city is still under siege. We can't win a war if we just hunker down.”

“This is not a war,” Fiona shouted. “This was a riot!”

“Sure as hell looks like a war to me,” Jenkins replied. “Or did you forget about what happened at Lalthetta? The tribals are mobilizing against us. Hell they struck the first blow long ago and you ignored it, now look what's happened.”

“I am still your superior officer,” said Fiona. “I issued orders to...”

“You are only my superior by point of fact, once all hell breaks out I'll issue the orders I feel like issuing,” Jenkins said. “Sorry I was busy actually *taking* the fight to the enemy to bother waiting for your orders. Thanks to me things are now secure. We still have a good deal of fighting left to do
though, but first, Daniel needs you back at the compound.”

Fiona narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“He didn't say, though considering the current state of affairs, no doubt he wishes to discuss or tactical options.”

Fiona turned and stomped off. Jenkins ducked back down into the rotor-craft and the ship's down-draft kicked up a billowing cloud of dust as it lifted off and zoomed away. Fiona scanned the skies and could see that several other Spitfires and airships, including the Queen's Fist had taken up positions around the city. Regardless of what Jenkins said, Fiona did not feel such excessive force was necessary. It would only create problems in the long run. Callous butchery was something an oppressed people remembered, something they rallied around. Even though they had perpetuated the attack, the Kaldriens would no doubt use the slaughter Jenkins had rained down on them to depict those who had died today as martyrs.

Just as Jenkins had said, the riot had left the inner city intact. In fact, as Fiona passed the Consortium bungalows, she spotted several of the company's high ranking officials sitting on their veranda, taking in their afternoon tea. The man chatted away, seemingly oblivious to the devastation the rest of the city had seen. Fiona swept passed the men and entered the main building.

The Consortium holdings in Kaldry were unique in the fact that they were not ridiculously opulent. The Consortium managed several colonies in both hemispheres and tended to flaunt its wealth about, especially since it seemed to impress the more savage natives they encountered. The Consortium had tried something similar in Kaldry, but the Ra'kala had been thoroughly unimpressed, and so the Consortium had adopted a more reserved approach to their decoration. No doubt it saved them a good deal of money.

Fiona knew she would find Daniel in his rooftop penthouse. While the rest of the Consortium holdings were sparse, Daniel's office's and personal residence were not. Instead, they assaulted the senses with a mishmash of various valuable cultural artefacts Daniel had “collected” over his years as a Consortium Administrator. There were tribal masks from Ethenia, strange arcane contraptions from Felviar, and beautifully carved Dwarlkeen statues, all thrown together in a random collection of conflicting styles and time periods. Opulent, neoclassical paintings by Loackar and Molnair hung upon the walls and ceilings, clashing with the more modern architecture. The large penthouse overlooked a beautifully manicured rooftop garden, and provided a perfect view of Essar's, now really Satesh's palace.

Fiona found Daniel seated on a spindly chair in the centre of the garden. His left arm was in a sling, and there were several burns on his face and hands, but he appeared fine otherwise. Like the gentlemen Fiona had passed on the ground, Daniel was sipping tea from a fine porcelain cup.

“Ahh Fiona I am glad Jenkins found you,” said Daniel. He placed the teacup down on its saucer, started to stand that sat back down. “I would rise but my injuries, well what can I say, they pain me greatly. I saw no sign of you during the fighting and I thought....”

“I was protecting the princess,” said Fiona. Daniel smiled and motioned to an elderly Ethenian slave. The black man disappeared, then returned a moment later, clutching a chair in his leathery hands. Fiona nodded to the man, but stayed standing, clasping her hands together at the small of her back. “I was ensuring that the city remained stable, instead of slaughtering people in the streets.”

Daniel arched an eyebrow. “Slaughtering? Hmph I would say it's what our attackers deserve. They meant to kill us.”

“Yes, but many were poorly armed,” said Fiona. Allen emerged from the other side of the courtyard, followed by the Ethenian carrying a tray and tea kettle. Fiona watched Allen closely, he had always bothered her, more so now since he grown a goatee. “We should never have turned heavy artillery on them unless it was absolutely necessary. In fact, where did those heavy cannons come
from? I seem to recall only ordering three craft equipped in such a manner, all of which are currently deployed to the front. No craft carrying that amount of fire power is currently assigned to the Consortium.”

Daniel shrugged, reached back and took a tea biscuit of the tray the slave carried. “The Consortium reassigned them several months ago. Jenkins has kept them in reserve for just such an occurrence.”

“I never issued orders for....”

There were plenty of rotor-craft and other military vehicles in use in Kaldry, so Daniel acquiring several more did not trouble Fiona. What did trouble her was how he had obtained them. The craft Fiona had seen Jenkins departing in was considerably newer than most she had at her disposal. Even though the Consortium acted autonomously for the most part, they would still need Assembly clearance to appropriate such a craft, and no paper work had crossed Fiona's desk.

“I know,” said Daniel. Allen tapped him on the shoulder and bent forward to whisper something in Daniel's ear. “I did. You may be the highest ranking military officer in Kaldry, but you are not the supreme ruler of this country, not yet anyway. Kaldry is still a protectorate of the Consortium under my control. Until your Lord-Protector arrives this country is mine and I will appoint what military force I deem fit. Now tell me, where is Mr. Travers?”

“The last report I heard placed Mr. Travers in pursuit of a Weaver who was allied with the rioters,” Fiona replied.

Daniel sipped at his tea. “According to several eyewitnesses, the ambassador was seen fleeing the carnage after he brutally interrogated and murdered a valuable hostage. Based on Mr. Travers history I cannot say that outcome is surprising. The man is unreliable at best, a liability at worst. There has been no sign of him, so he has no doubt either been killed, or perhaps he ran off and joined the savages. It would not be out of character for him, he seemed rather opposed to the Consortium's rule here and we all know how,” Daniel sipped his tea again, “unreliable he can be, especially after he deserted in Felviar. Tell me, what have you heard of Satesh?”

Fiona ground her teeth together. “I have heard no....”

“Critically injured,” Allen smirked. “That is two important citizens you failed to protect, the ambassador and a Vishen. Several dozen others, including Father Bently, lost their lives. I know Assembly wants to remove Consortium rule of Kaldry, but look what happens when the Consortium does step back and allow the military to run things.”

“I currently have half the number of men the Assembly intends to deploy,” Fiona retorted. “By the Third Proclamation of Achlish colonisation I am in command of all Achlish forces, both military and Consortium in times of conflict. Do not attempt to blame me, when you refuse to contribute the necessary soldiers.”

“Fiona,” Daniel sighed. “Some would consider your invocation of the Third Proclamation a threat. Your judgements in today’s conflict were...questionable at best, but now your hand is finally revealed. Allen often said I should be careful when dealing with you.”

“You cannot replace me,” Fiona replied, utterly calm. “It would require a full military tribunal, and if you have not noticed there are not enough ranking members of the military here for such a trial. In addition what charges would you bring against me?”

“Incompetence?” Daniel finished his tea and set it aside. “I am sure some members of the military would also find your attempts to usurp command from Colonel Jenkins worrisome. The Proclamation may be law when it comes to administrating Achland's colonies, but it is not the only power that rules here. Also last I looked Colonel Howe had recently arrived, and when you include him, the officers who accompanied him, and the Consortium's own officers, I believe you will find we do have the necessary men to convene a tribunal.”
“You know before you go tossing around accusations you might want to check your facts,” said Cole, as he limped across the garden towards them. “You missed one little detail, I'm not dead. But please don't let that upset anything.” Cole smirked at Allen and Fiona got the distinct impression that Cole knew something about the Consortium adviser that she didn't. “I am sure this tribunal could be very illuminating for us all.”
Chapter 22

Cole sat with the small Ronic journal in one hand, lazily flipping through the pages. The “tribunal” that Daniel had called was set to begin in a few minutes, but so far the proceedings had been slow. Due to the nature and size of the event it was being held in the large open courtyard outside the Consortium compound. A whole host of witnesses had turned out, including a good many Kaldriens. Fiona had not asked Cole to attend the hearing, but he had taken it upon himself to do so. Part of Daniel's accusations rested upon Cole's disappearance and his failure to appear could be damaging to Fiona's defence. Besides, Cole saw the hearing as a perfect opportunity to both impress the Ra'kala and further investigate his suspicions regarding Allen's connections with the warlocks.

“My word, is that a Ronic text?” Mohan dropped down into the open seat on Cole's left.

“Yes,” Cole replied, not sparing the kelf a passing glance.

Seating arrangements in the courtyard had been awkward at first and then Allen had suggested they position the members of the tribunal on the roof of a bungalow. Bhaskar slid into the seat on Cole's right, just as the six member panel strode out onto the roof, looking down upon the crowd. Fiona stood at the front of the crowd, glaring at Daniel as he took his place at the centre of the committee.

Daniel rapped a gavel down on the desk in front of him. “Order please. The case for dismissal of Fiona Walsh as Supreme Commander of Achlish military forces is now called to order. The accused is present correct?”

“Yes,” Fiona replied. Unlike the tribunal assembled to condemn her Fiona had not dressed in her military best. Instead she wore a tattered officer's uniform, the green a stark contrast to the white stone of the bungalows. While some might consider such an appearance improper, Cole found it a rather impressive visual reminder of Fiona’s service.

“Good, we may proceed.”

The opening statements laid out Daniel's case against Fiona. By his claims Fiona's inability to prevent the riot not only showed her inability to command loyalty from the Kaldriens, but an inability to issue tactically sound orders. In addition, Daniel was also accusing Fiona of an attempt to usurp power from the Consortium, namely by issuing orders that placed Daniel and several other prominent Consortium officials in mortal danger. Before Daniel could continue, Allen had stood up and added that Fiona's orders had also caused Satesh to be injured and that her father would never have lost control of the situation and that he would have served loyally. Cole could see that the comment had hurt her, but she said nothing. Daniel latched onto that comment, declaring it as proof that Fiona was attempting a coup, noting how she had originally gained her position as colonel through duplicity. Cole found the entire case lacking in any concrete evidence, especially since most of the so called charges were being played up to the point of absurdity.

“You know what still gets me?” Asked Thomas, while Daniel called forward another witness forward. “I don't understand why the riot even started. Sure that one man was screaming about some religious nonsense, but both Essar and Satesh were kelvish. Even with the religious differences between the castes, they still believe the same things, more or less. The claim that Essar was not laid to rest with the proper rites is absurd. Why would anyone believe those rites had not been observed?”

Cole bit his tongue. He had been wondering the same thing for a while now. Of course he knew Essar hadn't been laid to rest according to the Kaldrien customs, what bothered him was how that information had gotten out. It was possible Satesh had told someone, considering he appeared to be in league with Allen and by extent the warlocks. Perhaps Satesh was the pawn Armel had overheard Allen discussing being used to further his plans. Yet Cole doubted that. Unless Satesh was a much better actor then Cole gave him credit for and able to shield his emotions to fool Cole, he wasn't the culprit. Besides according to Armel, whoever the “pawn” was, they were supposed to have died to further the warlocks'
cause. If so, perhaps Satesh was just a false lead, meant to distract Cole from the real conspirators.

There had been several other men in the room as Essar died. Right now, Cole suspected Daniel may have had a hand in it, especially with these charges against Fiona. But again, Cole felt this trial was only Daniel seizing upon an opportunity he would have not had otherwise. That left only a few other men to investigate, including Mohan and Bhaskar. Both of those men were Ra'kala and while Bhaskar may have opposed Satesh's decision on how his father was to be buried, Cole doubted he would have provided the lower castes with information that could result in his own death. Whatever the case maybe, it was clear someone was playing both sides of the conflict and whoever they were, they were smart. If it was Allen, Cole hoped that soon the man would blunder, revealing enough information so Cole could act, hopefully by killing him.

The hearing continued for several hours under the hot Kaldrien sun as both sides called several witnesses forward. As an observer, Cole noticed that Allen seemed particularly invested in the attempt to remove Fiona, more so than Daniel. The continued arguments eventually led to a small squabble between witnesses after which the entire tribunal broke for a quick recess.

“Things seem to be going rather well,” Cole sauntered forward to talk with Fiona. “Daniel has assembled only circumstantial evidence against you.”

“Yes and the Ra'kala are firmly on his side,” Fiona replied. “Thankfully they are not involved in the decision making process, only the military personal shall issue a judgement.”

“Well I suppose that is good,” Cole replied, watching the tribunal reassemble to continue the hearing.

After several more witnesses had been thoroughly interrogated, Corporal O'toole was called up to testify.

“Now, tell me corporal did you not hear Colonel Walsh issue an order to directly override any Consortium military action?” Daniel sneered.

“I did sir,” O'toole replied. “We had already taken up defensive positions at the time when Colonel Walsh ordered us to fall back.”

“Yes, I seem to recall the situation,” said Daniel. “Allen and myself had taken refuge within a rather unstable stall and had hoped rescue would be forth coming, sadly help never arrived. Instead I heard the Colonel shout that we should be left and that none should challenge her orders. In your opinion could your forces have reached us as well as secured the princess' safety?”

“With the hectic nature of the battle I am not entirely sure,” Corporal O'toole began.

“It is a simple yes or no,” Allen interjected from the sidelines, twirling his goatee as he spoke.

“Could Colonel Walsh have issued an order that would have enabled Achlish soldiers to come to our aid? Furthermore did she attempt to place restrictions upon the Consortium command chain?”

Corporal O'toole took a deep breath. “There were more than enough soldiers on hand to both secure cover for the princess and he Administrator. Furthermore the orders that I heard...”

“Objection!” Cole leapt up. “You're putting words in the corporal's mouth. You're leading the witness!”

“You are not recognized by this court,” said Daniel. “Please be seated.”

“Mr. Travers' motion is sustained,” Erik proclaimed. “His point is valid and you do not have authority over this tribunal Daniel. You do not hold a military rank. I on the other hand do.”

“Thank you sir,” Cole bowed. “In times of military distress all Achlish soldiers, regardless of rank are expected to put the lives of the royal family above their own. Not until such a time as they are confident no more harm shall come to said persons are they to address any other affairs. This is strict Achlish law. If Colonel Walsh issued orders in such a situation no one, regardless of loyalty, has a right to challenge them.”

“Oohh yes, let the man who twists military law for his own gain speak,” said Allen. “You left the
military company you were serving with during the height of the Felvian Incursion and yet still managed to receive the same honours as the rest of your squad. honours you did not deserve. Now you are trying to claim honour for a battle you ran away from, or was it someone else we all witnessed fleeing from the riot that claimed so many lives?”

Sparks of magic crackled between Cole's fingertips and he restrained an urge to strike Allen dead on the spot. “My military career is not in question here, nor are we examining the actions I took during the recent civil unrest.”

“Ohh but they can be!” Allen's face lit up with glee. “Several eyewitnesses report you brutally torturing and killing an unarmed civilian.”

*How the hell does he know this,* thought Cole. The crowd behind him began to chatter and with his magic he could feel there attitude towards him shift. They were angry, shocked, and disappointed. Cole could feel that the crowd's already low opinion of him, especially the Ra'kala's, had fallen even further.

“This court is not convened to...”

“Then perhaps when Colonel Walsh's case is finished, we can conduct a hearing regarding your actions Mr. Travers,” said Daniel. “I am sure many would find your actions most...disturbing and deserving of punishment. Now be seated.”

“I will not!” Cole roared. “We are here to discuss the implications of the orders Colonel Walsh issued and to determine if those orders should result in her being removed from command. By law the Colonel committed no fault because at the time the orders were issued she had no way of knowing if Princess Helen was secure.”

“So, you are to have this council and all those of Kaldry believe the military should not defend them until they are certain they have secured their own interests?” Allen snickered. “How very disturbing. Be seated Mr. Travers, you have nothing more to offer us.”

The council argued for several more hours, during which time Allen continuously reminded the crowd of Cole's gaffe. He cursed himself for not seeing the obvious trap earlier. Through Daniel, Allen had encouraged Cole to voice beliefs that Allen then twisted back and used to erode Cole's standing with the Ra'kala. It was a devious ploy and Cole wondered if Daniel had even been aware of Allen's plans.

In the end, the tribunal decided to take a full day of recess, citing that the recent chaos and rioting needed to be dealt with first before any more deliberations. Allen did his best to persuade them to reconsider but Erik forcefully declined. Fiona disappeared almost immediately, no doubt to attend to military matters. There was still a good deal of rioting in the capital and to make matters worse the attacks on the outlying settlements had only intensified. The bags under Fiona's eyes were proof enough that she was running herself ragged.

“You spoke well,” said Thomas as the two walked back to their bungalow.

“I was manipulated,” Cole replied. “Allen wanted me to speak so the Ra'kala would have another reason to distrust Achland. He and Daniel have spent a good amount of time ingratiating themselves to the natives and they will leverage that anyway they can.”

“COLE!” Mohan came bounding down the walk. “Oh I am glad I caught you. Myself, as well as several of my peers and some of your citizenry are going on a touch of adventure. There is an old Ronic ruin several hours ride to the north. After seeing your interest in that journal you carried, well I thought you might want to come along. I have already talked to Bhaskar about it, and he insisted I invite you.”

Cole considered Mohan's offer for a moment. It was not even midday yet, and Cole had not made any other plans, besides seeing more of Kaldry could not hurt. What really intrigued him was the opportunity to meet with some of the Ra'kala in private. So far most of his dealings with the Ra'kala
had been formal. An opportunity to meet them on neutral ground, without the Consortium's involvement would provide Cole the perfect chance to impress the Ra'kala. If he could win one or two of their number to his side, it would go a long way to easing his work load. It would also give him a chance to get to know Bhaskar, whom he suspected of colluding with Allen.

“That does sound fascinating,” said Cole feigning excitement. “What is the dating of these ruins? I would assume mid-empire, based upon your people's history.”

“Actually, they date from closer to the empire's collapse,” said Mohan. “A truly fascinating period. The Consortium has made a good show of excavating and restoring them. It wasn't always that way, indeed until Allen arrived the Consortium seemed rather uninterested in them.”

“Is that so,” said Cole. “Well my schedule is open so I suppose it would not be too much trouble for me to accompany the expedition. Just allow me with the time to change into fresher attire and then I shall join you.”

The revelation that Allen was behind the excavation intrigued Cole, especially since it coincided with his strongest piece of evidence against the warlocks, the private excavation company that both Braden and Garret were involved with. The fact that the Ronic journal also perfectly coincided with this new revelation was almost too convenient, yet Cole could not resist the urge to explore the ruins. Perhaps the warlocks were searching for something, if so, Cole had to know what it was they were after. While he doubted the ruins would provide any direct clues or links to the writing in the journal, it might be worth going just to get a better feel for the period.

Cole deemed fashion was more appropriate than function for the excursion and dressed himself in a fine pair of black slacks, white silk shirt, and a dark thigh-length jacket, accompanied by a pair of his finest leather shoes. Paranoid that he was being watched, Cole slid his notebook, the Ronic journal and the warlocks' pins into his jacket pocket. When he arrived at the train station, Cole found that his fashion choice had been appropriate. All the members of the expedition were dressed well, save Count Oscar, who had dressed himself in set of tan safari linens, pith helmet, and monocle. As the man strode along the platform, he looked like the cover of an adventure novel come to life.

“Ahh Cole old bean, glad you could accompany us,” said the count. “My time here in Kaldry has been dreadfully boring and I am glad someone of your social calibre finally shares my interests. I hope my wife was not too forward.”

“No,” Cole replied, avoiding the man's gaze. “No she wasn't too forward at all.” Your daughter on the other hand is something of a Harlot. I should know, I've bedded plenty of harlots.

The train left the station at twelve past noon and the group shared a midday meal of small finger sandwiches, caviare, and Kaldrien hotcakes. Mohan introduced Cole to several Ra'kala, though Cole had a hard time remembering each man's name. There names were all similar, with too many e's, x's and other odd letter combinations. The only name Cole could remember was Bhaskar's, mainly since he had met the man before, and his name was at least somewhat pronounceable. During the ride, Cole became well acquainted with the others, though that was mostly the result of them avoiding any political discussion. Cole actually found the company quite pleasant and with the discussion so distanced from himself or any other troubling matters, he found himself drinking less than he normally would have.

At one point, Mohan did slip and begin ranting about how he felt Satesh was unfit to inherit his father's position. This comment sparked an interesting and lively debate. Apparently Bhaskar also agreed that Satesh was unfit to replace his father as High Vishen, but only because of his age. Now that Essar had been buried, the Ra'kala would gather to elect his successor and it seemed Satesh, backed by the Consortium, was going to make a grab at the position. If the rumour was to be believed, Satesh would rule as High Vishen, while at the same time allowing the Consortium to proceed unimpeded by the Lord-Protector. Interestingly enough, Cole noted that Mohan was very opposed to that notion, though not to the idea of the Consortium continuing its dominance of the country.
While the other man was ranting Bhaskar slipped away. Suspicious, Cole waited several minutes and then followed the other man, using the excuse that he needed to use the lavatory to cover his departure. He found Bhaskar leaning over a small polished bowl in the far forward car.

"...do not worry, we are on schedule," Bhaskar muttered, some of his words swallowed by the clattering sound of the train speeding along the tracks. "Just make sure they are in place when we arrive. It was hard enough formulating an excuse to invite him."

Bhaskar straightened up and Cole darted back to his seat, arriving several minutes before the other man. The fact Bhaskar had been scrying with someone was interesting, but there were of course plenty of humans in Kaldry, so it was not out of the question that the man was communicating with one of his advisers. Still, he already suspected that Bhaskar might have been the one to inform the lower castes of the fact that Essar had not been laid to rest with the proper funerary rites. Such evidence did not mean he was connected with the warlocks, though it did demand further investigation.

As they travelled, the countryside grew progressively wilder and soon all traces of civilization vanished when they entered the northern Kaldrien jungle. The jungle was so thick that the only way to lay train tracks had been to burn and salt the earth along the desired route. Even now, almost twenty years after they had been laid down, Cole could see that the jungle still crept in close to the tracks, and branches often smacked against the sides of the train. At just a bit past three, the train pulled into a lonely station in the centre of an Achlish military compound. The expedition filed out of the train, then boarded a cloth top steam-truck that awaited them.

"Nothing like a bit of adventure to clear away any fears," said Oscar, taking a hit from his snuff box. He offered the tin box to Cole, but Cole waved him off. "I have wanted to do this for some time actually, but there has always been some minor financial issue that begged my attention. Now that my business is in ruins well...hahaha I can visit some ruins!"

Cole groaned at Oscar's horrid joke and he noticed that several of the Ra'kala did as well.

"The ruins are really something," said Bhaskar. The middle-aged Ra'kala's skin was a creamy umber and unlike his southern counterparts, Bhaskar's face was clean shaven, something Cole had come to understand was common among the northern Kaldriens. "I for one am very grateful to Allen, without his help this part of my people's heritage might have been lost entirely."


"Indeed, we owe him a great debt," Bhaskar continued. The Steam-mobile rumbled along a dirt path burned into the jungle, bouncing back and forth as it trundled over muddy terrain. "Even now it is their soldiers who will accompany us on this little jaunt."

Cole scowled, he hadn't really counted on Consortium soldiers watching his every move. "There are more ruins than just those we are visiting?"

"There are hundreds Mr. Travers and not just Ronic," Bhaskar exclaimed. "In fact the ruin we will be exploring today is a blend of both Ronic architecture and my own people's work. We had and still continue to have a very advanced architectural style. After Ronen fell, some of her people saw fit to make peace with the native Vishens. Together they built several marvellous cities. In fact Al-katal is one of the few surviving wonders from that age. There are others true, but the majority have been lost to time when the jungle reclaimed them."

"I've heard reports of unrest in the region," said Oscar. "Selther and the like."

"My region is under control," Bhaskar replied. His tone sounded somewhat suspicious, and so Cole reached out to probe the other man's mind. He found nothing to arouse his suspicion, but Bhaskar did seem nervous. "There is nothing to worry about."

They rode in the trucks for close to a half hour, before disembarking and continuing on foot. As they walked, kelvish escorts used machetes to clear a path in front of them. The jungle was dark and when Cole looked up he couldn't even determine where the canopy ended. By his rough estimate some
of the trees could have been close to three hundred feet tall, but even that was suspect. Before long they emerged into an open space and Cole looked down upon the old ruin.

It was an impressive site, built in a bowl shaped depression in the centre of the jungle. Just as Bhaskar had said, Cole saw that the monument combined both Ronen and Kaldrien styles, especially in the use of pillars. Outside of the pillars, the ruin was clearly Kaldrien, with the many tiered walls and intricate carvings common to early eras. The expedition marched down into the dell, while the servants carried large umbrellas to shade their superiors from the afternoon sun. As they walked, Cole noticed that the Consortium guardsmen were somewhat nervous and kept shooting furtive glances back into the jungle.

“Well, I say that is impressive!” Oscar declared as they crossed under a massive arch carved in the shape of a leaping tiger. “Who would have thought such artistry was possible at such a time!”

After passing through the archway, the group emerged into radial amphitheatre easily one hundred feet in diameter and now Cole saw why this place was labelled as a Ronen ruin. From the outside it appeared to have only the slightest hint of Ronic influence, but the interior was something different all together. Here and there the tiered and domed Kaldrien building style mixed perfectly with the pillared and perfectly measured Ronic style. What Cole had first taken for some small settlement turned out to be the shell of some long forgotten city.

Bhaskar explained that the ruin had been fully excavated about a decade prior. Further work was still being conducted, but the civil unrest in the area had made it somewhat difficult. Bhaskar hoped that one day he might be able to restore the ghost city to its old glory, and talked of clearing the jungle so that he could recolonise it. Cole had to agree, the place had a certain grandeur, though the amount of decay would most certainly impede any attempts to make the old city habitable.

They explored together for a time, before small groups began to break off, each accompanied by several Consortium soldiers. Cole accompanied Mohan, Oscar, and Bhaskar, in exploring a sector that had not been fully cleared. Using his magic, Cole was able to open up a damaged corridor and the four men set off to explore. It seemed that the collapse had sealed the corridor off from the jungle and the entire hallway was free of any signs of decay. Cole created several motes of light and sent them sailing along through the darkness. The view was breathtaking. The entire tunnel had been painted with bright colours and the frescos appeared to be a blending of both Ronen religious beliefs and Kaldrien ones.

“This is fabulous,” said Bhaskar. “I had never dreamed something this complete could have survived. It appears to be a complete recounting of Rakale's finding of the Dreamstone blade and his battle with Xithar the corrupt. A truly fascinating story.”

Bhaskar launched a deep discourse on Rakale, apparently the Kaldrien myth-hero who had given his name to the entire Ra'kala class. Kaldrien myth was full of such stories, great heroes and gods battling monsters and each other, utilizing fantastic cosmic powers and weapons capable of splitting the heavens. Apparently Xithar had been Rakale's brother, before the former had been corrupted by some force outside the realm of both gods and mortals. The same evil had touched Rakale, but the latter had resisted, twisting the power of the corruption to his advantage, and using it to slay both his brother, and the evil force that had corrupted both of them.

“I find it interesting how such tales get passed down,” said Oscar. “Our own people have a similar myth, one that takes place before the Wars of Sealing. While those wars released the magical spirits and allowed man to finally truly weave magic, these myths talk about how older deities were sealed away by a man wielding a great gleaming blade. According to the legend, the blade that King Aldos wielded was but a sliver of an ancient blade that had been used to remove the heart of some foul demon.”

Cole wondered if his sister Erika knew of that myth. The last he had heard of her she was involved with the Royal Archaeology society, working to excavate several castles dating back to the
Perhaps, once he returned to Achland, he might inquire after her, just to make sure she was still alive, and to inform her of the wonders she had missed in Kaldry.

“It is interesting how we all tell such similar myths,” said Bhaskar.

“Do you think the other end is collapsed?” Mohan asked.

“Yes” said Bhaskar. “Usually we go over this section and end up in a grand plaza. We always wondered where this led to though. I wonder if there are more chambers like this.”

“Well we could always try to find out,” said Cole, glad that his cunning plan appeared to be working.

With Bhaskar in the lead, the men left the tunnel and climbed over a series of low walls before emerging out in the plaza Bhaskar had mentioned. It truly was a fantastic site, bordered by fluted Ronic columns, though it was almost entirely consumed by the jungle. As Cole looked about, he could see small chips of brightly painted title here and there and concluded that the plaza had no doubt been a great meeting place in its day. By now, they had drawn close to the city’s outer wall and Cole could see that various buildings had been directly carved into the stone. The doorways of these carved dwelling places were in the shape of hexagons, something Cole had never seen before.

The group dispersed somewhat and Cole found himself wondering alone down an enclosed street. The passage gently sloped upwards and then opened out, and Cole found himself in large round chamber, with a domed ceiling. It appeared to have been a garden, where in strategically cut holes in the dome overhead had allowed just enough light for the plants to grow. Parts of the dome had long since collapsed, and vines clambered in through the holes. The stonework here was pitted and scarred, and appeared older than the rest of the city. A towering banyan tree grew up from the centre of the chamber, its twisting roots forming a castle of brown within the ancient city.

There was a rustling sound from up above and Cole glanced up. Leaves swirled down around him and he thought he saw movement in the upper branches. It was only in that moment, that he realized he had not seen any animal life at all within the ruin. The entire city was quiet. He sent a pulse of magic through his body to calm his nerves. No doubt the explorers had startled whatever animals called this place home and it was only because Cole was alone had they begun to resume their normal activity.

In that moment of silence, Cole noticed that the Consortium guard who had being following him had disappeared. Unperturbed by the development, he began to explore the chamber he had found himself in. The stonework was indeed much older and rougher than the surrounding ruins. Ronic stone crafting was often smooth and precise. The stonework here was crude, formed from limestone rocks, fitted together without any mortar. Strangely that only applied to part of the chamber and it appeared the dome and several of the walls had been erected around the rougher, limestone masonry.

Cole continued to explore, but he could not help but feel as though he was being watched, in fact he could feel an odd malevolence in the air. his attention was drawn back to the towering banyan tree. It was easily a century old, perhaps two. From the way the tree's upper branches had burst through the roof of the dome, he postulated that it had grown by accident, its seeds deposited in the droppings of some animal.

Cole slowly crossed the room, never taking his eyes off the banyan. Every angle presented some new facet of the tree and he had a sudden urge to write some long emotional poem to describe the tree's perfection. A moment later, Cole thought he could hear voices and he craned his neck back to look down the covered tunnel. There was no one there. No doubt the wind had carried Bhaskar's or Mohan's voice down the enclosed space so all he heard were echoes. Now that the spell of the banyan tree had broken, Cole turned back to the rest of the chamber and found himself face to face with a fearsome beast.

Cole panicked for a moment, then realized he was only looking at an incredibly lifelike and
hideous statue that crouched in a shadowed niche. The statue had the head of a dragon, or perhaps a viper, while large plumes sprouted from the creature's head like hair, falling down around a masculine torso. The creature was bipedal, almost human, save for the bestial head and thick scales that covered its arms and legs. The creature's eyes were sparkling sapphires, and the entire thing was so perfectly carved that even now as Cole studied it, he could have sworn it was alive.

The statue was placed at the mouth of another tunnel, leading down into the earth. Cole could see that the walls beyond were constructed in a similar manner to the older stone work, but painted in a fashion that matched those in the collapsed tunnel. The paintings were decayed, but Cole thought he saw something that looked like a man, wielding a glowing blade, clashing with some oddly misshapen creature.

Again Cole heard a rustling noise from up in the banyan tree, and he tore his eyes away from the statue. In that moment, a ripple ran through the carved stone and the malevolence in the air intensified. He wheeled about, his fingers crackling with magical energy. The sphinx settled its sapphire gaze upon Cole and his heart grew heavy with dread. Summoning up all his mental strength, he met the monster's gaze. The air thrummed with electricity, and he readied his defences.

Cole stood there for a full minute, but no attack ever came, and when he looked again he saw that the statue had not moved. He dismissed the nimbus of indigo energy that surrounded his hands and let out a deep breath. Obviously the stress of the job was getting to him and he figured that was what had caused him to think the statue had moved. He smirked and turned back to the statue. Then he saw that there was some odd text carved into the plinth that the statue rested upon. Intrigued by the writings on the statue, he dropped down on his knees, just as a shadow dropped down from the banyan tree.

Being this close to the statute, Cole also saw that the stonework was very different from any he had seen in the ruins, indeed it was finer than any Ronic stonework he had ever seen. The text upon the plinth, consisting of several consonant and apostrophe heavy words was also strangely familiar.

Heart pounding with excitement, Cole dug in his pocket and withdrew both the battered notepad that contained his condensed notes and the Ronic journal. He flicked through the pages, searching through the text for the translation cypher he had created. Whatever this statue was, it was another strange riddle, one he intended to solve. So lost in his own whirling thoughts, Cole did not see his attacker lunge at him. One moment he was reading the text, the next his head exploded in pain and he dropped down into the twilight of unconsciousness.
Chapter 23

Cole awoke to find his hands bound and a dagger pressed to his throat. *Ughh, when I transcribe my memoir I'm leaving this part out, Cole thought. Bloody horrible way to do a scene transition, getting knocked out, kills any tension.*

Cole's head throbbed and for a moment he thought he might drop back into unconsciousness. Wherever he was it was dark, though he thought he could see light streaming through an open portal somewhere off to his left. He was lying propped up against a stone wall, and he figured his abductor must have taken him down a tunnel of some sort. Thunder rumbled through the enclosed tunnel and he soon realized the thunder was gunfire coming from some far off place.

The sound of pounding feet reverberated through the tunnel as Cole fought to regain his senses. Stars danced in front of his eyes as he was hauled to his feet. The dagger was removed from his throat and for a moment he considered calling out, then he felt the tip of the blade in his back. A voice grunted a command and Cole began to run. As he ran he reached for his magic, but the mild concussion he had suffered was making it difficult. Cole fought to focus his mind but the harder, he tried the more the magic just slipped away. The circle of light drew close as Cole and his captor ran along, then in an instant the glare enveloped them.

Cole clenched his eyes shut and brought his bound hands up to shield his eyes. His captor jabbed him in the back with the knife and Cole began to run again, his eyes slowly adjusting to the fading daylight. He heard voices, but the glare hid their owners from his sight. Cole blinked and when his eyes had adjusted, he looked around at his attackers.

There were seven of them, all men, dressed in leather breeches, brightly coloured linen shirts, over which they wore light leather jerkins woven with metal scales like those of a fish. Some of the men had supplemented their armour with metal vambraces, greaves, or boiled leather Pauldrons. From the colourful wrappings of their weapons Cole determined they were Selther, dusky skinned kelvish warriors from the north. They were paler than Bhaskar, but only just, and their skin was still a deep, creamy umber. Once they had been a threat to the Ra'kala, but now they were scattered over the country, living just as savagely as the other low caste Kaldriens.

They crossed the open fields around the ancient city quickly and then entered the jungle. Cole glanced back at his guard. The man was young, perhaps a year or so younger than Cole, and he was dressed in the same clothes as his fellows. Instead of weapons, there was a thin staff slung over his back and his rough-made shirt was dyed bright blue, a stark contrast to the yellows and oranges the other men wore. He was comely, with pronounced, angular features, and a thin nose, uncommon for a Kaldrien of any racial heritage. Just before vanishing into the jungle, Cole managed to glance back at the city. Cole could see smoke rising from somewhere near the front and for a moment he wondered what had happened to the others.

The Selther set a frantic pace and soon Cole began to lag behind. His chest burned and he doubted that even if he could focus his thoughts enough to weave a spell, he wouldn't have had the energy to sustain it. If Cole's slower pace bothered his guard, the young man he didn't show it. After ten minutes of running the Selther finally slowed into a steady jog. The warriors easily slipped through the trees with grace and agility, while Cole staggered over exposed roots or blundered into low hanging branches.

Finally, after a half hour of running, the Selther slowed and eventually stopped in a small clearing. Utterly exhausted, Cole flopped down on the loamy earth. Cole's guard allowed him a brief respite and strode off to converse in low tones with the other men. Cole understood some of the northern dialect, but his mind was preoccupied, so he did not bother listening in, instead he began to focus on his magic. Cole tried for several minutes, but even when he focused all his energy, he was not
able to tap into the small spark of energy that could make his powers manifest. It was almost as if something was blocking his gift, then Cole looked down at his wrists.

Cole had to commend the savages, there were not many ways one could restrain a Spellweaver as powerful as Cole, yet they had done so in an exceedingly simple fashion. Most methods of disrupting a Weaver's talents involved keeping their mind occupied, weather through physical labour or mental distress. True imprisonment was often difficult and involved large quantities of Cold Iron be placed around the Weaver. During the Felvian Incursion, Cole had assisted Benedict in interrogating hundreds of elves, often restoring to pain as a means to disrupt their focus and even then some of the more powerful elvish Spellweavers had still been able to work their magic.

Now, Cole was the helpless one. The length of cord the Selther had used to bind his hands was studded with rough ingots of Cold Iron. Such close contact to the slightly radioactive mineral would hamper Cole's ability to weave magic, making his abilities all but useless. While he had not noticed it before, he now saw that the rough metal nuggets had cut bloody furrows in his wrists. The low grade pain, combined with the physical exhaustion, and the Cold Iron's suppressive properties, guaranteed that as long as his hands were bound, his magical abilities were effectively neutralized. It was also likely that some of the Cold Iron had gotten into Cole's bloodstream, which would ensure that even after he was freed, his abilities would most likely not return immediately, to say nothing of the other health issues. Close and prolonged contact with Cold Iron had been proven to cause all sorts of deformities, including hair loss, numbness in the extremities, radiation sickness, and chemical burns. If enough of the Cold Iron were to leech out into Cole's bloodstream, he would die, not from lack of magic, but from blood poisoning.

The jungle grew progressively darker as the sun set, and then Cole heard a crashing sound somewhere off to his right. He watched as another band of warriors emerged from the jungle. One of them carried a rifle, but like their comrades the rest carried bows, knives, or other simple weapons. Just as Cole went to look away, he saw that the new arrivals included a woman, or at least he thought it was a woman. She was dressed in a similar fashion to the men, though the metal scales sewn into her jerkin were enamelled a bright, vibrant red. The jerkin was pulled tight across her chest, and her breasts were so small that Cole would have easily mistaken her for a man, if not for her hair. Unlike the others, she wore it long, and pulled hair back into several braids, most likely as a way to keep it under control during the heat of combat. Like the others her hair was dull, lustreless.

Cole studied the Selther with a critical eye. All of them, the woman included, were very slim, so much that he thought it possible he could count their ribs if he were to see them nude. Cole had heard that there was a famine in the outer territories, but he had doubted the validity of that statement, at least until now.

The new arrivals talked with their fellows for several minutes, then the woman's gaze fell on Cole. Her face flushed with anger and she rounded on the young man who had taken Cole captive. Seen together it was obvious the two were related. They both had the same high angled cheek bones and thin nose. Cole observed that with her almond shaped eyes and dark skin the woman had an oddly exotic sensuality, though he would not consider her beautiful in any traditional sense. While the two looked similar their bearing and demeanour was very different. Even with his talents suppressed as they were, Cole could feel that the man was more relaxed, calmer, while his sister was tightly wound, nervous, ready to attack at a moments notice.

“Sanyo, we were sent to kill them,” the woman hissed. “They were to be an example. Why did you take him?”

“He survived an encounter with the guardian, sister,” Sanyo replied. “Only one other has done that. He must go before the elders.”

“You would challenge the Prophet?” she asked. “To challenge him is to doubt him. How can
you doubt a man who so clearly predicted our enemy would be here?”

“Yes Saniyya, I would challenge him,” said Sanyo. “As Amak'Arai, it is my right. Like the Prophet before him this man has encountered the guardian and survived. Besides it was Hadiya's word, not the prophet's that brought us here. He shall be brought before the elders. For two to be chosen in such a way…”

Sanyo stopped and Cole scowled. He had understood most of the conversation, except for the authority Sanyo had invoked. From Cole's admittedly limited knowledge of the intricacies of Kaldrien dialects, he knew Arai meant weaver, which could mean this man was claiming himself as a Spellweaver. Spellcraft was uncommon among kelves, so to discover that one of such a low caste claimed to have the gift was interesting indeed. What really piqued Cole's interest was the casual way Saniyya spoke of the Prophet. If it was the same man as the Spellweaver Fiona had clashed with, learning of his whereabouts could prove to be very valuable information, especially if Cole's suspicions about the man's real identity proved accurate. Plus the amount of respect, if not outright adulation, he would receive upon the Prophet's downfall was a prize enough, even if it wasn't Garret hiding behind the mask.

Saniyya glared at her brother and for a moment Cole thought she might actually attack him, then she turned and stalked off. The air in the clearing was tense as the others watched the two siblings. Sanyo hauled Cole to his feet. For a moment Cole resisted and Sanyo moved to unsheathe the dagger belted at his waist. Cole relented after that and Sanyo did not draw his weapon.

They set off through the slowly darkening jungle again and Cole noted that Sanyo moved at a slower pace then before, most likely to accommodate Cole. This simple gesture caught Cole off guard; he had not expected such a small kindness from a savage.

The Selther war-band continued its march as the day died. By Cole's best guess the sun would be setting in two hours or so. If he was going to make an escape he would need to do so soon. It would take time for his magic to return and Cole did not want to get lost in the jungle at night. The hardest part would be losing the warriors, though he felt confident that once his powers returned they would be of little consequence. The minutes dragged by and the ground began to slope upwards. As the sun continued to sink lower and the shadows began to lengthen, Cole noticed that the space between trees was growing larger and that there were large slabs of rock thrusting their way up from out of the earth.

The party continued onward and soon Cole noticed that the ground to either side of them had simply disappeared. It took Cole a moment, but he realized that they were now climbing up the sloping branches of a massive tree. They continued to climb for several minutes, before stopping in the tree's crown. Branches arched up and away from them forming a network of natural bridges and archways out over the jungle. The Selther stood with their backs to Cole, staring off at a valley in the distance.

“Will we make it before starfall?” asked one of the others. “If we keep this slow pace the Achlander will be the death of us.”

“Do not worry Xethar,” said another. “Sanyo's woodwalking will keep the predators at bay and if that does not work, Saniyya will gladly kill them won't you?”

Saniyya glared at him. “I will make sure to stop them just late enough so that you die Le'sso.” There was bitterness in Saniyya's voice and a touch of loneliness, two emotions of which Cole was quite familiar. Indeed Le'sso's tone had been mocking, instead of complimentary, and Cole wondered if he might be able to exploit that in order to effect his escape.

Cole slowly backed away from the Selther, drawing ever closer to the edge of the branch they were standing on. He cocked his head to the side and looked out over the edge. It wasn't a far drop, perhaps thirty yards at the most, and there were many evenly spaced branches he could catch himself on. Of course, Cole would only really be able to catch himself if his hands were free. Bound as they
were, things would be somewhat difficult. He glanced back at his captors and saw that they were ignoring him for the most part, still heavily engrossed in their conversation. Cole smirked and stepped over the edge.

Wind whistled through Cole's hair, then he struck a branch feet first. His knees buckled, and he toppled to the side. Hands flailing, he grasped a thin branch, but before he could establish a tight grip, the branch snapped. Cole overbalanced, tumbling backwards. Branches slapped his face as he fell. He struck the next large branch hip first, sending a jolt of pain through his body. Cole rolled to the side, grabbed a branch, but his weight pulled it down and it tore open his hands. He struck two more branches before crashing into the ground.

“Bollocks,” Cole muttered. Leaves and branches swirled through the air, and through eyes half clouded in pain, he could see the Selther looking down on him from above.

Cole coughed once and sat up. He tugged at his bounds, but the metal studded leather held firm. One of the kelves let out a whistle and Cole watched Saniyya and several of the others began to leap down through the branches. Cole staggered to his feet, doing his best to ignore the pain in his hip. He began to run, not giving a thought as to where he was headed. Somewhere behind him Cole could hear his pursuers crashing through the jungle. Cole dashed to the right, stumbled, and then found himself tumbling down a low slop into a muddy ditch.

“This was a new jacket,” Cole groaned. He rolled over and his hand came to rest on a piece of jagged stone.

Cole's fingers clenched shut, and he took hold of the rugged piece of rock. After fumbling around for a moment, he finally managed to get a good grip on the chunk of granite. He twisted the sharp rock about in his hands, and then began to tear at the leather strips binding them. Grunting with effort, Cole managed to slice into the leather and then tear it apart. Now free, he rubbed his wrists together trying to get the blood flowing, before standing up and dashing off into the jungle.

Now that his hands had been freed, Cole felt a sudden surge of energy. He still couldn't access his magic, but he had gotten a second wind. He ran along, and before long he could feel his magic come surging back in a flooding rush of euphoria and adrenaline. Magic pounded through his veins, and he saw the world come alive with light. There were plenty of shadows available in the dappled half-light of early evening, and Cole wove them into a glamour, bending the light away so he could hide himself. Now hidden from sight, he slowed and pulled out his Telethium. The device's compass spun, and Cole tried to decide on the best course of action. He wasn't really sure which direction he had come from, all he knew was that the valley the Selther had been headed towards was somewhere off to his right, west by the compass. A more observant adventurer would have not needed a compass to determine the direction, especially with the sun setting as it was, but Cole had never been one to observe such simple phenomena.

--Utterly lost in a jungle that would soon be dark, Cole quickly ran through his options before settling on the most logical course of action, scyring. Focusing all his energy on Thomas' life force Cole reached out for his friend, sifting through the swirling vortex of human life. The process was harder than it should have been, though Cole attributed that to stress. The shiny gold surface of the telethium shimmered like water as an image began to resolve itself. There was a loud thump and then rustling in the jungle behind Cole, his head snapped up and he slipped the telethium back into his pocket. Whatever it was would not be able to see him through his glamour and Cole let out a sigh of relief. A vine twisted itself around Cole's ankle, and he was yanked off his feet.

Even though Cole was tired, his reflexes were still sharp. A wall of shadow blossomed up from the ground and sliced the vine in half. Cole sprang up, eyes darting around as he searched for his attacker. This was first time someone had seen through his illusions and Cole wasn't about to let himself be caught off guard again. Reaching for his power, Cole sent a surge of energy out through
every shadow in a thirty yard radius. There was a shout and a flurry of movement off in the foliage behind him.

Sanyo burst out of the tangled underbrush, staff in hand, diving towards Cole. The rough wooden staff the young man carried had come alive with fresh growth and was now covered in shifting plant life. Cole whirled around, a mass of shadow-stuff flowing around his feet. Tree branches bent down to grab at Cole and he dove away, only to find that the underbrush had reached up and tangled itself around his feet. Cole snarled and hurled handfuls of indigo energy at Sanyo. The young kelf blocked the first bolt with his staff, but the second caught him in the chest, leaving behind a deep burn in the man's armour. Sanyo stumbled back and his concentration broke, causing the undulating plant life that had entwined itself around Cole's feet to wither and die.

Now free Cole re-established his glamour, but not before surrounding his feet with a whirlpool of shadow. Sanyo was hunting him through the plants, so all Cole had to do was kill any he came in contact with. The plan would have worked, except for the fact that Cole now left death in his wake. Before he had even run fifteen paces, Sanyo had already figured out what Cole had done. Sanyo lifted his hand and conjured a spray of thorns that hurled themselves at the fleeing Achlish Spellweaver.

Cole heard the thorns hiss through the air and whirled, reusing the energy of his glamour to erect a shield around himself. The thorns exploded as they struck the resplendent energy shield and then a vine wrapped itself around Cole's wrist. The vine jerked Cole to the right, just as several more twisted themselves around his other extremities. Several entwined themselves in Cole's hair, ripping and tearing as a way to break his concentration. He struggled for a moment, before he felt thorns begin to emerge from the vines, their points just sharp enough to pierce his skin.

"Do not struggle," said Sanyo in Achlish. Sanyo spoke slowly, with only the smallest hint of an accent, but he spoke better than most, indeed Cole had noticed that even Satesh had trouble with the Achlish language at times. "It will only make it worse."

"You will release me," said Cole, his words honeyed with magic. "You will then inform me where the nearest military patrol is encamped. If you do so swiftly I may allow you to live."

"I will not," Sanyo replied. "You will come with me, peacefully. Since you have destroyed your bounds I have no way to hamper your magic. I must restrain you again or the others will become suspicious, but if you use your powers they will kill you."

Cole glared at the other man and then used his magic to dig into the kelf's thoughts. For a moment the other man resisted, but then he yielded to Cole's probing, showing Cole that he meant him no harm. Cole smiled as he dug his claws deep into Sanyo's consciousness. The savage was a fool for lowering his defences. Cole began to seize control of savage's mind. In response more thorns sprouted from the vine wrapped around Cole's right arm, digging deeply into his flesh. Cole screamed in pain and withdrew his enemy's mind. Sanyo met Cole's gaze as the vine wrapped around Cole's left arm sprouted thorns as well.

"Do not take advantage of my kindness Achlander," Sanyo spat. "The only reason I do not kill you now is because the Guardian did not."

The thorns withdrew from Cole's forearm, leaving behind dozens of small bloody holes. Cole was too weak and unskilled to attempt any healing. Instead, he simply slowed the blood flow and spread a thin layer of repulsion over the wounds, preventing any blood from leaking out and doing further harm to his clothes.

"And what is so important about this guardian sparing me?" Cole asked.

Sanyo waved his hands and the vines released Cole, save for a length that wound its way around his wrists. "It means the Prophet is wrong," Sanyo whispered so quietly Cole could barely hear him. "It means he can be challenged."

Like a dog that has been beaten by its master, Cole limped along behind Sanyo, making no
further attempts to flee. Even if he wanted to, Cole seriously doubted he could weave any more magic today. He was exhausted, and as he walked he could feel his head drooping. For a moment Cole thought he saw The Well Dressed Man, standing in the shadows, smiling his strange smile. Cole stopped, and looked up just in time to see the ethereal figure wink and vanish, before Sanyo whacked him in the back with his staff. Cole started walking again, eyes lingering on the spot where he had seen the supernatural visitor. The two men rejoined the rest of the Selther several minutes later. The other warriors welcomed Sanyo warmly, commending him on his ability to restrain Cole, though he did note that Sanyo kept anyone from inspecting his bonds too closely. Saniiyya seemed unimpressed. “You should have killed him,” she muttered.

By now twilight had seized the forest, and Cole began to hear things moving around in the dark trees that surrounded them. Even in civilized society, stories were told of the bizarre creatures that stalked the Kaldrien jungle at night, huge millipedes with pincers capable of cutting a man in half and thousand pound tigers covered in bony plates. All were said to be remainders of some forgotten age, still living in the dark jungles that man had yet to tame. Unlike Ethenia, where natives had hunted many of the beasts to extinction, the jungles of Kaldry still housed dark terrors, ready to spring at a moment’s notice. As they walked Cole noticed that the Selther were becoming increasingly nervous, especially Saniiyya who had drawn a matched pair of wickedly curved khukuris.

Soon the trees began to grow sparser, and the group entered into a twisting canyon. The fading light played off the rock, distorting Cole's view. At first he thought the rock was riddled with caves, but as he walked he saw the shadows shift and change, revealing nothing but flat, unassuming stone. If there were tunnels back in the rock, the setting sun made them hard to locate. They certainly have chosen a very defensible location, Cole thought as he spotted as pair of scouts crouched behind some boulders. The twisting canyon soon opened onto a valley. kelves clustered about, some congregating around cook fires, others tending to a herd of elephants at the far end of the camp. Sanyo, now at the head of the group, strode straight into the centre of the encampment, leading Cole in between a row of sputtering torches.

The camp was laid out in a circular fashion and a large bonfire burned in the centre, surrounded by silhouettes. Cole spotted several dozen kelves sitting around smaller fires, working on menial tasks such as fixing armour, sharpening weapons, or sewing cloth. What surprised Cole was that he saw men sewing, something he would have figured a woman's job in a savage tribal society such as this. The Selther had a reputation as fearsome warriors, so the idea of the men working at such domestic tasks was something Cole had not expected, but then again he had not expected to find a woman among the warriors either.

Sanyo walked straight through the crowd, but none of them seemed to pay him any mind. Saniiyya stepped up and placed her khukuri to Cole's throat. The inward curving blade was cold against his flesh and Cole shivered as he realized how easily Saniiyya could slit his throat. The simple motion of shivering caused the razor sharp blade to cut his skin, drawing a thin line of blood. Saniiyya pressed a second blade into Cole's back, obviously a sign she wanted him to continue walking. Cole found the process difficult, mainly since any time he moved the khukuri at his throat would dig into his skin.

A skeletal kelvish woman, dressed in a heavy black cowl, stood at the edge of the bonfire. Over the black cloak she wore a mantle of bright peacock feathers that fell down her back in a waterfall of colours. Mixed in with the feathers were a series of small bronze disks, each shimmering under the firelight. As they approached, she turned to face them, the hood hid her face, but the fire was reflected in her pale silver eyes. Sanyo stepped forward and whispered something in her ear, of which Cole caught the words “guardian,” “survived,” “Prophet,” and “false”. The woman's eyes flashed as she settled her gaze on Cole.

“What ever my twin tells you is wrong,” Saniiyya said in her native tongue. “This pale-skin
outsider was not spared by the Guardian, he probably was not even close to it. He must die, like all the others who have besmirched our sacred places.”

“And that is why you left several of them alive?” The cowled woman asked. “From what your brother has told me you retreated instead of killing all those who transgressed. Is that not in volition of what your prophet decreed?”

“I left our Kaldrien brethren alive so that they might have the opportunity to repent,” Saniyya replied. She removed the khukuri from Cole's back and moved to retrieve something from a pouch at her waist. “The Achlish only still live because of the weakness of the others. I killed six of their number myself.” Saniyya flung a handful of small bronze medals to the ground and it took Cole a moment to realize that they were rank medallions belonging to Consortium guardsmen.

“They had guns,” said Le'sso. “We fought as best we could Saniyya, not all of us are blessed with your blood lust.”

“Even so, we should kill this man now,” she growled. “His blood shall appease Ahkli and bestow the red warrior's blessing on us all.”

“You know if it's all the same to you I would rather live,” said Cole, in the Selther dialect. “Also, for the record, I can understand everything you're saying.”

Saniyya replied with sudden savagery, driving Cole to his knees with a feral scream. “Saniyya stop!” The matriarch commanded. Cole knelt before the cowled woman, his life entirely in her hands. For a moment, he thought he saw a pair of cold blue eyes, and a face in one of the bronze disks, but it vanished, and he figured he must have seen his own reflection. “You shall not spill the blood of one who the Guardian has spared.”

Saniyya pressed the khukuri against Cole's throat drawing more blood as she did so. “There can only be one chosen by the Guardian. The Prophet has already been spared and this man bears none of the scars of conflict.”

“She is quite right,” said Cole, mind racing. “I didn't fight any sort of guardian. You should just release me.”

“By his own tongue he admits it!” Saniyya wailed.

The next few moments were a blur for Cole. He felt Saniyya's khukuri dig into his neck and then he was forced face-down into the dirt, blood seeping into the ground. There was shouting, then someone crouched down next to Cole. Sanyo reached out, checked Cole's pulse, then leaned forward. “Keep your mouth shut if you want to live,” he enunciated slowly, ensuring that Cole felt the weight of each word. Cole felt a warmth spreading over his neck, and he knew Sanyo had healed his wound. “Follow my lead and you need not die.” Cole nodded his head and Sanyo helped him up. “The Achlander speaks without knowing our ways. They only know of conflict through strength of arms, not the subtle battles we fight. This man did face the Guardian and has survived. That means that two such mortals have come forth.”

“You recall the myth-story of Rakale and Xithar,” said the cowled woman. “Are you saying the Prophet is corrupt?”

“I claim no such thing,” replied Sanyo. “I am only stating that which I have observed. The Prophet would have us fight Achland. This man is of Achland....”

“And here to forge a truce between all our peoples,” Cole added, thinking that sounded best. “My people are already working to supplant the Consortium that has ruled for to long. That is why I have come to Kaldry. This prophet seeks to destroy Achlish rule. I come to ensure no more harm can be done by my foolish countrymen.”

“Then you shall go before the Prophet,” said the silver-eyed matriarch. “That shall determine if the Guardian truly spared you. Perhaps the time of myth has begun again. Perhaps the bonds that were forged are coming undone. You shall meet the other one who has been chosen, until such time shall
remain with us Achlander. ”

“Cole, my name is Cole.”

“I am Hadiya, and your command of our language is terrible,” the woman smiled, teeth flashing in the gleam of the fire. Kneeling before her, Cole could now see that her face was badly burnt and that a knobbly white scar ran up left side of her face and neck. “You are now under my protection until you go before the Prophet. Then we shall learn what the gods have planned for you.”

Cole drew in a deep breath, only now realizing that the entire Selther camp had gathered around the bonfire. Hundreds of pale eyes were fixed on Cole and shiver ran down his spine. Saniyya glowered at him, before turning and stomping off into the darkness. Hadiya turned away as well and soon the crowd collapsed.

“This is where you say thank you,” grumbled Sanyo.

Cole smiled, but remained silent. He was now alone, surrounded by savages, and one of them had saved his life. Cole owed Sanyo a blood debt, but more than that, the kelf intrigued him. Sanyo was an enigma, from his actions alone, Cole ascertained that Sanyo disagreed with the machinations of the Masked Prophet, something none of the others seemed willing to do. Sanyo could never openly oppose the man, instead he was using Cole as a pawn, lying about the guardian, and ensuring that Cole survived. Cole would play along for now, especially since Sanyo could become a very valuable tool for him to wield against the Prophet.
Chapter 24

Before the rioting surrounding Essar's funeral, Thomas had found his job as Engineering Consult to the Achlish Army rather boring, but now he had plenty to do. The attack had not only left huge swathes of Al-katal in ruins, it had also heavily impaired the army's response capabilities. Once the dust had settled, it became clear that some of the attacks had directly targeted Achlish military outposts. Four barracks had been torched, including one that housed thirteen suits of Achlish Steam-armour. In the hours since the tribunal against Fiona had concluded, Thomas had set to work at a military outpost down along the river front. Like Thertan, Al-katal had only become the nominal capital of Kaldry because of its proximity to the mighty Gantair river. The river flowed down from the north and its many tributaries sustained life all throughout Kaldry. The sun had set about an hour previously, yet Thomas still sat hunched over a workbench.

The outpost, one of seven in the city, had been the one to house the Steam-armour sets. The attackers had used mining explosives to blast apart the inner walls, before rushing in and torching the complex. Achlish battle armour was built to sustain such traumatic forces, but some of the armour's support mechanisms had been damaged and one suit's perpetual-combustion unit had been breached. The unit had not been attached at the time which prevented an explosion, but the breech had released a torrent of magical fire. The mage-fyre had caused the majority of the damage, especially since the fire resisted all attempts to extinguish it, and burned with an enough heat to melt stone.

Even without a power source, the Steam-armour would still have needed maintenance. The amount of strain the pistons and gears underwent in the course of a battle was often enough to cause at least one part to malfunction. For three hours now, Thomas had worked to repair a single unit's systems. It was menial work and as Engineering Consult and a high ranking member of the Fraternity of Engineers, Thomas could have delegated the task to one of the many technicians employed by the Achlish military. The thing was, Thomas enjoyed such simple work. Soldering gun in hand, Thomas had gone to work slowly but surely fixing the armour.

Achlish Steam-armour comprised dozens of mechanical parts, hundreds of pistons, and yards of pneumatic tubing. In addition to a primary steam engine mounted within the chest cavity, the armour also contained at least four miniaturized engines, depending on the armour's relative weight. Lighter suits were easy to wear, thus required less mechanical assistance. Bulkier units could contain up to a dozen additional engines. Even something as simple as a Grappler gauntlet contained hundreds of mechanical parts, any of which could fail and cause the entire piece to malfunction.

As Thomas set to work repairing the mage-fyre containment unit of the suit's primary steam engine, he heard the door open behind him. Thomas continued his work, no doubt it was just another engineer, several had already come and gone. Thomas inspected the unit closely, noting that he would no doubt need to leave it open until such a time a Weaver of sufficient skill could recreate the mage-fyre essential for combustion. While Achlish Steam-armour was a wonder of mechanical engineering, it would have been an impossibility without magic to provide the necessary power. Early models that ran purely on steam power still existed, but those really couldn't be called "armour" since they required seven men to operate them effectively.

"Mr. Atkin," said a man.

Thomas looked up and then pulled his goggles up off his face. "Yes?"

The kelf was middle aged, with soft, pale green eyes and a clean shaven face. "I am Bhaskar El'urun, Vishen of the northern jungle provinces. We need to talk."

Thomas set his soldering iron down and removed his goggles. "Yes, I remember you from the first night. If Cole has offended you in any way I am very sorry." He grabbed a cloth and used it to wipe the soot from his face.
“No, Mr. Travers has not offended me at all,” said Bhaskar. “I am here because of Mr. Travers. He accompanied me and several others on an expedition to a Ronic ruin in my province. While there, we came under attack by a group of freedom fighters. In the ensuing chaos Mr. Travers...disappeared.”

Thomas tossed the rag to the ground. “What?!?”

“The attack was sudden,” Bhaskar explained. “Mr. Travers had wondered off to explore an ante-chamber. I advocated we hunt for him immediately, but I was overruled by the expedition's Consortium escort. We retreated, but still sustained heavy casualties.”

“When did this happen?” Thomas demanded as rolled down his sleeves.

“We returned approximately twenty minutes ago,” Bhaskar replied. “Knowing that you were an acquaintance of Mr. Travers, I sought you out immediately.”

“And the others?” Thomas asked, hastily donning his jacket. Thomas would have preferred to clean off the grease that covered his arms before dressing, but the situation necessitated he move quickly.

“Count Oscar is dead, as are a good number of the Consortium soldiers who accompanied us,” said Bhaskar. “By now Mohan and the surviving Consortium soldiers have reported to Daniel. Word spreads quickly, so no doubt Colonel Walsh already knows by now as well.”

Thomas weighed Bhaskar's news for a moment and found that while the implications of Cole's disappearance or possible death were dire, what he really cared about was his friend's safety. While Cole might be difficult at times, he was also one of the few people Thomas felt he truly understood. While most people hid behind a small layer of lies, Cole hid behind hundreds, but he was always genuine with Thomas. His disappearance would also complicate an already tense situation, especially now that Daniel and the Consortium were actively campaigning to have Fiona removed.

“What are you going to do?” Thomas asked. He and Bhaskar left the workshop, striding out past a host of chattering soldiers.

“I have already sent my scribe off to alert my militias,” said Bhaskar. “This attack transpired in my province, so it is my responsibility. If the events surrounding Essar's funeral are any indication, this attack will no doubt lead to further bloodshed. I would suggest you seek out your Colonel, she will no doubt need all the assistance she can get.”

As they crossed the parade ground, Thomas spotted several soldiers standing along the walls of the outpost. The autumn night was cool, cloudless, and the moon was waning. At the gates Bhaskar bid Thomas goodbye, then disappeared into the night, flanked by a pair of Rankalan soldiers. Thomas turned up the street and headed for the inner city, checking to be make sure his revolver was loaded. In the aftermath of the riots, attacks upon Achlish citizens had risen dramatically and Thomas shuddered to think what might happen when word got out about Cole's abduction or possible murder.

The inner city gates swung open as Thomas approached and twelve fully armed Rankalan soldiers swarmed out, accompanied by six Consortium guards. One of the Consortium men saluted Thomas as he ran past. Thomas returned the man's greeting, then dashed through the swiftly closing gates. Somewhere overhead, Thomas could hear the gentle thwack, thwack, thwack sound of an Achlish rotor-craft. Even from a hundred yards away, Thomas could see that the Consortium compound was swarming with activity. As Thomas approached, several soldiers came out to greet him.

“Mr. Atkin, we are glad you came,” said one of the men, his rank insignia indicating he was a corporal in the Achlish military, while his partner was on the Consortium pay roll. “Colonel Walsh was looking for you, this way.”

Neither of Thomas' escorts said anything else as they led him along the broad walk up to the main Consortium headquarters. All the bungalows along the walk were lit up and Thomas could hear snatches of frantic conversation carried to him on the cool night breeze. Together the three men entered the main building, then turned to the right, heading for the main conference room. Even from this
distance Thomas could hear raised voices.

“This is just the sort of thing I warned you would happen,” Daniel shouted. “We were too soft on them! Unless we retaliate quickly, this situation could spiral even further out of our control!”

“Retaliate against who?!” Erik demanded as Thomas entered the room. The room was very warm and the glass windows had fogged up.

“Any of them,” Daniel replied sweeping his hands around dramatically. “We have to show these Kaldrien savages that they cannot intimidate us!” Satesh clicked his tongue. “Present company excluded from the label of savage of course.”

“Again, such an act would only serve to further the rift between us and the lower castes,” said Fiona. “The last thing we need right now is to remind the lower castes of our....previous responses to their hostile actions, especially considering the nature of the current situation.”

Fiona, Erik, and Daniel, as well as several Ra'kala, Mohan and Satesh included, stood around a large table in the centre of the conference room. Upon the table was a full colour map of Kaldry. This was the first time Thomas had seen Satesh since the funeral and he smiled when Thomas caught his eye. Satesh looked well for the most part, though he walked with the aid of a crutch and Thomas knew that the kelf's left leg was in a cast.

The map of Kaldry was studded with hundreds of jewelled pins, marking troop movements around Kaldry. The roughly triangular subcontinent spanned a mind-numbing amount of space and looking at it in this fashion showed just how outnumbered they really were. If any large scale conflict were to break out in Kaldry the triumvirate of Achland, Consortium, and Ra'kala forces would be hard pressed to secure even a third of the country.

“Ahh, Thomas, glad to see you,” Erik looked up from the map. “I assume you've heard.”

“Yes,” said Thomas. “Bhaskar told me.”

“Yes,” said Thomas. “Bhaskar told me.”

“He is with you, yes?” Satesh sounded tired, which given the events of the last week Thomas supposed was normal.

“No,” Thomas replied. “Bhaskar left for his own province after meeting with me.”

“Damn, we could have used him,” Daniel pounded his fist down on the table. “I was hoping he would arrive so I could convince him to seal his borders.”

“How much do you know?” Erik asked, his voice tight with emotion.

“No more than that Cole has gone missing and that Count Oscar is dead,” said Thomas.

“They were attacked by a band of Selther raiders,” said Daniel.

The mood in the room darkened. Hailing from some of the most extreme mountain ranges in northern Kaldry, the Selther were famous for both their combat prowess and their brutality. While subsects of various castes had opposed Ra'kalan rule, the entire Selther people had refused to submit for centuries, instead fighting a bitter war of attrition against the upper castes. The Selther were barbarous warriors, fond of sneaking into an enemy camp and quietly butchering all save one man, who was then left to awaken and witness the carnage alone. The had fought against the Ra'kala for almost two centuries, eventually joining the other castes during the Canet Uprising almost a decade ago. The uprising had ended in even more bloodshed when the Consortium had driven the Selther from the blighted waste they called a homeland. If the Selther had been the ones to attack the expedition, Cole was as good as dead.

“Are we sure it was the Selther?” Thomas walked across the room, stopping at Erik's right.

“Pretty bloody sure,” said Daniel. “They filled my men with enough of their arrows for us to identify them. Plus, the wounds their fooking kukris inflict are damn distinctive. You can check the bodies if you want, but only they are capable sort of brutality. It's pretty easy to recognize, especially when you've seen your entire family butchered in a similar MANNER!”

Daniel was shaking with rage and Mohan placed a hand on his shoulder. “You must calm
yourself my friend. Those events were not of your making.”

“Until we have concrete proof we are only listing Cole as missing in action,” said Erik. “But, considering how uhh mangled the others were, that might be somewhat optimistic. We also have no way to know where the attackers went, so we can't truly retaliate.”

“Which leaves us at something of a loss,” Fiona surmised. “I've already ordered a patrol to form up and search through the jungle surrounding the ruins.”

“Considering this was an attack upon Consortium forces I believe it falls under our jurisdiction,” said Allen. “I do believe we have had enough of your power grabs for one day, don't you?”

“My men still need time to assemble their gear,” Fiona continued, ignoring Allen's interjection, “they will not be ready to deploy until morning. Now, while Cole was only with us a short time, his presence certainly left a mark on local politics. The Assembly has invested a good amount of time into this endeavour, and we cannot allow that opportunity to be squandered.”

“Thomas,” said Erik. “We have not yet been able to contact our superiors in Achland, but Colonel Walsh and myself have decided that if anyone could replace Cole as Crown Ambassador, it would be you.”

Thomas' stomach churned as he considered the implications of what Erik had said. Not only would Thomas be inheriting Cole's unfinished work, he would also inherit all the danger that brought with it. If he were to accept, he would become a target and somewhere in the back of his mind he could hear Cole ranting about warlocks and shadowy conspiracies.

“We do not expect you to answer us now,” said Fiona. “We just wished to ask you first before we re-establish connection with Achland.”

Thomas scowled. “Re-establish connection? What's happened?”

“Nothing of any great consequence,” said Erik. “Our scryers have been having difficulty contacting anyone. Telegram lines appear to be functioning, but we are still awaiting a reply.”

From what Thomas gathered scrying was an imprecise and unpredictable form of communication at the best of times. This was one of the major reasons the nascent telegraph technology had become so valuable. Not only was it more reliable, it did not require a Spellweaver to operate it, which meant anyone could use it.

“Well, if we are going to be waiting anyway I suggest we get some sleep,” said Satesh.

“Doubtless we could all use a good rest.”

Everyone nodded in agreement, then began to depart for the night. For a moment it looked as though Erik was going to approach Thomas. The man probably blamed himself for Cole's disappearance, since as far as Erik knew the only reason Cole had come to Kaldry was because of his invitation. Thomas considered telling Erik about Cole's real motivations, but the elderly Colonel left without saying anything and Thomas followed him out into the dark hall.

“Mr. Atkin,” Fiona called. “If I might have a word before you retire?”

“Yes?” Thomas replied dully.

“Not here,” said Fiona. “There are some details of Cole's work I would like to discuss with you in private. If you would follow me to my apartments, we can talk there.”

Thomas followed Fiona out of the building. He was only vaguely aware of where they were going. All at once, the realization that Cole could be dead struck Thomas. It was an odd feeling of mingled grief and fear. All of Cole's responsibilities would fall to Thomas, as would any trouble he had uncovered, as would care of Armel. Thomas had seen little of the elf boy in the last few days, though when he had seen him last, he had been with Helen and a kelvish lad his own age. Thomas idly wondered how he should go about informing Armel of Cole's disappearance.

“I thought you did not keep a residence here,” said Thomas. Fiona opened the door of a small
bungalow far removed from the others and motioned for him to enter.

“It was my father's,” Fiona stepped inside, the mage-fyre lamps brightening in response to her presence. “It's modest, but we can talk freely here.”

The bungalow was modest in proportion, though not in decoration. It was a single room, split by a finely carved divider from the far east. The wood frame divider held a series of bright paintings, all done upon silk cloth, showing cherry blossoms through the seasons. Hunting trophies, including the head of a vicious dire-tiger of the northern Kaldrien jungles, hung upon the wall. There were several racks of weapons, some domestic, others foreign, including a polished rapier and main gauche. In addition to the stuffed trophies, Thomas saw several Ethanian tribal fetishes, as well as a human skull mask, the favourite garb of the Üruush necromancers, hanging upon the walls.

“I take it this was all your father's?”

“Yes, whatever people may think of him he was something of an eccentric collector,” said Fiona. “He was also a greater strategist.”

“He was rather ruthless if the stories are to be believed,” said Thomas.

“Yes, he could be rather....harsh when it came to his enemies” said Fiona after a measured pause.

“A style you do not seem to share.”

“We all try to distance ourselves from our forebears, don't we Mr. Atkin?” Fiona smiled. “Either to distinguish ourselves, or to repent for sins they committed. My father may have been ruthless, but he was also a great commander. I do my best to ensure that his legacy is not forgotten.”

“So then, what...ahhh,” Thomas screamed as something in his breast pocket burned white hot. Thomas wrenched open his jacket and dug in his pocket. The small, round locket he kept there had grown hot, but only for an instant. Even now, as he drew it out, the gold locket had grown cold again. Thomas inspected it for a moment, then flipped the locket open. On one side there was a photograph of Clarissa and where there normally was only polished gold there was a swirling vortex of magical energy.

The image whirled for a moment, before resolving itself into a face. “COLE!” Thomas exclaimed.

“Hello Thomas,” Cole replied. His voice sounded small and somewhat tinny, but it really was him. “Ahh and you are already with Fiona, perfect.”

“Sister?” Fiona asked, nodding at Clarissa's picture.

“Fiancé,” Thomas corrected her. “We are to be married when I return to Achland.”

“Wait, you're getting married?” Cole cocked his head to one side.

“Yes, I told you about my engagement....Cole what the hell are you doing alive?!”

“Wait, I'm supposed to be dead!?” Cole asked, confused. “Oh yes, the Selther, well I can see how you would think that.”

“Where are you?” Fiona asked. “What is the enemy's physical strength?”

“Uhhh well, I'm in a cave,” said Cole. “There is only one guard, but she, well she's not someone I would want to try to subdue. Thankfully I am still able to use my magic, so I am shielding this conversation from her. If she DID know I was contacting you, well she would probably burst in and slit my throat.” Cole sounded rather jocular, as though he really did not comprehend the gravity of the situation. “To answer your original question, I am really not one hundred percent sure where I am. The Selther took me to a valley maybe ten miles or so from the ruins.”

Thomas watched Fiona rip a map off the wall, then lay it on the table. She took out a magnifying glass and a set of cartography tools, including a compass, and several lengths of cord, then set to work mapping out the co-ordinates Cole had provided.

“I believe I have found the place,” she said after several moments. “We were already mobilizing
Newcomb

men. We'll have you out by morning.”

“No,” said Cole. “If you do that I'll just get attacked again.”

“What do you mean again?” Thomas asked. “If you were retrieved, the Selther would be taken captive or killed, you need not fear them.”

“It's not them I'm worried about,” Cole explained. “Come now Thomas, you are a well read man. Whenever someone of my...skin colour gets taken by savages he is always fine. Both fiction and history agree on that fact. Besides they already think I am some sort of chosen one or something.”

“Excuse me, what!”? Fiona guffawed.

“They took me to meet their shaman, leader lady...person,” Cole stammered, searching for the right word. “Apparently I disturbed something in the ruins, survived an encounter with some 'Guardian', and now they think I am marked just like this prophet of theirs. Well, one of them does anyway. That is why I am contacting you, they are going to take me to the prophet.”

“Where?” Fiona demanded.

“Not sure yet,” Cole shrugged, the movement causing the entire image to ripple. “I'll keep you informed. Right now I need you to not antagonize them. I think Allen may be working in tandem with the prophet or at least one of them is.”

“One of who?” Fiona asked.

“Thomas, do we trust Fiona?”

Thomas grimaced, mostly because he could already anticipate Fiona's response. “Considering recent events I think it's best we do.”

“Right,” Cole nodded. “When I said I would be attacked again, I was talking about Allen. Several weeks ago before leaving for Kaldry, I discovered a coven of warlocks working to bring down Achland from within, at least that is what I think they are doing. Their plans seem to involve Kaldry and based off some historical texts I have found. I believe they are anarchists responsible for the fall of several empires, Ronen included. I've suspected Allen since I met him, for reasons I will withhold. Now, I believe the Masked Prophet may be one of them as well. The Selther seem to believe he can foresee things and that he has been chosen to lead them because of some odd pagan nonsense.”

“But, there was no way for them to know you were coming,” said Fiona. “Unless, unless they were told by someone. But how would they contact the Prophet if he isn't with them?”

“Scrying,” Cole replied condescendingly. “It's obvious they planned it. After the reception I was attacked and almost killed, Armel saved me. After that, they tried to have me killed during the funeral, that failed as well. Your trial was another attempt to remove me, mostly by making me lose any sort of respect I had amongst the military and the Ra'kala. While I must admit that worked, they probably still saw me as a threat so they arranged to have the Selther kill me. I Now the real question is who they, and by extension Allen, are working with. I would say Mohan, he seems shifty, but I think Bhaskar might also considering I caught him plotting with someone whilst on the train.”

“But the Selther haven't killed you yet,” said Thomas. “Why?”

“I don't think all of them agree with the Masked Prophet,” said Cole. “It would seem that there is dissension in the ranks, which gives us an exploitable advantage.”

“So, you mean to tell me, that everything that has happened over the last few days, all the death, all the accusations against me, are because of you?” Fiona growled. “My men had their lives put in jeopardy so that some cabal of warlocks could eliminate you?”

“Precisely,” Cole replied. “And now they believe they have done it. Well...they won't for long if the prophet really is in league with them. Thomas, Fiona, I hate saying it, but discovering who's pulling the strings inside the Consortium is now your job.”

“Oh really,” said Fiona. “Why is it our job now?”

“Because I'm a bit tied up.” Cole sniggered at his own wit. “Besides, I am going to have a shot
at the Masked Prophet very soon. If you can find who's manipulating the Consortium, I can stop the rebellion brewing out here. They are intentionally working both sides, so we have to as well.”

Thomas watched Fiona consider Cole's offer. “How long till they take you to the Prophet?”

“Can't say.” Cole's image began flickering, the colour slowly draining away. “I can't hold the scrying much longer, I'm tired and my magic is failing. It seems like they are travelling to the Prophet, so a week maybe more. By then, they should all love me anyway, so it shouldn't be hard to remove the Prophet, or at least convince them to turn on him. I'll talk to you again once he is dead.”

“No,” said Fiona. “I want you to keep me updated on any developments. When you know where they are taking you, and where the Prophet is, you will contact me. Then I can bring the necessary military force to bear against him.”

“Further bloodshed will only compound the problem,” said Cole. “You'll make him a martyr, but I can see your point. Better eliminate him, then allow him to escape. Besides, I don't want to be stuck with these savages any longer than necessary. As soon as I find out where we are going, I will inform you. I'll be in contact again shortly.”

Cole's image flickered and died. “Do you trust him?” Fiona asked.

“Cole may be eccentric at times, but yes, I trust him,” said Thomas. “It might sound crazy, but I believe Cole when he says there is a plot against us.”

“That some outside force was plotting against us was obvious,” said Fiona. “Daniel wouldn't push to replace me, not without encouragement from an outside party. He's never been a brave man, but over these last few months he's been acting odd. Ever since Allen returned to Kaldry, at the beginning of this year, I have suspected him of working towards some ulterior motive, now I have found it I suppose. Though Cole's explanation seems...”

“Self-absorbed?” Thomas offered.

“That is one way to put it,” Fiona smiled. “Does he always make himself the centre of everything?”

“Yes, but that's Cole for you. There might be more to this whole plot, but for now all we have is Cole's word. Are you with us?”

“For now,” Fiona replied. “But be warned, I am not doing this for glory. I am doing this to ensure my men are safe. If what Cole tells me is true, someone has been intentionally killing my men, and they shall pay for their transgression.”
Chapter 25

The few hours of sleep that Cole managed were twisted things, full of memories long since suppressed. Dreams, built upon memories from his time in Felviar bubbled up to the surface of Cole's subconscious, torturing him with visions of his failure. Even when Cole's mind let him sleep, the hard cot the Selther had provided him didn't. The thing was barely two inches thick and did little to insulate Cole's back from the hard cave floor. The blanket they had given him was equally thin, and the cave grew very cold, especially since he had removed his trousers, shirt, and jacket so he could sleep comfortably and not worry about wrinkling them.

In between the few hours of sleep he managed, Cole would attempt to contact Benedict. Events in Kaldry were accelerating out of hi control and he needed to consult with the older man. The first few times were difficult, as though something were interfering with the magic that fuelled the scrying.

When he did finally manage to contact the spy-master, the man seemed rather unsurprised at the news that Cole had been abducted.

“Seems you have been provided the perfect opportunity to destroy this so called prophet,” said Benedict. “Seems the perfect role for you as well, you always did enjoy adulation. Just don't let it go to your head.”

Finally, after several hours of tossing about, Cole found a patch of rock that was flatter than the rest and settled down to sleep. Moments after closing his eyes, he fell asleep, only to be awakened by a swift kick in the ribs. Cole's head hurt as he tried to determine how long he had been out. When he opened his eyes, he found himself looking up at Saniyya. The warrior woman stood holding a bundle of clothes in one hand, and an earthen bowl and mug in the other.

“Get up,” she commanded. “Eat quickly.”

“Just leave it,” Cole rolled over, trying to ignore her.

“Ohh, the Achlander is ashamed,” Saniyya's eyes darted to where Cole had left his clothes folded neatly on the ground.

Cole grunted and sat up, keeping the blanket closely wrapped around himself. Saniyya laughed aloud, watching as he struggled to keep himself covered.

“I wish to preserve my modesty is that so strange?”

“Do you really think I have not seen a man naked before?”

Cole thought on that for a moment, he had to admit the situation was rather ironic, especially since his pants covered just a fraction less skin than current Saniyya's clothes did. The kelvish woman had done away with her armour, instead opting for a pair of leather leggings that clung to her every curve, and a tight band of red cloth that barely covered her small breasts. Seeing her like this confirmed Cole's suspicion. He could see every one of her ribs and even the bones of her spine. She might be slim, but she was also incredibly muscular, toned like an athlete or a runner, and as his eyes traced along the slender curves of her body he could feel himself becoming aroused.

Before standing, Cole made sure to rearrange himself. The situation was awkward enough, without Saniyya seeing his current situation. He stood, kept the blanket draped over his shoulder like a cloak, and took the bundle of clothes from Saniyya. In the bundle he found a rough spun shirt similar to the ones the men wore and a pair of woven trousers.

“Thank you,” Cole tossed them down on the mat. Saniyya stood watching him, her hands hovering over the hilts of her blades. “I needed materials to fix my clothes.”

“You'll be awfully hot,” said Saniyya, continuing to glare at Cole. He took the mug and bowl from her, took a swig from the mug, and found it filled with a bitter drink that was not entirely unlike tea. It wasn't up to Achlish standard, but it wasn't terrible. He set the food down, crossed the chamber to retrieve his clothes, and then noticed that Saniyya was watching him closely, her pale eyes studying his
bare skin. She flashed him a wicked smile when he caught her staring at his crotch.

“I'll be fine,” Cole sat down to eat. The bowl contained some form of mashed plant matter and in comparison to the tea it was horrible. “Are you going to keep standing there, or can I be trusted to eat in peace?”

Saniyya favoured Cole with another fiendish smile, then stalked out of the cave. Cole scowled, he had enough problems to deal with and Saniyya's shifting attitudes were low on his list of priorities. Whatever her intentions, she made him feel incredibly awkward and uncomfortable, though he guessed that could have been her goal. He had shown very little emotion or reaction to her physical threats, so perhaps she had decided on a new form of torture, one that worked to mock the values she believed Cole held. For a moment he had considered playing along. Saniyya was very lithe and flexible, and he wondered if he might be able to find a suitable application for those attributes. Of course if he did attempt any advances, Saniyya would probably use it as an excuse to gut him. Of course, with the way her hands lingered over her weapons, Cole suspected that her real intention was to intimidate him, especially since she had walked in when he was at his most “vulnerable”.

_Why must my life be full of such misery_, thought Cole.

Cole quickly finished the bowl of mash, then set it aside. The garments Saniyya had brought him were actually very well made, which surprised him. He had figured the Selther would have produced more primitive textiles, but on close inspection he found that the cloth was in fact very strong. Wasting no time, Cole took his jacket and began to tear strips from the shirt Saniyya had given him. His jacket was torn in multiple places and using the Selther garment for material, Cole used his magic to stitch the fabrics together, blending them into one solid whole. He held the jacket up, checked it, then proceeded to do the same with the rest of his clothes. The patches weren't perfect, but Cole was confident the only people who would even be able to notice them were the socialites and tailors of Achland.

Satisfied that he had at least repaired some of the damage, Cole dressed, using another spell to remove the dirt and mud that clung to his clothes. He pinned Braden's medallion to the front of the battered Ronic journal, then slid the book into his jacket pocket. The sun had only just begun to rise, tinting the eastern sky with colour. The Selther were already active and Cole watched as they began to load the elephants with the various tents and other camp materials.

“Glad to see my sister didn't kill you,” said Sanyo.

Cole turned to find the other man crouched on a low shelf over the mouth of the cave. “She'd of had a hard time of it.”

Sanyo dropped down next to Cole, laughing the entire time. “You have a very high opinion of yourself.”

“And why shouldn't I?” Cole finished his drink, rolling the earthen mug around in his hand. “According to your testimony, the Guardian spared me, which as you said, means I am an equal to this Prophet of yours.”

“No, I said it means you can challenge him,” Sanyo corrected. “There is a difference. Come we need to break camp before it gets too hot.”

The caravan of Selther lumbered out of the valley in a single file line. The elephants, larger than most Cole had seen in Kaldry, took the lead, the young and elderly riding in large baskets on the beasts' backs. The troop took a winding path through the jungle, mainly following the cliffs, before turning down an old dry river bed. As they walked, Cole pulled out his telethium and did his best to track their route. The Selther were headed in a predominantly southerly direction, though that only helped in the most general of senses, especially since the Selther often turned off to follow other paths through the jungle. Cole still had no idea where they were going, so knowing what direction they were headed didn't really help.
After several hours of trudging through rough terrain, Cole decided he hated walking. The jungle was wet and sticky and he was soon drenched in sweat. He was able to use his magic to alleviate some of the discomforts of the walk, but for the most part it was an utterly dismal affair. The Selther continued to avoid him, and Cole soon found himself limping along behind the rest of the column. Sanyo often wandered close to him, ducking in and out of the foliage. The Selther Spellweaver seemed rather relaxed, even peaceful, out here in the wilds, and he was often accompanied by several other young men. With his escort being so relaxed, Cole slipped away, entertained the idea of simply running, but then he heard light footfalls and the sound of breathing.

“You know I can hear you right?” Cole glanced back over his shoulder to see Saniyya gliding through the trees.

“You should talk less and walk more,” Saniyya replied.

“I’m not going to run, you have my word on that,” Cole slowed even more to fall in step with her, accidentally brushing his arm against hers. Saniyya flinched back from the slight contact, hands going to the hilts of her khukuris, and Cole stepped away from her, scared she might attack him.

“You Achlanders never keep your word,” Saniyya said, her tone harsh, nostrils flaring. She began to walk faster, and Cole struggled to keep up. “Even if you did escape, you would be very easy to track, you make a lot of noise.”

“Well, this is not exactly my natural habitat.” Cole clambered over a large root that had thrust itself up from out of the ground. “I’m more used to paved streets.” Saniyya snorted dismissively. Cole hauled himself out of the mud. The two began to walk along again, though Saniyya's hands were always resting on the hilts of her khukuris. Now that he wasn't distracted, he was able to observe just how strong she really was. Saniyya was skinny yes, but at the same time he could see tense corded muscle rippling beneath her skin. Her abs and chest were well defined, drawing even more attention to her petite breasts. Saniyya turned to Cole, and his eyes darted upwards, but the glint in her eye told him she knew where he had been looking. Like all kelves, Saniyya's irises were very pale and that made her hazel eyes appear coppery, almost red. In truth, Cole had to admit that she was rather pretty, not in the traditional Achlish sense, but she had her own savage, primal beauty.

Stop staring at her, Cole admonished himself. She's your captor, she's not pretty she's an uncivilized savage, and would slit your throat if the opportunity presented itself.

Around noon the column stopped and the Selther began to remove cooking utensils from the elephants, setting up a makeshift camp in a large clearing. Cole found a shady spot under a large tree and sat down to rest. His feet were throbbing and when he removed his shoes and socks he saw that they were covered in blisters. Cole grimaced. As they walked, he had noticed that the Selther wore light slipper-like shoes, which were no doubt more comfortable on long marches. Cole pulled his shoe back on, just as one of the Selther walked towards him.

“What contribution to the mid day meal will you be making?” The man squeaked in a voice a good deal higher than Cole would have expected for someone so rotund.

“Eating it,” Cole replied, careful to mind his pronunciation of the Selther dialect.

The man laughed. “Do all Achlanders have such a sense of humour? If one wants to eat they need to contribute. Come, we will find something for you to do.”

“Why would we need to do that though?”

“Because we all must contribute if we are to survive,” said Sanyo, appearing behind Cole without the slightest sound.

“Well, aren't you sneaky,” Cole replied. “Wasn't it you who said I was some chosen one? Your god spared me.”

“That was not our god that spared you.”

“You seemed to imply as much last night,” Cole retorted.
“The Guardians are not gods,” said Sanyo. “The rest of your tribe seemed rather respectful of them,” Cole sneered. “What other reason is there for them to be so reverent?”

“The Guardians are ancient, and they deserve our respect, but they are man made” replied Sanyo. “Whatever you may think, we are not so primitive as to worship rocks. The magic that infuses the Guardians has protected our sacred places for generations, and so we afford them the respect they deserve.”

“Then why say I was chosen?”

“Because the Prophet called himself chosen.” Sanyo sounded incredulous, as if he doubted the claim.

“So...let's find you something to do,” interjected the short kelvish man. “Come on.”

Cole followed the man through the camp, and he noticed several of the children watching him, their eyes alive with curiosity. Probably haven't had much contact with white men, Cole thought. He passed by a group of boys roughly Armel's age and noticed that they too seemed rather more interested in him than the rest of the Selther. In the centre of the camp the Selther had started a series of fires and Cole was amazed to discover that the savages actually had metal cooking pots. As Cole approached, he saw a group of hunters return, carrying several large boars between them.

Throughout the day, Cole had made many observations about the Selther. While last night, he had thought them unified around the cowled shaman Hadiya, he now knew there were instead lead by a collection of elders, most of whom were women. Indeed, he saw very few men over the age of thirty, and the majority of those were all either crippled, or missing limbs. There were two-hundred and fifty or perhaps three-hundred Selther in the “tribe”, though many appeared to be from several diverse groups. There were roughly forty children, and an equal number of elderly, but for the most part the core of the Selther people appeared to be in their twenties, and Cole wondered what calamity had beset the community to so skew their population.

In addition to the Selther, Cole estimated there were thirty elephants, mostly being used as beasts of burden and as mounts. The Selther were well armed for the most part, though only a few carried firearms, all of which were ancient, flintlock pieces crusted with rust. Though they might be well armed, the Selther did not appear well provisioned, and the signs of hard living were etched on their gaunt faces.

“Can you clean a kill?” The man asked. He was shorter than Cole, and looked to be in his late sixties, with silvered hair and a long drooping moustache His skin was darker than some of the other, and he wore a brown vest, but no shirt.

“No,” said Cole.

“Can you cook? Hunt?”

“No,” said Cole. The man pointed him to a small stool in front of one of the larger cauldrons.

“Then what good are you?” The man laughed. “You must contribute something to your people to be dressed so finely.”

For some odd reason the man's offhanded slight hurt Cole more than it should have.” In Achland there are individuals who don't need skills,” said Cole. “We are....leaders and others serve us.”

“Hadiya was right, you speak our language very poorly,” said the man. “Do not worry, most of my people speak your tongue well enough. I am Qismat, if you were wondering. Here you can help clean these.”

Qismat handed Cole a stack of bowls, a small jug of water, and a bristle brush. Some of the bowls were metal, while other were earthen ware, but all showed signs of heavy usage. The metal bowls were dented and discoloured, flecked with rust, while the earthen ones were chipped and cracked, and several of both types seemed to have been burned at one point.
“You clean the bowls before you eat?”

“All vessels must be purified before they are used,” Qismat explained as several other kelves gathered around the large cauldron. One of them, a woman, drew out a small tinder box and began to strike a flame. Cole smiled and flicked a small ball of fire into the gathered wood under the pot. The woman gasped and stepped back. “You're a Weaver?” Qismat hissed.

“Of course,” Cole replied.

“Well then I guess you won't mind helping with these.” Qismat passed Cole another, larger, stack of bowls. “It will go much faster with you cleaning them.”

Does this sub-human think I am a servant or something?

Cole simply sat there, watching as Qismat worked. The other man made a swishing movement with his hand, and Cole let out heavy sigh, then set to work. He wouldn't stoop to using a brush of course, that might damage his nails. Instead Cole conjured a jet of magic from his finger tip and used that to clean the bowls.

After Qismat had Cole purify the bowls, he handed him a stack of mugs left over from earlier in the morning. Cole rolled his eyes and took off his jacket. The day had grown warm and he didn't want to get his jacket any dirtier than it already was. As he worked Qismat passed him a bowl of boar stew, a hunk of hard brown bread, and mug of cold water. Cole ate as he worked, slowly making his way through the stack of mugs before moving on to another pile. A crowd began to gather as he worked, watching with cold, pale eyes. Once he had finished with the food and his work, a woman stepped forward.

“Yes?” Cole asked, glancing at the pile of cracked cook ware she carried.

“Can you....” the woman stopped. “With your talents you could...”

“No,” Cole sneered. He stood up and tossed his jacket over his shoulder, then ran a hand back through his hair, ensuring that it stayed in place. “I shouldn't be using my powers for such menial tasks anyway.”

The Selther resumed their march soon after, once again tramping through the forest. Refreshed by a good meal, Cole found himself able to better keep up with the group, though his feet still hurt a good deal. Cole did notice a change among the Selther. Before they had been rather cool to his presence, but now that he had revealed his abilities as a Spellweaver, he could sense their curiosity. Cole smiled to himself, this was how he liked things, now he would get the respect he deserved.

Cole spotted the group of boys he had noticed early running alongside the caravan, fighting with short branches they had plucked from the trees. As a member of the gentry, Cole had fenced in his youth and as he watched the boys he couldn't help but critique their style. They were too loose, too wild, and their foot work was very sloppy. Cole watched one of the boys clumsily parry a blow, but instead of riposting, he stepped into his opponent's personal space and shoved him to the ground.

“Dead,” the boy placed the tip of his branch to the other boy's throat.

“Who taught them?” Cole asked Sanyo.

“They teach themselves,” he replied. “It is not until we come of age do we find our Veths. Depending on fate some will need to relearn the skills of their Veth, while others will recall their pasts so perfectly they will not need further training.”

“They are doing well for their age,” said Saniyya.

“They are? The one boy doesn't move his feet enough and his grip is poor.”

“Ohh, are we a master swordsman now as well as Weave-touched?” The warrior woman taunted. “If you know so much, why don't you teach us oh prestigious one.”

“Fine,” Cole, removed his jacket, handed it to Sanyo, and rolled up his sleeves. “I'll need a weapon.”

Saniyya walked to one of the pack elephants and climbed up into the basket on the beast's back.
She opened a wicker chest and rooted through it, returning a moment later with a short stubby blade perhaps two feet long. Cole took it from her and tested the blade's balance. It was rather crude, flecked with rust, but he had not expected much from such primitive people like the Selther. The leather wrapping was still cracked and peeling, though it rested easy in Cole's hand.

“Well, I don't like the balance.” Cole fell into a fighting stance, bouncing on the balls of his feet, then slashing at the air several times. “It will have to do. Though I feel I may be at a slight advantage when all my enemy has is sticks.”

“She doesn't.” Saniyya drew the khukuris sheathed at her waist. She twirled the curved knives in her hands, her eyes locked on Cole. Watching Saniyya's meticulously kept blades whirl through the air, Cole realized that she had given him a blade never meant to see combat.

“Ohhh, this will be interesting.” Cole shifted his weight to his back foot and held the blade out ready for the first clash.

Saniyya held her blades low and began to circle around Cole, the wicked knives in constant motion. Cole watched her draw close and then lunged, thrusting with the tip of his blade. Saniyya wheeled to the side, dark hair whipping through the air, and caught his thrust with her right hand blade. The force of the blow caused Cole to overbalance and he stumbled. Saniyya twisted her khukuri downwards and locked it around Cole's blade. He wrenched back, only to find her other khukuri resting against his throat.

“Dead,” Saniyya declared. She flicked her right hand down, effortlessly disarming Cole. She drew closer to him, so close that he could smell her. Dirt, sweat, the metallic smell of blood, all of these scents clung to Saniyya, it made her smell real, authentic, not like the perfumed women of Achland. As Cole looked at her he found that they were almost the same height. “Maybe someday you'll put up half a fight.” Saniyya twisted her weight around and dropped Cole down into the dirt.

Somewhere off to his right he could hear the boys laughing. When Cole looked up, he saw that Saniyya's entire body was shaking and he could feel the anger pouring off of her, even though their exchange had not been heated, or volatile. He knew she was angry with the Achlish, but her anger was greater than he could have predicted.

The boys continued to laugh, and Cole felt his face growing hot. He had faced similar mockery before as a boy, but never at the hands of a savage woman so inferior to him. Saniyya snorted and muttered something under her breath that Cole could not hear; she then turned her back on him and walked away. Cole's fingers clenched around the worn leather hand-grip of his borrowed blade. Saniyya's flippant manner infuriated him and he reached for his magic. Lying on his belly, Cole summoned a lash of shadow around his fist and whipped it out, wrapping the solid mass of energy around the warrior woman's ankle.

Cole yanked Saniyya off her feet and leaped up. One of the boys gasped. Cole closed on her, intending to place the point of his blade against her throat and force her surrender. He had not even closed half of the distance between him and the fallen warrior woman before Saniyya arched her back and sprang up. Saniyya flipped about, her khukuris already in hand, and effortlessly parried Cole's blade. Cole fell back, doing his best to muster some form of defence against Saniyya's furious assault. Before Saniyya had been toying with him, but now she was attacking full out, holding nothing back.

The two combatants danced together for several seconds before breaking apart. Cole had underestimated Saniyya before and was not about to make the same mistake twice. Cole's confidence in his own abilities began to slip. While he had fenced as a boy, he had abandoned his lessons when his magic had manifested itself. He retained some of the lessons, but such practised and rigid forms were no match for the sheer ferocity of Saniyya's fighting style.

Cole ducked under a howling khukuri, and Saniyya brushed past him, her bare skin hot against his. Lightning shot down Cole's spine, that simple touch sparking something deep inside him that he
had repressed for many years. He slid to the side, just as Saniyya brought her left hand khukuri around. Cole tilted his head back, but the wicked blade still kissed his cheek, drawing a line of blood.

Saniyya whirled away, khukuris hissing through the air, and then plunged back into the fray, weaving a cage of steel around Cole. Cole, left hand wreathed in a flickering nimbus of protective magic, defended himself with both blade and spell. He caught another one of her blows, but the force of the blow snapped him around, and Cole could feel something give way in his back.

The fight dragged on and Cole was exhausted. Time fell away and he was barely paying attention to their surroundings. Cole had long ago reached his physical limit and was now only able to hold his own because of his magic. Saniyya was an amazing fighter, faster than Cole could have ever imagined. Even using magic to augment his abilities, Cole was still losing. The battle was draining and Saniyya's constant press never allowed him the time he needed to concentrate and cast a spell that could end the brawl.

Low, high, mid, mid, low, high, low, low, Cole could do nothing but respond to Saniyya's attacks. Blood flowed freely down Cole's cheek, but he ignored it. He blocked a blow, made to turn, and found Saniyya's right leg wrapped around his. Cole barely had time to gasp, before Saniyya pressed her blade to his throat. The smallest of smiles flickered over her exotic features.

"You lose," Saniyya whispered, her lips nearly brushing Cole's own.

"Really now?" Cole smirked. "I suggest you look again."

Saniyya's eyes darted downwards and Cole released the indigo nimbus that surrounded his left hand. Saniyya reacted in the blink of an eye. Again she swept Cole's feet out from under him and he crashed to the ground. The burst of energy shot skyward, missing Saniyya by a wide margin. The clearing fell silent. Cole half expected the kelvish boys to start laughing again, but they did not. Cole pushed himself up into a sitting position and found that he and Saniyya were in fact alone, in a clearing he did not recognize.

"How did we get here? We can't have fought that long," thought Cole.

Cole figured Saniyya would have left, but instead she was standing several yards away, just staring at him. There was an odd look in the dark skinned woman's eyes, something that made Cole uneasy. There was anger in her eyes of course, but also something Cole thought might be curiosity, possibly even astonishment. Neither moved, instead they just stared into each others eyes for several seconds, before a rustling in some bushes nearby broke the oddly intimate moment. The boys stumbled into the clearing, while Saniyya turned and left Cole lying in the dirt, followed closely by Sanyo.

"You going to laugh again?" Cole staggered to his feet, searching around for the blade Saniyya had given him. "I did lose after all."

"Everyone loses to Saniyya," replied one of the boys. Sanyo reached out a hand, but Cole ignored him. "Her Veth has been blessed by Ahkli, perfected in the ways of the warrior."

"Fantastic." Cole didn't have time for savage superstitions. "Any reason you're still standing there?"

"I just wanted to make sure you are all right," said the boy. "That was an intense fight and..."

"I don't need your help," Cole retorted. His back was aching from where he had pulled it and his magical exertions had made him light headed.

The boys just stood there, watching Cole for several minutes before leaving, heading off after Saniyya. Cole muttered several curses under his breath, stooped to pick up his blade, and found that the sleeve of his shirt had been slashed opened and his arm bleed freely. Cole was too exhausted to fix it, so instead he just ripped the sleeve off, and began to twist it into a bandage.

"If you are to tired I can close that wound for you," said Sanyo. "I have some skill."

"Save your breath." Cole gritted his teeth together and pulled the tourniquet tight. The wound was shallow, but it still hurt a good deal.
“Here let me.” Sanyo placed a hand on Cole's shoulder. Cole flinched away, face set in a grimace. “Why are you so angry?”

“Do I need to give you a reason? You're the one who dragged me out here!”

“I kept you alive,” Sanyo replied, his tone remaining neutral. Cole wished Sanyo had yelled at him, at least then his anger would be justified.

“Yes you kept me alive, just so I could be tortured by your sister.”

For a moment it looked like Sanyo was going to say something, but the words died on his lips. Cole returned to the caravan alone, leaving Sanyo standing alone in the jungle. The sun had just begun to set, and the caravan had stopped, this time forming camp under a shallow rock shelf. Cole helped Qismat to unload one of the elephants and then helped to purify the cookware. This time Cole did not use any magic, instead doing all the work by hand. He wasn't sure, but for a moment he thought he saw Qismat nod his head in approval. As twilight approached, Cole saw a line of guards begin to light torches around the edge of the camp. The men moved swiftly, setting up a perimeter some thirty yards out from the others. A large bonfire roared to life in the centre of the cave and Cole watched as the Selther gathered around it, sitting down together to enjoy the evening meal.

Qismat passed Cole a plate. “Do you want to join us? Even though you are....well what you are, I believe we can find a place for you to sit.”

“No I'm fine,” said Cole. He watched Hadiya stand, arms spread wide to greet the group of children that gathered around her. For one moment, Cole felt a sudden sense of loneliness. In Achland no one gathered like this, no one gathered just to be together, there was always some hidden ulterior motive to it. While he hated the intricacies of Achlish social graces, it was where he belonged, not out here at the edge of civilization, if it could even be called that.

“No one should have to eat alone,” said Qismat. “You may be an outsider but that does not...”

“No, I enjoy eating alone,” said Cole. “It's all I ever done and I've gotten used to it.” Qismat nodded and Cole watched him walk away, bending to kiss a woman Cole presumed was the man's wife. “It doesn't matter if I'm here or if I'm in Achland, I'll always be an outsider. I don't belong anywhere.”
Chapter 26

“So, you've never been down to the wharfs?” Armel scoffed as he moved his Dragoon forward to claim Kishan's Knight.

“No,” Helen replied from where she sat on the railing. Now that they had become friends, the three adolescents spent most of their time together. Right now, they sat together on a second floor veranda overlooking one of the palace's many gardens. Helen sat on a railing, watching from above as Armel and Kishan played a game of Skirmish at a low table. “Leaving the palace on my own is...impossible, so I really can't go out and explore Thertan.”

“You could always sneak out,” Kishan said, his brow furrowed as he tried to decide on his next move. “It can't be that hard, can it?”

“You don't know Ian,” Helen drew her legs in against her chest. Usually Helen's governess, Ms. Dolley, insisted she wear dresses, but today she had been able to convince the shrewish woman to allow her to wear a pair of trousers and a simple spun shirt. Armel found that this actually made her prettier, especially since it allowed him to get a good look at her legs.

“I can hear you lassy,” Ian called from where he stood out in the hall. “So don't be gettin too sassy.”

Armel looked at Helen and they both broke out laughing. “I wonder what Ian would do if I were to jump off this balcony right now!” Helen called back.

The tall Gelishman leaned his head in through the doorway. “I'd throw both of the lads out and then hope they hit first. Then you'd have something soft to land on.”

“Ohh he is cheery,” Kishan began to gnaw on his lip, reached for one of his game pieces, then stopped. “Dammit Armel, why did you have to take that Knight! You were supposed to take the wedge of Footmen at the hill.”

“I would have lost my Dragoon to your Longbow men,” said Armel. “Maybe you should stop trying to teach me games I don't know.”

“But that's the only way I'll win!” Kishan moved a wedge of Musketeers forward to capture Armel's forward cannons.

So far Armel had played Kishan in checkers, chess, and Skirmish. Armel had only really known how to play the first and only because he had played with a group of gamblers down in the Narrows. Even though he was unfamiliar with the rules of the other two games, Armel had learned fast and had only lost by a narrow margin in chess. It was clear from just these few games that Kishan was a horrible tactical thinker, but Armel still found himself having fun.

“Are you only teaching me to play these games so you can win?” Armel grabbed a handful of crystalline pomegranate seeds from a bowl on the floor.

“Of course,” Kishan replied. Armel plopped the handful of seeds into his mouth, carefully chewing them so as not to bite into the hard pits. “I have to be able to win against someone don't I?”

“You could move your Footmen up to the far hill,” Helen advised. “You've already taken most of Armel's Bow and Gunmen, so he would have a hard time taking it back from you.”

Kishan looked up at Helen in disbelief. “Easy for you to say, you're not playing, you have an advantage.”

Helen laughed and sat down next to Armel. “So how are we going to go about getting rid of Ian?” She whispered. She reached across Armel's chest to grab some pomegranate seeds. “He hasn't left me alone since the funeral. I want to go out alone again.”

Flustered by Helen's touch, Armel moved his cavalry forward, only to have Kishan crush them with the cannon battery he had taken in the previous round. With that move Kishan had now re-secured his borders, as well as driven Armel back into a corner. Armel's Dragoons could lead a charge at the
cannon battery, but he would suffer heavy losses.

“Armel, could you weave some magic?” Kishan asked. “Make Ian think we are still here?”

“No,” Armel toppled his own Queen over, signalling his surrender.

“Well, at least I won,” Kishan smiled.

“Yes, yes, you did wonderfully,” said Helen. “Now then we need to....”

A horn sounded from outside the window. Helen stood and walked back to the balcony. Armel shrugged at Kishan and followed her. When he looked out, Armel could see a long line of red-coated Consortium Guardsmen marching towards the compound. They were all in full uniform, weapons held at the ready.

“Well, that is odd,” said Ian. Armel turned, he hadn't even heard the man approach, yet here he was, standing over him.

“Yes, it is,” Helen agreed.

“Why is it odd?” Kishan asked from the other side of the room.

“The Consortium is supposed to be disbanding most of their standing platoons,” said Ian. “I count close to three hundred men there and they are all fully armed.”

“But why would they be disbanding if the Lord-Protector hasn't arrived yet?” Armel asked.

“Don't we still need the Consortium to keep us safe?”

“That was part of the reason Major-General Howe was deployed,” Ian replied. “He was supposed to bring enough soldiers with him so that he and the Rankala could maintain order, while the Consortium forces left. Can I trust all of you to stay out of trouble? There is something odd here but I can't put my finger on what, I need to consult with Colonel Walsh.”

Ian marched out of the room, but Armel thought he saw the bodyguard flash him a quick smirk before he left. It seemed Helen had noticed as well, since not a moment later she dashed to the doorway and looked out. Kishan seemed to ignore the situation entirely, instead he sat glaring at the table, still trying to determine how Helen had seen a strategy he had not.

“He's gone,” said Helen. “I don't think he's gone far though and Ms. Dolley is probably around somewhere close.”

“So, we're going out the window then?” Armel looked out over the balcony. “Bit of a drop.”

“There is a tree just over there,” Helen pointed further along the wall.

Armel looked over. There was indeed a large palm tree that curved towards the wall. It wouldn't be an easy to climb down, but getting to it should be relatively easy. The palace walls were carved with all sorts of small niches and hollows which would provide plenty of hand and footholds. Armel would have suggested just climbing down those, but below them was a row of pillars and those would be impossible to climb down.

“We could stay here you know,” said Kishan. “Get some more food brought up, it would be nice.”

Helen rolled her eyes and climbed out onto the balcony. Armel followed her out. Kishan stayed behind for a moment, sighed, and clambered over the railing after the other two. They climbed along the wall easily enough, especially since the marble railing provided plenty of stability. The railing ended at a large pillar, but Helen found a way around that by dropping down to a lower level. The three kids made good time and soon found themselves parallel with the tree.

Helen reached out and wrapped her hand around the trunk of the palm. It took her a moment, but she eventually got a strong enough grip on the trunk that she was able to pull herself up against the tree and wrap her legs around the trunk. In one swift motion, Helen loosened her grip and began to slide down the smooth trunk, touching down on the ground below. Armel followed her example and soon the two of them were standing on the ground, watching as Kishan struggled to get a good grip.

“You've got to put your whole body into it,” Helen called. “Get your hand around the trunk then
swing your leg up.”

“Easy for you to say, you don't have to worry about crushing anything,” said Kishan, causing Helen to blush bright red. “If I could just.....”

Kishan's hand slipped off the trunk and he fell, toppling forward off the balcony. Armel panicked and ran forward reaching out with his magic. Even with Cole being busy or absent, Armel had kept up with his training. He would often sit up for hours at night testing out various means of manipulating the world's natural forces. Now that he knew how to reach for his powers, Armel found that he could do all sorts of things, but he also found that even the simplest of magic made him very tired. Cole had of course warned Armel this would happen, so the young elf boy had taken to running several miles around the inner city each day as a way to build up his endurance.

Even now, as Armel moved to catch his friend, he thought of a dozen ways to save his friend. Most were utterly impractical, such as animating the tree or the ground. Instead, Armel reached out into the air. Just as Cole had told him, Armel had found there was one element he worked best with, air. For Armel, manipulating the subtle magics in the air was very easy. In fact, whenever he reached for his magic, he could almost see the wind even if there wasn't any. coloured bands of energy swirled through the air and Armel reached for them, weaving them into a funnel shape around Kishan. The winds swirled around the kelf, slowing his fall, but not stopping it. Kishan hit the ground with an audible thump and Armel collapsed, exhausted from utilizing so much of his power.

“Armel,” Helen gasped and rushed forward. “Are you all right?”

“I'm fine,” said Kishan, his words muffled by the ground. “Thanks for asking.”

“It's nothing, I'm fine” said Armel as Helen helped him sit up. His vision was foggy and he felt weak, but he knew if he just sat still for a few moments the feeling would pass. “I have to do things like that or I'll never know my limits.”

“You could push them a bit harder next time,” Kishan he stood up and dusted himself off. “Maybe then my face wouldn't hurt so much.”

“But then Armel might hurt himself,” Helen patted his hand. Armel felt his face grow hot and turned away.

“I'll master it one day.” Armel stood. He was still a bit light-headed, but it wasn’t too bad. “When I do master it the first thing I am going to do is fling you so high into the air you never come back down Kishan.”

Kishan laughed and the four set off across the grounds. In the aftermath of the funeral, things had been tense around the inner city. While children still ran around, many stayed closer to their homes and there were no more large gatherings at the pool or the ball courts. The amount of soldiers who patrolled the inner city had nearly doubled. Before it was not uncommon to see a guard or two on the walls, but now there were several dozen. One night, Armel had gotten an urge to go out and explore the other parts of the city, only to find the gates barred and shut. The Achlish soldier had been suspicious and Armel had to spin a fabulous lie to the man. Even then Armel had not been allowed out and had to return to Cole's empty bungalow.

Armel looked up and watched the Consortium airship, _Bounty_, patrolling the skies along the east end of the city. The _Bounty_ was smaller and more streamlined than some of the other airships Armel had seen on duty around the city and he guessed it must have been a newer model. The ship was painted in the gold and red of the Consortium, causing it to stand out against the sky. As it chugged along, Armel could not help but imagine what it must be like to fly and wondered if he might be able to manage such a feat through the clever application of magic. Armel reckoned it wouldn't be much more complicated than other magic he had attempted, but it would probably be physically draining.

Since there were so few other children around, Armel, Helen, and Kishan visited the menagerie that one of the Ra'kala kept in a remote corner of the upper city. The animals were all kept behind
bright gilded bars, but their habitats were spacious. Once as a young boy, Armel had attempted to sneak into the Thertan zoological gardens located in the Castle district. rumours swirled about the creatures that were kept there, with the most fantastic saying that there were even dragons. The zoo had turned out to be something of a disappointment for Armel, mainly because he didn't even make it past the second set of entry gates before being tossed out.

The Kaldrien menagerie contained all sorts of animals, tigers, deer, even a tawny gryphon, its wings clipped short so it couldn't fly away. Kishan led the other two around regaling them with stories of how Kaldry had come to own four thoroughbred Dwarlish horses, some of the finest in the world. Armel found the entire menagerie enchanting, especially the family of otters that poked their whiskered noses through the bars, sniffing at his outstretched hand.

“They're so funny,” said Armel.

“They are ADORABLE!” Helen squealed. Armel had to agree, they were very cute.

“You're...uh,” said Kishan. “Come one Armel, they usually feed the crocodiles around this time. If we're lucky they might have live prey!”

Kishan ran further along the path and Armel stayed with Helen, standing at the bars of the otter enclosure. The girl reached out and took Armel's hand. “Armel...I never thanked you for coming to save me during the riot.”

“It was nothing,” Armel replied.

“No, it was good to have you so close. It was scary all the gunfire but you were so calm.”

Armel turned towards her. “I've been in the middle of things like that before.” Armel stopped for a moment, wondering just how much he should tell Helen about his life. “To tell you the truth I've been down in the rougher parts of Thertan quite often. Life is rough down by the Mallar, someone is always shooting at someone or trying to stab them...or you're running from the Watch. Just because I'm used to that sort of thing doesn't make it any less scary.”

“Well, I'm still glad you were with me,” said Helen as she leaned forward. Armel's heart fluttered as he tried to decide on the best course of action. He hadn't ever kissed a girl, so he wasn't sure exactly how he would go about it. For a moment Armel considered just running, it would be easier and less humiliating. His worst fear was that Kishan would come back and interrupt them. Beating back his fears, Armel leaned forward, lips tightly closed.

“Young lady what do you think you are doing!” Shrieked Ms. Dolley.

“I was...uh,” Helen sputtered.

“Misbehaving horribly,” the governess cried. Ms. Dolley was short, only a few inches taller than Armel, but she was incredibly wide, with quivering jowls and large pendulous breasts. “I thought you said you made some respectable friends!”

“I did,” Helen replied indignantly as Kishan came running towards them.

“I thought you made some human friends;” Ms. Dolley corrected. “Or at the very least Kaldrien friends of your own social standing. What happened to all those girls I introduced you to? They were all very nice.”

“They were boring,” said Helen. “All they wanted to do was gossip.”

“Well, then you should stay inside,” said the governess. She grabbed Helen's hand and began to drag her along, muttering under her breath. “He's an elf for god's sake girl and he also is a close associate of Mr. Travers. Lord only knows what that man has turned the boy into. Travers is a horrid, lecherous man, combine that with a boy's natural urges and who knows what might happen!”

“No wonder she keeps wanting to run out,” Kishan muttered when Ms. Dolley was out of earshot. “Personally, I'd just poison the old toad.”

“Toad?” Armel snickered. “I think she looks more like a hippopotamus.”

“She certainly seems mean enough,” Kishan shrugged. “But really comparing her to any animal
is an insult, to that animal.”

Armel and Kishan both broke into a round of raucous laughter. They laughed so hard that they had to cling to each other to stop from falling down. After several minutes, they finally settled down and Armel whipped the tears from his eyes. Together the two boys set off again, stopping to watch the crocodiles rip apart several cows that their handlers had lowered into the habitat. After that, the two walked up to the walls of the inner city and looked out over Al-katal. The city was still rebuilding from the riots, but even so Armel couldn't help but feel a sense of wonder looking out at the ancient city. While Thertan was cold, hard, and new, Al-katal was a red brick mystery, ancient and foreboding.

After spending several more hours exploring various hidden grottoes and gardens, the two boys decided to return to Cole’s bungalow. They were both hungry and Armel figured there would be something around the Consortium compound they could eat. They had just turned down a dirt path when Armel heard footsteps coming up behind them.

“Hey look if it isn't the elf runt,” called a drawling voice. “What do you think we should do with him Mohan?”

Armel turned to see Mohan and his troop of toadies, six boys in all walking towards them.

Kishan placed a hand on Armel's forearm and mouthed, “don't.”

“Well, he is a scrawny little point-ear,” said Mohan. “But he really hasn't done anything that bad.”

“From where I'm standing your ears look pretty pointy to me,” Armel called.

“Of course he has weaselled his way into the princess’s good graces,” said one of Mohan's friends. “Or maybe he's tried to do a bit more.” The boy leered at Armel. “Be a damn shame if he were to pop her before the wedding.”

“That's enough Sulkeh,” said Mohan. Even though he was a pompous ass, Armel couldn't fault Mohan, he had honour, at least in some form. “My friend is right though, I can't let you go and get too friendly with Helen. Considering my father is going to discuss her dowry right now.”

Armel felt his fist clench. “Glad you let your father do everything for you.”

Mohan took several steps forward. Out of the corner of his eye Armel could see that the other boys had begun to fan out around them, boxing him and Kishan in. “Jealous? You must be orphan. Even when you find someone to take you in he turns out to be a fucking traitor, running off with the savages. My father is actually respectable, unlike Mr. Travers who keeps trying to block the Consortium's work with our people. You should hear my father rant about him.”

“Your father doesn't sound very smart,” said Armel. From somewhere near his elbow Armel heard Kishan let out a terrified squeak. “Considering the Consortium isn't going to be around much longer, well I don't think trying to work with them is a good idea.”

“Don't insult my father, slime,” Mohan growled.

“But it's so hard not to.”

Mohan screamed and rushed at Armel. Kishan turned and ran. Armel glanced over his shoulder and watched as one of the other boys thrust his arm into Kishan’s path. Mohan swung and Armel ducked under the blow, twisting to the side, before the boy aimed a vicious kick at his ribs. Living on the streets, Armel had taken part in many scraps. Most he had lost, but he still had some experience. Mohan had training and before Armel even knew what was happening the other boy launched into a complex series of jabs and kicks. Armel dropped back, blocking what blows he could. He took a blow in the shoulder, staggered, and then was kicked in the shin. Mohan smirked and jabbed twice. Armel blocked the first, but the second blow caught him in the cheek and his head snapped around.

Dazed, Armel looked and saw Kishan on the ground. One of the other boys stood over him, driving savage kicks into the boy's back. Before Armel could intervene, Mohan attacked again. Armel felt his anger burn white hot and he reached for his magic. Flames burst from Armel's palm, setting
Mohan's shirt ablaze. Armel's head spun and he suddenly felt very tired. Mohan screamed and the boy who had been assaulting Kishan turned. Two of the others rushed forward and began to beat the flames down, while the four other boys surrounded Armel. Woozy, Armel blocked one blow, only to be bashed in the back of the head. He collapsed and curled into a tight ball, as the boys surrounded him. Armel clenched his eyes shut, hoping it would help to numb the pain, and then the crack of a gunshot split the air.

“All right you juvenile delinquents LISTEN UP!” Thomas roared, his gun pointed into the air. “This is NOT how boys of your upbringing behave,” Thomas levelled his revolver at Sulkeh. “Leave now and I won't tell your fathers.”

The boys scattered as Kishan dragged himself to Armel's side. “I told you not to antagonize them.”

“Where's the fun in that?” Armel wheezed.
“Are you all right?” Thomas dropped to one knee beside him. Armel sat up.
“Yeah, Kishan took the worst of the beating,” said Armel. Thomas holstered his pistol and helped Armel sit up. There were heavy bags under Thomas' eyes and in the gleam of the afternoon sun Armel thought he could see several silver hairs around the man's temples. “I've been through worse.”
Thomas smiled. “We'll get you both fixed up.”
“Have you heard anything from Cole?” Armel stood up, still shaking from his magical exertion. The simple jet of flame had taken more energy than Armel had thought possible and for a moment he thought he might pass out.

“No,” said Thomas, his tone icy. “Don't fool yourself Armel, Cole may have taken you in, but Cole doesn't do anything that doesn't benefit him.”
“But you're his friend. How can you say that?”
“As his friend that means I do even more for him,” Thomas replied. “One of these days he'll learn, but for now...well for now my job is to make sure he doesn't cause too much trouble.”
Chapter 27

On the third day Cole relented and removed his finely crafted Achlish shoes. One heel had already broken and the supple dark leather was beginning to crack. While the shoes had indeed suffered, Cole's feet were worse. His toes had chafed horribly, especially the little toes, which now resembled dark purple grapes. Even now, wearing the light slipper-like shoes that the Selther favoured, he could feel his feet throbbing.

The Selther stopped in a large clearing around five in the evening and a flock of armed hunters spread out around the caravan. Each day the column stopped at noon and dusk and today was no different. Cole and Qismat sat down together in the centre of the camp. Over the last three days, Cole had found something of a rhythm. During the day he walked removed from the others, always stalked by Saniyya, he worked with Qismat at mealtimes, then found a secluded part of the camp to sleep in. While it wasn't exactly the lifestyle Cole preferred, he had to admit that there was some sort of odd appeal to such hard work.

Even though he was contributing to the Selther, Cole was still a pariah. At mealtimes he noticed that many avoided taking the flatware he had purified and that most sat in such a way that he couldn't find a spot amongst them, even if he wanted one. Cole was fine with this arrangement, it allowed him more time to plan and plot out where the Selther were taking him. At the same time, it allowed him an opportunity to report in with Fiona without fear of being caught. The scryings were still difficult and so far Cole had still not been able to contact Benedict. There was some sort of odd magical interference making the scrying hard, but Cole was not really worried about it.

“How are you feet doing?” Qismat passed Cole a bowl of spiced meat and rice.

“Better.” Cole mixed the curry around, noting that it contained lentils something he had never seen in the Achlish equivalent. It was also spicier than other such dishes he had tried, and he had not liked it at first, but after a long day's walk, any food was better than no food. “They stopped bleeding at least.”

“I told you the shoes would help,” Qismat smiled.

“I have a question,” said Cole. “You say there is a famine, yet you seem to have plenty of food and you are always travelling Where do the Selther get their supplies?”

“Haha, you do not watch the trail very well do you?” Qismat sat down and began to eat. “We have passed several small villages during your time with us. While the upper castes hate us, many of the outlying villages are more than happy to share what they have.”

“Interesting.” Cole glanced around, making sure that he and Qismat were unobserved. “Are we getting close to our destination yet?” Cole reached out with his magic, and touched Qismat's mind, pouring in some of his own influence.

Qismat blinked and flicked his head side to side, as though he could sense something was off. “Not yet, we still have far to travel.”

“How far?” Cole pressed against Qismat's mind.

“Another week, maybe more,” said Qismat. His cheek was twitching, and Cole could feel the man resisting, though he shouldn't have been able to sense Cole's intrusion.

“Will the Masked Prophet be there?”

“Maybe.....he.” The older man stopped.

For a moment Cole considered pressing Qismat further. He doubted it would be hard to force an answer out of the savage, but yet he decided not to. Cole did not need the information, Fiona did. Even if he told her where the Selther were headed, it would not help him. Keeping Fiona in power was important true, but that did not mean Cole had to keep her informed. Besides, facing and subduing the Prophet alone held a certain appeal for Cole, especially since it would finally silence the fools that
dared to slight his honour.

“Good to know I won't be walking for too much longer then.” Cole released his hold upon Qismat’s mind.

Qismat blinked, then began to laugh. “That was a joke, yes?”

“Of course,” Cole replied, though he did not smile.

Cole stood up and looked about the camp. While Saniyya kept an aggressive watch over him during the day, at night she relaxed and left him alone. He could only stomach so many of her threats and insults. He wouldn't deny the validity of her anger, it was justified in some regards, it just became grating, since it seemed to be her only defining characteristic. He spotted Saniyya sitting at the very edge of a group of red clad warriors. She wasn't talking with them, in fact the men did not even acknowledge her presence, but she wasn't watching him so that was a good thing. He might be able to eat in peace for once.

Kaldrien society was built upon hierarchy and even within the same caste there were divisions. As he watched over the last four days, Cole had discovered that the Selther divided themselves by talent, each associating with a different god or goddess, and taking a different colour for their clothing. The warriors were concentrated to Ahkli, the red goddess of war. Some wore yellow or orange as well and Cole concluded that they were lesser warriors, both in age and skill. The hunters and raiders dressed in green, while those Selther that worked more domestic tasks wore brown. Both men and women were accepted in all the groups. Dressed in blue, Sanyo was still something of a mystery, though Cole figured the Weaver was most certainly given an august position because of how rare his talents were among those of kelvish.

Satisfied that Saniyya would not follow him, Cole crept off and sat down on a large rock at the edge of the camp. While he ate, he began his third read-through of the weather-worn Ronic journal. Even though Cole had already read through the book two times, he could not help but feel it still held secrets hidden within its tattered pages.

The amount of detail in the small journal was staggering and yet the section Cole found relevant only took up the front of a single page. The book detailed not only troop movements of Octavius and his men, but also contained all the records and accounts of the small kingdom they established. As Cole flipped over the page detailing the legion’s encounter with the lone tattooed warlock the narrative stopped abruptly, changing into a report on food rationing. Perturbed, Cole flipped back to the previous page and stopped. He had not noticed it before, but the page was slightly thicker then the rest. It had not seemed relevant the other times he had read through the journal, the book was poorly constructed and its pages were far from uniform, but now Cole began to wonder.

Not wanting to damage the fragile pages, Cole gingerly gripped the aged paper between his thumb and forefinger. Ever so gently, he rolled his fingers in opposite directions along the page. The yellow parchment crumpled and then puckered as the single page split into two, one peeling apart from the other. Heart pounding, terrified that he would tear the ancient text, he pulled the pages apart and began to read.

Cole could barely contain his excitement, the newly revealed page not only expanded on the story of the single warlock, it told of an encounter with an entire coven. The first man had apparently been a single agitator, whom Octavius had crucified, but only after the warlock had been thoroughly questioned. The man had not been working alone, instead he, and close to a dozen others, had worked to create tension between the Ronic legion and the barbarian tribes that dwelt in the surrounding area. The text was eerie, especially in how it paralleled the current situation in Kaldry. The author also seemed to imply that his single coven had not been acting alone, indeed he seemed to believe that many other warlocks had worked together to weaken the Ronic empire before its collapse.

While the legion had never discovered a clear motive, the author referenced a text that had been
taken from the warlocks. Time had claimed the text, but the author did postulate on what he believed the warlocks had been after, citing that they seemed to be conducting a ritual, fuelled by blood, that would undo some previous spellwork. Thoroughly enraptured and astounded, Cole finished the first page and then began the next, heart racing as he saw that it started with the words: Reports from Kaldry indicate that.

“What are you doing?”

“Gahh!!” Cole jumped, kicking his bowl of curry across the ground as he did so. Cole whirled about. Standing behind him was the group of boys he had been humiliated in front of the other day. Compared to the other Selther, the kids were dressed in rather plain garments, devoid of any identifying colours. The boys appeared to be between the ages of ten and fourteen and so had not yet found their place in the tribe.

“What do you want?” Cole snapped.

All the boys save one, shrank back at Cole's sudden outburst. This brave boy looked to be older than the others, and a small dagger hung from his belt. His black hair was long, and he had pulled it back into a tight braid. After a moment, Cole realized that it was the same boy who had tried to talk to him after his duel with Saniyya.

“Are you really a Weaver?” The boy asked, seemingly nonplussed.

“It wasn't obvious?” Cole bent and picked up his bowl. The Selther food stores were tight and so he would not be able to have his bowl refilled.

“I was just wondering,” the boy replied. “Sanyo is a Weaver, but I've always heard stories about how strong the Achlish Weavers are. Why didn't you use more of your powers against Saniyya?”

“I restrained myself, figured I should fight with honour,” Cole lied and the boys began to laugh. He snorted and sat down. The boys sat down as well. “What is so amusing?”

“That you fought with honour,” said when of the others. “Saniyya is always saying how you and your people have none.”

“Well, she's right about one thing, most of my fellows don't have any honour,” Cole chuckled. Now that he thought about it his answer was actually very funny, even if it was a lie. There had been no honour in his actions, merely a drive to beat Saniyya. “Then again neither do I, so you probably shouldn't be talking with me.”

“The elders said the same thing,” said the eldest. “I'm Del'to.”

The others introduced themselves and then one of the boys dashed off, only to return a moment later carrying a full bowl of rice. The boy handed it to Cole.

“Thanks,” Cole replied, rather shocked at the boy's action. “So, the elders really told you to avoid me?”

Del'to shrugged. “Some of them, but Hadiya didn't, so its not like we have to.”

The boys sat and talked with Cole for almost an hour. They asked him all sorts of questions about Achland, Thertan, and how his people lived. In turn, Cole asked them about the Selther. Del'to took the lead and regaled Cole with fantastic tales of his people's bravery in battle. For the first time in many years, Cole felt that he was actually accepted into a conversation instead of being merely tolerated. As they talked, Cole noticed several of the older Selther eyeing him from across the camp. Cole ignored them and instead began to weave some minor illusions to amuse the boys.

“Boys, away from the captive,” Saniyya called.

“Ohh, so I'm a captive now?” Cole dispelled a handful of small explosions he had conjured, each one winking out of existence with a barely audible pop. “Wasn't it your brother who said I was chosen by the guardian?”

“My brother is fool to think you could be chosen,” said Saniyya. “Del'to go, you should have listened to the elders.”
The boys shuffled off, and Del'to shot Cole a quick wink. Saniyya glared at Cole for another moment, before leaving as well. Annoyed, Cole decided to go to sleep, curling up on the thin mat the Selther had provided him. It began to storm during the night, and he only managed a few rough hours of sleep. The morning dawned but the rain lingered, mirroring his foul mood.

“You would have slept better if you came into the camp,” said Qismat, while Cole helped him prepare for the morning meal.

“I’d rather not awaken to find my throat slit.” Cole rubbed a hand over his face. His chin and jaw were covered in coarse stubble and even though he was using magic to keep his clothes clean, Cole guessed he probably smelled horrible.

“Ohh, she won't do that.” Qismat glanced over to where Saniyya sat sharpening her khukuri. “You might lose a finger or two though.”

The rain lightened as the day dragged on, but did not stop and the march through the forest was miserable. Cole's hair stuck to his face, and his feet were always wet. Worse, his finely tailored clothes seemed to drink in water, growing heavier with every mile. In addition to the torturous weather, Saniyya seemed decided that he was clearly not miserable enough already, and began to physically assault him again.

Saniyya would pull branches back, only to release them so the smacked Cole in the face or chest, or intentionally hit branches so he was drenched as he passed by underneath, or hit him with one of the short handled riding crops used to guide the elephants. At first, Cole tried to retaliate, calling out insults, or attempting to catch the incoming physical assaults, but Saniyya simply ignored him. He eventually grew tired of the constant bickering, and to avoid any further conflict, he began to avoid the paths she chose. Saniyya seemed to have foreseen, and so if he did not follow her, he found his path littered with exposed roots and deep puddles. In response, Cole extended his protective wards over his skin and clothes, exerting more energy so the wards would repel any dirt and water they came in contact with. It was not perfect, but it kept him clean and dry, more or less. The effort of maintaining the weaving drained him of much of his energy, which caused his mood to worsen, but at least he was dry. Saniyya, who seemed to embrace the natural elements, took notice of Cole's resistance to inclement effects, and began to try even harder to antagonize him.

“Saniyya, you do not need to keep antagonizing Cole,” said Sanyo, suddenly appearing out of nowhere, again.

“You really are very stealthy,” said Cole

“Magic helps,” Sanyo quipped, before refocusing on Saniyya. “Cole does not deserve the ire you spew at him, nor the physical abuse.”

“I'm helping him learn,” Saniyya replied. “Perhaps if he survives this he might be worthy of notice.”

“Cole is worthy enough,” said Sanyo.

“Ohh yes, I had forgotten about your precious Guardians.” Saniyya's nostrils flared slightly, a sign that Cole had come to associate with her an increase in her temper. If Sanyo kept needling her, she would no doubt lash out again. “The Prophet is the only one chosen by the Guardians Sanyo, only he can lead us.”

“But along what path?” Sanyo's tone was calm, cordial, the exact opposite of Saniyya. “Another war could cost us dearly.”

“Tell me brother, did you truly see the Guardians choose this pale skin?” Saniyya gestured in Cole's general direction. “I saw sign upon his person that he had encountered the Guardians. Meanwhile, we have all heard the stories of how the Prophet was found, half-alive, in front of the Guardian.”

“Cole was chosen,” Sanyo replied, just at ouch too quickly.
He's lying, thought Cole. Or at least embellishing the truth.

“Chosen to die perhaps.” Saniyya chuckled. “I heard the rumour around the camp. You've talked with some of the elders, you doubt what you saw in the ruins. You doubt your own claims.”

Sanyo offered no further argument. Saniyya sneered at Cole, and then stalked off into the jungle. “You did encounter something in the ruins right?” Sanyo asked after a moment had passed.

“If you want confirmation of some divine intervention, I am afraid you are asking the wrong man. I do not share any of my countryman’s religious beliefs, nor do I have any interest in gods, Achlish or Kaldrien, living, dead, or resurrected. So beliefs are for lesser mortals.”

When they stopped for the night, Cole wordlessly helped Qismat before stalking off to be alone. Sitting removed from the rest of the camp he attempted to start a fire, but even with his magic he was not able to find any wood that would burn for a reasonable amount of time. When he did manage to get a fire started, the wood merely smoked, instead of burning.

“Is the one the Guardian chose having trouble?” Saniyya purred, pressing herself up against Cole's back. He blushed. It was a cold night and through his thin shirt Cole could feel Saniyya's bare breasts against his back. “You would have better luck if you used dry wood.”

“Really? I hadn't considered it.” Cole leaned forward doing his best to distance himself from Saniyya.

“Ohh this shall be a fun dance. Still, I cannot understand it. You continually profess your hatred for me, yet wherever I go, you follow.” Cole turned his head to the side, staring into Saniyya’s pale, coppery eyes. This conflict had gone on long enough, and Cole intended to end it. “Really, your actions might give one the impression that you don't hate them at all.”

Saniyya glowered at Cole for another moment, then released him and turned away. Seized by some strange recklessness, Cole grabbed her by the wrist. Saniyya snapped about and before he knew what was happening, her blade was at his throat.

“Release me,” she growled. “Now.”

“That is a very beautiful blade,” Cole observed, keeping his tone neutral, and his eyes locked on Saniyya's, instead of allowing them to wander down to her bare breasts. “It is very different from those carried by your fellows. The craftsmanship, the material, it is all exquisite. It is steel I believe, something only a few of the others possess. Where did you get it?”

“You are not worthy to know that,” Saniyya spat.

“But I am worthy enough to have it slit my throat?” Cole smirked. “Saniyya, I will not deny your anger, I will merely observe that it is misplaced. I am not Achland, or a soldier, or the Consortium, or a dozen other things, I am simply a man who wishes to go free. If you hate me so much, release me, and you never need lay eyes upon me again. Trust me.”

“You Achlanders do not deserve trust,” said Saniyya, the hand holding the khukuri shaking slightly.

“Let me leave,” Cole implored, knowing he walked a dangerous path here, hoping that his plan would pay off.

“They were my mother's.”

“What?!?” Exclaimed Cole, confused by the non sequitur.
"The blades," Saniyya explained. "They were my mother's."

"Well, she did you a disservice then." The blade pressed against Cole's throat wavered, but he still did not release Saniyya's wrist. "Those blades are not half as beautiful as the eyes she gave you. What has become of her? I never see you with anyone but your brother."

Saniyya's nostrils flared, and she wrenched her wrist free from Cole's grasp. He half expected her to kill him then, but instead she turned and stormed off. For a moment, Cole thought he seen sadness in her eyes, but he figured it was nothing, she would never allow him to see her emotionally compromised. Though the fact that he might be able to force such emotions out of her was interesting.

Cole permitted himself a small smirk, glad to have won at least one of their bouts. Saniyya might enjoy antagonizing him, but she had nowhere near the experience he had. Cole had spent the last fifteen years passively-aggressively attacking people. He knew he should have felt bad sinking to such lows in order to provoke the savage woman, but she had started the entire agonizing affair.

"Well, it is good to see that you and my sister are getting to know each other," Sanyo called, as he came striding through the camp towards him. "I've never seen her act so friendly."

"Right," Cole grunted. "If that was friendly, I don't want to see unfriendly." He tossed another handful of conjured flames on the wood. The wood began to smoke and twist, but still did not catch.

"You want help with the fire?" Sanyo leaned forward, smiling as he reached out to readjust some of the branches.

"No."

Even though he had won a small victory, Cole's mood did not improve. In fact, the confrontation with Saniyya only aggravated him more, and Sanyo's naivety, or possible sarcasm did not help. The entire situation was grating, and he would be glad to be rid of the Selther. He had told Saniyya the truth when he said he wanted to return home. He had had enough of the savages, enough of Kaldry, and of hunting the Masked Prophet. Cole gave up on the fire, left Sanyo sitting alone, and strolled into the camp, looking for Qismat. The man was not hard to find, especially since without Cole's help, he was still working.

"Rough day?"

"You could say that," Cole grumbled as he set to work. Reaching out once again, he touched Qismat's mind, and began to sink his claws in. "How much longer do we have?"

"Are you so eager to leave us?"

"Yes," Cole dug deeper.

"A week...maybe more we are going to..." Qismat stopped. The man's voice was strained, rough, and Cole still pushed in deeper, using all of his pent up anger and rage to fuel the spell he wove. Qismat's right eyelid began to twitch. "We are heading for Rhutil."

"Really now?" Cole arched an eyebrow. Rhutil was dangerously close to the Al-katal, perhaps only a day's march and only an hour or so by train, even less by airship. "Is the Prophet there yet?"

Qismat shook his head as Cole released his hold upon the other's mind. "No, at least not from what we have heard. He is a mysterious wanderer. Wherever he is, you can be sure the Consortium and the Ra'kala will suffer. After Rhutil we are heading for New Thertan."

*New Thertan,* thought Cole. *That's on the coast, why would the Selther head there?*

After finishing his work with Qismat, Cole slunk off to report to Fiona. If he had to swallow his pride to escape the Selther, Cole would do it. He was sick of them. Even if he was to tell Fiona where the Selther were heading, he did not have to tell her the Prophet would be there. The soldiers would prove to be a valuable distraction, especially if they were not expecting to encounter a powerful Spellweaver. What did Cole care? These men had signed up for war, even Fiona was little more than a pawn to him, though a valuable one to be sure.

Cole ducked into the shadows, while drawing his telethium out in one swift motion. After he
had stopped wearing his coat, he found it rather difficult to keep the bright gold concealed, so he had
taken to hiding the telethium in his trouser pocket. The Selther probably knew he still had the device,
but Cole did not want to take any unnecessary risks. The telethium was his only link to the outside
world and however foolish it might have been, it made him feel safe.

Cole squatted down and flicked open the golden watch-like instrument, focusing his energy on
Fiona. Scrying was an odd business and required a certain emotional link with the target. To scry one
had to hunt through all the life energy, not only around themselves, but also around the person they
wished to speak with. Locating just one person was hard, but after repeated scyrings it became easier as
the scyrer became further attuned to the target's life force.

The telethium grew hot in Cole's hand, then its flat gold surface rippled. colours ran together,
flowing across the fine gold like wet paint dripping down a canvas. Slowly, the colours congealed into
a blurred image of Fiona. The image wasn't perfect, Fiona's hair was too bright, and her facial features
were softer, more feminine than normal.

“Fiona,” Cole said. “I was able to discover where...”
“Cole, you certainly kept me waiting long enough.”
“Things have been difficult,” said Cole.
“Would it offend you if I were to say I half expected you to abandon us all?” Fiona smiled. The
image settled, though it still looked rather strange, rather stretched. “Considering you seem to take
issue with almost every facet of our society, I would say that outcome would not be surprising.”
“Yes, well, I had considered it.” Cole ground his teeth together, reconsidering his plan. Perhaps
Fiona should just continue to blunder about, lost in her hunt for the Prophet. In fact, now that Cole
considered it, he saw that while helping Fiona thwarted whatever plans Allen had, it actually hurt his
ability to discover what those plans were.

“Then again, based on your military service we both know how good you are at deception,” said
Fiona. “You strike me as someone who would crow his involvement with certain events in Felviar from
the rooftops, yet you haven't. Does Cole Travers actually have some form of honour hidden away?”
“It's best to be modest about some things,” said Cole, fighting back memories of Felviar. If he
didn't think about them if he didn't think about those friends he had allowed to die, they couldn't haunt
him. If he stayed angry at Garret, he wouldn't feel the sadness that threatened to consume him. Cole's
hands began to shake and for a moment the image in telethium blurred as he lost his hold on scrying.

“Well then, it is good to see you have some propriety,” said Fiona. “So, what have you
learned?”
“The Selther are heading for Rhutil,” said Cole. “We should arrive within a week, perhaps
more. After that they intend to head for New Thertan.”
“New Thertan, are you sure?”
“That is what I was told,” Cole replied. “I don't see how it matters though.”
“Cole, Duke Lowell will be landing in New Thertan,” said Fiona. “His arrival will be a massive
public event...if the Selther are travelling to New Thertan. Will the Prophet be with them?!”
“I am not sure,” said Cole. “From what I gathered he moves among the people. Striking at him
will be difficult.”
“Do the Selther know that you can contact me?”
Cole looked over his shoulder, but he was sure none of the savages were watching him. “No.”
“Good, keep it that way.”
“As if you even have to ask,” Cole replied. “Deceiving these darkies is not only easy, it is fun.
How goes the trial?”
“Neither Daniel nor Allen have pressed the charges further,” Fiona reported. “Do you believe
they will?”
“We pushed them into a corner,” said Cole. “Mark my words they will lash out, but by then we'll have crippled them. First we'll deal with the Prophet, then we'll deal with the Consortium. I know how these men work Fiona. Trust me I am a master at this sort of deception.”

“Right,” said Fiona, sounding somewhat sceptical. “I suppose enraging the Ra'kala and being a pariah among your own people was part of the plan as well?”

“Of course not,” said Cole as he flashed her a devilish smile. “I did those things for fun.”
Chapter 28

Thomas sat at the desk surrounded by a stack of papers. The amount of work he had to attend to had doubled over the last few days. In response to a new wave of attacks in some southern cities, Erik had taken his platoon into the field. Thomas was now overseeing six dozen active combat steam units and managing the mechanics who dealt with the soldiers on a daily basis. At the same time, he was working with them, he was also working to prepare for Duke George Lowell's arrival. Currently, Thomas was reading through a stack of telegrams George had sent before leaving for Kaldry. The soon to be Lord-Protector had sent detailed instructions for how he wished to handle the political situation once he arrived. The problem Thomas now faced was convincing both Fiona and the Consortium to institute George's demands. Worse, the Ra'kala were still locked in debates surrounding the election of the next High Vishen, and until one was appointed Thomas could not be sure what sort of support the Lord-Protector would receive from the Ra'kala.

Duke George Lowell had been in charge of affairs in Southern Ethenia for almost two decades. He was a decorated war veteran, though he had never commanded front line troops. Since taking command of the garrisons and colonies in Ethenia, George had been able to bring that part of the empire to heel, though some reports placed him as nothing more than a figurehead. Thomas had met George several times, he was an interesting man to be sure and Thomas was intrigued to see how George would handle the situation in Kaldry. From the latest report, George was set to arrive in two weeks, bringing with him close to seven hundred soldiers, aboard thirteen ironclad steamers. It was a fleet designed with one purpose, to impress Achland's military might upon the Kaldrien populace.

Thomas continued his work, sifting through the massive stacks that Cole had ignored. It wasn't surprising that Cole had not bothered with any of the more tedious parts of his job as ambassador, but what caught Thomas' attention was the sheer amount of work. There were requisition orders for both the military and the Consortium, reports on troop movements, even letters written by Kaldrien nobility requesting various reparations from Achland. There was a veritable mountain of work and yet the Assembly and Benedict had only assigned a single man to the task.

The door to the office opened and a small kelvish man, with a bright green turban wrapped around his head, entered, carrying another stack of papers, letters, and several small leather bound tomes. Thomas let out a heavy sigh as the man placed the stack down on the desk. He had hoped that during his time in Kaldry he might find sometime to explore the country, though now that looked like it was not going to happen. Even though he would not admit it, Thomas almost felt jealous of Cole. At least he was outside exploring the exotic country they found themselves in.

"Can I get you anything?" The man asked. Thomas reached for a letter sitting on top of the stack.

"Pot of tea and some crumpets," said Thomas, as he slit the wax seal. "Also, get me a pair of bloody glasses. I've had it with squinting through this infernal monocle."

"Of course sir," the man bowed and left the room. The man looked oddly familiar, though Thomas could not place him.

The letter turned out to be another request for Cole to attend a meeting, this time in the south-east. Thomas set it aside, wondering just how many meetings the Ra'kala expected one man to attend. The day dragged into night, as Thomas worked his way through the stacks. A kelvish server returned several times, bearing silver platters laden with food. Thomas ate listlessly, plodding through the paperwork. By the time the sun had set, Thomas had finally worked his way through all the other stacks and started on the one the turban-wearing man had brought him earlier. Eyes burning, Thomas worked his way through the stack, sorting the papers into separate piles so he could deal with them later.

About halfway through the stack, Thomas came upon a letter with Bhaskar's personal seal.
Intrigued, Thomas opened the letter. Sometime in the last hour Thomas had misplaced his glasses, so instead of searching for them he pulled out his monocle again. Even though they had only met briefly, Thomas had gotten the sense that Bhaskar was a generally decent man, though Cole was suspicious of him. From what he knew of Kaldrien politics, Bhaskar had been one of the few Ra'kala to support Essar's more moderate stances. Thomas unfolded the letter and began to read.

_You may wish to investigate the Consortium's records, especially those dealing with the company's armament and supply._

Thomas read through the single sentence twice more. It was simple enough and would not attract attention if someone other than the designated recipient were to receive it. As he read through the sentence for a third time, he could not help but feel a nagging sense the letter was trying to influence his actions, possibly leading him into a trap. Thomas folded the letter back up and slipped it into the centre of another stack. He then stood, turned out the office's lamp and left to check the Consortium records.

With so much happening in Kaldry, the Consortium compound was mostly deserted. Even if it had been busy, Thomas doubted his activities would have garnered any attention. The Consortium kept all their records in a large library on the ground floor. The doors were unlocked and Thomas entered unopposed. The room was dark and Thomas flicked the gas lamps on. The records were housed in long filing cabinets, with the year and type stamped clearly on small metal placards. Thomas strode through the room, opening the drawer for the current year, and removed a stack of files. Immediately he noticed something wrong. There were too many records.

Even though the motion to replace Consortium rule in Kaldry was recent, the general process had begun almost two years previously. The original motion had not passed an Assembly vote, but it had caused concern among the bureaucrats. Because of this, the Consortium had slowly been pulling men and hardware out of the country for the last year, yet they had records showing that they had imported _more_ military gear than ever before. As Thomas flicked through the records, he saw that the Consortium had brought thousands of crates of rifles and other armaments into Kaldry. Based upon the records, Thomas quickly calculated that with the number of munitions the Consortium had imported, they would be able to arm their soldiers at least four times over. The problem was, the Assembly had passed several sanctions limiting the amount of arms the Consortium could import. Based on the records though, it was clear someone in the assembly had approved the Consortium's actions.

Disturbed, Thomas replaced the files, but not before checking where exactly the most recent munitions order had been shipped. Perhaps the increased munitions shipments were a simple accounting oversight, though he doubted it would be that simple. While he could not find any assembly members’ approval on the forms, he did note that the records listed a shipment currently being housed in Al-katal. A quick search through the previous records confirmed that multiple orders had passed through the same store house over the last year and a half.

Thomas carefully replaced the records, closed the drawer and left the room. Though no one stopped him, Thomas could not help feeling that he was being watched. Even before he left the building, he decided that he would investigate the store house. Even if the Consortium was stockpiling munitions, discovering what had happened to them would be invaluable. If more violence were to break out in Kaldry, Thomas knew they would need to arm as many loyal soldiers as possible. Night had settled over the city and Thomas returned to his bungalow, retrieving both his revolver and his cane, before setting off into the outer city. Things were still unsettled in the city and while not ever completely unarmed, Thomas felt safer with the weight of a gun on his hip.

The guard at the gate waved Thomas through and he strolled out into the lower city. During the
day Al-katal was busy enough, but the city truly came alive at night. As Thomas walked along, he saw women dressed in bright flowing garments dancing to lively flute music. The kelvish women whirled around, their hair and garments forming fluttering half circles around their bodies. A fire-breather walked through the crowd, accompanied by a man covered in snakes. People packed the streets, stopping at small stalls along the road or tossing coins to the entertainers. The night was full of energy, but here and there Thomas saw soldiers prowling about, hands always resting on their weapons.

Thomas left the high streets and plunged down into the city's underbelly. Even though the night was warm and the city strange, the winding streets gave off the same feel as those of Thertan. While the soldiers staunchly patrolled the other parts of the city, Thomas spotted few of them here. Men walked with their heads down, shoulders hunched. Though the buildings were different and he never visited such places, Thomas knew how to spot the brothels and pleasure dens based solely on the type of men who knocked at their doors. Even though he was thousands of miles from “civilization” depravity had not changed. Al-katal festered with moral disease, just as Thertan did. Though here it did so without a choking cloud of industrial fumes.

Thomas ducked down into an ally and took stock of the building he sought. It looked normal enough and Thomas began to wonder why exactly warehouses and other abandoned buildings were so frequently the site of such monumental happenings. Sure they were easy to hide things in, but it was still odd that they were so prevalent in both real and fictional events. The building was dark, though Thomas saw several vagabonds wandering around the perimeter. Thomas removed his hat and coat, then set them down behind a barrel, before picking up his cane and checking his revolver. Thomas darted from shadow to shadow, quickly closing on the warehouse. It seemed that the men he had seen early were not on patrol and were instead just vagabonds wandering the street.

The building, like many in Al-katal, was stone, crafted long before the Ronen empire conquered the subcontinent. There were three doors, two facing a brightly lit street, and a third down a dark alley. Thomas slipped into the alley, pulling out a pocket knife as he did so. Instead of flicking the knife open, Thomas drew a small series of picks from out of its handle. Thomas inserted the tools into the door's lock and twisted. The small barbs on the pick caught within the locking mechanism and the lock clicked open.

Thomas gently pushed the door open, as he replaced the picks into the base of the knife. He crept in, pushing the door closed with his foot. The room was dark and Thomas pulled out a small tube from his pocket. He clicked a lever on the tube's side and the portable gas lamp ignited. Thomas swung the light back and forth, its beam illuminating dozens of crates and boxes. The crates were stacked to the roof, arranged in neatly formed rows. A few had been pulled out and Thomas peered inside.

Nestled in a bed of hay, Thomas saw that the crate held seven polished rifles. He opened the next crate in the row and found it full of cartridges and magazines. One of the ways Achland and the Consortium had been able to keep their hold upon the Kaldrien population was through technology. The weapons that Achlish soldiers carried gave them a distinct advantage, yet here were hundreds of firearms, hidden away in a warehouse in the most unsavoury part of Al-katal, where they could easily be stolen. Thomas had just begun to replace the lid on the crate, when he heard a door open.

Thomas dropped down behind the crate and began to slink along, thankful that the neatly arranged rows hid him from any prying eyes. He worked his way towards the back of the building as lights began to come on. Thomas was almost to the door when someone began to speak and he stopped.

“How much of this do they need us to move out?” A man asked.

“Order was six crates,” replied another. Curious Thomas turned back down the aisle. The tall crates provided him with a good amount of cover and he was able to draw close to the men without being seen.

“Do they really think that'll be enough? If the Consortium wants to arm us all they....”
The man stopped abruptly and Thomas poked his head around the corner. The two were kelvish, dressed in plain clothes, but now another group had entered, a mix of human and kelves. Bringing up the rear was a man in dark robe. As they entered, Thomas could feel a slight pressure on his senses and his temple began to throb. He had felt something similar during the riot and when he looked up again, Thomas saw something silver flash upon the breast of one of the new arrivals.

“Satesh will get as much as we feel he needs,” growled the man in the robe. Thomas froze, he recognized that voice, it was Allen. “If he has a problem with that, well, perhaps he should find a different backer.”

“What about the other Ra'kala?” Grunted one of the Kaldriens, a human. “Surely some of them won't need...”

Allen struck the man with the back of his hand, sending him sprawling to the ground. “The matter is already settled,” said Allen.

“Sir....there is someone else here,” said the man with the pin. He was tall, with dark hair, pale skin, and heavy lidded eyes. As the man spoke, several drew small clubs from their belts, while one bent down and picked up a crowbar. “You should go....not good to have you spotted.”

“Deal with the situation, then get those delivered to Satesh,” said Allen, he turned to leave. “No gunfire though...and no magic, losing these weapons would be very bad.”

Thomas slipped back around the corner, gripping the butt of his revolver. Firing a weapon in here would be dangerous, especially since he could see that there were several kegs of gunpowder stacked against the far wall. Thomas relaxed his grip on the revolver and set off down a side row, pressing a small button on the side of his cane. The footsteps of the men searching for him echoed down the rows and Thomas began to count off their footsteps, using the shadows the men cast along the ceiling to calculate where they were.

Thomas took the first man as he turned a corner, jabbing the point of his cane into small of the man's back. The man let out a small yelp, before the cane discharged several thousand volts directly into the man's back. He dropped to the floor and Thomas dragged him away, sitting him up against a wall. By now, the men had fanned out and one of them was standing at the back door. Cursing his bad luck, Thomas picked up a handful of bullets and tossed them down a row. The man by the door started towards them, when one of his fellows waved him off.

Thomas swore under his breath and ran down the aisle parallel to the door, footfalls muffled by the hay that lay scattered on the floor. Thomas reached the end of the row, just as one of the men turned the corner. Before the man could react, Thomas readjusted his grip on his cane, grasped the top knob and twisted. The sword slid out with a thhhwang and Thomas sliced through the man's throat, spilling hot blood onto the floor. The man gurgled and groaned, hands clawing at his ruined throat. From somewhere along another row Thomas heard someone shout and he plunged the sword down into the man's chest.

Thomas sheathed the blade, just as two men turned the corner. In a flash Thomas drew his revolver and fired two shots, spraying blood and gore in the face of a third man. A bolt of eldritch energy crackled through the air, lancing along the row. The bolt struck Thomas in the left shoulder and seared his flesh. The Weaver flung a second bolt. Thomas dove to the side, his left arm hanging limp. The bolt followed Thomas, whizzing around the corner, before ploughing into the ground, blasting an inch deep crater in the stone floor. During the Felvian war, Thomas had fought many Weavers and in doing so he had adapted several methods for dealing with them. Crouched behind a crate, Thomas withdrew a small metal tube from a hidden compartment in his cane. He unscrewed the lid and drew out a glass vial filled with a viscous silver liquid.

The Spellweaver, most likely worried about causing an explosion, ran down the aisle after Thomas and skidded around the turn. With a flick of his wrist, Thomas hurled the glass vial into the
man's face. The glass struck the Weaver in the forehead and shattered, dousing him in liquefied Cold Iron. The Weaver wiped the silvery-fluid off of his face and flourished his hands, clearly intending to blast Thomas with a burst of energy. Nothing happened. The man paused and looked at Thomas, confusion etched on his sallow features. Thomas shot Spellweaver in the chest, then kicked him in the groin. The man pitched forward, his chest a smoking ruin.

Thomas stood there, watching as the Weaver struggled to stand. Even though he was mortally wounded, the man's magic could keep him alive. Thomas pistol whipped the man, stunning him, then shot the man in the head. Twice. The Weaver collapsed and Thomas put a third round in his head to ensure he stayed down. Fingers trembling, Thomas plucked the patina covered pin from off man's lapel and began to run.

Thomas could still hear voices buzzing through the room and he darted down another row. As he passed by, Thomas could see that one of the doors was unguarded and he dashed out. Now that he was exposed bullets hissed through the air around him Thomas fired several return shots in return, then his revolver clicked. Empty. Thomas holstered it and set off again, dashing through the maze-like streets of Al-katal. He could hear voices echoing through the streets. The men had not gotten a clear look at him, but still Thomas was nervous.

Thomas decided he would be safer heading for the Achlish barracks, instead of his bungalow. Hopefully there he would be able to find a way to contact Fiona, or Cole. Now Thomas had irrefutable proof that Allen and the Consortium were involved in something. Even if they were just arming the Ra'kala, it was clear that the Consortium was engaging in some illicit activity, even if they weren't allied with the warlocks Cole claimed were conspiring against Achland. As he ran along, Thomas fought down a wave of terror, even with a vague description he would now be hunted to ensure he did not share what he had learned. Not overtly of course, these men were never overt, Cole's fate was enough to prove that. But Allen and what ever dark allies he had would now be coming for Thomas and without Cole, he would have to face them alone.

Up ahead, Thomas could see the garrison and he put on an extra burst of speed. Just as he passed a dimly lit alleyway the street went dark, light simply vanishing from the world. Thomas blinked, then a hand snaked over his mouth and dragged him back into the alleyway. Thomas heard the sound of a door opening and he was flung down into a pile of pillows.

"Ahh Mr. Atkin your tea is ready," said the small man who had delivered Thomas' papers earlier in the evening.

Thomas blinked again. He was sitting on a plush duvet in private room of a small lounge. Through the lacy drapes, he could see tables packed with patrons, their laughter ringing through the room. Out in the main room, Thomas watched as a kelvish woman slowly began removing the layers of shawls and wraps she wore, while another woman danced atop a round table, surrounded by more men, their eyes filled with lust. The table in front of Thomas was laden with food, and when he turned to his side he saw Armel and a large man step down into the room through a shuttered window.

"You should thank your friend's apprentice," said the small man nodding at Armel. The bright green turban slid off the man's head and he pushed it back into place. "Even though he is so young, he was still able to toss a shroud of darkness over the entire street."

"It was nothing," said Armel, though Thomas could see that the boy was pale and his hands were shaking.

"Eat up, you did well. Now introductions. I am Cyril."As he spoke the curtain was swept back and a kelvish woman dressed in a low cut silk gown leaned in.

"Have all your guests arrived now?"

"They have been here for the last..." Cyril stopped and looked at Thomas, "twenty minutes? Mr. Atkin has been with us for almost a half hour now. He came in through the window, since as a man
who is engaged to be married, it is better he was not seen entering an establishment such as this.”

“And just what sort of establishment is this?” Thomas asked when the woman departed.

“One where we can talk safely,” said Cyril. “It is also the same one you met us at after leaving your bungalow earlier this evening. Though somehow you managed to misplace your hat and coat along the way.”

The diminutive man handed Thomas his hat and coat and then it clicked. The burly man had been with Bhaskar the other night, he was a Rankalan guard. Thomas was now also able to place where he knew Cyril from. The small kelf man had been with Bhaskar when Cole had left with them to explore the Ronic ruins and was obviously the “aid” Bhaskar had referred to when discussing that days events with Thomas.

“And why are we here?”

“To celebrate your wedding of course,” Cyril smiled. “As well as to discuss why your best man is not with us. Mr. Atkin, tell me, now that you have seen the warehouse, would you be opposed to the idea that Mr. Travers’ disappearance might not be all it appears.”

Thomas laughed. “Are you saying the Consortium guards intentionally let him be taken? That is not news. Cole figured that out a while ago.”

“Good, Bhaskar will be glad to hear it,” said Cyril. “It means Bhaskar’s faith in you, and Mr. Travers was not misplaced.” As he spoke Cyril placed a letter upon the table. “It also means we can trust each other. No more deception.....from either side.”

Thomas picked up the paper and read it over. “How long have you been in contact with him?”

“Ohh a while now,” Cyril replied with a faint smile. “Bhaskar is sorry that he had to deceive you so long, but orders from the Grand-General of Internal and Foreign Intelligence are not to be ignored. For his part, Benedict does not apologize, though I doubt that comes as a shock. In any case we must act quickly, your friend has precious little time left.”

“Cole can handle himself,” said Thomas. “Besides, if what he told me is any indication he knows it's a trap. He's doing this to smoke this so called prophet out.”

Cyril smiled again. “So he knows then that this is the fourth time a man Benedict has appointed to oversee events in Kaldry has been taken? Did you not ever stop to wonder why only one man had been given such a monumental task? Three others have come before. Three others have worked with the Ra'kala and the Consortium, and three others have been vanished under suspicious circumstances. The Prophet does not take prisoners, he has no mercy, and any deaths he causes can never be linked back to their true architects. I hope Mr. Travers does know what he is doing. If not, we may very soon be burying a charred corpse.”
Chapter 29

“Come on Cole,” Del'to called. “You've got to keep up.”

The storm clouds had finally broken over night, and when the dawn came the sky was bright pink, broken by steely blue clouds that slowly lumbered off to the west. The Selther had broken camp early to take advantage of the weather. In the confusion Cole had been able to extricate himself from Saniyya's watchful gaze. Originally, Cole had intended to blend in with a group at the head of the column, then he had been ambushed by Del'to and some other boys. Hadiya watched them for a time, her eyes flashing from underneath her dark cowl. Before long, the boys set out away from the rest of the Selther, crashing through the under brush.

Cole followed Del'to as best he could, but the boys were quick, and knew how to navigate the jungle. Cole could still hear the sound of the Selther vanguard hacking their way through the jungle, but for now they had left the caravan far behind. What amazed Cole was that he had not yet seen Saniyya. Either she had decided to ignore him completely, or he had actually succeeded in losing her. Cole felt it was most likely the former.

“Where are we going?” Cole wheezed as he ducked under a low hanging branch.

“Wherever we want,” one of the boys shouted back.

“Are there all sorts of things to explore out here in the jungle.” Del'to dropped down out of a tree behind Cole. Cole turned, confused at how the boy had managed to circle back around so easily. “There are some old ruins, statues and such up here as well.”

“Really? Are they Ronic, or just Kaldrien?”

“Does it matter?” Del'to smiled. “They're old and interesting.”

The boy set off at a run and Cole followed close behind, trampling through the mud without a care in the world. While Saniyya had shown nothing but contempt for Cole, Del'to and his friends seemed eager to accept him, or at the very least they did not hate him. That small kernel of acceptance made the entire experience more enjoyable. Even though he was still actively maintaining a protective charm around his person to ward off dirt and grime, Cole found that he was actually enjoying his time out in the jungle. Now that the rain had passed, he saw that there was an abundance of natural beauty around every corner.

Cole crashed through a thick grove of trees and found Del'to and several of the others standing around a large ring of stones and what remained of a wall. Trees and vines had sprung up inside of the old building and most of the walls had long since collapsed. Those that were still standing were only held up by the knobbly roots that had twisted themselves deep into the stone.

“Looks a touch dangerous,” said Cole. Here and there he could see pits and gaps in the earth, as though the ring was really a roof covered in natural detritus.

“We'll be safe enough,” replied Del'to. The other boys had already fanned out through the ruin and Cole saw them dashing here and there, climbing trees and engaging in mock fights.

Together Cole and the kelf boy began to wonder through the ruin, walking farther and farther away from the others. The ruins were primitive, and none of the stones showed any signs of mortar. The ruins seemed to be an old city, arranged around a shallow cistern. Cole thought he saw a woman's face in the under brush, but when he looked back it was gone. He inspected the cistern closely, there was no way it could have been a well, it was too shallow. Cole supposed it must have been a pool of some sort, though he found several places in one of the walls that showed signs of rust, as though anchors for chains had been drilled into the walls.

“So you really just allowed to run free like this?” Cole dropped down into the pit, running his hand along a strange etching in the stone. The figure ran along the bottom of the cistern, but most of it had eroded or covered by detritus. As Cole looked at it he felt the scar on his palm begin to tingle.
“Why wouldn't we be?” Asked Del'to, before he scrambled up the tree that had grown up out of the centre of the fallen building. “It's not like there is anything that can really....wow look at this.”

“What is it?” Cole looked up and saw that Del'to was pointing at something far in the distance. Del'to did not respond, and instead motioned for Cole to come up. Cole sighed, pulled himself out of the cistern, and began to climb up the tree. It wasn't the hardest thing he had ever done, but it certainly wasn't easy. The most difficult part for Cole was finding branches that would actually support his weight. Del'to was both young and very thin, which meant he had no difficulty clambering up. Cole's first attempt to climb ended with him toppling back as the branch he thought would support him snapped, spraying him with rot. It took Cole two more attempts before he was able to climb up to the same level as Del'to. Even then, Cole wasn't able to find a comfortable position to rest and so found himself awkwardly clinging to the tree's trunk, doing his best to lean out and look at what Del'to was pointing to.

It was a fire, throwing plumes of smoke high into the air. Cole pulled out his telethium, checked the wind direction, and confirmed that they were upwind from the fire, which was why Cole had not been able to smell it. Now that he could see it, Cole sniffed the air and found it was kissed with the lightest tinge of smoke. They were perhaps sixty leagues away from the fire and surrounded by forest, so Cole could not get a clear view of what exactly was burning. What had most likely drawn Del'to's attention was what hovered over the flames.

The *Queen's Fist*, pride of the Achlish air-force hung in the air, attended by three smaller rotorcraft that buzzed around her like strange glimmering insects. The *Fist*’s rotors pawed at the air, slowly approaching the billowing smoke. For a moment, Cole considered scyring Fiona and alerting her to his presence, but he quickly discarded that notion. As he watched, Cole began to calculate just how far away the ship was, wondering if it might be possible for him to run to it. Whatever had happened would undoubtedly keep the *Fist* busy for several hours and with some effort and a lot of luck he could very easily reach them before they left. As long as Fiona and Thomas had been true to their word, it was likely that everyone still believed Cole was dead, which would prove highly beneficial if he was to discover what Allen was planning.

“That ship is enormous,” said Del'to.

“Thirty seven guns,” Cole replied, somewhat amazed he had remembered that. “Minimum crew of thirty. All the guns are mechanized, so they only need three gunners to operate them. The plating on that monster is at least a two feet thick. Even if the gas bag were to take a direct hit from a twenty-pounder, the old girl’d just shrug if off.”

“It's amazing,” said Del'to, leaning forward to get a better look at the airship. “Did your people....”

Without warning Del'to's entire body convulsed and the boy's grasp on the branch slackened. Del'to fell forward, tumbling off the branch. Immediately Cole released his hand on the tree's trunk and reached out, grabbing Del'to by the arm. Cole was jerked to the side and his fingers slid over the tree's smooth trunk. Cole extended his wards out around Del'to to protect him. In a split second Cole saw that he would crush the boy when they hit the ground, so twisted to the side. Cole slammed into the ground, pain lanced through his left arm, and he heard one of his ribs snap.

Cole ignored the pain, sat up, and turned to Del'to. The boy's chest was rose and fell, but his breath was very shallow and as Cole watched he saw Del'to's breath slow even more.


No one came.

Cole stripped off his waistcoat, ignoring the burning pain in his abdomen. He rolled the expensive silk garment into a ball and slid it under Del'to's head. The boy's eyelids were twitching and his chest was only barely moving. Cole had no skills as a medic, or knowledge of how kelves differed
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biologically from humans. For all intents and purposes they should have the same internal biology, though Cole did know that both they and their Felvian cousins, had a slightly lower body temperature. For a moment Cole considered fleeing. The airship was close and none of the other boys knew he was out here. Cole bent forward and checked the Del'to's pulse, it was faint, weak.

Panicking, Cole scooped Del'to up in his arms and began to run, hollering as he did so. For a moment he thought he saw the woman's face again, but then it was gone. Branches smacked Cole's face as he ran through the jungle, heading back toward the Selther and away from the Achlish airship. The ground was still muddy from the recent rain and Cole was soon covered in thick red mud that he knew would never come out of his clothes.

A root caught Cole's foot, and he stumbled, pitching forward. He slammed into a tree, brained his head on a low hanging branch, and dropped Del'to. Cole ploughed into the ground face first, memories of another frantic run, this one through the streets of Felviar, flashing before his eyes.

“You know you could just leave him,” said the Well Dressed Man. Dressed in his immaculate suit, the man glided through the forest, watching Cole struggle. “What do you care? Really now Cole you could just leave him. No one will be able to find you. What do you care? Leave the boy, he's probably dead already. You've run before, you can do it again.”

Cole crawled through the mud, fingers reaching out towards Del'to. Cole tried to stand, but he couldn't. Del'to's chest stopped moving and Cole reached out, fingers coming to rest on the boy's neck. He found Del'to's pulse, but it was weak. Cole mustered the last of his strength, but just didn't have the energy to stand. Del'to's pulse stopped.

“COLE!” Hadiya screamed.

Cole looked up, watching the skeletal shaman run through the woods, followed by Del'to's friends and several other Selther dressed in the green of hunters. A strong pair of hands wrapped around Cole and pulled him up.

“What happened?” Hadiya asked in plain Achlish.

“One minute he was fine and then the next he just dropped,” Cole replied in Achlish. No doubt Hadiya had chosen to speak in Cole's dialect so that he could better communicate what had happened. Cole looked back and saw Sanyo holding him. “His pulse was very slow and his breathing shallow. His eyes are moving so his motor functions have not stopped entirely, but his pulse stopped at one point.”

“He has begun the Vethamra.” Hadiya leaned forward pressing her forehead against Del'to's. The heavy hood she wore sagged forward, hiding both their faces. Hadiya began to chant something that Cole could not understand and then he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Step back,” said Sanyo, helping Cole to his feet. “Cole...you are hurt.”

Cole looked down at his right arm. His sleeve had been torn open and a large bruise was spreading up his arm, and when he put a hand to his temple it came away wet with blood.

“I'm fine, just a few bumps and bruises, maybe a broken rib,” Cole replied. He and Sanyo stepped back from Hadiya and Del'to. The air had around the pair had grown thick, pregnant with magical energy. “Del'to needs to be healed.”

“No, you need help.”

This time, Cole relented, and pulled his shirt up. Sanyo rubbed a hand up Cole's side, feeling along the cracked rib. Cole gasped when the other man's fingers brushed over the broken bone. Sanyo smiled, pressed his hand against Cole's side, and the bone shifted, sliding back into place. He was amazed, the energy to weave such a spell was massive, and yet Sanyo had done so without the slightest thought to his own well being.

“You were at the funeral for Essar, yes?” Sanyo asked, continuing to run his hand over Cole's chest. The man's touch was tender, something unfamiliar to Cole who was used to the clawing of a lover, or Thomas' clinical and precise touch. Pinpricks broke out along Cole's chest and neck, and he
pulled away from the other man, feeling rather awkward, especially since Sanyo's touch was not all
together objectionable. “You have seen a Holding then.”

Cole bit his lip. Father Bentley had convinced Satesh to forgo the traditional Kaldrien burial
rites, which had resulted in the riots at Essar's funeral. It was possible that Sanyo had heard the rumours
and was intentionally asking so he could wheedle a confession out of Cole. “Yes, I have seen a
Holding. But Del'to is not dying, he was fine.”

“Our people take the memories and the life force, the soul, the Veth, of those who die,” Sanyo
began. “It requires a great deal of focus and it is some of the only magic our people are capable of. The
deceased's souls are then held by an elder. For the Ra'kala these memories mean little, but for us, and
many of the lower castes the Veth is sacred. Through one's life they draw closer to enlightenment by
honouring the gods and acting as is appropriate to their station. Together one's memories and actions
come together to form the Veth.”

“So that is what is happening here?” As Cole watched he saw Hadiya bring her hands up to her
temples. Light streamed through her fingers and her eyelids fluttered.

“When one of our blood reaches adolescence they die,” said Sanyo. “Their bodies cease to
function unless they are given a Veth. The Ra'kalan Holders create a Veth out of all those they hold
within themselves, bringing together many lifetimes and many experiences. Their Veth is not reborn,
not given a chance to seek perfection and union with the gods. We believe that each Veth is distinct.
Our Holders use their magic to create a pool of Veth, all lives bonded together. Hadiya is now searching
to find the Veth, the soul that shall be reborn in Del'to.”

“So she is going to destroy what he is?” Cole looked down, watching as Hadiya placed her hand
upon Del'to's brow, enveloping his head in a nimbus of glowing light. “What happens to the Veth he
already has?”

“He does not have one,” said Sanyo. “His current memories will be incorporated into his Veth.
He may remember his past lives, he may remember only facets, it all depends on how close his soul
was to enlightenment.”

Cole turned to Sanyo. “How many lives do you remember?”

A sad smile flickered over Sanyo's lips. “Many and none. I...I am different as is Saniiya. Our
Veth.....it is the reason I am able to Weave magic or so I am told. From what the elders say we are both
chosen by the gods, our Veth's have reached a perfect communion with them.”

“Do you really believe that though?” Cole asked “Some are just born better Sanyo and
sometimes there is no explanation for that.”

Hadiya began to moan loudly, her chanting rising to a fevered pitch. Cole's chest grew tight and
he could feel energy crackling through the air. Perhaps the kelves truly did process some sort of
tangible soul and gods who did watch over them. Intrigued, Cole tapped into his magic and reached
out, feeling the power that rippled through the air. The more he tried to touch the energy that rippled
through the air, the more it seemed to slip away, but from what he could sense there was no difference
between the powers Hadiya channelled and the magic of any other Spellweaver.

“Believe whatever you want Cole,” said Sanyo. “Until I had my Vethamara I could not weave
magic. Before you go Cole, why were you questioning Qismat about the Prophet?”

Cole did not reply immediately, wondering how exactly Sanyo had known about that. He had
been very careful to keep his voice down, had only questioned Qismat when the two were alone, and
had erased any memory of the incident from the man's mind with magic. Instead of answering, he
watched as Hadiya stood and then reached out to take Del'to's hand. The boy stood up, looking tired,
but clearly alive. The boy smiled at Cole and then turned to leave, while Hadiya muttered something to
one of the others.

“Perhaps I wished to gather information to help me better understand why I was chosen,” said
Cole.

“You could have asked anyone.”

“Would they have answered me?” Hadiya glanced over at Cole, before returning her attention to Del'to. The boy was on his feet, walking along, but he seemed unsteady. “If you haven't noticed, I am not exactly loved amongst your people.”

“The trust of the Selther is a hard thing to acquire,” said Sanyo. “We value acts over words, especially when they strengthen us all, or preserve the life of one who was in danger.” Cole rolled his eyes, thinking how clichéd Sanyo's statement sounded. “You have avoided my question. Why were you questioning Qismat? Why did you use magic to force an answer out of him?”

Sanyo did not sound angry, and when Cole reached out with his magic he found that the Selther Spellweaver was still calm. Indeed he sounded disappointed, as if he had expected better. That would be a first, someone expecting more of me, instead of condemning me flat out.

“I need answers,” said Cole. “This Masked Prophet is a threat to my people.”

“So, you and Achland seek to kill him? Is that why you invaded Qismat’s mind? Or are you trying to forestall the coming caste war? The war that the Prophet claims will finally break the caste system?”

“I was looking for answers,” said Cole. “You are repeating yourself,” Sanyo replied, still calm and controlled. “You showed a great interest in the ruins where I found you. I saw you with a small notebook. Were you seeking answers there as well?”

“Why are you pressing me?” Cole smirked. “My reasons are my own, and you have not yet earned the trust needed for me to share them,” said Sanyo. “But, trust is built upon truth. The Prophet was found in a chamber very similar to the one you were taken in. The ruins there are ancient, full of answers from the old world. I see that you took an interest in the ruins here as well,” Sanyo motioned to the surrounding jungle. “Would you be interested in seeing those were the Prophet was found?”

Cole considered Sanyo's offer for a moment. The man was certainly working towards some as of yet unrevealed goal. It was clear Sanyo doubted the Prophet, but more over, it was obvious he doubted himself. Perhaps Sanyo hoped Cole really had been chosen, and was taking him to those ruins to prove it. Either way, Cole stood to gain a great deal. Information about the Prophet would be invaluable, as would a greater understanding of the ancient Kaldrien ruins. Cole, always the atheist, still doubted that the Guardians had any legitimate powers, but if some sign were to reveal itself to Sanyo, or one of the other Selther, and caused them to believe in Cole's status as a chosen one, he would not seek to dissuade them.

“When can you take me?”

“I shall begin the preparations once we return to camp,” said Sanyo. “Saniyya will most likely wish to accompany us. I know that might be a problem, but I think you might find her attitude changed.”

“How so?” Sanyo simply smiled. “I shall leave that for you to discover.”

Once it was clear that Del'to was fine, everyone returned to the caravan. As he walked away, Cole glanced back over his shoulder and spotted Saniyya standing in the shadows, thick, red jungle clay clinging to her clothes. It wasn't clear how long she had been there, but Cole had a feeling she had been watching him the entire time. After the flurry of excitement, Cole stayed close to the others. Del'to rode along on top of one of the elephants. The boy seemed fine, though Cole was still worried.

“You okay?” Cole asked as he walked along beside the elephant.
“Yes,” the boy replied. “My head hurts a bit though.”

“Well, you did take a tumble out of a tree,” said Cole. “Any... changes, do you... remember things differently?”

Del'to considered that for a moment. “No, yes, well maybe. There are fractured things, half forgotten dreams, it’s all scattered, it’s not clear.”

Del'to didn't act differently, but he certainly seemed different, more thoughtful. While Cole was not about to believe that those of kelvish blood were reincarnated, he guessed it could be possible for them to remember old memories. As a Weaver, Cole had seen and done things with magic many, Thomas included, would consider impossible. In a world where such power existed, Cole figured anything was possible, including some form of reincarnation, no matter how weird it seemed.

The Selther only covered a short distance that day and Cole noticed that the lead scouts intentionally turned them away from the burning wreckage. When they stopped for the night, Cole took stock of his clothes. The mud had ruined his shirt, and so he replaced it with a remarkably soft Kaldrien tunic. Once he had finished changing Cole sat down with Qismat and set to work again, never once complaining or attempting to use his magic to make the work easier.

The mood in the camp had changed. While before most of the Selther had ignored Cole, now many greeted him as they passed, or attempted to engage him in short conversation. It was an odd change from the mute disapproval of earlier and Cole found it rather unsettling. They had no reason to accept him, he had done nothing to deserve it, and yet they were actively acknowledging him.

Cole collected his meagre meal and started to leave when he felt a tug on his sleeve. Cole looked down and found Del'to standing there. “Where are you going?”


“Come on, we've got space for you over here.”

Del'to took Cole's hand and dragged him over to where several dozen Selther sat. Sanyo looked up, saw Cole, and motioned for him to sit down next to him. Cole sat cross legged on the ground, facing a fire, surrounded by a dozen Selther. Del'to sat down on Cole's other side while one of the men pulled out a small string instrument. The man began to pluck at the strings while others began to sing. Cole did not understand many of the words, but from what he did it seemed to be a song of celebration.

“Is there something special about tonight?” Cole whispered.

“Del'to has become a man,” Sanyo replied. “He has had his Vethamra. When his memories settle he will find his calling.”

While they ate, Hadiya stood and more Selther crowded around. Cole had seen her speaking on the nights he sat alone, but now he was able to listen first hand. Hadiya spoke of the world's creation, reciting some tale about twin creators, one, Ahkli the red woman of war, and her brother, Teldri, the blue god of growth, nature and magic. Cole listened with moderate interest. It was fascinating to hear another culture's beliefs on how the world had come to be, though Cole even found the Achlish beliefs foolish. For Cole the world simply existed and that was enough.

“Why did you not run?” Asked Saniyya as she sat down next to Cole.

“What do you mean?” Cole asked. Hadiya's continued with her story, telling of how the twins had instructed the early peoples of the world in the ways of war and of magic. Eventually the people had split with those who followed the red-woman establishing Kaldry. They were not abandoned by Teldri, instead he infused them with his power so they could fight those who tried to oppress them.

“You could have escaped,” Saniyya replied simply. “Your people were not far and our hunters would have been slow to respond since many would have been searching for Del'to.”

Cole shrugged. “You still would have caught me. Knowing you I probably would have lost a foot,” Saniyya glared at Cole and he could feel her temper flare. For the first time Cole sensed that he had actually insulted Saniyya. “Besides, if I had not stayed something may have happened to Del'to.”
Something like a smile played around Saniyya's lips though it vanished a moment later. “Why would you care though? Del'to is nothing to you.”

Cole thought about that for a moment, while gazing intently into Saniyya's pale coppery eyes. “It seemed as though staying was the best thing to do at the time.”

Saniyya stayed sitting with Cole for the rest of the night, but did not question him further. The hours passed slowly and soon the fire had burned down to ashes. The Selther began to leave and Cole stood, walking off to a far corner of the camp.

Cole laid out his mat and thought back on the evening. Even if he would not admit it aloud, he had enjoyed the company. For once, Cole felt that his actions actually mattered, that someone actually placed value on what he had done, instead of judging him for what he might have done. Cole rolled out his mat and pulled the thin blanket around himself, listening to all the sounds of the night.

Cole fell asleep staring at a pair of glimmering red eyes just out of reach in the darkness. For once, Cole fell asleep easily, instead of musing on the minor slights he had received during the day, or agonizing over the events that had transpired in Felvia.

The rain returned in the middle of the night, though Cole hardly noticed. He would not have even awoken, if not for a slight breeze blowing over his face. Cole awoke, his eyes half open. Through the inky fog of half reality, Cole thought he saw Saniyya crouching over him. Rain spattered Cole's forehead and he thought he felt the weight of a second blanket being laid over him. Cole slipped back into the darkness of dreams and sleep, not entirely sure if he had ever really awoken at all.
Chapter 30

"Why is it we are always responding to an attack?" asked Corporal Hutchins as he pulled himself up and over a piece of twisted wreckage. "Think about it we are never out on the front. We are never attacking. Bugger it, we are the one's being attacked!"

"Language," Colonel Jenkins grunted through the grill of his helmet. Fiona had ordered the men to go out in full battle dress which meant one had to practically shout to be heard through the thick steel helmet.

The native rebels had struck again, this time destroying a packed freight train. The heat of the explosion had not only destroyed the train, it had also twisted the tracks, wrenching them back up from the hard packed earth. The flames had even consumed parts of the surrounding forest, sending up great clouds of smoke. From the air, Fiona had thought the tribals had set another town to the torch, but what she found was much worse. The supply train had been carrying a hundred of her men to the front and all of them had perished. Charred corpses lay among the wreckage, but the inferno had burned so hot it was impossible to tell which were human and which were kelvish.

"It just gets old walking into ambushes all the time," Hutchins continued. "It sort of inflates the squad’s casualties for one, which means pretty soon my number'll come up. I'm the only one with a sense of humour, which means I'll die first. Least I don't have a wife, or a fiancé back home, then I would really be in trouble."

"Don't worry you won't die first Corporal," said Jenkins, before he removed his helmet and mopped his brow, pushing a strand of dark brown hair back into place. "For one thing you're not very funny."

Fiona knew it was a trap before she even set foot in the burning wreckage. The question now was who had set it: the natives led by their Masked Prophet, or Daniel? Fiona tended to believe it was the latter. That was one of the reasons Fiona had ordered the men in fully armed, instead of only partially armed like last time. The snivelling Consortium Administrator could sling whatever accusations he liked, he would not be able to find anything to fault Fiona for this time.

The squad's search yielded interesting results. While the train had exploded, most likely because someone or something had detonated the power magazines, it had done so when stopped. On a hunch Hutchins turned and walked into the jungle, following the tracks for a few hundred yards. The flames had burned a good chunk of jungle, but just beyond the devastation Hutchins found a bend in the tracks. His conclusion was that the train had been boarded there. Even though he was young and still a corporal, Fiona had a feeling Hutchins had a bright career ahead of him, if he could hide his sarcasm.

Even though they had found how the train had been attacked, it still did not explain the explosion. Fiona had only dispatched a hundred troops and supplies sufficient to arm them once they reached Fort Sultren. Even if the train was taken, there should not have been enough munitions present to result in an explosion of such ferocity. Indeed, based on previous events, Fiona doubted that the Kaldriens would have left any munitions behind. Fiona did not like the implications. From the evidence present it was clear the train had been carrying more munitions than the requisition forms reported and that disturbed Fiona more than she liked to admit.

"Good amount of these men were shot," said Matthew. For the most part Fiona and Erik had maintained separate commands, but the events of the last few weeks had forced them to make several concessions. The units had now integrated more closely. Worse, the train that had been attacked had been exclusively transporting men under Colonel Howe's command, which meant they had even less men at their disposal now. "I thought the low castes had limited access to firearms."

Standing outside the forward most car, Fiona looked down at the corpses scattered around on the ground. The engine and the two leading cars had escaped the worst of the inferno and the men here
had indeed been shot. The fact that there were corpses inside the cars also provided further evidence to Hutchins' theory that someone had boarded the train before it exploded.

“Tribal raiders have been hitting our supply depots for months now,” Fiona explained. “I wouldn't be surprised if they had stolen a pair of Spitfires at this point.”

“I think they might have a tough time flying them,” said Hutchins. He dropped down out of a car that had split open, its metal siding twisted by the heat.

“According to your reports, including the one filed after Mr. Travers’ demise, the Selther have claimed this area,” said Matthew. “The problem is, based on all previous reports the Selther are not known for using firearms. They have on occasion, but even then they usually end up closing with their enemy, hacking at them with their khukris or other cultural weapons.”

Fiona looked again and saw that Matthew was right, the deceased had all been shot or burned, none had been slashed open or filled with red shafted arrows.

“We'll note it on the report.” Fiona looked around, the squad had spread out into the surrounding jungle to continue their investigation. The force of the blast had flung one of the cars into the trees and Beckman had set to work pulling bodies from the wreckage. “I want you to recover as many identity tags as possible, we need to get a count on how many men we lost. There have been reports of the rebels taking prisoners and I want to make sure no man is lef...”

Fiona stopped and listened. She thought she had heard something. The sun had begun to set and long shadows stretched out along the ground, reaching towards the train. Matthew noticed that Fiona had stopped to listen and he did likewise. As Fiona listened, she heard an odd clicking sound, accompanied by some rustling. By now the men had pulled most of the corpses out of the wreckage and had set to the grisly task of identifying the bodies. Meanwhile, Hutchins and several lightly armoured engineers were working to determine if the locomotive could be driven to its original intended destination for repairs.

“Colonel over here,” Matthew called from the far side of the train. Jenkins looked up, but Matthew waved him off, indicating he had wanted Fiona.

Fiona walked over to where Matthew stood in the middle of the destruction. “What is it Major?”

“Notice anything unusual about this wreckage?”

Fiona looked around. The car that Matthew was pointing to had toppled over in the explosion, dumping several dozen crates out onto the ground. The thick metal boxes, though scorched, appeared fine, and in the dying light Fiona could see the Consortium logo stamped upon their side.

“Munitions crates,” Fiona said after a moment. “I would guess perhaps twenty in all.”

“And none of them were on the cargo manifest,” Matthew added. “They also all bear the Consortium logo.”

“Careful of what you are implying Major,” Fiona warned. “Saying that the Consortium is moving arms in a manner not regulated by their contracts with the Crown could be seen as treasonous.”

Fiona turned, checking to make sure Jenkins was not within earshot. “Anything else?”

“Yes, the site and the surrounding bodies are rather intriguing.” Matthew nodded towards the corpses.

Fiona knelt down and began to investigate. “They've been moved,” she concluded. “It's difficult to see, but the burns along the ground don't match up to the burns on the bodies. There are also furrows in the clay that would seem to indicate that the bodies were dragged along.”

“Makes for an interesting conundrum doesn't ma'am?”

“It does major,” agreed Fiona. “You never saw this, but thank you pointing it out anyway.”

“What ma'am?”

“We need to get moving,” Fiona shouted, stepping away from the crates. “It'll be night soon and I don't know how any of you feel, but I would rather not be stuck out here once the sun goes down.”
“Ahh, why not,” Hutchins shouted. “It’s not like the giant flesh eating centipedes come out at....oh wait I see what you were implying!”

The Queen’s Fist hovered overhead, her eighty-pound cannons trained on the open space between the jungle and the ruined train. If anything was to attack the small squad of soldiers it would be blasted apart. Even with such a mighty escort Fiona was still nervous. This attack should never have happened and yet it had. In one day Fiona had lost what amounted to an eighth of her loyal fighting force. Sure the Consortium and Ra’kala still had plenty of men, but they were not her men. Duke Lowell would be arriving within the week, bringing close to two thousand troops with him, but until then Fiona and Erik were alone.

Before the sun set the engineers determined that the train and its two leading cars would indeed be able to reach the fort. Working quickly, Fiona and her men loaded the bodies, all of them, both Kaldrien and Achlish into the empty cars. There were relatively few Kaldrien bodies in comparison, but there were all so badly burned it was impossible to tell the difference. If any of the men objected to Fiona's orders they did not speak up. For Fiona it was a matter of simple dignity. Her men needed to be honoured with a proper burial and she would not risk leaving any behind.

Once the bodies had been loaded, Fiona and her men boarded the horseshoe shaped skiff and returned to the Queen’s Fist. The sun had just begun to set as the train of corpses set off, delivering dead men to watch posts they would have occupied in life. The mood in the Fist's staging room was sombre and even Hutchins did not joke as he normally did. Once free of their armour, most of Fiona's men departed for the small lounge located in the stern of the airship. Instead of joining them, Fiona made her way towards her private quarters aboard the ship, wondering what might have possessed Daniel or some other Consortium official to attempt a covert arms deal.

For all her stoicism, Fiona mourned for the men lost today, but she knew she could never show it. As a woman serving in the position she held showing emotions of any kind could be dangerous. She commanded respect not only through action, but also by burying preconceived notions of femininity. Fiona knew full well how dangerous bottling one's emotions could be. Her father had been consumed by his regrets, his anger. While Fiona told the world of her father's unflagging spirit during the previous Kaldrien rebellion the reality was that in those last days he had given into despair, eventually committing suicide. Since that day, Fiona had buried her own emotions, and given everything to her men. It was the way the world had to be.

Through her small port window, Fiona watched as Al-katal came into view. Like Thertan, the city was a crude blend of poverty and excess. The Ra’kala and the Consortium hid behind their high walls, residing in a world of dazzling light, while the rest of the city lay in darkness. When Achland had first arrived in Kaldry they had not been allowed within the inner walls of Al-katal. Instead of forcing the issue, Achland had acquiesced to the Kaldriens and instead built a series of garrisons in the outer city. After a time the Consortium stepped in, slowly assuming control of the country, eventually establishing itself within the inner city. Even after a century, the military still maintained its bases outside those original limits, honouring the first treaty struck between Achland and Kaldry.

Fiona boarded the rotor-craft again and arrived on the ground at the largest military base in the city. The atmosphere was tense and Fiona felt the gaze of every soldier following her. By now word of the attack upon the trains had no doubt spread. If the situation was not handled with care, the entire tenuous peace the military currently maintained could collapse. Fiona turned towards the base's main building and found dark haired Corporal Reginald Armstrong striding towards her, carrying a thick folder under one arm.

“Colonel, good to see that you have returned,” said Armstrong he saluted her, palm facing outwards, fingers brushing his forehead.

“Corporal,” Fiona returned the salute, holding it a second longer than necessary since neither
she nor the corporal were wearing their regimental caps. Corporal Armstrong was a good man, young, and like Hutchins, Fiona felt he had a long prosperous carrier ahead of him. “Report.”

“Ma'am, Daniel has called for your immediate removal, Ma'am,” said Armstrong.

“Of course he has,” Fiona said, glad that the trap had been sprung. Armstrong handed Fiona the folder and she opened it. “No doubt he is now pushing to have Colonel Jenkins instated in my place.”

Armstrong smiled at her. He was a smarmy boy of eighteen and no doubt his handsome smile had landed him in more than one woman's bed. “Ohh that is not fair sir, you can't ask me to report and then tell me what the report is about.”

“Fine, I won't talk next time,” said Fiona. “Where is Mr. Atkin?”

“Already meeting with the Administrator,” Armstrong replied. “A steamobile is waiting. I also took the liberty of having one of the serving staff prepare your formal wear.”

“Thank you Corporal.”

Fiona returned to her quarters and bathed quickly, washing the day’s events down the drain, before dressing in her white commanders uniform. She stopped to check herself in the mirror. The wide sash that ran over her chest gleamed with medals, all awarded for her years of service. The sash, scarlet to match her epaulettes, was her finest award. Only five men in the entire Empire had been awarded the Phoenix's Blood within the last fifty years. Fiona was the only woman to ever receive the award. Hopefully that would remind Daniel of the power she wielded. Just in case Daniel did not fully comprehend the situation, Fiona had brought her sabre with her, the blade's mother of pearl sheath glimmering under the light of the full moon.

The steamobile wound its way through the city. The inner city gates swung open to admit the small steam powered car and its mage-fyre headlights danced over the cool green gardens that surrounded the Ra'kalan residences.

The Consortium Compound swarmed with activity. Armed men dashed back and forth, but they all stopped to watch as Fiona stepped out of the car. Thomas rushed to her side. The man looked tired, with dark rings under his eyes and several bloody cracks in his lips.

“Fiona, I assume someone told you what's happening?”

“Yes,” she replied. Together they marched into the main Consortium command centre.

“Good, I was hoping he would find you first. Things are bad, we still have not heard from Cole.”

“I know,” Fiona whispered. So far they had been able to contain the truth about Cole's continued survival. Maintaining the charade provided Fiona with a good deal of leverage against the Consortium and a valuable trump card should she need one.

“Fiona...the Consortium is plotting against us,” Thomas whispered back. “Stockpiling munitions...deals with the Ra'kala.”

Fiona was not at all surprised to hear Thomas say that, indeed it was almost calming, since it meant Fiona was not alone.“We'll deal with it after these rebellions are put down.”

“So you think Cole will come through then?”

“I have every reason to doubt him,” Fiona replied. “But I cannot deny how grateful I would be if he were able to quell this rebellion, or even provide me the opportunity to remove the prophet.”

They turned a corner and were met by a small simpering man Fiona did not know. “Ahh Colonel, Daniel will receive you in the gallery.”

Fiona swept past the little man and mounted the stairs, taking them two at a time, before throwing open the doors of the “gallery”. It was a modest room on the second floor of the compound. There was a long table running through the middle of the room, while portraits of previous Consortium Administrators, and some rather ugly landscape paintings hung upon the walls, looking down upon those assembled in the room. Daniel sat at the head of the table, fingers clasped in front of his face,
Allen stood behind him, while Jenkins sat at his right.

“Colonel please, take a seat,” Daniel motioned to the nearest chair, directing Fiona to sit at the foot of the table. Fiona sat, her hard green eyes never leaving Daniel's face. “Now I assume you know.....”

“Don't play games Daniel,” Fiona replied. “These were my men who died, not yours. I'll deal with it.”

“Yes but...”

“You can't have me removed,” Fiona spat. “You’re just posturing as usual.”

“Am I?” Daniel chuckled. “Fiona several of your men approached the Colonel and expressed there...dissatisfaction with your command style.”

“Names and rank,” Thomas hissed. “Now.”

“Mr. Atkin, do you really think it wise to go digging into such matters?” Allen asked. The mood in the room suddenly grew very tense as Thomas gripped the back of Fiona's chair. Out of the corner of her eye Fiona could see that Thomas' knuckles had gone white. “And really does it matter who expressed these concerns? The men have lost faith in their commander. The Colonel has repeatedly failed to ensure the safety of her men, failed to ensure the safety of an ambassador sent by the crown....”

Fiona glanced up at Thomas and he gave the shortest of nods. “The ambassador is fine,” said Fiona. “In fact Cole is currently involved in Achland's most daring infiltration assignment since the Felviar Incursion.”

A ripple of surprise flashed over Daniel's face, but Allen's face remained neutral as though he had been expecting Cole to still be alive. “And how do we know Mr. Travers is still operating in good faith?” Daniel smirked. “When was the last time you heard from him?”

Fiona held herself in check. Cole had not reported in for several days, not since he told Fiona he was being taken to Rhutil. Fiona had attempted to contact him several times, but Cole had always ignored the summons. The scryer Fiona had employed had mentioned he found the process difficult, noting that he was not fully sure the magical energy had even been relayed properly.

“My contact with Mr. Travers is a matter of military security,” Fiona replied.

“If I may make a note here. Based on the reports, Mr. Travers was more or less snatched from ruins in the same general area as the locomotive we lost today was he not?” Allen cocked his head to one side. “Is it not possible that he may have information or be involved in that? Really, I am just surprised to learn he is still alive, the Selther are not usually so merciful are they? Personally, I would suggest the best course of action for you Colonel would be to effect an immediate rescue of the Ambassador.”

“Cole has already planned his own extraction,” said Fiona. “According to Mr. Travers the Selther and many of the lower castes are assembling to meet the Prophet. He plans to...”

“Assassinate him?” Daniel arched an eyebrow. “Come now, would you really let Cole take all the credit for such an act? Being in such a tenuous position as you are Fiona, I would think you would be more involved. Besides, a threat such as this so called prophet, is larger than any one man.”

Fiona ground her teeth together and stood up. “Daniel, do as you wish. Call for my resignation. But I can tell you now if I am replaced you will lose your only opportunity to stop this bloodshed. We all know Mr. Travers is unreliable, so I truly doubt he would take orders from you.”

With that Fiona turned and stormed out of the room. Thomas followed close on her heels, shooting a furtive glance back at Allen as he did so. The man was upset, Fiona could sense that much. No doubt the Consortium was pressuring him on all sorts of issues. Fiona did not speak to Thomas as the two marched out of the Consortium compound, she was to busy watching the soldiers marching along the tops of the buildings. Daniel was a devious snake, but Fiona hoped he was above something
as crass as murder.

“We should not have told him Cole was alive,” said Thomas once they had left the premises.
“It was a necessary risk,” Fiona replied.

They turned a corner and Fiona found herself facing a short kelvish man dressed in a simple suit and a bright green turbine. “Cyril?” Thomas sputtered. “What are you doing here?”

“The Colonel can be trusted, yes?” The man asked. Thomas nodded. “Good. You will need to tell her what you found Thomas. After today's events the Ra'kala and the Consortium have begun to mobilize. We do not have much longer now.”

“Ahh, so Daniel was not merely trying to replace me,” said Fiona. Cyril nodded and then motioned for Fiona to follow him. “I knew the man was a fool, but cutting deals with the Ra'kala?”

“He's been arming them,” said Thomas as he looked around, checking to see if they had been followed. “From what I have gathered it's been happening for close to a year now.”

Cyril led them along in silence for a few minutes before, turning into a grove of trees. In the dull half light of a small mage-fyre lamp, Fiona saw Cole's apprentice, the elf boy Armel, holding hands with Helen, while Ian and Mohan talked in low tones together several feet away.

“Cole has something to do with this doesn't he?” Asked Fiona.

“No,” Thomas replied. “We have not been able to contact Cole for several days now. Based upon what you said earlier I assume you have not either.”

“No,” said Fiona. “We talked earlier in the week. He expects to reach Ruthil soon, he is to contact me when he has a more concrete idea of when exactly that shall be.” Fiona looked around at those assembled.

Cyril nodded. “Cole is no doubt labouring under the delusion that this is a simple power grab. Benedict insinuated that we might face something like this.”

“You've had contact with Benedict?” Fiona chuckled. “Ohh so that is why Cole is here. I always wondered what particular strings Mr. Travers pulled, now I know. The Consortium is now informed that Cole and I intend to halt the native rebellions. I doubt they would be foolish enough to interfere.”

“You'd be surprised,” said Ian. “I've seen them moving troops in broad daylight.”

“They've kept you busy with the tribals,” said Mohan. “It was bait they knew none of you could resist. Bhaskar and I have been working together for some time now. I find the Consortium's methods wholly appalling. I know Essar felt the same way and I have approached Satesh several times with my concerns, but he's always brushed me off. If what you say about Cole is true, it seems you took the bait.”

“They won't attempt anything though will they?” Armel asked. “We have more men on our side.”

Fiona ground her teeth together. Discounting Ra'kala involvement, the Consortium and Achland forces were relatively evenly matched, or they had been evenly matched until today. Thinking on it, Fiona could not help but believe that the attack upon the train today had been intentional. Not only had she lost a good percentage of her men, Allen had intentionally misdirected Fiona's attention to the tribals, encouraging her to pursue them instead. Yet for all their plotting, the attack had also revealed the Consortium's various abuses, revealing the weapons shipments they had apparently been concealing for some time now. Fiona could not believe someone as calculating as Daniel would make such a mistake, clearly there was more to the plot then they had discovered so far.

“Until the Lord-Protector arrives we are at a disadvantage,” said Fiona. “Right now we have less men than the Consortium. Mohan would you and Bhaskar be able to support us if there was an open conflict?”

Mohan scratched his chin. “I cannot speak for Bhaskar, I doubt even Cyril can, but I can tell you this. If you are able to remove the Prophet and the tribal problem, you will not need to bother with the
Ra'kala. Deal with them and the Consortium will have nothing left to hold against you.”

Ian looked up. “The Colonel did not ask you for tactical advice. She asked if you would stand with us should relations with the Ra'kala or the Consortium sour. Which reminds me, if you are so eager to prove your loyalty to the crown, why have you not informed us of this before?”

“Because, Allen only approached me after the ambassador arrived,” retorted Mohan. Thomas glanced at Fiona when Mohan mentioned Allen, clearly drawing her attention to the fact that it was the man Cole suspected of being involved with the warlocks who was to blame for the plot. “After that I met with Bhaskar in private, and we discussed how we should proceed. I could not be sure who amongst you I could trust, but now I am.”

There was something in Mohan's bearing that made Fiona uncomfortable, and she decided keeping him under close watch might be beneficial. “I thank you for confiding in us Mohan. If this conflict does turn violent, we will need your support.”

“If things do degenerate into violence, we may not even be given the chance to react,” said Cyril. “Bhaskar has begun to move his forces back to Jes'lan. I suggest you begin consolidating your men as well Colonel. You cannot fight two wars. Withdraw from the front for now, at least until your Lord-Protector arrives.”

Fiona broke into a smile. “No, I still have a few tricks to play. The Consortium still answers to the Crown and I still enforce the Crown's laws. Cole will deliver the Prophet to us, though no doubt I will be asked to assist with that. The Consortium will try to distract us, keep me pinned down. I think its time I reminded Daniel exactly who he is dealing with. If he wants to make a power grab, let him. I would enjoy detaining him.”
Chapter 31

The Felvian night was cool and calm, a stark contrast to the nation's people. The elves charged into My'thren on foot, their armour died blood red by the light of the setting sun. Screams echoed through the streets as emerald flames consumed the city, flung from by the elven Spellweavers who whizzed through the skies overhead. Cole and his fellow soldiers tried to fight, but they were overrun.

An explosion tore apart a building, and Cole turned slowly, the reality of the dream blurring as faceless soldiers ran past. Tall, muscle bound Cormag darted past Cole, stopping every few seconds to fire back on the elves. Blood ran from a dozen small wounds, but if the man noticed, he didn't show it. Cormag ran and his skin slid off his bones, his cheeks sunk in, and his eyes dissolved, replaced by a pair of flickering flames. Lost in the logic of a dream, Cole questioned none of these occurrences.

“Come on Cole!” The corpse screamed as its lips purified and fell off. “We need to go! Benedict is waiting!”

Cole ignored his friend and continued his frantic search for Lissete. His limbs went limp, and would not respond. He stumbled through the haze of his memories, watching as they were twisted and distorted by his own subconscious. Renaud, one of Cole's elven friends, fought three enemies at once, before being stabbed in the back by a fourth. More faceless soldiers swarmed through the city, magical blades hacking any how opposed them to pieces.

The world swam in colour, while blood washed through the streets of My'thren. There was nothing but death and destruction here, but up ahead he could see Garret, this time he would reach him and kill him. This time he would not fail.

Cole ran along the dark horror filled streets, but he made no progress. The faces of the dead swirled around him, never letting him forget how he had failed them, how he had abandoned them. Achland had allied with the elves of My'thren, the first such occurrence in living memory and then abandoned them to the mercy of their countrymen.

As Cole lumbered along, he watched as a woman's head was bashed to pieces, her arms dropping an infant. The baby rolled along the ground, ageing and changing into Armel. Then Benedict and the Corpse that would be Cormag appeared at his side. Together they ran, together they fought, fleeing the carnage the elves had unleashed. Then Cormag was taken, consumed by the crowd. Cole tried to mourn, but the dream-Benedict pulled him along, never leaving him alone. Then the dream changed and for a few sweet moments Cole was reunited with his first love.

Lisette was perfect, her skin like porcelain, her eyes green emeralds, her hair spun gold. Then she faded, ripped from Cole's arms by the screaming elven legions who had invaded the city, the legions Garret had betrayed them too.

As the dark-eyed mob dragged her down, dream-Benedict came forward and grabbed Cole. Cole reached out, taking Lisette's hand. For one bitter beautiful moment their fingers were entwined. For one moment it seemed that Cole could change everything. For a moment it seemed they would be together, then their fingers slipped apart.

“Cole, we have to go,” dream-Benedict barked, his voice harsh.

“No...I.” The memories mingled with the dream. Benedict's hate of Lisette, his contempt, all of it exactly as Cole remembered.

“You have to leave her!” Benedict roared. His voice was fearsome, full of power that caused the dream itself to buckle and begin to shatter. Cole wanted to lash out and hit him. It was his fault she had died, his fault they all had, but it was Garret's fault as well. “Cole, we must go.” Then dream-Benedict's voice cracked, it changed, it was sad, pleading. Cole tried to force the memory away. He could not remember this it would make it all meaningless. Benedict had never been sad, he had only been hateful. Garret appeared again, smirking at him, and Cole tore himself from Benedict's grasp,
fleeing from the man in the same manner as he had all those years ago, fleeing so he could kill the traitor. “COLE!! No!! I won't leave you so-.”

Cole's eyes snapped open and he stared into the pre-dawn gloom, doing his best to hold back the tears. Even when he did not fall asleep thinking about Felviar, the memories still lingered there, turning into twisted dreams that tortured him. Cole shivered, doing his best to fight down the images that danced before his eyes. A light rain was falling and when Cole rolled over, he found the remains of a fire slowly burning down to cinders. Confused, he sat up and found that in the night someone had covered him with a second blanket. He had thought her kindness a dream, but it had been real.

Cole sat up and looked around the camp. A low mist clung to the ground, hiding the prone forms of the sleeping Selther. Family tents clung to trees or stood in the open, while others merely slept on the open ground. Here and there the fog lifted, burned away by what remained of several watch fires. The elephants stood at one far end of the camp, either sleeping, or keeping a silent watch over their masters. Through the fog, Cole could see several Selther guards patrolling the camp, but for now the morning was peaceful. A lone figure, Hadiya with her heavy shawl draped over her shoulders, stood apart from the rest of the guards, watching her people sleep.

Rising, Cole wrapped the heavier of the two blankets around himself and walked towards Hadiya. For once her hood was down, and he could see the knobby white scar that ran along her face, before curving back around her neck and plunging down her back. Cole could now see that one of her ears was burned, shiny scar tissue glimmering in the light of a waning fire. He shambled towards her, keeping the blanket wrapped close to himself to hide his shaking hands. The horrors of the dream still lingered, manifesting themselves as ghosts hiding in the shadows and stalking through the mist.

“Your thoughts are disturbed,” said Hadiya without turning to face Cole. “Your mind goes to dark places Achlander.”

“How could you...”

“Know?” Hadiya turned, a faint smile spread across her scared visage. “Some magics are more subtle than yours. Yes, Cole, I have a touch of the Weave. But that is not how I know. Those of us who have seen pain, those who have felt loss, can feel it in others. You've dealt with yours the only way you know how, but it still haunts you. I tried to bury mine....but it still comes back.”

Cole stood there with the Selther shaman for a moment. Looking at her, again Cole could now feel the loss she spoke of. Beneath that skeletal frame, beneath that measured look, was a rage just as potent as Cole's. In that same instant, Cole reached out further. Beneath the grey mist of the camp Cole could sense that same rage burning within those who still slept.

“She was not always so angry you know,” said Hadiya. Cole followed the shaman's gaze and found Saniyya sleeping alone at the far side of the camp. In sleep the woman's features were relaxed and for once she appeared to be at peace. “How much of our history do you know?”

“I know it is marred with bloodshed,” said Cole. “Your people have fought and die-”

“I asked of our history,” Hadiya's voice never rose above a whisper but her tone was clear: Cole had spoken incorrectly.

Cole stopped. “I could say yes and come across the arrogant fool or I could say no and appear ignorant.”

Hadiya nodded. “Even before your soldiers came, the Ra'kala ruled with an iron fist. Nothing has changed since then, only the way by which they excise their power. A warrior people living in the far north has little to fear from those of nobility and much to hate. We were what we were and we lived as best we could.”

Cole stood the entire time, listening as Hadiya recounted her people's history. She did not paint any of it with lies, but spoke plainly about both the actions of the Selther and the other castes. The Selther were warriors and they were feared by many for their blood lust. Hadiya hid nothing from Cole,
even telling of the blood she spilled while fighting. As he listened, Cole decided that it would be hard
for him to be so truthful about the things he had done in the heat of battle. He had killed and maimed,
but he did not think he would be able to speak of his atrocities like Hadiya spoke of hers.

The tale continued, Hadiya spoke of the first Kaldrien uprising and she spoke with pride about
how many of the lower castes had come together, united to drive Achland from Kaldry and to finally
topple the Ra'kala who had lorded over them. For Hadiya the uprising was a simple choice and she
regretted nothing. Even united, the lower castes still had been defeated and in the end the possibility of
peace was lost. The few elders who had gone to treat with the Ra'kala and the Consortium were killed.
Cole, who had only heard scant whispers of what had happened during the uprising, could feel the rage
bubbling within him. As in Felviar, Achland had chosen blood over peace and Cole had no doubt that
Benedict had been involved.

Then the true horror began. “Even though the Selther were only one of many who rose up
against them, the Ra'kala took the opportunity to destroy us,” said Hadiya. “Your people, unfamiliar
with our politics, assisted them. I will not hide the fact that we fought, I will not claim to be a victim.
We knew what declaring Desthrall, war with no quarter, upon the Ra'kala would bring, but if it would
destroy them, so be it. They started in the outer villages first.”

Hadiya spoke with conviction, but Cole could feel her anger. With the Consortium on their side,
the Ra'kala had been able to exterminate the Selther, doing so only because they saw the opportunity to
eliminate an age old annoyance. The Ra'kala and Consortium could have retaliated against any or all of
the lower castes, but it was easier to choose one and make them the enemy. Cole was just thankful to
learn that it had only been Consortium soldiers who participated in the attacks.

That did not make it right, but it made it easier. Cole could rationalize it then, hope that the
Assembly had merely overlooked what had happened. Of course Cole knew better than that and deep
down he knew Achland proper was still responsible for the slaughter of the Selther.

“Our villages burned, our people died, and we fled,” said Hadiya. “I remember watching two
young children stumble out of a burning wreck, their family gone. Such memories leave their mark
Cole. Some more than others. I saved those children, but lost my beauty in the process.” Hadiya's hand
reflexively stroked the knobby scar that ran down her neck. “Saniyya's Veth was always that of a
warrior, but those events changed her. The pain and anger corrupt the pure warrior. She is not the only
one and she will not be the last. I felt the anger calling to me, as have many who have suffered such
oppression. This Prophet that has emerged feeds upon it. His is our people's anger made manifest and I
cannot deny his call.”

“Is that why Sanyo believes I should challenge him?” Asked Cole. The mists had begun to burn
away, ripped apart by the Selther as they began to awaken. “He seems less angry than the others...could
he hope to turn them away from their hate?”

“I do not know what Sanyo believes,” said Hadiya. “All I know is that such anger festers and
can only bring more pain. The Masked Prophet may very well lead my people to glory, for now it is too
early to see. I can see why my people wish to follow him and if I were younger, I would no doubt agree
that his is the only route to liberation. But, manipulating anger and hate is never the proper way and yet
it is all we have.”

“But if you lead your people, why do you let them go to him?”

“I only instruct, teach, and give council,” said Hadiya. “I must let my people find their own
path. They would have gone regardless and I have sacrificed too much to be left behind now.”

The sun had risen and by the camp was awake, so Cole set to work helping Qismat. Even
though the morning was grey and rainy the camp was still lively. As Cole worked, he found the
melancholy that clung to him slowly slipping away as he exchanged pleasant greetings with the Selther.
Saniyya said nothing to Cole about the fire or blanket, though she did linger close by as he worked.
Del'to had changed as well, walking with more confidence, dressed in the red of a warrior with a short, curved sword belted at his waist.

Once the camp was packed, the Selther set out again and Cole noticed an even greater change, no one seemed to care what he was doing. Some still favoured him with angry or nervous glances, but for the most part it seemed the Selther had decided Cole was no longer a threat. Of course he probably never was, but it was still nice to feel the tension dissolve.

Without warning Cole's telethium burned white hot. Disturbed, Cole ducked into the cover of the trees, wrenching the small golden device out of his pocket.

What?” Cole hissed as he looked down at Fiona's distorted image.

“Cole...finally, I've been trying to contact you for days!”

“Never went through,” Cole replied, for once telling the truth. “What's happening.”

“Daniel knows you are alive,” said Fiona. “It was a risk I would rather not have taken, but it was necessary. How soon will you be at Rhutil?”

“I'm not sure,” said Cole. “We have to be getting close though. I assume the situation is getting desperate? I am not going to be allowed to do this my way am I?”

“Afraid not,” Fiona apologized. “I am going to need information Cole. There is evidence to suggest that the Consortium maybe plotting a coup to overthrow the military.”

“No doubt at Allen's insistence,” Cole replied. “He's the real mastermind behind this entire thing. Listen, I will get the details you need, though scrying has been difficult. For now, for now on the morning I first catch sight of Rhutil I will contact you. Something is blocking my scrying, so I do not know how effective it will be. Keep a polished piece of metal ready, it will grow hot, that will be the signal.”

“Good enough,” Fiona's image dissolved, leaving Cole alone once more.

The rain continued throughout the day, stopping and starting without the slightest warning. It was not as heavy as before, but still rather unpleasant. Again Cole had surrounded himself with a series of enchantments and barriers to ward away the grime and filth of the trail.

“So how much more walking do we have?” Cole asked Sanyo as the day wore on.

“Few more days, four at the most,” Sanyo replied. “When we arrive, you shall be brought before the Prophet.”

“And then you expect me to challenge him,” said Cole. Then Fiona comes and kills everyone...not a bad deal on the whole. “I don't mind, the Prophet needs to be dealt with anyway. But why me?”

“You're disposable,” Sanyo replied. Cole stopped aghast and then Sanyo began to laugh. “Do not take everything so seriously. No, you survived an encounter with the Guardian, none have claimed to do so since the Prophet came to us. Your magic...it feels like his.”

“What do you mean feels like his?”

“The magic you both wield feels like nothing I have ever felt before,” said Sanyo. “Your people Weave different Fates than I do, but they are still the same. You and the Prophet, there is something different there...something strange. I believe it is why you were able to survive the Guardians’ assault.

“I assume you mean that statue in the ruins,” said Cole as Sanyo's title finally clicked. What they called magic in Achland the Kaldriens called Fate. Sanyo was thus a Fateweaver Amak’Arai among his people, a simple substitute for the Achlish Spellweaver. “Nothing happened with the statue, it didn't even move.”

“It is because nothing happened that you survived,” said Sanyo. “Those ruins have stood for thousands of years, they have become monuments to things long lost. The Guardians were put into place to ensure only the chosen could pass.”

“There was writing around the statue,” said Cole.
“You could read it?!”

“Of course, I am very well educated.” Sanyo scowled. “Don't ask me what it means though, you interrupted that.”

“There are many of the ruins scattered through the jungle,” said Sanyo. “When Ronen they left many ruins behind. The Guardians watch over those places, waiting for those few chosen to explore the mysteries left behind. If you wish, we may have time to explore some before we reach our destination.”

They continued to pick their way through the jungle together, then Saniyya appeared without the slightest sound. She didn't say anything and instead just fell in step beside Cole. Together the Achlander and the two kelvish twins walked through the jungle, stopping here and there to wonder at the natural beauty. Their conversation was vapid, though like Del'to and the boys, both Sanyo and Saniyya asked Cole questions about Achland. It was the first time the three had ever just talked, and Cole discovered he actually enjoyed the twins’ company. He answered most of their questions, though he kept some details back, especially his involvement with the military. For his part Cole did not ask any questions, if what Hadiya had told him earlier was right, the twins had barely been Armel's age when the Consortium and Ra'kala had slaughtered the Selther and Cole did not exactly feel like reminding them about that.

Without warning Saniyya sprang away, drawing her khukuri as she dove into a large bush. Before Cole could even blink, Saniyya crashed to the ground, driving her knee down into the chest of a young deer. Startled, Cole stumbled back as several more bounded out of the under brush, tails held high. Saniyya grappled with the animal, slashing her blade down along the beast's neck. The deer bleated as its blood flooded out into the ground. Saniyya muttered something and slashed at the deer's throat again, spilling even more blood.

“I believe it's dead,” said Cole, as Saniyya dropped back onto her haunches. “You did not have to spill so much blood.”

“Ahkli thirsts,” Saniyya replied, wiping her khukuri clean on the deer's flank. “The gods must be appeased and blood must be spilled, it is the way of things.”

With Sanyo's help Saniyya bound her kill's legs together. “I will take it back,” said Sanyo. “I wished to return to the others anyway.”

“Why do you always put so many barriers up around yourself?” Saniyya asked once Sanyo was gone. A light rain had begun to fall again. Washing the blood off of Saniyya's skin.

Cole mused on the question for a moment. “Sometimes you have to put up barriers so you can gauge how others will respond.”

“That's not what I meant. You put barriers around your skin, nothing gets through. Not the rain, not the kiss of the earth.”

Cole looked at her. Saniyya's dark hair was plastered to her skin and there was dirt and mud smeared all over her body, but she did not seem to mind. In contrast Cole was, for the most part, still presentable. His magical abilities had kept his clothes clean, and while his Selther styled shirt might look outlandish in Thertan, he was still presentable. He was shabby true, but even here deep in the jungle, Cole had not allowed his physical qualities to degrade.

“Why would I want that?” Cole asked. “As a boy I lived in the country for a time. I played outside then with the others. Thomas...and Cormag,” Cole swallowed. “My friends, we all lived within a few miles of each other and we would often go running through the fields. But that was then, now, now I...I've moved past that.”

Saniyya pressed up close against Cole. “Why would you want to cut yourself from the world like that?”

“Things happen,” Cole replied. With Saniyya pressing so close some of the rain was beginning
to penetrate through his barriers, dampening his clothes.

“Yes, life happens,” said Saniyya. “You are not living if you're not getting dirty.”

Cole smiled faintly and released the magic that held his barriers in place. For once, Cole allowed himself to relax completely, not worrying how others might view him. In that single moment the world decided to conspire against him and the rain poured down in a heavy torrent. The rain pelted Cole's skin and clothes, and he did not care. Saniyya was just as tall as Cole and for a moment they just looked at each other, then she did something Cole did not expect.

The laughter started in her eyes, a smile danced along Saniyya's face and then she began to laugh. Cole hesitated for a moment and then joined her. Together they stood in the pouring rain, laughing as it washed away any boundary between them.

Here under the driving rain Cole allowed himself a moment of happiness. It was an emotion he had long since abandoned or one that he faked when the circumstance required it. But now, standing in the rain with Saniyya, Cole laughed and allowed himself to washed clean. As the rain washed Saniyya clean of the grime and gore that clung to her skin, it washed Cole clean of the loneliness and the bitter anger he carried, allowing him feel happiness, without lingering on the haunting memories of the past.
“Now those are some ruins,” Cole declared. He stood on the edge of a valley, Sanyo on his right, Saniyya on his left, looking down upon a city half collapsed and half buried under a rock fall.

For the last two days Sanyo, Saniyya, and Cole had been tramping through the Kaldrien jungle on their own. They had left the Selther caravan behind and struck out for an abandoned city that Sanyo knew of. Their intent was to travel faster than the others, explore the ruins, then rejoin the Selther when they were less than a day from Rhutil. Now looking at the ruins, Cole wished he had more time to explore them. They lay within a narrow valley between two taller peaks, thrusting their way up out of the rocky ground that threatened to bury them, and from here, they appeared to be of Ronic origin. The climb had been harrowing, but the vista was breathtaking. The day was still young, and a gentle mist, dyed pale yellow by the rising sun, swirled around the decayed Ronic city.

“The city certainly seems to have collapsed,” said Sanyo. “Which means yes...it is an impressive ruin.”

“At least we are going back down hill now, should make the climb easier,” Cole chuckled. Sanyo was certainly full of surprises, especially with regard to his rather sarcastic humour. “then it’s out the other side of the valley right?”

“Yes,” replied Sanyo. “Should be relatively easy, compared to the previous days.”

The three had taken a modest amount of supplies with them for the journey, but still had to hunt and scavenge for most of their food. Cole had attempted to help with the hunting, but had proven himself a less than satisfactory hunter. In fact he was so incompetent, neither of the twins had even volunteered to help him learn. Even with his failure, the twins were skilled enough that the journey, while hard, was not as difficult as it could have been. Cole had proven useful in other ways, mostly by joining his magic with Sanyo's in order to ward off night time predators. Before being relegated to assist with such menial tasks would have bothered Cole, but now he did not find himself minding so much.

Saniyya took the lead and the trio began their descent. They passed into the mist and Cole felt a strange shift in the air. The malevolence he had felt in the other ruins returned, faint, but still there. Cole spotted various bits and pieces of buildings, long covered by rock slides, or simply destroyed by the march of time, sprouting up out of the ground. Using those, Cole began to form a rough mental image of how the area must have appeared in its heyday. The entire valley would have been fortified, with large, well engineered walls, blocking both ends. The city would have been built in the shadow of these walls, a strong garrison town capable of throwing back whatever terrors emerged from the jungle.

The three explorers picked their way through the ruin, heading for a large structure located in the centre of the dead city. From the way Sanyo phrased it, the structure was more or less a temple, similar to the ruin Cole had been exploring before he had been taken. Now that they had descended fully into the valley, Cole could see that there were other buildings nestled along the valley walls, clinging to the sheer rock faces. When the daylight struck them, Cole saw that they had been hewn directly from the rock. They were different from the other buildings, more angular, and from a distance Cole thought there entry ways appeared to be hexagonal instead of rectangular. The morning mist slowly began to burn away, fully revealing the lost city's splendour Cole gasped, watching as a city long since forgotten, emerged out into the world.

During his childhood Cole had gained a passing knowledge of Ronic history. The Achlish countryside was dotted with old ruins, and while Cole had not been especially keen on seeing them, his older sister, Erika, had dragged him off to explore them many times. Now, striding through the ruins, Cole realized that he probably should have consulted more historical records upon his discovery of the
small battered journal, or at least taken it to his sister, though the two would probably have started fighting again.

They entered the temple grounds without incident, though Cole felt a rising sense of dread, that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The feeling wasn't enough to cause Cole to turn back, but there was certainly an aura of foreboding hanging over the entire place, and he could not help but remember the strange statue he had encountered in the other ruin.

A large dome rose up out of the centre of the courtyard, its surface carved with strange symbols. They passed through a soaring archway and Cole noted that much of the architecture was very similar to the ruin he had explored with Bhaskar, mixing Kaldrien and Ronic styles into something new and altogether more interesting. The archway led into a grand rotunda and Cole could see evidence that several mudslides had washed through the forgotten temple. Bits and pieces of metal poked up out of the packed mud like broken bones, glimmering in the early morning light. Saniyya bent down, ripping a rusted gladius up from the mud.

“This was a finely crafted blade,” said Saniyya sweeping the blade over her head. “Even rusted it maintains its balance.”

Cole took the lead, conjuring up several small glowing orbs to light their path. Even though the roof was fractured and cracked in places, only a small amount of light leaked through. The three of them continued along the main hall, stopping to admire the painted tiles and carved artwork that dotted the walls. The twins recognized several Kaldrien myths represented in the art work and took turns explaining their meaning to Cole, though he noted that there were no murals depicting Rakale and Xithar.

Together the three pressed on, soon coming to a broad ramp that spiralled down into the earth. Cole directed the glowing orbs down into the gaping maw and the three began their descent. As they followed the ramp down, Cole saw that his magical lights were not necessary, instead parts of the “ceiling” had been carved away, allowing light from the upper levels to filter down to the lower levels.

The ramp levelled out and Cole found that they had emerged into the area below the dome. Again, holes carved into the stone provided adequate light and large Ronic columns rose up to support the soaring dome. The place reminded Cole of a cathedral and as they walked along, he saw a dark tunnel looming up ahead, its mouth blocked by a shattered statue.

“This is where the Prophet was found,” Sanyo explained. “Another tribe of Selther happened upon him. They had decided to cut through the valley to avoid a troop of Consortium soldiers. Apparently they heard the sounds of battle and the scouts found him lying, burnt, within this chamber.”

Cole looked about and saw several large scorched marks running up the walls, but what drew his eye was the large statue in the far corner of the room. It was different from the one he had encountered before, and not simply because it had been blasted into several distinct chunks. Cole strode over to the damaged statue, noticing that the stonework was newer, conforming closer to modern Kaldrien styles then the hybrid Ronic-Kaldrien style of the other statue. There was something troubling about these differences, but Cole could not place what it was.

They continued to explore, penetrating deeper into the old city. The three turned down a side chamber and then Cole felt it, a presence similar to the one he had felt before. He dashed forward, leaving Saniyya and Sanyo behind. The aura of fear intensified, but Cole, now familiar with such things, banished it back. He turned another corner and found himself face to face with another stone monstrosity.

The head was different from the one he had encountered before, human, instead of that of a snake or dragon. The torso had six arms and pair of leathery wings sprouting from its back. The stonework was that strange mix of Ronic and Kaldrien. Sanyo skidded to a halt at Cole's side and his voice caught in his throat.
“That is...”
“Just some old Ronic magic,” said Cole, wondering if Sanyo had felt the strange aura. The statue stood in the mouth of a tunnel and Cole desperately wanted to continue exploring. “Nothing to worry about.”

Cole strode past the statue, while Saniyya followed close behind. Sanyo moved slower, eyeing the statue with caution. The tunnel was older, and once again Cole saw that the stonework had been constructed without any mortar. The stones used in the construction were more uniform as well, though they were still primitive compared the Ronic structures that had been built over them, or that statue that had been erected to ward off intruders.

The tunnel ran straight back from the statue and it soon grew dark, forcing Cole to re-summon the glowing orbs he had dispelled earlier. Some strange dark mineral glistened in between the gaps of the stones, reflecting the glow of the conjured lights. The tunnel sloped downwards, emerging out into another open chamber. Cole flicked his wrist and the orbs shot skyward, coming to rest at the top of several pillars. Again, parts of the ceiling had been cut away, allowing several shafts of light to filter into the chamber. Cole rubbed at his temple, trying to relieve the headache he had begun to develop upon entering the chamber.

While the other rooms the three had explored had clearly been Ronic, this chamber was different. The pillars here were rougher, the floor uneven. A stone slab altar lay at one end of the chamber, surrounded by several low polished pews. The place had suffered some damage and it looked as though a wall of the strange glimmering black stone had collapsed somewhere off the to their right, and several boulders lay in a jumbled pile around one of the pillars, but Cole paid them no mind, what interested him was the altar. Cole took one step, then another, his headache growing as he approached the altar.

“What is it?” Saniyya asked when Cole stopped to rub his temple again.
“You can't feel it?” Cole looked from Saniyya to Sanyo, expecting at least one of them to answer.
“No,” they both replied.
“Odd it’s like...” Cole hesitated, it was like the headaches he had suffered during the train ride through the Kaldrien countryside. In fact, now that he was thinking about it, he could feel his teeth aching, and he could feel an odd, almost audible pressure against his ears. Cole tried to centre himself and found that it really wasn't so much a headache as an odd pressure against his senses, exactly like the strange resonance he felt in the presence of the warlocks. Cole grabbed Sanyo's shoulder. “Are you sure you don't feel anything Sanyo? A strange pressure perhaps? An odd sound that makes your teeth hurt?”

Sanyo shook his head. Heart pounding, Cole stepped towards the altar and found that it overlooked a dark pit. The masonry around the pit matched with the rest of the chamber, almost looking like a shallow cistern or well. Cole swallowed and looked down, somehow already knowing what he would find.

Etched in the stone at the bottom of the pit was a rough ritual circle, its edges jagged and deformed. The pit was not deep and the geometric figures continued up the walls, stopping at a pair of rusted spikes set into the stone. Before he could get a better look, Sanyo handed him several tablets.

“What do you make of these?” Asked the Sanyo while his twin inspected a series of finely carved, free standing pillars that stood sentinel before the altar.

Cole looked at the tablets and found them covered in some strange, consonant and apostrophe heavy language. He had seen translated similar ciphers out of an old dusty tome once when he was a boy. The book now lay in a stack with several similar volumes in his study, dumped there so that Armel would not read them. Mixed in with the odd text were pieces of Ronic writing, but it was all so jumbled
that Cole could only read scattered bits. From out of the madness he identified a single chilling passage: *Not slain, dreaming, biding, shackled by blood they lay waiting.*

“It’s a warning or a chant,” said Cole, turning the stone around in his hands to get a better look. Just reading the strange writing, Cole felt his mouth moving on its own accord, silently reciting the words. “Best not spoken aloud I would think.”

Cole looked back into the pit and saw that there were strange dark stains splattered around the ritual circle, old blood that had soaked deep into the stone. Cole's eyes ran along the edge of the ritual circle, then it clicked. He had seen this before, twice, but until now he had not connected the warlock's circle in Thertan with the same one he had drawn upon the floor of his room as a boy. Even now, Cole could feel the hot knife slicing into the flesh of his palm. He had used the blood to fuel a ritual he had discovered in dusty old tomes, the same books in which he had first seen and read the strange language etched upon the tablets.

“Cole, what's wrong?” Saniyya stepped up onto the altar and placed a hand on Cole's shoulder “You've gone pale.”

The realization of what he was seeing struck Cole like a physical blow and for a moment he could not respond. Cole swallowed, fighting down a wave of terror. “Saniyya...what did you tell me the other day about Ahkli?”

Saniyya’s eyes swept over the pit, lingering on the ancient bloodstains. “I told you that Ahkli must be appeased by blood.”

Cole nodded slowly. “This place has seen plenty of blood, but it was never spilled to appease.”

Cole turned to his companions. “I am sorry Sanyo, I should never have asked you to bring me here. I should have realized it the first time I saw the writings around the guardian statue. Things linger in this place things that have no place in the natural world. The Guardians, they do not guard this place, they guard *you*, the Kaldrien people. These ruins, they pre-date the Ronic empire. This was once a place of great evil, a place of sacrifice. The Ronens sealed these places away, building the Guardians to ward off all those who might be corrupted by the powers hidden in this place. We need to leave....now!”

Before Cole finished a clicking sound echoed through the deserted chamber, reverberating back off the walls, and causing Cole's blood to freeze. The twins whirled about in unison. Saniyya's khukuris appeared in her hands, while Sanyo flourished his staff.

Terror-pedes normally only grew to a length of ten feet, with truly massive specimens reaching twenty. The behemoth that rose up from the corner of the chamber, its chitinous, segmented body looking like so many boulders stitched together, was easily thirty feet long, if not forty. The beast clicked its gleaming mandibles together as it scuttled across the ground. Saniyya sprang forward, blades flashing, while greenery blossomed along the staff that Sanyo carried.

Saniyya met the Terror-pede's charge head on, diving to the side and slashing at the beast's armoured carapace. A sharp ringing sound split the air as Saniyya twisted away. Her strike had done nothing. The beast twisted to face her, rearing back, its head almost brushed the top of the chamber. The ground around the Terror-pede's legs began to shiver, then vines burst up out of the stone, tangling themselves around the creature's legs. Cole joined in the assault, flinging bolts of indigo energy that bounced uselessly off the creature’s armoured hide.

The beast turned, slowed by the vines Sanyo summoned. Saniyya's blades hissed through the air she ducked to the side, dodging past the creature’s scything mandibles and then hacked off one of the Terror-pede's segmented limbs. The creature reared back, its head bashing a hole in the ceiling, while thick, foul smelling ichor leaked from its wounds. Bright light streamed in through the hole, fully illuminating the beast. Cole now saw that what he at first had thought to be perfectly formed chitin, was instead lumpy and malformed, covered in weird scab like abscesses. Tumours and strange tentacle shaped growths lined the Terror-pede's fleshy underbelly and Cole had to fight down the urge to vomit.
The bright light seemed to have startled the Terror-pede and Saniyya took advantage of the creature's confusion. She darted forward, blades singing as she slashed at the beast's underbelly. More ichor sprayed out, flowing over the altar and into the pit beyond. Shadows danced around the room and Cole reached for them, forming them in to spears that he hurled deep into the Terror-pede's guts.

Wounded and leaking ichor from a hundred small wounds the Terror-pede dropped to the ground. Saniyya rolled out of the way, barely avoiding the creature's crushing bulk. Saniyya dropped back into a defensive stance, khukris held high, ready for the beast’s next assault. Instead, the creature snapped about, whipping Saniyya with its tail, and sending her sailing through the air.

Cole ran, using his magic to push beyond his body beyond its physical limits. The world slowed, and he watched as the ground beneath the Terror-pede began to crack and fracture. One single enormous root slowly pushed its way up out of the ground, wrapping around the Terror-pede, and then crushing it. Cole slid to a halt and threw his arms wide. Saniyya slammed into him and even though he had braced himself with a wall of magic, he collapsed backwards and the two landed in a jumbled heap.

Saniyya sat up, straddling Cole. “Impressive,” she muttered. For a moment it appeared she was going to lean forward and kiss him, but then a shout from across the chamber drew her attention.

“That creature was not natural,” Saniyya hissed a minute later, her eyes fixed on the beast's still twitching tail.

“That's a bit of an understatement,” Cole replied, breathless from the fight. He had jumped back in time, so the razor sharp mandible had only sliced a thin line in his chest, but the wound burned, and his shirt was ruined. The three, covered in the blood of their foe, just stood there panting and smiling.

“It was corrupted. The energy of this place, the things that dwell here, they are no natural. We need to go.”

Sanyo nodded and they made ready to leave. Before they left, Saniyya used her khukris to remove the Terror-pede's curved jaws. It took a good deal of effort, but after several minutes, Saniyya was able to rip the mandibles out of the Terror-pede's head. The mandibles resembled a twisted mockery of Saniyya's khukris and judging by the creature's carapace, they were probably just as strong as the steel blades. No other horrors rose to meet them as the three fled the ruins and after close to an hour of solid running, they emerged from the valley. Standing on the low bluff, Cole sighed with relief.
when he spotted the leading elephants of the Selther caravan pushing their way through the jungle.

After several hours of hiking, they rejoined the Selther caravan and found that several other tribes had joined them as well. The other clans clothes and weapons were slightly different, heavier, but also less vibrant than their fellows, but there was no doubting that they were another group of Selther. Cole was assaulted by hundreds of emotions as he walked through the crowd and had to draw back his magical perception to avoid being overwhelmed. All around him, Cole saw what appeared to be relatives reuniting, families coming together again after years of separation.

There was a flurry of emotions to Cole's right and he turned to see Saniyya take a step forward. For a moment she simply radiated happiness. He turned following her gaze. Saniyya started to call out, then stopped, and a wave of sadness slammed against Cole's senses. Saniyya turned away, and Cole spotted Hadiya watching them. The old shaman had told him enough about her people and knowing the origin of Saniyya's khukuris was enough for Cole to guess who Saniyya had thought she had seen, her parents, long dead. Suddenly, Cole felt horrible for having earlier used Saniyya's method as a means to undermine her resolve. Even if Saniyya would not say it, Cole knew she was troubled, and he reached out his hand, placing it on the small of her back.

A shudder ran through the woman's body, and Cole reached out with his magic, brushing against Saniyya's mind. Instead of trying to control Saniyya's emotions, he opened himself to her, extending his own consciousness so she would know she was not alone. The two of them stood there, surrounded by the others for several minutes. Saniyya never turned or said anything and when Cole moved to wrap his arms around her, she slipped away, disappearing into the crowd.

Cole helped Qismat prepare for the evening meal, and while the amount of work had nearly doubled, there were so many new arrivals that they finished faster than usual. Not wanting to intrude upon those who had been reunited, Cole took his food and then went off on his own, secluding himself as he had before he had saved Del'to.

As he ate, Cole flipped through the Ronic journal. The line that started with “Reports from Kaldry” continued to discuss how the remaining legions had encountered more warlocks in the region. The report confirmed Cole's beliefs that the remaining Ronic legions had worked to protect the natives from the warlocks. The narrative concluded by stating that the threat of the warlocks had been maintained, and the legions here would remain vigilant. Cole found it odd that such an important piece of history had been lost, but then again, the time after Ronen's fall had been chaotic and much of the learning of Ronen had been lost in the countless wars that ravaged the land.

Now Cole knew what the warlocks wanted, or at least he suspected. Their history was written in blood and that blood had been used to fuel dark rituals throughout the world. They had brought down the Ronic empire, destroying the one thing that had stood in their way, and using the bloodshed to strengthen themselves. Some of the survivors had fled to Kaldry, creating the Guardians to seal away the temples the warlocks used to conduct their sacrifices. Ronen's fall had signalled the end for both sides of the conflict and the warlocks had vanished, until now.

Based on everything he knew, Cole now saw that motion to install Duke Lowell as Lord-Protector was not only a plot to force conflict between Achland and Kaldry, but against the Consortium as well. The warlocks wanted the county to tear itself apart, they needed to the bloodshed and death to fuel their dark designs. Allen was working to ensure the plan continued, manipulating the Ra'kala to ensure further strife between Achland and the Consortium, while the Masked Prophet worked with the lower castes, pushing them to rebel. Both were also seeking a way to subvert the wards the Ronens had created, and based off what Cole had seen today, the Prophet had already succeeded. Looking back further, Cole began to wonder if Garret's involvement in Felviar had been part of the warlocks' plan as well.

“Well Cole, you certainly seem to have a taste for foreign women,” drawled the Well-Dressed
Man. Cole looked up and found the man sitting on a tree branch, leaning back against the trunk.
“You've got some odd tastes. First that elf girl...what was her name? Ehh I guess it doesn't matter. At
least she had breasts, but this one, ohhhh Cole you can do a lot better. She's as flat as a boy.”

The Well-Dressed Man dropped down off the branch, moving with a weird mechanical grace
that was all together disturbing. Instead of moving as one, his legs and arms seemed to move
independently of each other as if he didn't even need them to walk and move. His suit was dull scarlet
and he had forgone his usual bowler hat, replacing it with a short top hat. Even though it was dark, light
seemed to bend around The Well-Dressed Man and his features were fully illuminated, perfectly visible
in the darkness.

Cole chuckled. “Emotions aren't exactly your thing are they?”

“Ohh so your you're just using this one then eh? Very devious.” the Well-Dressed Man replied
dryly. The Well-Dressed Man left no footprints in the mud as he walked towards Cole. “What happens
when these people find out you are using them eh? You've already betrayed them to Fiona, it's only a
matter of time now before they learn the truth. Have you forgotten the lessons you learned in Felviar? I
guess it doesn't really matter though, just look who your lover has led you to.”

The Well-Dressed Man pointed and Cole looked up. Walking through the crowd of Selther,
Saniyya at his side, was the Masked Prophet. Seeing him in person at last Cole was struck by how
enormous the Prophet was. The man was easily seven feet tall, with a broad back, and muscles that
bulged underneath the simple robes he wore. His head was wrapped in tight linens and upon his face
was a pure white mask, completely devoid of any human features save for a hint of a nose and two dark
holes were his eyes should have been. Cole panicked and shrank back into the shadows, withdrawing
into himself to avoid notice. Whoever this man was, he wasn't Garret, he was too big.

“Ohh are you scared?” The Well-Dressed Man laughed causing a wave of goosebumps to break
out along Cole's arms. “Or perhaps you are just distressed to learn that what you thought was true was
false. Regardless your time here is almost up. But wait, you were happy here, weren't you?.”

“Is that your professional opinion?” Cole asked as he continued to watch the Masked Prophet.
“If so, you really you are out of touch with human emotions. You're slipping.”

“Cole you wound me,” the man replied his voice oozing with contempt. “Deny it if you wish,
you've found some form of happiness here among these, hmm what would your people call them, ahh
right savages. Would you like to know a little secret? I'm happy for you, I truly am. As a matter of fact,
if you want, I can release you from our bargain. You can live here, happily hidden from the rest of the
world. It's not flashy but at least no one here will judge you, no one will spit upon your
accomplishments like they do in Achland. You can learn all the native ways, become one of them. Hell
you can become the mighty white man that leads them to prosperity. Whatever you want Cole, it's
yours for the taking, unless that Masked Prophet kills you of course.”

“Just what are you implying?”

Well-Dressed Man did not reply, instead he raised his right hand, then snapped his fingers. All at
once Cole was blinded, deafened, and struck mute as he lost hold upon his magic. The world dimmed
and sounds faded, as Cole's magic was stripped from him. Even if he had not been aware of it, Cole
relied more on magic then he believed, and without it he was helpless, his senses so diminished that he
could barely function. Cole gasped for breath and stars exploded before his eyes.

The Well-Dressed Man smiled and then cocked his head to the side, watching as Cole gasped
for air. “No...this isn't you is it? You'd never fade away into obscurity.” The Well-Dressed Man
snapped his fingers again and Cole's magic came rushing back.

“What do you know of me?” Cole panted, sucking down lungfuls of air. He was on his knees,
but he did not remember how he got there.

“Cole, Cole, what do I not know of you? The lone boy who summoned me up, who bartered
with me to gain powers he would never have otherwise, foolishly entering into a bargain he could barely comprehend. You are just like all the others, all the proud fools of the world.” The Well-Dressed Man smiled a smile to wide for his mouth, and yet his face did not distort or bend out-of-place. “Even now when you know you should cast me aside you will not. You need your powers to succeed, just as you need others to validate you Cole, you need them to worship you. Because of that you will face the Prophet, you may even burn all of Kaldry, but you will ensure that others see you doing it. You will make yourself a hero.”

“And then you'll destroy me I assume?”

“Heheahaa, why would I want to do that?” The Well-Dressed Man tittered. “You are the perfect pawn in a game that has gone on for centuries. Actually I take that back, you're more than a pawn to me Cole, you are a very valuable piece indeed, but a piece nonetheless. You have met some of the other pawns, though they believe themselves to be kings and players of the game. The pieces are on the table, you've put together the puzzle, the game is now afoot and things are about to get very interesting.”
Chapter 33

Cole spent the next two days in hiding, not once attempting to use his magic, lest he be discovered. Cole was not afraid of the Masked Prophet, he was simply watching and waiting. The Masked Prophet seemed to be at ease among the people and Cole did not wish to alert the man to his presence. Hadiya and Sanyo seemed to be avoiding the Prophet as well and Cole often found them walking along at the far edges of the column, avoiding any open discussion with their fellows. The Masked Prophet no doubt knew Cole was in the caravan, especially since Saniyya never left the hulking man's side. So far though, the Masked Prophet he had not acted on that information.

Rhutil had appeared on the horizon this morning, a collection of ramshackle buildings, stark brown against the green of the jungle. As Cole walked along, slightly apart from the others, he slowly drew the telethium out of his pocket. For a moment he merely held the device, feeling its cold metal surface. His heart pounded as he considered not sending the signal that would summon Fiona and gods knew how many soldiers.

It wasn't guilt that stayed Cole's hand, but pride. It was not respect for the Selther, it was not even the burgeoning emotions he felt for Saniyya, it was love that stayed Cole's hand; love for himself. It had taken two days, but he had finally decided on a course of action, he would contact Fiona as they had planned. But now, he was faced with the simple truth that his own pride might prevent him from acting as he knew he should. With a heavy heart, he reached out for Fiona, searching through all the multitudes of the world. The telethium grew hot in his hand as he signalled the attack. Hands trembling, he slid the telethium back into the pocket of his trousers.

The plan was simple enough. Fiona already knew that Cole and the Selther were heading for Rhutil and then New Thertan, the signal was merely a formality. There of course was plenty of territory between New Thertan and the village of Rhutil that Cole would be passing through so Fiona would prepare her forces and then have one of her men scry Cole, not only alerting him, but also getting a general feel for his location. He would then send up a flare at his location and guide the soldiers to the Prophet. In theory it was a simple plan, but he still worried that something might happen.

Rhutil proved to be a small, pathetic town, clinging to life beneath a large dam along the Kaldra river. Even though the streets were alive with people, Cole saw signs of starvation and hardship. Everywhere he looked, emaciated faces looked up at him, and he could count the ribs of the children that ran naked in the streets. As the walked towards the centre of Rhutil, Cole was struck by just how poorly the Consortium had managed this colony. While Cole had heard there was a famine, he had never really believed it could be this bad. True the Selther looked ragged at times, but Cole had always thought that to be a symptom of their nomadic lifestyle. Here was an entire city starving to death, one barely thirty miles from Al-katal. If things this close to the capital were this bad, Cole shuddered to think how bad the outlying villages must be.

Cole's horror slowly turned to anger. The Consortium were not the only ones responsible, though Cole would not deny their culpability. Achland had allowed this to happen, and then had hidden it from the world. Even if the Consortium was managing Kaldry, it had been Achland's allegiance with the Ra'kala that had allowed it to continue. Looking around, he now knew why the warlocks had decided to base themselves in Kaldry. They had found the perfect place to breed anger and violence. They had not even needed to change anything, all they needed to do was ensure that everything continued as it was, then when the time was right, tip the balance. Kaldry would fall, then the next colony, then the next, and soon the entire world would be awash in blood.

The Selther stopped in Rhutil for several hours to resupply. Watching from a distance, Cole saw a great amount of guns being loaded onto the backs of the Selther's elephants. Most were in crates, but there were plenty in the open, and Cole recognized them as standard Consortium issue rifles. Among
the armaments Cole also spotted several small single shot cannons and multiple revolving belt fed machine guns. Clearly the Kaldriens had been preparing for a long time. After loading, the column set off again, picking its way along the walls of a treacherous river basin.

The river banks along the northern side of the basin were steep, formed from packed river clay and loose silt. The footing was perilous and the elephants' heavy steps often caused the narrow winding path to collapse. Even though he was trying to hide, Cole still had to use his magic several times to prevent the road from collapsing entirely. Sanyo joined him and together the two men prevented several collapses that would have sent dozens tumbling down into the churning river.

“You're doing very well,” said Sanyo as he passed Cole a water skin.

“Been awhile since I've had to weave any magic like this,” said Cole, before he took a deep drink from the skin. The collapsing clay clung to everything and Cole guessed that by now he was covered in the stuff. Cole looked down at his arms and began to laugh.

“What is so funny?” Asked Sanyo

“My skin,” Cole replied. “I look like one of you.” Sanyo stared at him for a moment, then smiled. Cole shook his side to side and sent a ripple of magic over his skin, pushing the dirt off in a billowing cloud. Sanyo began to cough and Cole funnelled the dirt back down to the ground.

They left the river not long after and started into the jungle. It was almost mid-day when Cole felt the telethium grow hot against his skin. The soldiers were close and so Cole ducked back into the trees, sneaking away from the Kaldriens. He hesitated for a moment, again plagued by the desire to advance his own personal fame. Cole shoved the feeling aside and flung a bolt of magic into the air, where it exploded in a shower of cerulean sparks. Troubled, Cole returned to the caravan to find it stalled in the centre of a large clearing.

The Masked Prophet sat cross legged in the centre of the clearing, Hadiya standing in front of him. The other Selther were scattered around the edges of the clearing, watching as the Prophet continued to berate Hadiya.

“You did not answer me correctly,” the masked man growled. His voice was calm, measured, and sonorous, not at all what Cole had been expecting. Standing hidden in the back of the crowd, Cole reached out and touched the other man's mind, but recoiled a second later. The Prophet's mind was filled with madness and hate, a vortex of insanity, that for some reason felt familiar. Mixed in with the rage was the familiar pulsing pressure that Cole had since come to associate with the warlocks.

“Answer me!”

“Young call went out to all in Kaldry, Prophet.” Hadiya replied. Cole spotted Sanyo standing alone in the crowd, but he could not find Saniiyya. “We have answered it, but in doing so we have met another whom the Guardians spared. Your doubts are well founded, he is of Achlish blood, yet he has proven himself a friend of our people.”

“You would commit such treachery?!” The Prophet roared. “Why would you allow such a blasphemy to survive?”

“The guardians spared him,” said Sanyo, stepping out of the crowd, the ground beneath his feet shuddering slightly. “You were spared as well. You have earned your place Prophet, but you would have us go to war. This man was sent here by his own people to mediate this conflict.”

“They sent him here to treat with our enemy,” the Prophet hissed. “Together we have opposed their Consortium and so they seek to further our enslavement. This man was sent here to help the heathens oppress us, not to bring peace to this country. Am I wrong Mr. Travers?”

The Masked Prophet pointed and as one the crowd turned to face Cole.

“You speak truly,” said Cole, stepping away from the Selther. The Prophet would no doubt attack him soon and Cole did not want anyone to be caught in the cross fire. “At least for some of my people. Kaldry has suffered under the yoke of the Consortium so we seek to replace them. I was sent
here to ensure that process commenced properly. Achland wishes there to be no further conflict, they wish for peace.”

“Peace?!” The Prophet flung his head back and began to laugh. “Achland knows of no such thing! The want peace for the Ra'kala, nothing more!”

Cole took a step forward and the full force of the Prophet's aura slammed into him. The low buzz he had felt before turned into a full blown assault upon the senses. Cole's teeth ached as the resonance pounded against him, clouding his thoughts. In that moment Cole faltered and dropped down to one knee, realizing just how outmatched he truly was.

“I knew it,” Cole muttered. “You're not Garret, but you'll die just the same.”

“See how he falters!” The Prophet roared, throwing his arms up in the air. “He is weighed down by his lies! He hides his true motives from you! He will betray us all!”

“Cole has hidden nothing,” Sanyo replied. From the moment I met him, I knew Cole had ulterior motives.”

“And you brought him here?! Without finding out what he desired!” The Prophet bellowed. Flames suddenly flashed in the eye holes of his mask.

“Yes,” Sanyo replied with conviction. “I had to deceive the others, calling Cole chosen as you were when in fact he never faced the guardian you faced, indeed he faced something different.”

“You shall burn for your treachery and lies! You dare challenge me!?!?” Flames erupted up out of the ground around the Prophet.

Cole snapped into action, sweeping his hands through the air, and summoning a glimmering shield around Sanyo. The man did not flinch as the indigo shield enveloped her, protecting him from the Prophet's attack. The inferno swirled around Sanyo, dissipating a moment later.

“Someone has a hot temper.” Cole waggled a finger back and forth, while he strode forward to stand next to Sanyo. “Very poor form roasting your followers. Sadly I was indeed planning on betraying all these people to Achland. Well, that was until I got to know them, fell in love....wait no, that's not what happened at all. I did manipulate them though, see I needed to kill you and the best wa....”

“Yes, Sanyo replied with conviction. “I had to deceive the others, calling Cole chosen as you were when in fact he never faced the guardian you faced, indeed he faced something different.”

“Your words are empty Achlander,” taunted the Prophet. “Do you truly believe what you are saying? I think not. Your people offer nothing but false promises and death. Have you nothing better to promise us?”

“NO, I DON'T, thought Cole. A light wind whistled through the clearing, causing the Prophet's robes snap and dance. At this point I'd say anything just to buy Fiona some time.

“Your promises would leave Kaldry burnt to ashes!” Cole shouted back. “I do not deny that the people of Kaldry deserve justice, I only question your motives and your purpose. Why rise up when you know you have already won? Achland has seen your suffering, that is why they are replacing the Consortium.”

“So you have said,” the Prophet sneered. The two were barely ten feet apart now and Cole could actually feel the heat pouring out from the flames that flickered within the Prophet's mask. “But tell me Cole, why have your people not sent ambassadors to us before? Why did you make no effort to establish a connection with the downtrodden? Why did your people convince the Ra'kala to bury one of
our greatest leaders, Essar Al-Rakalthan in a manner offensive to Kaldrien custom?”

“Ohh, you've made a mistake,” said Cole. “Tell me, Prophet, how do you know my name?”

In that instant the air burned white hot and flames blossomed around Cole. The attack had been perfect, a display of raw Weaving so powerful Cole was struck dumb. Without even thinking, he wreathed himself in energy and clenched his eyes shut. Even shielding himself in such a way, he found it almost impossible to breath. The heat scorched Cole's lungs and he could feel his clothes catch fire. He threw his hands out, casting the flames away from himself. The Masked Prophet had not even moved, he just stood there, calmly watching Cole with his burning eyes.

Cole panicked for a moment then a wave of water crashed over him, extinguishing the fire. He looked over to see Sanyo calmly weaving a second wave together from the dew and water that lay about the clearing. Sanyo flashed Cole a sad smile, then flung the water towards him. Cole caught the water, just as the Prophet conjured a tornado of swirling flames. The water evaporated instantly, turning into scalding steam. Cole screamed, but again the heat seared his throat and lungs and he began to cough, fighting to draw breath.

Chest heaving, Cole dropped to his knees while the Prophet let out a booming laugh. “See here, the Achlander falls, destroyed but by the elements he thought would save him.”

Tears welled up in Cole's eyes, as he struggled to draw breath. Through the haze and steam, he watched as the Prophet slowly walked towards him. The crowd was shouting something, but Cole ignored them. He closed his eyes and shut the entire world away, focusing all his energy on breaking the Prophet's mental defences. During the Prophet's first assault, Cole had realized just how horribly outmatched he was, so now his only hope was to somehow break the Prophet's mind.

Bright scarlet madness and anger slammed against Cole, as he fought to pierce the Prophet's thoughts. Cole grit his teeth together and braced himself, preparing to force the man's anger aside, but now that he was concentrating, he found that the man really wasn't angry. All the anger and hate Cole felt was just a façade, beneath it was nothing but calm, calculated malice. Some hatred burned white hot, but what Cole found in the Prophet's mind was chilling.

Cole felt something. The warlock had discovered his intrusion and panicked. Blurred images flashed through the man's mind, a confused jumble of memories. A dark room, hooded men, things Cole had seen in the mind of Patrick, the warlock he had tortured to death, but there was something else, something the Prophet was afraid Cole might see.

Leveraging all his power, Cole tore into the other man's thoughts, grabbing the memories he sought to hide, and dragging them into the light. More shattered images flashed before his eyes. Death, destruction, but there was also loss, a sense of being betrayed, and loneliness. He fought his way through these and a single memory crystallized, revealing itself before him. Looking into the mirror of the other man's mind, Cole saw himself, turning and running down a burning street, leaving the man who's mind he had invaded behind to die.

“Cormag.” Cole's eyes snapped open. “You... you can't, it cannot be.”

BANG.

A gunshot split the air and Cole whirled to see soldiers running through the trees towards the Selther. They were not dressed in traditional blue of Achlish soldiers, instead they wore the red and gold livery of the Consortium. Behind them, an entire platoon of men in full Steam-armour crashed along, firing cannons mounted on their shoulders. The Selther began to scream as the Consortium guardsmen opened fire.

“So, is this what the peace that Achland promises looks like?” The Prophet rounded on Cole and flames shot out from his upraised hands.

The Selther in the clearing scattered, only to find themselves boxed in by even more soldiers. Cole averted his eyes from the carnage, but he could still hear the screams.
Cole flung up a wall of azure energy to protect himself from Cormag's attack. “Ironically this doesn't look to different from the peace you wanted does it?”

Cormag replied by lobbing a torrent of fireballs in Cole's direction. The flaming meteors burned white and blue as they hurtled through the air. Detritus along the ground caught fire as the flames passed by. Cole erected a series of shimmering walls to deflect and contain the blasts. The rapid pop, pop, pop, of smaller arms rang through the trees accompanied by the screams of the natives. Cole, right hand sheltered by a flickering indigo nimbus, batted a fireball aside causing a grove of trees to catch fire.

“You are faltering Achlander,” Cormag taunted, before slamming his fist into the ground.

The ground around Cole's exploded, spears of rocks exploding up out of the earth. He reeled back, but one of the rocks struck him in the cheek, slicing along his face and barely missing his eye. Cole whirled, just as another rock spear exploded out of the ground, piercing his abdomen.

“I'm just getting warmed up,” Cole grunted, twisting to the side. The rock snapped and he ripped it out of his side, hot blood gushing out of the wound. “It has been awhile since I've had a fair fight.”

With a wink, Cole snapped his fingers and six shadowy duplicates materialized around him. Two of them rushed towards Cormag, while the others turned and ran. Cormag grunted as he grabbed at the first doppelgänger. The illusion exploded in spray of indigo shards. Cormag flinched back as the shards pierced his chest. Under the cover of his illusions, Cole began to fling bolts of magical energy at Cormag. The bolts tore deep furrows in Cormag's cloths and skin, but the hulking man hardly seemed to notice. Cormag swirled his hands about and a wave of fire consumed Cole's doppelgänger, causing the magic supporting them to disperse.

Cormag calmly strode through the ruin and destruction, gunfire absorbed by the flames that wreathed his body. Again the masked man caused the air around Cole to simply ignite, but this time Cole was ready. Even as it happened, he could feel the heat around him increase, but instead of trying to prevent it, he simply reached for the colder air that Cormag had displaced. Thomas had been right, though Cole would never admit that to the other man. Fire exploded around him as Cormag let out a barking laugh.

“Impossible!” Cormag screamed when the fires died back.

Cole stood in the centre of the flaming vortex, encased in a thick layer of ice. A crack, audible over the gun fire rang out as he shattered the hoarfrost that clung to his head and neck. Icicles shimmered along Cole's brow and he smiled.

“Seems you have forgotten some of the basic laws of thermodynamics Cormag!”

The ice surrounding Cole shattered, and with a sweep of his hands he sent thousands of deadly ice-daggers hurtling towards Cormag. The icicles slashed at the burly warlock, shredding his robes and the flesh beneath. Reinvigorated, Cole went on the attack, commanding shadowy claws to spring up and tear at Cormag's body. The false prophet responded with a speed Cole had not expected of someone so large. Blood gushing from a dozen small wounds, Cormag danced through the thicket of shadow hands, sing the flames that swirled around his hands to break any that threatened to impale him.

Cormag spun his hand about, summoning up a whip of pure fire. The cord snapped out, wrapping itself around Cole's right thigh. Cole screamed as the flames seared his flesh. Cormag wrenched the whip around and sent Cole flying, tossing him into a tree. Cole held his focus just long enough to redirect the protective wards around his body. All Spellweavers had an innate reflex to create barriers of magical energy to insulate themselves from harm, but now, exhausted from the beatings he was taking, Cole could feel his focus beginning to slip.

Cole slammed into the tree, then slumped forward, and landed heavily on the ground. Through the dust and debris, he could see Cormag stalking towards him, flaming whip crackling as he swung it
around and around over his head.

Cole threw up a bubble of indigo energy around himself, just as Cormag brought the whip down. Cole feebly held his right hand up, struggling to maintain the barrier as the whip slammed down again and again. The ground around him cracked, and he dropped to his knees, while his protective bubble was driven further and further into the ground by the ferocity of Cormag's attacks.

There was a pause in Cormag's assault and Cole rolled to the side. The lash slammed into the ground inches from Cole's face and more debris exploded outwards. Rotor-crafts screamed by overhead, their main guns firing dozens of rounds in the blink of an eye. Through the smoke, Cole saw a group of Consortium guardsmen surround Cormag. The flaming whip tore into the men, tossing them around like dolls. In the confusion, Cole managed to pull himself together and slip away into the shadows.

Cole ran into the jungle, weaving shadows around himself to produce a ragged glamour that would shield him from view. The battle between Consortium soldiers and the Selther was intense and bloody. As he ran, he saw soldiers firing on families, children, and he could hear the trumpeting of elephants and the braying of frightened mules. At the same time, the Selther ripped men apart, using their curved khukris to lop off arms and legs, or just beheading men they had subdued. Seeing the Selther's brutal practices up close, Cole drew his glamour in close, terrified they might do the same to him if he were to be captured.

At one point Cole thought he saw Saniyya, blood smeared across her face, and torso, tearing into a group of Achlish soldiers, her khukuris flashing as she slashed open a man's throat, but he could not be sure. Cole turned to stop, just as a squad of hulking Consortium soldiers, dressed in full Steam-armour opened fire. Trees splintered as the soldiers' shoulder mounted cannons thundered, tearing apart anything in their path.

A scream caught Cole's attention and he turned to see a soldier being dragged along by a long length of vine. The man screamed even louder as he was dragged back into the shadows. A moment later he stopped. Before Cole could even rationalize what had happened, Del'to and Sanyo came tearing out of the shadows the Consortium guardsman had vanished into.

“Cole!” Del'to screamed. There was a large, bloodstained bandage wrapped around the boy's chest and he carried an aged rifle, its barrel flecked with rust. Sanyo appeared fine, but behind his pale blue eyes, Cole could see a roiling hatred. The young kelvish boy passed Cole a rolled bundle: his jacket and the notebook he had secreted within.

“What happened? Where is the Prophet?” Sanyo demanded, while Cole donned his ragged jacket, pulling it on over his Selther garb.

“I have no clue,” Cole replied, checking to make sure the warlocks' brooch was still pinned to the front of the Ronic journal. More gunfire split the air and the three men ducked back as trio of Selther warriors went running past. “You're the one who put me up against the Prophet, why don't you know where he is?”

“Don't make me culpable for all this,” Sanyo spat, throwing his hands up to make Cole aware of the battle that raged around them. “You brought the soldiers here, didn't you?”

“You wanted me to face the Prophet, so I did.” Cole's chest was heaving. “You lied to the others, so do not act so surprised that I lied to you. I brought the soldiers here thinking that the Achlish commander, Fiona, was in charge. She wanted to broker a truce.”

Another round of gunfire drew Cole's attention and he turned to see a host of brown skinned children run past. One of them, a girl, tripped, and then a bullet tore through her chest. Blood and shards of bone stained the green leaves of the trees and Sanyo let out a wordless scream. Sanyo didn't even have time to react, before a contingent of Consortium soldiers turned towards them and opened fire.
Acting purely on instinct, Cole attacked before the first soldier had not even opened fire. He flung a bolt of indigo energy deep into the man's chest and the soldier dropped to the ground with a wet cough. A bullet pierced Sanyo's shoulder and the Selther druid spun about, his face contorted in pain, before two more shots slammed into his chest and abdomen. Sanyo dropped to the ground and without thinking, Cole erected a wall of energy between the soldiers and Sanyo.

Cole turned and ran, leaving both Sanyo and the soldiers far behind. The air was rank with the smell of burning flesh and his eyes burned from the smoke that swirled through the trees. Cole knew he should go back, he should save Sanyo and the Selther, but he couldn't. Cole felt as though he might be sick, he knew he should go back, but he couldn't slaughter his own countrymen, even if they were committing atrocities. Memories of that fateful run through the streets of My'thren swirled through Cole's mind. Here he was, once again abandoning a friend, still only concerned for his own safety. There was a shout from off to his right, and Cole spun, just as a khukuri cleaved into his right shoulder.

Cole felt his collar bone snap, and he dropped to his knees. Saniyya stood over him, her face contorted in rage, spattered with blood. The Selther woman released the blade, grabbed Cole by the throat, and lifted him off his feet. Cole began to choke, then Saniyya slammed him up against a tree.

“You left my brother to die,” Saniyya hissed, her lips inches from Cole's. “You left us all to die.”

“Yes,” Cole gasped, amazed that he would confess to such a thing. Saniyya's grip tightened and Cole felt something pop in his neck. “I left him.” *I left them all...I always leave them*, Cole thought. “I tried to help...I...I failed...I.”

Gunshots rang out and Saniyya whirled, leaving her khukuri lodged in Cole's shoulder. Through the haze of destruction, Cole could see soldiers running towards him. Saniyya hissed in anger and dropped into a crouch, slithering away into the trees as the soldiers approached. One of the men turned and began firing in the direction Saniyya had fled.

“Do not shoot,” Cole pleaded. “Do not...shoot...her.”

“Travers...” the Consortium soldier sucked in a sharp breath. “Command said you were dead.”

“Not yet,” Cole could feel his head swimming. He had been heavily wounded in his fight with Cormag and the wounds he had suffered at Saniyya's hands had not helped. “I might be soon. I, I need you to get me out of here...I, I need to speak with the Colonel...I need to speak with someone...anyone.”

Cole collapsed. Laying on the ground, he could see dozens of corpses scattered about, their faces already beginning to bloat in the heat of the day. Cole stared into those pale, dead eyes, until darkness took him.
Cole had vague memories of the immediate aftermath of the battle, but he remembered being loaded onto a rotor-craft, and doing his best to hide the khukuri Saniyya had left embedded in his shoulder. He had been carried off of the skiff and taken to a gruff, thick necked, healer. The man used magic to stabilize Cole and seal his wounds, then he was taken and locked inside a small apartment. Cole only caught the briefest glimpse of the city, but it was enough to identify that he had been taken to New Thertan. Cole had now waited for two days, but he never saw Fiona. Indeed, he had seen almost no one since he had been detained.

The apartment the Consortium had arranged for Cole was located in a relatively well to do region of the city and was well furnished. Cole was particularly pleased to find the apartment had a hot water shower, something he had missed during his two weeks among the Selther. The Consortium also supplied Cole with a new wardrobe, though he found the tailoring and fabric to be very cheap, so used them for material to patch the homespun Selther garments he had been wearing. The Consortium kept him well fed, and he only wished there were some windows in the apartment so he could look outside.

To combat boredom, Cole busied himself with the riddle of the warlocks. He had answered most of the questions now, he knew what they wanted and where they had come from. Still, he agonized over Garret. Cole knew the man was one of the warlocks, yet he was not in Kaldry. Cole could still not comprehend that Cormag was alive or that he was working with the warlocks. Of course now he knew that the conversation he had overheard in Thertan had been referencing Cormag, not Garret, as the one who had been involved in Felviar. Whatever the case, Cole's mission was now clear, he could no longer concern himself with one man, instead he had to focus on stopping the warlocks' plans for Kaldry. He had to stop them from inciting any more violence, so he could prevent their ritual form reaching completion. If he did not, would use the energy of a thousand deaths to resurrect some dark terror from beyond the realm of comprehension.

On the afternoon of the second day, there came a knock at the door. Cole was lounging and before he could stand the door swung open. Daniel strode into the room, beaming as he bounded across the floor, bouncing gaily on the balls of his feet. The warden, a man Cole had named Lunk, for his size and vacant expression, closed the door as Consortium Administrator flashed Cole a smile.

“Well Cole, it seems your exploits among the Selther have proven to be quite the boon,” said Daniel, plopping down into the room's only other chair. “The information you provided Colonel Walsh not only allowed Colonel Jenkins and his men to rout the savage forces assembling against us, but based on all accounts the self styled Masked Prophet has been slain. I am sorry we had to detain you, but there were some legal complications regarding your actions. It's all cleared up now though.”

Cole grunted in the affirmative. “Good to know I could be of some use.”

“Some use? Cole, you almost single-handedly broke the back of what might have become the second Kaldrien uprising,” said Daniel. “You are a bloody hero Cole and I would like to see you receive the praise you deserve. All I need you to do is, well, I'll be frank, I need you to support the Consortium's position in the debate with the Lord-Protector. Do that for me and I promise Cole, you will be famous!”


Daniel scowled. “Yes, well, I am sure you will be relieved to learn that the Consortium guardsman you assaulted is expected to make a full recovery. The man insisted that we don't press charges. He conceded that in the heat of the battle it is often hard to make a fully rational decision.”

“Ohh, so that explains why your men were killing children and firing upon unarmed civilians,” Cole sat up. “I had been trying to determine why they did that, thank you so much for an answer.”
The silence that followed Cole's comment was palpable. For a moment Daniel appeared as though he was going to respond, but his mouth simply flapped open and shut rapidly. Amused at the other man's inability so speak, Cole leaned back in his chair, brushing his knuckles along the room's stone walls. The apartment really was rather nice, with shelves carved directly into the white rock walls and fine dark wood furniture. It wasn't as nice as the bungalow the Consortium had provided in Alkatal, but it was enough.

After several seconds of awkward silence Daniel seemed to have gathered his thoughts again. “Come now Cole, please don't tell me you thought any of those savages were innocent.” Cole shrugged. “You didn't even spend three full weeks with them, yet you're acting as though we are in the wrong. You are one of the last people I would have expected to, 'go native', as some call it and yet you are still wearing their garb.”

“What you sent over was unacceptable,” Cole replied. “Very cheap material, though I guess that is to be expected of Consortium goods.”

“Ohh petty insults, how mature,” Daniel sneered. “Are we going to do the whole 'blame the white man for the troubles of the ohh so noble savages' bit now?”

“I've considered it,” Cole quipped. “You slaughtered them without mercy and without cause, someone has to hold you accountable for your actions.”

“You are a fucking fool,” Daniel spat. “It's because of you we were even out their in the first place. What do you know of slaughter? You live in the lap of luxury back home, ignoring the sacrifices of men like me. Then you come here and think you can judge the situation based on the most basic contact with both sides. What other fool romantic notions do you have? Let me tell you what I know of the Selther and their ilk.” Daniel's entire body began to tremble and he slammed his fist down onto the table. “I was stationed here as a minor official during the first Kaldrien uprising. I was right in the middle of it at Fort Charles, so was my wife and young son. There were close to eighty soldiers there as well, but that did no stop the Selther. They killed our Spellweaver first, a sneak attack in the night, after that they picked the men off one by one.” Daniel was now on his feet, screaming at Cole, spittle flying from his thin lips. Cole could also see tears forming around the man's eyes, as though he could not decide if he was going to cry or continue screaming. “Then one night they came. I awoke that morning, alone, surrounded by the desiccated corpses of everyone I had known! My wife had been hacked apart so brutally it was hard to even determine if what was left had ever been human!”

“See, this is the kind of anger you need to work past,” Cole replied, voice oozing with condescension. “I would think something like that would compromise your ethics and ability to function as administrator for this colony. You might also want to get some psychological help.”

“Don't you dare speak to me like that,” Daniel bellowed. “There is more blood on your hands then there will ever be on mine! You betrayed the Selther, not me. You were the reason we were there!”

Cole flushed red with rage and the shadows in the room began to dance. The apartment's door banged open as Allen and Lunk burst in.

“Daniel you need to leave,” Allen commanded.

Daniel's chest was heaving, but he nodded to Allen and made for the door, before turning back towards Cole. “You amaze me Mr. Travers. I thought you would have gladly revealed in the possibility of the fame I offered you. Cole Travers, the man who saved Kaldry from anarchy, it seems like the very thing you would want to be remembered for.”

With that last veiled insult Daniel stalked out of the room, leaving Cole alone with Lunk and Allen. The warlock conspirator shot an aside glance at Lunk and the guardsmen left. Cole watched with vague amusement as Allen took the seat Daniel had vacated a moment earlier.

“You seem to have found the perfect proxy,” said Cole after several moments had passed. “So tell me now, what's stopping me from killing you right now?”
“A deal,” Allen replied. “You also want information, or at least Cormag believes you do, so until you get it, I am safe.”

“Ohh, so we are going to acknowledge that little detail? Hmphh.” Cole sat forward and looked directly into Allen's eyes. “I hope you are a convincing speaker, you'll need to be if you want to live.”

“Honestly, I don't understand why you are so angry Cole,” said Allen. “You above all people should know how easily people can be manipulated. We need someone like that and considering you've killed a few of my compatriots well, we need someone with some magical aptitude to replace them.”

“So, you are saying you have no magic at all?” Cole smiled and snapped his fingers causing cobalt flames blossom around his hand. “So, how do you prefer to die?”

“What purpose would my death serve?” Cole dismissed the flames and slumped back. “Daniel was right about you, you are entitled to a good deal of credit for what happened the other day. You just need to reach out and take it. At the same time there are many other things you could do instead.”

“Ahh, so this is all about power then?” Cole smirked. “Are we going to overthrow the queen and take Achland for our own?”

“Power is only a means to an end,” said Allen. “Besides, some plans are best left unformed.”

Cole sat forward. “So we are going to kill the queen! Brilliant! I can't wait to see how you deal with her guards, the army, Internal Intelligence, the Grey Watch. It'll be a party.”

“Why do you think we've started our operation in Kaldry, Cole?”

“You like the food.”

“Close, but no,” Allen smiled. “I know you've been hunting us for some time, but I doubt you have any idea of what we are truly trying to accomplish.”

“You want to start a war,” said Cole. “From that you will use to blood to power some form of ritual. Ohh, sorry, did you want to tell me all this, maybe in the form of a dramatic monologue?”

Allen stood up. “You have done a remarkable job Cole. Cormag was right about how smart you are, though you did miss some of the finer details. Blood is not the only thing that results from such atrocities. Death itself releases a good deal of energy.”

Cole scowled. “Now you sound like the Üruushians. Please tell me we are going to adopt their dismal philosophy, I look best in black.”

“Ohh Cole, if you only knew the extent of the powers we are tapping,” Allen licked his lips. “I cannot comprehend it, but from what Cormag tells me it’s intoxicating.” Allen's entire body shuddered, his lips forming each syllable of the word slowly and carefully. “One day I have been promised such power.”

Cole smiled, doing his best to hide how uneasy Allen was making him. The man spoke of power with an almost sexual reverence. Allen, so fully indoctrinated by the warlocks' dogma, was both sad and disturbing. Worse, the man's desire for power disturbed Cole, only because it was such a perfect reflection of his own desire.

Regardless of what emotions Cole felt towards Allen, it was clear the man was deceiving him, but he had revealed something important. In all their time together, Cormag had never shown any magical aptitude and yet just days ago he had fought Cole to a standstill. Whatever dark arts the warlocks were practising, they obviously had found a way to pierce the veil between reality and the formless nether of magic, a feat Cole had long believed only he was capable of performing. Allen had also revealed that Cormag had survived his encounter with the Consortium soldiers, a very valuable piece of information if there ever was one.

“Okay you've sold me! I'll work with you, but first I want a castle!”

“This is no joking matter,” Allen replied. “I'll let you stay here and mull it over Cole. Think on it, not only will you be able to claim the respect that should have been yours for years you will be able to claim power beyond rational thought. Imagine living and deceiving all those you hate and then one
day grinding them under heel. I also know a man by the name of Garret who would be very happy to see you.”

Allen turned and left Cole with his thoughts. Allen’s offer was certainly intriguing, especially since it would give him a clear shot at Garret, in addition to a great amount of power. Still, Allen spoke with a silvered tongue, and Cole had long ago learned to never trust a man who offered you power, but never told you of the cost. Before, the offer of power over his fellow man would have been enough for Cole, but after his time among the Selther, he found his desire to avenge those that the Consortium and by extent the warlocks had harmed was greater than his desire for power. Cole was just glad that Allen had confirmed his suspicions about other warlock cabals operating around the world.

After his meeting with Daniel and Allen, Cole noticed a sudden drop-off in the quality of his food. Weary of poisoning, Cole subjected the shrivelled steak they served him that day to a series of spells to reveal its physical make up. Thankfully, it seemed the men had only decided to nauseate him, instead of killing him outright. After reading through his notes for a fourth time, Cole found himself growing even more anxious. The Ronens had only barely prevented the warlocks from succeeding in their time, and they had been united against the threat posed by the cultists. Cole was one man, facing an unknown and shadowy enemy, whose dark designs he still did not fully comprehend.

Any day now Duke Lowell would be arriving, which meant the warlocks would strike soon. Cole only hoped that Fiona had been able to pull together some sort of welcoming for him, one that not only impressed the new Lord-Protector, but kept him safe. If Cormag was indeed still alive, it was likely he would lead any attack during the landing, and Cole knew of no weaver in Kaldry who could survive fighting his former friend.

The dreams Cole had in those days were some of the worst he had experienced since the end of the Felvian Incursion. Sometimes he was back in Felvia, back in that small apartment before everything went to hell. But now, Cormag was wearing his mask and robes, a reminder of what he had become. Sanyo also appeared there as well, becoming another ghost that Cole abandoned to the raving mob that pursued him. Those dreams now mingled with the fresh horrors of Rhutil and half-remembered parts of Cole’s childhood. Cormag was always there, a masked phantom, and a young boy, the friend that had kept Cole safe from the taunting and bullying he had endured as a child, and the hulking warlock who wanted to see the world destroy itself.

As Cole sat eating his fifth lunch, a pathetic sandwich and small salad, he heard a sound at the door. Intrigued, Cole folded up the notes he had been perusing and turned his chair about to face the door. It swung open as Lunk stepped in, followed by Fiona. The Colonel was dressed in a pristine white uniform, with dark red epaulettes, and dozens of medals pinned on her chest. In one hand, Fiona carried a suitcase Cole recognized as his own, while in the other she carried a stack of papers.

“Ahh, so you finally come to visit me,” said Cole with a wide smile. “Glad you could spare the time. I would have tidied the place up, but I didn’t know you were coming.”

Fiona did not return Cole’s smile, she simply sat, placing the folder on the table between them. “Glad to see that you recovered,” said Fiona as Lunk closed the door. “For a while there we feared the worst. Your shoulder did heal properly, yes?”

Cole rubbed the spot where Saniyya’s khukuri had shattered his collar bone. The entire bone itched, as did the skin, but whatever Cole did he could not get rid of the feeling. “Well enough, at least I can move it.” Cole took a sip from his teacup. The tea the Consortium had provided was very bitter, but it was better than nothing. “Where were you?”

“Ohh good, you’re going to berate at me as well.” Fiona pushed a strand of copper hair back behind her ear. “I was hoping that would happen.”

“We had an understanding Fiona, a plan.” said Cole. “Why was it that the Consortium responded to my call and not you?”
“Don't lay the blame on me Cole,” Fiona stated coldly. “Both of us are culpable for what happened. Sometimes we have to make certain judgement calls. While you've been gone the situation has changed. If I had not allowed Daniel to oversee the operation, the current political climate would be even more volatile. Daniel has continually challenged my command and seems to believe I am attempting to seize power. I provided him with the information you provided me as a show of good faith and as a means to smooth relations between the Consortium and the military.”

“Hundreds died as a result of that action,” said Cole.

“Yes and our stable relationship with the Consortium has been maintained,” Fiona replied. “According to the reports we also killed the Masked Prophet. Tell me, do you really think it would have been any different if I had been in command? There would have been bloodshed either way, at least this served a higher purpose by securing some form of peace between all the major political powers. For the first time in years the Consortium and the Ra'kala are not challenging the military's position.”

For a moment Cole considered pressing the point. He had already taken out a good deal of his anger on Daniel, but he had not purged himself entirely. Cole knew he could easily continue to harass Fiona, yet for some reason he didn't want to. Unlike everyone else, Fiona had never judged him on his actions in Felvia. Fiona had met Cole's anger with calm logic, instead of rebuking him for his actions.

“So, the slaughter was justified?”

“No,” Fiona sighed. “But it was necessary. You know that, I know that, and its just something we are going to have to live with. Our nation already does.”

Cole smiled thinly. “Yes...it does, doesn't? Perhaps one day we can move past all that. That is the reason for the Lord-Protector is it not? The Assembly wishes him to serve as a shepherd for the Kaldriens, to make them Achlish and raise them out of their savagery.”

“Well, we are doing an excellent job of that aren't we?” Fiona chuckled. “Sometimes I find it hard to see who the real savage is. Who is more civilized, the greedy conqueror or the spirited native who opposes him? Still, some of the Kaldriens have certainly benefited from our influence. The Ra'kala have accepted some of our culture, but can they truly become citizens?”

“I think that is a question for the politicians, debating empty psychological questions is something they do rather well.”

“Ohh, they do it very well and waste plenty of time in their debates,” Fiona replied. “As commander of all Achlish forces here, I am required to read transcripts of all Assembly gatherings pertaining to Kaldry. They fight endlessly about the people here. The Grand Chancellor seems to think it's our religious and civic duty to rule, like a parent, or some other type of guardian. Others feel we should be teachers, leaders, not lording our power over the Kaldriens, but trying to approach them as equals. Then we have the Consortium and those who are only interested in Kaldry for profit, there are plenty of opportunities for such things here.”

Cole sat forward and looked into Fiona's deep green eyes. “And what do you think?”

“I don't,” she replied. “I am a soldier, I have my orders.” Fiona slid the folder across the table towards Cole. “We all have our orders.”

Cole picked the folder up and opened it. The first page was blank. Cole licked his finger and turned it over and began to read. The second page was a detailed plan of the Lord-Protector's arrival, including his itinerary, and Fiona's plans for keeping him safe. Cole was troubled when he saw that Fiona had only appointed a token peacekeeping force to the city. Worse, the Consortium had only appointed a small fraction of their forces to the city, leaving the defence of the Lord-Protector solely on the shoulders of the military. The next page showed plans for the reception that would follow the landing and Cole continued flicking through the packet until he came to a single page of tattered parchment, written in what he assumed was Fiona's own hand. Cole's eyes zipped back and forth as he read over what Fiona had written.
“Ohh, you have been busy,” said Cole as he perused the plan Fiona had drawn up. “You've even involved Mr. Atkin, very clever.”

--Cole knew the motives behind Fiona's plan should have surprised him, but based upon current events they did not. Fiona had gathered evidence that the Consortium was not only stockpiling firearms, but that they were secretly supplying the Ra'kala. While Thomas had not been able to discover who in Achland was supporting the plot, Cole guessed that Allen was certainly involved. Fiona, along with Thomas, Ian, and several of the Ra'kala, had drafted a plan to detain Daniel and the rest of the Consortium's executives upon Duke Lowell's arrival, executing what Cole could only describe as a coup attempt to prevent a coup by the Consortium.

“Do you approve of our plan?”

Cole ignored Fiona and continued to read. The only part of the plan that he found odd was that Bhaskar and Mohan were colluding with Fiona. Cole would never have suspected either of them, especially Mohan who had seemed to only be concerned with his own agenda, to work with Fiona, but war often made for strange bed fellows.

“Everything appears to be in order,” said Cole. “Though how you persuaded Mohan to go along with these measures, I cannot fathom.”

“The election to the seat of High Vishen has gone against our friend,” Fiona explained. “Mohan wished to assist us as a show of good faith.”

“No doubt he wishes to find a seat on the Lord-Protector's council above the other Ra'kala,” Cole smiled. “Ahh the joys of political double-dealing.”

“You may wish to get dressed Mr. Travers,” Fiona handed Cole his suitcase. “The Lord-Protector's fleet shall be arriving within the hour.”

Cole opened the suitcase and stared at its contents. Inside was a simple pair of black slacks, a white dress shirt, and a fine dark jacket. Buried beneath these was a dark blue military trench-coat, crisply pressed with gold threaded seems and a starchly collar. Cole pulled the coat out and saw that a single silver medal hung upon the lapel. It was in the shape of a small plumed Phoenix, its claws clasping a stone meant to correspond to the actions for which it had been awarded. Cole's Phoenix clutched a small star shaped diamond, an honour only given to those who served with the highest distinction.

“I assumed it best you wore your Star of Sacrifice,” said Fiona. “Not many receive such an honour.”

“No they don't,” said Cole, looking at the medal with tears in his eyes. There was no way it could be the same one he had been awarded after his service in Felviar, that one was long lost, he had flung it away not long after receiving it. Hands trembling, Cole pulled the medal off of his lapel and flipped it over in his hand.

“Why are you removing it?” Fiona asked.

“I'm not,” Cole replied as he read the inscription. For my son, who served with bravery and honour. BT. Cole smiled at the medal for the first time and pinned it back on the coat's lapel. “How long has this been in your possession?”

“Several months,” Fiona stood up.

“Of course it has,” Cole replied. “Benedict always liked to plan ahead.” Lying bastard. How many months ahead has he planned? How much does he know? “I assume Benedict reviewed the packet you gave me?”

Fiona nodded. “The Grand General has been involved with almost every step of this process.”

“Oh course he has,” said Cole. “He always liked to stay on top of things. I shall dress and come out to meet you. We don't want to be late for the Lord-Protector's arrival now do we?”
Chapter 35

Fiona stood in the centre of New Thertan harbour, watching the Lord-Protector's white fleet sail into the bay. New Thertan, originally Hasel'an, was the greatest port in all of Kaldry. The first contact between Achlish explorers and the native Kaldriens had happened here and in the two centuries since, New Thertan had grown into a city that rivalled its namesake in size. The colonisation of Kaldry had started here and now New Thertan would be the site where that colonisation ended and the unification of two people began. No longer would Kaldry be just a colony, today it would become part of the Achlish Empire and her people would become Achlish citizens.

The Lord-Protector's fleet looked battered and from a rough count Fiona saw they had lost several ships, most likely to storms off the coast of eastern Ethenia. The ironclad steamers turned into Half Moon bay as a chorus of cheers and cannon shot greeted them. Twin fortresses, built along the arms of the bay unfurled the Achlish flag, letting it flutter in the light wind that swept over the bay. Fiona strode out onto a wide stone quay, Cole following close behind. Out in the harbour, a smaller steam boat uncoupled itself from its larger parent and began to speed across the crystal clear waters of Half Moon bay. Fiona preferred the bay's Kaldrien name, Sel'utheia, and thought that something was lost in the literal translation into Achlish.

"Make ready for the arrival!" Matthew shouted at a squad of six soldiers.

The men nodded and began to march along the dock behind Fiona, rifles at the ready. All the men, Fiona included, wore their military best, whites so bleached they were almost blinding. Fiona would have preferred a suit of Steam-armour, but that would have been improper.

Erik would have been in attendance, if not for a sudden uprising in the north. Bhaskar had requested aid and while Fiona was loath to provide especially since she needed the men here in New Thertan. Still she acquiesced to the Vishen's demands, especially since Achland needed all the allies amongst the Ra'kala it could manage. Bhaskar had proven himself loyal and Mohan had sworn to help, as long as Achland supported his bid to become High Vishen. Of course the Lord-Protector might very well do away with the Ra'kala entirely, but Fiona felt it best she not share that detail with Mohan.

"Three to each side of the dock," Fiona ordered.

The men fell into place as the small boat sped over the water, completing a lazy circuit around the semi-circular bay. Though there had been some rioting earlier in the day, the crowds had now settled down, for now. While the majority of New Thertan's population was Achlish citizens, hundreds of Kaldriens of every race, had been invited to welcome Duke George Lowell to the country. The entire welcoming part was nothing but a massive public relations stunt, as such everyone was on edge, but things had remained peaceful so far. Cole had expressed his belief that an attack was imminent and Fiona had to agree with the enigmatic Spellweaver's assessment.

The boat zipped around the bay, then banked slowly, before turning and heading for the dock. Blue and Silver pennants flapped on the boat's fore and aft runners and there was another blast of cannon fire as it slowed, coming in alongside the pier. The boat stopped and a moment later a ramp was thrown down over the side, hitting the stone with a loud thunk.

"Attention!" Fiona drew her sabre. "Company salute."

Sabre raised in front of her face, Fiona watched as a contingent of Achlish soldiers swarmed off of the ship, falling into neat ranks along the dock. The soldiers stood facing Fiona and her men as Duke George Lowell, Lord-Protector of Kaldry took his first step into the country. He was a tall man, with a bristly rust red moustache, dressed in khakis and a pith helmet.

"Welcome to Kaldry sir," said Fiona, her back erect, sabre held high.

"At ease Colonel," said George, flashing her a quick salute. His voice was squeaky, high pitched, not exactly the type of voice that commanded respect. "I thank you for your hospitality."
George turned to Cole. “Mr. Travers I have heard excellent things about you.”

“Thank you sir,” Cole replied, the two men shook hands quickly.

“I also heard several reports that you had died,” said George.

“Not yet,” Cole smiled. “I was simply snatched by a tribe of bloodthirsty savag...”

“Don’t use such petty insults,” George barked. “They are Kaldriens, soon to be Achlish subjects, not savages.”

“Of course,” Cole replied, clearly embarrassed. At the same time Fiona thought she a flicker of respect flash over Cole's angular features.

“INSPECTION!” Fiona shouted to her men, causing both Cole and George to snap to attention as well.

The men snapped their rifles up, barrels crossed. Duke Lowell passed by underneath them, not sparing the men a second glance. Fiona followed George through the thicket of rifles, while Cole and the soldiers who had arrived with the Duke brought up the rear. Together, Fiona and George marched along the quay, and then mounted the stairs. Children, both Achlish and Kaldrien, hung out of the buildings that lined the waterfront, furiously waving both countries' flags. As they walked, a band struck up “For Queen and Country”, the official march of the Achlish military. Horns blared and drums boomed as Kaldry welcomed its new Lord-Protector.

They left the waterfront, marched along several streets crammed with cheering crowds, and then stopped in the centre of a grand plaza. It had taken hundreds of man hours to scrub the plaza clean and a newly minted bronze statue, cast in the likeness of the Achlish Phoenix dominated the centre of the square, its wings arcing out over a raised podium. George marched up to the podium while a handful of soldiers motioned to a waiting crowd. Even though every member of the crowd had been thoroughly drilled upon the proceedings, Fiona could not help but feel somewhat nervous.

“Thank you for such a warm greeting, it is truly an honour to be here,” George said, his words swallowed up by the cheering crowd. As she looked about, Fiona spotted several people clearly working to keep them cheering. The crowd was so loud, that it was almost impossible to hear George speak. For a moment Fiona considered taking some sort of action, then she saw Cole weaving some spell in the air around the podium. “For too long has our Empire's heart has bled for Kaldry, but no longer. Today begins a new era of unity and prosperity for this nation as well as Achland.”

Cole's magic had amplified the Lord-Protector's voice, but Fiona still watched the crowd closely. For the most part those provoking the crowd to applaud and cheer where white Achlanders, but Fiona spotted several dark skinned Kaldriens of multiple races as well. She looked out to the edge of the plaza, where the crowd was pressing against the soldiers stationed there.

“Lovely ceremony isn't it?” Asked Allen as he stepped forward, right into Fiona's line of sight.

“Yes,” Fiona replied, craning her neck to the side to see past the Consortium aide. Those people were not cheering, in fact Fiona saw that they were screaming, jeering, and attacking the soldiers.

“It is good to see the people cheering for the Lord-Protector isn't?”

Fiona grabbed Hutchins’ rifle. Allen's placed his hand on Fiona's shoulder and she bashed him in the face with the rifle. Allen crashed to the ground, blood streaming out of his nose and running down into his goatee.

“Get the Lord-Protector down!” Fiona commanded, checking the Bryer-39 Auto-Loader to ensure Hutchins had loaded the magazine correctly. “You three with me!”

“But, today is not just about Achland,” George continued. “Together, we shall ensure prosperity for Kaldry. For many years I have laboured to bring peace and calm to some of the darkest territories in Ethenia. Now I shall endeavour to use that experience for your benefit and the good of this great nation.”

Fiona and her men ran towards the edge of the plaza and Cole fell in step with them.
“Something wrong?” He asked, a nimbus of indigo energy billowing around his right hand. “Looks like we might have some problems on the north side over there,” Fiona replied. Cole scowled. “This is going to be like Essar's funeral all over again,” he muttered. “Worse probably.”

George had brought plenty of men with him, but most were still out in the harbour, waiting till after the welcoming ceremony to disembark from their ships. Before Fiona and Cole could even reach the edge of the crowd, there was a flurry of gunfire, then the mob surged forward, trampling the soldiers holding them back. Fiona dropped to one knee and sighted down the rifle, firing two quick shots before standing and falling back.

The men Fiona had brought with her opened fire and she turned to see Hutchins guiding George off the podium. The Lord-Protector was shaking, but at least Hutchins had gotten him moving. The crowd had begun to scatter just as more armed Kaldriens, mainly kelvish, poured into the square. Unlike the rioters who had attacked during Essar's funeral, these Kaldriens were all armed with rifles, swords, and in several cases khukuris.

More gunfire split the air, and Fiona saw Cole conjuring up a series of indigo shields to deflect the worst of the barrage. Panicked citizens began to run about wildly, trampling each other in their haste to escape. Fiona signalled to Matthew and together the two cleared a path to Hutchins, calmly clearing out any attacker who got in their way. Cole followed close behind, fingers crackling with magical energy.

“This is bad,” said Hutchins. “Really, I hadn't noticed!” Cole shouted as more gunfire split the air. The Spellweaver whirled, hurling a flurry of magical bolts over his shoulder. “At least there aren't that many of them, maybe just a couple hundred.”

“What is the plan Colonel?” George asked calmly. The Lord-Protector was still visibly disturbed, but that did not affect his speech, and he spoke with composure that was oddly reassuring. “I assume we fall back?”

“Something like that,” Fiona glanced around, spotting a relatively clear alley off to their right. “Men, our mission is simple, escort the Lord-Protector from here to the barracks on Picket and Fleet. We'll head down that alley and then cut over to Union street. Move!”

Thomas glanced at his telethium for the third time, checking to ensure that everything was still on schedule. While not as large as Cole's telethium, or as embellished, Thomas had done a great deal more to personalize his, reworking the internals to include a stopwatch and several other mechanical minor tweaks. The entire back of the telethium was open, covered by a piece of glass. Thomas liked being able to see the inner gears and springs of the telethium. By now, he was so familiar with how every piece interacted, that he didn't even need to open the telethium to check the time.

The Lord-Protector would be landing any moment now and his arrival would no doubt draw a good amount of attention away from the party that had been arranged for him. Countess Amelia had volunteered her own house for the reception and now dozens of Achland's finest mingled about in her garden, chatting idly as they waited for the Lord-Protector to arrive. The tension between Fiona, the Consortium, and the Ra'kala had abated somewhat, but it was better to be sure Daniel would not interfere, then to suffer the consequences later.

“Are you sure you are carrying enough gadgets?” Ian asked as he and Thomas walked through the courtyard.

Thomas was indeed carrying a good deal more than Ian, but the difference was everything he carried was concealable, more or less. In addition to his revolver, Thomas also had his sword-cane, a spring-clip holster concealing a nine shot hold-out pistol up his left sleeve, and a stripped down
Grappler gauntlet on his right arm. Thomas had removed most of the Grappler's armouring, including the actual gauntlet, but it would still function.

A series of cables now ran down Thomas' right hand, wrapping around his fingers, while the palm mounted shocker floated free in the centre of his hand. It wasn't perfect, but from a distance it was not too noticeable. The hardest part had been figuring out how to conceal the actual pulleys and launching apparatus. Thomas had solved that by breaking the device down further, then stretching it out along his upper arm, shoulder, and back.

“You can never have too many,” Tomas replied with a wink. “Besides, don't you think you’re being a little conspicuous with that holstered on your back.”

“I don't go anywhere without Gertrude,” Ian patted his rifle. It was a beautiful gun, a Matherson High-Cal, all dark wood and steel, sporting the latest innovations, scopes, and a cylindrical drum magazine that held a minimum of fifty rounds.

As Thomas crossed the garden he spotted Cyril, a small red feather stuck in the side of his emerald turban, chatting with their host Amelia of North Haverton. The plump lady continued to natter on, while Cyril shot Thomas a quick smile and tapped the sword belted at his waist. Thomas nodded back. Ian tapped Thomas on the shoulder and pointed to where Helen stood with Armel and Kishan. If things turned bloody, keeping Helen safe was of the utmost importance. Together Thomas and Ian began to make their way towards Daniel, who was deeply engaged in conversation with several southern Ra’kala lords including Mohan. Cyril fell in step behind Thomas and Ian, while Daniel turned to face them.

“Ahh gentlemen, so glad you could join us,” Daniel smiled. “Ian, still going armed I see. Nothing will happen here, I can assure you of that.”

Thomas cleared his throat. “Chief Administrator, if I might ask you to step away for a moment, Ian and I would like to discuss a rather delicate matter with you.” As Thomas spoke, he saw the Consortium guardsmen who patrolled the roofs slowly begin to turn towards him. During his tour of duty in Felviar, Thomas had developed an innate danger sense and now that it was screaming at him, telling him to run. He had to get Daniel out of the open now, or something very bad would happen “If you would please step away with us for a moment we could....”

“You are going to arrest me are you not?” Daniel glanced around at the crowd.

“Yes,” Thomas replied. “Under the authority of Colonel Walsh we are going to detain you. This is not an arrest, merely a precautionary measure. The Colonel feels you have become a liability and evidence has come to light about unscrupulous dealings between Consortium and several undisclosed buyers. Specifically the stockpiling and sale of munitions, which puts you in breach of your operating contract with the Crown, and at odds with the Third Proclamation.”

“Ohh, I see,” said Daniel. Thomas had expected the man to at least be surprised, but instead Daniel sounded almost apologetic. “Well, I am very sad things ended this way, I had rather hoped they wouldn't.”

Before Thomas could even respond, Mohan drew a pistol from his jacket and shot Cyril point blank. The small man let out a single tired gasp and looked down to see blood darkening his fine shirt. Ian responded immediately, levelling his rifle at Mohan's chest. The party-goers screamed as a host of Consortium guardsmen forced their way through the crowd.

“You fookin' bastard you sold us out,” Ian primed the lever action of his rifle and placed the barrel to Mohan's temple. “Gimme one good reason I shonnit shoot you now.”

The click of a dozen rifles answered Ian. “Because if you do shoot him, you die,” Daniel replied with smug satisfaction as two guards pressed the points of their bayonets into Ian's back, while a third did the same to Thomas.

“Ohh, you wanna take that beat eh?”
Ian struck first, whipping Gertrude off his back and clubbing both men with the butt of the rifle as he swung it around. Ian opened fire, and Thomas spun, placing his palm against the third man's chest. Even stripped down, the Grappler-Gaunlet discharged several hundred volts straight into the man's torso and tossed him back. The guard collapsed, writhing and twitching, while Ian pointed Gertrude at the men who had appeared on the edge of the roof. Ian opened fire just, as Daniel shoved Mohan at Thomas and fled through the panicking guests. Thomas whipped out his revolver, intending to shoot the Administrator, but could not get a clear shot. The guards on the ground brought their rifles to bear. Thomas fired first, crippling or disabling as many as he could. Thomas and Ian stood back to back, guns roaring as they held off the Consortium assault.

“We're going to need to find some sort of cover you know,” said Thomas. He spotted Mohan fleeing between a group of guardsmen and without thinking, he shot the traitor cleanly through the calf. Mohan collapsed, screaming, as blood gushed from his wound.

“Ohh come on now lad, you really think there are enough of them to stop us?” Acting as one Ian and Thomas spun around. Gertrude spat hot death at the onrushing Consortium guards, while Thomas scanned the rooftops, ensuring they would not be caught in a cross fire.

Thomas spotted a guardsmen running along the edge of the roof, clutching a tripod mounted machine gun. Thomas clenched his fingers and the bolt-thrower attached to his forearm fired, tearing apart his sleeve. The cable screeched as the bolt flew through the air, punching straight through the Consortium guard's thigh. Thomas tapped at the Grappler's controls and the cable to snapped taut. He jerked his hand back and ripped the Guardsmen off the roof. The man tumbled back, letting out a short, loud scream, before he crashed to the ground.

“I'd wager a couple hundred...maybe.”

“BWAHAHA! THAT'S THE SPIRIT!!” Ian bellowed, continuing to fire with reckless abandon. “Now we just need to find Helen!”

“THOMAS!” Armel screamed as he dashed across the courtyard. “They took Helen!”

Thomas looked up, following the elf boy's upraised hands. Mohar, Mohan's son, and a group of Rankalan soldiers were dragging Helen away, followed closely by Daniel and Satesh. The young princess struggled furiously and struck Mohar several times but the young man simply ignored them. More Consortium soldiers rushed into the courtyard and Armel drew a dagger he had secreted away. The elf boy tossed the dagger, while Thomas fired on the oncoming soldiers.

There was a break in the gunfire inside the residence and the trio of men darted around a corner, taking cover on the veranda. Thomas drew in a deep breath, then he heard the sound of gunfire coming from some other part of New Thertan. The lower castes had attacked and Thomas only hoped Fiona and Cole were prepared.

* * *

“You know, I am really beginning to wonder about your rank,” said Cole, summoning another shield of shimmering blue energy around himself. Bullets careened off the shield, then Cole ducked out and fired several bolts of magic back at his attackers, aiming to disable instead of kill. “Really Fiona, one would think a Colonel would command more than twenty or thirty men in a time of crisis, yet I only ever see you fighting alongside a handful of soldiers.”

“I will gladly leave you behind,” said Fiona, before she turned and fired off a round of suppressive fire at the mob that thundered down the street.

“I would rather we don't leave him,” quipped George.

Cole smiled and followed Fiona's men around a corner. Originally the Lord-Protector and his escort were to board a Steam-mobile, then ride through New Thertan on a site seeing tour. The mob had prevented that, so now Cole, Fiona, and her men were cutting across the city, doing their best to keep George alive. The flight had proven difficult, especially since all the soldiers were only wearing their
dress uniforms, instead of the hundreds of pounds of armour they normally wore into battle. So far they had avoided any major casualties, but young Corporal Hutchins had taken a shot in the shoulder. It was only a superficial wound, but the Corporal complained continuously.

A pair of Spitfires whizzed by overhead, as the group dashed down a narrow alleyway. The gale created by the airships' rotors buffeted them and caused Cole's trench-coat to billow out behind him in a dramatic fashion. The screams of the mob reverberated off the walls of the alley and Cole could hear their footfalls approaching, drawing ever closer.

“Good to finally see our boys,” Hutchins shouted over the din.

“Those aren't our boys,” Fiona replied darkly. Cole looked up and saw that she was right. The gunships were painted in the red and gold of the Consortium, not the blue and silver of the Achlish military.

They continued to run down the twisting, labyrinthine alleys of New Thertan. The going was slow and several times they had to loop back to avoid a large pack of kelvish freedom fighters. For now, they were running along parallel to Pickett and Fleet street, but up ahead Cole could see that the alleyway forked suddenly.

“Which way?” Matthew asked. Behind them they could hear the angry shouts of the pursuing mob.

Fiona chewed on her lip for a moment. “Cole and I will take the Lord-Protector down to the right and hopefully out onto Fleet street. The rest of you to the left, try and buy us sometime.”

“I've always wanted to die valiantly,” Hutchins muttered.

Freed from their escort, the trio moved quicker, dashing to the right, before emerging out onto Fleet street. They had only gone one block, yet Cole saw no Kaldriens, but the reason for that was clear. Fleet street had been bombed into oblivion. Crumbling buildings spilled out into the street, crushing hundreds in the rubble, while several fires still sputtered along the street, throwing out dark clouds of smoke that obscured their vision. There were dozens of twisted Kaldrien corpses laying in the ruins, but Cole also spotted several Achlish soldiers, and even the bloated corpse of an elephant. Clearly the air support had not been concerned with identifying friend or foe.

“How much longer?” George wheezed.

“Not far,” Fiona answered. Up ahead Cole could see the silhouette of a fully armoured soldier walking down the destroyed avenue. “Just a few more blocks and we're there.”

“Smashing!” George replied.

As they drew closer, Cole saw that the soldier was not alone, there was another man with him. Another Spitfire buzzed by overhead, scattering the haze. Cole stopped, watching as Jenkins and Allen casually walked towards them.

“Colonel Walsh!” Allen called out, waving his hands over his head. Fiona stopped dead, while Allen and Jenkins continued their approach. “So good to see you and the Lord-Protector are unharmed.”

“Good of you to come out to escort us,” Fiona shouted back. Out of the corner of his eye Cole saw Fiona readjust her grip on her rifle.

“If you would kindly lower your weapon Colonel, we shall escort you back to the base” Allen's tone was pleasant, but his eyes were cold. “Once there, you shall be placed under arrest for treason and conspiracy to breach the treaty of 1804, drafted to ensure fair dealings between the Consortium and Achlish military forces.” A muscle in Fiona's jaw began to twitch, but she did not lower her rifle. For a moment no one moved.

“And if I refuse?” Fiona asked.

“Colonel Jenkins, shoot her.”

The thunder of Jenkins' rifle was like that of a cannon and Cole had only scarce seconds to
finish his weaving. The high calibre rounded slammed into Fiona with enough force to fling her back and over a pile of rubble. Behind him, Cole could feel George flinch and draw back from the Consortium Colonel who had just murdered Fiona.

“So is he to kill us next?” Cole asked voice dripping with contempt.

“No,” Cormag replied as he stepped out from the narrow mouth of a collapsed store-front “That job is reserved for another.”
Chapter 36

No one spoke as Cormag, the self-styled Masked Prophet of Kaldry, calmly strode out into the open. Flames flickered in the eye holes of his blank white mask and he left burning footprints in his wake. For one wild moment, Cole thought the hulking metal behemoth that was Jenkins might turn to fire upon Cormag. Instead the Consortium Colonel merely turned his back and began to walk away.

Jenkins had only gone a dozen paces before Cole heard the click of a grenade. The small sphere popped up from behind a pile of rubble, tumbling end over end, before striking Jenkins in the chest and exploding. The explosion was not large enough to damage the Steam-armour to any great degree, but it did cause Jenkins to stagger back. Quick as lightning, Fiona burst out from behind the rubble, her sabre painted red by the light of the grenade's explosion.

“Run!” Cole shouted.

Fireballs flew through the air, as Cole and George dashed down the street, away from the safety of the barracks. For a moment, Cole hoped Cormag was simply missing, but it was more likely that the pyromancer was just toying with them. Even so, Cole extended the protective wards he maintained around himself and wrapped them around George. Stretched in this way, the wards would not save them from a direct assault, but it would protect them from the most basic hazards.

“Bloody hell,” George swore. “Is Allen off his head?”

“Yes,” Cole panted as he reached around to make sure Saniyya's khukuri was still sheathed at his back. Cole had brought the blade with him never expecting he would need it, but now, he thought it a fitting weapon with which to kill Cormag.

“Why would he want me dead?”

Cole chuckled, “if we live I'll explain it you!”

As if on queue, a ring of fire blossomed up around them. Acting on reflex, Cole projected several barriers around himself and George. He expected the ring to slowly close in, but it did not. Instead, it simply trapped the two men in the middle of the street. A dark shape appeared through the flames and then they parted, revealing Cormag in all his glory.

“You may wish to start explaining then,” Cormag taunted. “I don't believe the Lord-Protector will be alive much longer and I don't wish that such a noble man should be left wondering why he must die.”

Cole struck first, using the dancing shadows cast by Cormag's flames to create a thicket of shadowy spears. The spears twisted about like snakes, their indigo tips glistening. Cormag darted to the side, avoiding the razor sharp shadows as they drilled into the ground where he had stood. The spears pierced the stone with ease, then rebounded and hurtled back towards Cormag. The warlock responded by lobbing a fireball at Cole, causing his concentration to break and the shadow spears to dissolve. Cole rolled to avoid the fireball, doing his best to split his concentration between himself and the Lord-Protector. George had shrunk back, away from the fighting, hiding behind a pile of rubble at the edge of the flaming ring, but he was still in danger.

*   *   *

Armel ducked back behind the pillar as another hail of bullets tore the marble apart. He, Ian, and Thomas had only narrowly escaped Amelia's residence and were now pinned down outside the Hall of Justice. The courthouse, its front façade done up in an old Ronic style, would have allowed them to slip through the interior and then out onto a back street, if it had been open. Instead, the heavy door was locked and Armel had been unable to conjure up the necessary magic to open it.

“You should have let me go after them,” Ian shouted, before he ducked out from behind a pillar and fired on the Consortium guards who had taken cover across the square. “We need to go back for Helen.”
“You would have died,” Thomas replied as he shot one of their attackers in the knee. The Consortium guardsman toppled forward, crashing to the stone, before Ian shot him in the head.

“We still should have gone after her,” Armel’s voice broke, suddenly shooting up several octaves.

“Don’t be getting any fool notions boy,” Ian muttered. He continued to fire on their attackers, driving the Consortium men back into cover. “Firstly your an elf, which means you’ve got absolutely no business trying to woo her. If that wasn't bad enough you’re not exactly a noble now are you? Not that either of those things matter to me.”

There was a clatter of footsteps from around the side of the building and Armel turned just as Kishan rounded the corner. The Kaldrien boy slammed into Armel and they fell down.

“ARMEL!” Thomas screamed.

Armel struggled to disentangle himself from Kishan, watching as a group of Consortium soldiers came tearing around the corner. Thomas turned, but Armel was quicker. The elf boy threw his hands out and drew in a deep breath, watching the colours that swirled through the air. With a simple flick of his wrist, Armel redirected the shifting colours. The sudden gale swept through the air, tossing several of the soldiers into the air. Drawing deep from his magic, Armel created a screaming vortex of wind and used it to sweep the remaining Consortium guards off the walk way.

One of the guardsmen on the ground raised his rifle and opened fire. Armel, feeling the change in the air, wove the winds in closer around himself, drawing speed and strength from his magic. Time slowed and Armel watched the bullet as it tore through the air, scattering the multitude of colours off in every direction. Armel redoubled his efforts, forming a solid wall of rushing wind around him. The whistling winds swatted the bullet away, sending it sailing into a wall. He whirled his arms around, hands releasing the tight band of winds that swirled around him.

The wind tore down the streets, flinging several Consortium guards out into the open. Ian and Thomas responded in tandem, quickly killing or crippling the men Armel had exposed. The exertion had drained Armel, and he collapsed into Thomas’ arms.

“Wow,” Kishan exclaimed. “You have GOT to teach me to do that!”

Armel smiled weakly, “shut up Kishan.”

Together the four of them dashed down the now cleared street, heading towards the waterfront. More Consortium guards swarmed down the street, firing as they came. Ian ducked into an open doorway, providing Armel and Kishan with covering fire. Kishan dove forward, while Armel simply ran, ducking around piles of rubble in an attempt to break enemies' line of sight.

“We need to get out of here before we are overwhelmed,” said Ian.

“We need a plan,” Thomas shouted from the opposite side of the street, before ducking behind an upturned cart. A Consortium soldier poked his head around the corner and Thomas fired a single round, blowing a chunk out of the masonry above the man.

Even though he had mastered some of his magic, Armel still felt relatively helpless. He couldn't shoot, and most of the magic he had mastered wasn't exactly lethal. He could attempt something, but he wasn't sure how far he could push his talents. Worse, Armel feared that if he were to conjure a fireball or some other dramatic effect he might lose control of it and hurt Thomas, Kishan, or Ian.

“I'm open to suggestions,” Ian glanced down the street. “Seems clear out that way, we could make a break for the harbour.”

“Maybe,” Thomas replied, but Armel could barely hear him. A Spitfire tore through the air overhead, drowning out much of their conversation. The rotor-craft hovered over the courthouse for a moment before turning back towards them.

“Ohh that's not fair,” Ian muttered. “Gertrude is not going to be able to punch through armour that thick!”
“Maybe she doesn't have to,” Thomas said while he rolled up his sleeve, freeing the stripped down Grappler-Gaunlet he wore. “Armel, think you can disrupt that thing's air stream for a moment when it passes by again?”

“Maybe...I think,” Armel replied, using magic to make himself heard over the roaring rotors. “I'll just need a few seconds,” Thomas shouted, before he stepped out into the open.

Armel drew in another deep breath and turned his eyes skyward. The Spitfire's air-stream was a swirling tempest of colour and for a moment Armel could not decide on the best way to stop it. The ship was nearly on top of them, when Armel decided that he would simply reverse the direction the air flowed as it was sucked up into the rotor. It only took a simple touch and the winds reversed, causing the Spitfire to nose down suddenly.

* * *

Thomas had not been entirely sure what Armel would do, but he had not exactly been counting on Armel trying to crash the Spitfire. Even as the ship dipped down, Thomas flexed his right hand and the Grappler-Gaunlet fired. Armel had calmed the winds around the airship and Thomas' shot was perfectly placed. The bolt punched through the railing above the Spitfire's loading door. Thomas tapped the controls on the gauntlet and the gears groaned as he was hauled up into the air.

Thomas swung about wildly, as the Spitfire began to climb again. The cable whirred as he was pulled up next to the airship's sealed sliding door. Thomas dangled outside of the craft as it spun about. Using his own momentum, Thomas managed to catch hold of the door and haul it open. He swung inside, detaching the cable just as the Spitfire finished spinning in place. With a sharp twist of his wrist, Thomas engaged the spring works of his holster and the hold-out pistol emerged into his hand. He crept forward into the craft and levelled the pistol at the pilot.

“Hands off the controls now,” Thomas ordered.

“Belay that,” said a voice. Thomas felt something sharp poke into his back. “What do you....Thomas?”

“Matthew?” Thomas turned around. “Bloody hell, what are you doing here?”

“Trying to find the Lord-Protector,” answered Lawrence, taking his hands off the Spitfire's flight stick so he could glare at Thomas. The rotor-craft nosed down and Lawrence corrected their flight path. “You attacking us is not exactly helping.”

“Is Cole with him?”

“He was the last time I saw them,” Matthew replied. “Those your men down there?” Thomas nodded. “Lawrence pick them up. We were part of the Lord-Protector's escort, but we got separated. We made it to the base, but the Consortium attacked us. We stole the ship, though Lawrence volunteered to come along, and now we are trying to find the Colonel.”

The Spitfire settled down to the ground and Ian, Armel, and Kishan dashed inside. The airship lifted off slowly, just as a squad of Consortium guards opened fire on them. Lawrence clicked his tongue and turned back towards the gunmen. He smiled as he squeezed the trigger and the main cannon boomed, blasting the Consortium troops into a bloody smear on the ground.

“How many men can this thing carry?” Thomas asked.

“Ten?” Lawrence shrugged. “We'll see I guess. I could use a copilot.” Thomas dropped into the seat next to Lawrence and took control to the Spitfire's touchy central rotor. “Next stop, picking the Lord-Protector up out of what is no doubt heavy fire. Ohh this day just gets better and better.”

* * *

Fiona was not a fool, she had worn a full protective jerkin under her dress uniform. The jerkin, reinforced with both magic and several ceramic plates, was designed to absorb the force of small arms fire, but still leave its wearer's mobility intact. It was not designed to absorb anti-armour rounds though and Fiona knew that Cole's quick thinking and even faster spellwork was the only reason she was still
Fiona danced around Jenkins, sabre flashing as it sliced at the thick metal of his Steam-armour. Jenkins whirled about, trying to crush Fiona, but she jumped back out of the way. With the weight of Jenkins' Armour, even a glancing blow from one of his fists would be lethal and so Fiona had to fight evasively. At first, she had hoped she might be able to cripple Jenkins and then pursue Allen, but it seemed someone had reinforced the man's Armour, removing the weaknesses she had hoped to exploit. Instead, the fight dragged on, with Fiona doing her best to stay in close with Jenkins. If she backed off or gave him any opening he would undoubtedly open fire again, then she would die.

“You can't win,” Jenkins taunted. He swung again and Fiona rolled to the side, reaching for another grenade. She had found the grenades by sheer luck on the body of a dead soldier crushed beneath the rubble and now she intended to use them for all they were worth.

“We'll see who's left standing,” Fiona replied. She ducked under another of Jenkins' wide swings and hacked at several exposed tubes along the Armour's right arm. While the Steam-armour provided Jenkins with a good deal of protection, it also slowed his movements and made him clumsy. Fiona would never be able to outlast him, but she could hopefully do enough damage to the Armour to cause it to malfunction. Better to say ‘she hoped she could do enough, etc . . ‘ rather than use the word ‘hopefully’…

Sparks flew as Fiona dragged the sabre along the back of Jenkins leg. The sabre, its edge kept impossibly sharp by a series of spells woven into its scabbard, easily parted the weaker metal of the suit's calf. She arced the blade up, slicing into the Armour's rubber coolant tubes. White smoke billowed out and Fiona retreated. Jenkins blundered about, wildly flinging his arms in hopes of blindly striking her.

Fiona pressed the attack again, cutting through several more coolant tubes. By now, Jenkins was completely consumed by the billowing white cloud. Fiona smirked and plunged the sabre straight into Jenkins' back, ripping into the suit's internal structure. She stepped back, ready to hurl a grenade into the hole, then one of Jenkins' forearm slammed into her.

Fiona was tossed into the air and she released her sabre, cradling her head in her arms, before she struck the ground. She rolled to a stop and was on her feet again in seconds. Fiona turned around just as Jenkins burst out of the cloud. His Armour was scorched and he moved somewhat slower, but he still came on, rushing the now weapon less Fiona. Jenkins leaped into the air, his armoured fist glimmering in the light of a dozen small fires.

BOOM!

Jenkins was hurled backwards through a wall. Fiona stood and found Hutchins standing with one foot on the barrel of a long nosed artillery cannon.

“What did I tell you about walking into traps Commander!” Hutchins shouted. Jenkins stumbled out of the wreckage and Hutchins bent down, firing the cannon a second time.

The shot missed the Consortium Colonel by a narrow margin and he rushed towards them. Bullets careened off his Armour and Fiona turned to see Matthew and the rest of her men running towards her down Fleet Street, guns blazing. Matthew tossed Fiona a rifle and together they opened fire. Jenkins lifted his arm to shield himself and began to slink off, trying to escape the blistering field of fire that Fiona and her men were laying down. Hutchins fired again, collapsing part of a building on Jenkins.

“That probably won't stop him for long,” Hutchins muttered. Fiona nodded and they began to run down the street.

“You know where the Lord-Protector is?” Matthew asked. They turned down an alley and Matthew waved to someone on the rooftop.

“He's with Cole,” Fiona replied.
The explosion rippled down the alley and Fiona flung her arms up to shield her head. A building behind them shuddered, then collapsed, blocking the alleyway behind them. As the dust settled, Fiona looked up and saw Thomas drop down off the roof.

“Hello Colonel,” said Thomas. “Sorry we were a touch late.”

“It's fine,” Fiona replied with a smile. “Right now we need to find Cole. He fled with the Lord-Protector back down the street with the Masked Prophet in pursuit.”

“Well then, I guess we should find them quickly,” said Hutchins. “Really, how hard can it be to find one insane masked man? We just follow the flames right?”

“You just destroyed the only way to follow him though,” Fiona pointed out.

“Ohh don't worry,” Thomas replied. “We won't be going back that way. We have something a bit more elegant in mind.”

Cole and Cormag continued to clash, the results of their weavings tearing great gaping wounds in the ground. So far, Cole had managed to hold his own and keep the Lord-Protector safe. Every time Cormag pressed the attack Cole would place himself between the two men, conjuring walls of energy to negate Cormag's attacks. Still, Cole was beginning to tire.

“You can't keep this up Cole,” Cormag called, a jet of fire shooting from his palm.

Cole drew a shell of protective energy around himself. The flames enveloped him, flowing around the shield like water flowing around a rock. Cole flung his arms out, hurling the flames away and then fired several bolts of energy at Cormag. The warlock simply held his hand up, causing the bolts to scatter away from him.

“I will keep this up as long as necessary,” Cole spat, directing a wave of shadow towards Cormag. “You will not kill this man.”

Cormag leaped into the air as shadowy tentacles burst up out of the ground, futilely grasping at his feet. The air around Cole suddenly grew hot, but he had long since learned to counter Cormag's attack. Cole pulled the displaced cold air back around himself and simply threw it against the heat Cormag had manipulated. Instead of an explosion of ice, the heat simply faded.

The warlock landed heavily on the ground, but before the man had fully gained his feet, George drew his side arm and fired. Cormag's hand snapped up and he snatched the bullet out of the air.

“MWAHAHA, you think simple bullets can harm a Prophet of the people?!”

“You are nothing but a false demagogue,” Cole shouted back. Flames rippled over Cormag's hand, melting the bullet to slag.

“And what are you if not the same. You fight to preserve Achland, yet you have nothing but scorn for her people.” Cormag flung the liquefied metal to the ground, causing the stone to bubble and froth. “Why fight to preserve a culture that despises you?”

The Masked Warlock began to stalk towards the Lord-Protector and Cole placed himself between the two. In the shadows of a ruined building, Cole thought he saw someone running about. He had an inkling of who was stalking through the shadows, so he reached out to touch her mind. Instead of simply touching her thoughts, Cole alerted the woman to his presence, causing her to flinch. In that moment he felt a sudden burst of pure blue joy, quickly shunted away behind a wall of red rage. Hidden amongst the warring emotions was a small sliver of golden emotion that those of a romantic mind would call love, and those of a scientific, sexual desire. She drew back and Cole wove the shadows up around her to shielding her from view. Before breaking the contact, Cole sent one simple command.

“Wait.”

Cormag attacked again, conjuring a river of magma up out of the bubbling ground and sending it flowing down the street. Shadows writhed at Cole's command, wrapping around George and hauling him up off the ground, while another torrent of shadows fought to hold the roiling magma at bay.
“Well, it would seem we are at an impasse,” said Cormag, he released the magic and allowed the magma to cool. “Tell me Cole, have you given any thought to Allen's offer?”

“Why would I even bother?” Cole did not trust Cormag and so kept George dangling several feet off the ground.

“Because, it was offered in good faith,” said Cormag. “Remember how I said the Lord-Protector's life was not mine to take? It is yours Cole!”

“That is your great offer?” Cole laughed. “Here I thought you might actually attempt to convince me!”

“Really now, why should I even need to convince you,” Cormag replied. “Cole, look around you, do you think this was hard? Allen barely had to act in order to get Daniel to perform the way we wanted him to. My job was harder yes, but even so it was easy for me to fan the flames of hate. Mortals by their nature are bloodthirsty creatures.” Cole charged and the two foes clashed again, lobbing spells back and forth. “Look at Felviar, the elves kill each other over vaguely defined ideals of perfection and when they get enough of that, they go out and kill everyone else. Achland is no better. Look what happened here in this country, all in the name of prosperity, look at the thousands who have died. Achland is soaked in the blood of millions.”

“So you are doing justice?” Cole fired several bolts of energy at his enemy.

Cormag swatted Cole's attack aside and continued on unperturbed. “There is no justice in this world Cole. You know that better than most. Look what happened to us in Felvia. I know you have not forgotten it. You must be tortured by it, the hatred must fester inside of you. Manipulation, warmongering, the world is a place of depravity. Perhaps you require a personal example though, if so look to Benedict. The man has used you from the beginning. Why hide what we did in Felviar? The elves would not care, yet he is the reason our people hate and despise you. He is the reason no one knows the truth! The crimes and sins of mortals are a ringing clamour, condemning us all before that which is unknowable! You cannot deny the horrors of this world!”

“No, I cannot,” Cole conceded, troubled by the implications of Cormag's words. He had often wondered why Benedict and those privy to the information regarding the information Felviar had never made it public knowledge. Cormag was correct in saying the elves would not care, but Cole did not have time to dwell on the past, he needed to stay in the present. “The world is a twisted brutal place, but who are you to condemn it?”

“I could ask the same of you Cole,” Cormag replied. “You are a hypocrite. You judge the world as worthless, yet you still desire the praise of the people. You don't want to save them, you want them to worship you! You support a corrupt regime that preaches peace, yet slaughters millions

“Is the violence you incite no less reprehensible?” asked Cole, brushing off Cormag's taunts. The warlock was right, in a way, but he was also horribly wrong. If he was to admit the real reason he continued to struggle, it would reveal a weakness he himself could not accept. If he were to admit, that deep down, he still had some hope for the world, he knew his spirit would break. Cynicism had become Cole's armour and he could never remove it.

“I do not hide behind a veneer of false intentions,” replied Cormag. “Unlike the violence you incite, my carnage has a purpose, and the energy released shall be combined with the proper rites. The sleepers shall awake and this world shall finally learn that its actions have consequences they cannot fathom. I had so hoped you would turn from your corrupt path, but it seems I may have to turn to baser means of persuasion. Tell me Cole, do you not wonder what happened to your friend Sanyo? Our ritual needs Spellweavers Cole, and the kelf has proven quiet powerful. He might survive the process, we need not sacrifice him. Join us Cole and I can release Sanyo to you.”

Saniyya burst out of the shadows that Cole had drawn around her, dressed in the same scaled armour tunic she had been wearing when Cole first met her. The boiled leather and flexible copper
scales would not stop bullets, but at least she it was more than she normally wore. The kelvish woman screamed as she leaped through the air, drawing the Terror-pede blade from its sheath across its twin on her back. Saniyya impaled Cormag with the blade, driving it deep into his chest. Cole released George and the man turned to flee, before a wall of fire sprouted up, once again blocking the street.

“You always had a good deal of anger Saniyya,” Cormag wheezed. “It makes you strong yes, but it also leaves you vulnerable.”

Flames exploded out from underneath Cormag's robe and Saniyya was flung back. Cormag spun about, conjuring a whip of flame wreathed in electricity, and snapped it at Cole. Saniyya tumbled through the air, before landing in a light crouch, her feet spread wide. Cole batted Cormag's assault aside, his hands consumed by a rippling nimbus of energy. He turned to say something to Saniyya, but was cut off as she charged him, weapons suddenly appearing in her hands.

Cole reached back and drew the khukuri he had secreted at there. He divided his attention between Saniyya and Cormag, throwing up a wall of energy to block the warlock's assault, while at the same time, thrusting out the khukuri out to meet Saniyya's attack. Lightning bolts, arching flames, and indigo shadows, exploded around Cole and Saniyya as the two fought. From somewhere far off to his right, Cole thought he could hear the drone of a rotor-craft, but he shut it away, focusing all his attention on keeping himself alive. He slashed the khukuri down, and Saniyya wheeled to the right, dark hair whipping through the air as she reached for her second Terror-pede blade. Saniyya caught Cole's attack with her second blade, turned it to the side, and then locked her blade around his. Cole's khukuri was wrenched out of his hand, just as Cormag shattered the scintillating wall of sapphire energy.

Saniyya slashed the Terror-pede blade down and Cole ducked to the side, batting away another fireball that Cormag had hurled in his direction. The magical attack was weak and when Cole looked he saw that Saniyya's blade was still deeply lodged in the warlock's chest. Saniyya darted around Cole and ran towards the Lord-Protector, khukuri raised and ready. Cole poured all of his energy into erecting a shield between him and Cormag, then whirled, grabbing Saniyya by the shoulder.

“Do not hurt him,” Cole screamed at the warrior woman. Saniyya whirled, khukuri whistling through the air. He caught the blade in his open palm, the swirling nimbus of energy protecting his hand from harm. He knew he could easily reach out take control of Saniyya's mind. It would be a simple thing, to violate her thoughts and cause her anger to collapse, but he did not. “Do not kill this man.”

“What right do you have to give such an order?” Saniyya snarled.

“No right,” Cole replied. Saniyya continued to force the khukuri down and Cole could feel it slicing into his palm. “I simply wish him to live.”

“And what happens then?”

“Change,” Cole hissed, only vaguely aware of the winds that whipped around them. “This man has come here to help my people repent for their sins. I have no way to know if he will uphold the oaths that he has taken, but I would like to believe he will.” Cole could feel tears welling up in his eyes and he knew he wasn't only speaking about George, but about himself as well. Out of the corner of his eye Cole saw Cormag launch another fireball at them. “Let this man live and never again will two children be driven from the burning ruin of their home, never knowing the fate of their parents.”

“Why should I trust you?” The wall of energy Cole had erected shattered.

“Because I am trusting you.”

Cole released Saniyya and turned to catch the full brunt of Cormag's assault with his upheld hands. If Saniyya was going to kill him, so be it. Cole was driven back, his magic pushed to its limit to absorb the force of the lightning bolt Cormag had flung at him. He would have fallen, if not for Saniyya. She had every right to kill Cole and George, but instead she braced her hands against Cole's
back, helping him to stand against the jet of flame the Cormag directed at them. Invigorated by her assistance, Cole redirected the crackling bolts of electricity, drawing them down into his palm, and absorbing them in order to power his own attack. He clenched his right hand and fired a bolt of energy at Cormag. The indigo missile struck Cormag in the face, shattering the white mask he wore, and hurling him down the street.


Saniyya nodded and fled down the street, closely followed by George. Cole turned back towards Cormag, interposing himself between the warlock and the fleeing Lord-Protector. Part of the Cormag's mask had shattered, revealing half of his face and a single eye. Blood dripped from his forehead, running down the remaining half of the mask. Cormag ripped Saniyya's blade from his chest, then placed his flaming hand upon his breast, cauterizing the wound. If it caused him any pain, he did not show it.

Cole looked into his old friend’s eye and saw nothing but hate. Cormag screamed and charged at Cole, sword held high. Cole drew his khukuri and parried Cormag's attack. Metal rang against metal, then an inferno of flame engulfed the street. Cole was blasted off his feet. He slammed into a wall, bounced off, and dropped to the ground, fingers going limp. Cormag smiled, raised his hand, and fired a bolt of lighting down the street. A building exploded somewhere, Cole and he heard George scream. Cormag raised his hand again, and Cole dove into the air. The bolt struck Cole full in the chest and he slammed into the ground, limbs twitching. A shadow fell over Cole and he looked up to see Cormag standing over him, silhouetted by the light of the afternoon sun.

“Cole Travers, fighting to keep someone else safe, instead of running for his life, Garret would be so disappointed.” Cormag placed Saniyya's Terror-pede blade against Cole's collarbone. “Before you die, there is something I must tell you. I do not blame you for what happened in Felviar, I do not blame you for abandoning me Cole.”

“Well, isn't that comforting,” Cole replied. A heavy wind swept down the street, ruffling his hair. Cole looked up and smiled “I just hope you don't blame me for this.”

The cannon roared and the street exploded. A Spitfire hovered overhead, its forward mounted gun aimed directly at Cormag. The cannon fired a second time and Cole rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding a fireball. A wall of fire burst up out of the ground, nearly incinerating Cole as he ran towards the descending rotor-craft. Through the haze, Cole watched Saniyya and George clamber aboard the rotor-craft and he put on an extra burst of speed.

“GO!” Cole screamed as fireballs exploded around him. He spun in place, hurling bolts of energy at Cormag. The warlock batted them aside and continued on, a wall of fire swirling around him. “Leave me, GO!!”

The Spitfire turned and began to rise, its forward mounted machine guns sweeping over the street. Cormag howled, and shot a jet of fire in Cole's direction. The rotor-craft continued to rise, the bay doors sliding closed, but it was going slowly, waiting for Cole. A fireball struck the cockpit and the Spitfire listed to the side, crashing into a building. After all this, Cole's friends were going to die to save him. For one wild moment, he considered turning back, then he saw Saniyya standing in the open doorway. Cole leaped, hurling himself into the air with a burst of magic. His hand brushed the steel side of the ship, then Thomas grabbed him by the forearm.

“I've got you,” Thomas shouted.

Cormag screamed again and flames licked over the surface of the rotor-craft. Cole redoubled his grasp on his friend's hand, just as Saniyya reached down and hauled him into the ship. Rotors whined and Spitfire began to ascend, fighting against the hot air resulting from Cormag's flames. The airship turned to the north, away from the harbour, while Cormag raised his hand and hurled the Terror-pede
blade at the fleeing ship. The blade spun once, then pierced the bulkhead, quivering just inches from Cole's neck.

The warlock let out a ferocious roar and whipped his right hand around over his head. The flaming lash struck the side of the airship and it dipped to the side. The whip curled around the craft and it was yanked back. The airship listed to the right, and Thomas overbalanced, toppling out the still out the open loading door. Cole stumbled and would have fallen as well, if Saniyya had not grabbed him.

“THOMAS!!!!” Cole screamed as his friend slipped past him.

Before Cole could react, Armel dove out after Thomas. The young elf boy drew his arms in to his sides and Cole could feel the boy summon up a swirling gale of wind. Cole reached out with his own magic but found that Armel did not need his assistance at all. Armel grabbed Thomas by the forearm, then flipped around, redirecting the winds he had conjured. Of all the myriad magical tricks one could perform with magic, Cole had never truly mastered flight, he merely jumped using magic to propel himself as high as possible and then fell.

Armel flew, dragging Thomas along with him. Their flight was erratic and Cole used his own magic to nudge the boy back into place, but still he flew, whipping through the air at speeds Cole could never have imagined. The pair shot through the open door, slammed into Cole, and the three went down in a tangle of limbs.

“GO!” Thomas screamed, leaping to his feet and dashing towards the cockpit.

The Spitfire twisted about, ripping free of Cormag's grasp, and shot off towards the far side of the city. Thomas ran onto the foredeck and dropped down into a seat next to Lawrence. Together the two men brought the airship under control. Several other Spitfires, all flying the Consortium colours, patrolled over the city, and Lawrence shot past them, eking out as much speed as he could from the damaged craft.

“Any idea where we should be going?” Lawrence asked. They cleared the far walls of New Thertan, leaving the burning city far behind. Cole turned and gazed back into the harbour, watching as cannon fire bloomed along the shore, and a wing of spitfires strafed the white fleet of the Lord-Protector.

Cole suddenly felt a presence of some magical entity and stalked into the Spitfire's cockpit. Daniel's face suddenly appeared upon the Spitfire's command board, along a stretch of polished steel prepared for scrying. Daniel's brown eyes gazed up at Cole and the man's mocking smirk was reflected perfectly by the magical projection.

“I speak now to condemn Achland and its military for conspiracy against both me, the Consortium, and the Ra'kala of Kaldry,” said Daniel. “Now longer shall this country be subject to such outside forces. The military dictatorship you wished to install has failed, and as such any further action by you shall be considered a hostile act of war against the new, free nation of Kaldry.”

“Is Daniel completely insane?” Fiona gasped. “Why is he staring a war? There is no way he can win! The Consortium won't support his position.

“It doesn't matter if Daniel is insane,” Cole muttered, before reaching out and banishing the magic that held Daniel's scrying in place. “It doesn't matter if the Consortium will support him. The warlocks got what they wanted. War has come to Kaldry. I've failed.”
Chapter 37

The Spitfire carrying the Lord-Protector and his entourage encountered no further opposition as it left New Thertan behind. In the glaring light of the afternoon sun Cole watched as hundreds of Kaldriens fled the embattled city, pursued by dozens of Consortium airships. On the horizon, Cole could see the bloated shape of airships slowly lumbering towards them, and the sound of cannon fire still rang out over Half Moon bay.

“You know we really are going to need a plan,” said Lawrence. He brought the Spitfire in low along the ground, skimming the tops of the trees. While the Consortium ships around New Thertan had not attacked them, there was no way to be sure what the incoming airships would do.

“We should return to the fleet,” George said. “We need to co-ordinate our efforts to take back command from Daniel.”

“For some reason I sort of doubt we'll make it,” said Hutchins. Lawrence nosed the Spitfire down below the canopy. Branches smacked against the sides of the airship and Cole drew in a sharp breath. The airships lumbered by overhead, cannons roaring as they fired on those fleeing New Thertan. Cole was just glad the roar of the Spitfire's rotors drowned out the scream of the dying. Lawrence seemed to be of a like mind and he closed the loading bay doors, sealing the ship. “We could swim sure, but what do you think the odds of the fleet surviving are?”

Lawrence brought the rotor-craft up and Cole saw they were now past the airship blockade. The Spitfire was ridiculously crowded. The Spitfire was ridiculously crowded. The airship's, semi-circular, almost horseshoe like shape, was designed to transport small squads of soldiers and several crew members. The forward cabin was designed for two pilots, while the curving arms where designed for a total of eight occupants at the most. Currently, there were close to a dozen people aboard and their combined weight caused the ship to list badly. Cole sat at the far end of the right arm, head in hands, doing his best to keep his thoughts clear. The tight quarters also made it apparent that many aboard smelled terrible.

“This is what happens when you don't include me in your planning phase,” Cole complained, lashing out in an attempt to deal with his own crippling failure. He knew he shouldn't be angry, everyone had done the best they could, but he couldn't help it. He should have seen the strings Cormag was pulling and yet he had not and now the warlocks had succeeded in starting a three way war between the lower castes of Kaldry, the Consortium, and Achland proper.

“You saw the plan,” Fiona replied. “You could have offered plenty of advice.”

“Yes, but did we have time to institute any changes?”

“Maybe next time you should do your best to not get snatched by a band of tribals,” Fiona replied. “No offence meant.”

“I learned long ago that your people often say things they don't mean,” Saniyya snorted. “Though recently I have found that some of you are a bit more trustworthy than I once thought.” Saniyya's lips twitched, almost like she was going to smile. “Glad that you at least acknowledge my presence. Someone would think a certain member of your company would be somewhat more grateful I didn't gut another certain member.”

“Ohh, I am very grateful,” George chuckled. “Mr. Travers, well.”

“Don't mind Cole,” Thomas muttered. “He's never very grateful.”

“Thanks.” Cole threw his hands up in the air.

“You are very welcome Cole,” Thomas replied. “Someone has to cut you down to size sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Fiona arched an eyebrow. “More than just sometimes.”

“So glad you all appreciate me so much!” Cole cried before turning his back on the others.
“I appreciate you,” said Lawrence in his nasally whine. “Though I would appreciate you more if you STOPPED SHOUTING!” The blond man turned in his seat, taking his hands off the rotor-craft’s steering column. The rotor-craft nosed down, but Lawrence ignored it. “Now, figure out where we are going or I am just going to put down right here!” Lawrence’s sudden outburst caused everyone to stop and turn towards him. “Sorry, I just, you know, thought you might all need some persuasion, we are not going to be able to stay airborne much longer. Tranquillity has suffered a good deal of structural damage.”

“Tranquillity?” Matthew scoffed.
Lawrence shrugged. “I figured it was a good name.”
“We go to my people then,” said Saniyya.
“You mean the ones who are currently fleeing New Thertan?” Fiona turned to the other woman. “Do you really think any of them survived? Those airships have turned the fields around the New Thertan into a killing ground. There will be no survivors, especially if Jenkins is in command.”

“None of my people attacked,” corrected Saniyya. She crossed her arms over her chest, causing the scale-armour shirt she wore to rattle nosily. “After the ambush in the woods many deserted the false prophet.”

“You didn’t” Fiona pointed out.
“No.” Saniyya shook her head. “I still thirsted for vengeance for Sanyo. I followed him into battle, but now that I know my twin is alive, things have changed. My people can provide shelter for a time.”

“We still need to stop and make some repairs,” said Thomas. “We are not going to make it much further in our current state.”

“What kind of reception can we expect?” Hutchins asked. Lawrence brought Tranquillity around and began to search for a clear patch of jungle they could land in. “We just going to swoop in and land or what?”

“Ohh yes I like that plan Corporal,” Cole stood up and cracked his back. “We can swoop down on the wings of our great sky beast like some sort of grand saviour.” Cole threw his hands up. “THEN I'll just stride right into their midst and everyone will worship me.”

“No,” said George. “We land far away from them and then walk. We want their help not their adulation.”

Cole smiled, George had turned out to be exactly the type of person he had hoped to meet in Kaldry. Though his voice was somewhat squeaky, and he wasn't exactly the bravest warrior, George had proven to be of strong moral fibre. George was exactly the type of impartial mediator that could bring Kaldry together. If only he had arrived sooner Cole knew that the events of the last month would have proven very different. Indeed someone like George may have been able to prevent the original Kaldrien uprising. Though Cole tended to agree with Cormag that Achland was irredeemably corrupt, it was men like George Lowell that kept him sane, though Cole would never admit that to anyone.

Since they were no longer debating their next course of action, and because the cramped quarters aboard the ship made it relatively hot, Lawrence opened the bay doors again. Wind whistled through the openings and Cole simply sat watching the jungle whip by far below. Lost in thought, Cole barely noticed when Armel sat down next to him.

“Are we going to go after Helen?” The elf boy asked, using magic to make himself heard.
“Yes,” Cole replied with a smile. Armel's talents had truly blossomed and Cole could not help but feel proud of him. “If we don't I think Ian might do so himself and we wouldn't want him to have all the fun now would? Worse, if we didn't I think you would kill us all and with the talent you showed today, ohh I shudder to think what you would do to us.”

“I'm not that great,” said Armel. He leaned his head against Cole's shoulder, which made the
older man feel incredibly awkward. “I couldn't even save Helen, or really fight back.”

Without really even thinking about it, Cole put his arm around the orphan boy's shoulder and drew him close. If he was feeling shaken up and disturbed about the days events, he could only imagine how Armel must be feeling. Cole had never really intended for Armel to get caught up in all this, but he could not deny that the ordeal had actually furthered his own plans for Armel's future. Armel's magical aptitude had proven that without a doubt, he was at least in some way descended from old Felvian royalty. Even better, his infatuation with Helen only further played into Cole's plans. Having an elven prince marry into the Achlish royal family would go a long way to smoothing relations between the two warring nations.

Lawrence brought Tranquillity down in a small clearing, barely large enough for the ship, then he, Thomas, and several others piled out to begin repairs. Thomas expressed doubt in their ability to do so without proper tools, but they set to work anyway. Cole ignored them and stayed aboard Tranquillity, pondering on the days events. Armel, Kishan, and the others piled out as well, leaving Cole alone.

Still ruminating on just what had happened, Cole pulled out his Telethium. The bright gold shimmered in the dappled jungle light and he the device around in his hands, pondering his next move. He needed to contact Benedict, but doing so openly might be risky. Cole stood, and found that the Terror-pede blade was still embedded in the bulk head.

Cole pulled the blade out. Saniyya had sharpened the Terror-pede's mandible, then wrapped its leather around its “base” to create a rudimentary handle. It was a rather rough job, but when Cole turned the blade over he found that a small Kaldrien fire ruby had been set into the pommel. He smiled, watching how the red stone caught the light and refracted it, making it look as though fires danced within the gem. Like its owner, the blade hid a great amount of depth and Cole wove a series of spells into the blade to strengthen it, before setting it down on the floor of the Spitfire.

The repairs continued well into the early evening and Cole slipped away, masking himself in the shadows of twilight. He struck out in a northerly direction, placing just enough distance between himself and the others so he would not be overheard. Saniyya was sitting with Kishan, Armel, and George, so he would not need to worry about her, and the others were busy with their repairs. When all he could hear was the sounds of the jungle, he drew out his Telethium and reached out for Benedict. There was no interference this time and the image resolved itself cleanly.

“Cole, thank god,” Benedict cried. The Spy-master looked haggard and there were large, dark rings under his eyes. “I had heard you were on the ground when the attack came. Is the Lord Protector alive?!?”

“So glad you are concerned about me,” drawled Cole. He glanced back over his shoulder, checking to make sure Saniyya had not followed him. “George is alive, as are Colonel Walsh, and several of her finest soldiers.”

“Is the Lord-Protector with you?”

“Yes,” Cole replied. “We escaped New Thertan and are now heading away from the city. The Ra’kala have allied themselves with the Consortium.....”

“Then attacked our fleet, yes, yes I know,” Benedict snapped. “You are several hours late in reporting this. The Assembly has already met. They are voting on our next course of action as we speak. Based on preliminary reports, they have already condemned Daniel and the rest of the Consortium command staff that remain in the country. They are going to declare war on Kaldry. There are all ready reports of unrest in the Western Colonies. The situation is quickly degrading.”

“I assume that the Assembly intends to focus its ire upon the duumvirate Consortium and Ra’kala forces?”

“No,” Benedict replied. “The Assembly intends to declare the entire colony lost. Any force that takes up arms against our soldiers is to be exterminated. It does not matter what caste or nation they
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hail from, the Assembly intends to crush any resistance they face.”

“Who is leading the vote?” Cole felt that he already knew the answer, but he needed to be sure.

“Vice Chancellor Sutlen proposed the measure,” said Benedict.

“Of course he did,” said Cole. “And was it not Clayton Talbit, his junior aid who put forward
the original measure to remove Consortium governance and appoint a Lord-Protector?

“Yes. Cole, what are you getting at?”

“Because, everything that has occurred in Kaldry has been carefully calculated.” Cole pulled
out his notes, including those he had written while detained in New Thertan. “I already informed you
about my belief that a cabal of warlocks have been working to incite rebellion here. Now I know they
have. Not only was the Masked Prophet one of them, Allen, Daniel's primary aide is one of the
conspirators. They forced Sutlen's hand, they wanted him to go to war.”

“Then all the more reason for you to withdraw,” said Benedict. “I warned you that if war was to
break out in Kaldry it could very well doom our empire. Unless the Assembly acts quickly we will not
only lose Kaldry, but the Annexation as well. There have already been several anarchist attacks in lands
we took from Üruush. The news about Kaldry spread like wildfire.” Cole bit his lip, but kept his
thoughts to himself. There was no way such news should have reached the general populace of Tereth,
yet it had. If that didn't prove the warlocks were involved, nothing would. “For now, I need you to
assist the Lord-Protector, bear him to safety. Bhaskar and Erik hold the north, there is war there, and
some of the lower castes have risen up against them, but the border should still be secure.”

“So, that's it then? We just slink off, then soldiers come in and torch the country.”

“Is that empathy I hear?” Benedict chuckled. Something in the man's tone annoyed Cole, it was
almost as if he wanted Cole to agree with him.

“No,” Cole replied. In truth all he cared about now was stopping Cormag, Allen, and the rest of
the warlocks. He could care less what their real plans were, or if Garret was involved, for now all he
wanted was revenge. The warlocks had attempted to manipulate him, and he could not let that stand.
Besides, for once he would be able to manipulate Benedict, forcing him to help, instead of the other
way round.

“So what do you propose we do?”

“Fight,” said Cole. “I am taking the Lord-Protector to meet with a band of Selther who survived
the attack. If I can convince them to ally with us, we could lay siege to Al-katal, capture Daniel, and put
an end to this revolution.”

“A daring plan to be sure,” said Benedict. “It will take several days for the Assembly to draft a
deceleration of war. By my estimate you have seventy-two hours, if not less.”

“That is more than enough,” said Cole.

“Right,” Benedict vanished, then reappeared a moment later. His hands were hidden so Cole
guessed he was preparing a gramophone to record Cole's new orders. “Cole Travers, I shall now issue
you new orders. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“As of this moment, the security of Achlish interests is threatened. You orders are to secure
Kaldry by whatever means necessary. At this point all other interests in the country are secondary,
including peace with the lower castes. You are to remove both the Consortium, the Ra'kala, and are to
ensure Achland rules unopposed. Do you understand your orders?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” said Benedict. “Contact me when you have established contact with the Selther. For
now no one is to know that we have spoken. When you contact me we shall plan out exactly how we
will proceed”

Cole released the scrying and Benedict vanished. He returned to Tranquillity to find the repairs
finished. While the ship still needed a great amount of work, they no longer needed to worry about it crashing. They re-boarded the ship and set off. New Thertan was an inky smudge on the horizon, belching dark smoke into the afternoon sky. Saniyya moved into the forward cabin, issuing commands to Lawrence on how to find the other Selther.

“Cole, I need to ask you something.” Thomas sat down across from Cole. “That man...the prophet, his face...he looked like Cormag. You told me Cormag died in Felviar.”

“He did,” Cole lied. He couldn't tell Thomas Cormag was still alive, mostly since he still could not accept the fact himself. “The Prophet is a skilled Spellweaver Thomas. He was in my mind while we were fighting, possibly in yours as well. It was a projection, nothing more. These warlocks are devious, and stopping them will take all of my skill and genius.”

“You don't have to do these things alone.”

“If I don't stop them, who will?”

“There they are,” Lawrence called out, pointing towards several fires glimmering under the jungle canopy. “What do you want me to do?”

“Put down about a half mile out,” said Fiona. “We don't want to startle them by landing in the centre of the camp.”

“Right,”

Lawrence brought them down to the north of the Selther camp and they disembarked. Lawrence turned off the Spitfire's rotors and the jungle fell silent. They set off together, with Saniyya taking the lead. Cole saw her flash several quick hand signals and concluded there must be other Selther scouts hiding in the shadows. Judging by how Fiona had readjusted her grip on her rifle the Colonel had seen them as well.

Before long, Cole heard the trumpeting of an elephant and then the group emerged into the middle of the Selther camp. Now, instead of camping in a clearing, the Selther had taken refuge beneath the thickest stretch of canopy they could find. Hasty barricades had been thrown up around the camp and guards with outdated rifles patrolled the camp.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Thomas muttered, eyeing the native riflemen. “They could very easily shoot us.”

“That they could lad,” George replied. “Course they have every reason to do so.”

The camp was arrayed in an almost identical fashion to the one Cole had entered on the night he had first been brought before Hadiya, though the mood in the camp was much darker. He only knew most of the Selther by sight and walking through the camp he noticed several dozen were missing. Cole saw Qismat, but not his wife, and it appeared Del'to had lost an arm, the stump wrapped in a bloody tourniquet. Looking around at the Selther, Cole suddenly felt an sudden swell of emotion. He was angry, with himself. While he was not completely responsible for what had happened, or the years of atrocities that had been committed, Cole was still racked with guilt.

There were also many faces Cole did not recognize, and many of them were not Selther. As they walked, Cole saw humans, kelves, dwarves, and even several furry Vitzen gathered scattered around in the crowd. Here, under the trees, the races of Kaldry were coming together as one people, united in grief over the horrors their land had witnessed. They passed by all the other fires and stopped in the centre of the camp. Hadiya looked up, her pale silver eyes alive with fire.

“And so you return.” Hadiya reached out to embrace Saniyya. “Did you find the vengeance you sought?”

“No, but I have found someone who might help me,” Saniyya replied, before stepping to the side. “My brother was correct, the prophet was not who we thought he was, he is corrupt and needs to die. I have yet to decide if the Guardian truly marked anyone, but I have brought the man my brother believed to have been chosen, as well as the man he believes can bring peace to our lands.”
As Saniyya spoke, the Seltber gathered in close, muttering amongst themselves. Several shot Cole aside glances, but they did not seem hostile. Indeed, at Saniyya's words the fervour of their muttering seemed to increase. George strode through the crowd, nodding politely to anyone he passed.

"Almula'thena." George stepped forward, and bowed to Hadiya, flourishing his hand in intricate pattern Cole had seen the Seltber use several times before, but never really understood. Now he guessed it must be a greeting of some kind. "We humbly implore your protection and ask pardon for the sins of our people."

"You shall have what protection we can offer, though that may not be much considering our current situation." Hadiya smiled, her teeth just barely visible beneath the shadowy folds of her hood. "Now then, Cole, you have returned as well."

"Yes, I have," said Cole, not entirely sure of what kind of reception he might receive.

"The Prophet has proven false and he leaves a void among our people." Hadiya looked around, her gaze lingering on Saniyya. "Cole, son of Achland, Sanyo believed you to be marked by the great elder powers in the same manner as the one we once called prophet. Will you step forward to lead us?"

"No," Cole replied with conviction. The crowd's whisperings increased and several turned their backs on him. "I do not deserve to lead you. I betrayed the trust you afforded me and in doing so have not only dishonoured my heritage, but the Seltber as well." The crowds muttering increased and Cole turned to face them. "I have not returned to lead you, but to assist you. I am not worthy to lead, but I believe I can regain my honour by fighting at your side."

"Cole, what exactly are you insinuating?" George asked, moustache bristling.

Cole stopped, he had not meant to say what he had said. He had only wanted to rile the Seltber, to get them to fight. Now though, he believed what he was saying. His anger and guilt had turned into steely conviction.

"I insinuate nothing," Cole continued. "I am suggesting an alliance between Achland and those we have wronged." Cole turned back to the crowd. "The Consortium and the Ra'kala have stolen the future from you. If you would have us, I swear to you that Achland shall pay the restitution that you and all the people of Kaldry deserve. This man, George Lowell, was appointed by my people, and sent here to bring peace, but we were betrayed. Now, I offer Achland's peace to you, the true people of Kaldry, those we have been wronged. The Ra'kala had their opportunity, they rejected it, instead deciding that war was a more palatable option. If the Ra'kala wish for war, so be it! We shall show them that they cannot break the spirit of the people who oppose them! Together, as equals we shall throw down the Ra'kala and cast out the Consortium! Who will join me?!"

The assembled Kaldriens did not respond. Cole's chest was heaving, no one spoke and he felt himself grow sad, then Del'to raised his remaining arm into the air. "I will!"

"As shall I!" Cried Qismat.

One by one the crowd began to cheer; Kaldrien, Achlish, human, non-human, it no longer mattered, they were all voicing their agreement in a dozen dialects. Saniyya appeared at Cole's side. "I will," she whispered, and then began to scream along with the rest of them, her hand resting on Cole's shoulder.

Before Cole could say anything else, George stepped forward, and took the khukuri he still had sheathed at his back. The Lord-Protector held his hand out palm up and then slowly drew the khukuri along it. The cut was not deep, but it bleed freely.

"As speaker for my people, I swear to uphold the honour that you are placing upon me." George said as he held the khukuri out, hilt to Hadiya. He looked utterly ridiculous standing there in his stained khakis, monocle hanging from his lapel and dented pith helmet, but at the same time he exuded confidence. "Does the speaker of the Seltber agree to this honour?"

"I do." Hadiya took the blade and repeated the same self mutilation. Hadiya handed Saniyya
her khukuri, then reached out and took George's hand. “We are bound by blood and honour now Achlander. Our fates entwined.”


“We need to plan,” said George.

Without further theatrics, the war council assembled, bringing together a dozen Kaldrien leaders. In addition to Hadiya, there were three other Selther elders present, each hailing from a different clan, and several human elders. George was elected to lead the council, but immediately stepped down, stating that he preferred all present to have an equal say. Still, it began increasingly clear that the Lord-Protector would truly live up to his name, immediately requesting that Hadiya send messengers to any other Kaldriens in the region, asking them to withdraw so they would not suffer further casualties. The council's next move was to appoint Fiona as commander of the united Kaldrien and Achlish forces. She accepted somewhat grudgingly, and then they set to work planning their invasion.

Cole pulled out his Telethium and scryed Benedict. Grand-General of Internal and Foreign Intelligence feigned ignorance, as exactly as he had planned. Cole felt guilty deceiving the others, but he knew it was for the best. To compensate Cole told them all he knew of the warlocks and their plot.

“Which explains why Allen ordered Jenkins to shoot the Colonel,” said George. “They got exactly what they wanted. Still, that does not explain how the Consortium was able to arm both themselves and the Ra'kala so quickly.”

“The Consortium has been importing them illegally for some time now,” said Thomas.

“Did you ever discover which Assembly member was backing them?” Cole inquired.

“No,” said Thomas. “But,” Thomas sighed. “From all the information I have gathered, I believe Sutlen may have been involved. The Vice Chancellor had been an ardent supporter of the Consortium for years, and was the last member of the Assembly to vote in favour of removing the Consortium from Kaldry, so it makes sense he would support them.”

Everyone went quiet for a moment.

“We need to kill them,” said Saniyya. “These men, including their false prophet, have betrayed the people of Kaldry. They must die.”

“You going to stab them?” Fiona chuckled.

“Perhaps,” Saniyya replied with her typical wicked smile. “I believe your weapons are more than up to the task.”

“Cole, if it is true that the warlocks arraigned all this should we not surrender?” Asked George. “They want war, you said so yourself.”

“They want bloodshed and so we shall give it to them,” Cole shrugged, knowing how utterly clichéd the sentiment sounded. He still could not see how Sutlen figured into all this, but he guessed the man was just another unwitting pawn the warlocks had used to further their own goals. “If these men wish to challenge Achland and Kaldry they shall be challenged. Together we can show them they cannot intimidate us. They may be able to turn men against each other, but they shall not break our conviction. They are planning a ritual here in Kaldry, powered by death. I have felt the energy building since I entered the country. I suffered headaches and its energy disrupted our scrying. If we can remove the Consortium and the Ra'kala, and secure peace, we can stop this ritual before it is complete.”

“And what of my father, and the other Rankalan soldiers?” Cole turned, watching Kishan come striding out of the crowd. “What of the Consortium soldiers who serve alongside them? Have they done anything wrong by simply serving?”

“Be silent boy,” hissed Saniyya. “Your people have served those who have oppressed us for far too long to absolve them of any guilt.”

“But where does it end?” Kishan asked. “If the Ra'kala are thrown down, the caste system will
continue, just with you at the top instead of them.”

“Then let us hope that such things can begin to change,” said Hadiya. “Unity between our people, between all the people of Kaldry should be our first goal. Let us pray that after tomorrow, forgiveness will be something we can all find within ourselves to grant those that have wronged us.”

Cole nodded, not entirely in agreement with Hadiya's unconditional forgiveness, and drew out his Telethium. Now, with Benedict joining the debate the council's conversation turned from simple reaction, to action. As they talked, more Kaldriens arrived and Hadiya immediately brought them in on the discussion. Instead of turning them away, George brought them into the conversation. Slowly the plan came together. Even with the additional Kaldriens, they were of course sorely outmatched. Saniyya felt that a swift attack upon Al-katal would not only grant them the element of surprise, it would encourage the lower castes of the capital to rise up with them.

“You will need allies among the Ra'kala,” said Benedict. “Thankfully I planned for an event such as this long ago.”

“Of course you did,” said Thomas. “You've been planning with Bhaskar for some time.”

“I am afraid he will not be able to help us,” said Cole. “His region was struck hard by the recent uprisings...” Cole stopped.

“There has been no problem in the north,” Benedict replied. “Cole, why do you think I have had Colonel Howe stationed there? Why do you think I told you to make for the north? I knew the Consortium may attempt something during the transfer of power, it is one of the reasons you were sent to Kaldry. Erik has not been fighting uprisings, he has been preparing. If you can secure Al-katal I can assure you Bhaskar and Erik will reinforce you.”

“You always were good at lying,” said Cole.

“A necessary deception,” Benedict smiled. “Did you ever expect anything else?”

Infuriated by Benedict's continued lies, Cole stepped away from the council. Over the last few hours his headache had slowly returned and he couldn't stomach Benedict any longer. In addition to his headache, he had also noticed that Benedict's image often wavered, never appearing as clear as it had earlier in the day. These signs troubled Cole greatly, especially since such disruptions often warned of powerful magic being woven elsewhere.

The afternoon wore on and it was soon decided that they would need to move camp. By now, the number of Kaldriens had swelled to several hundred, and while many were injured, they still wished to be included in the preparations. Tranquillity hovered overhead, as the column began to march east towards Al-katal. As the Kaldriens walked past, Cole saw weapons being passed around, including plenty of rifles no doubt seized from the Consortium. The most shocking moment for him though was overhearing Saniyya and Fiona discussing tactics and plans for attack. In retrospect, Cole should have guessed the two women would get along, they were both tenacious fighters, though raised in radically different circumstances.

As night fell, the column came to a halt in a wide clearing. Bonfires were stocked and those gathered began to chant war cries, and paint themselves for battle. Lawrence brought Tranquillity down on the far side of the camp, and soon found himself overwhelmed by Kaldriens offering him parts salvaged from downed craft.

Cole detached himself from the crowds and again set to perusing his notes. By now, he knew he would glean nothing more from them, but reading over what he had discovered was oddly calming, if still disturbing in more ways than one. The idea that such a conspiracy had continued for centuries was disturbing enough, but the true nature of the warlocks plot inciting war to power a blood ritual that was meant to appease or bind elder power was simply terrifying. Cole hoped that by stopping Achland's invasion and eventual war upon Kaldry would be enough. So far everything that had happened had benefited the warlocks, and Cole wondered if he was pursuing the best course of action by lashing out
at the Consortium. Perhaps George was right, perhaps their best option was to merely wait and try for a peaceful solution.

Instead of dwelling on such baffling moral quandaries, Cole set to work to find the warlocks. He had already seen three sites where such rituals had been conducted, two ruins, and a small city lost in the jungle. Somehow he doubted any of those locations would be used. Cole retrieved a map from Tranquillity and laid it on the ground in front of him. Looking at the map, he concluded the warlocks were conducting their ritual in Al-katal. The capital was a central location, built throughout the centuries. Somewhere under that city, Cole knew he would find an ancient crypt.

“Cole, why are you sitting off alone?” He looked up to find Saniyya standing over him, her dark hair loose and free. She had abandoned her armour and was again dressed in simple slacks, with her small breasts hidden a thin red canvas band. From the other side of the camp, Cole could hear music and he saw shadows dancing in front of the fire. “Take my hand, come on.”

Cole looked at Saniyya for a moment, set his notes down, and took her hand in his. Saniyya pulled Cole to his feet, and he felt his anxiety collapse. His heart begin to pound. She dragged Cole into him very centre of the camp, straight into the middle of the revelries. The music was wild, played upon sitars, flutes, and drums.

The rhythm pounded through Cole's body, and he released himself of conscious thought. He and Saniyya began to dance, bodies entwining in time to the beat. Cole, utterly enraptured, pulled Saniyya close and kissed her softly. She responded by pulling him in closer and turning that simple soft kiss into a burning moment of raw, sensual, release that Cole hoped might never end.
Cole and Thomas stood together on the platform, waiting for the Consortium supply train they planned to ambush. Daniel and the rest of the Consortium had fallen back to Al-katal, turning the Kaldrien capitol into a veritable fortress. Bringing any sort of armed force into the city would be difficult, and so they had decided to “appropriate” a train for their purposes.

“Cole, about last night,” Thomas began. “You and Saniyya were rather, close, at times.”

“Ohh, this must hurt your sense of Achlish propriety to ask such a thing.” Cole smiled. “Come now Thomas, what do you think happened?”

“Knowing you, I would say a great deal.” Cole felt his cheeks grow hot. “Ohh darling, is my inquiring about your exploits embarrassing you? It’s cute how prudish you can be.”

“Nothing happened,” Cole muttered.

“Really? What could this mean. You are usually rather, ahem, quick to take advantage of such a situation. Could it be that Cole has finally found someone he cares for?” Thomas chuckled and pulled out his Telethium. “They are late, you think a large company would keep their trains running on time.”

“Come now, you can't blame them,” said Cole, trying to regain his composure. The platform they were waiting on was little more than a simple stone slab in the middle of the jungle, devoid of buildings accept for a water tower and coal-shed. Cole was just glad there was a platform, rumour had it that in some of the most primitive parts of Kaldry banyan trees were used to mark where a train should stop. “I would like to see you keep the trains running on time in a country gripped in the fervour of revolution. I just hope they stop.”

“Well, at least we planned for it if they don't.” Thomas patted the Grappler-Gauntlet he wore over one arm.

During the planning phase, Thomas had discovered several dozen Grappler-Gauntlets and their accompanying leg braces in the Tranquillity equipment lockers. In addition, they had found two light sets of Steam-armour secreted away in a storage compartment usually reserved for spare parts. Neither set was complete, and both lacked the mechanical enhancements that would increase the wearer's strength, but they were still a valuable find. It had been decided that Ian and Fiona would wear them, and both had further supplemented it with pieces of Seltner armour. Thomas now wore the Grappler and the leg braces over his suit, the brass metal piping clashing against the dark fabric.

The two men stood there for several more minutes, before Cole heard the whistle of the approaching train. He looked up, and could see the smoke billowing up over the trees. The train turned a corner, and headed for them, pistons labouring as the train lumbered into the makeshift station.

Thomas let out a sigh. “That, ohhhhh that is a gorgeous loco. Wide gauge track, triple steam stack, you don't see many old black beauties like that any more. Sure the newer trains are faster, but ohhhh, nothing can compare with that craftsmanship.”

Cole rolled his eyes, Thomas was always going on about such things, often comparing the engineer to some great hero who had mastered the fire breathing dragon that was the steam engine. He had to agree with Thomas though, the train was gorgeous, a massive black engine, with gleaming gold pistons and metal work trailing over its face. Its wheels were taller than a man, and its three smoke stakes where polished to a gleaming sheen. At first, Cole thought the train might not stop, but then the whistle sounded again, and the locomotive hissed to a stop. He stood perfectly still, allowing the wind around the train to catch his great coat and set it flapping. Cole felt it looked more dramatic that way.

“Ho boys, wit ye doin' all te way ort here?” Called the engineer, a small man, with a large white moustache, and wide brimmed hat. He swatted at a Kaldrien firemen, sending the man, and his shovel full of coal away.

“Waiting for the train,” Cole replied. The man's mind was at ease, and Cole quickly planted the
seeds of his own influence there to ensure the man stayed that way. “Our regiment was ambushed, and we were the only ones to survive.”

“Well, ain’t you lucky,” the engineer called out. A host of other men swarmed off the train and over the platform, some began to shovel coal, while others went to hook the water tower to the engine. “Ye lookin for a lift on into te capital?”

“Yes,” Thomas replied, his hand resting on the butt of his revolver. “But we don't want to be a bother. How many men do you have with you?”

“Just us and a couple o' soldiers,” called one of the workmen from where he stood by the coals-hed. “We got plenty of room for you.”

“What are you transporting?” Cole leaned to the side, glancing at the nine box cars being pulled along behind the engine.

“That's classified,” replied a Consortium Guardsmen. He glared at Cole and the Spellweaver smiled at him, waving like a loon. “Tell me, which company were you with? I don't mean to insult you, but a small band of traitors, those responsible for the death of the Lord-Protector, is still at large.”

“Oh really?” Cole probed the soldiers mind, but found it alert, clearly not worth the effort.

“How many of them were there?”

“Again, I am not at a liberty to say,” the Guardsman replied. As the man spoke, Saniyya appeared atop one of the cars. Cole smiled, so far he was doing a good job of keeping everyone gathered around the platform, and not investigating the side of the train that was exposed to the jungle. “For now, all I can tell you is that Colonel Walsh has been declared an enemy of the state.”

“And which state would that be?” Fiona called from where she stood next to Saniyya.

“What the hell?”

Thomas discharged an electric blast from the Grappler-Gauntlet into the guards chest, and then levelled his gun at the technicians. Cole conjured a rolling mass of shadows behind him, just as a band of Selther burst out form the jungle on both sides of the tracks. All the workmen, the engineer included, threw their hands into the air as the Selther surrounded them. The sudden commotion drew the attention of another Consortium guard, and the man stepped out of the train.

The guard panicked for a moment, then drew his firearm, firing several shots at Cole. Cole brought the shadows up around him, absorbing the bullets before they could do any harm. The soldier baulked. Saniyya grabbed the edge of the car's roof and spun about, kicking the man up against the car. She landed perfectly, then darted forward, placing her khukuri up against the man's throat.

“I apologize for the inconvenience,” said Cole, using magic to ensure his voice carried far enough for everyone to hear. “We need your train. Those of you who surrender peacefully will not be harmed.”

They encountered no further resistance. After surrendering their weapons, the guards, the engineer, and workmen were lead away into the jungle by a small band of Selther. The Tranquillity zipped past, before turning on its rotor, and settling down at the edge of the tracks. Ian, Matthew, and the rest of the soldiers disembarked from the airship, just as some of the Selther hauled open one of the box car doors, revealing hundreds of sealed wooden crates.

“Well then, seems Daniel's illegal arms deals are turning around to bite him in the arse,” Ian chuckled. He cracked open one of the crates, revealing its contents to the world. “I mean look at this stuff! How many rifles do you think are in here?”

It took several hours, but working together they were eventually able to clear out four of the six cars. The crates contained dozens of rifles and side-arms, as well as several dozen tripod mounted machine guns. The Selther and other Kaldriens armed themselves first, with many taking multiple weapons and plenty of ammunition. Once armed, those assaulting the city began to load into the now open cars, herding four elephants into the last car. After clearing off a flat-top car, the Tranquillity
Figuring that they would be the three to draw the least amount of attention, Cole, Thomas, and Lawrence, took to driving the locomotive into Al-katal. Cole, worried he might be recognized, used magic to turn his hair a golden blonde. As the train approached Al-katal, Cole felt the same dull pressure on his senses he had felt before, and his headache began to return. Whatever ritual Cormag and the others were weaving, it was reaching a crescendo. Whatever happened today, his main goal was stopping the warlocks, anything else involving the Consortium and the Ra'kala was secondary.

They passed through the outer wall of Al-katal without incident, and no one bothered to look up as the train sped through the streets. Cole, who had not been in Al-katal for more than a month, found it strangely silent. The brightly dressed crowds that brought the city to life were gone, and Cole saw that the streets were patrolled by dozens of Rankalan and Consortium guardsmen. The whole place had been brought under strict Consortium order, and it was disturbing to see the once thriving city brought low.

The tension began to rise when they entered the train yard outside the station. There were more guards on patrol here, and now that they were moving slower it would be easier for them to identify the train's drivers. Everything seemed fine, then they were shunted off to a different rail line. The shift happened automatically, and there was nothing they could do but watch as the train turned away from the station, and began its approach to a small loading dock swarming with Consortium guards and workmen.

"Well, this is certainly going to prove interesting," Lawrence said. He throttled back the train's speed, then threw a couple of other levers.

"Yes, it will," Cole agreed. "Lawrence, Thomas and I can take it from here. Head back, let the others know there has been a change of plans, then prep Tranquillity for take off. Tell them to wait for my signal."

"What's the signal going to be?"

Cole only smiled, and Lawrence set off, sliding along the small lip that ringed the coal-car. Thomas took over driving the train, and really didn't need Cole's help, and so he simply stood counting the men on the platform, trying to formulate some sort of cohesive plan. The train continued to slow, and Thomas turned a series of knobs in rapid succession, causing the locomotive to belch several large clouds of steam.

"Cut your steam!" Shouted one of the men on the platform.

It was late afternoon, and long shadows stretched out over the bare stone platform. Cole expanded only a small amount of energy, causing the shadows to rise up and consume the platform in a cloud of rolling indigo mist. One of the men let out a shout of surprise as the train slowed to a stop. Before any of the men had a chance to react, Cole leaped out of the train, striking the stone and sending out a wave of concussive force. Men were thrown back, and Cole watched a shadowy figure steal across the platform. Saniyya flitted through the shadows, cutting down men before they even had a chance to react.

"I told you to wait for my signal," Cole cried, jumping back to avoid the thrust of a bayonet.

"I thought all the screaming was the signal!" Saniyya darted forward and plunged her khukuris into the bayonet wielder's back. The man screamed, as she ripped the blades from his flesh, then chopped downwards, cleaving off the man's right arm just below the shoulder. "Besides, you don't have any right to be giving me orders!"

The train doors banged open, and Fiona led the charge. Selther poured out of the cars, quickly overwhelming the paltry force on the platform. Even before the skirmish was over, the Selther and other Kaldriens began to unload the packed freight cars, leading the half dozen elephants out onto the blood soaked platform. The elephants now wore thick pieces of scrap metal over their heads and legs,
and wicker howdahs, full of armed Kaldriens, were lashed to their backs. Spiked clubs had been tied to the
elephants' tusks and trunks, and the machine guns had been mounted on the beasts' backs, turning
them into living tanks.

“We'll take the station first,” said Fiona. In the distance, Cole could see soldiers running across
the open yard, ducking in and out of the cover provided by the various trains and buildings. “We'll
establish a beach head, and then move out into the city.”

“Cole!” Thomas called. “Come back in one piece okay?”

“Ohh I intend to,” Cole replied. Thomas held out his hand and Cole pulled his friend into a tight
hug. “YOU are the one who needs to stay safe! I'm going to be on the ground, you'll be in the air, that is
much more dangerous. You have to get home to that fiancé of yours. Clarissa would kill me if anything
happened to you.” Thomas stared at him, mouth agape. “Yes, I remembered her name....now get
going!”

Thomas nodded, and hurried off to man the Tranquillity guns, while Cole joined Fiona and the
Kaldriens in charging across the open space between them and the station. The fighting here was
horrendously lopsided, and the Consortium forces were soon overwhelmed. The enemy line broke as
the elephants ploughed into them, and that momentum carried the Selther straight into the station. Now,
instead of a bustling hive of life, Cole found the station deserted, no doubt emptied out so Daniel could
keep a better handle on the Kaldriens. The station was not fortified at all, and the Consortium guard
broke, fleeing out into the street. In the chaos, Cole saw Armel running through the crowd, dagger
flashing as he and several young Kaldriens, tore into a group of soldiers. Cole dashed forward, and
wheeled the boy about.

“Armel ,what the bloody hell are you doing here?!”

“Saving Helen,” Armel replied with a flippant tone Cole had never heard the elf boy use before.

“Ian has that covered,” said Cole, dragging the boy back down into the low ditch that concealed
the train tracks. “Go back and wait.”

“But if I did that I wouldn't be her dashing saviour.” Armel ducked down as bullets went
whizzing through the air over their heads. “Besides, didn't you also tell me that I should be dramatic
and impressive if I want to win a woman's heart?”

“The boy is quite right,” said Saniyya. Cole had not even heard her approach and yet here she
was, crouched inches away, rifle in hand. “Among my people, a man must prove himself to his woman.
He must not only show her that he is worthy, but show her that he believes her worthy. Only then will
she give him her token. I would also very much like to see this dramatic and impressive side of you the
boy speaks of. It would be most,” Saniyya stopped and slowly licked her lips in the most sensual
manner possible, “exciting.”

Cole did his best to ignore Saniyya's comment, though he found her raw sexuality very exciting
as well. Instead of getting distracted, Cole went back to flinging bolts of cerulean energy at an
entrenched knot of Consortium soldiers. Saniyya joined in as well. She was an excellent markswoman,
and in the end claimed more kills than Cole. The station fell soon after, and the horde continued on out
into the streets. The delay in the train yard had given the Consortium time to prepare, and the invaders
faced steep resistance.

Again, the elephants proved an invaluable asset, able to tear through the fortified positions of
the Consortium and Rankalan forces. Slowly, more Kaldriens began to join them. Most were not armed
or armoured, but the Selther happily shared what weapons they had. Overhead airships and Spitfires
began to fire on the invading force. The tight quarters made such tactics risky, and with Armel's help
Cole was able to shield a good many of those closest to him from the bombardment. Tranquillity met
the enemy fleet head on, shooting down a score of enemies before they even realized the danger.

The fact that the Tranquillity was not immediately shot down was a testament to the skill of
both her pilots. Indeed, as the battle wore on the little airship continued to harry the enemy fleet. Several times Cole saw her slip below the horizon, hidden by buildings. At those times he feared the worst, but every time Tranquillity reappeared, having only dipped down to avoid pursuit. At one point, the rotor-craft shot past a wedge of enemy craft, and instead of the internal rotor tilting, the entire outer body of the ship was rotating around the rotor, spinning around it like a gyroscope. Such a feat was not only dangerous, it was insanely impressive.

While Thomas and Lawrence kept the airships busy, Cole and the others fought their way up the streets of Al-katal. Even with the impromptu change to their plans, they had still managed to catch the Consortium flat footed. For the most part they only encountered Kaldrien guards and soldiers. Some of the smarter ones threw down their weapons and ran, but others, notably the paler skinned Rankala and native humans, held their ground. The fighting here was brutal, both sides were heavily armed, and were unafraid to use lethal force.

As the invading force drew closer to the inner city, they began to encounter more and more Consortium guards. The more lightly armoured men were quickly overwhelmed by the press of the invading Kaldriens, but as they drew within site of the wall, Cole could see Consortium soldiers in full Steam-armour running towards them. The men opened fire, and Cole dragged Saniyya to the side, saving her from a cannon blast.

“You didn't have to do that,” she hissed, peeking her head out around the corner and gunning down several soldiers.

“You could have been killed,” Cole replied. The Steam-armoured guards were slaughtering the lightly armoured Kaldrien warriors, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. The Steam-armour's Cold Iron coating made any magical assault worthless, and Cole had no other talents to offer.

“What you need to be focusing on is finding my brother,” said Saniyya.

“I'm doing my best.” Cole's headache had increased greatly as they penetrated deeper into the city, and he could practically see the energy in the air. Cormag and his fellows were close, but Cole could not yet pinpoint exactly where they were performing their ritual.

From somewhere down the avenue an elephant trumpeted, and Cole looked back just in time to see one of the beasts coming rampaging up the walk. Before the armour clad Consortium soldiers could even react, the elephant trampled them, crushing the Steam-armour like a tin can. The Kaldriens cheered and pushed on, drawing ever closer to the inner city gates.

“Seems my brethren are giving you a chance to do even better,” said Saniyya before she bent forward and planted a swift kiss upon Cole's lips. “Come on, and please change your hair back, it looks better black.”

Cole chuckled as he and Saniyya ran along. The elephants' charge had taken them to the very gates of the inner city, where they now clashed with a dozen Consortium soldiers in full Steam-armour. The elephants held their own, but their strength was evenly matched by that of the armoured soldiers. Cole watched as one man stopped an elephant’s charge, grabbing the beast by the head, and then flung it into the wall. The elephant struck the wall with bone shattering force, crushing its riders against the stone. The beast let out a pitiful moan, then collapsed to the ground. Instead of fighting at range, the Kaldriens closed with the Consortium and Rankalan soldiers, turning the area outside the gates into a confused fracas.

Without any heavy arms, the Kaldriens had no way of breaching the gates. Hidden atop the wall, Consortium sharpshooters began to rain death down upon Kaldrien warriors. There was a shout from somewhere off to his left, and Cole turned to see Fiona leading another charge up the avenue. Two more elephants followed her, their machine guns clearing the top of the wall, at least for the moment.

“We need a way to take that wall!” Fiona shouted. “Cole, any suggestions?”

“I could try to contact Thomas,” Cole suggested. Up on the wall, the Consortium guardsmen
began to drag out several cannons. Cole grimaced, as he ducked back down a side street. While trying to think of a way to breach the gates, he spotted Armel and Ian across the avenue. “Armel!” Cole shouted. “Think you could help me with something?”

“Sure!” Armel ran towards Cole, just as the cannons opened fire. Artillery screamed through the air, and Cole felt certain Armel was going to die, and yet not a single shot came close to the elf boy. Instead, it seemed Armel was using magic to deflect the cannon balls, sending them hurtling back towards the walls. With one last surge of energy, Armel dove towards Cole, tucking into a quick roll, just as another round explosions tore the street apart. “What do you need?”

“We are going to breach the gates,” Cole poked his head out again. “I was going to have you stay here and act as support. Summon winds and the like, but after watching you just now, well.” Cole chuckled. “This may sound unfair, but Armel, how do you feel about coming with me?”

Armel smiled, “what are we going to do?”

“Just follow.”

Cole ran out into the street, his hands crackling with indigo energy. The cannons on the wall continued to fire and he lobbed several bolts on energy in their general direction. Together Cole and Armel reached the very edge of the inner city wall and then Cole leaped, using a burst of magic to contract his muscles, and send him sailing into the air. Armel followed in his wake, nimbly flying through the air, zipping over the wall, and then landing next to Cole. The soldiers atop the wall were taken completely off guard, and Cole began to riddle them with sizzling bolts of energy.

“Get the gate!” He shouted as a knot of soldiers opened fire.

Armel ignored Cole's orders, and instead threw out his hands, kicking up a massive stream of wind. The winds struck the soldiers, disrupting their aim. Armel flicked his hands again, and for a fraction of a second, Cole could see something incorporeal whiz through the air. The scythe, formed from compressed air slashed at the soldiers, tearing deep wounds in their flesh, and in the stone around them. With their combined efforts, Cole and Armel managed to clear the wall, and then dropped down into the inner city.

There were no guards on this side of the wall, and using magic to enhance his strength, Cole began to push the gates open. The large stone doorway groaned, and then a crack appeared as the gates parted. His back threatened to give out, and then fingers wrapped around the edges of the gate, hauling them open. With one massive effort, Cole and the Kaldriens hauled the inner city gates open.

“Into the city!” Saniyya cried. The attackers poured in like water rushing to fill a ditch, and Cole had to dive out-of-the-way to avoid being trampled. “Capture their leaders!”

“Men of Achland, of Kaldry, unite as one!” Fiona screamed, sabre held high. “CHARGE!”
Chapter 39

Fiona could not help but stand in awe, watching as a host of Kaldriens at her command, poured into inner Al-katal. Only a few days ago such a sight would have terrified Fiona, now it only exhilarated her. The rage that had been awakened within the lower castes was frightening, and she wondered what the future might bring. For a generation Achland had preached that only its influence and power kept the world safe from Felviar and Úruush, but now she saw the power inherent in the kelvish people, and the possibility that Achland may have been wrong. Fiona did not have the time to dwell on such thoughts though, revenge was what drove her; revenge and duty. Daniel, Allen, Jenkins, they would all die for assuming they could challenge her authority. Cole might be correct, these men might have been manipulated by some secretive coven of warlocks, but Fiona did not care, they would die either way.

Ian, Hutchins, and the others followed Fiona as she led the Kaldriens onward, charging head long into the inner city. Consortium soldiers fired from entrenched positions along the wall, doing their best to slow the charge. Fiona issued orders with a few simple points and Matthew responded, forming the Achlish soldiers into a perfect unit. While she had nothing but loathing for Allen and Jenkins, Fiona still felt disturbed ordering the deaths of the Consortium guards, they were her countrymen, she had fought to protect them, and now she was ordering their deaths.

Fiona buried that thought away, beneath the realization that she did not care about ordering the deaths of Kaldriens. It was a strange thing for her to realize how subtly racist her time in Kaldry had made her, and she found that it actually disturbed her. As Fiona lobbed a grenade towards a squad of entrenched men, she mused on the fact that perhaps when this was over it would be best to leave Kaldry all together. Between her father's death, and the events of the last few days, Kaldry now held to many conflicting emotions for her to truly function as an impartial commander.

Cole rejoined Fiona and her men after the inner city gate was opened, but he seemed diminished, tired. The pale Spellweaver had appeared troubled when they entered Al-katal, but now he looked even worse. There were dark bags under Cole's eyes, his skin had taken on a yellowish hew, and he kept rubbing at his temples.

“Something wrong?” Fiona asked. She took cover behind a large palm tree, firing on enemies entrenched on the other side of the gardens.

Even with her Steam-armour, Fiona had to be careful. The armour was missing several key components, including both Grappler-gauntlets, the lower fauld, the Spaulders and back part of the Cuirass. Fiona had supplemented this with pieces of armour provided by the Selther. The armour would still function, though would not enhance her physical abilities, and with so many pieces missing the protection it afforded was limited.

“I'm fine,” Cole replied. The stretch of land immediately surrounding the gates was mostly cultivated jungle and the Consortium had taken cover along a shorter wall that ran along the main road. “The energy is growing stronger though. It's, it's like some weird sound throbbing inside my head. I can't really explain it. Its getting stronger the closer we get to.....wait I know where its coming from!”

“Where?” Saniyya asked, appearing beside Fiona without a sound. The two women opened fire, clearing out the Consortium soldiers that crouched behind the wall.

“It's very obvious actually, damn I am an idiot.” Cole smacked himself on the forehead. “They need the death., ohh it makes perfect sense. They are conducting the ritual inside Nal-katal! They are in the old mausoleums!”

Fiona broke cover, sprinting across the open road. She fired twice, killing two more Consortium guards, then hurled herself over the wall, shooting a third man before he had time to react. Cole dropped down next to Fiona, hands bristling with indigo energy, while Saniyya dropped down on his
“Then let us go,” said the Kaldrien woman.

“No,” Cole replied. Off to the left, Fiona could see several Consortium soldiers picking their way through the dappled light of the trees. Cole casually swished his hand in their direction and the surrounding shadows erupted into a flurry of claws and mouths that tore the men apart, their screams echoing through the trees. Fiona, a hardened soldier, could taste bile in her throat, and fought the urge to vomit. “Saniyya, stay here. Help Fiona.”

“I won't leave my brother!” Saniyya shouted. The trio pushed forward, taking a small outpost along the road.

“Cormag and the other warlocks are enemies beyond your skill. I must face them, alone. No one else dies because of me.”

“I was the only one to wound him if you recall!” Saniyya fired several quick shots, one nicking a Consortium guard in the shin. The man dove forward, cartwheeling through the air when Saniyya’s second shot took him in the chest. “You need me.”

“Yes I do,” Cole replied, in a tone so utterly romantic Fiona could do nothing but roll her eyes. “I also need you safe.”

“Can we keep the lovers quarrel off the battle field?” Fiona asked. She fired several shots before breaking cover, firing again, and diving behind another tree. “Cole get out of here!”

“I'll be back,” Cole said, before grabbing Saniyya around the waist and pulling her into a quick kiss, “and I'll have Sanyo with me.”

After losing the gate, the Consortium redoubled its efforts to hold off the invading force. Dozens of Consortium men, clad in full Steam-armour clashed with the Kaldriens. The casualties were staggering, and yet the Kaldriens fought on, with some of the kelves actually matching the Steam-armour blow for blow. Kelves were of course a good deal stronger than most of the other races of the world, but Fiona had never believed it possible they could match the sheer power of Achlish steam-technology, and she wondered just what sort of power had now been unleashed upon the world.

The inner city, composed mostly of gardens and walled mansions, provided little in the way of cover, which proved to be a great boon. Unlike the outer city, here the Consortium guards could not entrench themselves very easily. Elephants rampaged through the city, breaking the delicately constructed firing lines most Achlish soldiers relied upon, while Kaldriens charged in, engaging the guards in melee combat. Even as Fiona fought alongside the Kaldriens, she did her best to calculate how she would beat them, and found it rather difficult. It was humbling in a way to see standard Achlish tactics completely and utterly crushed by an enemy most of her fellows considered savage at best.

By now, the battle to take Al-katal had broken into several distinct parts. Fiona lead her men and close to fifty Selther, Saniyya included, up the main avenue of the inner city. Matthew had splintered off, leading the assault on the Consortium compound, which oddly, was already burning. Fiona found that odd, but with the chaos that had enveloped the city, and the hatred the lower castes held for the Consortium, she saw it as a logical outcome of the attack. At this stage the outer city was no doubt completely lost to the Consortium, so hopefully Hadiya would be able to gain some measure of control over the rowdy lower castes. Bhaskar and Erik should be arriving soon as well, so now all that was left was to ensure Daniel and the Ra'kala did not escape.

The fighting grew fiercer the closer they came to the High Vishen's palace. The main river rock causeway, lined with soaring arches hiding Kaldrien heroes in shadowed niches, turned into a killing field. A new river now flowed over those rocks, a river of blood. Fiona and the others made steady progress, slowly working their way up arch by arch. Gunfire and explosions tore apart the fragile stone carvings, obliterating years of culture and work in an instant.
Fiona continued to fight, but could feel a growing sense of unease. The Consortium had committed many lives to holding the causeway, but so far she had not seen any sign of Jenkins. The Consortium Colonel was not the type of man to lead from the rear, and his continued absence was troubling. Even without Jenkins, the Consortium force was formidable, they had plenty of men in Steam-armour, and everyone of their fighters was heavily armed.

In some cruel twist of fate that same technological superiority proved to be the Consortium's weakness. Ian, his high powered hunting rifle loaded with armour piercing rounds, was able to kill many of the men before they even drew close. Armel also proved himself against the Consortium force. Though the Cold Iron dampened his magic, Armel was still able to stagger the hulking Steam-armour with sudden fierce wind gusts. In their arrogance, the Consortium had not committed any Spellweavers to Kaldry, and so Armel was given free rein to scatter the unprotected Consortium forces.

“To think Cole wanted you to stay behind,” said Saniyya. Armel sent another swirling vortex of razor sharp wind hurtling towards a cluster of enemy soldiers, breaking their lines and allowing the Selther to surge forward. “Perhaps I should abandon Cole and instead turn my attention to you. Your young, but that might be better, means you don't have any bad habits I would need to break.”

“Uhh...that.” Armel turned a violent shade of crimson.

“If anything, Armel's dedication proves his loyalty to the crown,” said Ian. He opened fire on the Consortium guard, blowing limbs off with a single shot of his high powered rifle. “With the right patronage, and confirmation of noble heritage, he could prove to be an eligible match for any noble citizen. Of course she would have to be rescued first. Armel, think you can make it onto that third story balcony up there?”

Fiona looked up to where Ian was pointing. The lower floors of the palace had been barricaded to prevent easy access from the ground, but the upper stories were still open. With a bit of luck, a lone flier could easily infiltrate the palace. It would be dangerous, but Armel was small, and skilled in the Weave. If anyone could snatch Helen out from under the Consortium's nose. it would be the elf boy.

“I should be able to,” said Armel. “Do I have the Colonel's approval to leave the battlefield and affect a rescue of Princess Helen Ellery?”

“At least you have the decency to ask, unlike some of our company,” said Fiona. “Permission granted Apprentice Fauchere. Do your country proud.”

* * *

Armel zoomed through the air, as Fiona and the others pressed in on the Consortium. The soldiers had gained the final arch, and now there was only open ground between them and the palace. As he flew along the open ground, he spotted several Consortium sharpshooters taking up firing positions along the palace roof. Armel banked away from the third floor balcony, hugging close to the palace wall. He buzzed past the gunmen, and then leaned back, looping around and blasting the men along the roof with his wind-stream. The men stumbled back, giving Fiona and her men a chance to rush across the open ground.

Armel continued through the loop, getting an upside down view of Fiona and her men taking cover against the palace walls. His stunt brought him parallel to the ground, the he banked up again, and dropped onto the balcony. The sound of battle died away, as Armel stalked into the palace, drawing his dagger as he did so.

Before today the battle of New Thertan Armel would never have considered using his powers so liberally. But after he had rescued Thomas, Armel found that something had changed. He was no longer tired after using his magic, indeed the more energy he used, the more powerful he felt. Armel did not even have to reach for his magic any more to see the colours swirling on the wind and as he ran along he could feel the magic surging through his veins, making him stronger and faster than before.

Consortium soldiers pounded through the hallways, running to reinforce their lines before Fiona
and the others could break through. Armel, well versed in the arts of being “invisible” stole from shadow to shadow, darting past the soldiers, as he continued to hunt for Helen. He had at least a general idea of how the palace was laid out, but he couldn't be sure where Helen would be detained.

There was a flurry of commotion down in the courtyard, but Armel ignored it. But now Fiona had most likely breached the doors, and begun her assault on the Consortium proper. Instead, Armel dashed down another hallway, ducking back behind a large potted plant when he heard voices and footsteps approaching. The band of soldiers dashed past, and he waited several moments before jumping out, and running back down the hall the soldiers had come from. He turned a corner, just in time to slam straight into Mohar. Armel fell to the floor, dagger slipping free of his grasp.

“Well if it isn't the elf boy,” drawled Mohar. He wore a light leather tunic, and there was a sword belted at his side, though doubtless his father, Mohan, never intended him to use it. “I heard you were dead.”

“Not yet,” said Armel. He drew his feet up under him, ready to spring into action at the slightest provocation.

“I'll have to fix that.”

Armel darted to the side, while Mohar drew his sword with an entirely unnecessary flourish. Armel was able to recover his dagger, and rush Mohar before the other boy had even gotten into his ready stance. He lunged, and Mohar batted the dagger away. The Kaldrien princeling had good form, and he was strong, but he was also flashy, needlessly swinging his thin sword through the air as he slashed at Armel. Even being at a disadvantage because of his dagger, Armel was able to parry each of Mohar's attacks before responding with a few quick jabs of his own. After several seconds, he saw that Mohar wasn't really aiming for him, instead the kelf boy was aiming for Armel's dagger, something no competent swordsmen, or street fighter in Armel's case, ever did.

Armel knew he could have used magic to end the fight quickly, but he wanted to beat Mohar fairly, or at least put up a decent enough fight that he embarrassed the other boy when he did resort to magic. He duck under another of Mohar's high cuts, and the Kaldrien boy overbalanced as if he had been expecting Armel to meet his blade. Armel drove his knee into Mohar's stomach, and then grabbed the other boy by the forearm. Using just a touch of magic, he spun around, and tossed Mohar to the ground. Mohar struck the marble floor with bone shattering force. Armel did not wait for his enemy to regain his footing, instead he dived atop the Mohar pressing his dagger up against the older boy's throat.

“Where is Helen?” Armel demanded.

“Second floor, in the library,” Mohar swallowed. “Please don't kill me.”

Armel snorted, then brained Mohar in the temple with the hilt of his dagger. Mohar went limp, and Armel peeled the boy's sword out of his hand. Instead of taking the stairs, Armel simply leaped over the banister and flew down a level. There were two guards stationed outside the library doors, rifles held at the ready. Instead of sneaking up on them, Armel charged, flinging his dagger at the closest guard.

The blade spun once, and then struck the closest guard hilt first. Blood gushed, as the man's nose shattered, and before he could respond, Armel swept the guards feet out from under him with a quick gust of wind. The other guard reacted faster, but by now Armel was so close the only thing the man could do was attempt to bash him with the butt of his rifle. Armel caught the blow on the flat of Mohar's sword, but the force of the blow wrenched the thin blade out of his hand. The soldier aimed a swift kick at Armel, and the elf boy leaped back, before throwing his hands out and blasting the man with a bolt of lighting.

Armel gasped as the Consortium soldier was flung back, crashing through the doors, and landing in a twitching heap on the library floor. Armel had not intended to strike the man with such
force, indeed he had not even intended to conjure a bolt of lightning. The guard writhed in pain on the floor and for a moment Armel felt sick. He had fought and injured men before, he had even killed them, but never so easily, or by causing such visible pain. The guard groaned and staggered to his feet, just as Helen swung a heavy paddle into the man's head.

"Impressive entry," said Helen. She poked at the man with the paddle's handle, checking to ensure that he would stay down. "I'm going to assume that your here to rescue me?"

"Yes..I," Armel began before Helen pulled him into a quick kiss. In reality it only lasted a few seconds, but for Armel the kiss lasted several life times. "So...then...should we get going."

"Yes, we should," Helen bent down and scooped up one of the guard's discarded rifles. With clearly practised familiarity, Helen checked the clip, unlocked the safety, and cocked the lever action. "Let's go."

* * *

Armel's intervention on the roof provided Fiona and others the perfect opportunity to begin their assault on the palace doors. The scant Consortium force inside the palace courtyard crumpled, and fell back, slowly closing the main gate behind them. Saniyya surged ahead of the others, and dove through the gate, blades whirling as she hacked into the soldiers trying to close it. Not to be out done, Fiona dropped to one knee, and began to pick off the men surrounding Saniyya, several of whom had drawn their side arms.

"I had them under control," said Saniyya as Fiona and the others slipped through the gates.

"I couldn't let you have all the fun," Fiona replied. Ian and several other Kaldriens hauled the gates all the way open, and then flooded into the courtyard where only a few weeks earlier, the Consortium had hosted a ball to welcome Cole and the dignitaries to Kaldry."Besides what would I do if you died. Its not like someone with your skills is easy to find."

"Glad to see you two ladies are getting along," Ian said. The large man stopped and looked about, his hazel eyes sweeping over the balconies and the soaring staircase that led up to the main interior of the palace. Consortium soldiers guards swarmed them, clashing with the Kaldrien warriors who assaulted the palace.

The Consortium fought hard to keep control of the palace, but where slowly pushed back. More Kaldriens poured in through the open gates, while Ian and Fiona fought to take control of the entryway. Multiple pillars, spaced around the room provided cover from the Consortium sharpshooters on the upper levels.

"Ian!" Helen shouted from above them.

Fiona looked up, watching as Helen and Armel dashed along the upper level. Ian, engaged in a shoot out with a Rankalan soldier on the stairs, ducked around a pillar and discharged two quick shots, cleanly killing his assailant. Ian looked up at Helen and chuckled.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-ta.

Jenkins, machine gun in hand, dropped down from the second floor, gunning down three Kaldriens as he fell. The Consortium Colonel, dressed in full a suit of Steam-armour stomped along, the screaming barrels of his rotating machine gun trained on Ian.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-ta.

The bullets tore into Ian, ripping deep holes in the man's chest, spraying those behind him in a cloud of blood.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-ta.

Up on the balcony Helen began to scream as Ian toppled back, his mane of shaky brown hair matted with gore.

Helen hefted the rifle she carried, and fired at Jenkins. The rifle bucked violently in the girl's hands. Her shots went wild, while some bounced off the heavy plate armour Jenkins wore, rebounding
around the room. Jenkins turned, and swept the machine gun over the balcony. Wood and marble exploded as the bullets tore apart the finely crafted masonry. Arnel dove, dragging Helen down out of the line of fire. Fiona, sprinted to Ian's side, by even before she knelt next to him, she new the leonine man was dead.

With sudden shout of rage, Fiona sprang up and fired on Jenkins, emptying an entire clip into the man's back. Wearing his heavy armour, the Consortium colonel barely noticed. Magazine spent, Fiona tossed the rifle aside and drew her sabre. Up on the balcony, Helen opened fire again, bracing the rifle on the railing, her shots still bouncing uselessly off the colonel's armour. Jenkins turned about slowly, machine gun cutting a swath of destruction through the mass of Kaldrien warriors. Fiona dove to the side, avoiding the spray of bullets, while Helen continued to fire at the man who had murdered her bodyguard. Fiona ran at Jenkins, zigzagging back and forth, to throw off his aim. She closed with him, then slashed her sabre across the barrel of his machine gun, cleanly severing the barrels. The weapon kicked back in Jenkins' hands, slamming into the his helmet. Jenkins reeled backwards, just as Allen lunged, short sword in hand, aiming for the small of Fiona's back.

Fiona whirled, catching the man's thrust on the flat of her blade, and throwing it aside. Allen, dressed light leather armour, rolled with the force of the blow, coming up in Fiona's blind-side. Allen plunged the short blade into her back, slipping it in between the folds of her scavenged Steam-armour. She grimaced and twisted about, ripping the warlock conspirator's blade out of her back. Blood splattered the ground, as Fiona chopped her sabre down. Allen gasped as Fiona laid his back open. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jenkins draw his sabre and charge. Fiona threw her arm out, using her gauntlet to deflect Jenkins' blow.

The force of the blow drove Fiona to her knees, and she could hear Jenkins laughing through the grill of his helmet. He brought the sabre high up over his head, holding it in two hands, readying himself for a killing blow. The sabre came down and Fiona wheeled about, tripping Allen as he tried to flee. Jenkins plunged the sabre into the ground, slicing a deep furrow in the marble. Fiona lunged, slashing at Jenkins, engaging him head on.

Allen skittered away, as Fiona and Jenkins fell into a steady beat, each fully committed to killing the other. The battle around Fiona dissolved, and she poured all of her focus into her blade. Blows fell like rain as the two colonels fought, blades flashing through the air, drawing sparks as the skipped along the surface of the Steam-armour. She spotted an opening in Jenkin's defence, but Allen attacked in that same instance. Fiona twisted to the side, letting Allen's momentum to carry him into Jenkins. The two men barely avoided a collision, each stumbling back to regain his footing. Fiona lunged again, aiming a killing at Jenkins' neck, then a bullet pinged off her armour.

Fiona head whipped about, and she watched Daniel level a rifle at her from the second story landing. She dashed behind the pillar, bullets tearing deep chunks in the marble. Fiona glared at the Consortium Administrator, just as Jenkins recovered, and pressed the attack. The thuggish colonel swung his sabre with both hands, Fiona ducked under the blow, narrowly avoiding being decapitated for the second time. Jenkins' momentum carried him forward, and the sabre sliced into the marble pillar. He yanked the blade to the side, trying to rip it free. Fiona charged, fully committing herself to the attack, just as Allen lunged again, once again aiming to stab her in the back, while she was distracted, and unable to respond. Steel rang against steel, as Saniyya dove into the fry, parrying Allen's sword with her shimmering Terror-pede blade.

Jenkins wrenched his sword free, and together he and Allen pressed the attack. Without saying a single word, the two women turned to face their enemies. Fiona and Saniyya fought back to back, moving in perfect tandem to cover each other's flank. The fight was dirty, and the combatants often slammed together, aiming punches and blows at vulnerable points as often as they tried to stab each other. Saniyya caught one of Jenkins' scything cuts and turned it aside with the flat of her blade, while
Fiona slashed her sabre along the man's abdomen. Steel screeched, as Fiona's sabre tore a deep hole in Jenkins' armour. The Colonel staggered back, and Daniel fired again, blowing a hole through Fiona's shoulder.

"We need to get to Daniel," Fiona spat, blood gushing from her wounds. Allen lunged and she was barely able to block the blow. Daniel's shot punched cleanly through shoulder, it hurt like hell and combined with the injuries she had suffered from Allen, Fiona was finding it difficult to lift her arms.

Saniyya caught Allen's next blow, but Jenkins lashed out at the same moment. His' sabre kissed Saniyya's cheek, drawing a thin line from nose to jaw. Saniyya laughed the blow off, and bounded up the stairs, dancing around and hamstring a Consortium guard who had rushed her with his bayonet. Fiona followed the other woman up, and together they began to ascend the wooden stairs backward, still locked in combat with Jenkins and Allen. The fighting was fierce, but the women now had the high ground, and with it a distinct advantage. Fiona flipped her sabre into her left hand and rained blows down upon Allen, almost forcing him over the railing that ran up the stairwell, while Saniyya switched to her khukuris, slipping inside of Jenkins guard and tearing deep gashes in the sides of his armour.

Swords clashed and wood groaned, as the four combatants fought their way up the stairs. Jenkins, in full Steam-armour that weighed several hundred pounds, lumbered forward. His heavy boot broke through the wood with a crack, and he began to struggle, trying to free his foot. Fiona flicked her sabre through the air, slashing it along the base of Jenkins' helmet. Blood spurted out from between the steel folds of the Colonel's armour, spraying Fiona full in the face. Jenkins tottered for a moment, before overbalancing and crashing through the railing, his leg snapping in half, ripped apart by the weight of his armour. Allen let out a shout of surprise, turned to flee, then Saniyya drove both of her khukuris into his back.

The Selther woman responded immediately, driving both of her khukuris deep into Daniel's chest. Daniel's entire body heaved, as the blades punctured his lungs. Saniyya snarled, and twisted the curved blades around, causing Daniel to convulse. Another gunshot tore a chunk out of the stairs, missing Saniyya by a hair's breadth. Fiona snapped around, watching Daniel dropped his rifle and run along the balcony. She sheathed her sabre, drew her revolver, and levelled it at the fleeing Consortium Administrator. Fiona squeezed the trigger with casual indifference. The bullet blew through Daniel's shin, shattering the bone, and sending the disgraced Consortium Administrator sprawling to the marble floor.

All around the courtyard, Fiona could hear the cheers of the Kaldriens. Slowly, the world opened up again and now she saw that Satesh had been dragged out into the courtyard. The once proud Ra'kala Vishen was dressed in tattered clothes, and bound in chains, though he still held his head high, as a rowdy band of Selther led him out into the courtyard. For a moment, she thought they might kill him then and there, but instead they lashed him to a pillar, alongside a surly looking Mohan and several other captured Ra'kala. Fiona slowly mounted the stairs, savouring the sight of Daniel dragging himself along the on his stomach, desperately trying to escape.

"Seems you've found yourself in spot of trouble," said Fiona. Daniel whimpered and tried to stand. Fiona placed her foot on the small of his back and forced him back down onto the ground. "I, Fiona Walsh, Colonel of the Achlish military and second in command to Lord-Protector Lowell, place you under arrest."

Daniel let out a chocked cry like he meant to say something, but decided against it. Saniyya stalked up next to Fiona, khukuris still wet with Allen's blood.

"We should kill him," said the Selther woman.

"He'll stand trial," Fiona replied, reaching down and grabbing Daniel by the scruff of his neck. The fighting seemed to have died down for the most part, and Fiona let out a sigh, just as the sound on
an explosion split the air. “What the hell?”

“Cole!” Saniyya dashed off.

Fiona dropped Daniel, and ran after the Kaldrien woman, with Armel following close behind. Fiona found Saniyya standing at an open window, staring out at Nal-katal. A billowing cloud of dust rose up from the sprawling mausoleum that was the dead city. As Fiona watched, another explosion rocked Nal-katal, and another dome collapsed, bolts of magic flying through the air. The battle for Al-katal may be over, but it appeared the battle for Kaldry was now coming to a crescendo.
Chapter 40

Cole drew a veil of shadows around himself, and began to run along the edge of the inner city. He had left the battle far behind, but the sharp crack of gunfire, and the roar of cannons, still split the air. The rich and powerful of Kaldry had so far been spared the horrors of war, but Cole had a feeling that today things would be different. The Selther and their allies had driven a wedge straight into the heart of Al-katal. The Ra'kala and Consortium would fall and in their place a new order would rise. The parallels to Achlish politics, the poor rising against the rich, were disturbing, and Cole did his best to force those thoughts out of his mind.

Nal-katal was visible over the high walls of the inner city, and using a small burst of magic, Cole leaped up to the top of the wall. The building energy that he had felt upon entering Kaldry had turned into a full assault upon his senses. From atop the wall, Cole looked out at the collection of tombs and mausoleums that made up Nal-katal, and thought he could see the energy swirling through the air. When he closed his eyes, he could feel the same dull pulsing he had felt in the presence of the warlocks pressing against his temples, causing his head to pound, and his teeth to ache.

Cole frowned, the scar on his palm was tingling again, but he ignored it and dropped to the ground, running through the twisting streets of outer Al-katal. The streets were tight and shrouded in shadow and smoke. By now the battle had begun to calm, and as he ran along, Cole spotted Hadiya standing before a crowd. The hooded shaman spoke with conviction, using he authority to keep the crowd calm.

"Today the Consortium has fallen," said Hadiya. "The tyranny of the Ra'kala has been broken, but we must not give into hate. Now is a time for forgiveness and reconciliation between the peoples of Kaldry. At the same time, Achland has proven herself to be a true ally. A new generation of men have come to power, men who wish to make amends for the wrongs of the past. Once the Ra'kala and their allies in the Consortium are captured, we shall lay down arms and enter into a new age of peace."

Cole skirted the edge of the crowd, but dropped his glamour just long enough for Hadiya to see him. He met the shaman's gaze and returned her smile, before slipping off into the shadows. There were still patches of conflict in the streets, but for the most part it appeared that Al-katal had fallen to the invaders. Cole turned up a broad avenue and found himself passing through the same open bazaar where Essar's funeral procession had been ambushed on its way to Nal-katal. As he ran up the hillock leading towards Nal-katal, he heard the blast of a train whistle and turned back to see several trains pulling into the station. Even from so far away, Cole could hear shouts of joy, welcoming Bhaskar and Erik to the city.

Ignoring everything else, Cole turned back to the cluster of tombs that made up Nal-katal. The dead city was nearly half the size of the living Al-katal. The city was bordered by a wall of white marble, while the tombs themselves were carved from a variety of materials. Some were black, others white, and Cole could even see some that had been covered in statues carved from man sized hunks of jade. He approached the dead city slowly, using his magic to probe the area around him. Not only was the energy of the warlocks' ritual growing in intensity, but the whole city of Nal-katal gave off a sense of foreboding.

There were no gates in the walls around Nal-katal, instead the walls were removed, and then rebuilt once a momentum was complete. Because of all the commotion surrounding Essar's funeral, the wall around his mausoleum had never been rebuilt. Cole stepped over the boundary between the two cities, and immediately felt a change in the air. A tingling feeling ran up his spine, and he noticed that the sun light here was lessened, as it twilight had come early. Cole set off at quick trot down the twisting footpaths that wound their way around the ancient tombs. Statues with dead eyes leered at him from shadowed niches, and for a moment he though he saw some of them moving. Cole shivered again
as another wave of energy assailed his senses.

All the sepulchres were sealed, the arching entry ways blocked by great stone doors. Cole followed the building sense of dread into the heart of the necropolis, walking back through the centuries, to a time before the Achlish had arrived in Kaldry. The further into Nal-katal Cole penetrated, the closer the mausoleums grew, leaning in over the pathways, and before long the sky vanished completely. He passed into a domed rotunda, and found himself facing seven doors arrayed at each of the cardinal directions and their derivatives. Cole had entered from the south. Unlike the rest of the tombs, these archways were open, gaping black maws, the belched clouds of mist across the black marble floor.

Cole closed his eyes and tried to focus, pushing away the dull throbbing of the scar on his palm. The same vague tonal pattern, that faint resonance he had felt in the presence of the warlocks had now turned into an all out scream, threatening all his senses and causing his hackles to rise. Focusing all his will, he cast the droning aside, and reached out, searching for the source of the energy. colours swirled before his eyes, leaking out from the north eastern passage. Cole summoned a small mote of light, and stepped into the pitch black tunnel. The blue light of conjured mote cast strange shadows down the passage and he began his journey into the very heart of Nal-katal.

The passage way sloped downwards and soon began to widen. As Cole descended deeper and deeper into the ground, the air began to grow colder and the shadows grew deeper, soon turning into pools of darkness. He shuddered as he realized that even if he wanted to, he would not be able to command these shadows to do his bidding. In reality, Cole never truly commanded the shadows, instead he manipulated the light that surrounded them. There was no light here, save for the sliver of light he had brought with him. Cole knew that if the mote were to be extinguished he would never be able to conjure another to replace it.

The passage widened into a hallway, then into a chamber, and then, into a soaring cathedral. Cole could see none of it, but could only guess at the dimensions of the room by the echoing sound of his own footsteps. The darkness pressed against his eyes, while the acoustic pressure of the warlocks' power tore at his eardrums. He continued to follow the flow of power.

Cole turned down another hallway, and found himself facing a massive statue, illuminated by a column of light radiating down from a hole in the ceiling. After such a long time in the dark, the light was blinding and he brought a hand up to shield his eyes. Blinking, Cole lowered his arm and saw that the chamber he had entered was different from the others. He was deep beneath Nal-katal, and now the masonry had shifted back to that simple un-mortared limestone style he had seen scattered across the country. Cole had found one of the old temples, watched over by an ancient Ronic guardian.

The statue here was of a woman, clothed in light armour, with four arms, each clutching a curved khukuri. Unlike the others, this statue had been brightly painted in reds and silvers. Cole took a deep breath and stepped forward. Again he felt the power of the ancient protective wards laid down by the Ronics. For a moment he considered fleeing, then he looked up into the statues eyes. For a moment Cole as looked into the statues eyes, he thought he saw Saniyya staring back at him. He mustered his strength and took another step, and then another, never taking his eyes of the Fire rubies set into the statues eyes.

Once past the Guardian, Cole turned down another hallway, following it further and further down. He continued along in darkness, and soon another sound, a real sound, was added to the one that tore at his ears. It was the sound of voices, dozens of them, chanting in the same low pitch. The chant was strange, comprised of words that seemed to have no beginning and no end. Because of the nature of the chambers Cole walked, through he had no way to tell where exactly the voices were coming from, or if there were really any voices at all. Instead, he continued to follow the flow of energy, watching it snake and dance through the darkness. The floor began to slope upwards again and Cole
soon found himself following a spiralling ramp up, yet the air continued to grow more stale. The stone around him had changed again, as had the workmanship, but he could not remember seeing it change. It was as if he had stepped through the veil between reality and dreams, passing into a world so mutable his senses could barely make sense of their surroundings.

Gone was the rough limestone, instead the surrounding walls appeared to be some sort of strange volcanic basalt. Red streaks ran through the stone, swirling through the darkness, and drawing Cole's eye along their strangely geometric lines. The light of Cole's summoned mote played along the stone for a moment reflecting off the stone in some places, and being absorbed by it in others. Even as Cole continued upwards, he had the strange feeling that he was going deeper into the earth. This place, whatever it was, was ancient, constructed in epochs long forgotten, a crypt lost to the centuries and one that should have remained lost. The Ronics had tried to seal it away, killing those who built these places, and constructing the Guardians to ward off anyone who grew to curious, but they had failed. Those who worshipped in these foul places had survived, the warlocks had re-emerged, and their foul rituals, powered by blood, were once again being practised, though to what ends Cole could not be sure. Based upon his research, all he knew was that these foul practices were not simply contained within Kaldry, instead the warlocks had conducted their rituals all over the world.

Cole's chest was heaving when he emerged out into the far end of a broad chamber semicircular tomb, lit entirely by an eldritch purple light, that emanated from nowhere and from everywhere at the same time. The round walls of the chamber continued up and up, and Cole felt a chill run down his spine when he realized he was in a massive sacrificial pit, just like those he had observed in the other ruins. Figures in dark cloaks stood at the far end of the chamber, hands upraised as their voices continued to chant those same strange words. Hundred curving lines were etched into the stone, connected by a series of chalk lines, forming a perfect geometric figure. Cole watched the glowing energy spread along the chalk lines, bringing the runes to life. His eyes traced along the edge of the strange pattern, and the press of energy upon his senses returned as blinding, deafening pain, that threatened his sanity.

Cole dropped to his knees, clutching his head in his hands. His head threatened to tear itself in half, and still he fought. He cast aside the pain and stood up. He took one step, the another, before colliding with a solid magical barrier. Cole stepped back, hand stretched out to stroke the air. The barrier that blocked his approached crackled as his finger touched it, and he knew that unless he could discover some way to break the ward, the way forward would be forever blocked.

The warlocks, so enraptured in their blasphemous chanting, did not even notice that Cole had approached them. They stood in a circle the around glowing pentagram, heads bowed as if in prayer. The light spread out from them, connecting the lines of the pentagram with the red veins that ran through the basalt. More radiant runes covered the robes of the warlocks, pulsing along in time to the strange purple light that illuminated the chamber. Sparks leapt up from ritual circle, crackling over the warlocks' chests, and diffusing into the glimmering silver pins they wore.

Cole had a sudden flash of insight, and drew out the warlock's brooch he had carried with him since taking it off Braden's corpse. In the flickering light of the chamber the patina appeared to move. He flipped the pin over and undid the clasp, revealing the pointed stud. He pricked his finger, then wiped the blood onto the silver. The metal soaked up the offering, the blemish darkening, forming another blob of patina. Cole stepped forward and passed through the barrier.

_Ahh so this is why they carry such an identifiable marker_, thought Cole. _They must sacrifice some of their own blood to be allowed within the bounds of the ritual._

Statues of strange creatures that Cole could not even begin to describe peered down on the proceedings, watching them with dead, cold eyes. Cormag, hooded and cloaked like the others, but taller than all the rest, stood at the furthest point of the circle away from Cole. At his right two men
held Sanyo up, preventing the Selther druid from collapsing.

Sanyo had been stripped down to a loincloth, and his skin had been slashed open in a series of deep cuts that mirrored the glowing runes upon the robes of the revealers, and the markings upon the floor. Looking at them all together, Cole could see that the markings literally made those standing around the pentagram part of it, incorporating them body and soul into the ritual.

“Bth'ml uth oktp tah tra'djt,” they chanted, the voices echoing back off the stone. “Bth'ml uth rqef vopz'tel.”

Cole averted his gaze from the warlocks, and instead looked down at the marks upon the floor. Memories flooded back as his eyes traced along the edge of the pentagram. It was larger than the one he had etched into the floor of his bedroom, but other than that, they were almost identical. Unbidden, memories of a time before Cole's magic had manifested itself bubbled up out of his subconscious, mingling with the otherworldly atmosphere of the room.

Cole lay face down in the dirt with the other boy atop him, his hands entwined in Cole's hair. The crowd around them cheered as Cole's face was driven repeatedly into the ground. There was a shout, and then Cormag bowled the bully off Cole, while Thomas pulled him up off the ground. That had been the moment Cole had broken, allowing his anger to consume him. He had delved into tomes of lost lore, long forbidden, searching for an outlet for his rage.

He had cleared the space in his room, a small patch of bare wood, and set to drawing the strange shapes, copying them from the crumbling books he had stolen from shops in the poor districts of Thertan. After completing the patterns, Cole drew more figures upon his skin, and then produced a knife, slicing open his palm to contribute the blood that the rite required. Cold flames had enveloped Cole, bursting up out of the pentagram as and the Well Dressed Man appeared to him for the first time.

Cole fought back the memories, took another step forward, and again found his way blocked by an invisible barrier. He looked up at the chanting warlocks and was again inspired by their appearance. Raising two fingers to his face, he began to chant along with the warlocks. Cole did not know the words, and yet he spoke them. As he spoke, he drew shapes upon his flesh with magic, tracing along the lines he had drawn there as a boy. Cole dragged his fingers along his flesh, leaving behind burning lines of indigo energy. The pain was maddening, yet his skin showed no sign of mortification. Once the etchings were complete, he stepped forward, lifting his hand and pushing it through the barrier. Once through, the resonance grew to a fevered pitch and only Cole's continued chanting kept his mind from shattering.

“Sanyo,” Cole called between syllables of diabolic chanting that threatened to tie his tongue in knots. “Your sister sent me to find you! I do not believe it wise to keep her waiting, she would be rather cross I think.”

“Cole,” Cormag growled. He pulled his hood back and looked up from the pentagram. He had abandoned the visage of the prophet, and wore his own face once again. The man's yellow eyes glowed with flickering energy and his golden hair had turned black under the eldritch light. “You are too late my old friend, you have failed.”

“I am disinclined to believe that.” Cole let out a nervous laugh, covering his terror with his usual swaggering sarcasm. “You tried to start a war between the castes of Kaldry. I have united them. You tried to set Achland against the Consortium. I prevented that. You wanted bloodshed, I gave it to you, while also preventing it!”

“Hehehaahahaa.” Cormag threw his head back and began to laugh, his eyes glittering with insanity. Around him the other warlocks continued to chant, taking no notice of the conversation happening in their midst. “I was not talking of the petty concerns of mortals. You may have delayed our plans here, but such inconveniences are irrelevant. All it takes is one death to undo years of peace, and you have only had moments of it. The inevitable is called such for a reason Cole. Nothing can stop that
which is coming.”

“I beg to differ.”

“I bet you do.” Cormag took a step forward, gingerly avoiding the glowing lines carved into the stone. Sanyo's head lulled to the side and his eyelids fluttered slightly. “You should have accepted Allen's offer to join us. You could have been great Cole. You could have had that which you desire.”

“I can still have it,” Cole replied. “You see I left out the best part, I am responsible for every victory today. All of it was because of me. I shall be remembered for all time, while you will fade away.”

“Huhuhaha, Cole, Cole, you shall be the one to fade away, buried here beneath tombs long forgotten.”

The air around Cole ignited suddenly, but instead of trying to counter it, he channelled the heat down into the stone beneath his feet. The basalt gobbled up the heat, just as it had the light from Cole's summoned mote. The fire vanished and Cormag rushed across the pentagram, bounding between runes. Azure energy lanced forth from Cole's finger tips, and Cormag leaped out of the way, landing awkwardly to avoid touching the pentagram. The bolts careened through the air, and Cole released the magic, allowing the bolts to fade away. Though he needed to stop the ritual, disrupting its participants would be disastrous if he did not do so carefully. Cormag screamed and launched himself at Cole, his hands engulfed in flames. Cole countered his attack, hands consumed by a nimbus of shimmering blue-black energy.

The warlocks continued to chant, their voices rising like ominous music to accompany Cole and Cormag's duel. By now both men each had learned all of each others tricks. Cormag ignited the air around Cole, but Cole merely moved the heat around, wreathing himself in a protective shield of icicles. Cormag hurled balls of fire at Cole, while Cole drew in close, using them to choke and muffle the flames. Shadows liquefied, and then exploded into a flurry of jagged spikes that hurtled towards Cormag. The warlock's hands ignited and he grabbed the shadows, crushing them in his massive fist. Cole smiled, and the shadows shattered, showering Cormag with hundreds of razor edged shards of energy.

One of the shards of shadow energy sliced along Cormag's jaw. Rubies of blood dripped down the warlocks face, striking the marble with an audible thunk. A ripple of energy blossomed out of the centre of the ritual circle, and Cormag went on the offensive again, lobbing flaming meteors in Cole's general direction, just as Sanyo ripped himself free from the his captor's grasp. Cole dove out of the way of Cormag's attack, and caught of glimpse of something shimmering in the air over the pentagram. Cormag swished his hands through the air, and twin whips of fire materialized in his grasp. The warlock swung the whips down, while Cole rolled to the side. The fire struck the basalt, but did not burn, or even damage it.

A tremor shook the entire chamber and yet the warlocks continued to chant. Cormag roared as he hurled the flaming whips at Cole. The coiling flames whirled through the air and Cole jumped to the side, tucking in his arms as he rolled between the twin walls of flame. He landed, palm to the ground and he looked up. Cormag snapped his fingers sending a jet of flame towards Cole. Cole leaped back, concentrating all his thought on keeping himself alive.

Another tremor rocked the chamber and the chanting reached a fevered pitch. Cole continued to mouth the words along with the warlocks, watching as something began to materialize in the centre of the pit. Sanyo began to convulse and the man holding stepped back. Sanyo arched his back, his face contorted in both ecstasy and pain. The Selther druid began to writhe about and then stopped. Sanyo spun and slammed his fist down into the ground. Rock spikes erupted from the stone, skewering one his captors as they burst up from the basalt.

Cormag attacked again, lightning bolts lancing out from his fingertips. Cole deflected the bolts
and danced away, careful to avoid the glowing runes. The other warlock who had held Sanyo lashed out, slashing at the Selther druid with a long knife. Sanyo ducked under the point of the blade and drove his fingertips into the man's sternum. The warlock doubled over, and was impaled by a second pillar of stone. Cole moved to help his friend, just as Cormag shot a gout of flame at him. Cole leaped back, landing just behind the chanting warlocks, on the very edge of the glowing pentagram. Cormag chuckled and tossed a fireball at Sanyo. It struck him in the chest and knocked him to the ground.

“You always were easy to distract,” said Cormag, as he strode towards the centre of the pentagram. Over the roar of the chanting warlocks Cole could hear Sanyo moaning. Sanyo tried to push himself up, but Cormag put a foot on the kelf's back and forced him back down. “Tell me Cole, what makes a god a god? Is it the worship of the faithful? The foolish belief of mortals? Or the ability to warp reality with one's very presence?”

As Cormag spoke, the lines upon the stone began to glow all the brighter, and the air around the warlocks seem to bend in on itself, as though something was tearing at the fabric of reality. Cole turned to watch as something emerged through the crack, something that should never have existed. Even if he wanted to describe the thing, he knew that describing it would drive him mad. There was nothing there and yet there was. The world seemed to fold in upon itself as a window to another world opened, revealing a realm of twisting insanity. Cole drew in several panting breaths, never moving his foot from where it had landed moments ago, perfectly bisecting one of the lines of the pentagram.

At the same time, a voice filled the chamber. It did not speak, instead a rumble filled the chamber. Pain ripped through Cole's head, as the sound assaulted him, but he stayed standing, struggling against a sound the came from deep within his own skull. There were no words, least not any that he could comprehend, yet the pain brought comprehension, and images flashed through his mind; destruction, death, and the end of mortal existence. The voice spoke to Cole's mind, claws digging into his conscious self, showing him just how insignificant his life was, and the futility of his continued resistance.

“Tell my Cole, if gods warp reality what does that make us?” screamed Cormag, stepping off of Sanyo and striding towards the rift between realities. “A single Spellweaver can violate every natural law. We wield the power of gods. So what must true gods truly be like, if not the void of existence? The very fabric of reality has begun to unwind, and the chains have not yet been severed! Soon now, the power of gods shall be within reach!”

“I would be careful about making such claims if I were you,” said Cole, struggling to silence the voices in his head. He forced the them away, and pointed to where his foot rested upon the glowing runes. “I'll tell you what makes a god a god Cormag. Gods cannot die.”

“NOOOO!!”

Cole swept his foot side ways, obliterating the delicate curve of the pentagram. Cormag's rage was a palpable thing, but even it was drowned by the force of the explosion that tore through the room. The force of the blast was unimaginable. Cole, already swathed in a dozen protective wards was hurled across the room, as violet flames erupted from the glowing pit. The pentagram cracked length wise, and the red veins in the basalt glowed white hot. Cole landed, using all of his magic to root himself to the ground, while at the same time conjuring a shield of shadows around Sanyo's prone form.

The warlocks screamed as energy erupted out of the earth. Cormag had vanished, utterly vaporized by the first blast. Cracking sounds reverberated through the chamber and great chunks of stone crashed down into the chamber, shattering into a million razor sharp fragments when they struck the ground. Cole dashed towards Sanyo, not even noticing the pain as the shards tore into his chest and arms. Instead of attacking, the warlocks ran, frantically clawing at each other as they tried to escape the collapsing chamber. Vents opened in the earth as magma spewed forth.

Cole dropped to one knee next to Sanyo, and checked the kelf's pulse. It was faint, but still
there. He let out a sigh of relief as Sanyo reached up, cupping Cole's chin in his hand. Sanyo was beaten and bloody, but his eyes were focused, alert.

“Cole,” Sanyo croaked as the world collapsed around them. “I think you may have over done it.”

“Maybe,” Cole shrugged. Sanyo reached up and Cole pulled the other man to his feet, holding him in his arms. The passage Cole had come through was blocked, but he could see another one in the distance. “Are you able to run?”

“I'll need help,” said Sanyo. Cole wrapped an arm around Sanyo and helped him to stand. “It's going to be hard, but it's better than the alternative I am sure.”

The earth moaned in pain, as Cole and Sanyo limped along, each man doing his best to support the other. They ran through the darkness, passing out of the strange basalt chamber, into a primitive limestone temple, and then back into the tombs of the Ra'kala. The explosion below had damaged the tombs here and many had begun to collapse. Debris flew through the air, but both men continued on, both only wishing to see the sun one last time before dying.

“We've almost made it,” said Cole. Up ahead he could see the domed rotunda that he had entered before descending into the earth. As far as he could tell there was no way they should have ended up here, but he was not going to question how the architecture of the tombs functioned.

Cole dragged Sanyo across the rotunda, just as the dome cracked. Pieces of marble ripped themselves free of the dome, crashing to the ground in a spray of white rock. Slivers of marble hurtled through the air, tearing into both men with crippling force. Sanyo collapsed, dragging Cole down with him.

“Leave me,” he implored. Sanyo ran a hand down his side and pulled a bloody chunk of marble from his side. “I'm just slowing you down.”

“Not a chance,” Cole growled, readjusting his grip on Sanyo. “I'm not leaving anyone behind again.”

Cole and Sanyo staggered out of the rotunda, bleeding from a dozen wounds just as the dome collapsed entirely. All around them, Cole could see the tombs collapsing as bursts of magical energy exploded up out of the ground. The ran, clinging to each other for support. As they ran Cole could see the ghosts of all those he had abandoned, Cormag, Lisette, and the others, watching him, judging him. He ignored them and continued to run, leaving the past to collapse behind him.

Cole and Sanyo were both exhausted, yet they refused to give up. Even as the ground began to collapse and the work of generations collapsed around them, the two men used magic to deflect any debris that came to close, each weakening his own wards in order to reinforce the others when his magic failed. Cole knew that the effort should have killed him, that he was drawing too deeply into his magical reserves, but he didn't care. They had not escaped from the chambers beneath the earth to die now.

Cole could feel himself fading as they drew within sight of Essar's tomb. Sanyo slapped Cole on the back, and the two put on another burst of speed as the very earth dropped out from under their feet. Cole's vision began to blur, but he thought he could see Saniyya, Armel, and many others standing ahead of him, urging him on. At that moment, Cole knew he was dying, mainly since those people he saw in the distance were standing a plane of pure white nothingness.

Using the last of his strength, Cole ran past the unfinished tomb that would have housed Essar. By now, he could not even feel Sanyo's arm wrapped around his back. He felt nothing as he stumbled and fell forward, into the arms of apparition that had taken on Saniyya's countenance. Explosions still rang in Cole's rang in ears, as he felt something press against his lips. A spark lanced through Cole's body, and he snapped to life again.

“Saniyya,” Cole gasped. He broke the kiss and pulled away. “Saniyya...I...”
“You're alive,” Saniyya replied. Cole was lying in her arms at the edge of a gaping chasm. “We've won Cole, the battle is over.”

Saniyya helped Cole to stand, just in time for him to look out at a crowd of cheering Kaldriens. Even though his entire body ached, he could feel life coursing through him. The crowd's joy was infectious and soon he was laughing and cheering along with the rest of them. It was over, the battle was won, Cole had survived. Even as they cheered, the Well Dressed Man stood aloof from the crowd, watching Cole with a smug smile spread over his wicked, unsettling visage.
Chapter 41

The chamber was dark, which annoyed Cole. The Assembly certainly likes their theatrics, he thought, as the seven panes of sheet metal began to glimmer. The scryings flickered for a moment, then resolved themselves into the images of the seven most influential members of the Assembly; High Chancellor Cameron, Vice Chancellor Sutlen, and ministers Broadbent, Ellery, Hartell, O'Flannery, and Tenning.

“Mr. Travers, thank you for meeting with us,” said the High Chancellor. “We will conduct further inquiry upon your return to Thertan, but we wished to at least begin the dialogue before you left Kaldry.”

“Which is why I suppose you waited three weeks until I was preparing to leave,” Cole remarked, fully aware that such flippant reply would infuriate those gathered.

“Your actions in Kaldry will indeed be of the utmost concern,” Tenning interjected. “Your original orders were to ensure the transfer of power from the Consortium to the Lord-Protector, not to dismantle the caste system in Kaldry.”

“I have not dismantled it Minister,” Cole replied. “Many of the Ra'kala allied with the Consortium in their blunder and in so doing invalidated our offer. If the Ra'kala had maintained their power after the Consortium was ousted we would have seen rebellion on a scale unimaginable.”

“We would have had order,” said Tenning. “Instead you have allowed the people of Kaldry to create their own parliament. They were remain a colony guided by our firm and just hand, not become an independent nation.”

“If I might correct you minister, Lord-Protector Lowell has been appointed as Prime Minister of the Kaldrien parliament,” said Sutlen. “We still maintain control of the colony. In my opinion the matter is closed and any further investigation shall only harm the peace Mr. Travers has created.”

Well at least someone supports my decision, thought Cole. Even if he is only supporting me in order to hide his dealings with the Consortium it's nice to have an ally. “Thank you for the support Vice Chancellor.”

“Sutlen do you really think the Lord-Protector will be able to maintain his power?” Asked Tenning. “What happens when the Kaldriens hold an election and he is supplanted.”

“Progress?” Cole cocked an eyebrow. “Minister, what better way to guide the poor souls of this world than to allow them to build their own democracy? Achland's benevolent guidance has allowed this. You of all people should be praising the Kaldrien people.”

Minister Tenning lapped into a moody silence.

“Vous speak well Mr. Travers,” said Cameron. “Your motives certainly provide insight into your actions. I thank you for taking the time to meet with us.”

* * *

Cole stood upon the docks of New Thertan, watching as the remnants of the Lord-Protector's fleet floated in the harbour, while mulling over his brief meeting with the Assembly. The white fleet had lost several ships to storms, and even more to the Consortium, but most had survived. For some reason he was dreading returning to Achland, even though his brief meeting with the Assembly had gone well enough. A crowd almost as large as the one that had gathered to welcome George to New Thertan came to see Princess Helen off. The simple farewell had turned into a massive celebration of the new era Kaldry was about to enter, but it was one Cole knew he could not be a part of, peace was not something he could ever have.

Of course the celebration was not without its complications. The dissolution of Consortium power had proved problematic, and several large Ra'kalan forces still remained at large. The Assembly wished to try Daniel for treason, while at the same time the newly drafted Kaldrien Parliament had
expressed an interest in trying the man themselves. The disagreement had lead to some political tension, but George had once again proven himself to be an exemplary mediator. To ensure a fair trial, Daniel would go to Achland, but in addition to treason, he would be tried for war crimes as well. The remainder of the Consortium staff and armed forces would face a Kaldrien tribunal. Meanwhile Satesh and the other Ra'kala who had refused to submit to the new regime would face a Kaldrien one.

Now as one of the great white ships turned towards the docks, Daniel was lead out in chains, flanked on either side by Fiona and Saniyya. Cole knew it was really Allen's fault, the warlock had manipulated Daniel, but still the Administrator was not entirely without blame, but too few knew of the warlocks for Daniel to be absolved of his guilt. The entire operation had been conducted so perfectly, and left so few loose ends that if he had not been involved, Cole doubted he would not even believe his own claims of a shadowy force manipulating the entire world shaking event. He would inform the Assembly of course, but if his suspicions about Minister Tenning's involvement with the Warlocks proved true, he would no doubt be ignored.

After the Kaldriens had drafted their first constitution, Fiona had retired as Colonel of the Achlish forces. She had done so voluntarily, though from all reports it seemed she would be facing an Assembly inquisition into her actions.

A sudden trumpet blast signalled Helen's arrival, while Erik lead a squad of soldiers down the docks. The men snapped to attention, as George led Helen down the dock. A single black horse followed behind them, pulling Ian's coffin along behind it. On Cole's left, Armel began to fidget as Helen passed, and the princess flashed the elf boy a quick smile before walking past. Though Cole had been rather busy with his own pursuits, he had not missed the fact that a romance had blossomed between Armel and Helen, and he only hoped it would survive the return to Thertan.

The steamer pulled up next to the dock, and Daniel was the first to board. Once the Administrator was secure, the cannons in the harbour began to fire a full gun salute to the young princess who was now leaving the country. George, Bhaskar, and Hadiya stepped out onto the dock to say their final farewells. Sanyo, his face scarred by the warlocks ritual, and Thomas followed in their wake. Thomas would be staying in Kaldry since his contract with the military was set to expire in seven months time, and now, because of the recent battles, he would have plenty of work left to do.

“I hope you understand this is not farewell,” said George to those assembled on the docks. “I hope you understand this is not farewell,” said George to those assembled on the docks. “One day I intend to join you all and return to Achland, but for now I shall implore the Kaldrien people to allow me to remain here. There is much work yet to be done, and I would be honoured to contribute in whatever small way I am able.”

“You honour us all by staying Lord-Protector,” said Bhaskar. “Mutual understanding between our people is what is needed now, and we shall accept any guidance you may offer. This offer extends to anyone who might wish to stay.” Sanyo caught Cole's eye, but he turned away. “As George said, this is not farewell, all of those who have sacrificed to establish this peace are welcome to stay, though they are also welcome return at any time.”

Now that the formalities were complete, those standing on the dock broke into several more personal groups. Hadiya and Helen stood together, and the scarred shaman passed her several small parcels. Helen had adopted several of the native fashions, dressing in the light silk gowns favoured by the women of the north.

Matthew flashed Cole a quick salute, before shuffling off. The man had been elected as Fiona's replacement, though for some reason Cole rather wished he would return to Thertan. Matthew had warmed considerably to Cole in the last three weeks. Still, Matthew was a good man, strong, and fiercely loyal. If the warlocks did return, he would not only keep Erik safe, he would defend the new Kaldrien Parliament better than any other Achlish officer the Assembly might appoint. Erik, Fiona,
George and Bhaskar stepped away from the others, while Sanyo approached Cole.

“You could stay you know,” said Sanyo. Even with magic, the scars upon Sanyo's face and body had not healed. Instead of hiding them, Sanyo had embraced the markings, and had the intricate lines inked into his skin. The bright blue tattoos stood out his dark skin, and were actually quite beautiful, if one did not know their foul origin. “I am sure Saniyya would be very glad, as would George. Kaldry could use a man of your calibre Cole.”

“I'm not staying,” Cole replied. Further down the dock Saniyya began to walk towards him, dressed in pair of leather leggings, and a bright red homespun shirt. With her skin and hair scrubbed clean, and the sun behind her, Saniyya glowed with exotic beauty that left Cole breathless, and at the same time feeling guilty. Just looking at her was a betrayal of Lissete's memory. “I can't stay.”

“Why?”

“You saw what I saw,” said Cole. “Those men, the things they summoned up. Before coming here I was hunting them in Thertan. There are many more of those men out there. They hide in the shadows, and I am the only one who can drag them out into the light. I could stay here in Kaldry and feign ignorance, but I have a duty, these men must die.”

“If there ever comes a time when you need help, do not hesitate to ask for it,” said Sanyo. “These men have wronged me, they have wronged my people. But like you I have a duty to uphold.”

Sanyo smiled as Saniyya approached. “Now I believe I hear Hadiya calling me, I should depart.”

Sanyo shuffled off, leaving Cole alone with Saniyya. For a moment neither spoke, and instead merely gazed into each others eyes. Even after all that had happened, Saniyya was still troubled, and ill at ease around Achlanders. Like Cole, Saniyya hid her pain beneath a false veneer. Cole used sarcasm, while Saniyya used anger, both hiding so as not to reveal their pain to the world, lest it be used against them. Now, with that stripped away, both were discovering what feelings true romantic emotions could evoke. Heart fluttering, Cole reached out and drew Saniyya into a soft kiss.

“Sanyo asked you to stay, didn't he?” Saniyya asked when they broke apart.

“Yes,” said Cole. “I told him I couldn't.”

“Good,” said Saniyya. “I am not going to ask you.”

“If you did, I would have to,” said Cole. “Mainly because if you did ask me to stay, I would know something was wrong.”

Saniyya smiled, “are you ever going to stop being so obnoxious?”

“It seems to have won you over,” Cole replied. “Though I don't think I could ever claim to have won you.”

“Well, you are learning, so that is a start,” said Saniyya. “Regardless, you have yet to best me in physical combat, so you still have much to learn. Hold out your hand.”

Cole did as he was bid, and Saniyya placed a small token into his hand. It looked like a pin, its head capped with a small, finely cut ruby. The shaft was gold, and when Cole held the stone up to the light, it came alive with a fiery inner glow. Kaldrien fire rubies were rare, and even one of this size would cost a small fortune.

“It's lovely,” said Cole. He pulled out the stopper and made to affix the pin to his lapel, when Saniyya grabbed his hand.

“It goes in your ear,” Saniyya corrected, indicating several similar studs in her own ear. Cole grimaced, and then held the earring out before him. He concentrated, and flames sprang up between his fingers, sanitizing the pins rather dull point. Saniyya smiled and took the token from him. With one swift motion, she jabbed it through the skin of his ear, placing it in the curving cartilaginous flesh of his upper ear, instead of the lob.

“That hurt,” Cole muttered as Saniyya slipped the stopper on again.

“Be quiet,” Saniyya whispered, before pulling Cole into another kiss, going so far as to nibble
They held the embrace for several minutes, before the shrill wail of the boat's horn called them back to reality. Even with the spectre of departure looming over them, Cole and Saniyya shared several more brief kisses, each growing lighter and lighter, before they broke apart entirely. Helen boarded the steamer first, flanked by Erik, who would be assume the role of her bodyguard for the duration of the voyage, followed by the other Achlish soldiers who would be returning home, then came Cole's turn.

“So, I guess this is goodbye for the time being,” said Thomas.
“You'll be back in Thertan before you know it,” said Cole.
“That is if you don't blow it up first,” said Thomas.
Cole chuckled. “Please, I wouldn't do that.”
Thomas grabbed Cole and hugged him close. “I know what you intend to do Cole, stay safe, and don't get yourself into too much trouble.” Thomas released him. “I won't be there to bail you out, and we both now what happens when that happens.”

“I'll be fine.” Cole turned to walk up the gang plank, watching Saniyya turn and slip through the crowd out of the corner of his eye. “I'll keep Clarissa company while you're gone.”

Thomas brought a hand to his face, and shook his head back and forth. Cole opened his mouth to call out after Saniyya, to invite him to come with, but found he couldn't, not yet. He had buried his emotions so deep after Felviar, that to accept them now would be a sign of weakness. With heavy heart, Cole turned his back on Kaldry, and followed Armel up onto the ship. He arrived on deck, and Fiona flashed him a quick smile, before nodding her head to a man standing in the aft end of the ship.

BRMMMM, cried the ship's whistle as the steamer began to pull away from the docks. The crowds of New Thertan cheered again as the ship turned slowly, and Cole caught sight of Saniyya. She simply stood there, pale copper eyes locked on Cole. He nodded to her, and then turned to face Benedict.

“I would not have expected to find you in the field,” said Cole, eyes till lingering on the docks. Saniyya was receding into the distance now, but even so Cole continued to gaze at her, trying to sort through the quagmire of his emotions. “I assume you were aboard when the fleet was attacked?”

“The Dauntless was not in the harbour at the time,” said Benedict. “Which is why she is now serving as the flagship of this fleet. We have to ensure that Helen stays safe after all.”

“So, are we going to count this one as a success? Because if so I want a medal ceremony., a big one” The Dauntless began to pick up speed and soon Cole lost sight of Saniyya. “It must be public as well, not some half-arsed thing like last time.”

“If I am not mistaken, you are already wearing your medal,” said Benedict his eyes alighting on the fire-ruby earring that Cole still wore. Cole scowled and Benedict began to chuckle. There was something in his tone that troubled Cole, as if Benedict knew something he did not.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” Benedict replied regaining his composure. The Dauntless passed by the twin forts that stood along the arms of Half-Moon bay, and each fired another cannon salute. “When we return to Thertan I will see what I can do about the medal ceremony. It should not be hard to arrange you, Fiona, and many of the other soldiers proved your loyalty during these events.”

“Tell me, how many of these events did you manipulate father?” Cole spat the word out like a curse. He fought down a lump in his throat, he had not meant to say that, it had simply come out, yet somehow, in this moment, it felt like the right thing to say, the right word to use to question the motives of the elder Spy-master, and make him dwell on the heinous acts he had committed.

“You know, I believe that is the first time I have heard you use that word since our service together in Felvia,” said Benedict Travers, his voice trembling, though with what emotion Cole could not be sure. “I suppose I owe you an honest answer, I manipulated as many events as I was able. How
is that any different from what you did here? You lack some of my tact true, but what you did with
Armel is rather cunning. The boy really is a lost son of a Felvian noble you know.”

“I'm nothing like you,” Cole hissed. The lie tasted bitter in his mouth, but he would never admit
that to his father. “I dislike being manipulated. How long have you had this planned?”

Instead of responding Benedict handed Cole a thick brown envelope. Cole tore it open and
leafed through it's contents. There were six black and white photographs inside. The first showed was
of Allen, standing down an alleyway talking with Clayton Talbit. Upon both their lapels was a familiar
pin, its silver marred by small black blemishes. The others were all similar, showing various men and
woman, all wearing the same brooch. One of the pictures showed Garret, talking with a sallow looking
man Cole had never seen. A smile played around Garret's thin lips, and the picture had caught him
talking with an officer of the watch. The final picture was different from the rest. It depicted two men,
the first had his back to the camera, still there was no mistaking the man's build. It was Cormag.

“These were all taken over the last three years,” Benedict explained. “I take it you know what
the brooch all these men are wearing signifies.”

“I do,” Cole replied. “These are the conspirators I warned you of.”

“Correct,” said Benedict. “Flip the pictures over Cole, look at the dates, how far back do they
go?”

Cole flipped the pictures over, and felt his throat grow tight again. “Twelve years.....long before
Felviar.”

“Precisely.”

“Then why did you trust....”

“The Achlish man with the strange pin that we broke out of a Felvian prison camp?” Benedict
chuckled. “Because, I needed to test a theory. Until that point I was not sure there really was a
conspiracy at work.”

“So you sacrificed a hundred good lives to validate your own theories?” Cole screamed, causing
the surrounding shadows to dance and thrash. “You helped them! It wasn't until we met Garret that you
If you knew who these men were you knew what they wanted, why did allow Garret to serve with us.
You knew....even when I warned you, you ignored me....but you knew.”

“Yes,” said Benedict. Magic crackled around Cole's fingers, and he fought back the urge to kill
his father. “Like what you did here in Kaldry, I ensured that the situation in Felviar never reached the
level of violence the warlocks desired. Yes I know who they are Cole, I also have a vague idea of what
they want.”

“Then why did you not continue to hunt them?!”

“I never stopped,” Benedict replied. “I merely crafted a tool to use against them, you.” Cole felt
the colour drain out of his face. “I continued to track these warlocks, but once I discovered how deeply
entrenched in the Assembly they were, I stopped any overt movements. That was before Felvia. After
that it was a simple matter of creating the perfect hunter. He needed to be unassuming, someone who
would not draw attention to their actions, or someone so flashy their actions would be considered
eccentric. You proved to be the perfect candidate Cole. It only took a bit of gentle prodding, but after
the events in Felviar, well I must say you are eccentric personified. I will admit I had my doubts, but in
the end you proved yourself. What happened here in Kaldry more than proves that.”

Cole's entire body began to shake and he thought he might vomit. Even as a child, Benedict had
manipulated him like this, often resorting to underhanded measures to ensure he behaved. After what
had happened in Felviar, Cole had lost all faith in the man who was his father, legally having himself
emancipated, and then suing to acquire the estate in Thertan, as well as his inheritance early.

“How long have you been grooming me?” Cole hissed. “You sent me to all those schools, had
me learn history, weapons handling, was it all so you could send me after these men?”
“Of course not,” Benedict replied. “You would have died. Not until you manifested your skill in the weave did I even consider you a credible threat. Once that was accomplished it was simply a matter of ensuring you came to Kaldry. Yes I lied to you, but look what you accomplished! You stopped them before their plans could come to fruition.”

Cole slapped his father full in the face. Benedict simply stood there, relinquishing himself to his son’s anger. Cole drew back to hit him again, but stopped himself. He could see tears in Benedict's eyes and feel them in his own.

“Cole.” Benedict choked the word out as though it pained him. “I know it doesn't help. I know its years to late, and it won't change anything, but still I have to say it. Cole, I'm sorry....for everything.”

“What happens now?” Cole croaked.

“Now we act,” said Benedict, once again regaining his composure. “Our enemy holds our country by the throat, I intend to rectify that. Kaldry was just the first step. I need you on my side Cole. Together we can stop this threat. Will you join me?”

Cole let his father’s offer linger in the air, while he stared off at the rapidly vanishing Kaldrien coast. Looking back, he saw his father's hand in everything that had happened since he had attacked Cormag in that dingy bar. Cole couldn't even remember the tavern's name, yet Benedict had no doubt planned Cole would go there. He had worked with Bhaskar to manipulate things in Kaldry. Indeed, Cole now doubted that his encounter with the Selther had been mere chance, and if so, he wondered if his emotional involvement with Saniyya was just another calculated ploy by Benedict to ensure he stayed complicit to the plan. His father had manipulated Cole's every action, and now he was giving him a choice, or at least the illusion of one. After all he had learned, Cole only saw one option available to him.

“When do we start?”
Garret Levine stood in the darkness, watching as Daniel, the disgraced Consortium Administrator was led down in the belly of the steamship Challenger, and then locked in the brig. Water dripped down of the pipe works that surrounded them, and sloshed around the floor. Daniel's cell was up against the bulkhead, with only a few feet of steel separating it from the churning ocean. The guards departed moments later, leaving Daniel alone to contemplate his fate. Garret stepped into the light, and crossed the room, hands coming to rest on the bars of the Administrator’s cell. Garret reached out with his magic, dissolving the metal in the bars and causing it to flow up his arms.

“Who are you?” Daniel asked, shrinking back into the corner of his cell.

“A friend of Allen,” Garret replied, lowering his hood. “So by extension, I am a friend of yours.”

“I don't need anything more to do with Allen, or his friends,” Daniel spat. “Unless you are here to free me that is.”

“Well, it would appear today is your lucky day then because I am.” The hooked-nosed warlock extended his hand to the Consortium Administrator. “We always take care of our own.”

Daniel smiled and took Garret's hand. With the slightest exertion of his magic, Garret sent the liquid metal racing down his forearm. The steel flowed up Daniel's arm, and raced up his neck. He jerked back, as a razor sharp barb, thinner than anything forged by man, severed his spinal cord, and killed him instantly. Daniel collapsed, the metal preventing any blood from leaking out.

Garret knelt over the corpse, sealed the wound with a touch of magic, but left the metal embedded in the Administrator’s brain. He then rose and placed his hand upon the bulkhead. The metal rippled, and a small portal opened. Dark water sped past, but his magic held it at bay. A hand reached up out of the water, and Garret grabbed it, pulling Cormag up into the ship. The other warlock stumbled into the cell, wrapped in a tattered robe, one hand pressed to the side of his face.

“You?!”

“Yes, me.”

“You were supposed to be in Üruush, inciting the vampire lords.”

“It was decided that I should come to Kaldry,” replied Garret. “Our plans for Üruush and the rest of Tereth proceed along the path that we desire. Sadly it seems things here have....degraded.”

“You do know Cole is aboard don't you?” Asked Cormag, looking down at Daniel's corpse.”This will be the perfect opportunity to kill him and his associates.”

“Why do you think I killed the Administrator?” Garret turned to face the other warlock. “I have sent Travers a message. I know he has been hunting me, this will remind him why. We will kill Travers, in time, but first he must be broken. You look terrible.”

“I'd like to see you swim next time,” replied Cormag, shaking the excess water out of his robes, and then using magic to funnel it back down into the ocean. “When the body is discovered, we can't stay on this ship...we risk discovery.”

“You would be surprised what a small amount of coin can procure,” Garret smirked and closed the whole in the ship. “Besides, we have allies in many places now. We will not be discovered. I'll be taking a dip in the drink soon enough, I have a ship to catch. Don't worry you'll be well taken care of. I hear Üruush is pleasant this time of year. The second phase of our plan is now under way, though I shall have to modify it a great deal, since well our plans for Kaldry appeared to have failed.”

“Did they now?” Cormag chuckled.

“You cannot mean...”

Cormag removed his hand from his jaw, revealing a large, jagged wound. Unlike a normal scar, there was nothing but a dark hole in Cormag's skin that ran straight down to the bone. The veins around the wound were black, and instead of looping or curving gently, they were jagged, taking sharp angular
turns. In a way the dark veins reminded Garret of the ritual circles used by all manner of Spellweavers. Even the exposed parts of Cormag's jaw bone were effected in such a manner, marred by strange black lines that seemed to shift ever so slightly as Garret watched them.

“The first marker has been laid,” Cormag explained. “Not in the manner we wished.”
“No, not exactly,” Garret grimaced. “How will this effect...”
“The other markers? We need to plant them first.”
“Come, we need to get you somewhere safe.”

Garret led Cormag out of the brig, and wove the bars back into place. For all intents and purposes, it would appear that Daniel had suffered a major brain aneurysm. Only one with a gift for magic would be able to tell what really happened here, and that was exactly how Garret wanted it. The two warlocks turned, and together started down the dimly lit corridor, entering a candle lit chamber in the back of the ship.

“Tell me of this new plan first. Has...he approved?” Cormag placed his hand back upon his jaw, as though trying to hide something.

“It is of no consequence,” replied Garret. He severely disliked how secretive the order could be. Even when they gathered, all the members wore heavy hoods, and talked in vague terminology. There was safety in secrecy. If one of their number was to be captured, he would only be able to reveal a fraction of the truth to his interrogators. “He will be too busy dealing with the anarchy in the Assembly. Your failure in Kaldry has disturbed a great many things. Meanwhile, from the bayous of Orlel in the Western Colonies, to the twisting streets of Inibraugh, the lesser cults are gathering. The can sense the world is changing.”

“We did not fail in Kaldry,” Cormag repeated.
“You were nearly discovered though,” said Garret. “You released a great deal of power, but the marker...it was not meant to be inscribed upon a mortal. The power...it cannot be contained in such a manner.”

“You know little of the power I wield,” said Cormag, as he once again revealed the scar.

In the shallow flickering candle light that filled the chamber Garret could see something moving along Cormag’s jaw. The scar throbbed, then a lump of flesh, grey, flecked with bits of green and purple. Now that he had removed his hand, the thing began to writhe and seep out of the wound. The thing that emerged looked like a tentacle, or perhaps the frond of a barnacle. Again, Cormag could hear gentle whispers in the air as the thing unfurled, while at the same time, an eyeball appeared in the centre of the writhing mass of corrupted flesh that protruded from his face.

“So they have awoken.”

“Some of them, yes,” replied Cormag. “I have become their vessel. The first of the sleepers are awake, roused from their eternal dream. Soon, the world shall know their power, and quake in fear.”