

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Dawnsmoke and the Influence of Character Tropes on the Construction of Fantasy
Fiction

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the University of Hull

by

Edmund Hurst, BA English Literature and Drama (University of East Anglia), MA
Creative Writing (University of Hull)

(June 2017)

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted elsewhere.

For Biss

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Mom and Dad, for always making sure I had something to read and for giving Percy the Park Keeper a Yorkshire accent.

Thank you to Sarah Naughton-Doe, Sarah Crombie, Lucii Ives and Emma Wilson, for kindness, understanding and the generosity that let me finish on time.

Thank you to Simon Kerr and Ray French for style and sense and for allowing me to take the first steps that made this thesis possible.

Thank you to Martin Goodman for endless patience, innumerable pieces of sound advice and countless opportunities. I am forever grateful for a supervisor who did the work of three years in just one.

Thank you to Charlotte, Alex and Francesca for being so wonderfully successful that I had to do a Ph.D just to keep up!

Thank you to Alfie, for letting me tell him stories. There is no greater critic, nor more deserving audience.

And finally, thank you to the three ladies whose hair was each a different shade of red. For inspiration.

Contents – Dawnsmoke

Abstract	vi
<i>Dawnsmoke</i>	1
Part 1 – Audeamus	2
Part 2 – Deficere	263

Contents – Exegesis

Exegesis	453
Introduction	454
A Fantastic Definition	458
The Tropes of Categorisation	470
The Inception of Character	491
Voice and Attitude	511
Realism and Resolution	518
Bibliography	523

Abstract

This thesis is formed of a fantasy novel, *Dawnsmoke*, and an exegesis that will examine the role played by character tropes on the creation of the three principal protagonists in *Dawnsmoke*.

Dawnsmoke interweaves three narrative strands from a diverse set of principal protagonists. Luke, Samantha and Kain combine narratives in order to tell the story of Arx, a city where fire burns blue and memories can be trapped in metal. Told through three distinct third-person-limited voices, this novel explores the concept of self-induced memory loss, isolation and the price of heroism.

The exegesis considers the definitions of fantasy offered by C. N. Manlove, W. R. Irwin, T. E. Apter, Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson and contrasts these definitions with modern considerations from Neil Gaiman, George R. R. Martin, Ursula LeGuin and Kazuo Ishiguro. It posits a definition of fantasy literature that encompasses the traditions that *Dawnsmoke* shares. It analyses the impact of specific sub-genres on the character norms in *Dawnsmoke*. It examines the inception of Luke, Samantha and Kain in relation to common character tropes and how the subversion of these thematic expectations impacts the narrative arc of each character. It observes the techniques used in crafting unique voices for each character. It concludes with an examination of the resolution of each protagonist's journey.

Dawnsmoke

Part 1: Audeamus

Everything rusts.

Sharp becomes dull, flames become ash and truth is re-forged as a lie. Time
passes and link-by-link we are chained by falsehoods.

To remember then, we must forget.

Forget certainty and unlock the imaginary. In dreams of chaos, behind the
smoke and the sweat, the steam and the dirt, is the place where memories come to
die.

Arx. A city of metals and men.

Chapter 1

Luke never could sleep the night before an execution.

He yawned and checked the array of knives tucked under his coat. The steel was cold against his thumb. He checked each of them, made sure they didn't catch on his belt or trousers. That's the thing with knives. It's all in the draw. A stuck knife was a death sentence, sure as a noose was. A wiggly knife is a lucky knife.

And today he would need all the luck he could get.

Rotheart plaza was grey. Oily smog blotted sunlight from the concrete. Slipshod buildings of metal and wood funnelled people through the plaza. The crowd shuffled like drunks under the black clouds. No work, no money, no food. What else was there to do but drink and watch people die?

Luke squeezed through the mob. Rotheart was one of the more prosperous districts in Austellus. It still had a market. Blacksmiths without tongues gibbered their wares and moonshiners peddled the Austellus Special. Stank like sweat from an overweight whore, but it was sweeter than drinking the water. On the outskirts, fire-eaters belched flame from kerosene-soaked chins and sword-swallowers choked on razors. A celebration of risk to whet the appetite for violence

At the heart of it all was the *Cicatrix*. The brass platform was polished to shine. Elbows out, spectators jarred for position. Luke slipped through and made for the white-haired idiot that stood before the dais.

"Reminiscent of the seven-scarred sun, our prodigal princess awakens!" Kuyt's voice was a blazing baritone, backed by a lifetime on the stage. "About time you showed up."

Luke knuckled his eyes. "Shove a sock in it old man. Why are we here? The Scaffold is that way."

The old actor shivered, despite the blankets that wrapped from his second chin to sagging arse. "A bit of culture won't kill you lad."

"Culture is it? That why it stinks of piss?" Luke wrinkled his nose.

"Don't be stupid. That's me." Kuyt actually grinned.

"Oh, well, obviously. Don't worry, there's nothing to be ashamed of Kuyt. I've heard it happens in the twilight years. Beautiful in its way. Well, if you like old men that piddle themselves." Luke glared at him. "No one likes old men that piddle themselves."

Kuyt swatted at him. "Cheeky little tosser. I aimed for my blankets."

"*Why?*"

Kuyt raised a rodent-sized eyebrow. "There are thieves everywhere. Who'd want to nick a blanket that smells like piss?"

Luke let his gaping jaw swing. Sometimes, it just wasn't worth the effort.

Up on the *Cicatrix*, a shirtless bloke shuffled towards the crowd. He was corded in muscle with pale skin smooth as a newborn. He gripped a pair of iron rungs that hung overhead to better display his back. The chain rose and forced him to his toes.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Let us begin our shared obscenity." The *Flagellator* emerged from behind a modesty curtain. His red-silver coat was pristine in colour and cut, but it was nothing on his *Catamidio*. The three-headed whip gleamed with rich leather. Silver spikes studded each lash.

It began to spin. The crowd clustered closer, forcing Luke right to the edge of the platform. The *Catamidio* whirled, a tempest of silver and brown. A low thrum tore through the air, *whum-whum-whum*.

The crowd's breath caught in a silent pulse of desire. Desire to see a man bleed.

The *Flagellator* turned his *Catamidio* on the pale man. The living canvas screamed like rusty gears, but the whip never stopped moving. Quick, sharp lines tore into his pale flesh. Specks of skin and viscera misted the air.

Luke shielded his face from the splatter. His stomach bubbled like a swamp but he couldn't turn away. The *Catamidio* danced across a sheet of red and purple. How could the *Flagellator* even see what he was doing anymore?

A few more screams and the *Catamidio* fell still. Each lash dripped with a string of flesh and gore. The *Flagellator's* face was misted with tainted-pink sweat. He reached for a bucket.

Salt water. To keep the cuts from closing.

The living canvas shrieked like shattered glass. He thumped his heels on the platform. Blood sluiced from his back to reveal a precise pattern of lines and stripes of red, purple and pink.

The *Flagellator* bowed and the applause was deafening.

"Culture?" Luke growled in Kuyt's ear.

"Art isn't just pretty pictures lad. It's transformative. To perform is to be vulnerable. The *Flagellator* strips away artifice to better expose the weaknesses of flesh and muscle." Kuyt tossed a coin on to the stage. He wasn't the only one. They struck in a hail of *pings* and the *Flagellator* scrambled to gather them up.

The living canvas released his death-grip on the iron rungs. His eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed.

"Glorified masochism." Luke's teeth were bared. The *Flagellator* rolled the pale man onto his back so he could claim the coins sunk in the puddle of blood.

"Self-harm on a city-wide scale. At least the executions are honest."

For all of an instant, Kuyt's face was pinched with guilt. He blinked and it was gone. "Barrel of laughs you are. Come on then misery guts. Let's go see some people die."

Now the show was over, a stream of bodies wound through the plaza. The buzz from hundreds of voices melted together and the smell of rust and sweat was thick in Luke's nose.

"People need culture," Kuyt barged his way through the throng.

"No, people need food, work and a roof over their head." Luke dodged around a one-armed woman with burn scars on her face.

"There is more to life than just survival," Kuyt said.

"Says a man who never been too hungry to sleep." Luke wrapped his arms around himself. "Too hungry to move when the Walkers start kicking you..."

Kuyt's eyes lit up. He stopped dead. "Kid, you remember starving? That's fantastic!"

Luke shook his head. "I didn't say that. It's just... a feeling."

The old man's smile refused to fade. "What is memory but a feeling? Hold on to it kid. You gotta start somewhere."

"How naïve."

Luke jerked around. "Kuyt. Please tell me you heard that."

The old man didn't respond. He was frozen mid-step. The crowd around him were statues.

"Remember."

The voice spoke inside Luke's head. The people disappeared and Rotheart vanished into a blank of mist. The sky overhead shifted into twilight darkness, filled with silver stars.

Sweat blasted from Luke's frozen pores. Everything began to itch. The tang of molten iron stung his nose and the bitter mist lay thick on his tongue.

A taste of magic.

A woman stepped through the haze. Broad with short hair, she hefted a forge hammer with tattooed arms that looked more than capable of swinging it.

A candle guttered in her other hand. The flame was blue as frozen sky. Like an ex-lover, the sight sent a twinge all the way through Luke's spine.

Mindbreaker.

"Who are you?" Luke's mouth felt like it was filled with blazing coals.

"Ferra." Her voice was blunt as her hammer. *"I am here to ensure you survive today."*

"How?"

"You know what we can do. You can't tell me it doesn't call to you."

Luke swallowed. A Mindbreaker had the power to cut away memories and store them in metal. To enter a person's mind and slice away a piece of the past like it never happened.

"The mind controls the body. Without remorse we are limitless." Her voice was soft as a promise.

"Without loss we are invincible," Luke finished for her. He knew the phrase all too well.

It was the first thing he could remember.

"Two years." Luke's hands shook. "That is as far back as I can remember. Before then there is nothing but echoes in the mist. I have no desire to go through that again."

Ferra glanced at the false sky. *"Mindbreaker. We earn the title. Any mind we manipulate begins to crack and yours is fractured beyond any I have seen. How are you still sane?"*

Luke swallowed. "Does it matter? Memory magic is evil."

"Evil is a word for children." Ferra moved closer. *"Magic does not have morality. The choice of how it is used is left to us."* She pressed something into his hand.

Luke glanced down. The chunk was dark and flecked with silver. "What is this? Iron ore?"

"A gateway metal. It can unearth forgotten memories." Ferra curled Luke's fingers around the unrefined lump. *"I will know when you are ready."*

Luke blinked and she vanished.

Rotheart re-appeared in a deluge of colour and noise. Kuyt didn't miss a step. He cocked his head at Luke. "You're sweating like a Walker in the nest. Is everything okay, kid? You've gone right pale."

Luke panted. It was all too much. Every sensation tore at him, demanded his attention. After the silent seduction of the mist and the subtle burn of magic it was overwhelming. "Just... give me a moment."

He ran through the crowd, dodging fists and boots and gobs of spit. A rain barrel was set in the mouth of a nearby alleyway. He jammed his head into the water. Bubbles burst from his mouth and desperation drowned in the icy depths.

Much better.

Luke spluttered a breath and spat out the taste of rust. His eyes were reflected in the water. No sclera, no iris, no pupil. Just blue orbs, sharp as ice.

Bloody magic. How could he be addicted to something he couldn't remember?

Luke ran a fingernail over the scar on his cheek. That, at least, he remembered. The white-hot sting as he pressed the knife to his face. The slow drip of blood. Scars give history. They relegate pain to the past and provide physical proof that you survived.

Maybe the *Flagellator* was on to something.

"Luke!" Kuyt puffed and gasped his way over. He wiped his red face. "What are you...?" His eyes fell on the gateway metal still visible in Luke's hand. In an instant, the colour drained from the old actor's face. "No. Please. Tell me you haven't."

Luke shook his head. "I'm clean. This is just... a reminder."

Kuyt met his eyes for a long time. "I believe you." He nodded. "You are better off without it kid. Memory magic is evil."

Luke slipped the metal into his pocket. "Evil is a word for children..."

"Alright you two. What's going on here?"

Kuyt leapt like a naughty child at the sound of the Walker's voice. The woman charged over. A piss-off two-handed sword was slung over her shoulder.

Arx was a city of two sides. Austellus and Caelum. Austellus was poor, dirty, and stank like sin itself. Caelum was rich, clean and corpulent as an overfed priest. The Walkers were a symbol of this divide. Their black cloaks were earned by upholding the 'law' in Austellus. It was their boots that pressed the Austelli to the mud. Their blades that maimed those who didn't jump fast enough. Their irons that claimed people for the Scaffold.

Luke hated them like spitting mouthfuls of blood. "What do you care, Walker?" He fingered a knife at his waist.

"The execution is starting and you two are loitering back here. You don't think that looks suspicious?"

Luke glanced up. She was right. The streets were empty. "I don't reckon that is any of your business." He spat. "Come on Kuyt, we're late."

They made for the Scaffold. The Walker followed close behind.

At the front of the plaza, the crowd was packed tight. An unnatural silence lay heavy on the air.

Shadow fingers ran down Luke's spine.

"Come on kid." Kuyt glanced over his shoulder at the Walker. She was still watching them. The old actor took a breath and eased into the crowd, past a Foundryman with forge-burns on his arms. His face was red and his fists were clenched. A spring wound close to snapping.

The Walker let them go.

Before long, a pocket of space opened up around Kuyt's elbows, right in the heart of the crowd. The Scaffold rose before them and Luke felt a pulse of rage deep in his chest. The enormous platform took up almost half the plaza. Its wooden planks were rotten and the nails were rusty, but five nooses swung over the edge, clean and new.

"Finally!" A blonde woman shuffled into place beside Kuyt. "What kept you?"

Kuyt just shook his head. "Sorry Addie."

Adira. Kuyt's latest 'actress-in-training.' She was an eyeful to make anyone's balls ache. She moved with the grace of a wolfhound and every leather-clad step carried the promise of violence. Perfect shoulders, legs up to here, and the face of...

Well. The face of a scarred ex-Walker.

"Hey Addie." Luke smiled. If anything, that spider web of pink and white lines on her cheek got his blood even hotter. "Nice tits."

Her sigh hit him like a slap. "Stick your thumbs up your arsehole, Luke."

"Only if you go first."

Her mouth flickered it what was very almost a smile. "Why, you not sure where to find it? Makes sense, I suppose. All your shit comes out your mouth."

Luke snorted.

"Shh!" Kuyt smacked his arm. "That Walker is back."

The blackcloak pushed towards them. Other Walkers filtered through the crowd beside her and Addie caressed the handles of her twin hatchets like lovers. Nothing gave her more pleasure than cutting her old allies down.

The condemned arrived on the Scaffold in a clank of chains. A pair of Walkers led five hooded prisoners across the Scaffold.

A giant followed them.

Its face was hidden behind a mask of black iron with eyes of jet. Every inch of the body was covered in blue-silver steel and a wicked axe glittered over its shoulders. The Scaffold splintered in its wake.

An Enforcer.

Whilst the Walkers were sent to uphold the law, the Enforcers could create it. Judge and executioner, they were beyond retribution. Rumour had it there were three of them in total, but no one knew for sure.

Anyone could kill a Walker. Change, real change, needed far bigger.

The death of that armoured bastard ought to do it.

"How do you put an end to something like that?" Addie asked.

Luke set his teeth. He smiled with a confidence he didn't feel. "This is what we planned for, Addie. Don't lose your nerve now. Watch for me on the Scaffold. Our rebellion starts today."

The Enforcer held up a hand. If the crowd was quiet before, now it was silent. "Citizens. Today you will see justice served. The criminals before you are guilty of

arson, murder and destruction of property. They are sentenced to hang from the neck until dead.”

The crowd cheered. A celebration that, this time, someone else would suffer. Luke rubbed his temples. Idiocy induced headaches were the worst.

“You think oration is a part of their training?” Kuyt asked Addie. “See how he keeps the mask facing the crowd? That’s what keeps it alive. You think they have a neutral mask teacher in the Citadel?”

A blade came to rest against Kuyt’s throat

“Silence before the Enforcer.” The Walker’s knuckles were white on the hilt. “If I hear even the slightest noise from you lot again, I’ll take the old man’s head for a trophy. Clear?”

Kuyt’s eyes were white. He looked at Luke.

It was time.

“Addie. Now,” Luke said.

She screamed. It was an odd, gurgling sound.

“You...!” The Walker drew back her sword to strike.

Something inside Luke changed. A new feeling shot through his body. Viper-quick, he drew a stiletto knife and slammed it into the Walker’s throat.

She crumpled.

Luke flicked the gore from his blade. His strike was perfect. They always were. The knowledge, instinct and conviction of a fighter boiled deep within his mind, despite the fact he couldn’t remember a single moment of training.

A broken mind had its perks.

Addie’s scream reached a crescendo. “Treachery! The Walkers want to kill us all!”

People turned. Other voices broke out. Shouts. Arguments. The crowd began to swell. To rock and shift.

An instant too late, Luke realised their mistake.

The plan was to cause a disturbance, some isolated pockets of fighting to distract the Walkers. But they hadn't taken into account the mindless thirst for blood that existed in Austellus. The pure, unmasked hatred that had been bred between the poor.

Sanity snapped. The riot hit like a fist.

Luke threw himself into the melee, Kuyt and Addie forgotten. A Walker bellowed from a knot nearby. He attacked and two men fell with open throats. The people of Austellus were not trained to take on Walkers.

Luke smiled. That's what he was there for.

He charged the blackcloak with a roar. The Walker swung and his blade spat blood. Luke ducked and rolled beneath the cut. He struck out and warmth drenched his arm. The Walker grunted. Red blood splattered on black mud.

Luke leapt to his feet. A shadow flickered, so fast! He threw himself out of the way. Another Walker. The man's beard was knotted with blood.

The Walker's blade flashed. Luke dodged, slipped, went down. Concrete leapt to smack him and the blackcloak's sword whistled down.

You cower, you die.

Luke rolled aside. Mud splattered on his face. He sat up and flung a knife. The blade drew a red line across the Walker's bicep.

Blood-beard roared and raised his sword high overhead. Idiot. Luke lashed out. A knife danced between his fingers and drove into the Walker's side. Right in the kidney. The blackcloak fell, mouth open in a silent scream.

Luke groaned to his feet.

An Austelli bloke ran at him and Luke dodged, just in time to avoid the three-fingered fist. He lashed out with his boot. The steel-tip sank into the bloke's groin.

Someone grabbed Luke's sleeve and he threw his elbow backwards. He turned just in time to see the child scream and clutch her shattered nose. Blood gobbled down her cheeks and she dropped her sharpened corkscrew.

Luke ran on.

He forced his way through the crush of bodies. A woman drew three inches of steel from a Walker's heart. A man fell with his throat bitten out. The pair of Walkers were dragged from the Scaffold by the howling mob. So much screaming. It pounded in time with the blood that rushed in his ears.

Luke burst out before the Scaffold.

The five prisoners were alive, but the nooses were tight. Behind them, the Enforcer drew its axe.

Luke didn't pause. He leapt to meet the giant. His feet hit the Scaffold with a crunch. Wooden planks cracked.

A few screams still floated from the crowd, but the noise began to fade. The riot had wound down. The Walkers were either dead or fled and the stink of blood was warm in the air. All eyes were fixed, firmly, on him.

The Austelli loved a spectacle.

The Enforcer hefted its axe like a toothpick. The creature was enormous. A beast of steel, no knife was getting through that armour. The Scaffold creaked under its weight. Planks of wood splintered under its feet.

"You have disturbed my execution with violence. Who are you to cause such bloodshed?" The Enforcer's voice was measured. Intelligent.

"I could ask you the same thing. Our lives do not belong to your Caelum overlords!"

"These five are criminals. Arsonist. Murderers. They were reported by their fellows and must be punished for their transgressions. That is how lawful society works. Without you, they would have been the only ones to die today."

"They are Austelli. That is enough for me to put a stop to this!" Spittle flew from Luke's lips.

"Your delusions are far more dangerous than you realise."

"My knives are worse. Just ask those dead Walkers." A sour grin spread on Luke's face.

"You are an evil man."

"Not for this."

The Enforcer raised its axe. Luke pulled a pair of knives from his belt. Twigs before a giant, but they were all he had. The world shrank to the size of a single, armoured figure stood in his way.

Luke charged. He kicked the Enforcer's stomach and numbness bit his toes. He lunged and slammed his knife into the Enforcer's chest.

The blade snapped. The Enforcer didn't move.

Luke took a deep breath and drew on every sensation, every feeling that his shattered mind could provide. He attacked. A whirlwind of steel and fury. Knives pinged and clanged and clashed with that odd blue-steel armour. In a fair fight, the giant would be dead ten-times over.

But this wasn't a fair fight.

With a sudden burst of speed, the hilt of the Enforcer's axe rose to smash into Luke's nose.

Spots exploded in his eyes. Groggy, he flung a knife. Right between the eyes, the hilt bounced off the iron mask.

The Enforcer drove a fist into Luke's stomach.

Agony slammed into his gut and Luke was thrown backwards. Breath whistled from his lungs.

The Enforcer stepped closer.

Tears leaked from Luke's eyes. He had to get up, to move, but he could no easier spring to his feet than he could take the sun in his hands. Blood was thick in the back of his throat.

The Enforcer lifted its axe. The beast planted a foot for the killing blow.

Something snapped. That armoured boot, heavier than the Scaffold could take, plunged through the splintered wood and the Enforcer crashed to its knees.

The axe still fell.

The world flickered black and gold. A river of blood gushed down his back. Luke howled like he would never stop.

The Enforcer cursed and struggled to free its leg.

"No..." Somehow, Luke made it to his feet. Blood pooled in his boots. He moved through a haze and bent to lift the Enforcer's axe. Burn everything to ashes, the thing was *heavy*. It took all he had to reverse it over his head.

With a grunt, he slammed the shaft into the Enforcer's mask.

The shockwave numbed his wrists and a *clashhh* rang over the Scaffold. Luke brought the hilt down once more. A wet sob broke from the Enforcer's throat. The iron mask crumpled and fell.

The face behind was smashed, bloody and far too young. High cheekbones, a bloody chin and emerald eyes that refused to focus.

Luke raised the axe once more. Blade first this time. This was not murder. It was justice. He held the weapon with shaking arms.

Then he had a better idea.

The axe crashed to the Scaffold and Luke knelt beside the Enforcer. He drew a knife. Blood wept down his spine.

He sliced the buckles that held the breastplate in place and dragged it free. The Enforcer's skin was clammy. He looked like an overcooked slug.

Luke dragged him to the edge of the Scaffold. Even without the breastplate, he was a heavy bastard.

"Please," the Enforcer whispered between mashed lips. "You kill me and there is no going back. Caelum... Austellus... It will be war."

Luke sneered. "That's kind of the point. I hope death hurts."

He kicked the armoured bastard into the crowd. The mob fell on him. Angry men and women howled like dogs. The Enforcer screamed.

When the screaming stopped, the crowd bellowed with a ground-shaking roar.

"My friends!" Luke smiled and held out his arms. "Today you have witnessed a miracle. The Enforcer is dead!"

More cheering. Agony slashed through his back. Luke walked down the Scaffold and ripped the prisoners' execution hoods free. Five faces peered out at the crowd.

The last prisoner was a woman. The manacles that bound her wrists were caked in blood.

"Almost thought you had forgotten us," she whispered. Luke smiled and clapped her shoulder.

He walked back down the line. "Caelum would take your friends, your families, your lives. Today, I am your saviour!"

He waited for the cheering to die down once more. The Scaffold wavered and his vision began to fade. He had to work quickly. Strength drained with the blood

down his back. Luke took hold of the closest noose and raised a knife to cut the first bloke free.

There is a better way.

The voice inside Luke's skull was sharp and cruel. Something burned against his leg. He tore the gateway metal from his pocket. It glowed with a pulsing, blue light. A headache, so intense it felt like his brain was melting, seared through his skull.

Foreign memories flooded Luke's mind like oil in water. A different man, a different time. Memories of rebellion, the Flame Protests. Austellus in arms. Caelum on the run. So vivid, it was like he had *lived* it.

The strength of the new memories pulsed through him. They animated his body with a strange energy, similar to when he fought but with a wild edge of malice. He could barely feel the gash on his back anymore. Doubt vanished. Certainty settled on him like armour.

Austellus was tired. The people were so used to being hurt. He could pull them from the fire, but they would still fear those who lit the flame.

That was wrong. They should fear him instead.

"I will save you." Luke blinked slowly. "From yourselves. That is why I must take these lives myself."

A hush fell on the crowd.

"Yes my friends. These five are not heroes. No! They are the ones who murdered a score of innocents. Worse! They are the ones who burned down the grain silos in The Bricks! We cannot throw off the shackles of the Caelum elite whilst criminals like this fester in our midst. One and all, we must rise to punish any who threaten Austellus!"

A grumbled swelled from the crowd. Small bursts of conversation. The people were confused. Angry. Easy to manipulate.

The prisoners said nothing. They were guilty after all.

Luke had ordered the attack himself.

"My friends, what do we do with arsonists and murderers?"

The crowd knew the answer well. "Hang! Hang! Hang!"

Luke smiled and pushed the first man to his death. The rope around his neck snapped taut. Three more ropes. Three more shoves. So easy.

The woman was last. She met his eyes.

"You are an evil man."

"I know."

She spat at him. He pushed her down to join the others.

Luke watched her struggle. Her fingernails clawed at the rope. She gouged bloody marks in her neck and gurgled. A shame. The only ones with the steel to set fires against their own and now they were dying for it.

But a rebellion doesn't need heroes. It needs bodies.

"Luke. What are you doing?"

Kuyt raced up the Scaffold with shuddering steps and sprinted to the woman. He grabbed her noose and heaved, but the blood-slick rope slipped from his fingers and she swung away.

She kicked out once, twice more, then fell still.

Luke blinked. Five corpses hung before him. Bodies of those who had trusted him. The Scaffold stank like offal and shit. His throat burned.

The memories faded. That vicious, unrelenting certainty disappeared and energy drained from his body. The Scaffold shook under his feet.

No.

Luke turned to Kuyt. The old man's eyes were dark and wet. It was all wrong. This wasn't supposed to happen.

But it was too late.

Like a marionette with cut strings, Luke collapsed. The world exploded with agony. Blood dripped from his coat. A puddle leaked around him, thick enough to drown in.

The sound of footsteps. The smell of iron. The cry of a bird suffocating in a smog-scarred sky.

Luke fell into the choking darkness.

Chapter 2

Samantha DeAcarris scratched her tits.

A blob of sweat was stuck right under the leather straps of her bra and she dug a jagged fingernail dug into it like a mongrel trying to dislodge a tick.

There it is. She groaned with relief.

Not that she was going to stop sweating any time soon. The basement shimmered with heat and sparks danced through the stuffy air. White-gold flames danced over the coals with a smell of soot and char.

Perfect.

Sam lifted a bar of metal from her workbench. The most complicated alloy she had ever mixed. Iron, carbon, manganese, tungsten, copper and a dozen others, carefully weighed and mixed over two weeks. It glittered like a star as she set it in the heart of the fire.

Sam sat back on her anvil with a sigh. Sweat curled the hair around her ears. She glanced back to the projects on her workbench and guilt twinged in her stomach. She had promised to look at the clasp on Francesca DePayye's necklace and a dozen scripts for Walker blades sat in a pile on the edge of the table. Still, she was happy to put those off. She hated making weapons.

Well. Most weapons.

Sam took the crumpled drawing from a pouch at her waist. The artist had a fine eye for detail. A wave curve of steel, inlaid with a pattern of thorns and a split-tip.

A fitting design for the first piece of Dreamsteel forged in living memory.

Sam willed the alloy to heat faster. Her heart fluttered. She hadn't been this nervous since her first day in the forge.

...

Mother died on a Lightday.

The sky was grey and the room was cold. Father stood with his arms folded and the newborn screamed. Doctors whispered together. Surgeons fiddled with steel tools.

Sam hid in the doorway and watched. A lady stepped forwards. Her presence was caught in the memory like a splinter under a fingernail. The lady said something and Mother gasped. She nodded and then turned to Father.

“Do right by the girls, Horatio.”

The woman pressed a knife to Mother’s neck. The flames that lit the room began to dance. A burst of blue light. Voices were raised. Something was wrong.

Sam heard the moment Mother died. It came in a sigh. A single, heavy breath that seemed to draw the spirit from her body. The image of Mother’s face had long since faded from her memory, but that final breath was branded on her soul.

When it was over, Father held Mother’s limp hand for a long time. “I will. I swear it.” His words echoed with the strength of blood.

From the day, everything changed for the worse. Father sent Sam through every dance parlour and stuffy schoolroom in Caelum. Strict governesses and etiquette masters were single-minded in their instruction of the ‘feminine arts.’

“You’ll thank me one day,” Father told her, and yet for ten years every one of Sam’s teachers sent the same reports back to him. Capable but unwilling. Difficult. Argumentative.

If only she was more like Elizabeth.

Sam's little sister was a prodigy. She danced like a vision, sewed like a seamstress and developed early. Lizzy was an inspiration, the model pupil.

A shame she was such a bitch.

"Oh she's even worse at home," Lizzy told her band of loyal suck-ups. "She can barely eat without a bib. Our dogs always sit by her chair and I bet even they dance better than she does."

That was it, naturally. Sam launched herself at that stuck-up snit with a howl and they fell to fighting.

It didn't last long. Mistress DeFarris yanked them apart and demanded to know what happened. Everyone agreed that Sam had started it and that was so unfair that she bolted from the parlour and ran all the way home with tears boiling down her face.

She fled to the basement. Father had forbidden her from going down there so it was the perfect place to hide from him. The forge was hot and stuffy.

Forge Master Mendy, a man she had only seen in passing, looked up from the anvil. "Ere gel, what're you doing back so early? Your Pa says you was supposed to be out dancing all day." His Austelli accent had never left him. Jack Mendy was plain as iron.

Sam wiped her eyes. A few soft words later and she bawled out the whole story. It was like picking a scab. When she finished, her anger at Elizabeth was hot as spilled blood. "I wish she was dead."

Jack stood up. He was gigantic. She was surprised he didn't bump his head on the ceiling. "Is that so? Well. My master always used'ta tell me, you want a man dead, you make the weapon yourself. You up for it?"

Sam had never nodded so quickly.

"Then grab those two handles there..."

What followed was the most exhausting afternoon of Sam's life. She pumped the bellows, raked the coals, burned her arms and prepared the anvil. Master Mendy even made her fetch his hammer. It was the same size as she was and it took everything she had to drag it across the floor. When he swung it, the clang was deafening. Her tears dried in that wave of heat.

Not that she was done. Master Mendy made her drag the hammer back, bank the fire, wipe the soot from the walls and sweep the floor until it gleamed. When she finished, Sam collapsed in the corner and wiped her forehead on her grubby sleeve.

"So." Jack reached a pair of tongs into the unsalted quenching barrel. "Still want to go out and stab your baby sister?"

"...No."

"Figured as much! Without a Ma, youse need to look after each other." Jack plucked the knife free. The spit of metal was barely visible in his massive hand. "Now. What shall we do with this? Your Pa would have my head if he caught you with a knife, blunt or otherwise. Tell you what, come here."

Jack rummaged under his workbench for a hammer and some nails. He bowed his shoulder to her. "Climb on."

Sam scurried on to his shoulders. The height was dizzying. How did he cope being up there all the time without sicking up?

"Lets hang it up here, far from where it can hurt anyone. That way you'll always remember that you don't actually want to kill little Lizzy."

Sam held the knife in place and Jack hammered the nails. When they were done, he lowered her to the ground. She looked up at the dull knife.

"It's pretty ugly," she said.

"Your fault that."

"It's my first time!"

Jack snorted. "Who cares? Anything made in anger is ugly and weapons worst of all. Nah. Proper Metalwork needs a clear head and a calm mind. If you are going to make something, make it beautiful. Make people happy. Don't make them bleed."

"Then why do people make so many weapons?" Sam asked.

Jack shook his head. "I have no idea," he grumbled. "But don't you go focusing on that. Instead, how about you wrap your peepers around this?"

He drew a gold ring from a box on his workbench. Slender and curved, it was rippled in a pattern so complex Sam could barely follow it, even with her thumb leading the way. "What's this?"

"It belonged to your Ma." Jack frowned for a moment. "I'd love to know who made it. I've no idea how they engraved it that fine, but all she told me was to keep it safe. Well I reckon there 'ain't no place safer than in your hands. What d'you think?"

Sam's smile practically split her face in two. "Thank you!"

Jack grinned. "Though it might be a bit big for you yet." He took a loop of leather from his pocket and hung the ring around her neck with gentle hands. "Much better."

That night, with her backside still sore from Father's hand, Sam fell asleep with her hand wrapped around that golden band. A fire kindled inside her heart and her dreams were filled with sparks and iron.

The next evening she was at the forge once more. From the moment she came downstairs, Jack had a job waiting. Then another. And another. She set to it with a will and kept at it long after her bedtime.

Five years passed. Her days were taken up with hair-extensions and sewing patterns, but her nights were alive with steel and heat. Her fire-frizzy hair, sooty

face and bloody knuckles kept her distant from the other girls, just as their sour perfumes, 'training heels' and gossip bored her in a way that Jack's lectures on forge safety never could.

It was a price she was more than willing to pay. DeAcarris Steel became known as tough, striking and expensive. Perhaps that was why Father never put a stop to it.

On her eighteenth birthday, Jack called her down to the forge.

"Master." She sketched a faux-formal bow for him. "We forging a cake?"

He swatted at her. The smile-lines around his eyes stood out like craters in rock. "Gob as big as yours, you'd have it polished off in a couple of bites no matter how tough I made it. Nah, I called you down to let you know that I reckon you've outgrown bein' my apprentice. Consider yourself a Journeyman. Or woman. Journey...lass?"

Sam snorted. "Journey-lass? I like that." She touched his arm and smiled. "Thank you, Jack."

He shrugged. "You earned it. Now, on to the fun bit. I got you a present." He handed her a disk of metal, about the size of a small dessert plate.

"Uh. Thanks?" The disk was thin as paper but it gleamed with a faint blue light. Pretty, sure, but it looked worse than useless.

"Not impressed? Watch this." Jack clamped the disk on the anvil so that half of it hung over the side

He lifted his hammer, hundreds of pounds of forge-strengthened steel, and slammed it down on the overhanging steel with everything he had. The crash sounded like a hundred bells being crushed all at once

Well. So much for her birthday present. No way it survived that. Except... when Jack moved his hammer away, the disk was still perfect. Unbent and unmarked.

"What *is* that?" Sam asked.

"Dreamsteel. I got it from my master years ago. No idea how he made it and everyone I ask seems to have forgotten as well. All I've got is a wet bucket of rumours. Supposedly unbreakable, Dreamsteel can cut through blades, shields, solid plate and more besides."

Sam frowned. "What else is there to cut?"

Jack just shrugged. "I've heard that Dreamsteel blades could cut through another world, but I think we can dismiss that as codswallop. I heard it from a drunk, who heard it from a whore, who reckoned she got it whispered to her by some blacksmith with his tongue missing. A fine load of bull...uh, rubbish, if ever I heard it."

"Bullshit indeed." Sam smiled at Jack's blush. "A shame the recipe is lost."

"Forgotten, not lost." Jack pulled out a notepad and flicked through page after page of scrawled annotations. "It's been my life's work to bring Dreamsteel back. I've gotta be damn close by now."

Sam didn't even hesitate. She looped her apron over her head and grabbed a hammer. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Over the next three years they made their way through one hundred and fifty six different attempts at mixing Dreamsteel. All unsuccessful. Jack's claim that he was close was nothing if not optimistic.

The old forge master disappeared last year. Said he was going to Austellus to pick up some supplies, and maybe nose about for Dreamsteel rumours. He put Sam in charge of the forge in his absence.

A week without him was fun. Two weeks and she started to miss his bluff manner and joyful smile. Three weeks and she began to worry.

A month later they held his funeral. No one had heard from Forge Master Mendy since he crossed the Mucro. It was time to let go.

By the side of his empty grave, Sam made a promise of her own. She would not let his dream die with him. She would fulfil his promise.

She would return Dreamsteel to the world.

...

Sam retrieved her alloy from the coals with a pair of tongs.

The steel was alive with heat, a white-orange glow so fierce that the room felt smaller. She set the bar atop the anvil and bent to retrieve her hammer. A double-length handle to make up for her shorter arms, and a head constructed in the *Salix* style, for extra flexibility.

Jack Mendy had made it for her himself.

Sam soon lost herself in the dance of sparks and the clang of metal. Sweat leapt from her arm with every blow as she hammered out the basic blade shape.

When she was done, a dull ache groaned in her shoulders. It was a good ache. The steel gleamed like a wolf's fang made of moonlight. This was it. She could feel it.

The bar of steel *hissed* when she lowered it into the unsalted quenching barrel. She dropped the Dreamsteel disk in with it. That was a rumour Jack had sworn by. The only way to replicate Dreamsteel was to quench it with a pre-forged 'seed.'

The door above the stairs opened.

"Samantha! What are you doing down here? We have to leave!" Lizzy flounced down the stairs. She was a great one for flouncing. Her make-up was flawless as her alabaster dress and her inky hair sparkled with clips and combs. Diamond eyes in a midnight river.

"I've still got time." Sam glanced through the open gap in her tiny window. It was already dark outside. Okay. So she didn't have that much time. "I'll be up when this is done."

Lizzy stomped her dainty feet. "We are already late. Did you at least get Lady DePayye's necklace fixed?"

Sam kicked the dust between her toes. "No."

"*Samantha!*" By the Prelude, but Lizzy was shrill. "I begged Emma to ask her mother to send that necklace to us. If you don't have it finished by the time we leave..."

"I'll do it, relax." Sam held her hands up. Ever since Jack disappeared, DeAcarris Steel had seen a rather large dip in fortunes

Apparently, the fact that she had a pair of breasts meant that her work could not possibly be of the same standard.

"Well hurry up. You've got a lot of work to do if you even want to look half-way presentable, and... what are you looking at?"

Sam tore her gaze from the rusty dagger pinned to the wall. "Mm? Nothing. I'll be up soon."

Lizzy sniffed and threw her head back before darting back up the stairs.

Sam dusted her hands together. Despite Lizzy best efforts, excitement still bubbled in her chest. She dipped her tongs into the water barrel and drew the length of steel from the water slowly.

It was black.

Oh just sod it! Sam let the half-blade fall to the floor and, as expected, it fell apart like ash crumbled from the fireplace. Same as all the others. She walked over to the workbench and crossed out the formula in Jack's notebook. The final page was full of scribbled out annotations. That had been the last one. Now she was all out of ideas.

Head bowed, she fiddled with the clasp of Lady DePayye's stupid necklace. A couple of taps and a new hinge-pin and the thing was good as new.

Sam left the forge behind with the gaudy thing in hand. Time to get ready.

...

Sam watched the moon beyond the glass window of the DeWhit ballroom and desperately wished she was anywhere else.

"Sammy. Didn't that dress come with gloves?" Father shifted in his close-fitting jacket, never once letting his public-facing smile fade.

Sam scowled. Her dress was a simple green affair that matched her eyes. There had been a pair of silken gloves to go with it. She even managed to get them on, for all of a heartbeat. Then the sodding spider-string pieces of nonsense just exploded from her forearms. A lifetime of swinging a hammer would do that to a girl.

"It's too warm for gloves."

That, at least, was not a lie. Even compared to the forge, the DeWhit ballroom was oppressive. Proper women didn't sweat. That was probably why she was the only one with stains the size of two lakes spreading from her armpits.

"I see." Father gulped his wine down and shook his head. He turned towards the nearest table and, within moments, was embroiled in some debate about mining rights.

Sam just glanced around. Bored.

Even packed with socialites, the room felt like a cave. Fur rugs and dressed stone predominated. Uncovered torches spat and spluttered and the smell of too many perfumes mingled in the smoke.

It was all very DeWhit.

The River Lord sat at the high table, a cigar between his lips. It was a wonder he didn't set his ginger moustache on fire. Walter DeWhit was the wealthiest of all the named lords. Probably why his tastes ran so close to garish.

Sat beside him, and flirting outrageously with his son Jonas, was Elizabeth.

Hooped skirts and floated sleeves, her dress was so bizarre that it had to be right on the bleeding edge of fashion. The DeWhit heir certainly seemed to think so. He could barely take his eyes off her. Their courtship was the talk of Caelum. The DeAcarris family was not a powerful one and yet Lizzy had snared one of the most eligible young men in the city.

Sam was so proud she could spit.

Jace DeSané sat on the other side. The Earth Lord was dressed in silk and a bottle of wine was already empty before him. Young, handsome and single, he was swarmed by a gaggle of wish-we-were-widows. Low-cut blouses and ear-splitting laughter, their husbands mingled on the floor below but they angled and simpered for a better connection. Like the crystalline confections that topped the fancy cakes, they were all sugar and no substance.

At least the other named lords had some restraint. Stocky Benjamin DeMori, the Stone Lord whose family built the Patriae Wall that surrounded Arx, chatted

softly with Var DeKeita. The Steel Lord, High Commander of the Walkers, nodded. His hair was grey as his title.

On the opposite side of the table, as far away as possible, sat Andross DeGaya. The Sky Lord had a youthful face, but his hair was white. Everyone knew his story. The hero of the Flame Protests, he had lived in Austellus before his ascension to Lordship. His hatred for DeKeita was legendary.

Beside him sat Leanne DeSüle. The Sea Lord was the only female member of the Upper Senate. Her dress was black in mourning for a husband who died decades ago. Sam had only spoken to her once. The iron-haired woman had touched Mother's ring around her neck and muttered something about a mistake. Well, it's not like she could talk! Her jewellery was hideous, all thick iron chains and bangles.

And for some reason, Father was terrified of her.

Above the high table, his chair set in shadow, was Simon DeProleai. High Lord of Arx. A single glass of red wine sat before him. Untouched.

"Excuse me, sir?"

Sam almost leapt out of her chair. A young man in a gaudy pink shirt approached Father.

"Yes lad?"

"My name is Larry DeConté. Might I ask permission to take your lovely daughter for a dance?"

Sam raised an eyebrow. Had the man-boy forgotten his glasses? By all appearances, he was a decent catch. Rich, if tasteless, and even somewhat handsome behind that enormous nose. Clear skin, bright eyes and...

Ah. Blonde hair. Outspawn then.

With the endless sand of the Deadlands to the north, and nothing but farms and villages to the south, Arx had been isolated for generations. No one seemed to remember why they had first closed the gates to outsiders, but everyone agreed that it had been a smart move. Even the best Outspawn were untrustworthy as devils.

Father curled his lip in consideration. Anyone else would have spat on the boy's impudence, but Father was in no position to be picky.

"By all means. Samantha, this young man wishes to dance with you."

"I heard." No one had asked her if she wanted to dance with the boy, but it was better than putting up with Father's guilt trip all evening. She took the lad's clammy hand and led him to a corner of the dance floor.

Spiral patterns of inlaid ebony glittered under her feet and a bandstand of soft oak rose in the middle. A young couple snickered as Sam shuffled into place beside them, scorn stamped across their snooty faces. The woman was dressed in bright orange, with an enormous green hat. She looked like a carrot.

Sam made sure the bint saw her smirk.

The DeConté boy tugged her close. His breath smelled like warm milk and his hand slithered around her waist. Sam shuddered. A familiar bubbling began in her stomach. Disgust roiled in her abdomen and bile rushed into her throat.

She did not enjoy being touched.

He stared down the front of her dress like he had dropped a diamond down there, despite the complete absence of anything for him to get his glance caught on. Sam cleared her throat but his gaze didn't even waver.

The music started with a screech that tore right through her ears. A cacophony of too many strings all striving to keep to a sprung rhythm. The dance began with a jerk and a stumble.

The boy heaved Sam around the floor. His knuckles were white. Puffs of sand flicked from his feet like his shoes were lead. When he attempted to twirl her, he almost pulled her arm from its socket.

"Is this your first time dancing?" Sam rubbed her shoulder.

The boy flushed.

"I thought so." She yanked his hand from her waist and placed it on her shoulder. "Follow me."

Sam led the idiot boy through some simple steps. He struggled at the start, but it didn't take much to drag him into line. Step. Together. Back. Towards.

"See? Easy. Now, again."

By the time the music wound to a close they were both sweating. The final notes squealed out and Sam set the boy down. He didn't even offer a bow before he stormed away.

"How embarrassing."

Sam glanced around. The nearby couples were staring at her.

"A woman leading? Do you think they teach that wherever that Outspawn's ancestors came from? I knew she was odd..."

"If she were *my* sister, I would just *die*. How *does* Elizabeth do it?"

Sam's chin fell. The other couples stepped aside as she walked back to Father. The steaming drink before him was untouched. Clearly, he had been watching.

Saul hovered over his shoulder. Whiplash lean and with eyebrows thick enough to swallow his face, Saul was driver, butler, manservant and bodyguard all rolled into one. He had been serving the family for as long as she could remember.

"Would my lady care for a drink?"

Sam met his smile. "Please."

"DeWhit has provided a lovely whiskey tonight. Or perhaps I can tempt you with some wine?"

"Water for her, Saul." Father's voice was tight with anger. "Perhaps that will keep her from any further embarrassment."

Sam stared at her lap. She twisted Mother's ring around her neck and watched the dancers.

Elizabeth's white dress shone like a beacon amidst the blues and reds. She was stunning. No sense denying it. Her movements made even the most intricate steps seem easy and she was still able to flutter her eyelashes at Jonas DeWhit. The way her dress billowed around her made it look as if she were a mere breath of wind away from ascending to the heavens.

Of course, when she got there the wind would realise what a terrible mistake it had made and dump her back with a thud, but Jonas DeWhit was not to know that.

"Are you going to sit here alone all night again?" Father asked.

"No." She was almost certainly going to find a glass of wine at some point.

Father stood up. "Of course. I should go and mingle." Even his eyes were cold.

"Take this with you." Sam shook the necklace from a pouch at her waist. "Tell Lady DePayye that you hired in a man to do it. Might help our reputation a little."

"Thank you Sammy." Father's voice was a little softer this time.

When he was gone, Saul swept beside her with a glass of water. "I could get you that wine now?"

Sam shook her head. "No Saul, you get off to your dinner. I'll be fine."

The old servant paused for a moment. He set a heavy hand on her shoulder. "You will. I know it."

Sam forced a smile for him and waved him off. Saul really was far too good to her.

Finally. She was alone.

Sam folded her arms. This was all she wanted. Space to be herself, to do what she wanted, without Father's judgement, or Lizzy's acid tongue getting in the way. Why was it too much to ask?

She coughed and forced a lump down her throat. Damned if she was just going to sit and be miserable all evening.

Thankfully, a good wine was always in fashion and it wasn't long until she located a pitcher. It even had a few drops of condensation beading on the side, a sign that it was perhaps just a shade cooler than the soupy air.

A young man bumped into her elbow. Sam scowled and rounded on the moron. Her breath caught. Despite his scruffy shirt and uncombed hair, she recognised him instantly.

Matthew DeProleai. Heir to the city.

Just tremendous.

"May I pour for you?"

"No." Sam drew the pitcher away from him and filled a glass. The wine was good, a taste of ice and spice amidst the smoke. "What? Do you want some?"

He nodded. "I would be no gentleman should I refuse such an offer now would I?"

"In my experience, 'gentlemen' become a lot rarer when wine is involved." She sloshed a mouthful into his glass before topping up her own.

He grinned. "Perhaps you just haven't been spending time with the right men? Come, surely you will share a glass with me?"

"Oh absolutely not." Sam shook her head. "I will not be the butt of your jokes for an evening. By your leave, my lord." She turned to walk away.

Why was everyone staring at her?

It wasn't even a subtle. Master DeReus with his scarred face and bold appraisal from the nearby table to old lady DeCalt peering over the top of her spectacles. A flush of blood filled Sam's face.

"Uncomfortable, isn't it?"

Sam turned back to DeProleai. "What did you tell them?"

"Nothing. This is just what happens when someone speaks to me. It is... tiresome."

"Oh poor you."

He smirked. "I thought that you, of all people, would understand the desire to avoid your reputation. I've observed you at these dances before. You participate only when your Father is watching. Then you sit and drink until it is over. Rude, abrasive and with a penchant for blacksmithing of all things. Elizabeth said you'd sleep in the forge if you could."

"She is such a sweetheart." Sam set her wineglass on the table to keep from shattering it.

"Quite. You should thank her."

Preferably with a fist or two. "For what?"

"For our courtship."

That stopped her. "Our what?"

"Courtship. You know, dancing, drinking, moonlit carriage rides?"

"I'm familiar with the concept." In theory. "But why? You've just listed all the qualities that make me less desirable than a washer woman with two teeth and half a leg."

“Simply? I want a break. A few months without some new pair of breasts thrust in my face every morning.”

“Oh please. It’s not like you would be doing anything else.”

“Have you no idea what is brewing in Austellus as we speak?” DeProleai looked truly offended. “An Enforcer died! Father might pretend blindness, but I won’t. The Austelli need a firm hand and Var can’t do it all on his own, not with DeGaya opposing him at every turn.”

“Sure. But even if I did believe you, what is in this for me?” Sam folded her arms.

“Respect and reputation. I am Heir to the city after all. Think how proud your Father would be. Consider it a trade. The way I see it, we are both in need of a little freedom from expectations.”

Sam chewed her cheek. It was an appealing thought, but there had to be more than he was telling her. The most eligible man in the city did not offer a date without some ulterior motive.

But she would have plenty of time to figure that out later. Sam shrugged. “Deal.”

“What, that easy? I had quite a few more reasons why this is a good idea.”

“Keep them for the bargaining table. We will discuss the details of this trade later.” She licked her lips in anticipation of just exactly what her demands would be. “Though don’t expect me to swoon. I don’t swoon.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” He offered her his hand. “Come then, let’s get this over with.”

“Excuse me?”

“We are at a dance. It would be somewhat odd to announce a courtship if no one sees us take to the floor together.”

Sam groaned. The feeling of his hand in hers made her ill.

The room was eerily silent as they made for the dance floor. One by one the other couples made their excuses and fled. Over DeProleai's shoulder, she caught a glimpse of Father. His mouth was open in an O of scandalised delight.

"Sister!" Lizzy's voice was honey and syrup. They were the only two couples left. Jonas DeWhit shook Matthew's hand.

"Elizabeth!" Sam embraced her.

"Do you know who that is?" Lizzy hissed.

"Yes. Unlike some, I actually pay attention to the men courting me."

"Courting? Have you lost your mind?"

"Jealous is an ugly colour. It suits you." Sam broke the hug with a shove. Two spots of colour appeared in Lizzy's cheeks, but she was far too practised at controlling herself. A languorous smile spread across her face and she turned to face Jonas DeWhit, all tits and tongue.

Sam clicked her teeth and DeProleai stepped forwards. They took hold. The music began.

A waltz. Sam let go of a breath she had forgotten she was holding. Slow. Easy. One, two, three. One, two, three. DeProleai met her step for step with confidence. Despite the boiling in her stomach, it was almost pleasant. She even managed to smile.

"You are a lovely dancer." Matthew's eyes glittered.

Sam snorted. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

He drew her close. The music fell away. "I know. Perhaps this will." He bent and pressed his mouth to hers. Her first kiss.

It was revolting.

The taste of his lips, the scratch of stubble, the smell of his unmistakable *maleness* all combined in a putrid swirl of vile sensation. Bile pooled behind her teeth. She tried to pull away but his arms drew her close. He made a noise in the back of his throat.

“Get off!” Sam lashed out, blinded by disgust.

She blinked. A web of pain spread down her palm. The music stopped. Matthew’s cheek was red with the imprint of her hand.

He said nothing. Just turned and walked out. Noise flooded the ballroom in his wake. Shocked laughter and scorn, so thick she could taste it

Sam just stood there. Lost.

Alone.

Chapter 3

Kain twiddled his thumbs on the riverbank.

Sunlight broke through the canopy an' picked out the frost on muddy leaves. Would'a been right pleasant without the chilly wind makin' ice grow on his feet.

He wriggled his toes to try'n bring 'em back to life. Fishes were feelin' the nip just as much as he were an' the crafty buggers were all still abed. Only thing to do were to bait his hooks with dangly worms an' see if hunger got the better of the slimy buggers afore the cold did him in.

The Kink were a great place for fishin'. A clump o' trees made up the better part of a spawnin' run that led to all sorts of juvies makin' the journey down to the sea.

Kain had named the Kink hisself, on account of the bend in the river reminded him o' the big knot in his spine. Twisted his body sommat fierce an' hurt like blazes just for breathin'. A brisk walk were enough to get him sweatin' fit for the pots.

'Course, it used to be even worse. Fact, for nineteen summers his most notable achievement were that he could make it downstairs by hisself. That all changed the day he turned twenty.

...

That mornin', Pa demanded Kain come down to the paddock at the end o' the garden. With a little help from Ma, they made it down an' there, sat on a pile o' wood shavin's an' bent nails, were a crooked foldin' chair.

"Lookit, see?" Pa were just chuffed to bits. "I made the legs a little shorter on this side, and the seat is wider'n usual. It's a fishin' stool! I spoke to anglers down in Vos and they gave me the idea. Well? What're you waitin' for? Gerrup in there!"

Sat on the wet grass, Kain showed 'is pearly whites. He held out his arms. "Go on then, gimme a hand."

"Aren't you even gonna try on your own first?" Pa stood with his arms folded.

"Try what? Breakin' a leg?"

"Come on boys, this is silly," Ma said. "Here Kain, I'll help you up."

"No you bloody won't Andrea. What lad, you tellin' me you won't even *sit* by yerself no more?"

"I can't," Kain said an' that were it. Two decades of disappointment boiled over an' Pa just exploded with fury.

"'Course you can! But you won't. Won't do anythin' if you can get someone else to do it for you, will you? You know what most lads your age are doin'? Movin' out! Gettin' married! Not wheedling their Ma to help 'em off the shitter in the middle o' the night!"

"Richard! Enough!" Ma said.

Pa looked in all manner o' moods to keep goin', but the look on her face shut him up. He turned an' thumped back to the cottage.

The rest o' the day were hollow. Abi, unaware o' the whole rigmarole, gave him some blankey she crocheted. It were a lovely thing, all blue an' gold an' soft as puppy fur. The perfect gift for a useless invalid.

That night, Kain sat in his room an' thought on what Pa said. He were still thinkin' long after the candles drowned in their own wax an' even the moon gone dark.

Next mornin', afore Ma even put the bread on to rise, Kain slid down the stairs. The bruises on his backside weren't gonna be pretty, but so what? He grabbed the fishin' pole by the door an' let hisself out.

Pole. Step. Grunt. River weren't far. He could see the copse from the kitchen, but that didn't make it any easier. Every step sent a twangle from his arse to his shoulders an' he sweat like an albatross in a storm. Just gotta reach the bank. Only a couple. More. Steps...

He blacked out.

Wakin' up were painful, but the humiliation were worse. Pa slung him over his shoulder like a sack o' spuds an' carried him home, grumblin' all the way.

So the next mornin', Kain did it again.

His legs were sore an' his head were poundin'. Every step made him jerk like a chicken in the thresher but that weren't gonna stop him. The bank felt as far away as the moon itself, but he kept on keepin' on.

His foot hit a wet patch o' grass an' he went flyin', arse over tit. This time he didn't pass out. He had a fit. Everythin' were bright. Saturated. The world tumbled away like a bale o' hay down a hill an' he fell with it.

When the seizure ended, he were alone with a bloody tongue an' all the strength of a lamb bein' chopped for casserole.

Abi came for 'im that day. Fourteen summers old an' already stronger'n him. It were no problem for her to jam into the space under his armpit an' limp him home.

She chatted constantly, any old nonsense, just to avoid the stink comin' from his trousers. Even hauled the water for a bath though, mercifully, she left him to wash on his own. Abi were nicer'n a blue jay on a Lightday, but even she griped when she emptied his shit-stained bathwater.

That night, Kain spent some tears into his pillow an', just for a bit, let hisself feel as wretched as he truly were.

Next day, the sun were a scorcher an' his legs were stiffer'n a carcass set to hang. By the time he made it downstairs, everyone were already at the breakfast table. Abi kicked a chair out for him, but he ignored it. Ignored the silence that followed him through the room. Ignored their pity. Didn't want any of it. All he wanted were his pole.

He slammed the door behind an' all, just for good measure.

Kain learned sommat about pain that day. Namely that if there is enough, it all starts to feel the same. Sure, to start with his legs hurt, an' his arms hurt, an' his back were so swollen it felt like he were walkin' with his head somewhere between his knees. He had to stop twice to vomit, an' black spots danced in the tears that filled his eyes, but eventually it just couldn't get no worse.

That were nice.

By the time he made it to the bank, he were just about lucid enough to start fishin'. Gettin' the hook in the water took most of the afternoon, an' then nothin' happened except some worm drowned.

It took a week for the first bite, when enough warm days passed to draw out the bugs an' the fish got fat an' lazy. One afternoon, just as he were rollin' the ache from his shoulders... a bob. A ring o' water rippled from his bait.

He had a bite. River fish were small. Should be easy to pull in.

'Course, 'should be' made no soup. He tugged the line an' it tugged right back. Kain settled in for the long haul. Some clouds up an' pissed on him, an' he cut hisself on the wire line, but he finally managed to reel the damn thing in.

He were left starin' at an empty hook.

Next day were no different. He sat there all day, but when Ma turned up at sunset, his nets were still dry.

But he didn't stop. Couldn't. Not again. He needed to land one. Else it were all for nothin'.

A dip in the water. The line rippled an' he held his breath. A little tug.

Kain began to wind the line around his fingers, slow as a rollin' cow. One length. Another. He could see it! Brown spots an' slick as mud. Another length. The fish splashed in the shallows.

It were gonna let go. He knew it like he knew his own name. It would retch up the hook an' leave him cursin' how...

He landed it.

Kain collapsed to the grass, pantin' like he had run a race. The little fish suffocated beside him.

He had done it.

...

Problem were, a dead fish didn't really change nothin'. Sure, it were fun for a while, the cripple bringin' home the nightly meals. It even got him a gruff apology from Pa, for all that were worth, but they were a farmin' family. Most o' his catch ended up in the slop for the pigs on a good day.

The day dragged on.

When the fish finally woke up, he caught a couple. Knife in, belly open, guts out an' sling the flesh into his net. When he were done, Kain washed the fish blood from his elbows.

A horse whickered softly.

Kain turned. The beast stood a few feet away, muzzle dipped in the river. It were enormous, almost twice his size, an' beautiful as a paintin'. Soft brown coat with white socks. Saddlebags hung from the horse's side. Not wild then. So where did it come from?

"Ere, come back now!"

Kain watched the trees. Some bloke came crashin' through the undergrowth. There were leaves caught in his beard an' sap dripped down his ear.

"There you are Ro!" he scolded his horse. "Scared me fit to death pissing off like that." The beast just kept on drinkin' as the bloke went through her panniers. "You've still got it, right? You 'ain't up and lost it, have you...? There's a girl!"

He pulled a little copper ring free an' slipped it onto his finger with a sigh. "Wouldn't like it if I lost this, would he?" He ran his fingers through her mane an' pulled the burrs an' tangles free.

Kain coughed an' the bloke near jumped outta his skin.

"Slap my bollocks lad, you could have said something! Bloody thing." The man nodded at his horse. "She got away when I let her walk for a bit without my arse in the saddle. That's gratitude for you, eh?"

"Sure?" Kain said.

The man walked over an' pulled off his hat to reveal a baldin' head an' some fifty summers worth o' lines around his eyes. "Names Fetch." He held out his hand.

"Kain."

"So, what are you doing in this neck-o-the-woods?" Fetch wiped the sap from his ear.

Kain pointed at his carry net. "Fishin'."

Fetch recoiled. He held a hand up over his face. "Gross. Never eat any animals with eyes kid. That's advice you can keep."

"What kind o' animal don't have eyes?" Kain asked.

"You know. Like... a steak. Or bacon. All I know is that if it can see me, I 'ain't eating it. Unless it's a useless bloody horse!" He turned to the beast an' set his hands on his hips.

The horse lifted her head from the river an' began nibblin' on some grass.

Fetch cracked his shoulders. "Long day! Say, you know the way out of this forest kid? Can't tell my arse from my elbow in here."

Kain grinned. Forest? The trees around the Kink were a few paces deep with a limp, let alone on horseback. "Aye. Down there." He pointed to an openin' in the foliage. "Just keep goin'. You'll get to the grasslands soon enough. Where are you headed?"

"No time kid, no time! Thanks. You 'ain't a bullshitter, I like that." Fetch scrabbled up on his horse. She went to bite his arm, but he pushed her head down. He tossed Kain a salute an' galloped off, coat flappin' up behind him. A proper sword glinted at his hip! Why'd he need a sword out in the middle o' nowhere?

Kain shook his head. Tryin' to make sense o' that encounter were like tryin'a shear a sheep with a spoon. 'Sides, the sun were startin' to waver. Probably time to be gettin' back.

The walk still took it outta him. Every step sent a little jolt up to his back. He snapped a dead branch from a tree an' set on up the hill. For anyone else, it would be a hop, skip an' a jump, but for him it were a mighty climb.

At the top, he were sweatin' an' completely outta puff. His left leg started givin' it the wobbles, so he leant on his stick to catch his breath an' looked out over the grasslands.

It were green an' thick as thatch with farmsteads. Vos were in the distance, a tiny fishin' village with a stone wall. Mines dug into the grass around it like giant

rabbit warrens. 'Course, they were mostly abandoned now. No reason to keep diggin', so said Pa. Arx had enough metal nowadays.

Arx. The eternally out-o'-reach. It rose in the distance like a wide-mouth bass what swallowed the land. A massive metal pillar rose high above the blackened wall, visible all this distance away. Ma an' Pa were both from Arx. When they told the story they even made it sound *romantic* that they turned their back on civilisation to start a soddin' farm!

'Course those weren't Kain's favourite stories. No, the best ones were when Pa had a few an' spoke o' the Ant. Hero o' the Flame Protests, he had taken up a sword an' fought for freedom for his fellow man. The Ant had changed the world. Even Pa couldn't keep the awe from his voice when he spoke about 'im.

Kain had it all figured out. One day he'd make it to Arx. One day he'd touch the Spire that broke the sky. An' one day he'd be a hero fit to impress Pa too.

He swung his branch like a sword. Almost lost his balance an' smacked down the hill like a loose sack of turds afore his pinwheelin' arms got him steady again.

Probably time to stop daydreamin' an' get home.

Downhill weren't much better'n up but he managed it all the same. By the time he reached the cottage, he were puffin' like his lungs were full o' sand. Sun kissed the horizon goodnight an' the grassland burst with orange.

Kain yawned an' chucked his fishin' gear in the shed. Ma didn't like the smell in the house. He hefted his carry net to the front door.

It were locked.

Ma never locked the door. Aside from Garrid down the lane with his wanderin' goats, there weren't another person for miles.

He pounded on the wood. "Hello?"

Moments later, the door opened. "Oh hello dear." Ma dusted her hands down the front of her apron an' tucked some stray greys back into her bun. "How was fishing?"

"Decent." Kain held up his net. "Why's the door locked?"

"Oh nothing serious. A man came to visit your father and he insisted on it."

"A man?" Kain walked into the kitchen. It were warm enough to chase the chill from his bones an' the smell o' cinnamon set his mouth to waterin'.

Ma took the fish from him an' set them next to the stove. "From the city. Came on some sort of urgent business. He had the most peculiar name..."

"Fetch?"

"How did you know that?"

"I met him out near the Kink. What does he want with Pa?"

"I don't know. They went into the living room not long after he arrived, and shut the door. Didn't even let me offer him a cup of tea." Ma shook her head.

Kain grinned at that. A body could be as rude to Ma as they wanted but to refuse a cuppa? Sacrilege. "Where's Abi?"

"In her room."

"Can I go see Pa?"

"I wouldn't. You know how he gets..."

"Ma, I'm fine. A little sweaty, but I'm not gonna collapse. I just wanna see what they are talkin' about."

"I don't..."

"Okay Ma, thanks." Kain walked past her to push open the door to the livin' room.

The fireplace blazed an' outlined the two men stood afore it. Solid, stationary Pa looked he were carved o' stone. Beside him, Fetch waved his arms about an'

almost tripped over Munch. The old collie heaved himself up an' came over Kain for a scratch.

"Hello?" Kain said. Munch licked his hand to remind him that he weren't done yet.

Pa looked over an' nodded. "Son. How was fishin'?"

"Decent."

"Ey, there's the lad I met! What're you doing here? You following me? Because that's weird. What's up with your legs? Why are you walking funny?"

Kain reeled under the questions.

"Don't speak to my son like that." Pa's words were there, but the pride weren't. More like embarrassment that someone else had noticed. "You are dealing with me, and I already gave you my answer."

"Come on, it's not like you don't have it. I've seen your storage sheds, and DeSané's willing to pay triple. It's not just you either. Everyone's gotta send what they can. Lean winter, so I'm told."

Pa sat on the arm of his favourite chair. "I can't leave the farm again. It's the tail-end o' the season. I don't have a swift horse like you. For me it is a weeklong trip to Arx and I canne miss that kind of time. The place would go fallow before I got back."

"I take that answer back and DeSané will remove your tenancy and my testes."

"He can't!"

"You kidding? DeSané could have both of our heads without blinking."

Pa narrowed his eyes. "I'd like to see him try. No, you take this back to young Jace. You tell 'im..."

"I'll go," Kain said. The words leapt from his mouth afore he could stop them.

"No, you won't," Pa said.

"What's the problem? I can take Crabbie an' the old cart an' be back in no time." Kain's heart leapt into his throat. A chance to go to Arx! He couldn't pass that up, not no way, not no how.

"Master Fetch, give us a moment," Pa said.

"Sure." Fetch wandered back to the fire an' sat on the floor. A moment later Munch fell into his lap.

"Son, you ain't strong enough for this." Pa had a right cob on him, brows drawn tight enough to crack a walnut.

"Yes I am. Look Pa, don't sound like we have a choice. Abi is too young, Ma would never go an' you already said that you can't." He were practically beggin', but Pa didn't look convinced.

"You don't know anything about Arx. There are rules and..."

"So teach me. You want me to be useful, to get outta your house? Then let me go."

Pa paused. "How strong do you feel?"

"Better'n ever. Look Pa, he's heard me say it now. What message will it send if we back out now?"

Pa scowled. He turned from Kain with a sigh.

"Very well. Master Fetch, it seems that Jace DeSané will have his delivery. Tell him to expect my son within the week and the payment best be ready."

"Ere, that's brilliant!" Fetch leapt to his feet. Munch tumbled from his lap with a thump. The old dog growled a little, then fell to the side an' closed his eyes. "I get to keep my balls, well for a bit longer eh? I'll wait for you in Arx, kid. Buy you a beer!" He bowed so low he could have kissed the floor. Then he left, bowin' once for Ma afore he bustled from the house.

Kain watched him go. He tried, he really did, but he couldn't wipe the smile from his face.

He were goin' to Arx!

Chapter 4

White. Fire. Pain.

Luke groaned. If this was death, then why did it hurt so much? If this was death, then why was he naked?

He squinted. Turns out that whiteness wasn't a portal into the afterlife. It was a wall. White washed and mouldy with old blood.

Not a great sign that.

Neither were the ropes that bit into his wrists and ankles. The metal slab beneath him was cold. He tried to shift up on to his elbows.

Mistake that.

Luke squealed like a child. A spasm wracked him, neck to arse. Snot burbled down his cheek. Screams burned silent in his chest. Darkness slammed into his eyes like a giant fist in his face. A river of ooze slid down his back.

Beyond the sobbing, Luke did the only thing he could. He breathed. Moments passed like days, time measured by each breath that whistled between his teeth.

He ran out of tears long before the world stopped spinning. The pain wasn't gone, but he could open his eyes without feeling like they were going to squirt out of his face.

Progress.

Footsteps sound from outside. Two pairs. Cold sweat beaded on Luke's forehead. Something rattled behind him. A door?

He squeezed his eyes shut like he could hide in the dark.

The air changed. Two people entered the room, footsteps soft as death. Luke groped for a knife that wasn't there. Breath froze in his lungs.

Someone approached. So close he could smell them.

A familiar smell. Piss and old blankets.

Luke's eyes snapped open. "Hey Kuyt."

"He's awake." Kuyt walked past without looking down.

"Guess I owe you a drink." Addie leant against the wall. She folded her arms and all of a sudden that shirt was tight in all the right places. "How you feeling Luke?"

"Like some asshole sliced open my back. How is it?" Luke asked.

"Bad." Addie grimaced. "Dunno how you were on your feet that long. Even DeSarrk didn't think you were coming back."

"DeSarrk?"

"Yeah." Addie shuffled against the wall. "Surgeon from Collegium Foments, up in Caelum. Supposed to be brilliant, but he's done jack shit so far."

"Wait. *Lincento* DeSarrk? Damn it Addie, how'd you manage that? DeSarrk hates Austellus like we all took turns riding his daughter."

Addie shrugged. "You'd be surprised how easy you can cross the Mucro with a scowl and a black cloak. DeSarrk was home so I just knelt before the big doctor, took his cock in my hand, and told him I'd twist it off and feed it to him if he didn't come with me. He was the one that insisted I tie you down. Did you know you scream in your sleep?"

Yes. "So, uh, where are we?" Luke asked.

"Safe house, just off the Arena. Kuyt and I carried you here after... you collapsed."

"Right. Well. Thanks," Luke said.

Addie nodded and the room lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. Luke glanced at Kuyt. After a long moment, the old man finally met his eyes.

His face radiated betrayal.

“Saviour.”

Luke frowned. “What?”

“That’s what they are calling you. Those who saw your... performance. Here to save us, not just from the Walkers, but from ourselves. It’s quite the cult.”

“I don’t...”

“Though from what I hear, the Austelli don’t know whether to raise a glass or piss on you. Sure you killed five innocents, but then you died for them. What a trick! I don’t think even I could have taught you that.” Kuyt’s acrid sarcasm died in a breath.

Luke winced. “Well... did we at least recruit?”

“About sixty.” Addie tugged at her blonde braid. “I’ve got ’em running drill as we speak. Probably killed each other by the time I get back, but that is a risk I am willing to take. Useless piss-pots.”

“Sixty.” Luke’s heart sank. “From that huge crowd.”

“And not a person more.” Kuyt’s face was stone but his eyes burned. “Not to mention that Caelum is pissed to hell. Announcement came down from the Upper Senate this morning. Triple patrols on the streets and tightened security around the Scaffold. Good job.”

Luke licked his lips. “Do you want to know why I did it Kuyt? Fear. The Austelli need to fear me more than Caelum or they will never stand up for themselves.”

“Fear does nothing but make a coward wise and a brave man stupid. We were supposed to fight against fear, not for it. Or did you forget that?”

Kuyt slammed the gateway metal down, right before Luke’s eyes.

“I saw you looking at it.” Kuyt’s eyes were cold, accusing. “Memory magic did this. Didn’t it?”

Luke began to sweat. The strange memories bubbled through his mind but he forced the images away. "I just... wanted to show the people that we are serious about their suffering."

Kuyt snarled. "There is enough violence in Austellus kid. Not a lot of people thirsty for more. Suffering is familiar. Change is hard."

"But... I won."

"You call that a victory? I reckon your back would disagree."

"I..." Luke coughed. A splatter of blood flecked the side of the gateway metal. "Damn it. We'll talk about this. I swear. But for now, can we focus on me not dying?"

Kuyt didn't respond. He looked at Addie.

She sighed and pushed herself from the wall. "I'm out. Goodbye Luke." She paused. "You were an asshole, but you gave us something to fight for." Her voice was devoid of the usual mockery. She almost sounded sincere.

She left without a backward glance.

"What was that?" Luke asked.

Kuyt just shook his head. "I'll come see you when DeSarrk is back."

"Wait, Kuyt!" Luke shouted, but it was useless.

The old man was already gone.

...

Luke woke with the singular sensation of needing to piss more than he ever had in his life. Two figures hovered over him and he grunted.

"Luke? Still alive?" Kuyt again.

"Just about. Bladder's about to explode though. How do I piss lying down?"

Luke asked.

"With difficulty." A new voice, accompanied by soft hands. "Brace yourself."

Luke was lifted an inch from the metal. A spike of pain dug into his back and he hissed, but it was far softer than the snarling agony of last time. That had to be a good sign.

A chamber pot dug into his thighs. Such a Caelum contraption. They even made pissing difficult. He closed his eyes and let relief wash over him in warm, yellow waves.

"You're the surgeon, right?" Luke asked.

"Lincento DeSarrk, at your service." A short, fat bloke with a beard the size of an overgrown rat shuffled over. He did a decent job hiding his distaste, but it was there if you knew where to look. "Are you done?"

"Almost..." There it was. Much better. Except now his prick was pickling in a pot of piss. "Could you...?"

DeSarrk scuttled over and eased him up to swipe the pot. A wet stripe cooled on Luke's leg.

"Kuyt, where's Addie?" Luke asked.

"Training," Kuyt said. "She's not coming back."

"Oh. Okay. Well. I'll have to go find her. You, surgeon, how are you going to heal me?"

DeSarrk made a noise and looked away.

"Pardon? I didn't quite hear you," Luke said.

"Come on Doctor Shit-For-Brains. Tell him," Kuyt demanded.

"Austelli." This time the disgust rang clear in DeSarrk's voice. The surgeon leaned closer and tongued a notch in his lip. "Listen. With a laceration like this,

standard procedure is to sew the wound, keep the patient fed and watered, and wait for vital fluids to re-accumulate.”

“So do that.”

“Obviously it is not that simple. You bled for a long time before I got to you. Even now, the wound weeps. With the blood loss and depth of cut, the shock of a needle would kill you.”

Luke met the surgeon’s eyes. Unfortunately, the bastard looked to be telling the truth. “Then just wait a bit. Let me regain some strength and we’ll do it then.” He began to sweat. The air was warm and close.

“Again, it is not that simple. The edge of the wound is red and getting darker. Your skin is moving from proud to necrotic and that axe cannot have been clean. A few more days and the dead tissue will poison your blood and kill you far more painfully.”

“Fine. Then how can you heal this?” Luke asked. His voice lost all its strength. Odd that.

DeSarrk just shook his head.

Icy fear drilled into Luke’s heart. “I’m going to die?”

DeSarrk nodded. There was no sorrow in his eyes. Just cold competence.

“Yes.”

“Is there nothing else?” Panic bit at Luke. “Any other option?”

“Just one.” A scalpel appeared in DeSarrk’s hand. “I can offer you a swift end. Bloodletting is painless, and I assure you...”

That was it. Something broke in Luke and his temper erupted. “Of course! Can’t help me, but you’ll leap to finish me off. You Caelumites are all the same!”

“I understand that this is upsetting...”

“Upsetting? You patronising cunt, don’t talk to me about upsetting!”

"I'll leave you to your thoughts." DeSarrk edged away.

"Yeah, run you coward. I hope Addie kills you for this. You hear me? I hope she kills you!" Luke shouted. Anger throbbed in time with the pain that lanced into his back. He tried to shove himself up but a wave of nausea forced him back down to the slab.

The door slammed closed.

"Can you believe him?" Luke turned to Kuyt. "Pedantic, superior, cocksniffing, wet-nosed, smart-arse bastard! Might as well have taken me to a dog leech."

The old man placed a hand on Luke's shoulder. "Relax kid. Take a breath. You can't see the cut. It's just not the type of injury you survive. It was obvious the moment we got your coat off."

Luke's anger drained into the old actor's palm. What did it matter? Angry or sober, he was just as dead. "Then why are you here Kuyt?"

"Because I want to be. No one should die alone. Besides, Addie asked me to stay. Poor lass. I reckon you were doing a job to win her over, especially after..."

Kuyt shook his head. His grip tightened. "You did good Luke."

"I failed."

"You killed an Enforcer."

"I killed my own men."

"You did. Perhaps you shouldn't have. But then, maybe you're right. This is how change starts. The match that lights the flame doesn't burn until the end. I forgive..."

"Don't." Luke snarled. Tears misted in his eyes. "Don't you dare forgive me. Forgiveness is for the dead."

The look on Kuyt's face pierced Luke's heart. "Okay kid." He patted his shoulder. "Get some rest. I'll be back to check on you later."

Kuyt left and for a long time, everything was quiet.

Luke didn't blink. Maybe the tears would re-absorb into his eyes. The gateway metal still sat in front of him, spotted with blood. It wavered in his liquid vision.

Pathetic. Die with dignity. I did.

Luke blinked. A blinding light flashed from the gateway metal.

Everything reversed. Something flickered and Luke was falling...

...

Luke blinked. He stood back on the Scaffold. Black rain fell from a smog-soaked sky.

He tried to move, tried to call out, but it was impossible. It was like he was trapped in another man's body.

Another man's memory.

He crumpled to his arse on the edge of the Scaffold. Where were the splinters? The missing planks? Even Rotheart plaza looked odd. Fewer buildings but they were neat. Tidy. Glass windows glittered like diamonds.

His hand was warm. Luke glanced at his stomach. Blood poured between his fingers like wine from a skin.

"Reilo." A man emerged from the darkness. He held a sword with a bloody edge.

Reilo? The name was both unknown and yet... familiar.

A new voice spoke with Luke's lips. A cruel voice. "DeKeita. Here to finish the job?"

“Unfortunately.” The man sighed. His half-beard concealed most of his face but he still looked morose.

“The Flame Protests will continue. Austellus is bigger than just me. Caelum will fall.”

“You really have no idea, do you? Austellus does not exist in a vacuum. We all needed those forges. Industry died tonight, Reilo. It will be a miracle if Arx survives. How can it, when its beating heart is still?”

Luke’s lips curled into a snarl. “Who cares? I’d burn this whole city down just to take you with me.”

DeKeita grimaced. “I know. Luckily, your followers are more afraid of you than we are. No chance of you becoming a martyr.”

The blade punctured Luke’s lungs. A spear of ice sent blood into his throat.

Luke grunted. Blood ran down his chin. His senses began to fade. Cold. Then hot. Then numb. Light faded into the void.

The last thing he saw was a pair of violet eyes.

...

Luke blinked. The memory faded into a blanket of mist. Grey. Endless. Eternal. Directly overhead, an enormous piece of gateway metal radiated light.

The light sent five shadows from Luke across the fog. Different sizes, they were faceless and featureless.

Except for one.

The shadow stood from the floor and took on a more human appearance. A face resolved on the darkness. The features were sharp and familiar.

“You!” Luke said. “Reilo, the man from my memories.”

"Almost." The shadow's voice was vicious. "They are my memories. But you are welcome to them. To learn the price of failure."

"Your memories? Then, that energy when I was on the Scaffold... that voice that spoke to me. It was you. You killed my men!"

"I did not make you do anything you were not already considering. Revolution favours the strong."

"Liar! I would never..." Luke began.

"Is this really how you want to spend your last moments? There is no need to lie to me. I could not control your body, Luke. Not whilst you are still alive."

In this place of mist, physical sensation was lost, but Luke still felt like he shivered. "What do you mean?"

Reilo's lips opened in a terrible smile. *"He promised me a new life."*

Luke shuddered. "No."

"You cannot stop me Luke. The pain is too great." Reilo raised a shadow hand.

Agony burst in Luke's mind. His body was dying. He could feel it.

"Death will set you free. No more struggle. No more lost memories. Just rest."

A pool of darkness began to grow from Reilo's feet. Everywhere the mist touched the void, it disappeared. The pain became a little less.

"Don't fight it Luke. I'll lead the revolution you wanted. Blood and fire. It is the only way."

The darkness spread. Peace and victory. All he had to do was close his eyes. Close his eyes and let Reilo take over.

An image seared his mind. Five corpses hung by his own hand. That look of horror on Kuyt's face. Addie.

"No!" Luke bellowed. Mist wisped from his lips. "This is my life. My body. My revolution. You failed, Reilo. I won't make that same mistake."

Luke opened his hand. The gateway metal overhead shrank and fell into his palm. It began to shine, brighter than before. The darkness and the mist vanished into the light.

"There are some things we are not meant to forget. I'll be waiting," Reilo whispered, moments before his shadow disappeared

Light became dark and back on the table, Luke opened his eyes.

Existence was fire. Breath crackled in his lungs. He tore his lips open to the taste of blood. It was like being trapped in a corpse. Everything was tinged in white and gold.

"Kuyt?" Speaking hurt, like gravel in his throat. Hopefully the old man was still around. Hopefully he hadn't given up.

"Luke? How are you conscious? The doctor said..."

"Kuyt. You were right. Fear only leads to fear. Revolution is bigger than me. I get it now."

"Bollocks to that son, there are bigger things to worry about!"

"I know. Go, get the doctor. Then go. Find a... Mindbreaker."

Kuyt's eyes bored into Luke. "Why?"

"I need to survive. To make things right. Forgetting is better... than death."

The old man looked down. Eternity passed under his consideration. He left without a word.

Stay awake. There would be no more second chances. Luke fought, harder than ever before. Blood pooled under his tongue. Sweat dripped into his eyes. The world melted in front of him.

Perhaps it was already too late.

"Stop arguing and get in there!" Kuyt's voice. The door banged.

"Don't pull me. He has to be dead by now." DeSarrk. Doubting bastard.

"Help. Me."

"By the Prelude!" DeSarrk's rushed closer. "Quickly, drink this."

A flask tilted against Luke's lips. He swallowed daggers. Once. Twice.

"Drowning," he dribbled. The flask vanished.

"That should numb the pain." DeSarrk didn't sound hopeful.

"Kuyt. Please," Luke said. He heard a sigh and then the door clicked shut.

"I am sorry young man. Truly, I cannot imagine your pain."

"I know. One job. Keep me alive until Kuyt gets back," Luke said. With supreme effort, he turned his head and forced DeSarrk to meet his eyes.

DeSarrk tongued the notch on his lip. Then he nodded. "Very well."

Time passed. DeSarrk moved and Luke did as he was told. Drink this. Eat that. Brace yourself. The candle of his life guttered low. Darkness crept into the edge of his vision and dread, real as gold, flickered through his veins.

Maybe it was already too late.

"Breathe. Don't forget to breathe. Come on, stay with me Luke! Kuyt is here. You need to wake up!"

"Memory Sacrifice. I consent," Luke said.

"What does that mean?" Kuyt.

"Shh." New voice. Female.

Shattering steel. The fall of a chain-link waterfall. A hammer broken by the wind.

A voice spoke inside his head. "*Remember.*"

Reality bent. Luke's mind opened. A bridge of blue fire spread out before him. He crossed over and the pain vanished.

The mist returned to surround him but it was no longer featureless. It wisped and rose to form buildings, streets.

Memoria.

Luke soared over the city of mist. Movement in Memoria was based on perception. He willed himself to move and he flew through the fog. A twilight sky swirled overhead.

Memoria. Arx seen through his memories. Austellus was perfect. Twice as large as its real life counterpart and detail as a prayer. He could see everything with perfect clarity. The shop that sold his favourite pasties. The corner where he killed his first Walker. The river Mucro that split the city like a serpent's fang.

He shuddered as he looked into those icy depths. In Memoria, the river ran black with sour regret.

He shoved the memory aside and floated towards Caelum. He had never set foot on the rich side of the river and in Memoria the streets were distorted and cast in shadow. Rumour and whispers did not create a clear picture. There was only one thing that broke the darkness.

The Spire.

Like a fragment caught in his mind, the Spire glittered blue-silver with stolen sunlight.

Shadows clustered around the base.

Luke floated down. Four human-shaped shadows stood around the Spire. The gap was obvious. A fifth had once stood beside them.

Reilo.

"*Luke.*" A figure materialised beside him. Muscled arms and short hair, Ferra walked through the air like she owned it.

"*Ferra. Kuyt found you,*" Luke projected. Talking in Memoria was as simple as thinking the words and willing them out.

"I found him. I knew the moment you were ready, Luke. Or do you prefer 'The Saviour'?"

"Luke is fine. I need your help."

"You already look like a corpse," Ferra projected.

"I know. But I know what you can do." Luke soared over Memoria. From on high, he could perceive the whole city. He focused his thoughts and sent out a *pulse* from his hand. Immediately, a rush of silver orbs began to rise towards him. They rose from specific locations. Districts, streets, buildings all lost their sharpness as the memory that created them was drawn away.

Manifest Memories. Memory made tangible, those silver orbs contained the strong, emotion-rich memories that defined him.

Beneath them, Luke saw a familiar shadow. Reilo vanished almost as fast as he appeared.

"So few," Ferra projected. *"Why did you sacrifice so much?"*

Luke shuddered. He relieved it every time he slept. Nightmares that made him scream and thrash. *"I didn't. I was forced."*

Ferra shook her head. *"Impossible. You can't compel someone to sacrifice their memories. They have to be willing."*

"There are ways to remove consent," Luke projected. *"Just ask Dirk."*

Memoria reacted to the mention of his name. White became black, fog boiled like water and silver memory orbs resolved as red. Hatred, thick as bile, drenched his mind.

Back in his body, Luke took a deep breath. The white fog began to return. Slowly.

"I would give anything to remember who I am. But we are far beyond that now." Luke projected.

"Then what do you want from me?"

Luke drew Ferra down into Memoria. The silver orbs fell with them and they soared into the Rotheart plaza. The Scaffold was rendered in impossible detail. He could make out the individual splinters in each piece of wood.

Such was the strength of the memory it contained.

"I want you to cut away the memory of my wound. If you can remove the memory, and the doctor stitches, maybe we'll get the cut closed before it kills me."

"It won't work Luke. For a proper removal, you will have to re-live the memory. It is risky and with a mind like yours..." She trailed off.

Luke shuddered. How long would it take her to get a clean cut? Steel through his skin. Tearing flesh. Weeping blood. No matter how skilled she was it would not be quick.

"There is no other choice. I don't want to die."

Somewhere in the distance, he heard Reilo laugh.

"I'll do it," Ferra projected. *"Or at least, I'll try."*

Luke let go of a breath he forgot he was holding.

Her presence vanished from Memoria and Luke let a little reality seep back in. He felt Ferra untie his wrist and place the gateway metal on his palm.

"So you can save him?" The hope in Kuyt's voice hurt.

"Not a chance. But he is insistent."

In Memoria, Luke held out his hand. The Manifest Memory burst from the Scaffold, silver as the falling axe it contained. Fear bubbled in his chest. Not because of the pain. Not because he might die. Not even because he could lose his mind.

No, he was terrified because he wanted it. The freedom of Memoria. The correction of reality.

It felt so right.

Ferra appeared beside him. She gripped her hammer in those massive hands and glanced at the Manifest Memory. *“Ready?”*

Was he?

“Let’s do it.”

Chapter 5

"I'm sorry, this isn't working. Would... would you mind putting your trousers back on?"

Sam drew the silk sheet up to her naked chest. The *Puto* gave a pretty smile. The tight muscles of his stomach bunched over his swinging penis. The thing moved like a dog's tail.

"You sure, *Amata*?"

"Very sure." Sam shuddered. He didn't need to touch her. She had her answer. "Could you turn around? I don't want you to see me." As soon as she was sure he wasn't looking, Sam leapt from the bed and threw her clothes on.

She lifted Mother's ring from the bedside table. "I'm so sorry," she whispered as she slipped it back over her head.

Sam sat on the edge of the bed and tried to ignore the muffled noises. The creak of bed frames, the vaporous moaning of those working, and the self-satisfied grunts of the customers. It made her sweat bile.

"Why so sad?" The *Puto*, now fully dressed thankfully, sat beside her.

Sam shifted away. "It's not you. It more... biological than that." She shook her head and tossed a purse over to him. "There's some gold in there. You don't know me. If anyone asks, you spent the night alone." She glanced through a gap in the gauze-wisp curtains. "Sod it, that's morning here." She grabbed her cloak from the back of a wooden chair. "Remember. You never saw me."

"As you will, *Amata*." The *Puto* gave a confused little bow, and Sam let herself out of the room. She tried her best not to run, but the sooner she could get out of there, the better. If her skin crawled anymore, it would creep right off her body.

The entrance hall was empty but for a pair of guards by the door. Sam shrank into her hood, but they paid her little mind. Another disgraced customer was nothing new.

Outside, the road was clear. The *Lupanar* was a hidden little building, just outside the Voluptas District, so the odds of someone catching her shame were slim, but she still stuck to the shadows.

Sam's heart beat a din against her ribs. She had never done anything like that before. A brothel. All night! Was she depraved? What if someone had seen? But then, she was already disgraced. And she had to be certain. Except, now she knew the truth, it made her more miserable.

Sam huffed. No wind, but the air was like ice. She walked quickly for warmth and plunged through the Shopping Promenade until she found him.

"Samantha! Where have you been?" Father's voice boomed across the street.

Despite herself, a scalding blush raced into her cheeks. "For a walk. To clear my head."

Father looked suspicious enough, but he just sighed and shook his head. He set a heavy hand on her shoulder. "I know you hate this Sammy, but we don't have a choice. Walter DeWhit came to see me last night. He told me in no uncertain terms that Lizzy and Jonas' courtship was over. We are not a popular house. With DeProleai and DeWhit against us..." Father trailed off.

Sam stared over his shoulder and found her reflection in shop glass. Anything to avoid Father's eyes. She lifted her hand to her ear, and the wing of silver that hung there. Jack Mendy was right, even now. Sometimes the best way to get over something was to pound the dents into something else. She had made them just before she left for the brothel.

"Matthew must accept your apology. Whatever it takes."

Sam finally met Father's eyes. They were creased. Tired. Her heart plummeted like a stone down a gutter. "Yes Father."

"I can't force you Sammy." Father's face was a sickly mask of paternal affection. "I'd have a better chance trying to convince a horse to climb a tree. All I ask is that you do what is right."

Sam said nothing. Father squeezed her shoulder and they walked together in silence. No sound but the crunch of boots on the pavement.

"Ah, there he is!" Father tugged her towards a dressmaker's shop. Saul stood outside. A cloak of servant's grey swirled around his shoulders. "Saul! You've had us walking all morning. It had better be worth it."

"I assure you Sir, you will not be disappointed." Saul held the door open and when Sam entered, he winked at her.

It stank like a midden heap of autumn flowers. Sam coughed. Tears stood in her eyes. It was just as she had feared. There was not a single simple dress on display. Everything was lace and satin and clever stitching. Good taste died long ago. This must be where it was buried.

"He-llo," a voice chimed from the counter.

Sam looked across at the most ridiculous woman she had ever seen. Easily past forty summers, she was dressed in a white skirt and a man's waistcoat open to show so much powdered bosom that a person might drown in it.

"Hello Miss." Father planted the most delicate of kisses on her wrist. Behind him, even Saul had the grace to look uncomfortable.

"Oh Sir!" The woman blushed like a tomato and curtsied like an infant.

"What can we do for you and your lovely daughter today?" she cooed.

"We are looking to have a dress made for my darling Samantha. Say hello dear."

"Hello dear." Sam could feel the blood in her cheeks.

"Well you have come to the right place! At *Kendricks*, we strive for fashion and elegance of the highest order. But listen to me prattle on! Why don't you sit yourself down?" The woman's eyelid descended in the biggest, most obvious wink anyone had ever attempted. "Leave us girls to it."

"Capital!" Father sat on the short couch with a sigh.

Sam glared at Saul. The serving man shot her a sheepish grin and wiggled his fingers in a guilty farewell.

"Come along dear," the ridiculous woman said.

Sam could have wept. She dug her fingers into her temples and attempted to soothe the headache that was twisting thorns behind her eyes. The woman led her into the back room and closed the door behind them.

"Stand over there." The woman's voice was suddenly cold. She pointed at the wooden platform in the middle of the oversized wardrobe. There was a full-length mirror beside it and the floor was scattered with discarded lace.

"Excuse me?"

"Stand. Over. There. Are you deaf girl, or just rude?"

Sam's jaw fell so far she could have kicked it. Who did this woman think she was? "You will not speak to me like that."

"Would you prefer this, my lady?" The woman's voice rose an octave and the simpering puffball was back.

"By the Prelude no! My head is already throbbing."

"Good. It is exhausting keeping it up for that lot out there. Now, if you don't stand where I tell you, I will move you myself. You don't want that."

Sam stepped on to the platform quickly and tried to force the blush from her cheeks.

"Better. Perhaps there *is* something worth working with. Though there is such a lot of work to do. Look at yourself girl." The woman jabbed at the mirror with an imperious finger.

Sam looked. Black trousers and a cream blouse. Might have been a stain on the cuff from the forge, but it was serviceable. Strands of hair spilled down her shoulders and there was a windswept quiff right on top of her head. Heavy black bags hung under her eyes.

"Do you own land? Are you a widow? Have you been granted a title?"

"No, of course not."

"Then what right do you have entering my shop looking like some smithy's wife? Your Father must be so ashamed. Why should every other woman have to make the effort when you get to slouch around in some fishwife's knock-offs?"

"Elizabeth's knock offs," Sam said. "She's the one interested in all this frippery and nonsense. These clothes protect me from that world."

The woman's hands flickered and something sharp pressed into Sam's side.

"Doesn't seem like very strong protection now, does it?"

Cold sweat formed on Sam's face. "Not now you mention it."

The woman moved back and stowed what was now very clearly a knitting needle, back up her sleeve. "Exactly. Clothing does not protect you. Clothing is simply a tool. How you appear is how you project yourself to others, a representation of who you are that everyone can see. If you do not respect yourself, then why should anyone else? You think you can catch a husband looking like that?"

"I don't want to catch a husband!" Sam growled.

"Well, you won't catch any woman's eye with those clothes either."

Sam blushed all the way to her ears. "What are you implying?"

"You should really work on your reactions. Would you relax? It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not ashamed. I just... all I know is that the idea of a man touching me makes me want to peel my skin off and set it on fire."

"I didn't ask. Either way, you hardly inspire."

"And a nice dress is going to change that is it?"

"No, but it is a start. Like it or not you are stuck in this game as much as the rest of us are. You want to change it? You have to win. That is what I offer. Now. Shall we?"

Sam nibbled her inner cheek. It was a waste of time. Lizzy was the flower. She was the manure that helped it to grow.

But she did hate to lose.

"By all means."

What happened next was like getting caught in a storm. She was stripped, poked, measured and examined like a hog for market. It was surreal. It was exhausting. By the end, her sweat stained more than a few bolts of cloth.

But the result was quite something.

The dress was solar blue, with a slash of sky running across the skirts. The high neck made her look taller, more commanding. There were no sleeves but her naked arms did not look out of place. Instead they looked... strong. The woman had even insisted on 'sorting out that rat's nest you call hair.' It was pinned around her shoulders now, a few chosen curls brushing her neck.

"Thank you," Sam said, unable to take her eyes from the mirror. "You have helped me make a very important decision today, Miss...?"

"Miss nothing. My name is Mira."

"Mira. Here, I want you to have these." Sam unclasped her earrings.

"Please, I have enough jewellery woman, I don't need some trinkets you bought at market. Your Father will be paying handsomely enough, have no fear."

"I didn't buy these. I made them."

Mira paused and raised her eyebrows. She took the earrings and examined them. "These are good work. A Foundryman wouldn't be ashamed of a piece like this. Saul was right about you."

"You know Saul?" Sam said.

"Of course! I've known him since before we left..." Mira cut herself off, but the unspoken word still shimmered between them. *Austellus*. "Well, anyway. He is the reason I saw you today. Said you could do with a boot up the backside."

Sam grinned. "I suspect he was right."

Mira nodded. "Good. Now, shall we show them?"

Back in the shop, Father was right where she had left him. A mug of tea steamed between his fingers and he chatted with a young shop girl that hovered by his elbow.

"Sir?" Mira was gone and the simpering shop lady was back.

Father looked up. For a moment his face was transformed. The heavy lines around his eyes smoothed away and his mouth stretched into a smile. Something bright kindled behind his eyes and refused to be banished. "Samantha! You look lovely."

Oh how her eyes itched to roll. "Thank you Father."

"You look just like your Mother."

Words vanished from her throat. Sam turned away and ran her fingers across the gold band. A lump rose in her throat. "Thank you."

Father shrugged. "Well, you know..." he harrumphed. "Anyway. A good job all round. I suppose we should be discussing payment."

"We have already settled the bill." Mira held the silver earrings up to the light.
"Well. Until next time."

"I think I am ready to meet with Master DeProleai now," Sam said.

Father leapt to his feet. "Truly? Oh Samantha that is wonderful! Saul, we must get back!"

Saul swept into a bow. "I have arranged a carriage. It would be a shame to get dust on your new dress." He held the door once more.

Sam paused a moment by the open door. "Saul. Thank you."

A smile spread across the servant's face. He knew. He always did.

"Any time little Sammy. Any time."

...

One bumpy carriage ride later and Sam was ensconced in a plush armchair awaiting Matthew DeProleai's arrival.

She hated waiting.

But she had promised Father, so she grit her teeth and tried to find a comfortable position. The dress might be pretty, but it was sodding hard to sit down in.

A fire crackled in the hearth. Shadows danced through the room. There was even a glass decanter of whiskey that Father only brought out when he was really trying to impress someone. Sunlight shone within the amber. Just out of reach.

Father puffed on his cigar like the future of Arx depended on it and Lizzy sat at his side, politely disinterested. She ignored the book in her lap, just as she had ignored Sam's new clothing beyond a dismissive sniff.

Saul bustled around in the silence, nudging tables and wiping dust. He sneezed and the whole room shook.

A knock came from the front door. Sweat tumbled down Sam's arms. Father nodded at Saul and servant bowed and slipped from the room.

"Now Samantha," Lizzy said. "Do try and keep your hands to yourself this time."

"Wonderful suggestion. Any other tips from your failed courtship?" Sam said.

Elizabeth's cheeks flashed the colour of the sunset and she raised a finger.

"Not. Now!" The look on Father's face promised murder. Lizzy clicked her teeth but her glare smouldered with an unspoken threat.

Saul knocked on the open door. "Lord DeAcarris, the ladies Samantha and Elizabeth. May I present Matthew DeProleai, son and heir to Simon DeProleai, the High Lord of Arx."

Matthew followed in behind him, a sulky look on his face. A child forced into a task he didn't want.

"Master DeAcarris. Elizabeth." He nodded at them. Then he flicked a look at Sam. It was so venomous she could feel her throat close. "I apologise for the impudence, but I must prevail upon you to vacate the room."

"Well," Father said. "Master DeProleai, you must understand, she is a young lady and to leave her un-chaperoned..."

"I understand sir, but you shall trust that my motives are wholesome." Sulky he might be, but Matthew DeProleai was used to being obeyed.

Father flicked a glance at Sam. Worry shone naked in his eyes. "As you will." He stood awkwardly and offered Elizabeth his arm. Saul followed them out and the door closed behind him with a click of polished oak.

Sam waited all of a heartbeat. "What do you want Matthew?"

"My cheek is fine by the way." His eyes caught on her bare arms. "Despite the thumping it received." Matthew's granite eyes glinted with firelight.

Sam felt the room lurch. Her heart thudded in her ears. Almost, she wished for her old clothes, to hide in an oversized shirt again.

Almost.

Then Matthew sighed. "By the Prelude, woman. All I wanted was an apology. It galls me no end to actually ask for it."

Sam bit back her snappy retort. What was the harm in being polite? "I'm sorry..." Nope. Couldn't do it. Sod him. "Sorry you couldn't keep your lips to yourself!"

"That's the best I can expect, isn't it?" he sighed. "Believe me, I won't be making that mistake again. Very well. You are forgiven."

"Fantastic," Sam said. Inside she was dancing. "Now, if we are done here?"

"Well, it seems prudent that we first discuss our relationship."

The dancing stopped. "I had rather thought that the... unpleasantness had put an end to that."

"It could. Of course, then your family will face the scorn of every noble house seeking my favour. Which is all of them by the way. Or we can spin it as desire. A stolen kiss, a lovers' quarrel. Standard stuff."

Sam licked her lips. Idiot he might be but Matthew DeProleai knew the shape of the world. "Why?"

"So you can wear this." He tossed something on the table.

"What's this?" Sam lifted the whisper-fine length of steel chain to the light.

"A bond chain, albeit an unfinished one." Matthew shook his sleeve down and mimed wrapping the chain around his wrist. "We forge the final link and fasten it together when our engagement is official."

"You have got to be joking. You think I want to marry you?"

"I'm not asking you to *marry* marry me. Just pretend. Think about it. We say we have been together in secret for years and suddenly I am no longer a brash little boy. I am a terribly maligned romantic soul." He smiled at his own image. "And you are no longer a spinster-in-waiting. You are the woman who melted my icy heart. Then, when everyone is bored of it, we get the chain cut off, engagement annulled, and go our separate ways."

Sam stood up. She had to move, to process. She made for the window. The daylight was all but gone and heavy clouds were threatening. This was ludicrous. The very idea made her want to leap through the glass and run until she could no longer feel her legs.

Sod it, she was having a brandy.

It tasted like almonds and burnt honey. "What... would I have to do?"

"Precious little. Just be seen with me say, once a week?"

"That sounds easy."

"It is easy," he said in a dark voice, "and it would really piss Father off."

"So. You want me to make an enemy of every woman in Arx so you can get back at your daddy?"

"Oh please, they already hate you. The only difference is that whilst you wear my chain, they will never dare speak against you. Besides," he eyed her new dress, "you almost look the part now."

"There is more to this. What aren't you telling me, Matthew? This has to be more than just taking a break from courting."

Matthew sighed. He picked dirt from under his thumbnail. "Father has become... desperate. All he talks about now 'continuing the lineage.' If I don't pick a wife myself, then he will pick one for me." He looked up. His eyes were wide and

sad. "He's changed and I'm worried. If I am engaged then maybe he'll listen to me..."

Sam nodded. "Okay. Then why me? Any number of ladies would be happy to take up your offer. Ladies far better suited to you."

Matthew sighed. "Because you are the only person I've met who seems as miserable as I am. I thought you would jump at the chance."

Sam watched a drizzle of rain leak from the clouds. Engaged to the heir. It did have its merits. Wealth, prestige, and more importantly, time. Time to figure out what she wanted.

"I have some conditions."

"What? Are you actually saying yes?" Matthew leapt up.

"One, you never touch me beyond the bare minimum without my *express* consent. Which you will never get. So you never touch me."

"Well, I would think that after a while..."

"This is not a negotiation Matthew. If you can't agree, then our deal is off."

Matthew frowned at her sudden passion, but he shrugged. "Okay. If it means that much to you."

"Number two. Since you did not ask Father's permission, and since we are going to have to sell him on this, you are going to make it up to him. I am certain he has some projects that could do with... official backing."

Matthew's smile was tight, but he knew the price of bread. "Very well."

"Third, you remember what this is. No falling in love. No romance. I don't want your heart, and you won't get mine."

He snorted. "I can promise that will never, ever, be a problem."

"And finally, I want access to the Citadel Forge."

"I... why?"

Sam merely smiled. If there was a place in Caelum that held the formula for Dreamsteel, then that was sure to be it. "I am the one making the demands here, not you."

Matthew shrugged. "No skin off my nose. But I'll have to accompany you. Father is... very particular when it comes to guests in the Citadel."

"Very well." Sam said. "Then we are agreed."

They shook hands. Sam could have done a cartwheel. Perhaps now she would finally stop being the family disappointment.

Probably not, but it was nice to hope.

"Well then." Matthew smoothed his shirt. "Should we go and meet your family?"

"I suppose," Sam said.

He held out his arm for her. A flash of fear jerked through her throat and for a moment she wanted to call the whole thing off. Sam pruned that thought like a dying branch. She braced herself and then set her hand on his arm.

She could do this.

"Ready?"

"Of course." Sam fixed a smile on her face.

Time to introduce her family to her brand-new fiancé.

Chapter 6

“Ow. Just take the bandage, bastardface, not the skin,” Luke said.

“I’ve delivered babies that whine less than you. We’re almost finished.”

DeSarrk yanked the last piece of wrapping free.

Spots of blood stained the bandage. Luke groaned. “How does it look?”

“Better.” Kuyt did a circle of the slab. “A *Flagellator* would be disappointed with how quick it’s clearing up.” He leant against the grubby wall. “How do you feel?”

“As good as can be expected for a man on a slab.” Luke shrugged.

“Luke. Do you remember her?” Kuyt asked, subtle as a boot to the arse.

“Her?”

Kuyt pulled at his thumbnail. “Ferra.”

Luke made a show of scratching the top of his head. The scar on his back moved like a splinter under the skin. “Big lass? Built like a brick shithouse and carries that hammer everywhere? Don’t you remember Kuyt? She was the Mindbreaker that messed about in my head a week ago.”

Kuyt sighed through his teeth. “You don’t have to be a smartarse about it. You swore you were done with this stuff kid. What changed?”

Luke raised his head. “What changed? I almost died.”

Kuyt picked at a scab on his hand. “Fine. Then you don’t remember what happened?”

Luke shook his head. “All I know is that I hurt. Now I don’t.”

“So that cut in your back... you’re just not interested?”

“Why would I be?”

“Because that huge Enforcer took an axe twice the size of your ego and tried to slice you in half with it.”

Luke shrugged. “Doesn’t matter.”

“How can you say that?” Kuyt began to pace.

“What do you want from me? I’m not going to pretend to give a shit about something just so that you feel better. I don’t remember it, my body doesn’t remember it, so it didn’t happen.”

“But it did.”

“Let me ask you something Kuyt. If DeSarrk told you that you were his long-lost brother, would you care?”

DeSarrk started at the mention of his name and suddenly found a hundred different things that kept him occupied.

“He’s not,” Kuyt said.

Luke rubbed his temples. “I know that, but we’re playing pretend. Say he could prove that he is, without a doubt, your biological sibling. Would you suddenly care about him?”

“Well, yes,” Kuyt said, but his voice was not certain.

“Of course you wouldn’t! Facts don’t change feelings. Just because something happens, doesn’t make it the truth.”

“But your memories...”

“You want to know what I remember? I remember that Enforcer, the very symbol of those Caelum bastards, broken before me. I remember that we won.” A real smile spread across Luke’s lips. “For an afternoon the Upper Senate did not rule in Austellus. We did. My belief is stronger than the truth. Can’t you see how amazing that is?”

“No.” Something changed in Kuyt’s eyes. For a moment, they lost all their light. “Can’t say I do.”

Luke shook his head. Memories. They would do that to a man. “We agreed Kuyt. Anything it takes. Now, how about you get me some clothes?”

“Clothes? Why?”

“We’ve got things to do. And I’m sick of you dirty old men staring at my dick.”

“Oh. Well, I really would not recommend it.” DeSarrk clattered his instruments together. “I cannot recommend any exertion until we understand the extent of...”

“Kuyt. Give us a moment.” It was not a request.

Kuyt huffed like a tornado, but he did as he was told. The door slammed behind him.

Luke took a deep breath. Then he sat up. Sweat swam over his eyebrows but he forced himself straight.. “DeSarrk. Answer me something.”

The surgeon raised an eyebrow.

“What happened that night? When you healed me.”

DeSarrk chewed his words like gristle. “A strange night. The woman, Ferra, she whispered in your ear and the candles in here began to burn blue.” He tongued the notch in his lip. “The smoke gathered around your face and a tendril of it pierced your inner ear. A bright light burst from that metal you were holding. Ferra touched your back and the wound began to... vanish. I sewed along the lines, but to be honest, I do not believe it was necessary. In fact, I have a feeling that my stitches are the sole reason you even have a scar. Should be healed in a couple of days.”

Luke nodded. A wave of desire washed over him. He wanted to find Ferra again. To lie before her and let her wipe the dirty corners of his mind clean. Last time she had granted him his life. What could he ask for next?

Reilo's words echoed in his mind. *"There are some things we are not meant to forget."*

"I need to be careful," Luke said quietly.

He eased himself from the table. The floor was cold. He ignored DeSarrk's pointed sigh, as well as his own nudity, and picked up a scalpel. How much of his blood had it drunk over the last week? He rolled it over his knuckles with a flourish and caught it midair.

"Impressive." DeSarrk nodded at the scalpel. "From what that older gentleman was saying, you are quite the fighter."

Luke snorted. "Kuyt is no gentleman. Besides, you don't 'fight' with a knife. You survive with one. Trade a cut for a kill and you are on the right path. But you have to be quick. Efficient. Vicious." The words felt familiar in his mouth, like he had said them a thousand times before.

"To fight as you say... one would assume it would leave a man with quite the collection of scars. I only see the one. Well, two now of course."

"You would think." Luke ran a hand down his unblemished skin. His fingers twitched to the single raised line on his cheek.

"Did you train with... a gang?"

Luke snorted. "Austellus has no 'gangs.' Well, unless you count those idiots in the Nest, but that's more like blood sport and hooliganism. No, as it turns out, poor people are far more concerned with where their next meal is coming from than they are in planning heists or taking territory." Luke held out the scalpel for DeSarrk.

"Thank you." DeSarrk stepped to take it.

Luke moved.

He whirled behind the flabby idiot and pressed the scalpel to the surgeon's neck.

"I should kill you." His voice was soft. "You know what we are planning. I should end you here and now."

The surgeon began to sob. Tears dribbled into his beard. "Please. I helped you."

Luke pressed the knife closer. Rage, real and sudden as a thunderstorm, slammed into him. "So what? I'd burn this whole city down just to take you with me."

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.

Reilo's voice whispered in time with his heart. Luke's hand shook. Sweat ran down his neck.

The scalpel clattered to the floor. Luke shoved the surgeon away. "Go home DeSarrk."

DeSarrk licked his lips. "Yes. Yes, thank you." He bobbed his head and scrabbled from the room without a backward glance.

Luke sat down on the slab. "You can't control me, Reilo." He spoke to the empty room.

Silence was his response.

A few moments later and Kuyt re-appeared in the doorway. He chucked a bundle at Luke. "Where's DeSarrk?"

"Gone." Luke freed a shirt from the bundle and pulled it over his head. "So how about you tell me about our soldiers?"

Kuyt raised an eyebrow, but he let the obvious question die on his lips. "Is that what you are calling them?"

“Why not? What have you and Addie been doing whilst I’ve been wrestling with shadows for a week?”

Kuyt rattled a breath through his pursed lips. “Hiding, mostly. Sixty angry bastards are hard to conceal. The Walkers might be blind, but even they would notice if we took over a whole street.”

Luke tied a belt around his waist and wrapped a coat around his shoulders. “So where did you put them?”

A faint smile hid in the corners of Kuyt’s mouth. “I’ll take you.”

...

Rustscape was a graveyard.

True, everywhere in Austellus had seen its fair share of death, but it wasn’t just bodies that were buried in Rustscape. It was industry.

Kuyt loved it. “You smell that kid?”

Luke took a sniff and almost coughed out his eyeballs. “Yeah. Smoke, lead and... do I detect a hint of shit?”

“No!” Kuyt threw his arms wide. “That’s the smell of history, my lad.”

“Is that so?” Luke stepped over a beggar sleeping in the remnants of a smashed kiln.

Kuyt beamed. He ran his hand across a panel of metal and, true to its name, orange rust flaked off around his fingers. “The Flame Protests really did a number here.”

“I know Kuyt.” Truth be told, now that he was sharing Reilo’s memories, he knew far more about the Flame Protests now than he had ever wanted to.

“Rustscape used to be so much more. Thirty years ago, it was the heart of Arx, beating with fire and steel. The Mucro was crystal clear and ran with gold.”

Almost true. Reilo's memories showed that the poisoning of the Mucro had actually started years before. Can't dump that level of waste in a river and expect it not to have an effect.

"Then we cracked it. Dreamsteel. Our finest moment." For a breath, Kuyt's face lit up with a grim pride. It was soon crushed under a frown. "And our greatest mistake."

"Why?"

"I... don't remember. And I am not someone with a weak memory." His voice was so thick with implied meaning that it came out like treacle. Kuyt was never shy about how much he hated memory magic.

Of course, the old man had no *proof* it was anything out of the ordinary. In fact, had it been anything else, Luke would have figured it was just the old bloke's mind failing him. But Kuyt was not the only one who couldn't remember the problem with Dreamsteel. In all of Reilo's memories, it was conspicuously absent as well.

In fact, no one in the whole of Austellus seemed to have any clue as to what had made Dreamsteel so special.

"It took over and soon, Dreamsteel was all we made. Nose to the grindstone, year after year, it was dreadful."

"Yeah, it's called supply and demand..." Luke tried. Reilo's image of Rustscrape was far from awful. Black with smoke, sure, but lively with people and glittering with money. A life beside the forge was a hard one, but it came with its rewards.

"So much smog. We suffocated. Blacklung swept through us like a hot sword through cake. So many died. The streets were filled with bodies and it wasn't long

until Austellus was on the verge,” Kuyt rubbed his temples. “Can’t remember what started it all, but soon every worker in the city was united.”

Infant-onset-lungrot. A complication of the smog, mixed with the wave of illness destroying their immune systems. Reilo remembered it well.

The skin on her chest sloughed away. Rot drilled holes in her lungs. She died in agony and terror.

That was the day he had decided to lead a revolt. That was the day he had insisted on violence. And that was the day that everyone had listened to him.

Luke paused and held himself up against a building, blinking furiously. He would not weep for Reilo’s daughter!

“We tried to be diplomatic at first, asked the Upper Senate to consider what they were doing to us,” Kuyt continued on, oblivious. “But they wouldn’t hear it. That’s when things got violent.”

Luke felt a drop of water on his head. “I think it’s starting to rain.”

“We took the forges first. Then the factories.” Kuyt’s fist clenched.

“I think you’ve mentioned.” Luke rubbed his eyes. He could remember leading the charge himself. Reilo was a violent bastard at the best of times. “But look around you Kuyt. Rustscrape is a wasteland, and the rest of Austellus is no better. Most ex-steelworkers I’ve spoken to would give anything to take the Flame Protests back.”

Kuyt sighed. “It’s so easy for old men like me to want to re-live the past. To go back to when things were easier and simpler. Aye, Austellus was wealthier. But you have to stick by your convictions. What comes first? Money or people. I guess for me, it comes down to trust.”

“Trust in who?” Luke asked.

“The Ant.” Kuyt’s grin was enormous. “Of course, he goes by Andross DeGaya now, but before that he was a true leader. No. A true hero. He was the one who ended it all. Destroyed the Foundry, the source of this interminable smog. And now, the home of your rebels.”

They turned together, towards a ruined pile of bricks, glass and metal so spectacular in size that the street itself split before it.

“Holy shit.”

“You haven’t seen the best part yet.” Kuyt grinned like a child and gestured for Luke to follow him.

Together, they walked towards the remains of an iron gate. The pitted metal crumbled in Luke’s hand. Ash-coated shards of glass littered the floor between them and puddles of shadow splashed beneath his boots. Following Kuyt’s lead, he scrabbled over a half-wall of black bricks.

Everything was scarred with scorch marks. The bricks were warped and the masonry was torn and shattered. Luke glanced down and the bottom of his stomach fell away. That was the largest crater he had ever seen. Easily twenty sword-lengths across, he could barely see the other side. The cobblestones that surrounded it were melted like wax.

Black smog rose from the darkness. The smell of ash was thick in Luke’s nose. “What happened here?”

“Last act of the Flame Protests, my boy. This place was the soul of industry. It makes sense that it was the last to go.”

“This was not the work of a mob.” Luke kicked a pebble into the crater and watched it disappear into the darkness.

"I wasn't there." Kuyt shrugged. "They didn't let us kids follow, no matter how we begged. There was a man. Reilo Sandrasova. It was his death that spurred us on."

Luke felt cold. "How?"

"The man was insane and violent, but he was the heart of the revolt. When he died, the Ant took over. He led the rebels into the Foundry and this is the result." Kuyt scratched his head. "Dreamsteel died that day and that got the Upper Senate's attention. They took the Ant into their ranks. Made him the Sky Lord. The revolt disbanded and I went for an actor."

"And whilst you were dicking about in tights, they founded the Walkers, locked down the Mucro, taxed every bent nail they could and left Austellus to rot."

"That they did." Kuyt's voice was thick with remembered pain. "That's why we are doing this, eh?"

Luke grit his teeth. He knelt to run his finger across the bubbles of stone that surrounded the crater. "Looks like a monster attacked this place," he said.

Or escaped from it.

"Here." Kuyt handed him a handkerchief. "That smoke gets thicker. You don't want a mouthful of the stuff."

Luke raised an eyebrow at the handkerchief. "The smoke gets thicker where?"

"Down there," Kuyt said like that made any sense.

Luke sniffed. "What do you expect me to do? Jump?"

"You could. Or you could just take the stairs." Kuyt pointed. Hidden under a lip of broken stone was the hint of a staircase cut into the rocks. "Watch yourself. They can get a little slippery."

Luke stared, slack jawed. He fastened his handkerchief around his mouth.
“Fan-damn-tastic. Lead the way then, King Arsehole.”

Kuyt began his descent. Luke rolled his shoulders. Not even a Mindbreaker would protect him from that fall.

He placed a foot and almost immediately skidded down a step. Slippery wasn't the pissing word. Luke spat. His saliva was wet against the handkerchief and he immediately regretted it. Fucknuggets, he would have turned around and left right then and there had Kuyt not gone first. He would take an arse-naked swim through the Mucro before he let that decrepit old man put him to shame.

Luke followed Kuyt down the corkscrew staircase. Thick smoke danced around his face and he silently thanked Kuyt for his foresight.

Halfway down and the heat hit him. It licked the sweat from his arms. His hair fell into his eyes. Heart caught between his teeth, he made his worst mistake.

He looked down.

A deep, red light glared up from the darkness. An eye of molten fire. All at once he felt his stomach try to swap places with his tongue. “Kuyt. Kuyt!”

“What?” The old man stood on the opposite side of the crater, further down.
“Come on kid, you're almost there. What, you afraid of heights or something?”

Luke gnawed his bottom lip. “No. I respect heights, just like I respect anything that can kill me!”

“Then what is it?”

Luke felt his jaw click. That red light burned beneath him. It was almost familiar. “Nothing.”

“Well you're half-way now. Up is just as far away as down. Best hurry.”

Luke growled. He set his jaw and forced himself onwards. The heat seared into his skin as he made his way down.

The moment Luke reached the bottom of the stairs he slid to his knees. "That. Was not fun."

"Eh, you get used to it." Kuyt drew a skin out of his coat. The old man was barely sweating. "Drink? You're looking a little... moist."

Luke tore off his handkerchief. The water was gritty and warm as piss, but right then it tasted like life itself. He tossed the last mouthful over his head and let it run down his back.

"Better?" Kuyt held out his hand. His own handkerchief was folded neatly in his top pocket.

Luke nodded and allowed the old actor to draw him to his feet.

"Good. Welcome to the Foundry. Or what's left of it."

The place was enormous. A huge cavern dug into the rock. The sight and smell of metal was everywhere. Anvils, kilns, forges, machines he had never seen before, covered every wall. Rust coated the old equipment.

Except for one.

Luke walked over. It looked like a metal arm set over a pit dug into the floor. Gears, winches and chains ran the length of the thing and it glimmered in the red light like it had just been polished. A stone bowl was attached to the end of the arms by wires as thick as a man's arm. He glanced down the pit.

Heartfire.

It boiled black and orange, like burnt amber. A bubble formed and spat. This close it was like standing in the sun. Scalding tears formed in his eyes. Something was wrong. What had happened here? He felt something tug at his chest. A memory? No. Just a feeling.

Fear.

"Kid? You alright?"

Luke stepped back. "Yeah." He scrubbed his face on his sleeve. "Come on then. I've followed you into this sweatbox. Where is my army?"

"Training on the lower level. Come on."

They walked towards the balcony. Beside it were a bunch of cracks in the rock, the size of a spider's silk.

"What are those?" Luke asked

"Tunnels, mines?" Kuyt shrugged. "There are some bigger fissures on the bottom level. We sent a few men through them when we first got here. Most came back within the day, reports that the tunnels just closed off or that their torches were guttering out. The others..."

"The other's what?"

"Didn't come back." Kuyt's face was carefully blank.

Luke followed the old man to the steel balcony. Kuyt leant on the railing and gestured down.

Weapons made of wood clattered and crunched together in soot-coated hands as the Rotheart recruits trained together.

Addie stood in the middle, correcting and bollocking in equal measure. "You have to be the biggest, most miserable excuses for human beings I have ever seen!"

"She has a knack for this." Luke watched her thighs when she walked. A man could lay his head between those and speak with angels.

"Aye. That Walker training never really left her." Kuyt said.

"Definitely enough for a few squads at least." Luke watched two men begin sparring. One of them lunged and tripped over his legs. He slipped and smacked into his opponent. The pair of them went down like bottles down a hill.

Addie was over in a flash. Her training blade made a distinct *thwack* when it hit their arses.

"Well. When they have been trained a little."

"What are you thinking?" Kuyt asked.

"Slash and burn, maybe? We've got enough. Six squads, three by three rotations. I wonder how far we can push them."

"Don't expect too much kid. Sure, we stoked the fire a little, but that won't last forever. The life of a rebel is hardly an enticing one."

"True." Luke scratched the scar on his back. "I guess I should meet them then."

"Right." Kuyt stepped to the side and took hold of a chain attached to a rusty iron panel. "Come here."

Kuyt heaved at the chain. Flakes of rust showered them like dried blood. A screech of grating metal filled the cavern and it wasn't long before everyone was staring up at them. The platform clanged to the lower level.

Addie marched to the front. "Luke. You survived."

"I did. Do I get a kiss?"

Addie shrugged. "Sure. Pick any one of these sixty idiots and get your lips wet."

"I was thinking from someone a little closer."

"Come on Luke. I know Kuyt's old, but even he's got his standards."

The old man chuckled softly and Addie grinned for a moment. Then she cleared her throat and turned sharply to bellow at the troops. "Line up! Here stands your Saviour. The man who will lift you from the dirt and lead you to glory!" She turned back to murmur at Luke "Don't balls it up."

A couple of them bent a knee, but most just stood and watched him. The word 'Saviour' echoed from a few throats. They did not sound impressed. Dull eyes in a puddle of dirt. This is what he would use to overthrow the Walkers?

Luke stepped forwards. The first moment was crucial. Win them or lose them, these first words would be his legacy.

“Uh, hey. How’s it going?”

Behind him, Kuyt sighed loud enough to be heard in Caelum.

“Not great, mate.” A man nodded from the front row. He was missing a piece of his ear and a half-day beard clung to his grubby chin.

“Oh. Sorry to hear that. What’s your name?”

“Gaz.”

“Well Gaz. What is the problem?”

The man licked his pink lips. The look on his face was distinctly unimpressed. He looked at Luke like a butcher might look at tripe. “This ‘training’ is bullshit. I grew up in Rustscape with blades for pillows. I know how to fight. We ‘ain’t here to smack each other with wooden swords. We’re here to kill Walkers!”

A ripple of agreement came from more than a few throats.

“That a fact?” Luke said. “Addie, fetch us a pair of training swords will you?”

Addie plucked two wooden blades from the rack and passed them to Luke.

“Training exercise?” she whispered.

“Something like that.” Luke took a sword from her hand and swished it through the air. He tossed the other to Gaz. “Very well Gaz. Show me what you can do.”

Gaz snorted. He was a big bastard and, in front of everyone, his pride was up. He held his ‘sword’ like a club.

Luke sighed out a calm breath. “Ready?”

Gaz responded by charging. His training sword came in a rush but Luke stepped aside. In the same motion, he lashed out and sent the false blade spinning from Gaz’ hands. He kicked the scarred man into the dust.

"Huh. Seems like you could do with a little more training." He spoke to the crowd and was rewarded by a few nervous smiles.

"Fuck you," Gaz snarled.

"Excuse me?"

"You owe me another chance." Gaz clutched his training sword to his chest.

"Any idiot can get lucky!"

Luke glanced down at his feet. A sickly smile spread over his face. "Very well. Come."

Gaz was more cautious this time. He circled slowly. Luke leapt forwards. He caught Gaz' blade with ease. A dull clack broke through the cavern.

Gaz grunted and tried to force his blade down, but Luke stepped back and brought his blade around with a flourish. It clacked into Gaz' wrist and the idiot dropped his weapon. Again.

This time, Luke's boot crunched into Gaz' nose and the man fell back with a scream. Blood poured down his face.

Luke placed his foot on Gaz' chest. He levelled his training sword at the bloke's throat. Blood bubbled from Gaz' lips and he held his arms out in surrender.

"Alright. Alright, you pproved your point," Gaz' burbled.

"My point?" A snarl spread over Luke's lips. A frozen tempest swirled through his veins. Anger, cold and purposeful, filled him. "How little you understand." He drew his blade away from Gaz' neck. The scarred man blew a sigh of relief.

It was still fresh when Luke brought his blade down again. The heavy wood smacked into Gaz' cheek and broke the skin. Blood ran down his face and he squawked.

He tried to scrabble up, but Luke pushed him down with his boot. He brought the sword down again. Harder. Two of Gaz' teeth split his cheek.

Again. Harder. *Crunch*. The white of Gaz' eye was stained with red. Blood leaked from his ear and a black lump formed on the side of his head. His struggling was weak.

Luke brought his sword down once more. It hit with a wet *smack*, like an apple thrown against the ground. Gaz' face went slack. Black blood poured from his open mouth.

Luke stepped off the corpse and wiped a string of blood from his cheek. He tossed his wooden blade into the crowd and they leapt aside like it was a snake. Every pair of eyes was on that bloody splinter.

"Let that be a lesson," Luke said. "I am your Saviour. You belong to me. If I tell you to train, you train. If I tell you to fight, you fight. If I tell you to drown a newborn, you find me a sack small enough. There are countless Walkers and sixty of us. The only way we can win is with absolute commitment. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir." The reply was crisp.

"Good. Back to your drills. I am borrowing your commander."

Luke gestured to Addie. Along with Kuyt, they stepped on the metal panel. The old man yanked the chain and they ascended in silence.

Back at the top, Luke turned to Addie. "Right. Here's the plan. I want three squads patrolling at all times. One in The Bricks, one in Brownlines and one in Rustscape. That gives us the widest net possible. We'll need eyes on the river. Find me a few who can stay awake and send them to the Ferriway. A rooftop overlooking the Mucro should do."

Addie raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"The Walkers take all prisoners over to Caelum to be locked up before each execution. But, if we know when they cross back over, we can stop them before

they even reach the Scaffold.” Luke took a deep breath. “How can we persuade people that their lives are worth something if they wake up every day knowing that they might die on a Walker’s whim? We stop the hangings, and we give Austellus its balls back.”

Addie stepped towards him. It felt like she was staring into his soul. “A good idea for a change. We pull it off and I might just let you buy me that drink. I mean, I’m not going to sit and drink it with you, but I’ll let you drop the coins for it.”

Luke snorted at that and ran a hand through his hair.

It came back sticky with Gaz’ blood.

He turned to Kuyt. “Thoughts, old man?”

“You promised me that you would stop killing our own people.”

Luke felt cold. “No I didn’t, what are you talking about? One corpse is better than sixty when some idiot figures he doesn’t have to listen to orders and gets his squad killed. It’s about the message. They need to fear me.”

“Fear again! You said...” Kuyt’s voice was strangled and his face was twisted in anger. With a visible effort, he calmed himself. “You could have sent him away. Made him an outcast. There was no need to kill him. When you get angry like that...it’s like you become a different person.”

“No! I’m not...” That wasn’t true. He had made the decision to kill Gaz. Not Reilo. Hadn’t he?

Faint laughter echoed inside his skull.

Luke gripped the gateway metal until his fingers hurt. The image of Gaz’ pulped face seared his mind and suddenly, he felt sick.

Ferra could take it away. He touched the metal in his pocket. One final taste. Then he would go clean for good.

Luke licked his lips. "Kuyt. We need to be united now, more than ever, or else this is all for naught. You've got to believe that I am doing this for the right reasons, even if you disagree with how I do it. You need to trust me."

Kuyt stared at him for a long time, his expression unreadable.

Then he sighed. "I do trust you, kid."

Luke blew out a breath. "Then we are agreed." The heat of Heartfire blasted against his back and he felt energy flow through him.

"The executions end today."

Chapter 7

Why were adventures so dull?

Kain scratched his arse. Felt like he had a hedgehog jammed up in there. Not like Crabbie needed his hands on the reins. The ancient mare knew the way better'n he did.

Three days o' sittin'. An' waitin'. An' itchin'! Horseflies were a bugger an' no mistake. Kain's face were swollen an' scratchy as a pregnant cat. Bumpin' around in a cart sure weren't doin' his back no favours neither. Every dip in the dirt rattled him about like a jackrabbit in heat.

Gust o' wind cut inside his coat, cold as fish guts. It were gettin' late. The sun drenched over the horizon like a side o' beef set to hang an' the road were windin' into a snake's shadow. Felt like years since he licked the last scrap o' lunch from his molars.

Over the last few days he'd stopped at a couple o' inns, paid his pennies for bed an' breakfast, an' done his best to ignore the snickerin' kids that stared at his legs. But no such luck now. This last road were a quiet one. Naught but trees 'til a body made it to Arx. Still, not like he never camped out afore. Didn't take long for him to spy a likely copse, stringy evergreens tall an' shady. He edged Crabbie over an' it weren't long afore she were gnawin' on some nearby shrubs, happy as a flit by the fire. Kain lowered hisself from the cart.

His foot touched the grass an' like that his leg gave way. Ground kicked his back like an angry mule an' he yelped. Snotty, watery tears fell to the grass.

Balls an' blast it, but it were temptin' to just lie there. To watch the pretty clouds an' never get up again. But then Crabbie came over an' licked his cheek with that long, sloppy tongue o' hers.

Kain spat an' pushed hisself upright. "You vile creature." He grabbed her coat in mock severity an' yanked hisself up. He kissed her nose an' held her until his legs stopped shakin'.

Look after the animals first since they canne do it themselves. Aye, cheers Pa, never would'a guessed. Kain rummaged up a water skin an' held it up to Crabbie's slobberchops.

Lap.

Lap.

Lap.

When she finally had her fill, an' spat a gobful down his shirt for good measure, Kain tethered Crabbie to a saplin' an' loosened the harness.

With the cart free, he dragged the cover off an' gave it a good eye over. For all Pa's whingin', he put together a heck of a spread. Spuds, parsnips, turnips, carrots, apples, clemmies, blueberries an' those weird little pears. Almost emptied the pantries an' that weren't even the best bit. Hidden in the middle were a stack o' grease-wrapped packages. Salt pork. Ma did it herself an' everyone who tried it agreed that it were just the tastiest cut o' heaven they ever had.

Kain licked his lips. Surely they wouldn't miss a couple o' chops?

He grinned, yawned fit to swallow the sun, an' got to work on a fire. Didn't take long, Pa insisted he practise a hundred times a day after all. The pine were sweet. The smoke made the clearin' feel like spring an' it weren't long afore his pork'n beans were ready. Tender an' sizzlin', just what he fancied after a day o' swallowin' bugs. He dug in with relish. 'Ain't no need for manners on the road.

The pork tasted like home.

Kain gobbled down the last of it an' settled back against a tree. Should probably give the pot a bit o' a wash an' maybe even wash some o' the dirt from his

face, but it had been a long day. Every muscle were stretched to achin' an' he were right comfy watchin' the fire. The sparks leapt an' danced afore his eyes. They whirled an' rose to fade into the darkened sky...

Kain woke to a scream in the darkness.

He scrambled to his feet. So much for a quick nap! Bugger it but his back hurt like a mound o' termites were eatin' through him. He lurched outta the clearin'.

A horse raced down the road, far enough away that the starlight just barely picked out the rider that clung to it. Dirt churned up from runnin' hooves.

Sommat thundered in the distance behind 'em. A phalanx o' shadows. Someone were givin' chase.

Kain crept forwards. The first rider were close now, almost level an' floggin' his horse like a madman. If he weren't careful, then...

CRACK!

The sound o' the horse's scream hit like a red-hot nail. The beast fell in a cloud o' dust, its leg bent back at a crazy angle. The rider were thrown smack into the middle o' the road. Just out o' reach.

The chase were gainin' fast. More horses raced down the road far behind. A few moments more an' they would arrive. The rider were helpless. No way they could miss 'im.

Then Kain were movin'. Why were he movin'? He kept low to the ground an' knelt beside the rider. He held a hand to the lad's lips. A whisper of warmth. Still alive.

Kain straightened, winced, an' grabbed the rider under the pits. He pulled. It were like diggin' a chain through his body. Every short, scrabbled step tore into his back. Bloody legs! Couldn't they just work for one pissin' moment? The pursuit were gettin' closer. Any moment now an' they'd see him. He had to get clear!

Sommat clicked an' Kain went down. The feelin o' rusty knives scraped through him. No chance he were movin' again any time soon.

"Hide!"

Kain looked over at the rider, just in time to catch the cloak he chucked over the pair o' them.

They lay still. Kain closed his eyes.

Hoof-beats.

"His horse is here! Leg's broken."

Clatter. Steel on leather.

"Where is he?"

Footsteps. The stink o' ash'n sweat.

"Fan out. He's tricky. DeProleai does not want him back in Arx."

More footsteps. Closer.

"Another horse!"

"Kill it."

A bowstring twanged. An arrow thwacked.

An old horse screamed.

"There's a cart with it. He had help."

A thud. Sommat shattered.

"HE HAS A FIRE!"

"Down! Everybody down!"

Shoutin'. Anger. Fear.

Silence.

Kain sniffled back a couple o' tears. His breath were warm in his face. This were insane. All it would take were one man with a torch an' they were good as mulch.

He never even made it to Arx.

"Do you...?" he whispered to the rider.

Footsteps. Close.

"What was that?" The voice spoke, so close. Kain could feel boots in the grass beside him.

"What?" A woman's voice.

"I heard something." The man sounded so certain.

Kain bit his tongue 'til it hurt.

"What? Where?" The woman's voice were tight. Expectant.

"I don't know."

Slap.

"We don't have time for this. DeProleai will have my head." The woman's voice were sharp, but fear still bubbled behind her words.

"Captain! The fire's clean. He's not here." A second bloke's voice shattered through the night.

"Come on. He must have continued on foot. Sweep the road. We'll find him."

Footsteps. Hoof-beats.

Silence.

Kain counted to two hundred. The silence remained unbroken. That should be enough, right? There wouldn't be anyone left now. No one waitin' to see if anyone were hidden in the darkness...

He counted again.

"I reckon they're gone." He barely breathed the words.

Not that he got a response. He peered out from under the cloak. Just grass an' quiet.

Kain braced hisself. "Come on." One shuddery leg caught under him but he forced it upright, not stoppin' until both feet were on the grass.

The rider coughed. Wet. The bloke didn't speak an' his eyes were shut, but he reached out an' grabbed Kain's sleeve. Without askin', the bugger levered hisself up.

Kain's eyes watered sommat fierce. What, did the bloke think he were a hitchin' post? "Right. Let's get you goin'." He tossed an arm around the rider's shoulder an' dragged him closer. "We cripples gotta stick together."

They limped across the grass. There were a lump on the ground next to the clearin', but Kain forced hisself to ignore it. There would be time to grieve later.

How they made it back to the camp, Kain weren't quite sure. The fog o' pain an' stress o' discovery did wonders to keep a man locked from his thoughts. Not that it were still much of a 'camp.' The other riders had picked through everythin' an' doused the fire to boot.

Kain lowered the rider to the floor an' scrounged a couple o' twigs to get a small blaze goin' again.

Now what?

Kain slumped to the dirt. He were shaky as a foal. His pack were missin', so that were it for bandages or rubbin' alcohol, an' by the look o' things, the rider needed both. A dark, wet stain spread from his kneecap.

Kain winced. There were a long tear in the cloth an' inside were wet an' pink. Right in the heart o' the wound, there were a glimmer o' sommat silver, with a splinter o' wood pokin' free.

He burped back some sick. How were the rider still conscious? There were no savin' that leg. If a pig had those injuries then it would be ham hock for dinner an' no mistake.

But there had to be sommat he could do.

"Metal."

Kain jerked at the sound o' the rider's voice.

"Metal," the bloke repeated. "Knife. Belt buckle. Anything."

"I don't..." Kain patted his pockets. "I don't have any on me. Hold on, there should be some in my saddlebags. Just gimme a mo' to get my breath back."

"No time." The rider shook, a spasm jerked his body. "The head of the arrow... it's still in there isn't it?"

"Yeah," Kain said.

"I need it out."

"What?"

"You heard me. I can't close the wound with it still in there. Pull it out. Put it in my hand. Then run."

"No!" Kain shook his head an' tried to ignore the insanity of the request. Even lookin' at the blood made his stomach churn.

"You have to!" The rider sat up. His eyes glittered in the firelight, violet as an angry sunset. What kind o' man had eyes like that? They pierced Kain down to his bones. "Do you want me to die?"

Kain shook head. "'Course not. Damn an' bugger it, fine!"

"Thank you." The rider took a deep breath. Even that looked painful.

Kain choked down a couple o' breaths. He set his hands over the wound an' slowly found the broken haft of the arrow with his fingertips. The rider hissed.

"Ready?" Kain asked.

"A question first." The rider blinked. "Why did you save me?"

"Why wouldn't I? No one would leave a fella to die on the road."

“And you dream, don’t you? I can see it. Of a life that this broken body holds you back from.”

Kain felt cold. “How do you...?”

“It doesn’t matter. I know where your road ends. What is your name?”

Kain licked his lips. “Kain.” The moment he said it, he felt wrong. Like he had just given away some great secret.

The rider just nodded. “I’ll remember you. Kain.” He gasped. “Okay. Do it. Do it now.”

The rider closed his eyes an’ his lips began to move. A prayer? A death offerin’? Kain couldn’t tell.

He swallowed. One quick movement an’ it would be all over. He gripped the bloody splinters between his fingers.

Kain pulled, hard as he could.

The rider screamed, loud an’ sharp enough to break the night wide open. The hunk o’ metal caught an’ scraped against the bloke’s flesh afore it came free with a gurglin’ pop. Blood spewed from the hole an’ covered Kain’s hands.

“Give it me!” the rider shouted.

“What?”

“GIVE. IT. ME!” The rider lurched forwards an’ tore the arrowhead from Kain’s grip.

The fire exploded with blue flames.

Kain scrambled backwards. What in the name o’ buggery an’ bastards, were goin’ on? The flames rose like they were alive an’ the smoke were thick an’ black. It stank of rust.

Kain covered his mouth. Icy sweat froze him to the spot. All he could do were watch as a circle of blue fire wound around the rider. Sparks alighted on his waxy skin.

Remember.

Kain glanced around. Where had that come from? Sounded like the trees were talkin', a word from the sky itself.

"I need help." The rider's voice were thick as blood.

Sweat stung Kain's eyes. The fire scorched the dirt an' the heat seared his face. The arrowhead in the rider's hand began to glow. Light erupted from the shard of metal. At the same time a blaze o' light, brighter than the sun, burst from a pouch at the bloke's waist.

The smoke began to boil an' soon the black were tinged with red. Figures, detailed as sculpture, formed from the smoke. A young girl with a broken neck. An old man missin' his jaw. A couple with open stomachs. A baby with no arms. Countless spectres filled the clearin'. A graveyard o' bodies.

The rider shuddered. His violet eyes flickered open an' tears sizzled down his face. The oily shadows surrounded him. He shook his head, but they all pressed closer.

One of the shadows stepped free of the others. A man with a bloody hole in his neck. He leapt at the rider.

The rider opened his mouth to scream. Smoke poured down his throat. Blisters broke over his tongue as the scaldin' phantom vanished inside the bloke's body.

Another shadow leapt in. Smoke forced through the rider's ears, the tiny hairs burst into a flash o' light. Another shadow an' the rider's skin began to peel.

One by one, the shadows poured into the rider. His hair began to smoke. Sweat evaporated. His tongue burst into flame an' wordless shrieks wracked his body. Blue fire rushed over his face an' his eyes melted. A dense blue fog whirled in the sockets. Flames licked the flesh from the rider's face an' it bubbled away. A black skull emerged.

The blaze swirled through the clearin'.

Kain's heart hammered into his ribs.

The skull turned to face him.

"I TOLD YOU TO RUN." The words grated from a jaw without a tongue.

Kain didn't need tellin' again. He were on his feet in a blink an' he fled back to the road like a kid from his nightmares.

Behind him, the copse exploded.

Kain fell smack on his face. A wave o' heat sluiced over him. He turned to see a column o' blue flame roar towards the sky. For a moment, those flames lit the night.

A faint breeze chilled the sweat that dripped from his chin.

Kain leapt to his feet. Bugger this for a game. Only one thing to do. Saddle Crabbie and get outta...

Ah.

He smelled her afore he saw her. A lump in the darkness. Arrows stuck from her sides an' the grass around her were black with blood.

"Sorry gel.' He sniffed. A couple o' well-earned tears fell to her coat. Should bury her. Show some respect. But what could he do? Even if he had a spade, what chance did a cripple have o' diggin' anythin', let alone a grave?

The cart were shattered beside her. Months o' hard work spoiled. He caught a glimpse of a grease-wrapped package with a boot-print smearin' it to the mud.

Calm. Eat. Normalise.

Pa's advice whispered to him an' Kain's were only too glad to listen. He dug a carrot from the mulch an' began to chew. He could still walk 'ome. Fire monsters were not part o' the job description. Surely Ma would understand.

But Arx wouldn't.

If he ran now, then there would be trouble. Eviction. Punishment. All those things Fetch had warned of.

An' Pa would never let him forget it.

Sommat ignited in Kain. One o' the sacks had survived an' he started fillin' it. A couple o' spud were serviceable. Ditto some turnips. He sorted through the mess quickly. A little bit o' everythin', that's what they wanted. Sure, there were not as much as he started with, but that were hardly his fault.

He hefted the sack an' winced at the added weight. Kain set his jaw. Pain were gonna be a constant companion for the walk, best get used to it now. Pa said this last leg took one day with a horse an' cart at a trot. If he walked quick, he could do it in three.

Kain stepped out into the road. The rider's horse were still down, dead as doornails. The panniers were split an' a whole mess o' metal poured into the dirt. Swords, knives, spears, but even by starlight the metal were black. He reached out an' touched a sword. The blade flaked away like rotten wood.

Kain shuddered an' wiped the flakes from his fingers. Just leave it. He had bigger worries. Like hopefully those riders wouldn't come back an' run him down an' hopefully he could make it to Arx without his back splittin' in two.

One step at a time.

Chapter 8

“You promised there would be no romance.”

Sam drew her cloak around her shoulders. Weak sunlight brightened the street but a cold wind robbed it of any warmth. Window shutters banged against lead-lined windows and the signposts shuddered. The borough shivered.

“This isn’t romantic. It’s legal.” Matthew ran his fingernails through the stubble on his chin. “Father is angry enough as it is. Do you really want to give him a loophole for annulment?” He scratched his cheek like he had fleas.

Sam grabbed his hand and yanked it down. “Would you leave it alone?” A couple that walked by cast a glance at her tone and she winced. “Uh, darling.”

Matthew just shook his head.

They walked towards the Scent Market. It bustled with noise. Customers flitted between shop fronts and market stalls like birds and the air was hot with conversation

Of course, it stank like evil itself. Each new fragrance mingled in the smog and tormented her nose. Lilac and silk, jasmine and cinnamon, cardamom and... bacon? Not to mention the stink of render and tallow. Her eyes watered.

A little girl strode past, her mother in tow. Sam caught sight of her dress and smiled. Bared arms, slim skirts, it was a child’s version of the grey one that she herself was wearing. Mira was in high demand these days. She had taken to calling the design *Textura*. The little girl gasped when she saw who was looking at her, and tugged her Mother’s hand with glee shining naked in her eyes.

That was something, wasn’t it?

"There they are." Matthew drew her attention over to a *Sepladium*. The scent-combiner stirred her vials and tubes of vibrant liquid. Beside her were three lads slouched together like they had nothing better to do.

Danil DeKanu, fourth son of Lord Devon. Rupert DeArio, whose brother had recently enlisted as a Walker in an attempt to pay back his debts. Benjy Ranna, progeny of a family of foreign traders who got caught in Arx when the gates were closed.

Nobodies, the lot of them, but they were Matthew's best friends. They grinned and slapped his back in greeting.

Lizzy was far less excited.

"There you are!" A false smile snapped on her lips. "Smell this." She held out a vial. "Lady DeVoli has truly outdone herself."

The woman running the *Sepladium* smiled modestly. Sam stuck her nose over the blue-and-orange liquid.

By the Prelude, it felt like her nostrils were burning.

She stepped back with a watery smile and nodded. "Very..." she coughed. "Very nice." Sod it, but it smelled like a fire in an outhouse.

Lizzy laughed. "Come, let's get you a drink." She took Sam's arm and led her towards a stall with colourful punch in a variety of bowls.

They made it about half way before Lizzy stopped and whirled to face her.

"Right. What are you playing at?" Lizzy folded her arms.

"Excuse me?"

"You and Matthew. I know it's not real."

Sam just stared. What did Lizzy know? Had she been hiding behind the door when Matthew 'proposed?' That was just like her. How dare she!

"I mean, how in the name of the Prelude did you manage a coup like that?"

Sam let go of the breath she was holding. Jealousy. Much simpler. "He's not an unstable regime Lizzy."

"No. I do gossip. Dianne DeTali informed *me* about her engagement before she told her mother. *I* was the first to know when Jace DeSané gave Luci DeArio the bloody itch!"

"Voice down sister dearest, I doubt Rupert would appreciate such 'rumours' being bellowed down the street." Sam glanced back towards the *Sepladium* but Rupert's eyes were fixed firmly on the backside of a young lady in a tight dress.

"Oh please." Lizzy's voice drew her attention back. "Luci is not the first member of her family that I have taken to the apothecary. Stop changing the subject. When did you and Matthew even meet?"

Sam forced a smile. "What can I say? I suppose you are just not as informed as you think you are." That was vague enough. She toyed with an errant curl that fell down her shoulder. "Tell me something Lizzy. In all of this gossip you've heard, how is it possible that you didn't know about Jonas DeWhit's penchant for the unspoilt?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Lizzy raised a single, perfect eyebrow.

"Well from what I heard, he always has his whores wear white. Something about purity? The Prelude knows where he got that from, certainly not his womanising Father. The point being, how did you expect him to react when he found out about the others? Set DeTheo. Max DeNass. Bill DeLaijo. Honestly Liz, your sexual history reads like a who's-who of social status. Climbing the ladder one man at a time, eh?"

Lizzy's eyes sparkled. Those weren't tears. They couldn't be. "I am a young woman with no prospects, no connections and no friends. My mother is dead, my father is reviled and my sister is universally mocked for her odd habits. I spend

more time on my face and clothes every morning than most girls do in a month, just to remain relevant. What other choices do you think I have?"

"Well, keeping your legs closed for one." The word's escaped before Sam could stop them.

Liz stopped dead. She lifted her proud head and sniffed. "Do you honestly believe I enjoy this?" Her voice was cold and quiet. She pulled free and walked back over to the trio of idiots that surrounded Matthew. The mask was back and she laughed at DeKanu's attempt to flirt with her.

Sam bit her lip. Lizzy had never been so candid before. Maybe it was true. Maybe she really didn't have a choice but to sell herself to the highest bidder.

Just as Sam had.

"What was that?" Matthew came over.

Sam scratched her neck. "Never you mind."

Matthew shrugged. He had only been involved with the DeAcarris family for a few days, but it was clear he was already sick of the bickering. "Well, shall we? It's getting late."

Sam nodded and let him lead her through the district, Lizzy and the boys trailing behind. It wasn't long until the other shoppers noticed their odd procession. Hundreds of eyes watched them pass.

They could not get to Steelhammer Row fast enough.

When they finally arrived, Sam took a deep breath. The air was scorched with smoke. Open-air forges, half-covered by tents, lent their warmth to the day. Hammers fell in a spray of sparks and the unified *clang* made her shiver all the way down to her toes. It was magical.

"This way." Matthew's petulant tone broke the spell.

Sam traipsed after him. Right at the end of the row was a tent closed to the wind. The leathery fabric was stamped with the DeProleai crest. A depiction of the Spire.

Sam turned around. The enormous metal tower broke the Caelum skyline far overhead. It radiated authority and reflected the afternoon sunlight like a blazing beacon. She looked back to the crest. Was the etching covered in cracks? Perhaps it was supposed to be lightning. Either way, it was an appropriate sign for the most powerful family in the city.

Matthew led Sam inside.

The tent was enormous and the forge was already hot enough to get her sweating. A smiling blacksmith nodded over his *Indentina* hammer. A young woman stood next to him, her shaven head covered in a spiral pattern of tattoos. Her shirt was as red as the ink that wrapped around her scalp.

"Welcome," the blacksmith said. "My name is Kyle and this is Mistress Ignis."

"I'm Samantha DeAcarris." She inclined her head. The blacksmith bowed low in response, but the woman just stood there and watched.

"I know," she said. The woman turned to Matthew. "Do you have a witness?"

Matthew nodded. "Danil DeKanu."

"Call him in."

Matthew left to call his friend. The barefaced lad leapt into the tent.

"I knew it! I knew you would pick me." He punched Matthew in the arm.

Ignis pointed a finger at Sam. "You. Wait outside."

Sam scowled. Being spoken to like that was *not* why she had agreed to this sodding engagement, but Matthew's eyes were pleading at her. She tossed her hair over her shoulder. Fine.

They fastened the entrance behind her. Sam leant on the tent pole and tried to listen in, but it was oddly quiet. No hammer falling, no talking. Nothing beyond a faint hint of smoke that escaped through the cloth. How long was this going to take?

The sun moved across the sky. Lizzy sent one of the boys off for a campstool and took a seat as they waited. Cold wind toyed with the hem of Sam's dress. She shivered.

It was almost dark when Matthew stumbled from the tent. His usually curly hair was lank and stuck to his head with sweat. By the Prelude he was pale.

"How was it?" Sam asked.

Matthew just shook his head. He lifted his hand. The chain was soldered tight around his wrist. A new link shone with the gleam that only existed in freshly forged metal. Silver, rather than steel, the pattern was incredible. Tiny splinters and jags of geometric perfection. A line of red jasper was embedded through the middle. It glittered like a slit throat.

"Matthew." Sam rubbed the corner of her eye. "This is incredible. How did you make it?"

Matthew's lips moved, but nothing came out.

Danil DeKanu leapt from the tent and jumped on Matthew's back, cheering. The other two boys raced over to slap his back.

"We can have him now, right?" Danil asked Sam.

"Why?"

"To get drunk! It's not every day your best friend gets *engaged*! Even if he didn't tell us beforehand..." Danil's eyes narrowed.

Sam bit her tongue. Even the nobodies didn't quite buy it. "Of course," she said eventually.

They hoisted Matthew on to their shoulders and charged down the street.

“Samantha.” Ignis opened the tent flap. “We are ready for you. Choose your witness.”

“Oh good.” Lizzy stood up. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Look, Lizzy,” Sam said. “I didn’t mean to imply anything earlier, I just...”

“Fascinating,” Lizzy interrupted her. Her eyes were flat as flint. “Shall we?”

Sam shook her head. There was no talking to her when she got like this. They ducked inside the canvas tent.

It was hot, far hotter than before, and the blacksmith was still working the bellows. The air shimmered with heat and already sweat dripped from Lizzy’s nose. How could someone look so pretty with sweat dribbling down her face? It wasn’t fair.

“Come let us begin.” Ignis wrapped the steel chain around Sam’s wrist and fastened it in place with a bronze half-ring. She passed Sam a lump of silver.

“What are you doing? That temperature is wrong for silver. And besides, you can’t make a chain direct with a lump of ore. Where is your round bar? The wedge to shape it?”

“The girl knows her stuff!” The blacksmith laughed.

Ignis ignored her and placed her hand on the side of the forge. “Remember.”

The flames in the forge dimmed. For a moment, the air was still.

Then the forge exploded with blue fire. Sam sheltered her eyes. Phantom smoke began to fill the tent. Red as a sunset.

“Place the silver in the flames,” Ignis commanded.

“Are you insane? I don’t know what fuel you are using but I don’t intend to melt my hand!”

Ignis met Sam’s eyes. Without a pause, she shoved her hand into the fire.

"No!" Sam leapt forwards. If she acted quick enough, they might save the woman's arm, but...

Ignis pulled her hand from the forge. It was untouched, not so much as a scorched nail."

"What... is this?" Sam asked.

"Magic," Ignis said. "Your turn."

By the Prelude, what had she gotten herself into? Sam looked around for support but Lizzy just shrugged and gestured towards the fire.

Sam grit her teeth. Before she could think any better of it, she thrust her hand into the flame.

It was warm. Like swishing her hand in a bath, though sweat still rolled down her face. Smoke tickled around her ears.

Remember.

A voice spoke... inside her head? Sam blinked.

The forge seemed to grow. Like a mouth of some great beast, the black iron expanded until it was all she could see. The blue fire began to stretch. It spread into the darkness. A pathway of flame.

"Walk the bridge Samantha." Ignis' voice sounded inside her head once more.

"How?" Sam licked her lips. "Show me."

"I cannot. The choice must be yours."

"I've lost my sodding mind," Sam muttered. She set a foot on the lip of black iron. "Absolutely sodding stark..."

She walked across the bridge made of fire like it was the most natural thing in the world.

The end of the bridge was a straight drop into a dark abyss.

"Step into the darkness Samantha. Come to Memoria."

Sam's heart squirmed into her mouth. One final act of madness. She stepped off.

Sam took a breath to scream but she didn't fall. The fire vanished and a platform of white mist grew beneath her feet. It expanded like a blizzard until the darkness was coated in wisps of translucent smoke.

A person materialised beside her. Scalp tattoos, a red dress and a look of sneering superiority. Ignis raised a finger. She pointed into the mist.

A pillar of metal burst from the smoke beside Sam.

Sam cowered. The metal rose far higher than she could perceive. The Spire. Real as life.

She turned to Ignis.

"If you wish to speak, merely think the words. I will hear you."

Sam's thoughts bubbled up. *"Alright. Okay. What is going on? Where am I?"*

"Good. You communicate well. This is Memoria. Consider it your 'inner world.' A reflection of reality as you perceive it."

"But there's nothing here but the Spire."

"Patience. See?"

Sam found her attention directed upwards. The dark sky shuddered and silver stars began to form high above, budding from the Spire like cherry blossoms.

"What are those?"

"Manifest Memories. Brace yourself."

The stars fell. A hail of silver into the mist. With each collision, a new building formed. But they were all wrong. Her basement forge burst into existence, the size of a mansion. The orbs vanished into the enormous space and it became as clear and detailed as if she had her nosed pressed to every wall.

Madam DeFarris' dance parlour, Mira's shop, the *Lupanar*, all formed from the smoke. Less detailed, only one or two orbs vanished into them. Fewer memories of these places, perhaps?

The final star fall was the greatest. A barrage of silver formed a building that almost matched the Spire for height.

"This is my home," she projected at Ignis. "Why is it so big?"

"Memoria shapes the world as you remember it. You are fixated on your family and yourself. Memoria reacts accordingly. It takes years of training to prevent the mind from seeing what it wishes to see. Even then, it is difficult."

"Then why is the Spire here? I've only been to the Citadel once and I barely remember it."

"The Spire exists in all Memoria shadows."

"Why?"

Ignis ignored her. Instead, she turned to the front doors of Sam's imagined home. *"The silver will not wait. Come with me."*

Sam tried to move her legs, to follow Ignis towards her home, but nothing happened. *"How?"*

"Your mind is at work here, not your body. Just imagine yourself forwards. Perception is key."

Because that made *total* sense. Still, Sam did as she was told. She imagined herself flying through the fog.

And she did.

"I moved!"

"Congratulations." Ignis' projection was as dry as a tongue in a hung-over mouth. *"Now. Let us enter your home."*

"The doors are shut."

"So imagine them opening."

Sam did so and was rewarded with the sight of the wooden panels swinging inwards. She willed herself inside.

The entrance hall was enormous, horse-sized windows and wooden panels as large as trees. Ignis floated in beside her. *"Now, I want you to bring a memory of Matthew to the fore. A strong one. I will pare it from you and store it in the silver."*

"What?"

"I am a Mindbreaker. I can remove memories and invest them in metal."

"Wait so, you can see my memories?"

"When you select one, of course." Ignis strode through the hall. *"A test of the love between the pair of you. I am instructed to report back to Simon DeProleai of what memory you choose. If you want my advice, don't make it a... physical memory. I suspect he will not enjoy that."*

Sam glanced around. Matthew's hadn't mentioned anything like this! What did he expect her to do? The strongest memory she had of him was slapping his smug face for stealing a kiss, and she rather suspected that would not count as an acceptable choice.

"Come. The silver is beginning to form. Any longer and it will become useless."

"Uh, give me... give me a moment."

"We don't have a moment."

Sam closed her eyes. Sod it, what she wouldn't do to be in bed right now. Hidden under the covers like a child cowering from a nightmare. She could even see it, four-posters and a mound of blankets...

When she opened her eyes, she was stood beside it. Her bedroom reflected before her. Ignis was gone. She felt a pulse of annoyance from somewhere beneath her. Clearly the Mindbreaker was going to have to walk.

Which gave her all of a few heartbeats to figure out what to do. Panic bit her and Sam gripped Mother's ring around her neck. Even in this 'Memoria' it was warm.

Something glittered on the bedside table

Sam frowned. The Dreamsteel disk. Unlike everything else, it was the same size as it was back in reality. It looked like a thumbnail on the gigantic table.

Sam reached out. What was that doing here? Her fingers brushed the metal.

Agony shattered in her mind. It felt like glass was being ground into her eyes, up into her brain. She tried to scream, but her lungs didn't work.

Around her, the room began to warp. This was not a gentle gust of white fog. It was a maelstrom of colour and she was trapped at the heart.

...

Sam blinked.

She was in bed. Not her bed. And she felt different. Wrong. Like being forced into someone else's clothes, but far more... intimate.

A woman stood over her, her face creased in concern. A man leant against the wall behind her. His eyes were cast in shadow.

On the wall behind them, a candle burned blue.

"Where... is my daughter?" Sam's lips moved.

"With the doctors. It is not important. You are dying."

Sam could feel the truth of the words. Her body felt weak. Tired.

"Can't you heal her?" A voice spoke. A familiar voice. Sam looked over. It was Father. Younger, but unmistakably him. "Isn't that what you Mindbreakers do?"

"Easy," the man spoke from the back of the room. "It is not that simple."

"Can't you see she's in pain?"

"The fastest way to heal her is to remove the memory of the wound. I can cure her quick. But it would kill your daughter," the woman said. "Is that what you want?"

"Of course not!" Father blustered.

"Elizabeth," Sam said. "Her name... Elizabeth."

"Then stand back and let her work. Okay Aer. Gently now," the man's voice was soothing. "Hold the knife steady and time your breathing with hers."

"Miss. If this works, there is no telling what you might forget," the woman said. She pushed a lump of gold between Sam's fingers. "I must ask for your consent."

"You don't need it," the man snapped.

"I... it hurts," Sam found herself saying. "What do you mean... forget?"

"Your family. Your husband. Yourself. I don't know how much you will lose. But it is the only way."

"Aer!" the man growled at her.

"But surely, you would not forget us...." The pain in Father's voice broke Sam's heart. Tears rolled down his face.

"My dear. Nothing can erase the life we have lived together. I'll just have... to fall in love with you... all over again." Tears sprang in Sam's eyes and they fell without shame. A spike of pain jammed into her abdomen and she gasped. "Okay. I consent. Do it."

The woman nodded and began to speak. Smoke started to pour into the edges of Sam's vision.

"Do right by the girls, Horatio."

A knife lay against Sam's neck. It was cool. Then hot.

Something happened. She felt... odd. Images flickered and faded like treacle draining from a bathtub.

"You're taking too much!" The man's voice was sharp. "Aer! You're taking more than just her memories. Pull back, you're killing her!"

In an odd way, Sam knew he was right. For a moment she was floating, lighter than air. A golden doorway rose before her.

Then everything was dark.

...

Sam thudded to the ground and opened her eyes.

The forge was back and Lizzy knelt over her. "Samantha?"

She rubbed her eyes and sat up. "Lizzy! I saw her. I saw Mother, when she died and..."

"Are you done?" Lizzy cut her off. Her eyes rolled like marbles.

"Clearly." Ignis' voice was cold with anger. "See for yourself."

Sam looked down. The chain around her wrist was melted shut. The silver link was slender and curved like ivy. "How...?"

"Good," Lizzy interrupted. "Congratulations." She turned on her heel and stalked from the tent.

"Wait, Lizzy don't you..." She tried, but Lizzy was already gone. A headache began behind Sam's eyes. So strong. She could have wept.

"Come." Ignis reached down to help her up. The forge fire was out and the blacksmith had vanished. How late was it? Ignis kept hold of her hand as she led Sam to a small table set in the back of the tent.

"Ignis... what happened?"

Ignis knit her fingers together. "I am very rarely surprised Samantha. To see a person's memories is to take their measure, and yet I would love to know just how some girl, with no training, was able to pare a memory away on her own. And yet I suspect you have no idea. Do you?"

"I don't even understand where we were," Sam said. She pulled Mother's ring from her dress and held it. It was cold with sweat.

The Mindbreaker's eyes widened. She stared at Mother's ring with a desperate hunger. "Gold. Of course." Her hand rose like she would tear the ring from Sam's throat.

"What?" Sam tucked the ring back down her dress. "What is it?"

Ignis' eyes flickered a moment. "If you'll excuse me, I have a letter to send."

"Wait!" Sam called, but Ignis marched from the tent and vanished.

Sam rubbed her temples. The headache was fading, but her mind still reeled with questions. What had happened back there? Why did she remember *being* Mother? Something had gone wrong, but what were they trying to do?

Sodding questions. Why can't things just be simple?

Sam sat by herself for a long time. When she finally left, Steelhammer Row was deserted.

She walked home alone, through the quiet and the cold.

Chapter 9

Luke held his breath and waited for the Walkers.

Word came down not too long ago. The eyes on the Ferriway had located another target.

The ambush spot was a good one, a ruined stonecutter just off the arterial road through The Bricks. Collapsed houses barricaded one side of the street. Any re-enforcements would have to come the long way round.

"Luke. You sure you're up for this?" Addie was coiled beside him, tight with tension.

Luke rolled his shoulders. "I'm fine. Follow my lead."

Addie frowned a bit, but nodded all the same.

A cloud of smog rolled overhead. It blocked the sun and the Walkers arrived in its shadow. A full squad of seven, they marched with grim faces.

The Captain, a bearded man with a silver brocade to proclaim his rank, twitched a hand towards his blade.

Three prisoners were chained behind the Walkers. Two men, one woman, corralled by steel shackles. Thin as strips of piss, the lot of them, and with the empty eyes of those who know death is coming.

Luke took a deep breath for the taste of it. The thick, chalk taste of The Bricks. The cloying, clammy taste of Austellus. Blood and metal.

It was time.

"For Lara!" Luke leapt from behind the half-wall of broken stone and darted at the Walkers. Knives flashed in his hands.

The closest Walker was still wrestling with her blade when he leapt at her. Steel slashed and the blackcloak fell with blood bubbling between her lips.

The others turned. Six blades cut through the smog.

In an instant, Addie was beside him. A whirl of metal and murder, her hatchet smashed into the neck of a nearby Walker and blood misted the air.

“Back!” the Captain bellowed. Longswords bristled as the Walkers formed up around the prisoners. They fell back against the wall of a broken building.

Luke smirked. So predictable. “Now!”

A cry burst from behind the Walkers. Ten rebel soldiers, armed with rusty weapons and grimy shirts, slammed into the Walkers. Two blackcloaks fell, overwhelmed by the surge of bodies. The others turned, drawn out of position to face the new threat.

Luke fell on them.

His knife punched in and out of a Walker’s stomach. Burbling, bleeding warmth soaked his hands. Beside him, Addie’s hatchet split a Walker’s head like a rotten pear. His brain splattered across her leathers.

The Captain gutted a dirt-faced rebel and leapt away. Even alone and surrounded by bodies, his eyes were unafraid.

Everyone held for a breath.

“Retinentia damn it.” The Captain slammed his blade to the ground. “I surrender.” He knelt and held his hands behind his head.

Luke stepped in and kicked the Captain’s blade away. “Good.”

“Aye. So what happens now? Ransom? Or am I taking a message.”

“Sort of.” Luke shrugged.

He rammed his Needlepoint blade into the Captain’s eye. The body slumped to the blood-slick pavement.

Luke blew a breath free. All in all, the assault had taken about as long as a good shit. Three rebels lay beside the fallen Walkers, and one more had a wound in his arm deep enough to show the bone. His cries were small and sad.

What a victory.

“Well? You lot, get to it!” Addie wiped blood from her forehead and watched as the survivors looted the dead. The last few weeks had really taken it out of her. Her lips were chapped and her skin was grey, but it was more than physical. The spark in her eyes was gone and even Kuyt had felt the rough edge of her temper more than once.

Luke sat back on his heels and watched the looting. Walker steel was worth taking and besides, someone had to find the key for those twig-thin prisoners. They huddled together, eyes expectant as they waited for him to fix things.

Just like everybody else.

Luke ground his palms into his eyes. Three weeks. True to his word, no one had been executed, but the cost... Only a handful of rebels remained and half of them were too injured to be any use.

“Here!” A young bloke held an iron key over his head. Didn’t even look like he had to start shaving yet, but he already had a finger-wide scab down the side of his face that leaked puss on to his shirt.

Addie freed the prisoners and then looked at Luke, expectant. He cleared his throat.

Time for the Saviour to make an appearance.

“My friends! You are free!” He threw out his arms as if he was offering the prisoners the whole city.

They just kind of... looked at him. No gratitude. No compliance. Not even a single bastard tear. It didn't help that Reilo's memories were just filled with grateful, cheering crowds. Smug dead bastard.

"Uh, but I did not do it alone!" Damn it, they were ruining his speech. "Look! For it was not I that saved you, but the regular men and woman of Austellus. Your brothers and sisters!" He gestured to the dead-eyed rebels. The ignored him, still up to their elbows in the viscera of dead Walkers.

Luke could have bitten straight through his damn tongue. Was a little thought too much to ask?

"Cheers?" The female prisoner gave an awkward half-curtsey.

"Yeah. It was brave work you did today." The prisoner on the end nodded. His forehead was bleeding, but he held his head proud.

"They are no braver than each of you." Luke clapped the bleeding prisoner on the back. "The liberation of Austellus begins with us. Broken men and women whose lives are meaningless to the Caelumite dogs. You will join me, and together we will take our city back!"

They didn't cheer. Ingrates. Luke forged on. "You lot, take them back with you. Introduce them to Kuyt and all of you get a warm meal down you. Training starts at sunrise."

The rebels nodded and led the prisoners away. A muted complaint came from one of the ex-prisoners, but it was ignored.

When they were out of sight, Addie turned to Luke. "Who's Lara?"

"What?"

"Lara. You shouted her name when you charged."

The sweetest child even born in Austellus. Reilo's voice sobbed inside Luke's head.

He gripped the gateway metal in his pocket. "My name is Luke!" he hissed.

The voice vanished.

"Luke?" Addie prompted.

He blinked. "Oh. Uh. No one. Just something to shout. Get the Walker's attention and that."

"Right..." Addie drew the word out into a series of clicks. She shrugged.

"Regardless. We need to talk."

"About what?"

Addie spread her arms over the blood-soaked street. The smell of shit and death mingled in the smog, sickly sweet. "You can't stop an army with a handful of ill-trained civvies. Our soldiers are on the verge of exhaustion. We've lost fight after fight and the next time that happens, our rebels will break. Hard. When one flees, they all will."

"We're not losing..." Luke muttered. He sighed. "Is it really that close?"

"Closer. Something needs to change. The whole 'fear first' thing isn't working. The Walkers are malicious but... they make sure that everyone in Austellus has access to food. They keep the worst of the murderers from the streets." She looked down and flexed her fingers. "We are... an unknown. A rebel group that stands for nothing but violence. Austellus won't follow us for petty revenge. The cost is too high."

"But we can win this!" Luke said. Ferra made sure he remembered that much.

"Let's say you're right. Let's say we do win. Then what? What do you, or I, or Kuyt, know about running a city? Taxes? Infrastructure? Trade? You got any ideas how that stuff works?"

She knew he didn't. "Then what do you suggest. We give up?" And this from Addie of all people!

"No," she snarled. "You keep pointing my blades at the Walkers and I'll follow you into the Deadlands. But we won't win Austellus like this."

Luke made a noise. She was right, but what did she expect him to do about it? The people of Austellus could barely piss leeward without help. No. What they needed was a leader. Someone strong, to guide them in the right direction. A Saviour to rescue them from themselves.

Besides, taxes and shit can't be that hard. He'd figure it out.

Something glittered in the mulch. The hand of one of the Walker's corpses... was it glowing? Luke stepped closer. A copper ring shone, like a scrap of sunlight was caught beneath its burnished surface. What the...?

The air around the bodies crackled and spat. The air was scalding. Luke leapt away. The smell of rust forced itself down his throat.

The dead man stood up.

Luke scrabbled back. His tongue ran dry. Addie rushed to his side. Thick blood still oozed from the Walker's stomach.

The corpse's eyes opened. They erupted with blue smoke.

"*Hello Luke.*" Words grated from the dead throat like they were being forced up, but there was something... familiar about the sound. Something that boiled in Luke's very soul.

"Dirk." He gripped the hilt of a knife until his knuckles hurt.

"*You still remember me. How sweet. Then you'll have no problem with coming to see me. Tonight. Caelum. Apex Street. Meet me at the Temple.*"

"You can fuck right off." Bless Addie for a beautiful idiot. She set herself between Luke and the body.

Dirk's puppet-corpse turned to study her. "*Strong and driven, but insecure enough to follow this man. You would be an interesting project.*" The corpse

shrugged. Blood splattered from its stomach. *"But your words are meaningless. He will be there."*

Luke met the blue fog with a stare of his own and the corpse grinned. Blood stained the dead Walker's teeth. The body blinked. The smoke disappeared and the corpse fell, motionless once more.

Addie growled. With one lash of her hatchet, she tore the head from the body. A few moments later and she did the same for each of the others. "Can't talk without a head, right?" She didn't sound certain. "So. That was Dirk."

Luke nodded and closed his eyes. A flicker in the darkness. Reilo was back.

"You're not actually going to see him, are you?"

Luke opened his eyes. "I have to."

"Why?" Addie asked.

"He has my past locked away. Without that... I have nothing." It wasn't until he said it out loud, that Luke realised how desperate the desire was. Like a void inside his soul, the darkness that swallowed his past left him empty of everything. All of a sudden he knew, with perfect clarity, that he would burn Austellus to ash in order to fill it.

"Bullshit." Addie folded her arms.

"Excuse me?"

"You expect me to believe that crap, when every night you sneak off to that Ferra and chip more of your memories away?"

"That's different," Luke said. All of a sudden, rage boiled up from his throat and off his tongue. "I decide what Ferra can take from me. A little lost pain here or there is nothing. Dirk just takes what he wants and there is nothing anyone can do about it. Damn it, the man shoved a bunch of dead men's memories inside my head! Do you not see how terrifying that is? It's about consent."

Addie raised an eyebrow. "Consent. From the man who just forced three people to join his army."

"I freed them! You were just complaining that we don't have enough soldiers."

"Soldiers. Not slaves, Luke. You have to ask."

"Sometimes you have to make people do what is best, even if they don't want to!" Luke shook his head. Strings of dried blood flew into the street. "That is nothing on what Dirk did to me. You might as well ask the difference between paying for a whore and forcing yourself on someone in an alleyway. Surely you understand that?"

In an instant, Addie's entire countenance changed. Her mouth twisted in a bestial snarl and, without warning, she threw herself at him. They went down in a tumble of limbs. "How dare you! Did Kuyt tell you? I'll murder him. What, is it just impotent anger that I never let you fuck me?"

"What are you talking about Addie?" Luke glanced up. Addie's fist smacked his head back down. Salt blood pooled behind his lips. A hatchet lay against his neck, close enough to shave with. "I just meant, like, as a woman..." The hatchet pressed closer and he snapped into silence.

"No. You're right. I don't know the difference. We worked together for years. I should have wanted him. Stupid girl. I couldn't even stop him from slamming my face to the floor." Her free hand flew to the scars on her cheek. "I froze. A fully trained Walker and I just... lay there. How pathetic." She slid off him and sat against the wall. Her eyes were empty.

"Addie, I didn't..." Luke reached for her hand.

"Don't."

They were silent together for a long time.

Luke turned back to the bodies. She didn't want him looking at her right then. He crawled through the gore and freed the copper ring from the Walker's swollen finger.

"What's that?" Addie's voice was thick.

"I saw it glowing before Dirk took over." Luke ran his thumb over an engraving.

CETERA DESUNT.

He chewed his bottom lip. Whatever it meant, he couldn't just leave it in the street.

But Dirk had used it. And that thought sent so much fear through him that he dropped the thing like a stone.

"I'll take it." Addie swept the ring up and into her pocket.

"Are you sure?" Luke tried to disguise the gratitude in his voice. "I mean, I don't want to ask, but..."

"Don't treat me like I'm made of wet paper, Luke. I'm not just some victim."

"You know if you tell me his name..."

"Him being dead won't change anything. But thanks for the offer." She gave a perfunctory squeeze. It didn't fix things between the two of them, but it did something to reduce the bruising. "Dirk on the other hand... that's a scalp I'm happy to take. So. How do we get to the Temple?"

Luke stood up and dusted off his hands. "Only two ways into Caelum. Nest or barges."

"The Nest? Do you know the way through?"

Luke shook his head. The Nest was a warren of houses, alleyways and factories that spread like sewage through the heart of the city. Impossible to navigate unless you lived there, and those that did, did not take kindly to people

dicking around on their turf. Rumour had it that the last one who tried was left flayed up on a post just outside the entrance. If Austellus was a sword, then the Nest was the bloody, infested point.

“Barges it is then.” Addie shrugged.

“Yep. You’ve done this before, right? We just nick a couple of Walker cloaks, and...”

Addie was already shaking her head. “Sorry. Your eyes are a little distinctive for that.”

Luke sighed. “Then what else is there?”

“Smugglers,” Addie said without preamble. “I arrested a few in my time, but damn it if they didn’t have the nicest bribes. I’ll make some inquiries.” She gave a hard smile and looked back at the bodies. “Until then, we should probably get out of here. They’ll send Walkers looking for this lot.”

“Addie, wait...”

“Please don’t try and fix me, Luke. I’m not broken.”

Luke bit his lip. He could see the pain in her eyes. How much did it cost her, that strength?

Sometimes you have to make people do what is best. Even if they can’t see it themselves.

“You’re not a hero for suffering Addie. You know what happens to those who take the world on their shoulders? They end up crushed by the weight. Come with me to see Ferra.”

“Luke, please. It’s hard enough as it is...”

He moved beside her and slid an arm around her shoulders. “I know. To fight every day... surely that just means he’s won?”

Addie looked at him. Her eyes were wet. “I don’t...”

“There is no shame in forgetting something that hurts. You have suffered enough. It’s time to let go.”

“I can beat this, I...” Her words failed her.

“Addie. Do you trust me?” Luke held her face in his hands.

She nodded. Her neck trembled.

“Then let me help you.”

Addie met his eyes for a long time. “...Okay.”

Luke smiled. Addie was a smart woman. In her secret heart, she knew what was best.

They left the dead bodies in the dust behind them.

Chapter 10

Kain blinked sandy eyes.

He 'ain't slept properly in days. The thought o' those black-cloaked riders kept him up most nights. When he did manage to snatch forty winks, his dreams were haunted by nightmares made o' blue fire.

The road sloped upwards. Kain dug his toes into the soil an' shuddered with the effort. The sack over his shoulder felt like he were carryin' a horse. By the time he crested the rise, he were drenched in sweat an' spittin' flies like crumbs. But there it were. Arx.

God o' the Fields, it were so big.

Countless black bricks wrapped around the city to keep the inside a secret. Outside, the Poena Sea licked the cliff-sides clean with a tongue o' foam an' froth. Looked like a pair o' massive thumbs squeezed the land around the city. There weren't no way around, less a bloke fancied a swim past the rocks an' shale.

High above, the Spire cast its shadow across the sea.

The metal column split the sky. The reflection were blindin' an' Kain felt sommat, deep in his chest. Reckoned it were awe.

Almost there.

He followed a cloud of dust down to the main road an' it weren't long afore he were dodgin' around bodies an' carts. Farmers, the lot o' em. He knew the look. That mix o' angry exhaustion an' disappointment in the rest o' the world for not workin' as hard as they did. Pa wore it all the time.

A dusty path led off to the sea an' that's where the carts were headed. Stank like man, beast an' produce, all spoilin' in the sun. The ferry were right at the end an' Pa's instructions were clear. Take the grub, wait in line, chuck it on boat an' get

a receipt. The rafts took the food all the way over to the rich folk so that they never had to see the grubby hands that picked it.

Well. Bugger that for a game.

Kain turned away from the dock an' made for the city gate. No way he were makin' it this far an' not goin' further. The salt-smell o' the sea faded, replaced by the smell o' city folk. It weren't a healthy stink, like offal or manure or nothin'. It were artificial, like the air were made o' metal flakes. He spat, but there were no gettin' rid o' it. The taste o' civilisation!

Up by the gate were two o' the surliest men he'd ever seen. Proper bugger's faces they had, stone stiff an' scowlin'. Walkers. That's what Pa called 'em. The swords they wore looked like they could do a decent job choppin' down a tree, let along a person. Kain hunched into his coat an' tried to shuffle on by. Pa's advice. Stay quiet an' don't piss 'em off.

"Oi. You."

Great advice as always Pa.

One o' the Walkers, a tall bloke with a shadow o' stubble, came over. He already had his sword out.

"Hello!" Kain smiled just as big as he knew how. Couldn't hurt to get the armed buggers onside now, could it?

The Walker's boot caught him square in the stomach an' Kain went down like a sack o' stuffin'.

"What you smiling for, cripple?" The Walker leant over him, his sword inches from Kain's face.

"Nothin' ..." Kain wheezed. Bugger it, but he could barely breathe.

"Well. Now look at this." The other Walker knelt beside the open sack. "Just for us! You shouldn't have."

Kain tried to uncurl, to soothe away the throbbin' pain in his stomach. "You can't..."

The Walker's blade whispered against his throat. Bugger but it were sharp. All Kain had to do were sneeze an' he were comin' away a head shorter. "You having a picnic cripple?"

"No. I'm just deliverin' the stuff." Kain groaned. Stomach were gonna look like a sunset with bruises tomorrow.

A strange look passed over the Walker's face. "Delivery? Then where is your horse?"

"Dead." Kain bit his lip. "Some... bandits caught me, about three days ago. Been on foot ever since." Probably for the best that he didn't tell them the whole truth.

The Walker let the point of his sword fall into the dust. "You, cripple? You walked three days to get here? All to make a delivery. Through this gate?"

"Yeah." Kain rubbed his stomach. "Pa told me to use the ferry to get it sent across, but I wanted to do it like this."

The Walker stared at him for a long while. "Well. Get up then boy."

"You sure?" His partner straightened.

"Yeah." The Walker grabbed Kain's wrist an' yanked him back to his feet.

Kain hissed. Tears spotted in his eyes.

"You're alright." The Walker dusted him off with heavy hands. Rough bugger, probably picked the wings off butterflies'n all. "Give it back Todd."

"Why?"

"Because when was the last time one of them carts came through *our* gate? Dunno about you, but I'm sick of my Angie eating whatever we can rescue from the bin. Come on man, you grew up on the Ferriway. You know this better than me."

His partner huffed out a sigh that made his greyn' fringe dance. "Aye, that's the truth." He lobbed the sack, gently mind, at Kain's feet.

"You're an idiot though cripple." The Walker who had kicked him shook his head. "What, you figure you'll just go for a wander through the streets by yourself? You know not everyone here is as nice as us two. Come on, I'll get you an escort."

"No!" Kain coughed to try'n lower the pitch o' his voice. "I mean, nah, it's okay. I'll be fine." Truth be told, if he never had to deal with a Walker again then it would still be too soon.

"Well take this, at least." The Walker flipped a knife over an' held it out. "You've got some steel between your legs boy, but it's suicide to walk through Austellus unarmed."

Shit. Caelum, that were where Jace DeSané would be expectin' his grub. Not Austellus, those slums that Pa said to 'avoid at all costs.'

So that's why he were supposed to use the ferry.

Kain did his best to nod like a polite lad an' took the Walker's knife. Felt like the right thing to do an' besides, he kind o' liked the feelin o' steel in his hand. Felt like he were a fighter. A warrior. No one would be gettin' in his face now. "Ta."

The Walker an' his partner gestured Kain through. He nodded his thanks. All he could do really.

He took his first steps into Arx.

People everywhere. Kiddies scuffled an' screamed down the street like puppies fightin' over a stick. The noise were deafenin'. The wall must o' cut it sommat fierce. Inside were a storm of voices that demanded to be heard.

Some woman ripped the wall from an old wooden hut with a bar o' steel. A man sat next to her an' took a big swig o' somethin' from his flask. He pulled his hat down to shield his eyes an' belched.

A hawker shouted his wares to a little crowd. Two men went for the same bottle an' fell to blows. Violent ones, too. This weren't two drunk farmers arguin' over where a boundary line lay. This were proper anger, meaty thumps an' blood.

A pair o' Walkers charged in to break 'em up. Blood dripped from one lad's lip an' the other had a shiner the size of an apple. The Walkers shoved through the crowd an' dragged the men away.

Off to the side, a woman lay slumped against the wall. She shivered despite the sweat pourin' down her face. A whackin' great bit o' phlegm flew from her lips. It did not look healthy.

"Here miss, you okay?" Kain untied a water skin from his pack an' held it out. "Want a drink?"

She snatched the skin an' tipped it into her mouth.

"Easy. It 'ain't a race." Kain smiled a sad smile. Poor lass.

She took the skin from her lips an' dropped it to the ground. A couple o' drops stained the dust at her feet. Then she coughed again. An' hawked. An' spat. Right in his face.

Kain reeled backwards an' swiped at the soft, wet splatter on his cheek. "Ere! What are you playin' at?"

"Leave her alone!" A little boy, couldn't be more'n ten summers or so, popped up from nowhere an' grabbed his arm. The added weight dragged Kain to his knees an' he groaned.

"Watch it!" Gettin' up were goin' to be a right bugger now.

"You watch it!" The kid clenched his little fists.

"Me? It were her!"

"Oh yeah? She did what? Sat there? Said nothing? Scared you, did she?"

What? Kain looked at the woman. Even animals didn't spit on each other. Then he saw it. Her eyes. A dense blue fog swirled in the sockets where her soul should be.

"Here you are Ma." The boy held a skin up to her lips but she didn't drink. "Ma? Ma, come on. Ma you can't just give up. Drink the water!" He shook the skin. Water spilled down her face in filthy rivulets.

"Easy lad," Kain said. "She's just not thirsty right now. See? I already gave her some." He pointed at the discarded skin between her feet.

"Oh. Then she's okay. She's okay." The kid's hands shook as he capped the water skin. Without warnin', he started to cry.

Bugger it! What were he supposed to do with a cryin' kid? Abi had barely made a noise growin' up, but couldn't just ignore the poor bugger. It tugged at somethin' inside him an' he found himself desperately wishin' for a way to make it stop. It were like listenin' to Munch whine when he were a puppy. Always did when he were hungry.

"Sandwich!" Kain blurted. "Want a sandwich?"

The kid wiped his eyes. Kain lowered the sack an' found a loaf. He tore the bread in half an', with the Walker's knife, sliced up some cheese to cram inside.

"Here." Kain smiled an' handed it over. He carved a bit o' the cheese off for himself an' popped it into his mouth. That were all the invitation the kid needed an' he went to town. Crumbs flew from his mouth .

"So what happened?" Kain asked when the boy had finished his mammoth mouthful.

"I don't know." The boy spoke to the bread in his hands. "It made sense at the start. No need to remember Da' after he died. And afterwards she started smiling again. Promised everything would get better. Except the smiles didn't last. Just one

more time, she said. Just one more time..." His bottom lip trembled but he kept his eyes dry. "That blue fire bitch took everything. All so Ma didn't have to live in the real world with the rest of us."

Kain scratched his neck. Blue fire again. It didn't make a lick o' sense to him, but the kid were so solemn when he spoke it made him wanna weep. "It'll be okay," he said but even he knew how weak that sounded. He took a handkerchief from his pocket an' wrapped a decent bundle, a bit o' bread, some apples an' cheese. All stuff that could be eaten straight away. "Here. For her. When she gets better."

"You think she will?" There were so much hope shinin' in those eyes.

"Sure kid. 'Course she will."

Kain stood up with a wince an' the kid surprised him with a very adult handshake. He left just as the kid were tryin' to coax his Ma into tryin' a piece o' cheese.

Kain hobbled through the streets. Bugger him for an idiot, but that had taken too long. The shadows were gettin' longer an' he really didn't want to be in Austellus at night.

He made for the Ferriway. Quickest way into Caelum, though it might cost some o' his coins to get across. Pa made him tie them to his upper thigh for the trip. Pickpockets everywhere, apparently, an' knife or not, there were no way he were fightin' them off.

That were not a comfortin' thought.

So. Arx were a massive disappointment. Pa had warned him, but the words had not done it justice. Austellus were a dump with piles o' refuse an' discarded sheet metal everywhere. Even the wind were dirty. A great black mist that weighed heavy on his shoulders.

The sooner he could get home, the better.

"Mister?" A tiny voice called out.

Kain looked over. Huddled in the entryway to a broken wooden hut were a gaggle o' five or so kiddies. The closest were nothin' more than a waif, not enough fat to grease a pan.

"Yes lass?"

"You got any coin mister? Please, my sister, she's..." The kid's eyes filled but Kain just held out his hand.

"I'm sorry little one, but I need my coins for myself." Bugger it, but it were impossible to see a kid that small. No need for it, no need at all. Kain lowered his sack to the ground an' began to rummage. "But how'd you fancy some dinner?"

...

It were gettin' dark by the time he made it away an' cold enough that his breath were smokin'. The kids had been unrelentin', all ribs an' sad eyes, but they were smilin' when he left. If that weren't somethin' worthwhile then he didn't know what were.

The sack were much lighter now, on account o' the damn thing were more than half-empty. Made the walk a whole lot easier, but he were right worried what would happen when he handed it over. Kain sucked his teeth. Still, it's not like it were his fault! Didn't ask to be attacked an' there ain't no one with a conscience that could leave those kids to starve. DeSané would understand. Bugger it, but he would make the man understand.

Bollocks in hand, Kain made his way through a big open plaza. Some enormous platform rose up afore him. Just the sight o' it sent a right shiver through his toe hairs. Twisted ropes hung from the edge.

Stood between them were a bloke. White hair, but a young lookin' face. Kain recognised him like a storybook come to life.

The Ant.

He limped into the crowd. It were un-real! Sure, the nose were a little bigger'n he imagined, an' Pa used to paint him in much grander togs, but Andross DeGaya still looked right heroic. A champion in the flesh.

"But surely there is a better alternative?" The Ant held out his arms. "This 'Saviour' is a criminal, a murderer who has already turned on Austellus. It is nothing like the Flame Protests."

The Flame Protests. Kain were practically salivatin'. A real-life hero, talkin' about real-life heroic stuff! Now this were why he came to Arx!

"Fuck you Sky Lord!" One bloke from the crowd shouted. "And fuck the Saviour and all. How about you two fight it out amongst yourselves and leave us out of it? We don't wanna fight. We wanna work!"

A roar swelled with the sentiment. The bloke's scarred jaw were juttin' an' there were a right stubborn cast to 'is face. Well, he'd tell that bugger what for! Kain opened his mouth to remind the bloke just how much he owed to Andross DeGaya!

"Move it along, lad." A hand fell on Kain's shoulder.

He turned. A Walker yanked him outta the crowd. "Why?"

"Because if they start fighting, they'll take out the cripple first. And I'm not going to waste men saving you. Best you leave now and save us both the trouble, eh?"

An' with that, the bloke dragged Kain from the plaza an' shoved him off down the street.

"I catch you back here and we'll make one of those nooses yours, got it?" the Walker warned. He folded his arms an' watched Kain limp on down the road until a corner blocked 'im from sight.

"Bastard, right?"

Kain started. A young bloke, sandy hair an' half an ear, popped up next to him. "Aye, too right."

"Don't worry. The Saviour has plans for those who wear black cloaks."

There were that name again. "The who?"

"The Saviour! The man who died for us, only to rise once more and lead the fight against our Caelum oppressors!"

"I'm... uh, not from around here," Kain said.

"My friend! Then you missed a miracle! For no one else could stand beneath the iron weight of an Enforcer and come out victorious!" His eyes shone with zeal.

"That a fact?"

"Reborn in the smoke of the Foundry, he comes to fight for the downtrodden and light the path. To purify the darkness with cleansing flame."

"Sounds... interesting." Kain glanced around. Why did he attract all the nutcases?

"Of course, he cannot do it alone." The young bloke stepped across an' put his hand on Kain's chest. "What's in the bag, friend? Weapons? You are heading for the Ferriway. Do you not think those Caelum heretics have enough?"

Kain snorted. "Weapons? I 'ain't that excitin'. All I got is a bit o' food. Well, more snacks now, but you know." He lowered the sack an' opened it wide. "See?"

"Food?" The bloke's eyes flickered.

He drew a blade from beneath his cloak.

“Woah, what are you doin’?” Kain held his hands up. “Just take it, yeah?” Just grub at the end o’ the day. Not worth dyin’ over.

The bloke nodded, almost polite. He glanced at Kain a moment. “Oh. I see. You *want* me to take this. That Walker was your ally, wasn’t he? You want to get robbed, so your blackcloak friends can hang me! You think I don’t recognise one of their knives?”

Kain plucked the spit of steel from his belt an’ chunked it to the dirt like it were a red-bellied eel. “No! I’m not with them. Just take it.”

“Oh I will.” The bloke said.

He lunged.

Kain scrambled back. The sword whipped at his chest an’ he fell away in a flash o’ pain an’ screamin’ ankles. Down on the floor again. He could hear his heart in the dirt.

The young man stepped forward.

“Please.” Kain held his hand out like it would protect him.

Blood splattered his eyes.

The bloke dropped his sword. His hand rose to the foot o’ steel that came from his belly.

A figure stepped out o’ the shadow. There were somethin’ familiar about the way he stood. “Bloody Saviour.” He knelt to rifle through the dead man’s coat.

Kain turned his head an’ vomited. He risked a glance back, but the young bloke were still dead. His stomach bled into the remains o’ the sack.

“You alright lad?” The man called down to Kain.

It were a voice he recognised.

“Fetch?”

“Who... Hopalong? What are you doing in Austellus? About time! I’ve only been waiting sixty years!” Fetch reached out an’ hefted Kain to his feet. The man looked different. More...guarded than he had been in Ma’s kitchen.

“Fetch, he just... ”

“And those bloody noble ass-pimples would have gotten me as well, if I weren’t slippery as a sausage. Any idea how difficult it is to make excuses for a week?”

“The blood... ”

“And you wouldn’t believe the hissy fit that Jace is throwing! Did you know his ball is coming up soon? If not, he will be sure to tell you. Over and over again. Honestly kid. I hope you...”

“Fetch, stop it! You just killed someone.”

Fetch paused. His eyebrow rose an’ he shrugged. “I did. By the looks o’ things, he was about to have you for dinner. You rather I just left him to it?”

“Obviously not, but... ”

“So a man died. I chose him and not you. People die all the time kid.” His words were cold but his face creased with concern. He slung an arm over Kain’s shoulders. “Look’it, it’s not like you need to get used to it, eh? Let’s get you to Caelum and something warm in your belly. Should do you wonders.”

Kain nodded to that.

Fetch scratched the back o’ his head. “Uh, that bag. Anything important?”

Kain looked back. The brown homespun were soaked with blood.

“No.”

Fetch nodded an’ led Kain down to the Ferriway. Neither o’ them looked back.

The bank were vile. A muddy street filled with beggars. The river stank like silage an' the barges clanked about on slimy chains.

"Thank my dick we aren't late. Nothin' like Austellus at night, kid. We'd end up as whores before the moon were out. Well, I would. You could hand the ladies drinks or sommat." Fetch winked an' led Kain towards one o' the remaining barges. A squad o' Walkers waited beside it.

"Fetch. You're late." The lead Walker had a silver brocade tied around his arm. Pa said that meant he were a Captain, an' he did not look like a happy fella.

"I know, I know." Fetch ran a hand through his hair. "Not sorry though, look who I found!"

He shoved Kain forwards, right into the middle o' the Walkers.

The Captain glared at him. "You found a cripple. Good job Fetch. What's next, a pretty rock?"

The other Walker's laughed.

"My name's Kain." He tried to stand up straight but his back were throbbin' sommat fierce. "Jace DeSané's expectin' me. Apparently he's got a party comin' up or somethin'?"

"Finally!" The Captain spat off to the side. "I see Fetch has been teaching you timekeeping. Why are you in Austellus? Is your brain as slow as your body? And where is it, anyway? I was told to expect a cart."

"I don't have it anymore."

"What do you mean?" The Captain stepped forwards. He narrowed his eyes at Kain. "Hold on. I heard a rumour today. Some cripple feeding orphans. You wouldn't happen to know who that was, would you?"

"Well yeah it were me, but the thing is..."

Behind him, Fetch groaned.

“Late and a thief. They are going to have a field day with you.” The Captain turned his back. “Take him!”

Kain’s eyes widened as six blades drew a ring o’ steel around him. His mouth flapped, but there weren’t no words. He just held up his hands in surrender.

Fetch sighed. “Well kid. You’ve really gone and screwed yourself now, ain’t you?”

Chapter 11

Luke watched the Walkers clamp irons around the idiot boy's wrists.

A single prisoner, a cripple no less, was not worth his time. They dragged the boy onto a barge and the chain dragged them across the river. Some water-wheel mechanism on the Caelum side kept them working. The wake of the barge stirred the river and the stink of fish-and-tar made his eyes water. The easiest way to Caelum was through that foulness. It was fitting.

Luke forged further down the bank. Even this late, it was packed. Workers stacked boxes, lit torches, cleaned chains, shovelled mud, all whilst ignoring the beggars that infested the Ferriway like rats.

More barges broke the sludge of the bank as Walkers were relieved for the night. Luke scratched his chin. Here was the reason the Walkers were harder to get rid of than a nest of cockroaches. Each barge was big enough to hold a battalion. If they were going to take those blackcloak bastards down, then something had to be done about the river.

A groaning clank broke through the air. Luke glanced over. One of the barges was stuck, clumped into the sludge of the bank. The chain was caught on a rusty sword hilt. It stuck fast before a group of workers leapt to free it.

Huh. Now that was an idea.

Further down, one of the oversized buckets squelched into the bank and sprayed filth over an old guard of Walkers. Not like they could get much dirtier. Only four survivors, with two blades between them. Their eyes told a familiar story. Resignation. Failure. The ghosts of their dead allies weighed hard on them.

The new squad could not have been more of a contrast. A full complement of seven, they practically leapt from the barge. Black leather shone and their steel was polished to blinding.

Rage built in Luke's chest. His fist curled around a knife. False-edge, Spearpoint steel. Perfect to slice. To skin. He should follow them. The barges didn't run after sundown. There would be no escape.

Pick them off one by one. Watch the panic set in. Sure, one death could be an accident, two a coincidence, but three, four, five? Someone was out to get you. He would save the Captain for last. Follow him down an alleyway. Watch him panic, scramble. Beg. Back him against the wall and slice open his stomach. Draw out his intestines, inch by inch. How loud would he scream?

Luke forced out a calming breath and touched the gateway metal. "Get out of my head, Reilo."

The anger was a long time in disappearing. It was getting more difficult. Luke forced out a calming breath. There was time enough to deal with that later.

For now, he had to get to Dirk.

The last tendrils of sunshine disappeared beyond the walls and the Ferriway fell into darkness. The river transformed from sludge into a sheet of black diamond. The moon was trapped beneath that crystalline surface, bright and heavy.

Further downriver the smell really started to hit. There was a sluice grate built into the wall and it was there that all the crap in Austellus wound up. The stench of rot made his bowels clench. No one would come this close unless they had to.

Which was what made it perfect for smugglers. Right on time a ripple splashed into the dark water.

“Addie?”

Her silhouette emerged from the gloom. “Ahoy.” A raft broke through the darkness and settled against the bank with a dull thump. Addie leapt free with the predatory grace of a cat.

She hugged him.

“Uh, Addie?” Luke spoke quietly into her ear. He held her gently. Addie did *not* do physical contact. “Are you... okay?” She smelled like lemons and velvet.

“Yes. I don’t know what you told Ferra, but I feel right. Like a great boulder has been lifted off my heart. All thanks to you.” She squeezed him. “I owe you. You have no idea.”

Luke stared at her in the moonlight. Her eyes were brighter, her hair was clean and her back was straight. She was beautiful and her smile was just for him.

But there was something hollow in her eyes. A void where that spark had once been.

“Addie. Why are you wearing that?”

She lifted the copper ring and sighed. “Ferra looked at it. It’s fuel for her magic, instead of the fire.” She shrugged and put her hands on her hips. “Oh piss off with that look. You told me to take it.”

“To keep it from Dirk. Not to wear.” Luke winced.

“If I wear it, there is a chance I can figure out what he did to that Walker. Listen, I’ll let you know the instant anything weird happens. Now, shall we get going?”

Luke took one last glance. Later. “Sure.” He turned to the raft. Skinny wooden planks knotted with a rope at either end. “What, was a floating carcass unavailable?”

“Shut up. Any bigger and the Walkers would see.”

She stepped on the raft and yanked him up with her. The whole thing rocked with their weight.

“Oh this feels safe,” Luke said.

“Would you relax? It’s not a long crossing. I just stick the pole in and push.”

Without another word, Addie cast off. A wave of water lapped against Luke’s boots.

“Don’t we need to... crouch down or something?” Luke peered through smog.

“No. The returning barges only operate upriver. Just stay close.”

Luke stepped in. He could feel the muscles in Addie’s back against his chest.

“That’s very close.” The pole broke the surface of the water slowly. Water glistened on the shaft.

“Then don’t wiggle so much,” Luke said.

Addie laughed. She was very warm.

To distract himself, Luke watched the river. Calm. Serene. Dark. How many bodies were down there? There had to be more bones in the Mucro than anywhere else. Would he end up rotting down there? Almost had once...

Still, Addie was right and the crossing was smooth. It wasn’t long until the stink of rot faded and all that remained was clean air.

Luke filled his lungs and closed his eyes. That was what Austellus was missing. The freedom to breathe. He would bring that back to them.

The raft thumped into the Caelum bank.

“Told you.” Addie grinned in triumph. “Easy.”

“Thanks.” Luke stepped off the raft. “Now. Go back.”

“What?” Addie asked. “Why?”

“Kuyt needs to know what is going on. And if I don’t come back, someone needs to keep the rebellion going. Come on Addie, you just said you owed me.”

She chewed her fingernail for a moment. "Fine."

"What, that easy?"

"You know your business. If you don't need me, then that's just the way it is."

"But... where's the stubbornness? The pig-headed certainty that you could do a better job? Damn it Addie, I expected to have to tie you up and push the raft out on the river myself!"

Addie smiled a lopsided grin. "What are you talking about Luke?" She stepped closer and grabbed his shirt front. "Just don't die. I quite like wasting my time on you."

He searched her eyes for a long time. There was nothing. Luke shivered. "Sure."

Addie turned her back and cast off. She raised a hand in farewell. The copper ring glinted on her finger before she was swallowed by the darkness.

Time to go.

Luke crept down the street and towards the intersection where four streets met. It was all so planned. Austelli streets were designed like a child had got a charcoal stick and drawn a bunch of lines in the dirt. Caelum felt... organised. The intersection was enormous and even had a signpost with directions.

"A...pex." Luke squinted. Kuyt had taught him how to read, but it never came easy. He turned down the marked street

A cloud passed over the moon and he stumbled through the darkness. An enormous lump rose in the shadows and he made his way over.

The Temple was colossal. Stone platforms layered atop one another in a pyramid with a wood structure at the top. Each stone was bigger than a man was tall.

A man stood in the middle of the steps. A red cloak hugged his shoulders. His face was pale and smooth. Ageless. Violet eyes shone in the moonlight.

“Dirk.” Luke’s hand twitched to his waist.

Dirk scratched the side of his nose. “Temple of the Prelude. A lovely little belief, isn’t it? A time of universal memory, when everyone was happy.” He quirked a smile. In that instant, his face was transformed. “Do you think Gazers are happy?”

Luke scowled. Gazers. Those mindless idiots that allowed a Mindbreaker to take too much. They lived in their happy memories as their body shit and dribbled into death. “No.”

“Did you know the priests take care of them? Gazers. They treat them like holy folk. Though it is their minds that are hole-y.” Dirk snickered like a child. “With no memory, their minds are pure as Retinentia. I always found that odd. One can only *become* a Gazer with a Mindbreaker’s help. And they attribute any magic to Dedisco. Their ‘dark one.’” He walked down the stone steps of the Temple. “Perhaps we should pray to him, mm? His vile magic has had quite the impact on the pair of us.”

“Who cares about some dead religion?” Luke shrugged with an indifference he didn’t feel.

Dirk leapt down the last step. “You do. Don’t you remember?” His leg lashed out and caught Luke right in the stomach.

A flash of pain doubled him over. Dirk grabbed Luke’s hair and smashed his cheek into the bottom step of the Temple.

Dirk tore the gateway metal from Luke’s pocket and slammed it in front of his eyes.

Blinding light. Reality changed.

...

Luke blinked. Night on the Temple steps.

A trio of women held him down. *Flagellator* scars ran across their arms, the vague pink marks lending an edge of violence to their hands.

Luke tried to push them away, to heave himself up, but once more he was trapped behind the eyes of an unfamiliar body. Round as a pie and twice as sweaty.

"You took Mam." The woman hissed into his face. Her nails dug into the pudgy skin of his throat, just loose enough for him to breathe.

"No child. She lost herself. We merely tried to bring her back." Luke's thick, pink lips slapped together.

The woman snarled. The other two kicked Luke's ample flesh and pain thudded into him.

Blubbery snot ran from his nose and he whimpered. "Please. I am a Priest. I do no harm!"

One of the women knelt over him. A familiar whip uncoiled around her hand. The *Catamidio* was sharp and clean. "You bring Mam out now. Or you can be a corpse like Da."

"Please," he wheezed. "I cannot allow a Gazer..."

"Wrong answer fatty." The woman stood up. Her two friends grabbed Luke's arms and held him pinned to the steps of the Temple he was sworn to serve.

The first lash of the *Catamidio* fell and Luke screamed. The pain was intense. Like a hook of ice tore through his flesh.

It fell again and again. Shallow cuts, designed to hurt not to kill. Luke screeched until his throat was raw. He roared and pissed himself under the careful

cuts. His stomach became a sheet of red and purple and blue. His robes were stained with it.

Time froze and broke with each new stripe. He begged for death, he wept for it, and all the while the *Catamidio* fell.

When the knife punched into his throat, he whispered a prayer of thanks.

Just before his eyes closed, he saw something in the mist.

A pair of violet eyes.

...

The vision popped like a soap bubble. Luke blinked and Dirk removed his boot from his face.

"No." Luke wobbled to his feet. "What was that?"

"Death Echo. You didn't think Reilo was the only one did you?"

A headache began to pulse between Luke's temples. "Those shadows... stood by the Spire."

"Death Echoes are unlike any other memory. You've heard the expression 'my life flashed before my eyes'? That is what a Death Echo is. The brief sum of a lifetime of experience. You can feel them, can't you?" Dirk tilted his head. "Reilo Sandrasova and Harri DeGlan. You are a bit of both, aren't you? A rebel and a priest."

Luke clenched his jaw. "I'm not just the culmination of some phantom memories you forced between my ears."

Dirk threw back his head and laughed. "Of course not. But you have to wonder, don't you? Who else is in there? Influencing you." His violet eyes glittered.

The headache got worse, like a poker jammed into the back of his head. "Is this why you called me here? To mock me?"

"No. I need your help."

Luke snorted. "And why would I do that?"

Dirk turned back to the Temple. "Death Echoes react to the place that each person died. First the Scaffold. Now the Temple. There is another in Caelum. If you help me, I will show you where it is."

Luke snarled. "Why would I want another voice inside my head?"

"They hurt, don't they? I didn't realise..." Dirk said softly. For a moment, his face was slack. Then his smile returned. "The Death Echoes hide something very important. You will never know who you are unless you can hear them all."

Luke spat. The bastard had him over a barrel. "Fine."

"Don't worry," Dirk said. "I'm not asking much. Just the use of some more... clandestine talents that I suspect you might have." He snorted with laughter.

The sight of Dirk's mocking smile made him shudder with the *need* to punch that insufferable prick in the face. "What are we after?"

"Just some memories that are of... particular interest to me."

Luke grimaced. Memory theft was vile. No one knew that better than him.

"Don't scowl. The wind will change and your face will stay that way. Well, what do you say?"

Luke glared. "Let's go."

"Wonderful." Dirk grinned. His smile was so venomous his lips should have been dripping with heartsblood.

Luke followed Dirk down Apex Street and off down another road. The night was silent but for the sound of their boots on the gravel. No Walkers, no drunks and no dying men to block their way.

It was a different world.

Luke shook his head. Harri's memories splattered on his mind like rain on glass. Walking the streets in the sunlight, a pastry in one hand, and smiling for the kids.

Luke spat it on the pristine street. "So. How are these memories contained? What are we looking for, a necklace? A bracelet?" It had to be something sufficiently gaudy. They *were* in Caelum.

"I'll know it when I sense it." Dirk's voice was far away, like he was concentrated on something else entirely.

Well. "That sounds promising."

The street widened and the size of the buildings increased. Some of the manors were incredible. Six storeys of stained glass and gleaming latticework. Gilded wooden panels and, wonder of wonders, real plumbing. No shit in the streets for the Caelum elite.

Overhead, something broke the skyline. A metal dagger, but far, far bigger. A faint bluish tinge came from the metal and he recognised it with a shock like a boot to the balls.

The Spire. Even this far away it was... eerie. Odd.

Wrong.

"And here we are. Take a look." Dirk stopped outside a smaller manse.

Luke surveyed the building. A far cry from some of the white-brick constructions that they had passed, it was still gigantic. Three storeys tall with a dozen real-glass windows, thick panels, whitewashed brick and a huge chunk of bird shit right down the front window.

"So. How do you intend to get us inside?" Dirk asked.

"I don't..." Luke began, but something nagged at him. A feeling. Just like when he fought, or that time on the Scaffold. Experience without practise. Options opened up before him like unfolding a map. "Fine. Each of those windows is breakable."

"I would prefer not to wake the people that we are robbing."

"You know what happens when a rich bastard hears a thump in the night? They blink, frown, then go back to bed," Luke said.

Dirk's infuriating smirk did nothing to make him feel any better. "No broken windows."

Luke crushed the bubbling in his stomach with effort. "Then we shimmy up to the balcony and I'll pick the lock. It's only a latch."

"Ah." Dirk rolled his shoulders and shook his head. "I don't much like the idea of a climb."

Luke growled. "Fine, front door it is then." He sized up the door. Polished oak and a brass lock. The thing was thick as a Prelude preacher.

An echo of dismay floated from Harri's memories, but he crushed it without mercy.

Luke took a few steps back. "Move aside."

"You're going to kick it in?"

"Why not?"

"It's too thick. Besides, I believe I warned you about making noise."

"I'm not kicking through it, I'm just going to..." He ran, aiming for the lock.

BANG!

The door burst open. Luke pinwheeled forwards and slammed his face into a rug. Blood filled his idiot cheeks.

"Not locked huh?" Dirk snickered.

"You think?" Luke levered himself upright. "See. I told you, those rich bastards don't hear a thing."

"Who's there?" A querulous voice cut through Luke's gloating. Yellow light flooded from a corridor. It cast shadows across the carpet and up the enormous staircase before them.

"You were saying?" Dirk folded his arms.

An old man with a mane of white hair appeared from the corridor. The torch in his hand spat and spluttered. He wore a night robe but held a fireplace poker like a sword. "Who are you? You have five seconds to leave before I call the Walkers!"

"Brownlines," Luke said.

"... Excuse me?"

"Your accent. You grew up in Brownlines, didn't you? It's faded, but that is definitely the sound of the slums on your tongue."

The old man frowned. "Thirty years ago," he said. "I followed their mother across the river."

"A lifetime." Luke smiled. He was warming to it now. A few more moments and...

Dirk burst into action. He leapt forwards, fist, foot and forearm. The old man crumpled.

"What are you doing?" Luke hissed.

Dirk lowered the ancient idiot to the carpet and plucked the torch from his grip. "He was in our way."

"No he wasn't!" Luke said.

Dirk ignored him and drew something from his sleeve. Was that a knife? The Mindbreaker kept it hidden behind his hand, but a sharp edge reflected slices of the torchlight.

“Don’t kill him.” Luke held out a hand. “It’s not worth it.” And besides, the old man was Austelli. That had to count for something.

Dirk smiled. “As you wish.” He pressed his blade, ever so gently, to the old man’s neck.

The torch in Dirk’s hand burned blue.

“No...” Luke whispered, but it was too late.

The old man convulsed. His eyelids flickered and each breath came from his throat like it was being forced out. A lazy smile hung around Dirk’s mouth. He held a shard of metal in his hand. Was that an arrowhead? It glimmered with light.

The torch flickered and like that it was over. The old man stopped thrashing and Dirk let him fall. “Interesting.”

“What? What did you do to him?” Luke licked his lips with a dry tongue.

“Guess.” The torch in Dirk’s hand illuminated his grin like his lips were made of flame. He stood up and dusted his trousers down.

Beneath him, the old man’s eyes were gone. Blue fog boiling in their place. He was a Gazer. A mind lost in memory. A body left to breathe and rot.

“With me!” Dirk commanded.

Luke closed his eyes. Harri’s memories whispered a hundred prayers at him, but none of them would serve. Some Saviour he was.

They walked up the staircase. This had to be where the rich ones lived. Paintings festooned the walls and the carpet was soft and purple. Dyes were a rich business. Even the air tasted of coins.

Dirk led them to the end of the corridor. The torch in his hand spat an inferno of blue flame. They reached a door. Dirk touched the latch and nodded. "This is the one." He handed Luke the torch. The flame flickered orange. "Hold this."

The door opened with a click and revealed a bedroom so rich Luke would have rubbed his eyes, had he not been holding a whacking great torch that would have taken his eyebrows off. Two enormous wardrobes, bigger than a room in The Bricks, and a dressing table dominated the spotless wooden floor. In the middle of it all sat a four-poster, canopy bed, big enough for ten people with room to spare.

"Stop!" Dirk hissed as Luke made to follow him inside. "Do you want the light to wake her up?"

Her? Oh. The mound of duvets was pretty lumpy. Dirk moved the curtain aside and a mop of black hair was visible on one of the pillows. Dirk reached down and lifted something from around her neck.

A golden ring, curved in an impossible pattern. Dirk held it for a moment. A strange look spread across his face. His hand shook. His smile wavered. Were those tears in his eyes? Dirk opened his mouth to take a ragged breath.

Then he began to scream.

"Dirk!" Luke sprinted over. He clamped a hand over Dirk's mouth, but the screaming, sobbing, biting still continued.

It had to be the ring! Luke moved to take it from Dirk's fingers, but the Mindbreaker shook his head.

"It. Would. Kill. You," he gulped.

Luke opened his mouth to respond.

Then the girl sat up with a snort. She rubbed her eyes and looked up at them.

Then *she* screamed. The sound of ripping silver.

“Come on!” Luke yanked Dirk from the bedside. The Mindbreaker slipped the ring into his pocket. The pain on his face lessened somewhat, but his eyes were still tight.

Together, they tore back through the house.

The corridor flashed past. Doors opened. Shouting. Noise. A girl, beautiful like a painting in a whorehouse, peered from an open doorway. An older man in satin pyjamas bellowed something. Luke ignored them both and made for the stairs, Dirk right at his side.

Three Walkers stood at the bottom, swords ready.

Luke leapt down, a knife flashing from his sleeve. A Walker fell, choking on a spray of blood.

The next man swung his sword, but Luke was on him, blade punching into his cheek, his neck, his stomach, and his groin.

The Walker slumped to the carpet. Luke glanced to the side. Dirk was already moving. There was no blood on his hands and yet the final Walker lay motionless behind him.

They made for the door and burst into the street together. The cold air hit like a slap. Voices broke through the night’s silence.

“Robbery!”

“Walkers!”

“Thieves!”

Dirk tore towards an intersection and Luke followed behind. The houses in their wake lit up with candles and Walkers poured from the doors.

They reached a crossroads and Dirk stopped dead.

“What?” Luke asked.

Then he saw them.

Each exit was blocked by a squad of Walkers. Black cloaks snapped in the wind and their blades were held steady. Where did they come from? Luke turned. Walkers were racing down the path behind. No way out.

Dirk stepped forwards.

"What are you doing?" Luke hissed. The Walkers were close. They were not there to make threats. They were there for murder.

Dirk closed his eyes.

Remember.

The word blanketed the street and the torch in Dirk's hand erupted with blue light. It looked like the street was underwater. He held his arrowhead aloft and it *burst* with a brilliant, blinding light. Luke closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the Walkers were collapsed. Luke scrambled to the closest one. He lifted the Walker's eyelid.

Blue fog in an empty eye socket.

Luke fell backwards. "Should have killed them." He held his knees. "Death is kinder."

"Luke." Dirk's voice was weak. The torch in his hand was out and he stumbled. "Help. Me."

Luke stood up and pulled a knife from his belt. Oh he would help the bastard all right. He didn't have time to kill all of the Walkers, to free them from their misery, but he could certainly butcher the man who had done this to them.

Dirk didn't resist as he grabbed his collar.

"Do it Luke," Dirk whispered. "If you can. I am the only one who knows who you are. So make your choice."

Luke held Dirk closer than a lover. He could see the pupils in the other man's face dilate. He could almost *see* the blood. He imagined it pouring from his throat, all those pretty words lost forever.

Just like his past would be.

Luke growled and let go of Dirk's collar.

"Good choice," Dirk said. "Now, help me. More are coming and I don't have the strength to walk."

Luke hefted Dirk to his feet. Together they limped down the street. More lights flashed. The sound of shouting, of Walkers, rang through the night.

"We can't out-run them like this," Luke said. "What do we do?"

"In there." Dirk nodded at a warehouse door.

Luke set his shoulder and shoved the wooden doors open. Sacks of grain, high as the ceiling, were piled in front of him. Greedy Caelum bastards. They could feed the whole of Rotheart twice over with this! He set Dirk down against one of the sacks and knelt next to him.

"What was that screaming back there? You screwed this up, Dirk."

"*Aversa* Memory. Aer set a trap for me, I..." He shook his head. "Turns out I am stupid as you are."

Luke ground his teeth. Outside the doors the sound of boots was getting closer.

"You need to let me inside your mind Luke." Dirk coughed. His lips were turning black. "I can save us."

"I would rather die," Luke said. "There has to be another way."

Shouts came from outside the door. In the gap he could see a Walker's cloak.

"There isn't," Dirk said. There was a knife in his hand. Blue-silver steel.

The knife from his nightmares. Fear paralysed him.

Dirk touched the knife to Luke's skin.

The doors burst open. Walkers poured into the warehouse.

Light burst in Luke's eyes and he sank into nothingness.

Remember.

Chapter 12

The Spire glittered with stolen sunlight.

Sam shaded her eyes but she couldn't look away. The Spire defied explanation. A masterwork of burnished metal, it pierced the sky like a blade made of starlight. No seams, no joins, no solder lines. Everything she knew about metalwork said that it should not exist, and yet there it was. An impossibility anchored in reality.

She snorted. The Spire was a pretty piece of metal all right, but her destination was the building that squatted in its shadow. True, the Citadel was as grey and smog-scarred as the lords that congregated inside, but it was the only place in Arx where things actually happened. She clutched her petition with shaking hands. It was the only place in Arx where she could demand resources to track a thief.

The path to the gates was lined with trees. Probably very striking when green but now the branches were bare and twisted. Brown sludge stuck to her slippers and slowed her steps to a shuffle.

Gave her time to think.

Images flickered like sunlight through a curtain. Violet eyes large enough to swallow her mind. Blue orbs cold enough to freeze flame. Three Walkers dead on the carpet. Saul. Blue fog in his eye sockets. Unspeaking. Unmoving.

Despite the sunshine, Sam shuddered. She reached for the comfort of Mother's ring.

Oh. Right.

"Greetings! Beautiful day, isn't it?" A Walker's voice snapped her back to the Citadel gates. He bowed

Sam winced at the sight. By the Prelude, how many pimples was he cultivating beneath his hairline? Someone should really tell him to wash his face from time to time. Though, from the smell that wafted beneath his clothes, bathwater did not seem like something he troubled himself with.

Sam paused for a moment. "What do you want?"

"Nothing more than to wish you a pleasant morning." The Walker smiled and showed a row of yellow teeth.

"I see. Well then, if you'll excuse me?" She gestured to the open gate.

"Of course!" Another bow.

Sam strode past the grinning idiot and his short, silent partner. Did they have nothing better to do than to waste her time?

"You are such a suck up." The morning breeze carried the new voice to her ears. Must be the short one.

"Shut up." Pimples sounded defensive. "Do you know who she is engaged to?"

"Yes. Still no excuse for you to have your tongue so far up her arse that you can taste what she had for breakfast."

Pimples guffawed like a mule. "You won't be saying that when I make Captain. Besides, it's a nice arse. Could do with a little tonguing."

Sam blushed all the way to the tips of her ears. It wasn't worth it. They probably made comments about every lady that walked past.

"What was that?" Sam's slippers took her back to the gate before she could so much as think if it was wise.

"Pardon?" Pimples jerked rod-straight.

She glared at the whites of his eyes. "You were just speaking about me. Something about your tongue, and my arse?" She whipped her head around to the short Walker. "Don't you dare laugh."

The smirk died on his lips.

Sam turned back. "Name."

"Ah come on Miss. I'm sorry, I really am." Pimples rubbed at the back of his neck.

"What. Is. Your. Name?"

"It was just as joke is all. Didn't mean anything by it."

Sam rounded on the other Walker. "You. One chance to tell me this idiot's name and I might just forget your part in this."

The Walker didn't even pause. "Andre Fort. Ma'am."

Pimples groaned.

"Good boy. Andre Fort. You will be hearing from me." She turned to leave.

"And wash your sodding face!"

Sam stomped through the smog and stalked towards the Citadel proper. Some pathetic plea followed behind, but sod it. Let's see how the idiot would laugh when he was re-assigned to the midnight shifts in Austellus!

The Citadel courtyard was massive and dominated by a fountain. A miniature Spire, water was supposed to spurt from the tip but at the moment, it was dry. Probably for the best. In full flow, the phallic monstrosity made her sick.

Behind it, the real Spire cast a shadow over everything. Just the sight of it brought back the memory of her trip to Memoria. Mistress Ignis. Mother's memory. Dreamsteel. They had to be connected. She had so many questions, and yet she couldn't bring herself to go back.

Not now Mother's ring was gone.

Sam shook her head. She marched up to the Midnight Chamber and drew her petition from the pouch at her belt. The bond chain around her wrist glittered.

Sam rapped against the image of a full moon embossed onto the wooden door. After a moment, a dark-haired servant answered.

“Yes?”

“Samantha DeAcarris. Here to see Matthew DeProleai.”

“One moment.” He closed the door and ducked inside a moment.

When the door next opened, Matthew greeted her with blood-shot eyes.

“Samantha? What do you want?”

“Good to see you too,” she said. “I need you to present this.” She held up her petition. Matthew took it from her. “Afterwards, I thought we could go to the forge? You did promise after all, and I...” She left unspoken the rest. The fact that she could no longer stand to be in her own house. That she had to stay away whilst Father had Saul... removed.

“Right.” Matthew rubbed his neck. “Samantha, I understand, but this won’t...”

“Matthew. What is the meaning of this recess?”

The door opened further to reveal Simon DeProleai. High Lord of Arx. He wore his chain of office and his hair was slicked back from a deep-lined face.

He did not look happy.

“Lord DeProleai.” Sam curtseyed as deep as she knew how.

“The correct form of address is ‘The Honourable DeProleai.’ Lord DeProleai is my son.” The heat in his voice dried her tongue to the roof of her mouth.

“Matthew? What’s that?”

“Um...”

DeProleai took the petition from Matthew’s fingers. With every moment he studied it, his eyes narrowed.

He tore it. One line at a time.

“Number one. The Upper Senate does not provide assistance to individual families. No matter the circumstances.” He tossed the first part of the petition to the floor.

“Number two. No one may enter the Upper Senate when it is in session without an invitation. No exceptions.” More of the petition fell from his ivory fingers.

“And number three. We do not accept petitions that look like a child wrote them. Learn cursive.” The last scraps floated out of the door. DeProleai shook his head. “Matthew, you should know better than to bring that nonsense here. You need to understand that your duty to the city supersedes any... personal entanglement. Now get out.”

“But Father...”

“Out.” The command in DeProleai’s voice could have summoned icicles. Even Matthew seemed chilled by it. He stepped out of the door and it slammed shut behind him.

Well. That could have gone better.

“Seems like you are mine after all?” Sam tried for a smile, but it was a sickly effort. Sod it, but that petition was the only hope she had of getting Mother’s ring back. “So... the forge?” Sam raised an eyebrow. She was determined to take at least one positive from today.

Matthew sighed. “Sure. Can’t say I didn’t want to see you today.”

He scratched the skin under his bond chain and led her towards a building crouched at the side of the Citadel wall. A spiral chimney broke from a tile roof and the door handles were made of brass.

"That's odd." Matthew frowned at the crack between the doors. "I thought this would be locked." He shrugged. "Though I suppose you can hardly keep a servant from dusting. Well, are you coming?"

Sam reached for the door handle. Her heart fluttered in her chest but she tried for calm. It couldn't possibly be as good as she hoped.

By the Prelude. It was better.

Anvils of every size, two clay kilns, an open-air forge twice the size of her entire basement set up, brass bound barrels for quenching, banks of windows and flume hoods for ventilation and a stack of ores beyond anything she had ever seen. Tin, Lead, Copper, Bronze, Iron, Gold, Silver and countless others all in ordered columns according to what looked to be weight and purity.

"This is incredible." Sam ran a finger across a pristine *Admisce* hammer set in a bracket against the wall. "How do you not have Forge Masters biting your hand off for this?"

"Father's decision. Used to be one when I was younger but..." Matthew shrugged. "Guess there isn't anyone he trusts with it now. Hardly a surprise. The man doesn't trust anyone."

Sam nodded for him. At the back of the room, beyond the forge, was an oilskin covering something lumpy. She licked her lips and tugged it free.

Books. Countless books. She scanned the titles.

"No!" Her eyes practically bulged out of her face. "You have Xaphan's *On the Folding of Steel*. Cursbrick's *Soul of Ore*!" And so many others. Rare titles, books Jack had lamented as lost, and yet there they were, clean as the day they were bound.

"Is that good?" Matthew sighed. "I'm going to get a drink."

Sam barely heard him. So many! What to read first? She couldn't decide. Like a child, she pulled the volumes from the shelf and arranged them into piles. Then re-arranged them. Ordered by size. Then by author. Then by colour of the cover.

A single sheet fell free.

Sam frowned. The parchment was different. Each book was bound and free from creases or crumples, but the sheet was as yellowed and dog-eared as they came. The handwriting was harsh and blotted, but something about it drew her. She read quickly.

Simon.

The memory of Dreamsteel has been purged from the city. The blacksmiths who were shielded by the Foundry have been offered a choice. Death or mutilation. My hands are stained red, but I know what we do is for the good of all who survive.

Now we must take steps to ensure this never happens again.

Dirk left this morning. Fled the city to shatter the Dreamsteel that survives beyond the walls. Now is the only chance we have. The Spire is terrifying. That kind of power cannot be released again. I have spoken with Aurellius. He has given his Aversa memory into my hand. I leave it to you, along with this letter. Be vigilant. The knife makes me... uneasy. I suspect Aurellius rails against his confinement. Do not let the blade cut you, lest you wish to share his madness.

We have already converted the second Aversa. All it took was a touch. This afternoon, I will give my mind also. Three Aversa memories. I pray they will be enough.

When my mind is gone, I will ensure that I die along with it. I cannot burden my wife with a Gazer for a husband. She has already sacrificed too much.

I leave the city in your hands, my friend.

I am sorry.

P.S. My apprentice Jack knows nothing of Dreamsteel but the love of it. I beg you, leave him to his life. He deserves it.

Sam held a shaking hand over her mouth. The letter was addressed to Simon. It *had* to be DeProleai. He had helped eliminate Dreamsteel. Why? And what of the postscript? Apprentice Jack, Jack Mendy? He always said he grew up as a Forge Master's apprentice. It would explain his drive to re-construct Dreamsteel. Who had written the letter? It was impossible to guess.

"What's that?"

If Sam could have leapt clean out of her skin, she would have. She crumpled the letter into the pouch at her waist and turned to meet Matthew's steel-grey eyes. "Oh. Nothing." Sweat trickled down her back. "It's just so... overwhelming in here." She forced her hand to rest on Matthew's chest. "And I have you to thank." She swallowed her disgust and placed a kiss on the corner of Matthew's jaw.

The look of joy that flashed across his face made guilt simmer in her stomach. "You're welcome. I even brought you some wine." He cast a pointed glance at the two glasses in his hands.

"Thanks." Sam took a glass and attempted a sip. Turned into a gulp and a river of red wine poured down her throat. She coughed and shook her head. "Oh. That's good. Aarde Terrace?" she spluttered.

Matthew pursed his lips. "Father's personal supply. I hope he was looking forward to it." He took a vengeful swig and his eyes narrowed on the doors.

Sam sat on a nearby anvil and sighed. "Okay. Time for you to tell me just exactly what is going on between you two."

"He treats Austellus like a disease." Words burst from Matthew's lips like molten iron from a cracked crucible. "A plague that needs to be wiped out. I don't understand. He used to listen. Raising DeGaya to the position of Sky Lord was *his* idea. But for the last two years, he is obsessed with 'keeping them in their place.' And the Enforcers! I have no idea where he got that armour from, but it messes with their minds. People are dying for nothing."

Sam opened her mouth, but really, what could she say to that?

"And it's not helped by these constant parties." He tossed his wine back. "I get it, everyone likes a feast, but when supplies are this low, it's worse than irresponsible. It's suicide. He never used to be like this. He used to care. It's like he's from a different world. Like he's forgotten who he is." Matthew stared at the empty glass in his hand.

Sam swallowed. She kept her eyes on the floor. Hadn't quite expected him to open up that much.

Unfortunately, there were no answers hidden in the reeds that covered the floor. Despite the forge's disuse, they were all fresh if... uneven.

She looked closer. Why were those ones dragged out of position? Sam stood up and followed the broken stems. A pile of the things were dumped in the corner. She kicked them aside.

Beneath them was a trapdoor.

"Matthew? What's down here?" She waved him over.

"My will to live?" He came to join her. "Oh. I've never seen that before."

Their eyes met. Matthew shrugged. Together, they knelt to yank at the iron ring fastened to the top. The trapdoor opened with a crash to reveal an iron ladder leading down into the darkness. The smell of mildew wafted up.

"What's down there?" she asked.

"I don't know." Matthew crouched to peer down into the darkness.

Sam grabbed a torch from the wall of the forge and lit it. "Shall we?"

She didn't wait for an answer. The ladder was rusty but solid and it didn't take her long to descend.

After a moment, and some curse words she was surprised he even knew, Matthew joined her.

They took off through the carved cavern of rock. The whole place stank of disuse and rat droppings. "No one has been down here in a long time," Sam said. Cracks stood out in the walls. Some were only a hairsbreadth, but others were thick enough for a person to wriggle through.

"This is incredible," she whispered. Matthew grunted behind her. They walked slowly, no other sounds but their feet on the rock and a slow drip of water.

A voice broke the silence. No. Voices. Raised in argument.

Sam looked over to Matthew and gestured for him to follow. Further down the corridor, a light flickered from the side of the wall. A grate was set in the rock. She peered inside.

Below her was the Midnight Chamber. Sam gasped. Seven chairs arranged around a table. Stained glass windows glittered with sunlight and the carpet was rich as blood. The six named Lords were all in attendance and sat at the head of the table was Simon DeProleai. The chair beside him was empty.

"We really shouldn't be here," Matthew hissed.

"Come on. Don't you want to know what was so important that they kicked you out for it?"

Matthew chewed his lip. Then nodded. Sam turned her attention back to the room. The voices rose to meet her.

“... and the reports are not good. The city is already starving,” DeWhit grumbled.

“How is that possible?” Jace DeSané cut in. His clothes were skin tight and rich. “Or am I the only one to send out the call to those who owe loyalty to my house? Most deliveries have been completed and the ferries are running non-stop.”

“Stupid boy.” Leanne DeSüle leant across the table. Her wine was untouched before her and her iron curls quivered. She gripped a burning candle like she would stab him. “Caelum is fine. It is Austellus that is suffering. Farmers talk. If the Austelli discover what we are planning...”

“Enough.” Simon DeProleai spoke up and DeSüle’s jaw snapped shut. “You will all press your vassals. Keep the deliveries to Caelum.”

“Precisely,” Antonio DeMori cut in smoothly. “Then we can decide what we have to spare.”

“No. Austellus will fend for itself. Not a morsel will cross the Mucro, do you understand?” DeProleai’s voice was tight.

“And what will that lead to Simon?” Var DeKeita, the Steel Lord, said. “What do you think a population of angry, unemployed, hungry people are going to do when they realise we are stockpiling food?”

“They will starve,” DeProleai said. “Is that not the point?”

Silence fell on the room. Sam looked over at Matthew. His face was crushed with sorrow.

“Well, it’s not like they would know...” DeSané said.

“Is that so? Did you know that a few nights ago, we took a man into custody for stealing food? A delivery bound for you Jace, and yet he tossed it into Austellus like pissing down a well.”

"He must be punished. Severely. Now, more than ever, we need to keep Austellus in its place." Simon DeProleai's eyes glittered.

"Aren't we getting a little off topic?" Leanne DeSüle said. "So long as the Austelli can't cross the Mucro, then..."

"Can't they?" Var interrupted. "Then who broke into a noble manse last night and robbed them as they slept?"

Sam felt cold.

"You think the DeAcarris family was robbed by an Austelli?" Walter DeWhit said.

"Yes. The Saviour."

"Oh not this blasphemy again," Antonio DeMori groaned.

"Call it what you will. Last month he killed an Enforcer. Since then, we have not had a single successful execution in Austellus. Now he had attacked us in Caelum. Do you want to wait to see what he does next? I warn you, we are going to have another Flame Protest on our hands if we don't do something!"

"No. We aren't." Andross DeGaya spoke up for the first time. "The people of Austellus hate the Saviour as much as we do. He is an aberration, not an ideology. But they will fight us if the only other option is to starve. And we deserve it." DeGaya rubbed his temples. "How did it ever come to this?"

"Then what do you suggest, Ant?" DeKeita's voice dripped with venom on that last word, but DeGaya didn't even seem to hear it.

"Open the gates. Cross the Deadlands. We were a trading city once, at least that's what my father told me. We still have the forges, in a fashion. Our steel could be exported. Let us work steel as we once did, and maybe..."

"No!" DeProleai's voice was like a storm. "We cannot risk it. Should the outside world discover our secrets, then all is lost."

"What secrets?" DeSané asked, but everyone ignored him.

"And the Saviour?" DeKeita asked.

"A Walker will get him soon enough," DeGaya said. "The real problem is that we are starving Austellus!"

"Do you know what the Saviour did to my men, Andross? He stole their minds. Erased their memories. There are twenty-eight Walkers sat in the Temple of the Prelude right now, so that the priests can attempt to teach them how to eat and drink again. Last I heard it was not going well."

Silence crackled through the chamber.

"Memory magic," DeMori said. "Detestable stuff."

"There is no way he did that," DeSüle muttered to herself.

"Sam." Matthew tugged at her sleeve.

"Not now," she hissed. There was so much going on! So many questions. She strained to hear more.

"Yes now!" Matthew grabbed her chin and tilted her head away from the grate.

Blue light flickered down the corridor.

Blood throbbed in Sam's ears. Matthew met her eyes and nodded. Quietly, they left the grate behind and began to creep back down the tunnel.

Sam looked over her shoulder. The blue light was getting closer.

"Run!" she shouted. Matthew didn't need much persuading. He raced down the passageway and Sam followed close behind. The sound of footsteps echoed around them. How many pairs?

"Here, the ladder is just around the corner!" Matthew said.

Sam glanced backwards. The blue light was gone. "I think we lost them."

They turned the corner and there was a man. A blue flame burned in his hand.

Sam's heart froze in her chest.

"Luke. Fetch me the boy."

From behind, another man emerged. Those all-blue eyes... by the Prelude, it was *him*! The Saviour. He moved like a shadow. She could barely follow him.

He leapt behind Matthew and wrapped an arm around his waist. Matthew struggled, but it was useless. The blue light shone brighter and Matthew's assailant lifted him from the ground.

"Samantha!" Matthew shouted. "Help me!"

"I wouldn't." The man with the blue flame's voice was soft. He took one step towards her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

She saw into the hood. Violet eyes.

They froze her. She couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Couldn't think.

The blue flame between them crackled and spat.

Sam blinked.

And they were gone.

Chapter 13

For the first time, Luke walked the blue-fire path to Memoria under his own power.

It was an odd sensation, this control. It did not feel like magic. It felt like will power. An ironclad link between his conscious and unconscious mind. Fuelled by fire, it was enough to form the bridge.

"Luke?" Ferra warped into existence beside him. *"You control the Fires of Remembrance well."*

"My time with Dirk was... productive." Not that he remembered it.

The Spire burst from the mist beside him, silver as a star. Only two shadows remained beside it. That meant three Death Echoes unlocked. Reilo, Harri and now, Vincent. Such a wealth of memory from the latest dead man inside his head. Luke needed to find a good blacksmith and have a serious conversation.

Laughter bubbled from the mist.

"But that is not why we are here," Luke projected. He soared over Memoria. Towards the Mucro.

Unable to stop himself, Luke opened his hand. A Manifest Memory rose from the depths of the water. It radiated sorrow.

"Is this it?" Ferra projected.

"No. This is... something else." Luke gazed into the silver. He knew the memory it contained.

"Shall I remove it? I can sense the pain that it is causing you."

"No," Luke projected. *"A man should have one bad memory, I think."*

After all, Kuyt would never forgive him if he forgot the day they met.

"Don't worry. You'll get your fill." Luke shifted into a new section of Memoria. A few streets in Caelum were sharper now. Detailed from his time with Dirk. One of them led to a warehouse.

"Here." Luke focused and the warehouse doors opened. A silver orb resolved slowly, but there was something wrong. Instead of the mirror-like clarity of a Manifest Memory it was... dull, misshapen.

"Form your hammer," he pulsed.

Ferra's hands twisted and her hammer appeared. *"When you are ready."*

Luke traced his shadow fingers through the silver. The orb rose and consumed him.

Luke blinked. The memory played out like a dream underwater. So few details. Sensations. Everything was wrong. He forced himself through the recollection as it fell apart around him.

He knelt beside Dirk. They spoke, but the words were lost. Something glittered in Dirk's hand. The warehouse doors slammed open.

Then everything went black. Dirk's voice spoke, close as a lover's whisper in his ear.

"Memories are not real. Every person who shares an experience recalls it differently. The truth is unchanging. Only lies fluctuate. Memory exists as the lies we tell ourselves. That is the strength of this magic. It can make those lies real. Too many lies can break anyone. Remember that. Luke."

The memory shattered.

...

Shards sliced into his consciousness and Memoria vanished in a wisp of smoke.

Luke groaned and opened his eyes.

"I knew that wouldn't work." Ferra rubbed her temples. A circle of dead candles surrounded her ratty armchair. "Dirk can do things I can only dream of." She yanked open a curtain. Grey sunlight drizzled through the glass and the clouds were dark. "He has access to tools that..."

"Oh I know exactly how he did it." Luke scowled. He followed Ferra to the kitchen and took a seat at the table. The Mindbreaker set a kettle on her stove and tossed in a handful of leaves. "I still don't understand how you can work with that man."

Ferra thumped a pair of mugs on the table. "Let me give you some advice Luke. Stay away from Dirk. The time to take sides is coming and I am his. Remember that." She took a swig of tea. "Don't forget, of all three apprentices, I am the nasty one."

As if to make her point, a groan sounded from the back room. Behind a metal door, bolted shut.

"You know what? I don't want to know." Luke ran his finger over the rim of his mug.

"Clever boy." Ferra gulped the last of her tea and returned to the stove. "Another?"

Luke shook his head. He watched the leaves stir in his untouched mug. "I saw Addie. You did good work."

Ferra re-filled her mug. "She was a natural." She leant back against the counter.

Luke glanced at his boots. "She's changed you know."

"What did you expect?"

"No, I know." Luke pushed his mug away. "But there is something different about her now and I'm worried..."

Ferra's door slammed open and Addie burst into the room. Her eyes were panicked.

"Addie!" Luke licked his lips. "We were, uh, just talking about you..."

"Luke, there you are! We need to go. Now."

That got him to his feet. "Why? Addie, what's going on?"

"Execution."

...

The rooftop was cold. A gritty wind swirled like gravel in the riverbed, but Luke still sucked down a great lungful. Addie had insisted they run the whole way.

Kuyt sat on the edge of the rooftop. His skin was pimpled with the cold, but he barely seemed to notice it. He didn't so much as nod in greeting when Luke crouched down beside him.

The square was packed. Kids on shoulders, men on barrels, whatever it took to get a look. Five prisoners were chained on the Scaffold, each of them guarded by a full squad of Walkers.

"Addie?" Luke hissed. "Our guys are still watching the Mucro. Aren't they?"

She nodded. "Fresh eyes this morning. There is no way we wouldn't have heard." Her eyes were glued to the square.

An Enforcer stepped through the crowd and towards the Scaffold.

"No," Luke whispered. "Why would they send another? This crowd killed the last one."

Didn't seem to be in the mood for a repeat performance. The Austelli, dirty and scarred, stepped aside from the Enforcer like he was a holy man and allowed him to take his place beside the prisoners.

"Citizens." The Enforcer's voice was loud and cultured. "Thank you for being here. Today marks a very important day for the future of Arx." He gestured at the prisoners. "These men and women are here for one, simple reason. Wanton association with the criminal known as the Saviour. You!" He pointed an armoured finger to one of the prisoners. "Step forwards."

The lad came to the edge of the Scaffold with shuddering feet. The scars of torture were clear on his face.

"What is your name?" The Enforcer demanded of his chosen prisoner.

"Sep," the lad whimpered.

"Sep? Who is that?" Luke asked.

"You never bothered to learn their names." Kuyt's voice was hard as stone.

"Sep. What crimes have you committed?" The Enforcer set his armoured hand on the lad's shoulder.

"Mu...murder. We killed Walkers. And theft. We stole supplies. And..." The boy's voice trailed off on the last word.

"What was that lad?"

"...Revolution," he squeaked.

"Revolution!" The Enforcer held his arms open.

"Coward!" Luke snarled. "Why doesn't he keep his mouth shut?"

"You can't intimidate someone into loyalty, Luke." Kuyt's eyes were black as death. "Fear only goes so far."

"Does this man speak for you? Are you desirous of revolution?" The Enforcer spoke to the crowd.

"No!" The crowd bellowed back.

"You see? This 'Saviour' is nothing more than a killer. A master manipulator. He is *nothing* to you!" The Enforcer raised a fist. He clapped Sep on the back. "Your reward lad. For your honesty. Kneel."

Sep fell to his knees.

The Enforcer drew his weapon. Symbol of authority. Sharp as death itself. "I pronounce your judgement. Guilty!"

The axe fell and Sep's scream was cut short. His head rolled into the Rotheart slush.

"Sep. Son of Grant." Kuyt's voice was tight.

The next prisoner was brought forwards.

"I'm getting down there!" Luke stood up and drew a pair of knives.

"Luke. Sit down." Addie dragged him by the sleeve. "There are too many Walkers down there. Not to mention the Enforcer. And right now, that crowd hates you. You'd die in an instant."

Luke slammed his knife back into his belt. She was right, but anger boiled in his soul.

On the Scaffold, the next prisoner was knelt. The Enforcer swung.

"Rasha. Daughter of Benny. She was a brave one," Kuyt said.

"Denna. Daughter of Ari."

"Rogic. Son of Thomas."

"Lance. Son of Gary."

Kuyt's dull voice counted off the dead. Rain began to fall. A black mist that soaked clothes down to the skin and froze fingertips like ice.

The Enforcer flicked blood from his axe. Corpses surrounded him like crushed flowers in a field of grass. "My friends! Soon, we shall begin the *Caedes*

march. All those who associate with the Saviour will be captured and face their judgment. Anyone who comes forward with information will be richly rewarded.”

Another cheer.

The Enforcer turned and marched off. The Walkers followed behind and it wasn’t long before the crowd dispersed.

“Addie,” Luke said. Anger froze in his heart. “Go and fetch me a Walker.”

She nodded and vanished from the rooftop.

Luke sat beside Kuyt. The old man rocked slowly.

“This is what happens when you refuse to live in the real world.” Kuyt’s voice was acid.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Luke demanded.

“Exactly what you think it does. Where were you, when they hit the Foundry? That memory woman’s house, right?”

“So what? I don’t answer to you Kuyt.”

“You promised me Luke. You promised me you were done with that stuff. Never trust an addict. I can’t follow a man who doesn’t know his own mind.” Kuyt’s voice was hurt wrapped in steel. “And you are taking Addie down with you.”

“She’s happy!”

“She’s not happy. Addie doesn’t exist anymore. The woman I knew was strong. She was dealing with it. Or do you prefer her now she’s obedient?”

“Get off your high horse old man.” Luke spun to Kuyt. “What, you saying she’d be better off if she had to re-live that shit?”

“No!” Kuyt’s teeth glittered in the rain. “But you can’t just run and hide from the darkness. You have to face it. To advance. To progress. To grow. Otherwise you just get stuck in the same old cycle.”

Luke threw his arms out wide. "Well you didn't help! When Dirk brought me back from Caelum, set me in your lap like a kid with no memory of what he did to me, you were the one who just let him walk away! You hate memory magic so much? You could have ended it there and then!"

"What did you want me to do? That violet-eyed maniac could have broken me with a thought. My only concern was making sure *you* survived!"

"How many times Kuyt? I. Can. Take. Care. Of. Myself!"

"Really? Because from what I remember, you still needed me to pull the knife from your throat the first time Dirk fucked with you."

Luke winced. The old man was right.

The memory he would not let Ferra take.

The darkness that defined him.

...

Two years ago, Luke stood on the bank of the Mucro and decided to kill himself.

Watching the dirty waves, it all flooded him. The desperation. The loss. A future without a past was meaningless. He would make an end of it. The knife against his throat was sharp.

It would be quick.

"Careful with that, kid, you'll do yourself an injury." An old man clapped him on the back.

Luke jumped. The knife clattered from his numb fingers to the sludge of the bank.

"Here, let me." The old man bent to retrieve the steel.

He flung the knife as hard as he could. It vanished into the water with a splash.

“What are you doing old man?” Luke growled.

“Not old man. Kuyt. Come on. We’re going drinking.” Kuyt gripped Luke’s earlobe and dragged him down to a pub. Moments later a bottle of whiskey sat between them. Kuyt poured without pause until the glasses, the bar and the old man all faded into the empty blackness of true drunkenness.

The next morning, Luke woke with a tongue like a badger’s arse and a headache the size of a mountain. He moaned

Kuyt looked up from his armchair and smiled. “You’re awake.”

“No thanks to you.” Luke rubbed his temples. “What was in that bottle?”

“Austelli Molten. Good stuff right?” The old man stood up with a yawn. “Come on then, lad. We’ve a busy day ahead.”

Luke glanced down. “Why? You don’t even know me.”

Kuyt looked genuinely puzzled. “What has that got to do with anything? I want to show you something.”

Kuyt led him downstairs and out into the street. They wandered towards Rotheart plaza.

To the Scaffold.

“What is this Kuyt?” Luke asked from their spot in the crowd.

A prisoner was forced into a noose, high on the platform. His mouth moved, but the noise of the crowd blocked out his words. The Walker that held him in place ripped a handful of hair from his head.

“What do you think he is saying?” Kuyt asked.

“I don’t know.” Luke leant forwards.

"Is he asking for another chance? Or is it an apology? Do you think he cries out for someone? A mother, a lover, a brother?"

"I don't know." Luke's arms twitched with tension. "I can't watch this."

"Yes. You can." Kuyt's grip kept him in place like a chain. "You want to kill yourself? Might as well first see what it's like to die."

Luke watched, tears in his eyes, as three men were executed. The Walkers on the Scaffold cheered each body that fell.

Watching those men die did not make Luke feel any better. Shared suffering never helped anyone. But it gave him something else. Purpose.

That night, he and Kuyt sat down and discussed revolution.

...

"Except we failed. Two years in and what have we got to show for it? More bodies. More pain. I'm so sick of it." Luke rubbed his eyes. It would be so much easier to stop. To fade away and let Ferra take him to bliss.

Kuyt stood up. His blankets fell from him like he was shedding a skin. He glanced down at Luke.

He slapped him with the weight of every one of his years behind his palm.

Luke sprang to his feet. His cheek burned and his fists throbbed with anger.

"That is the problem with memory magic!" Kuyt's voice was trained to perfection. His indignation split the sky. "Apathy. You cut connection with the real world and no wonder things seem harder. After that first execution, you were ready to set yourself on *fire* in order to change things. Or have you forgotten?"

"Oh I remember. You want to see my anger?" Luke ripped a knife from his belt.

“Brave boy! You going to stab an old man?” Kuyt folded his arms, distinctly unafraid. “You want to show me you still care? Never visit that ‘Memoria’ again. Then maybe you’ll be worth something.”

“Fine!” Luke pulled the gateway metal from his pocket and reached his hand back to fling it from the roof.

“What is going on here?” Addie’s voice broke through the wind. Her hair was stuck to her face with the rain.

For a moment, they were all silent.

“Just a... disagreement,” Kuyt said eventually.

“Yeah. What he said. What are you doing back so quick, Addie? Where’s my Walker?” Luke asked.

When Kuyt turned away, Luke slipped the gateway metal back into his pocket.

“Don’t need one. You wanted to know how they slipped by us, right? I found the answer.” Addie produced a piece of paper from her sleeve.

Luke frowned. She was still wearing that copper ring. The sight made him uneasy.

“A map of the Nest.” Addie tapped the paper.

Luke gasped. “Impossible! Where did you get it?”

“I found a Walker Captain for you but he... struggled.” Addie grimaced. The hatchet at her waist was stained with red. “But look.” She pointed at a cluster of stars in the middle of the carefully drawn lines. “What do you think these are?”

“Routes...” Kuyt breathed, “into Austellus.”

“Exactly,” Addie purred. “They aren’t using the Mucro anymore. The Walkers found a way through the Nest. I bet that’s how this *Caedes* march is going to work. Sneak through and arrive at the Scaffold before we even notice.”

"And now we can stop it." Luke grinned. "I could kiss you Addie."

"Could you now?" She smiled

A tingle rushed through his skin.

"That's a lot of routes." Kuyt pointed at the lines on the map. "There is no way the three of us are putting a stop to it."

"We don't have much time for planning either," Addie said. "This is happening in four days."

"It's okay. We'll make it." Luke studied the map. "But there are ten stars. Ten squads?"

Addie nodded.

"We'll need the same then. Probably more, since they won't be trained..."

Luke rubbed his chin.

"Luke. They raided the Foundry. Took our soldiers. Those who weren't killed today have been taken prisoner. I only escaped because I... I cowered in one of those cracks in the rock." His eyes fell. Shame curled in his voice.

Luke gripped his shoulder. "Easy old man. There is nothing you could have done."

Kuyt shrugged him off. "Point is, we don't have anyone left. Unless you have a plan?"

"Let's call it an idea." Luke turned to Addie. "You coming with?"

"Where?"

Luke smiled. "You have the map, don't you? Well, I reckon it's time we went and threatened the most dangerous people in Austellus."

...

“Should be around here.” Addie’s finger crawled across the map. “If this is accurate, of course. Chances are we’re just a pair of idiots, lost in the slums.”

“Faith Addie,” Luke said, but he shivered all the same. The Nest was a claustrophobic nightmare. Buildings hung overhead, bent into the streets so far that they blocked out the light. The whole place was locked in twilight.

“Here goes.” Luke coughed to clear his throat. “Oi! Any of you bastards around, or are you all busy on your knees?”

His shout broke the silence like a dropped plate. For a moment, nothing happened. Then...

“Up there.” Addie pointed.

Luke squinted to follow her finger. Sure enough, a figure was moving over the rooftop opposite.

“And there too.” Addie pointed down an alleyway. “A whole bunch of them. And...”

“Drop the hatchets love.”

A man stood behind her, long-tipped spear levelled at Addie. The look on her face was one Luke had never seen before.

Surprise. She had never been snuck up on.

“Okay. Here we go.” She let the weapons tumble to the dirt street.

“Good. And you, any hidden weapons?” The spear-bloke grunted at Luke.

“Yeah, but it would be quicker if I just got naked.” Luke gave a nonchalant shrug that was far from what he was actually feeling.

“We’ll save that for later.” A new voice broke through, calm and with the edge of command. “Good work Quill.”

Luke turned to see a bloke, short as a child, walk towards them. A gaggle of men surrounded him, had to be fifty if there was one. Eyes shone in the darkness behind them. Countless others, hidden and waiting.

"And you are?" Luke turned to the short leader.

"Ziplok. Ruler of the Nest."

"Well, Ziplok..." Luke began, but something poked him in the back. He tossed a look back. That spear was now firmly between his shoulder blades.

"I'd be quiet if I were you," the man, Quill, said.

"Eh, he'll make enough noise soon enough." Ziplok rubbed his chin. He stepped up and studied Luke's face. "Oh-ho! Look who it is! Our very own Saviour has come. You aren't very popular right now, are you?"

"I don't think I ever was," Luke shrugged.

Ziplok grinned. "I do like a bloke who can laugh at himself. Tell me, Mr. Saviour, do you know what this is?" He held out his hand and the crony beside him opened a wooden box.

From the velvet inside, Ziplok drew a *Catamidio* to hand. The steel-tipped whip uncurled to dance across the dust at his feet.

"I've... some knowledge, yeah." Luke said.

Inside his head, Harri began to scream.

"Then you know what is going to happen to you."

"I can guess," Luke said. "But that won't stop the Walkers from controlling you."

Silence fell, so thick he could have spread it.

Ziplok ran a tongue over his crooked teeth and forced a sour grin. "The Walkers don't..."

"Oh please," Luke said. "Can't we be honest? You do intend to kill me, right? All I want to know is why? Why bend to the blackcloaks? You lot were the only resistance in the whole city before I came along."

Ziplok spat in the dust. "Fire," he said eventually.

"What?" Luke raised an eyebrow.

Ziplok ignored him. Instead, he reached for the lid of a copper barrels set against a wooden building.

Instantly, a column of orange flame shot from the open barrel and into the sky.

Luke cowered before the brightness. "What's that?"

"No idea." Ziplok forced the lid back. The flames vanished. "All I know is that it gets nice and hot when it's exposed to the air. These things are spread throughout the Nest. We mess with the Walkers and..."

"They burn you out," Luke finished for him.

"There you go. You've got your answer. I hope it was worth it, because now..." His *Catamidio* began to spin once more.

"I could help you," Luke said. That *Catamidio* was awfully close. "Addie? The map."

She handed the parchment over to Ziplok.

"What... they *mapped* it?" Ziplok's voice was thick with anger.

"You'll never be rid of them now. Not without my help," Luke said.

Ziplok glared at him for a while. "What do you suggest?" The *Catamidio* fell still at his side.

"I've got a plan. It starts with getting some big locks made. Tell me, how many black cloaks do you think you could get hold of in four days?"

Chapter 14

Kain groaned from his pallet.

The thing were about as comfy as a bed o' porcupines an' his back were kickin' off about it.

"Listen you." He grabbed a hunk o' disfigured flesh on his hip. "It 'ain't like this is my choice, so you can shove your complaints where the sun don't shine. Which is everywhere in this damn cell!"

Bugger it. Talkin' to hisself. He really were goin' loopy.

Two days. Two days locked in a cage with nothin' but his aches an' twinges for company. Kain shook his head an' tried to rattle some sanity back between his ears. Bugger it but a chicken locked up like this would go feral afore sunrise.

It took him three tries to stand. A tremor shot down his withered legs an' he almost kicked over his shit bucket. Couple o' stretches would do him a world o' good, even if he did feel about as strong as a steamed cabbage. Routine did sommat to fill the time, at least.

He started to stretch.

Bugger, but it didn't take long to get him puffin' an' groanin'. Not that he had a clue what he were doin', mind. Bend at the waist. Lock the knees. Shudder the arms 'til the knots in his spine felt looser. It took ages to go through it all, but it's not like he didn't have the time. Apparently Walkers didn't believe in breakfast. Not only were he cravin' eggs like a fox, but he still had his farmer's instincts. That meant up with the sun, even when he couldn't see the bugger.

Home. Pa must be cursin' his name by now. Ma would be worried sick an' Abi... Abi'd probably set the table for him every night. Just in case.

Kain gasped an' bent his knees. Should have known better. No. He had known better. Pa warned him often enough. Head down, get on with it, an' under no circumstances stick your barely-workin' feet into someone else's business.

Worse part of it all, were that he would do it again.

"Didn't know you was a dancer, Hopalong."

Kain twisted upright, ignorin' the click in his back. Sure enough, Fetch were pokin' his face through the bars o' his cell. That shit eatin' grin were the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Kain limped over an' grabbed his hand. "Fetch!"

"Sweaty palms lad!" Fetch wiped his hand on his shirt. "You know what they say about sweaty palms? Sweaty bollocks. When was the last time you got your leg over?"

"My what?"

Fetch just grinned wider. "Never mind. How's it going?"

Kain's hands tightened around the cell bars. "I'm a cripple in a cage Fetch. When am I gettin' out o' here?"

The grin faded a little. "Ah lad, it's not that easy. You stole from a Named Lord. Even admitted it, not that fibbing would'a done you much good. Only reason you aren't marching to the headsman now is because some high mucka-muck has a plan for a bunch of prisoners."

"Fetch. I need out. Please. Listen, Pa still got the money from the delivery earlier in the season, right? He can... reimburse the guy, DeSané. No harm, no foul." 'Course, that money were all they had to last the winter but bugger it, they could sell the whole damn farm if it got him out o' there!

"It don't quite work like that kid." Fetch shook his head "Look, I'll get you out of this. Promise."

Kain swallowed. "What... what should I do?"

Fetch gnawed at his bottom lip like a goat. "Just be polite. All you can do." A bell sounded from outside. Fetch winced. "I gotta go. Chin up kid, it'll be fine. Remember, be polite!" Fetch flung him a half-arsed salute an' jogged away.

Kain leant his head against the bars. He wanted to shout, to scream, like he had that first day in captivity, but he just didn't have the energy for it. He lowered hisself back to his pallet, with a hiss o' pain, an' settled in to wait for his lunchtime slop. It were all he could do.

Wait an' hope that Fetch didn't forget about him.

...

"Wakey wakey!"

Kain's eyes snapped open. A young man in a crushed orange suit were sat afore him, a foldin' desk across his lap. A Walker, so tall her were bent double just to fit inside, stood by the door.

"Who 'a you?" Kain rubbed his eyes. Back stiffened up sommat fierce, but he pushed hisself upright. The pain forced him awake an' he shuffled towards the young bloke.

"My name is Reece DeFurle. I am Minister of Records here and I will be the one deciding your fate." He spoke with the familiarity of rote. "Now, before we begin, would you please place your hands over the desk for me?"

"My name's Kain," he said, all friendly like.

"Hands please. Oh, and before you start thinking those violent thoughts that your kind so often does, I would like you to be aware that Geralt here has a very specific instruction as to what to do with anyone who attacks me. Geralt?"

The Walker unsheathed a knife from his belt. The steel were notched an' twisted like a corkscrew. "I get your eye."

Kain forced a laugh. Sounded like Munch hackin' up his dinner. "You kiddin'? I'd pass out just lungin' at you." He laid his arms flat against the desk. "Besides, I'm a farmer. I'm not even from the city. I just wanna get home."

"Splendid! I do enjoy a man who can laugh at himself." Reece pulled a pair of manacles from a bag at his feet. He clamped them around Kain's wrists. "Too tight?"

Kain winced. Felt like a rottie had hold o' his skin. "Aye, just a mite."

"A pity. Those are the only ones I have." Reece smiled a slow smile. "Now, if you will answer these questions nice and quick, we can both get about our business."

"Sounds good to me," Kain said. Fetch's advice rang between his ears. Just be polite. How hard could that be?

"Terrific! Now, did you enter Arx on Waneday, Fourth of Impes, with the express purpose of providing a delivery of foodstuffs for Jace DeSané, the Earth Lord, Named in the Upper Senate for his Contribution?"

"Well, some o' it. A big bit were lost when..."

"Ooooh. Yes or no answers only I'm afraid." Reece began to chew the corner o' his thumbnail. "Else, I'll just have to assume you're lying." He pulled the shred o' nail off with his teeth, then plucked it from his mouth an' laid it, nice as you please, beside his little notepad. "And we wouldn't want that, would we?"

Kain couldn't take his eyes off the half-chomped, spit-coated shard. "... no."

"So, this delivery was already two days late when you arrived, correct?"

"Aye, but..."

Reece gave a chuckle that sounded like a gold coin fallin' down the stairs.

"Sorry, I forget. Did I already tell you about the yes or no answers?"

"Ay... Yes, you did."

"Jolly good. I suppose we best stick to those then." Reece smiled an' popped the knuckles on his left hand, one after the other.

Kain gripped the edge of the small desk. "Yes. I were already two days late."

"Goodie. So, you arrived late and then elected to take the Austelli gate, rather than use the ferry, as you were contracted to do?"

"Well, I didn't thin... yes. Yes, I did." Kain folded his hands in his lap. They still twitched.

"Ess-pell-ended. I must say you are being most accommodating. Some people can be so frustrating, don't you think?" Reece's smile were yellow with teeth.

"Upon entry to Austellus, you promptly chose to engage in your first act of theft in cahoots with an orphan begging by the gates, yes?"

"What? No!"

"I must warn you, I have two very credible Walkers that have testified to that exact occurrence. Are you denying that you gave away the food?"

"No, but..."

"Then would you like to change your answer?"

Kain's jaw hurt. "Fine. Yes."

"Good, good, good!" Reece whirled his pen across the paper on his desk.

"After this theft, you continued deeper into Austellus and made your way into the Eastern Living Area, commonly called 'Brownlines.' Whilst there, you engaged in eight separate instances of theft, as well as trespassing in a Foundry-assigned home."

Is that what they were callin' that pile o' timbers that the kids had been squattin' in? "Sure. Why not. Yes an' yes again."

"Now now." Reece waggled his finger like a worm on a hook. "You have been quite pleasant so far, let's not spoil it shall we? Finally, you made your way across Rotheart plaza where you conspired to steal the last of the food with a man loyal to this 'Saviour'. An act that was only stopped by Master Fetch's intervention. The result of which was the ruination of any food that was still fit for purpose."

"I didn't give the food to that lad. He tried to rob me. But it did get ruined when Fetch killed him, aye."

Reece's eyes rose with his pen from the paper. "I'll just put 'yes,' then shall I? So. That is ten counts of admitted theft, combined with lateness, trespassing, desire to hide your crimes, working with the Saviour and engaging the services of *Fetch* of all people." He clicked his tongue. "My oh my but it does not look good."

Kain leant forwards. "I didn't know what I were doin'. I just wanna go home. Please."

"Well. You have been good. You answered every question I asked and you have been *most* civil. Between you and me, I believe that DeProleai's insistence on your punishment is a little... extreme. I am minded to make an example of you. Manners cost nothing, as they say. Besides, the *Caedes* march is full. So, how about eleven years?"

"Eleven years what?"

"Eleven years in prison. Oh heck. Let's just call it ten, one for each count of theft." Reece smiled widely. "After that, you are free to go."

"What?" Kain lurched to his feet. Bugger the pain, this were madness!

"You are welcome." Reece mocked a little bow over his desk.

Kain felt like steam must o' been shootin' out o' his ears. His hand curled into a fist. The Walker stepped forwards, but bugger him! "Ten years? Ten years locked in this cage will make me mad, you fuckin' imbecile!"

Reece's smile vanished. "Honestly. You try and do a man a favour." He stood up an' snapped his fingers. The hulkin' Walker gathered up the desk for him.

"What? Where are you goin'?" Kain demanded.

"Away." Reece tore another nail free with his teeth. He chewed it as he spoke. "If you want to be rude, I suppose you can just die with the rest of them. No skin off my nose. Enjoy the *Caedes* March young master Kain. I suspect it will prove quite illuminating."

Chapter 15

Safe to say, the Arena had seen better days.

Luke blew the rain from his lip. Drizzle hadn't let up for days. The sand was so thick it stuck to his boots like porridge. Stone benches glistened with moisture. Even so, he could feel the beauty of it. That sense of danger, of victory. For three nights, the sight of sand and stone and steel had burned in his dreams.

There was a Death Echo here. Had to be.

The Arena was decommissioned in the Summer of Archinx, due to public disinterest in bloodsports. Those funds were shifted in the winter to the construction of the Scaffold and the creation of a central plaza in Rotheart.

Luke started. He looked around and spoke softly. "Vincent?"

Instantly, the ground beneath him seemed to lurch. The Arena fuzzed and blurred like a visual echo and pain swept into his stomach.

Luke's hand crawled into his pocket. He touched the gateway metal. "My name," he hissed, "is Luke!"

The vertigo took a long time to subside. He stroked his stomach. Poison. What an idiot way to die. At least Reilo and Harri had been killed. Damn politicians, even dead they couldn't get anything right.

He lurched to his feet, his fingers still curled around the ore hard enough to feel the rough edges against his palm, and peered through the rain.

Something caught his eye. Looked like a small theatre box set right up over the side of the Arena. The kind where important folk might sit.

The stone steps had long been destroyed, and he was forced to crawl up like a damn insect, hand over hand to drag himself up to the top.

About halfway and an intense feeling settled over him. The feeling of victory. The gateway metal glowed in his hand. Existence tipped over and he fell into the past.

...

Luke blinked.

Sunshine, bright and pure, burst from the sky and Luke felt himself smile. The steps beneath his feet were polished flat by boots and every seat, every space and every conceivable spot that a person could fit, was filled. The Austelli had come out in numbers.

He raised his arms and the crowd cheered. A young woman with green-flecked eyes and auburn hair blew him a kiss and he caught it with an easy hand. Sixty summers old and he still made the ladies swoon.

"My friends! Lords and Ladies, People of Austelli and Caelum. Welcome, to the Arena!" A steel-haired man stood in the box behind him, shielded from the sunlight with a parasol. Luke didn't recognise him, but the memory supplied a name. Bas DeKeita. The first Steel Lord.

"Today you will bear witness to Lloyd Vindex as he takes on the biggest, and fiercest challenge of his distinguished career!"

Luke felt a wave of pride wash over him. A second name was expensive. One arm still up, he descended the steps two at a time. Prisoners with nothing to lose, beasts from the forests, trained soldiers, all had fallen at his feet.

He leapt into the centre of the Arena, sand puffing up between his boots, and drew a pair of curved blades from his waist.

"Lloyd. Are you ready?" Bas DeKeita shouted down.

In response, Luke drew a long, stinging cut down his forearm. "My Lord, these deaths are yours!"

"Very well! Then I declare this contest... begun!"

The three steel gates set into the base of the Arena opened and men poured out. Lloyd had never seen their like, but Luke had. Walkers. A full squad of seven, they circled him.

Luke bellowed a laugh and stood firm as the blackcloaks charged.

What happened next, was almost impossible.

Luke moved as he never had before. His curved knife slipped past the closest Walker's guard and slammed up and into his throat. He leapt over the body as it fell and the wind of two new strikes tickled his back.

One.

Foot planted, he spun. The two Walkers gaped in surprise. Twin knives slashed out and tasted their blood. Cut, cut, cut, ribbons of flesh floated to the sand and the pair fell with a gurgle.

Two. Three.

The other Walkers kept their distance. Smart, if you were fighting an ordinary man. But Lloyd Vindex was no ordinary man! Superior certainty flowed across Luke like sweat.

He yawned, big and wide, and the crowd laughed. One of the Walkers narrowed his eyes in anger. His blade lowered a fraction.

Without pause, Luke let fly with his long knife. The Walker looked down, as if surprised, and touched the smooth, wood hilt between his ribs.

Four.

The last three came together, as he knew they would. They were good. The best he had faced in some time, and three people were almost impossible to keep

track of. The scars of hard experience clustered their hands. There would be no tricks for veterans such as these.

But compared to him they were green as new grown grass.

A blade bit into Luke's side, at the exact same moment another sliced into his thigh. Blood dripped down his skin. The pair stepped in, desperate to push their advantage.

Luke grinned.

With a blur, his knife danced between the Walkers, punching holes and ripping cloth. Sheets of blood ran down their black uniforms.

Five. Six

The remaining Walker swung in desperation but Luke dropped his knife and caught the edge of the sword. A red line bubbled down his palm as he tightened his grip.

Slowly, he forced the sword back at the Walker. Pushed it between his teeth. The fool actually tried to bite it, to keep it from his throat. Teeth crunched and broke free. The blade bit into the sides of the Walkers mouth. Into his cheeks. Up into the roof of his mouth.

Trapped behind Lloyd's eyes, even Luke felt sick as the blade clove up and tore the Walker's face off from behind.

A tuft of hair hung from the top and the top of the jaw was still attached. He lifted the face over his head and the crowd went ballistic. Cheers, so loud they rocked the ground beneath him. Luke let their adulation wrap him. He was the greatest champion Arx had ever seen!

He was still smiling when the arrow slammed into his chest.

Luke gasped. His eyes snapped open and he looked down at the length of wood and steel that stood out from his flesh. His questing fingers ran across his back and found the bloody point, half an inch out from his flesh.

He gurgled and fell to his knees. Blood dripped from his flesh. Breathing was hard.

"Listen to me, Austelli!" Bas DeKeita's voice was hard and ugly. "Those soldiers were *my* men! It is important that you know the punishment for slaying them. Not even your champion is immune to the law!" His arm came down and the gates opened once more. Blackcloaks, countless as raindrops, poured into the Arena.

From his spot on the floor, it was impossible to tell who threw the first punch. All Luke saw was that the riot that followed shattered the Arena beyond all repair.

Screaming. Shouting. Blood in the air, in the back of his throat. Black cloaked bodies stepped on him. Bootless peasants kicked up the sand around his.

For the first time in his life, Lloyd felt tears sting his eyes. Not from the pain. From the betrayal.

In the middle of it all, a man approached. His face was young and he wore a white robe and a look of sorrow.

Dirk's violet eyes reflected the sunlight as they glittered down at him.

...

The vision rushed into darkness and Luke started screaming. The pain, the injustice, the cold hand of death, all slammed into him. Wheezing, gasping screams rippled through the frozen rain that pelted his skin.

He sucked in a breath. "Damn it, why? Why do I have to remember what it is to die?" Tears dribbled down his face and he bellowed defiance to the sky.

Eventually, the sensation faded. Death fled and the darkness left his eyes. Luke wobbled to his feet and drew in a deep, cold breath. Memories flooded his mind. Lloyd Vindex. Eternal champion. So that was where the knife-fighter experience came from.

Four down. One to go.

"Luke! There you are. What are you doing?"

Luke glanced up. Kuyt was looking decidedly pissed off. At his side, Addie had her fighting leathers strapped tight and Ziplok loitered like a child behind them.

"I was..." Luke shook his head. "Doesn't matter. What do you want?"

"What do I want? Are you serious? It's time Luke!" Addie shook her head.

"Time for what?"

"The Walkers are coming through the Nest as we speak you moron!" Ziplok spat. "I swear, if you lied to me..."

Shit. "I didn't. Come on then. Are your men in place?"

Ziplok nodded. He unwound his *Catamidio* from his forearm.

"Everyone is ready. There is just a question of costume." Kuyt tossed the sack into the sand in front of Luke. "Get changed. It's time the Saviour stepped out of the shadows."

Chapter 16

Kain wiped the rain from his face.

The pitter-patter made it sound like the street were shiverin'. A greasy grey wind blew across the Mucro an' soured his smoky breath. Mud from the bank o' the river slimed between his toes.

Kain licked his lips an' tasted ice. Manacles clung to his wrists an' sent numb little goosepimplies all the way down to his fingertips. The pristine Caelum street were packed with grimy prisoners. The rusty smell o' city folk made it through his blocked nose. Even the rain couldn't clear the stink from this lot.

A Walker lass elbowed past an' ran a length o' chain around Kain's waist. She dropped the lock twice afore she managed to get it in place. She moved on to the lass chained right in front o' Kain.

"You'll burn for this." The prisoner held herself nice'n tall.

"Now that'd be something. Least then I'd be warm." The Walker lass shivered.

"The Saviour will see you die today." The lass' eyes sparkled. They were deep an' red in colour.

The Walker just smiled back. "We're counting on it. Now bolt your trap and get in line." She backhanded the prisoner, so hard it split her lip, but the lass didn't even flinch. Just turned her head an' spat a gob o' blood.

Kain tapped his lips together, but there were no hope o' his own jaws flappin' like that. Needed courage to spit at the reaper, an' he reckoned there weren't no bigger coward in the city right now then him.

When that noose tightened, he knew exactly how it would go. His legs would shake. His lips would quiver. His eyes would leak an' piss would steam down his

legs. He would beg an' bawl an' screech for a Ma who weren't there. An' he would die. In shit'n shame.

A disappointment right to the end.

One by one, the Walkers led their prisoners in different routes down the street. Some ran parallel to the Mucro, others vanished down wider streets almost instantly, an' one just marched right on down the main road, easy as you please.

Far too soon, it were Kain's turn.

The chain jerked an' he were moved forwards. Icy water leapt to bite his ankle an' his neck sent a vicious little sting down his spine. The chain jangled an' clattered between his feet. Every shake felt like his bones were scrapin' together an' he couldn't keep his jaw from judderin'. Nose were already leakin' like a tap, an' his throat were sore with the sharp air.

Kain's toe smacked into a pebble an' he bit his cheek. Bugger it. Had to be the only damn loose pebble in Arx an' all. Felt like he had the tip of a mountain jammed under his toenail but the chain were not a sympathetic thing. It just dragged him on through the rain.

One last bit o' agony then, afore the end. Kain sighed. It would o' been nice, just once, to walk without pain. To be normal.

They marched on.

Rich folk splashed around the coffle, haggled with shopkeepers, chuckled behind their hands, all like it weren't the last day of his life. A kid ran beside the Walkers for a moment, gigglin' all the way. The blackcloaks tugged their forelocks for the brat.

When the kiddie were gone, the lead Walker barked sommat into the storm, an' the chain jerked off the main road an' into a warren o' ratty buildings. Jagged roofs an' leanin' walls o' wood. At least they cut off some o' the rain.

The amount o' rubbish lobbed between the buildings were shockin'. The gunk of old food, ripped an' razor-sharp metal scraps, an' sommat that looked suspiciously like some bloke's finger.

The streets twisted like wheat in the wind. Every couple o' steps, a copper barrel were set in the sludge. How could anyone tell their arse from their elbow in here?

The chain fell slack an' the line stopped, so sudden that Kain had to slap his hand against the wall to keep from smackin' into the lass in front. What were goin' on?

He peered around the line o' prisoners. For the first time, the Walkers broke formation. Then he saw why.

Bodies filled the alleyway.

Dozens o' them, all dressed in black cloaks. So much blood. It were like a slaughterhouse. The red were so bright it looked like paint, splattered through the muck an' spotted on the side o' the buildin's.

A man emerged from a side street. His white uniform stood out like a flame in the dark. He held his arms out in welcome.

The Walkers drew their blades. The rasp o' steel filled the alleyway.

The man looked at 'em. Sized 'em up. Seven armed warriors, trained an' ready to slice him to bits. Impossible odds for anyone with even a lick o' sense.

But the bloke just smiled an' drew a knife o' his own.

Chapter 17

“You!”

The Walker Captain snarled at Luke, but there was no hiding the quaver in his voice. Fear *seeped* out of him.

“Me.” Luke flicked the rain from his sword-catcher knife with a flourish taken straight from Lloyd’s memories. The splinter of steel danced through the air. A simple threat.

Not like the damn costume. Luke tugged at his sleeves. Another one of Kuyt’s ‘great ideas.’ The outfit completes the role, apparently, but the cuffs of his trousers were already soaked in sludge and the thing was about as warm as a nightshirt. Not to mention that there was nowhere to hide a bloody knife. A sword catcher and three throwing knives. He was practically naked.

The Captain took a step back. “Dart. Guy. Go and find Captain Kuro. Inform him that we are engaging the ‘Saviour,’ and will require assistance.”

“You are brave, aren’t you?” Luke stepped forwards. “To so idly boast that you will deal with me. They were brave as well.” He flicked red water at the bodies on the ground. “I wonder, are the other squads just as brave? Listen?”

The Captain’s chin tilted up. The sound was faint, but unmistakable. Over the rain came the sound of steel. The sound of screaming. The sound of death.

“I’m afraid that Captain Kuro will be a little busy right now.” Luke grinned.

“You two. Citadel. Tell DeKeita we need more men, as many as he can get across the river, as soon as possible!” The Captain gave a wave of his hand and a pair of Walkers ran off through the alleyway. He turned back to Luke. “What do you want?”

Luke laughed, loud and harsh. Reilo's laughter echoed inside his head. "What makes you think I want anything? What if all I want is to watch you die? To see your blood spill in the gutters and leave you for the corpse carts?"

"Then you will fall." The Captain moved to draw his blade. "And we will burn the Nest down around you as you die."

Luke fingered a sender knife from his belt. "I already died a couple of times. Overrated. But why don't you give it a try?"

He threw the blade. Right through the Captain's throat. The man dropped without a word.

BY THE PRELUDE, I KILLED HIM!

Harri's voice pierced the inside of Luke's skull with an explosion of noise. It was like a rat was gnawing on his skull.

Three Walkers approached, blades drawn.

The screaming got louder, almost paralytic and Luke felt tears sting his eyes. His hand fell into his pocket to touch the metal. "My name is Luke!" he roared.

Without a thought, he threw himself at the Walkers.

Chapter 18

Kain huddled against the wall.

It felt like his bones were frozen, but the sound o' clashin' steel forced the pain from his mind.

So. This were that 'Saviour' everyone was talkin' 'bout.

The line o' prisoners were stretched across the wall. Three Walkers charged to engage the Saviour, but that Walker lass who had fastened the chains still stood guard. Her sword were plenty big enough to keep order.

At his side, the lass from before, the one with red eyes who refused to bow, were smilin'. Like the prospect o' being rescued by some lunatic surrounded by corpses were dead excitin'!

"I knew he would come for us! The Saviour does not abandon those loyal to him." The lass smirked.

"Didn't you just." The Walker grinned right back. "Gotta thank you for that. Without his bleeding heart, we never would have caught the bastard."

"You'll be the one bleeding before today is out." The prisoner stepped up. The rest o' the line were dragged right along with her.

The Walker snorted so hard that snot dribbled down her chin. "Give it a rest. Three-on-one and we've got swords. Your little 'Saviour' is already dead."

The prisoner hawked an' spat, right in the Walker's face. It dripped, with the rain, down her cheek. "Go and fuck yourself. Heathen."

The Walker lass wiped the gob from her jaw. A cold smile spread across her face. "You know, we've got orders. Signed by Var DeKeita himself. Any group that comes under attack is commanded to kill their prisoners instantly." She raised her blade. "I think you can die first."

"No!" Kain shouted. He couldn't just stand there an' watch it happen. He pulled the chain between his manacles taut an' leapt in front o' the blade. The sword struck in a shower o' sparks, inches from his face.

"Get. Off." The Walker grunted. She tried to pull her blade back, but it were caught fast. All she did were drag Kain closer.

He tried to scrabble back, but the floor were soggy an' his ankles were frozen. He went down with a squeal an' dragged the whole chain with him.

The world flashed around him. Black an' brown an' red. Dark edges. Faded light. Twisted limbs. Kickin' an' screamin'. A glob o' mud splattered across his face an' up his nose.

Kain spit the filth from his mouth an' wiped his eyes.

That lass prisoner were sat astraddle the Walker. The manacle chains were caught around the Walker's throat. The blade were just out o' reach, no matter how the Walker's fingers twitched. The other prisoners sat back in the muck. Some hissed encouragement. A bloke with half an ear gave vent to a horrid gurgle o' joy an' even clapped his hands.

The Walker grunted.

Kain watched in horror. The bunched up chain locked him so close he could feel the heat from the Walker's skin. He could see her eyes begin to bulge. Her face turned red, purple.

"Stop it. Please..." Kain whimpered.

"Bolt it cripple, or you're next." The red-eyed prisoner hissed. The veins in her neck twitched with effort.

"But you're killing her!"

"Kind'a the point." The lass caught her tongue between her lips.

She began to twist.

The chain tightened an' Kain were dragged even closer. The Walker's eyes were desperate. But there were nothin' he could do.

Crunch.

Chapter 19

Luke's arms burned.

He grimaced, leaking blood. The trio of blades whipped against him through the rain.

He didn't remember it being this hard.

The iron in his pocket might have quieted the voices, but it stole their experience. Lloyd's mastery was gone, vanished into the mist. Even Reilo's anger would have helped. Instead there was nothing. All he felt was tired.

"I don't suppose you fancy facing me one at a time?" His voice broke through the storm, and with it he hurled a throwing knife.

It missed. The blade clunked, hilt first, into the wall. So much for that.

Not that even one of the Walkers so much as blinked. He was running out of options. Only the narrow alleyway was keeping him alive.

A flicker. The blade leapt at his throat. Luke slammed his back into the wall to avoid the cut. Another blade swept at his legs. He parried awkwardly and skittered back.

The trio of Walkers advanced.

Luke spat. They were in no rush, clearly content to just wear him down. Worse, it was working. The sword-catcher felt like lead in his numb fingers. No way he was keeping this up much longer.

"Help me!" Luke gripped the gateway metal. What does a man do when confronted by multiple enemies and almost impossible odds?

He attacks.

Luke smiled at Lloyd's voice, faint from the back of his head. He flung himself at the Walkers. They retreated, but not fast enough. His sword-catcher pinged

between the blades, tossing attacks away. All he needed was one moment, a single misstep and...

There!

A Walker slipped on the slush and Luke lunged. He drove his blade straight for the blackcloak's heart. Raindrops pinged from his knife. Sweat froze on his forehead. Blood pounded inside his skull.

Clangg!

Luke's blade clashed into the Walker's hilt.

Shit.

The Walker parried instantly. His sword snatched out. Vibrations pierced the chill on Luke's hands. The Walker smashed into his weak guard, once, twice. The third strike caught the sword-catcher and sent it flying. It flicked through the rain and disappeared into the shadows.

Bollocks.

Luke fingered the last knife from his belt. A tiny needle of metal, it was next to useless. But it was balanced for throwing. Choices. Choices...

He wiped the rain from his eyes. If he turned to run, one of those blades would be through his hamstring before he took more than a step. Something was going on behind the Walkers, some struggle between the prisoners perhaps, but they didn't even turn.

They approached once more.

Right. Well, he had done his best. No one could argue against that, but now it was time for Plan B. One he had borrowed from Dirk.

"Kuyt! Now!"

The corpses rose from the dirt.

Chapter 20

On his knees, Kain wept.

The Walker were dead. Her neck a torn mess o' blood, cartilage an' sinew. The other prisoners were busy freein' 'emselves, but Kain clung to his chains.

Felt like he belonged in 'em.

An old bloke scuttled over. He wore a black cloak, but he didn't look like a Walker. A moustache fair split his whole face an' white hair were crusted to his scalp.

"You released your shackles. Good." Over his shoulder, the other 'corpses' made short work o' the last three Walkers. They wiped blood an' mud from their weapons. At least the knife at the old bloke's waist were clean.

Kain drew the Walker lady closer. She were still warm. Blood soaked his sleeves.

"Kuyt!" The lass prisoner grinned. Her red eyes sparkled.

The old man groaned an' clicked his back. "In the flesh. Sorry I let them take you, Danni. Never again. Now, let's get you lot somewhere safe and dry, eh?" He looked down to Kain. "And you lad. Come on. There is nothing more to be done here."

The Walker's dead eyes shone with rain. They were burnt brown an' dull.

"He's not right." The lass glared down with a look o' pure murder. "Limping away at the back like that. I say we leave him." Her voice were speckled with venom an' she still had that sword in her hands.

Kain stared at the blood on his hands. He were ready.

"Easy there girl." The old man held out a hand. He turned to the other fake Walkers. "Quill, you know the Foundry?"

A man with an aquiline face nodded.

“Good. Take them there and keep them safe. I’ll join you shortly.”

This ‘Quill’ nodded. He shouted a few commands an’ the prisoners were marched off into the darkness.

The old man knelt in the mud beside Kain an’ slung an arm around his shoulders. “It hurts, doesn’t it? Men like us, we aren’t made for a life of blood. No shame in that lad. But you gotta get up again. Else its all for naught.”

For a moment, the old bloke sounded so much like Pa that everythin’ stopped. The rain. The cold. For a single moment, everythin’ were gonna be okay.

Then the Saviour stomped over. “What’s going on Kuyt?” His voice broke time back into motion. The white costume was stained with red.

“This one just needs a moment.”

“We don’t have a moment. Damn it, but I’m already going to be late.” Blood dripped from the Saviour’s elbows. “Hang on. You’re that cripple from before.”

“I’m what?” Kain asked.

“Never mind. Come on Kuyt, we need to go.”

“Alright. Help me with him.” Kuyt stood with a grunt an’ heaved Kain to his feet.

Then the pain came.

Kain gurgled. Fire an’ irons through his body. Breath snorted through his nose. Even with Kuyt at his elbow, he shook with effort.

“You alright kid?” Kuyt patted his shoulder.

“No.” The world were an ocean o’ pain an’ he were drownin’ in it. “Just gimme a moment.”

The Saviour spoke right by his ear. “We. Don’t. Have. A. Moment!”

"Balls to it Luke, just get going." Kuyt shook his head. "You and Addie can manage alone."

"But what if there are still Walkers around? Come on, drop the cripple an' come with me. Give me one good reason why not."

Kuyt just shrugged. "Dunno. Guess I've got a soft spot for saving kids who are in way over their heads."

The Saviour snorted at that.

"Go on Luke. Addie needs you."

The Saviour bit his lip. For the first time, the lunatic looked human despite his soul-blue eyes. Then he gripped Kuyt's wrist. "Luck, old man."

Kuyt bit off a smile. "You too."

The Saviour nodded an' took off down the mess o' alleys. He vanished into the shadows.

"Just us now kid." Kuyt jammed hisself into the space under Kain's armpit. "One step at a time, eh?"

Kain nodded. He forced the pain down with a wince, an' lifted his foot.

They passed through the street slowly. Offshoot paths broke around them, but Kuyt led with sure steps. Kain strained his ears for the sound o' Walkers, but all he could hear were the damn rain. Felt like he were frozen on the inside.

The alleyway broke open with six routes spread out afore them.

"Just a moment," Kuyt said.

Kain were only too happy to stop. His smog-clouded breath broke the raindrops an' he coughed up sommat slimy.

The old man reached into his shirt an' pulled out a scrap o' paper. He squinted down at the thing an' scratched his moustache. "This one leads to the Foundry," he muttered. "This one the Ferriway..."

"That's where your Saviour bloke were goin', right?" Kain asked.

"Aye..." Kuyt chewed his cheek.

Kain shook his head. "Alright. I gotta know. Why do you follow that guy? Seems like a right loony to me, bein' honest." Probably a more polite way to ask that, 'specially o' the guy who had just saved his life, but he were too shattered to be tactful.

Kuyt stared off into the alleyway. "I've been following him for two years. I kept him alive, but he found a reason for it. Luke is a man worth following. When he knows his own mind." The old man scratched his neck. "I was too young to help the Ant, but damn it I am going to be there for Luke."

Kain laughed. "The Ant! You know, I wanted to be just like 'im. I learned how to read just so I could get through *Fall o' the Foundry*. The Ant were a real hero. I always wanted a piece o' that. Turns out, that occupation is a mite too dangerous for my likin'. Figure I'll be much happier back home. Just point the way. Then you can get back to your Saviour."

Kuyt scanned his bit o' paper. "It's not far." He gestured at an alleyway. "Just follow it round to the Austelli gate, but..."

"I can make it." Kain tested his ankle. "Go to 'im Kuyt. I reckon he's gonna need your help more'n I do."

The old man looked at 'im for a moment. He nodded. "Just make sure you hurry. They close the gates when the sun goes down." He gripped Kain's wrist. "Thanks lad."

Kain nodded an' the old man raised a hand in farewell. Like that, he were off.

Kain frowned up at the sky. The clouds hid the sun, but by his best reckonin', he had time. No different from gettin' back from the Kink afore supper. No different at all.

Cold, tired an' sore, Kain set his jaw.

Time to get home.

Chapter 21

“Luke! Where in the ever-living fuck have you been?”

Addie’s voice was almost lost to the storm. Ziplok stood beside her, his *Catamidio* wound around his waist. They were both covered in red and brown stains.

Luke slipped on the sludge of the Ferriway. “Kuyt’s not coming, but we go ahead as planned. How did your end go?”

Ziplok and Addie spoke together.

“Perfect!”

“A disaster!”

“What?” Luke glanced from Ziplok’s grin to Addie’s frown. Her eyes were creased with worry.

“Don’t listen to her. Today is a great day! We slaughtered those Walkers.”

Ziplok punched a fist in the sky. “The Nest is mine!”

“Yeah, and those prisoners died for it.”

“What? That can’t be true. My lot are heading to the Foundry right now. What happened?” Luke asked.

“The Walkers had their orders. If the prisoners weren’t getting to the Scaffold, then they were dying in the gutters.” Addie’s face was slack. Her eyes looked lost.

“It doesn’t matter. The Nest is thick with bodies. No Walker will ever think of moving in on my turf again!”

Luke felt hollow. So many. Dead on his orders. That wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

People die in rebellions. Deal with it.

Reilo's voice spat some steel into his backbone and Luke nodded.

"It's not about the dead. Damn it, Addie, they knew the risks. We push on. You have to see the bigger picture."

"Luke. We spoke about this. You can't force people to die for you."

Thunder boomed overhead. For a moment, the Ferriway was lit with pure, white light. Power. Change. Force. The sky crackled with energy and Luke drew on it. His body reacted. Refreshed.

"Yes I can!" He spat the words out with the water. "I'm the Saviour!" A rumble growled through the sky and moments later, a flash illuminated the Mucro like the river was on fire. "And we are ending this today, or their deaths will count for nothing."

Addie lowered her eyes to her hands and twisted the ring on her finger. When she looked back up, her eyes were determined. "Right."

"Ziplok, get your guys to Foundry. Kuyt should be there soon. Take stock of how many survivors made it, and we'll plan our next move."

"I don't answer to you." Ziplok folded his arms.

Luke grabbed the tiny man by his shoulders and snarled in his face. "Oh yes you do. You answer to me because when you answer to yourself you *let my people die!* If you argue, if you dare, then I'll burn the Nest down myself, do you understand!"

Ziplok's eyes were coals, but he nodded all the same and scuttled off.

"Good. Now, we just need to wait for..." Luke began.

"Oi. You two. We still doing this or what?"

They turned to the new voice. Ferra raised her giant hammer in greeting. A bag hung over her shoulder.

"Ferra, finally," Luke said. "Did you bring them?"

Ferra grinned and tossed the sack down between them. It opened and seven metal bars spilled out. Each had three thick prongs, about the size of two fists together, and a rubber plug on the back.

"What are those?" Addie asked.

"Chainlocks." Luke gestured to the links of iron that glistened on the banks. "Those chains run the barges, right? All those metal tubs are on the Caelum bank right now. If we lock them there..."

"The only way from Caelum will be the Nest." Addie widened her eyes.

"And we hold the Nest," Luke said. Reilo echoed the thought right back at him with a savage satisfaction.

"That's brilliant." Addie raised her eyebrows.

"Well, you know, I was due..." Luke scratched his sodden hair.

"We need to hurry." Ferra pointed across the river. On the other side, black-cloaked figures were piling through the smog. "These'll only work on a stationary chain. Too much force if they start moving."

"Then let's get to it," Luke said.

Together, they lifted one of the locks over a chain, each prong inside a different link. Addie helped him set it in place. Ferra's hammer came down and slammed the metal down. The vibrations bit into his hand and the tines dug into the clay of the riverbank.

One down. A spear of lightning illuminated the sky.

Luke sweated and shivered in equal measure. The three of them moved through the chains as fast as they could, but each lock weighed a ton and no matter how fast Ferra moved, the things took ages to get in place.

With just one lock left, a barge began to move across the river.

Ferra groaned and stepped back. "Damn it."

Addie grit her teeth. "So close!"

Luke glanced up at the barge. "They wouldn't send more than one squad at a time, right? The day we can't take out seven idiots is the day we don't deserve to draw breath. How about it Addie? You wanna take Austellus with me? One last fight."

She looked up at him. A hatchet twirled in her hands. "One last fight."

Ferra stepped forward. "Need a hand? It's been a while since I got to tear into someone."

Luke clasped her hand. "How could I refuse such a gracious offer?"

Ferra snorted.

They spread out along the bank and watched the barge make its slow way across the river. Luke felt his heart beating in his chest. Slow. Methodical. Lloyd's advice whispered to him. Strategies for taking more than one enemy. His memories made it seem easy.

The barge squelched into the muck and the back ramp began to descend in a groan of rusted metal. Thunder speared the sky overhead and illuminated the Spire, far in the distance.

"You ready?" Luke shouted. He looked to Addie and Ferra. They both nodded.

He bent his knees and gripped his knife ready.

The ramp splashed into the dirt and Luke gasped. Instead of seven, only a single figure stepped free from the barge.

A figure in blue-silver armour.

Chapter 22

A pair o' gates rose afore Kain.

He limped slowly. Felt like his legs were encased in ice. Every breath came with a sharp stab o' cold air, but bugger all that. He still smiled.

He were on his way home.

The big street were odd quiet around him. Well, except for that damn thunder. Every boom had him jumpin' half to heaven. At least there were no one around to see him twitchin' like a toddler.

The gates were just as tall as he remembered 'em. No Walkers this time. No one to stop him. He could already feel the free wind o' the grasslands on his face.

"Hopalong! Wait."

Kain turned. "Fetch. What're you doin' here?"

"Saving you, kid. At least, I was gonna. Damn Saviour beat me to the punch. Always stabbing that man. Today was nothing a bribe couldn't solve." He hefted a heavy purse in his hand. "Captain Ramsey and I go way back. Greedy bugger would have let you go, no question."

"Well, it don't matter now, does it?" Kain smiled. "I made it. Saviour or no."

"Uh, yeah. But that's the thing kid. You keep going that way and you're dead."

The words fell from Fetch's mouth. The remains o' the old man's hair were wild around his face an' his shirt were skewiff. There were blood on his face. Didn't look like he'd had the best o' days.

"What d'you mean Fetch? I'm out! Couple more steps an' Arx can bugger itself to infinity."

"Ahh kid. I can't go through a generation of politics for you right now, but anyone found on the roads in the next week is gonna get cut down, no questions.

Just had the word from the Upper Senate. Tonight is a debacle they don't want telling. No one escapes tonight."

"But..." Kain turned back to the gates. Three steps, that all it would take. Grass back between his toes. A table o' grub waitin' at home. Warm fireplace, soft bed. Family.

"I can still help you kid. Let me introduce you to someone. He can help. Promise."

"I just wanna go home..." Kain murmured. Why couldn't it just be easy?

Fetch shrugged. "Well you can risk it if you want lad. Nothing wrong with that. But you'll die. Sure as the sun rises in the morning."

Kain twisted his neck. Fetch's grimy face on one side. The grassland on the other. Thunder stabbed in the distance. Lightning boomed overhead

"Trust me kid. I can help you." Fetch held out his hand.

On his index finger, a copper ring shone in the rain.

Kain turned his back on the gate with a sigh.

"I do trust you Fetch. Lead the way."

Chapter 23

The role of the Enforcer was debated for generations. With Austellus in such a volatile state, there were arguments that the implementation of a judge-executioner would only add fuel to the fire. Counter arguments included...

“Try something helpful, Vincent!” Luke shouted at himself. The Enforcer’s axe whipped out, just missing his side and sending sludge flying.

“Luke. Focus!” Addie slammed her hatchets into the Enforcer’s blade. He shrugged her attack off and spun.

Luke ducked under the Enforcer’s sweeping attack and leapt back. No matter how he wracked his brain, there was no strategy forthcoming. Even Lloyd was at a loss as to how to kill a heavily armoured opponent with just a throwing knife.

And it’s not like Luke remembered how he killed the last one.

The Enforcer lunged for Addie but she danced away, her hatchets a blur of metal. Ferra stepped in and met the Enforcer’s axe with her hammer. A *clanggg* burst through the Ferriway and the impact sent Ferra sprawling away.

Luke burst forwards. He twirled his tiny knife in his fist. Wouldn’t do much, but momentum on the other hand...

He crashed into the Enforcer’s back and forced it off a step. A shockwave smashed through his arms. The Enforcer shoved back and Luke was thrown aside. The Enforcer stepped in and swung its axe down.

Crash!

Addie stood over him, her hatchets held beneath the blow. Blood dripped down her arms.

“Addie get clear!”

She threw the Enforcer's axe back and yanked Luke to his feet. "No heroics, idiot. We take him together."

Luke nodded. He began to circle the armoured monster. Ferra and Addie joined him. The giant turned its dead face to each of them in turn.

The Enforcer charged at Addie. Mud flew from the armoured boot. His axe flashed and Addie met him with her hatchets. He shrugged off her blow and tore the hatchets from her hands in one deft motion. An armoured leg lashed out and crunched into her stomach. She went down with a crash and her eyes rolled back into her head.

"Addie!" Luke roared and pounded at the Enforcer. Without thinking, he leapt on the giant's back. A hint of skin peered from an armoured shoulder and he jammed the knife down. It bit and held and did precisely nothing.

The giant twisted his arm and grabbed Luke from his back. Metal fingers clamped shut around his neck. The Enforcer held him, helpless as a doll, right out over the Mucro.

Luke panicked. For the first time, four voices were united with his.

I don't want to die.

He scrabbled his fingernails against the Enforcer's hand, but it was like a mechanical vice. No escape. Already breath was hard. A noose around his neck.

Ferra raced forwards, her hammer held over her head and aimed right at the Enforcer's arm. That much weight behind her attack and even armour wouldn't stop her. All she had to do was...

The Enforcer snapped a fist at her face and Ferra smashed into the floor in a spray of mud and slime. Her hammer spun away and blood bubbled between her lips.

The Enforcer began to squeeze.

Luke's heartbeat rushed in his ears. Vision began to fade. Red dots swarmed in his eyes. The rain faded. He was warm. No breath. Tight. Darkness.

Something exploded. Blue light flashed over the Ferriway.

The Enforcer's grip slackened, just for a moment, and Luke sucked in a life-giving breath.

Attack! Lloyd's voice was a command not to be ignored.

Luke lashed out with his hands and tore at the edge of the Enforcer's mask. A loose clasp came off and he threw the metal mask into the muck. A dark haired face peered out at him, mouth twisted with the snarl.

Luke reached out and jammed his finger into the Enforcer's eyes. His second hand slithered across the giant's sweat-slick cheeks. He dug his finger into the Enforcer's nose. His jagged fingernail tore into the soft flesh.

Bleed, Caelum scum!

The giant roared in pain, but Luke pressed deeper. Felt his finger sink into the oddly solid eyeball. Blood began to seep down his wrist. The Enforcer's screams were like music.

Then Luke was flying through the air, flopping and spinning. He slammed into the ground, winded but alive. Every gasp hurt and he rubbed his throat with a wince.

A maelstrom was building in the sky above him. Black smoke, thick as sin, curled through the sky. Blasts of thunder ripped through the clouds. Black rain fell. A proper Austelli storm. It was fitting.

He wobbled to his feet. The Enforcer turned to him. Blood ran from the giant's nose and down his chin and one eye was bulging red, but he was very much alive. Black rain stained the polished armour.

The Enforcer came forwards. He lifted his axe from the mud and shook the muck free. Luke's muddy hands swept over his ridiculous Saviour costume, but it was useless. No more knives. No more fighting. He cast about in the mud for something, anything, but there wasn't so much as a loose rock.

The Enforcer's face twisted in a vengeful snarl and the axe rose, high over his head.

"LUKE!" Addie screamed. One leg was crooked behind her. She flung a hatchet from the floor and it flew through the air to land before him.

Luke drew on every instinct Lloyd had and threw himself aside. The axe shattered the cobblestones where he had been standing. In one motion, he scooped up Addie's hatchet and dodged behind the Enforcer.

He brought it down with all he had on the back of an armoured knee.

The Enforcer screamed. One leg crumpled and his axe spun through the slime, just out of reach. Blood mingled with the black rain.

Luke stepped back to the Enforcer's face.

"You should have died." The Enforcer's voice was like gravel down a gutter pipe. It made a move like it would stand, but the leg was gone. It crashed back into the sludge.

Without a word, Luke slammed Addie's hatchet into the centre of the Enforcer's forehead. The giant fell with a crunch.

"I don't die."

Rain fell on Luke face. Cold as life. Smog wisped around his lips. His throat was sore and his back a scrabbled mess of pain, grit, slime and blood.

But he smiled.

"We did it! We actually did it." He threw back his head and laughed.

"We did." Addie's face was pained. She limped with a clearly broken leg dragging behind her. What did it cost her, that strength?

"Addie." Her name was a balm. Wordlessly, he pulled her into an embrace. Her arms wrapped around him, so tight it hurt, but he didn't care. Let it hurt.

It was finally over.

"Luke." The look on her face stole the breath from his lungs.

She kissed him. Behind the blood and the soot and the sour, black rain, was the taste of her. It filled his mouth with the sweetest taste he could remember.

"If you two are done..." Ferra's grumpy voice broke the kiss and Luke glanced over. The Mindbreaker was holding a hand to her chest and dragged her hammer behind her.

"Well, for now." He turned to Addie with a wink.

Another explosion, so strong the air hit like a slap. Raindrops sliced at his skin. This time, he saw the source of the blue light. A column of blue flame rose through the sky.

A copper ring flashed on Ferra's finger and she breathed deep. Bruises, cuts, blood all faded and disappeared into her skin. The smog swarmed her and when it vanished, her wounds were gone. She held her hammer in one hand once more. Easy.

"Ferra? What's going on?" Luke turned to her.

"The signal," she said.

She slammed her hammer into his knee.

Luke screamed. The sound of cracking bone followed him down into the mud. Water from the Mucro splashed around his shoulders. "Addie. Run!"

"I don't think so Luke." Addie spoke softly. The copper ring, the one she had worn for him all that time ago, began to glow. Her leg straightened and snapped back straight. The scrape on her elbow vanished.

No.

Luke scrabbled back. His knee was an epicentre of agony. Even the small movement sent spears of light through him. "Addie. Not you." Stupid tears formed in his eyes. "We could have turned the tide today. We won! Caelum would have listened to us, they would have..."

Addie laughed. It was a harsh sound. A cruel one. The ring on her finger glowed brighter. "Caelum? You really don't see it do you Luke? This is so much bigger than that."

"What are you talking about?"

"He said that you could not be trusted. A man throws his mind away is the biggest kind of coward." Addie looked at the copper ring.

"He?" Ice froze in Luke's veins. "You've been talking to Dirk."

"He is always with me now." She touched the ring with an odd sort of tenderness.

"Damn it, why? You know what he did to me!"

"I do. Do you know he considers you his biggest failure? It cuts him deep to see you like this." She looked down at him. Her eyes were violet. Just like Dirk's.

Ferra stepped in. "I was going to make it painless when we were in Memoria, but Dirk needed *someone* to take the Mucro for him. And you killed an Enforcer! You did everything we needed and more Luke. Don't worry. We'll let everyone know it was you that killed the beast. Isn't that what you wanted? To lead a revolt. Death to your enemies, and so on? Your name will live on. Even if you won't."

She smashed her hammer into his stomach. Pain clawed at his insides. It screamed through his body. Ribs shattered. Organs burst.

A pink tear rolled down Luke's nose. Blood splattered between his lips. Black rain fell across his face. The sky overhead boiled with soot-soaked clouds.

"Austellus belongs to Dirk now. We will use your name to take it from the Walkers. I remember it Luke. I remember everything. Nothing ever changes." Addie's voice was soft. Her mouth was turned up in a snarl but her eyes, her new violet eyes. They were weeping.

"Addie. Please," Luke whispered. He wanted to run. To scream. To find a blade and open his wrists. But he couldn't. He was frozen.

He was dying.

The last thing he saw was Addie's terrible smile.

Then darkness.

Chapter 24

Sam sat in the Midnight Chamber.

A storm licked at the crystal windows and the occasional boom of thunder rocked the stool she was sat on. Lightning lit the carpet beneath her feet. It was red as violence.

A sodding week to organise this farce of a 'trial' and even now, the room was half-empty. If that didn't take the cake, the biscuit and the piss, then nothing did. Antonio DeMori and Leanne DeSüle were missing. DeMori at least had an excuse, the servants whispered of his visit to the mines near the Deadlands. Apparently some areas of the Patriae Wall were falling into disrepair and as the Stone Lord, it was his job to fix them.

DeSüle had no such excuses. No one seemed to know where she was. Sod it, but a female face would have been more than welcome right then.

The other five sat in silence. High-backed chairs with crystal decals were arranged in a semi-circle around her, each with a glass of wine sat on the arm. She had nothing but a glass of grubby water to keep her throat clear.

"Samantha DeAcarris. You sit before the Named Lords of Arx to be held accountable for your actions." Simon DeProleai did not shout. His fury was not a leap of flames, but the anger of coals. His eyes glittered in his sunken face and cloth-of-gold clung to his shoulders. "You will not speak unless it is to answer a direct question and you will keep your answers short and certain. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Sam pulled the neck of her gown. She took a sip of water. Sodding stuff tasted like grit, but it was all she had.

"Well, I'll get things rolling, shall I?" Walter DeWhit leant in. His ginger beard was freshly trimmed but his unbound hair fell all the way to his neck. "What were you thinking? To lose the damn heir to the city takes some doing, you little scatterbrain." DeWhit thumped the arm of his chair and set his wineglass rocking.

"Walter. We did not call her here to insult her." Andross DeGaya picked up his wineglass and ran a finger across the rim. His intelligent eyes met hers and held them. "What I want to know is what happened? You cannot expect us to believe that Matthew merely wandered off."

"No. He was taken. Kidnapped."

"By whom?"

Sam ran her fingers down the sides of her nose. "By two men. Like none I have ever seen. One had violet eyes and the other... his were like frozen smoke. All blue. They appeared beside me and stole Matthew away."

"How?"

"I... can't remember." Sam scowled. The moment she tried to think back, her mind shied away.

Sam ran a fingernail across her neck. The loss of Mother's ring was keen as a slit throat.

She was such a coward.

"Samantha. Look at me please."

Sam raised her eyes. Var DeKeita's eyes were kind, but bloodshot.

"Listen, I know this is difficult. I've seen men with wounds that took their minds from them. I've notified wives and husbands that their spouses are deceased. Even now, the Temple is filled with Walkers who cannot remember their own names. But I need you to try for me. I need you to really think. Is there anything, anything you can remember, that might help us find young Matthew?"

Sam picked at a fingernail. Of course not. But there was something about the way he spoke. Almost like... he understood. She squeezed her eyes shut as tightly as she could. Was there something there? Something other than darkness? Maybe...

A glimpse. Tiny, but it was something and she clung to it with everything she had.

"Blue fire. The violet-eyed man. He held blue fire."

"Thank you, Samantha." Var DeKeita glanced over at one of the empty chairs around the table, a thoughtful look on his face.

"DeAcarris." Simon DeProleai's voice was almost a whisper.

"My Lord?"

"Why were you were beneath our city? The Catacombs are expressly forbidden."

"Something wanton, probably," Jace DeSané said. "They are a young couple, after all."

"I did not ask you, DeSané! I asked the girl why she believes that the laws of our city do not apply? Why she believes she can pervert my son into disobedience!" He turned his eyes on Sam. She couldn't speak.

"Simon, enough." Var DeKeita stood up. "You have dragged this out long enough. Surely we have better things to do than question the poor girl. Damn it man, Austellus is..."

"Austellus can burn!" DeProleai's voice was like a whip. His eyes bulged in his face and he rounded on Sam. "That hive of scum should never have been allowed to exist in my city! Well girl? What was it? What chains do you have around my son to force him to your will?"

DeProleai's glare wrapped around her throat. She couldn't breathe. His voice got louder with each word until he was shouting at her. The Citadel seemed to shake with the strength of it. "Are you threatening him? Did you blackmail him? Are you fucking him? Is that it? Is my boy depraved? Why? Why! Why did he pick you?"

"Because he hates you!" The words leapt from Sam's mouth before she could stop them. "Because he was sick of you trying to spend him like a coin! Because Matthew cares about this city, and that includes Austellus! But you won't listen, will you? No, because all you care about is your *power* and trying to turn back time! Why else would you...?"

A Walker burst into the Midnight Chamber. He was drenched and the stink of smoke and rust followed him like a cloud of flies. Blood ran down his arm. His stomach was dripping with black and his face twisted in pain.

"What is the meaning of this?" Simon DeProleai demanded.

"Apologies, my lords, my lady." The Walker's voice was tight.

"Don't be stupid." Var DeKeita dragged his own chair over to the Walker. "Sit, sit down. Dart, isn't it? What's going on?"

"My lord, I will stand." The Walker cradled his hand. His fingers were broken and crushed into a swollen fist and black and red. His whole body radiated exhaustion, shook with it, but his legs did not waver. "Austellus is lost."

Silence fell on the room like a blanket of snow.

"What do you mean lad?" Var asked.

"Blue fire. From that Foundry crater. A new group, copper rings and glowing eyes. We tried to run, but when that blue fire started up, they stopped dying. They fight like devils. Dedisco walks in Arx tonight."

At the mention of the Foundry, Var's face crushed into a look of panic.

"Damn it man!" DeSané stood up. "Don't we train you to report properly anymore?" He downed his wine in a single gulp.

"Sorry, my lord." The Walker bowed. A splatter of blood leaked from his stomach. "My squad, we met the Saviour. Captain Ramsey sent Guy and me back for reinforcements but a new group found us. Three of them. We cut them down but then that blue fire broke the sky. The dead men stood back up. I swear it! They killed Guy and broke my hand but... let me go." Tears stood in the Walker's eyes. "The barges are lost. I swam the Mucro."

Sam could hear the blood in her ears. Blue fire. Men who disappeared. It was so familiar.

"What of the Enforcer lad?" Var DeKeita spoke softly.

"He went across. Alone. Told us it wasn't worth us risking our lives, but..." The Walker's lip quivered. "My lord. There is no chance he survived." The Walker took a step and crumpled. He fell over the back of Var's chair and splattered it with his blood.

Var touched the Walker's wrist. "Dead."

Then something began to glow, deep within the ruins of the Walker's hand.

The dead man smiled and stood back up.

"My Lords. Such a pleasure to see you all." The voice grated from his throat. Heavier than before. Unnatural. *"Walter. Jace. Var. Ant."* He turned to the Named Lords and nodded in turn. Then those blue-fire eyes found DeProleai. *"Simon. Except it's not just Simon anymore, is it? Aurellius. How is the new body treating you?"*

Sam scrabbled backwards, but the fire-eyes never landed on her. What name had he called DeProleai? By the Prelude, what was going on?

Var DeKeita took a step back. "What... who are you?"

The Walker turned to Var and smiled. Blue fire flickered from his lips. *"My name is Dirk. I am the new Lord of Austellus."*

Andross DeGaya shook his head. His eyes were wide and white. "No... No, you are a dead man."

"Truly, I apologise for the state of my messenger." The Walker-corpse reached under his shirt and drew back a hand shining with gore. He shook his head. *"So uncouth. A shame. He fought well. They all did. A credit to you, DeKeita. But that is over now."*

"What do you mean?" Andross DeGaya bristled. He stood up and balled his fists, for all purposes like he would punch the man. The corpse.

"I have rooted the Walkers out and taken the Mucro. Only one barge is still running and I control the Ferriway."

"No." Simon DeProleai shook his head. "There are always more Walkers. This is my city and you will not have a single inch of my ground."

"Now now, there is no need for us to fight. Have no fear. When I am done, Austellus will be calm and clean and yours again. You were on my side once before, Aurellius. Don't you remember?"

DeProleai's eyes were tight with contempt. "I look forward to seeing you hang."

"That attitude is not very progressive. Though I had expected as much. That's why I took Matthew."

A pause.

"Liar." DeProleai crossed his arms.

"I thought you'd say that. You know, one of the best parts about stabbing folk is that they don't notice what you slip in their pockets." The corpse reached into his trousers and flung something at DeProleai.

DeProleai caught it. For a moment, his mask broke and worry crushed his face. He looked up. Not at the corpse.

At Sam.

His fingers twitched and something rolled towards her. Something familiar.

A silver link of chain, carved with red jasper.

"You have my son." Simon DeProleai spoke in a dead voice. "Where?"

"He is with a friend. All you need to do to keep him alive is leave Austellus in my hands."

Simon DeProleai said nothing.

"How dare you!" Var DeKeita stepped forwards. "Matthew may be important, but he is not worth half of this city!" His eyes narrowed. "You will pay for killing my men."

"I thought you preferred it when they die. I'm not sure your temple has room for many more."

"You... !" Var DeKeita's face was red. Men without minds.

The day Mother's ring was stolen.

"You took it, didn't you?" Sam stood up. "My Mother's ring from around my neck when I slept." A vision blasted through her mind. Violet eyes. "My ring and my fiancé. You have stolen them both from me."

"It's only fair. It was my knife that created it in the first place." Those blue-fire eyes found hers and Sam's sweat ran cold. A vision surfaced. The man who stood in the shadows as her Mother died.

Var took another step closer. He held a wine bottle in his hand like a club. The Walker's eyes snapped to his face.

"You will not be convinced, will you? Very well."

Everything happened in a blur. The Walker leapt forwards. His hand jumped towards Var's throat. The old man didn't have time to move.

DeGaya did.

From somewhere he produced a short-sword and leapt at the Walker. His strike was so fierce it separated the head from the body. As soon as the cut connected, the blue fire eyes faded. The Walker's head rolled to the carpet.

Sam fell to her knees. Hot bile stung her throat.

The Midnight Chamber was chaos. Servants raced about. Wine splashed into the carpet. The scent of death broke the air.

"Guards! Guards!" DeWhit shouted, like a child seeking his mother, but no guards were coming.

"Dead... he's dead... he's dead..." Jace DeSané gibbered like a madman.

Something glittered beside the Walker's body. A copper ring, covered in blood. Without thinking, Sam snatched it up. Two words were etched on its surface.

CETERA DESUNT.

"Andross..." Var said in a shaken voice. "Thank you."

DeGaya nodded and flicked the blood from his blade with a practised flourish. "I told you another Enforcer would not work. Perhaps now we can do better. Come. We need to get to the Mucro. Your men need you Var. That madman cannot be allowed to hold Austellus. We fight together this time."

Var DeKeita took a deep, shuddering breath. "You're right." He turned to Simon DeProleai and bowed. "By your leave, my Lord." Together the pair pushed through the doors. For a moment, they looked like young men.

"My Lord." Jace DeSané spoke to DeProleai, but his eyes were trapped on the corpse. "What do we do now?"

Simon DeProleai did not respond. He just knit his fingers together and stared at the door.

"Perhaps we should adjourn?" Walter DeWhit shook his head as if to try and regain some colour in his cheeks. "Save this... trial for a more appropriate time?"

Simon DeProleai said nothing. DeWhit waited a moment, and then nodded at DeSané. The pair bowed to Simon DeProleai. They excused themselves from the room.

And like that, Sam was alone with DeProleai. And the corpse.

"My Lord. May I be excused?"

Simon DeProleai turned slowly. His eyes found hers and pierced them. His voice was flat. "Samantha DeAcarris. Though the law prevents me from annulling your marriage without my son present, I want you to be aware that, as soon as he returns, I will tear that chain from you myself, even if I have to cut off your hand. Now get out of my sight!" DeProleai's teeth were bared and glistening.

Sam fled from the room.

Out in the courtyard, she panted. The cold wind slapped some sense into her mind and some red in her cheeks.

Austellus was burning.

Even from the Citadel she could see it. Thick, oily smoke that rose in the distance. She squinted. Flashes of blue light lit the night. A fresh blanket of black fog boiled through the city sky and ash fell with it.

"Sammy!" Father pounded down the pathway towards her, his shirtsleeves flapping in the wind.

"Father! What are you doing here?"

Father just swept towards her and lifted her into an enormous hug. "Thank the Prelude! Var DeKeita just ran past. He said something about an assassin in the

Midnight Chamber! I'm so glad you are safe." Father put her down. "What happened?"

Sam ran through the events for the old man. By the end he was shaking his head and he reached out to take her hand.

"This is all wrong. Come on. I am getting you home."

Together they raced back towards the house, noble residences flashing by in a haze. Twice they were forced from the road for squads of Walkers to pound past. The night was alive with torches and shouting. The stink of smoke got worse as they walked. Father ignored it all.

"Excuse me sir?" A young lad appeared from the shadows.

"Not now son," Father said.

"I apologise, but you are Lord DeAcarris, correct? I have an urgent message for you from Lord DeMane."

"DeMane? Give it here!" Father snatched the missive from the trembling lad's hand. He tore it open and scanned the contents. "No. No this is not right!"

"What is it Father?" Sam stepped towards him.

"Our contract with Lord DeMane, mining in the Desolation Belt. This was all signed and notarised but now... I am being told it was all a forgery? Is that right?"

"I am afraid so sir." The messenger looked terrified.

"But I've already paid..." Father shook his head. He turned to Sam. "I need to go and deal with this. Can you find your own way home?"

"Of course." Sam tried a smile. Lord DeMane was DeProleai's man through and through. This 'deal' was a gratuity, a pre-celebration of her supposed nuptials.

Her heart sank to her shoes.

Father took off at a lumbering jog and the messenger lad raced off behind him.

Sam forged onwards. The night was loud and bright and dangerous. The sound of blades clashing broke the air.

But she did not go home. Instead, she took the road for Steelhammer Row. Blue fire. Violet eyes. Copper rings. Only one person would know about all of those things. Ignis had some questions to answer. It was past time.

But when she got there she found the tent had disappeared. There were no signs it had ever been and the blacksmiths working late had no idea who she was talking about. A woman with a shaven head and scalp tattoos? Reckon they would remember someone like that!

It was like Mistress Ignis had never existed at all.

Chapter 25

Kain followed Fetch down the street.

The rain were slowin'. There were sommat. Gotta take the silver linin' on a night like this. Darkness grabbed hold o' Austellus like it weren't never lettin' go.

Kain blew out a smoky breath. It became a whimper. He crushed his eyes closed for a moment. Some hero he turned out to be.

"Where are we goin'?" he called to Fetch. Tried to distract hisself, but it didn't work. Felt like maggots were chewin' through his legs.

"Foundry. Heard of it?"

"Nope."

"Well we're close, so mush kid."

Great advice that. Worthy o' Pa hisself. "Oh aye. I'll just quit bein' a cripple then, shall I?"

Fetch snorted. "Come on lad."

He led them 'round a smashed factory twice the size o' the cottage back home. The street split out wide an' Kain followed Fetch right down the middle.

"Here," Fetch said.

'Here' turned out to be some great bugger's hole in the floor. Scorch marks'n char surrounded the thing. Shattered bricks an' glass littered the floor all around, like some massive kiddie had thrown a tantrum an' knocked all his toys on the floor.

Kain raised an eyebrow. He were just about to ask Fetch if his brain were addled, when a wave o' heat wrapped his limbs. Felt like all the warmth that'd been stolen from the day were released in one great burst. Delicious, bone-thawin' heat. It tingled through his tired muscles.

Fetch marched over to the lip o' the whackin' great void an' took a step down on to a hidden staircase. "Come on," he said like there were nothin' unusual about crawlin' down some great hole to nowhere.

Kain crept right along with him. A good little ducklin' trailin' after Mama. Not like there were anythin' else he could do. The gates would be locked by now.

Why were it always bleedin' stairs? Carved from rock an' slippery with soot. Who thought that were a good idea? Didn't even have a damn handrail. An' Arx were supposed to be civilised an' all.

Fetch couldn't give a nugget though. Walkin' down like it were just that easy.

Kain forced his foot down. Nice'n slow.

His ankle twisted beneath him. Arms whopped an' wailed into the darkness, just tryin' to keep the world underneath 'im. Just about managed to stay on his toes. A vine o' pain strangled his hips.

Kain gasped a couple o' breaths an' waited for his damn heart to stop tryin' to batter his ribs open. Waitin' wouldn't make it no quicker.

Step.

Wait.

Breathe.

Bugger it, but they were never endin'! He snorted an' sniffled his way down. Bile rose in his throat an' dripped from the corner o' his mouth, hot an' sour.

When his foot finally hit solid ground again, Fetch were nowhere to be seen. The old bugger must o' got sick o' waitin', so Kain just took a moment. Just to grab a breath.

The Foundry roared.

Kain held his hands to his ears. Heat blasted at him. A column o' blue flame rose from a pit right in front o' him.

Blue fire. Not again.

He scrambled around the pit o' gold an' followed Fetch on to a balcony made o' sheet metal an' set his elbows on the edge. "Fetch. What's goin' on?"

"We're waiting." The old man started to whistle.

"For?"

"Relax kid. He always knows where I am. Shouldn't be too long."

Kain sighed. More waitin'. If there were one thing Arx liked more'n hurtin' folk, it were makin' 'em wait. He peered off the balcony.

People stood bellow. Just a handful, but as soon as he glanced over, they all looked up. Their eyes were glowin'. Blue

"What's goin' on?"

Fetch smiled, but there were no humour in it. He twisted the copper ring on his finger. "I'm afraid they have all been taking my suggestions for jewellery."

"What does that mean?"

"It's probably best you don't know, kid." The old man took a flask from his pocket an' unscrewed the cap. The harsh stink o' liquor filled the cavern. Fetch upended the thing in his mouth. He swallowed'n smiled. "Want some?"

"No. Come on Fetch, what're you doin'? I gotta get home. I gotta tell Pa... bugger it, I gotta tell him everthin'. 'Sides, he'll need my help bringin' in the last o' the harvest. Weather is already startin' to turn. An' I don't have no more clothes, an' Abi will..."

"Kid. You're babbling." Fetch capped the flask an' tucked it away. "Just a little longer, alright?"

Sommat happened the moment Fetch stopped speakin'.

A change in the air. A skip o' time. Like reality were catchin' up to itself in a shift.

Kain turned. A man stood beside him, dressed in black'n gold. Tall an' expressionless there were an... aura that surrounded him. A presence that drew the eye. Like at the single stationary point in the sky, when all else is movin'. His eyes were violet as the sunset. Sommat familiar about that...

A woman stood behind him. She were dirty as anythin', rain-soaked clothes spotted an' splashed with filth. Her blonde hair were matted to her face, but her amber eyes were blank. She wore a copper ring.

"Kain. I'm glad Fetch found you. I have a gift for you," the man said.

"What do you mean?" Kain tried real hard to clamp down on the shudder in his voice.

The man didn't respond. Instead, he held out his hand. Fetch slapped a knife into his waitin' palm, an' the lass beside him rolled up her sleeve. The man struck quickly. His blade dug into her flesh.

She didn't even cry. Didn't flinch, even when the bloke ripped his knife free in a spray o' blood. The wound spurted like he'd hit sommat important.

"Observe." The man tossed his knife aside an' shoved his hand into his pocket. He closed his eyes.

Another blast o' blue flame.

The wound in her arm began to heal.

Kain watched, spellbound. The blood began to slow, an' stop, like someone inside her arm had turned the tap off. Then the flesh... it knit back together. Not like a real cut, there were no puckin' or scarin' or scabs. Just smooth, unbroken flesh.

Kain felt his heart beat in his throat. A miracle, he were watchin' a miracle. No other words for it.

"Your body would take longer, of course. But it could be done." The man spoke in his soft, singsong voice.

"Not bad eh?" Fetch slapped him on the back an' Kain groaned at the tremor that followed.

No. Not bad at all. "Magic," were all Kain could manage.

The man smirked. His violet eyes glittered. "In a fashion. I am a Mindbreaker. I can cut away memories of pain. When a memory is gone, the physical effect of that memory disappears. I erased the memory of my knife from Adira's mind. I can erase the memory of your pain just as easy."

Kain licked his lips. Sweat poured down his arms. The room were swelterin'. He took a breath an' a sliver o' pain slashed at his arse.

Pain.

His constant companion. A knife beneath the fingernails. A screw turnin' in his feet. Breathin', movin', eatin'... it were always there. Sure, he could force it aside. Do his best to ignore it. But that were near impossible when even sommat as small as trippin' over made it feel like his bones were made o' broken glass. To be free o' that. To be normal...

Perhaps Pa would finally be proud o' him.

"What would I have to do?" Kain asked.

"Nothing." The man's smile didn't reach those violet eyes. "Just forget the source of your pain."

"The source? But... that's my whole life. Childhood an' all."

"Exactly."

Kain sighed. Always too good to be true. He smiled a slow, sad smile. "Not a chance."

"Excuse me?"

"I've been a cripple all my life. If I gotta chose between memories or pain, I'll choose memories every time. Not worth bein' able to walk if it 'ain't me doin' the walkin', if you get me? Uh, not that I don't appreciate the offer."

The man looked at Kain for a long moment. His tongue darted to lick his lips. Then he nodded. "I apologise..."

"Nah, don't sweat it." Kain grinned. "I just..."

"... that you thought it was a choice. Adira. Take him."

The woman leapt at him. Her hands tightened around Kain's arms. He struggled, but she just lifted him higher. She moved him like he were a sulky infant.

"Let go!" he shouted.

"Come on," Fetch said. "Is this really necessary? He said he doesn't..."

"Would you rather take his place, Fetch?" The man folded his arms.

Fetch looked at Kain. His eyes were full o' fear. He shook his head.

"Then stay silent."

Kain were shifted through the cavern in a watery haze o' pain. He felt stone slam into his back, wires were attached to his wrists an' his ankles. He blinked. That great mechanised arm. He were strapped into the stone bowl right beneath.

Over that pit o' livin' fire.

"Is he secure, Adira?"

The blonde lass nodded.

"Good. Then go an' call them."

"Yes Dirk. Come on, Fetch."

Fetch looked over at Kain. Guilt crushed his face. "Sorry lad."

The pair skulked away, leavin' Kain alone with the violet-eyed man.

Wait. Blue fire. Violet eyes.

"Y... you're him, aren't you?" Kain tilted his head. "The rider I saved."

"Perceptive. You can call me Dirk." He inclined his head in a nod.

"I sa...saved you. Why are you doin' this?" Kain blubbered.

"A good question. My experiments need a working mind. You cannot lock Memoria if a part of the subject is forever trapped there. I couldn't risk it with an Arxian native. Who knows what shape their mind is in. But Fetch told me about you. Clean. Pure. Untainted by the city. Your mind is perfect." Dirk grinned like a madman, then slapped his knees an' stood up. "And here she is!" He turned. An older lady, steel-grey hair bouncin' on her shoulders, stormed towards him. "Aer. Welcome."

"Don't call me that Dirk."

"Ah, Aer. You were my favourite as well."

"That just shows how stupid you are. I know what you are planning. It is evil."

The woman's voice was strong.

"Evil? That's not what you said last time. When you helped me to purge Dreamsteel from this foul city," Dirk said.

"I made a mistake back then. I have learned from it. Something you can never do. That is why I must do whatever it takes to stop you."

"What, like create *Aversa* memories?"

A gasp caught in Aer's throat. "I wondered why 'The Saviour' would take the ring. It was you, wasn't it?"

"Of course." Dirk's laugh was loud an' cruel. "Though I will grant you, the pain was... unexpected. Hey Kain, if you want someone to blame, blame her. Without the nasty traps she set, I wouldn't need someone to take the keys for me." He turned to Aer. "I was there when you made the final one, you know. I watched you weep for it. Did you know you can retrieve a Death Echo from the body of a man who has

become an *Aversa*? A shame you didn't stay for his last breath. You could have saved him. Instead, that duty fell to me."

Aer's hand trembled. "Liar."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night. Now go. Oppose me. But know that the next time you see this lad, he will slit your throat." Dirk waved a dismissive hand.

Aer vanished without a word.

"Sorry, that was a bit rude, wasn't it?" Dirk said an' sat beside Kain. He twirled something in his fingers.

An arrowhead.

Kain groaned. He could feel the heat under his skin. Crisp an' sharp.

"Please..." he gasped.

"You're right." Dirk nodded. "We do need to start. They'll show up eve... Ignis! Ferra! There you are."

Kain lifted his head. Two women, one with tattoos on her arms, the other with red ink across her scalp, scurried into the cavern.

"Come along, come along. We've got a busy night ahead of us. Ferra, would you do the honours?"

The muscled lass nodded an' took hold o' a winch on the metal arm.

She began to turn an' the bowl Kain were strapped to began to descend. Red smoke wrapped his limbs. He spluttered with the heat of it. Everythin' warped an' he began to float. White smoke surrounded him. Some words followed him into the mist.

"You know your predecessor gave me so little to work with. Don't worry, there are no dead men's memories for you. Just an... alteration. And if it works, then the whole of Arx awaits!"

Chapter 26

Luke shivered in a puddle of blood and rainwater. Everything hurt.

He uncurled his fingers. Sat on his palm was that single chunk of iron ore. The gateway metal. Perhaps he had reached for it whilst unconscious. Maybe Addie had pressed it between his fingers in farewell.

Either way, it was the last thing he would ever hold.

No. I don't die here!

The iron glittered in his fingers and something shifted. Luke felt himself sinking. Not into darkness, but into himself. Shadow hands tugged at him, pulled him back.

Someone else blinked Luke's eyes.

Reilo? What are you doing? Luke tried to speak, but his lips were no longer his to control.

"Dirk promised me another life." Reilo's voice snarled from Luke's lips. "I've come to collect." He reached out and grabbed the corner of the building behind them.

He pulled Luke's body forwards.

Agony burst in Luke like a comet struck him.

No... Even his thought was weak.

Reilo didn't seem to feel it at all. He just reached out once more, and pulled himself another inch further.

Reilo. For the love of fire man, just let me die! Luke pleaded inside his own head. If he had eyes, he would have wept. If he had a body, he would have bled.

As it was, he just hurt.

Blinding, mindless agony thrashed through him with every movement, but Reilo just kept going. Inch by inch, he dragged Luke's body from the Ferriway and into an alley. Crumbled buildings, old fences and walls broken in pieces. A river of blood spread out behind him like the trail from a salt-poisoned slug.

Please! Let it stop! Just let it stop!

Reilo didn't listen. Instead, he placed Luke's hands on a building and took a deep breath. He was going to stand up.

Reilo please. Don't do this. It will destroy me. Think of yourself! How long can you survive with a madman inside your head?

"Longer... than you did." Reilo curled his fingers around the remains of a fence, rusted iron spikes dug into his hand.

The gateway metal began to glow.

"What? No!" Reilo shouted.

And everything changed.

...

Luke blinked.

He raced along the rooftops. The wind toyed with his greasy hair and blew a smile right across his face. He loved the rooftops. Only place in Arx that kept him above the smog.

He laughed, that high and sharp laugh of a child. Twelve summers old and already Caelum had learned to fear him, even if they didn't know who he was. He patted the prize tied to the front of his trousers. A purse filled with silver, more than anyone in Austellus could earn in a lifetime.

Not that he would spend it.

He burped. Smelled like sausages. Taking the coins was just to annoy them, taking their meals was the real savour. Even now, his mouth was still watering with the memory. Fresh bread. Sausages, seared to sizzle, and a wrap of bacon so greasy he barely had to swallow it.

This was just the start.

Luke approached the lip of the building. Another jump, no biggie, he'd made worse. He rubbed his hands together and spat on them for good measure. Three steps back, little run up and...

He slipped.

A puddle across the rooftop. His ankle bent and, instead of jumping, he flung himself from the edge of the rooftop.

Right on to an iron fence.

The cold iron bit through his jaw and into his cheek. Another spike rammed up into his chest. Tears formed in his eyes. Luke gripped the spike. Blood washed down his hands, between his fingers.

He slipped further down.

A wet cry burst from his lips. The pain. The pressure. The iron was slick and his body was heavy.

"Boy?" A voice. "It's Flynn, isn't it?"

Luke lifted his head. Who was that?

A familiar face. It was smiling.

"Oh dear." Dirk clicked his tongue. "Now this is a mess. You seem to have killed yourself."

"N..." Luke spoke around the spike jammed into his mouth.

"No? Would you like some help?"

Luke nodded. The rough edges of the iron spike ground against his teeth.

Dirk smiled. "Okay." He grabbed Luke's shoulder.

And pushed. The spikes dug deeper. Agony pierced him. Darkness. Mist.

Violet eyes.

...

"Luke... Luke!" The voice dragged him back.

Luke blinked and almost wept. His body was his own again. "I. Am. Luke," he whispered. The iron in his hand glittered.

Kuyt splashed through the mud towards him. Tears sparkled in the old actor's honest eyes. "Kid. No, no, no..." Pain was thick in his voice.

Luke licked his lips. The corpse of a smile slumped across his lips. "Kuyt. Glad you. Are here."

He watched Kuyt's mouth move, watched the tears fall, but the words vanished into the void. It was just as well. There is nothing to say to a dead man.

Luke turned to the sky. Black clouds hung over him like death itself, reaching out to claim him. He held the iron tight in his hand and waited for his final breath.

The sky erupted in a column of blue flame. Tall enough to rival even the spire, it broke the smog like lightning. The roar was deafening.

"What?" Kuyt's voice broke through.

Luke glanced down. The metal in his hand was glowing. Of course.

"I remember."

He spoke to the city itself. To the Spire and the Foundry. To the dead men. To Addie and Ferra and Dirk and Kuyt. To himself.

For the first time, Luke finally let go. His eyes rolled shut and a last breath rattled from his throat.

...

Luke crossed over. The Spire rose beside him and the blue-fire bridge disappeared behind.

But Memoria was empty. Noting but mist and shadows.

"You failed us Luke."

Five bodies rose to surround him. Shadows with familiar faces. The closest was cleft with anger.

"I was promised another life. Not another death," Reilo projected. His thought was scalding hot and his sharp face was tight with anger.

"A chance to make amends." Vincent's thought was sad and heavy. His scholarly face was carefully blank, but his eyes were fierce.

"A chance to win again!" Even as a thought, Lloyd's projection came out like he was bellowing from a mountain. His shadow was covered in scars and he thumbed them like a source of pride.

"To repent as a child of the Prelude." Harri's projection was close to a whimper. Cloth wisped around his shadow-form. Even in Memoria he was fat.

"To grow up." Flynn's thought was hard with loss. His shadow was the smallest. Lithe and dirty, no different from any Austelli orphan.

"You think I want to be bleeding out in a gutter?" Luke spat his sour thought like a mouthful of fire. *"You were suppose to help me! Dirk said you were hiding something from me. That I should listen to you!"*

"If you'd have listened, you wouldn't be dying. And we did hide something. We held back the void." Reilo gestured with his arm. The edge of Memoria boiled as a

dark cloud crawled through the mist. Every tendril of smoke that touched the inky blankness vanished, melted like ice before a fire.

A Manifest Memory was caught in the darkness. Luke felt it fade. The sharp edges of a day spent fighting softened. The silver orb vanished and the memory was lost.

"Even at the end I am doomed to remember nothing." Fear turned the sky of Memoria red. Violent flames burst in the darkness. Luke turned to each of the five Death Echoes in turn. *"For what it's worth, I'm sorry."*

"We don't want your apologies Luke." Reilo's shadow drew so close their noses were almost touching. *"We want your body."*

At once, five pairs of shadow hands grabbed Luke. Each touch felt like the burn of ice against naked skin. *"What?"*

"There are two ways to alter memories. The first is with a Mindbreaker. When given consent, they can slice memories free and feed them into a metal anchor back in reality. The second is with Dreamsteel," Vincent projected.

"You might know how to make it," Luke projected, it was one of the memories he had inherited from the politician, *"but we both know I don't have any."*

"True," Vincent replied, his thoughts still infuriatingly calm, *"but you are forgetting. There is always Dreamsteel in Memoria. The spike that links this world with Arx."*

The Death Echoes forced Luke towards the Spire. He struggled, but it was useless. To fight in Memoria was to fight with willpower and the pain had finally caught up with him. The agony from his body, the searing touch of each shadow, it was too much. At his best, he might have forced the will of one shadow aside, two if he was feeling particularly obstinate, but the will of five against the will of one was just too much.

They turned him to face the Spire. In that gleaming, perfect reflection he saw his body. It was so much worse than he had imagined. Skin pulped and leaking like a wineskin. The puddle he sat in was not water. It was blood.

Kuyt cradled his motionless body and wept.

In the distance, the darkness closed in. The mist vanished into the void. Emptiness swarmed from the shadows. All that remained was the patch around the Spire.

"Quickly now," Reilo projected. He had always been a leader. Harsh, cruel and calculating. Luke had admired him from the moment he drunk the dead man's memories like water. *"Press him to the Dreamsteel. Create the link."*

The Spire. A link between mind and body, between Memoria and Arx.

Unbidden, Dirk's voice spoke in his mind. *"That is the strength of this magic. It can make those lies real."*

The idea hit like thunder from a clear sky and Luke began to move. The five shadows couldn't stop him. Their will was bent to force him towards the Spire.

So he leapt towards the Dreamsteel spike himself.

"Stop!" Reilo's will was strong. Almost instantly, Luke felt his movement slow. With a snarl, he raised his hand. A Manifest Memory formed in his hand. A memory of utter darkness. He saw the knife. The Mucro. His desperation to end it all.

He hurled the memory at Reilo.

The moment the Manifest Memory touched Reilo's shadow, he froze. Pain flickered across his face and Luke found himself free to move once more. But the other four shadows were closing in.

Remember!

He sent the pulse from his mind and the sky over Memoria responded. Instantly, Manifest Memories fell like comets. The silver orbs crashed down and he

forced them at the shadows. The feel of Ferra's hammer in his stomach. The hurt of Addie's betrayal. The feel of a sword across his shoulders. Weeping in the rain. He sent them at the shadows and trapped them in his pain.

But that would only buy him a few moments.

He reached out to the Spire. A Manifest Memory formed in his hand. Inside the silver orb, he could see Walkers dying. He saw the Saviour, young and brave and healthy. That was who he was. He fixed the idea in his mind.

He forced the memory into the Spire.

Memoria screamed. The sky warped and swirled in a tempest of blood. The Manifest Memory passed through the Spire and back into his body. Memory became truth. Strength became real.

Back in Arx, Luke's hand twitched. The iron ore glittered in his fist.

Luke grinned. He knew what he had to do now. Forget re-birth.

This was his re-forging.

Manifest Memories gathered around him. Every powerful moment, every memory of survival, of health and youth, was forced into the Spire. The metal spike created a bridge and his body began to heal. To reflect the new truth that Luke forced into it.

The dark memories were cast back into the darkness. Destroyed in order to buy him a few moments more.

The Spire gleamed almost to blinding. He could feel the strength return to his body. The cuts closed. The blood vessels re-attached. Organs healed.

But two years do not make a life.

All too quickly, the Manifest Memories dwindled. "*Why? What more do I need?*" Luke could see his body through the Spire. Healthy. Fixed. Not a bruise to be seen. But he was still dead. And he had nothing more to give.

Reilo's shadow began to move. The memory Luke trapped him in was gone, flung into the darkness.

Forgotten.

"LUKE!" Reilo's projection was like a roar. Memoria shuddered with the strength of his triumph. *"I told you there are some things we are not meant to forget!"* He launched himself through the mist.

Reilo hit the Spire and began to melt into the Dreamsteel.

Luke watched in horror as his body began to twitch. Reilo's shadow pushed deeper into the Spire. Already half of him had disappeared. So many memories. Luke had healed his body.

All Reilo had to do was convince it that he was the owner.

Luke reached out to touch the Spire, but it was solid before his fingers. He had no idea what Reilo was doing, or how to stop it. He was helpless.

Back in Arx, the iron ore in his hand began to glow. Kuyt looked down, his brows drawn up in confusion.

Of course!

"Kuyt! Please. I need your help. Touch the iron. Save me!"

Luke's scream melted into the Spire and he watched, transfixed, as his body opened its lips and spoke the words.

Kuyt's lips moved. He frowned and shook his head. Rain stuck his grey hair to his face. No. The stupid moron! His fear of Memoria was going to get them killed!

Reilo's shadow vanished even further into the Spire.

Something changed on Kuyt's face. He winced and his jaw twisted like a man forced into a difficult task. He spoke again, into the silence, and buried his face into Luke's shoulder.

Then, with a reaching hand, he touched the iron ore.

A shadow hand burst from the Spire and Luke reached out to drag Kuyt into Memoria.

"Kuyt!"

"Kid? What's going on?" Kuyt's thoughts were wild and erratic. *"I saw that metal start to glow and I swear, you died, but you spoke and I touched it and... Where am I?"* Kuyt's projection glanced down at his shadow form. *"What am I?"*

"No time Kuyt. This is Memoria. You are a projection. And I need your help."

Only Reilo's arm remained in Memoria. Back in Arx, Luke's body began to stir. His eyelids flickered.

Kuyt turned to Luke. Drawn to Memoria despite his hatred for the place, forced into a shadow form that he didn't understand, and faced with death creeping in at every moment, he still nodded. No questions. *"What can I do?"*

"Memories. I need your memories. Let me into your mind Kuyt. I can use your memories of me to come back to my body!"

"No."

The word hung in the air like a stone.

"Kuyt, please. That shadow in the Spire. It's a dead man's memories. He's going to take over my body."

"I'll kill him Luke. Don't worry, I won't let him use you like that. On my honour."

"Don't kill me. Help me!" Luke was pleading now.

"We promised, son. No more. I won't sacrifice my memory for you. I've seen what it does. We neither of us deserve that fate. I'm sorry."

Stupid Kuyt and his stupid, stupid Anti-magic bullshit. Couldn't he see that Luke was dying? Why wouldn't he help?

"Memory magic is evil kid."

Luke's mind was still for a moment. Reilo's arm began to vanish into the Dreamsteel.

"Evil is a word for children." With a thought, Luke slammed Kuyt into the Spire.

Kuyt's projection hit the metal spear. Like a face held to a branding iron, he began to scream. Silver orbs flickered around him. His own Manifest Memories. Countless silver orbs, an ocean of lived experience. There were so many.

Reilo's hand began to disappear into the Spire.

Luke sorted frantically. Every memory Kuyt had of the Saviour, of their rebellion, of their fight, was forced into the Spire. Kuyt was a good man. He saw his friends as so much more than they were. His memories were like triple distilled brandy. The strength of an optimist.

Kuyt screamed and screamed as Luke flayed his mind, but he was helpless here. In Memoria, the old man was nothing more than a child.

Luke drained him of memories like emptying a wineskin. When he was done, Kuyt's shadow vanished with a wisp of black smoke and the Spire pulsed.

Reilo's shadow was thrown back into Memoria.

"Damn it Luke, why won't you..." Reilo began.

Luke focused his will. Conviction flowed through him. This was his mind. His memories. Reilo's shadow burst into a stream of silver orbs. Luke drew the Manifest Memories into himself and Reilo's past became his.

He exerted his will. The other four Death Echoes vanished into silver orbs and Luke absorbed their memories.

Strength coursed through his mind. The darkness fled Memoria and Luke turned to the Spire. He stepped through like it was a doorway, back into his body.

Back in Arx, the Saviour drew breath once more.

Part 2: Deficere

Chapter 27

The old house felt so much bigger these days.

Sam felt numb. The stink of her sweat-eaten dress, once one of Mira's beautiful concoctions, stuffed her nose and her stomach growled like a caged animal, but that was nothing new.

The bare floorboards of the living room were coarse. Without the carpet, it didn't feel much like a room anymore. More like a storage crate. The fireplace was the only thing left and it that looked as cold and dead as she felt.

Sam rubbed her eyes with her palms. It all started the night Austellus fell. Six weeks ago.

...

Back when the living room still held a table for brandy, Sam sat at her Father's elbow and watched as their family was torn apart.

"Another default." Sam set the contract on the stack before her. It was all the same. Bonds, negotiations, trade agreements, all squashed like beetles underfoot and replaced by letters of debit filled with unreasonable demands.

DeProleai's displeasure was not subtle.

The days passed in wretched misery. Lizzy sold her jewellery, Father divested his capital and Sam spent days on Steelhammer row making blades for coppers.

They held for a week before the Walkers arrived.

Sam was drinking. No sense in lying in bed just to toss and turn until morning. A thump from outside. Before she could so much as take a step, it was followed by a crash and the front door smashed into the entrance hall.

The Walkers piled in and their greedy hands fell on ornaments, rugs, wine, paintings, anything that would fetch even half a copper. They emptied her forge last. A trio of Walkers struggled with getting her anvil up the stairs from the basement.

"You. Take this to your Father." The Captain handed her a message baton, sealed with the DeProleai crest. "I would make sure he reads it. Ignorance of the law is no excuse."

Sam peeled the letter open and her heart sank into her knees. The house was to be repossessed. They had the evening to vacate, or they would be arrested for trespassing.

They ended up sleeping on Steelhammer Row. Father traded his cufflinks for a tent. That night, she and Lizzy lay awake together, both pretending that they couldn't hear Father sob.

It was no surprise then, when he decided to break the law. The only shocking thing was how bad his attempt was.

"I've found a contact. He is willing to revive a caravan across the Deadlands." Father rubbed his hands together. "Think about it! We will be the only family with trade from outside the city!"

"Who?" Lizzy folded her arms. "What caravan? Trade with where?"

"He... hasn't said." Father chewed his lips. "But there are huge profits here, if we can pull this off!"

Sam met Lizzy's eyes and shook her head. "Come Father, you can't seriously be considering this. It is an obvious scam."

"What other choice do I have?" Father's voice broke in a shout. His temper had gotten lost somewhere in the dust of their old house. "I've already financed the caravan. We've got nothing left to lose!"

A week later, Sam stood next to her Father atop the north section of the Patriae Wall. Together with Lizzy, the three of them stared off into the endless desert. The winds whipped the sand into a spiral storm of pale diamonds.

It didn't take long for the Walkers to arrive, hands full of letters implicating Father in an attempt to circumvent the most patriotic of Arxian laws. Trade with outsiders.

The Walkers were cruel, but that was still no excuse to take a swing. Father practically toppled into the Walker's arms with his attempt. That was it, of course. Off to debtors prison. One count of attempting to break the outsider embargo and one count of assault. Father would be lucky to make it out in fifty years.

Still, she and Lizzy visited every day. Dutiful daughters. Two streets from the Citadel, the prison was actually quite comfortable. Father had a bed, some straw and a pot to piss in. In all honesty, it was hardly any different from the tent they shared, except it had perhaps a shade more shelter from the wind.

Every time they visited, Father seemed to have aged a century. His skin was sallow and dirty, his shoulders sagged and his face was cadaverous, stretched tight over his skull. His eyes blazed in those dark sockets and just the sight of him was enough to tear Sam's heart.

The final time they saw him, Father leapt up from his pallet. "Girls, you're here!" His stick-like arm groped from the bars.

"Papa." Lizzy took his hand. "How are you?"

"I've cracked it! Figured out a way to get us back on our feet." Father rubbed his face against the bars. "Such an offer. All you need to do is ask for visitors."

"What are you saying?" Sam asked.

"Don't worry little Sammy. I know you wouldn't help. But Lizzy will. Won't you, dear?"

Sam glanced over at her sister and they shared a look.

"Of course, Papa." Lizzy patted his hand. "What can I do?" She spoke softly, the way one might speak to an elderly relative who wasn't quite there anymore.

"I was a salesman, don't you know? I've made a sale. And a bargain at half the price." He pulled Lizzy closer, his eyes wide. "I'm sorry. So sorry. Had to do it."

"Had to do what?" Lizzy asked. Fear made her voice high.

"Sammy! You'll have to take my part. Won't let me out for the ceremony." He tossed a bag at her.

It spilled on the ground. A pair of bond chains, engraved with Lizzy's name.

...

Sam forced herself to unsteady feet. Blank spaces on the walls stood out against the paint. A lifetime of memories, stripped back to a shell. All she had left was her purse, empty but for a copper ring and the Dreamsteel disk. She stared at her reflection in the blue-steel. All she could see were the bags under her eyes.

She made her way upstairs and through the corridor to her old bedroom. It was empty, just like everywhere else. She left the door open behind her. Father's room was next. They hadn't even left him with a table. Lizzy's room. Bare.

Except... what was that? A scratch in the wall where her bed used to be. Sam knelt beside the baseboard.

Elizabeth DeAcarris

DeProleai

DeSané

Elizabeth DeGaya.

Sam almost snorted a laugh. The handwriting was years old, but really? DeGaya? Turns out Lizzy was far more soppy than she let on. Of all the men to idolise about, she chose a war hero, born in Austellus no less, to be her make-believe-husband.

Husband. Sam's smile vanished like a corpse into a grave. She closed Lizzy's door and made her way back downstairs. It was time to leave.

Memories of a life she no longer lived held no interest to her anymore.

Outside, the wind bit into her exposed arms. Her rotten dress flapped about her like a flag but it was about as close to presentable as she was going to get. The streets were cold and empty. Most nobles no longer left their homes for a moment longer than they had to.

Not since the checkpoints appeared on every corner.

The black tents were everywhere, a mandatory pat down for anyone who walked past. Though quite what they were looking for, Sam had no idea. She suspected that the Walkers themselves were similarly ignorant.

She walked towards the nearest one. Best to get it over with.

A Walker held the tent-flap open without a word and she stepped inside. The cloth cut some of the wind, but she still felt like shivering. Walkers crowded around her like flies on spilt beer.

The Captain stepped forwards and Sam's heart lurched. She recognised that pimple-scarred face. Andre Fort. The Walker from the Citadel gates.

He sneered. "Arms out."

She did as she was told.

"So, how you doing?" He scrubbed her side with dirty hands.

Sam said nothing.

"I'm good me." Fort grinned like a rat. "Got promoted by High Lord DeProleai himself. Said he 'likes the way I do things.'" His hands moved down the outside of her legs and around her ankles. "I reckon you'd like the way I do things and all." His voice was soft as a whisper.

Sam felt the colour in her cheeks. Her arms twitched and somewhere deep inside, she screamed at herself. Fight back! What was wrong with her? What had happened to the proud woman who faced this man down like a dog?

The questions drowned in a wave of hopelessness. That woman was dead.

Andre Fort drew spirals up her thighs.

Sam whimpered and half a tear squeezed from under her eyelid. Self-hatred boiled like bile through her heart and her legs almost collapsed from beneath her.

"Alright. You're clean. Now get out." Fort laughed and the other Walkers were quick to join in.

Sam stumbled from the tent. She walked like a drunk, her arms tight around herself. Unbidden cruelty and petty violence. The Walkers were a shadow of their former selves.

Ever since they lost.

The uprising in Austellus was a complete success. That first night, DeKeita and DeGaya had united against the threat. Steelhammer Row churned out blades by the barrel-load and the Walkers ranks swelled with fourth-sons, guardsmen, merchants, anyone who could hold a weapon. DeGaya was to lead the counter-attack himself. How could they lose?

Rumour varied, but most agreed that the moment the soldiers stepped onto Austellus soil, they were met with blue fire and enemy soldiers that would not bleed.

The Walkers were humiliated. DeGaya lost, presumed dead.

Then Simon DeProleai made his offer. Any Walker who wished to 'pacify' Caelum could join his personal guard. There were desertions by the hundred and DeKeita barely had a skeleton force left. That Cetera cult held Austellus and DeProleai cowered behind the Mucro.

Arx was falling apart.

A gust of wind forced smog into her face and Sam coughed. Ever since that first night, smoke the colour of coal was ever-present in the sky. Even in Caelum, her breath was heavy with it. What were they doing back there?

She shuddered. Perhaps it was best she didn't know.

The Temple rose from behind the smog bank and Sam took the steps two at a time and yanked open the door.

The wedding was starting soon.

Chapter 28

The Temple was ugly as sin.

Good to know that some things never changed. The roof bowed in the middle with water damage and the pillars flaked with golden paint.

"May I help you dear?" A priest approached her. His face was soft and round as a Winternight pudding and his dusky robes were stained with hard use.

"Yes. I'm Samantha DeAcarris."

"Ah yes. Shall we?" The priest gave a short bow.

Sam followed down the empty corridor. Torches lit the ancient wood, whilst soot and spider webs stained the sconces. Alcoves broke up the walls with statues of nameless priests, their heads bowed and their hands pressed together in prayer.

Beside the statues was a door splattered with blood.

"What's that?" Sam asked the priest.

The priest stopped his wobbling walk for a moment. "That is the triage centre. Our hospital. We are still dealing with the outcome of the Austellus Uprising, both physically and mentally."

"Mentally?" Sam asked. A cold suspicion curled in her stomach.

"The body we can heal." The priest scratched at his neck. "Collegium Foments sends its students for training alongside out acolytes. But even their considerable skills do not work on a broken mind..."

"Gazers." Sam said. The word was cold in her mouth.

"Yes. Though we cannot give them back their memories, we can ensure that they are comfortable. And I believe that Retinentia takes special care of the cracked, for as is written..."

The priest began some pious blathering, but Sam ignored him. So. That's where they were keeping him.

Saul.

The priest stopped with a sigh. Clearly he was used to being ignored. "Would you like to see inside? There is not much time before the ceremony, but if we are quick?"

Sam thought a moment and then shook her head. "No. Not... like this." She couldn't bear to see Saul. Not now.

By the Prelude but she felt heartless as they left that door behind.

The priest said nothing. Sam followed him down the corridor and eventually they reached a door painted black. The priest pushed it open. "Here we are. The Chamber of Rituals."

Pretentious name. "Thank you."

The room was small and cramped. An altar stood at the front and before it was a row of pews, set out like tables in the schoolroom.

"Elizabeth is waiting for you." The priest gestured to a screen set up in the back corner.

Sam made for the wooden partition and rapped on the side.

"Yes?" Lizzy's voice floated from behind the screen.

Sam stepped around to find Lizzy sat on a short stool before a mirror. Even after living in a tent for a month, Lizzy still managed to look good. Midnight hair pinned around her shoulders. No necklace, which only served to emphasise her elegant column of her neck, and her face was painted with a casual perfection that Sam doubted she could achieve in fifty years.

"Samantha. About time." Lizzy sniffed and returned to her brushes. A pallet sat before her, covered in powders, paints, stains and... scissors? Black mulch? Was that seaweed?

Sam shook her head. It was like stepping into a different world. "Lizzy. What's with the dress?" The gown was well made. It clung to Lizzy's shoulders like gossamer, but it was completely black. Like a night without stars.

"Why not?" Lizzy said. "I choose to mourn, rather than celebrate."

"Look, I know this is not how you pictured it..." Sam tried.

Lizzy's laugh sounded like a golden bell being crushed. "Yes! Truly, I should have been more realistic. Who doesn't want to get married in a dilapidated temple, surrounded by strangers? Sold off by an indebted Father to a man I have never met. I should be grateful, I'm sure." Scorn poured from her words. "But it's not that bad. After all, I get to spend it with you."

Sam shuffled over in silence and sat behind her sister. Lizzy made the brush dance over her face. What a fantastic waste of time. All it took was a wet cloth or drop of rain and all her hard work was gone. Vanished like the illusion that it was.

"Perhaps it was inevitable." Lizzy ran the brush across the top of her tits.

"What was?"

"It's just as you said. I am simply climbing the social ladder one man at a time. Since it has become clear that only one man wishes for me to climb on him now, I should be thankful." Lizzy snorted. It was an ugly sound. "Why me? You are the eldest. Why can't you get sold off like a promising piece of livestock?"

Sam lowered her eyes and twisted the chain around her wrist. The silver link was warm against her thumb. "Come on Lizzy. You know I'm engaged to Matthew DeProleai..."

"Oh yes!" Lizzy smacked her knee in mock surprise. "I'd forgotten. Your thrilling romance with a missing man! Tell me, how is that going? What new leads are the Walkers chasing up?"

"Well, they aren't. You know, since the uprising and..."

"Interesting. You don't seem that broken up about it." Lizzy turned and folded her arms. Her mouth pulled to one side and she shook her head. "I knew it was bullshit. Matthew DeProleai and you. More likely that the moon fell in love with a turd."

"Charming." Sam chewed her lip.

Lizzy turned back to the mirror. She smeared something black on her fingertip and dabbed at her eyelids. "Do you know why I never liked you, Samantha?"

"What a lovely conversation to have on your wedding day."

"We both had the same education, the same advantages and the same expectations. Despite that, you chose to turn your back on everything and hide underground for your entire life."

"I'm not made for preening and petting." Sam's temper flared at the old argument. "I just want to do what makes me happy."

"And what about my happiness? Or Father's? Do you know how it ate at him that he could never find you a match? He wept the night you announced your engagement. Not from joy, but because he felt guilty. For 'misjudging' you." Lizzy glared at her. "You had three years with Mother. I never knew her. How is it that you forgot how to be a woman?"

"You want to know what I remember about Mother? I remember her death." Sam snarled. "I remember her last words. I remember..." she cut herself off. There

was no way to explain to Lizzy that she had experienced Mother's death. By the Prelude, she barely understood what had happened herself.

"...What were they?" Lizzy's voice lost its edge. "Mothers last words?"

Sam felt the anger leak out of her. "She named you. Elizabeth. Even when she was dying, you were all she wanted. Her perfect daughter. Her final words... she told Father to do right by us. All she cared about was our future... Lizzy, she loved us even at the end."

Lizzy was quiet for a long time. Eventually she sniffled and dabbed her eyes. "I swear if you ruin my make-up..."

Sam gave a weak laugh. "Hey, it could be worse. You could look like this." She jerked a thumb at herself.

"Retinentia forbid it," Lizzy chewed the end of her brush a moment and then stood up. "Sit."

"What?" Sam asked.

"On the stool." Lizzy pointed an imperious finger.

Sam opened her mouth to argue, but Lizzy just turned and yanked her over.

"Honestly. Do you live in a tent?" Lizzy plucked at Sam's mop of frizzy hair. The joke was weak, but they still smiled for each other. "My conscience demands I sort you out. Don't fidget."

Lizzy's hands walked with purpose between brushes, pots and pencils. Her work was quick, but brutal. It was like being attacked by a wire-sponge.

"Ow, also." Sam said.

"Shh." Lizzy tapped her lips with the end of a brush. Then shook her head.

"No. No lipstick. But at least now you don't look like you wandered in off the street."

She stepped aside and Sam looked in the mirror. Honestly, she could barely see a difference. Perhaps... were the bags under her eyes a shade less noticeable? Almost certainly not. But Lizzy was smiling.

And that was something, wasn't it?

"Ahem."

The polite cough drew both of their eyes. That pudding-faced priest was back.

"Yes?" Sam asked.

"My ladies. We are ready for you."

Sam turned to Lizzy. She nodded and the pair of them left the screen, and the smiles, behind.

Annoyingly, a couple of guests actually bothered to make the effort. A handful of Lizzy's less-connected friends, their fashionable dresses completely at odds with the Temple around them, sat on the front row. A man in a crumpled suit perched behind. Who any of them were was anybody's guess, but Lizzy waved to them all.

Then there was the groom's family. The DeSchär clan took up at least half of the room. Children screamed and ran about unattended whilst their mothers whooped with stale gossip. The man sat together, giggling at some ribald idiocy. Not one of them was paying attention.

Sam felt something tugging against her. She took Lizzy's hand in hers and gave it a squeeze. Lizzy's bond chain was tight against her wrist. No Memory Magic involved, but she still got to choose the metal for the final link. The black steel drew the light from the room.

Lance DeSchär stood behind the altar. Lizzy's husband-to-be wiped his forehead on a napkin and his elder brother clapped him on the back. Their

matching jackets had a decidedly military cut, but Lance was anything but. He was puffing just stood there.

Lizzy's grip on Sam's hand was hard enough to bruise. Her eyes were wide and wet.

Sam grit her teeth and took her position beside Lizzy just as the priest arrived to read the rites.

At least it would be quick.

...

After the ceremony, Sam sat beside the liquor and watched her sister dance.

Well, 'dance' was a kind way of putting it. She watched her sister get lumped around the Temple like a bag of turnips. Even Lizzy's forced smile was pushed to breaking point and her eyes were smouldering. Not that Lance DeSchär cared. His jowls were still split in a grin. He seemed truly obsessed with her. Throughout the ceremony, he had practically salivated, rubbing his eyes like he couldn't quite believe his luck.

That would make it easier, right? Lizzy had a husband who would do anything for her. That was more than most. She should be grateful. Happy even! She should...

She should be out breaking hearts. Not married to a man twice her age just to keep herself alive.

The dance finished and Lizzy gave a pretty curtsy. The room was mostly empty now, so the applause was muted at best. Lance waddled over to the food, provided by his mother of course, and Lizzy came straight to Sam.

"Lizzy. I'm so sorry." It was all she could say.

"No." Lizzy shook her head. "It's okay. Despite the who, would you believe I actually miss this? The dancing. The flirting." She shook her head. "Dear lord, I've lost my mind."

"Well, what little you had to start with."

Lizzy's mouth was pinched in the ghost of a smile. "You are so lovely. Anyway, I have to say goodnight and goodbye. Lance wants to... go."

"Go? Where?" Sam asked.

Lizzy just looked at her.

"Oh. Right." Sam almost retched.

"Yes, wifely duties. Still, they say the fat ones try harder, so I suppose I'm lucky." Lizzy forced a laugh. It sounded like the last bark of a dying hound. "But before I leave, I have something for you."

She reached into her pocket and drew out a locket.

"Father gave me this. He said it was only fair. You got her ring after all."

"What is it?" Sam ran her finger across the burnished necklace.

"A miniature of Mother. Father had it made. I don't wear it because, well the locket itself is hideous, but also I didn't want to ruin it. The clasp is already a little temperamental."

"Lizzy, I can't..." Sam tried to hand the locket back, but Lizzy closed her fingers over it.

"Please. I have... a new family now. It's time I got used to it." She stood up and steeled herself. Her back straightened and that tilt returned to her chin.

Despite herself, Sam flushed with pride. Lizzy was made of stronger stuff than she gave her credit for. She was marching to the hangman and she did so with her head held high.

She raised her hand in farewell and Sam returned the gesture.

“Goodbye. Elizabeth DeAcarris,” she whispered as Lizzy walked out of the door, and out of her life.

Sam’s eyes returned to the locket and she fiddled with the opening. Turns out Lizzy was right. The sodding thing was broken. She couldn’t even get her fingernail inside.

Sam looped it over her neck anyway. Then she realised something.

She was alone.

Just as she always wanted. Father was in prison. Lizzy was a DeSchär now. Sam had no responsibilities. No one to let down. No one to prove herself to. She could do whatever she wanted. Finally, she was free.

So why did it hurt so much?

Sam gnawed at her lip. DeProleai had won. He destroyed the family more thoroughly than she had ever imagined. The DeAcarris name would die with her.

Mother would have been so disappointed.

Sam found a brandy in her hand. Fire down her throat. Then another. And another.

The night began to blur. At some point, a priest must have come in and asked her to leave, because why else was she wandering the corridors of this ratty old temple? White door with red. That was familiar. She pushed it open.

Someone screamed. That was rude. Didn’t they know how loud they were? Goodness. Sam looked down and his *leg* was cut off. She snickered and fluttered her hand at him, but the Walker didn’t respond. Too busy sleeping.

She walked deeper. Lots of bloody bits. Why were there so many? And so nasty. Cut after cut made her tummy grumble and not just because of the brandy!

“Excuse me miss, can I help?”

She placed her palm on the priest's face and swiped down. "Yes. I'm meant to be here. I'm sick."

"My lady."

"Hey!" Her fingers became claws that dug into the priest's face. "I am nobody's lady! I'm..."

"Samantha."

"Exactly!" She pointed in the direction of the new voice. "This guy gets it."

The priest just looked shocked. He turned his face to the source of the voice and Sam followed his gaze.

Saul.

The sight of him slapped her sober and Sam knuckled her eyes. Someone had cut his hair too short and dressed him in white pyjamas, but it was most definitely him.

His eyelids were open. The sockets were filled with blue smoke.

"But how is that possible?" Sam asked the priest. "He said my name."

"I... our working theory is that Gazers still have some memories. They just don't have enough to function. It is possible that, occasionally, they are able to have a flash of cognition. It... doesn't last." The priest looked around, clearly awkward about having a drunk in his hospital.

"Saul?" Sam bent over to meet his eyes. "Saul, do you remember me? It's Samantha. You said my name. Remember?"

"Miss, please, it doesn't work like..." The priest began.

Saul reached out. He gripped the locket at her throat. Something happened with his fingers.

The clasp opened and Saul held the locket up.

The portrait of a young woman stared out. Short hair and curvy. Her smile was so wide.

“Saul...” Sam breathed. She took his hand in hers and reached into the pouch at her waist, desperate to find something to jog his memory.

He fingers brushed the Dreamsteel and a glow burst from her wrist. The silver chain-link was ice cold against her skin.

Reality fell away.

...

Sam blinked.

The Temple was gone. Instead, she was sat on a bed with lurid red sheets. A bank of multicoloured pillows lay beside her and a rich rug washed across the floor.

The smell was one she wished she didn’t recognise. Cheap perfume and body fluids.

The stink of a brothel.

Sam felt herself move. She was naked, but the body wasn’t her. Curves, like she had never dreamed, and a patch of hair between her legs shaped like a flash of lightning.

What was going on?

She tossed a light jacket around her shoulders. Barely enough to cover the important places.

“Darling, are you there?” Her voice was different. Lower. More... sultry.

The door opened and a man poked his head around. It was Saul, that grin was unmistakable, but he was... young. Handsome, even, with a black moustache and heavy muscles visible under his shirt.

"K. What's up?" Saul asked.

"Is he on the way?" Sam asked. For some reason her heart was fluttering.

Saul laughed. It was like a drum being dropped down the stairs. "Patience K. He'll be back. I'll let you know as soon as he arrives."

Sam pouted. "Okay."

Saul chuckled and shut the door. Sam sat on the edge of her bed and twirled the fringe of her jacket around her fingers. Thoughts bubbled up in her head. What was wrong with her? She was acting like a girl on her first night, all nervous energy and sour stomachs.

But she couldn't help it. After all, it's not every day that a Lord visited.

A sharp knock from the door. Saul's grinning face burst back into the room.

"Told you it wouldn't be long."

"He's here? Oh thank you Saul." Her heart thudded in her ears.

Sam turned to the mirror. Short hair. Curvy. A smile, so wide.

She turned. Saul was gone.

Father stood in his place.

...

The memory faded and Sam blinked as the Temple whirled into place around her. She looked to Saul, but his face was blank. No reason to believe he had any idea what just happened.

Not that she was any more clued in.

She looked down at the chain around her wrist. It was just like what had happened in Memoria. She had been trapped in one of Mother's memories.

Mother the whore.

Unease swirled in her stomach. Suddenly, everything began to make sense. The reason the other Lords looked down on them, the reputation of their house, even the weight of judgement that fell on both her and Lizzy. After all, what was to be expected from the daughters of a prostitute?

The pieces fell into place. Ignis said that memories could be stored in metal. Mother's ring must have her memories inside. Somehow, Sam had forced some of them into the silver chain link when she was in Memoria. Something to do with Dreamsteel...

That meant that there were still some of Mother's memories left in the city.

Sam stood up. She looped the locket around Saul's shoulders. Instantly, his hands rose to cradle the burnished orb. "You loved her, didn't you? Just like you loved us." She turned to the priest by the door. "Please. Take care of this man. I owe him more than you can possibly imagine."

"Of course miss." The priest bowed.

Sam kissed Saul on the cheek before she left.

She lied and told herself he was smiling.

Chapter 29

Kain tried, real hard, not to die.

The whackin' great sword flashed at 'is face an' he just about jerked around it. Slender steel slashed across the wall by his ear an' the lass at the hilt snarled. She reversed her grip an' twisted at his neck.

He parried like a drunken carp an' threw her strike back. Kain tried a lunge, but she slapped his blade away. Her steel whipped around an' he leapt back. The wind o' her strike laced across his neck.

Kain straightened, sword steady like he weren't pissin' hisself. The lass circled around the tight alleyway an' the afternoon sunlight danced over her blade.

She struck again. Kain got his blade up, but it were a close thing. Hammer blows smashed into his guard an' shockwaves shuddered through his arms. He held tight with blistered hands.

Kain sucked a breath into scaldin' lungs. Her blade darted like a sparrow, nippin' at him. He swung back an' their blades stuck in a crunch o' metal an' caught.

He pressed in. That were more like it! She might be quick, but he were bigger. Size alone got her up against the wall, pushed so close that the fury in her brown eyes were near to scorchin' him. Her white teeth clenched in a needle snarl.

She spat at 'im.

Kain reeled back an' ripped his blade free. He wiped the gob from his face, just in time to see her steel lashin' at his legs.

He stumbled back, cat over coals, an' just about managed to nudge her blade away from 'is ankles. Off-balance, he tried for a lunge but she moved around it like he were a sobbin' toddler, far beneath her.

'Course, that were exactly what he wanted.

In one motion, Kain straightened an' slashed. His steel licked the back o' her hand an' tasted blood. She growled an' slammed her sword to meet his next attack. Strike for strike, the clang o' metal filled the alleyway.

His steel caught hers, but only just. Her blade inched around his guard. Slipped towards his face.

Snapped.

Her pitted sword broke with a crunch an' the rusted steel clattered to the floor. He crunched his boot into the lass' fingers an' sent the hilt spinnin'.

The lass fell to the cobbles an' cradled her hand.

"I win!" Kain raised his arms like a ruddy champ. A puff o' breath curled around his lips. It were right cold now that he weren't flappin' about like a crow in a cockfight. He stepped up an' placed his blade right in the spot he reckoned held her heart. "Yield?"

The lass said nowt. She just looked at 'im.

"I knew it." Kain grinned. "See, swordplay's all up here." He tapped his temple. "Moment you thought I were crap, that were the moment I had you. I wonder if..."

He cut off when the lass grabbed the blade o' his sword.

"What're you doin'?"

She stood up. Kain just watched, jaw swingin' like a barn door. The lass stepped forwards, heedless o' the blood runnin' between her fingers. Tendons glistened white under the gushin' red.

Quick as a sneeze, her bloody hand came for his neck.

She gurgled. A good foot o' steel stood out from her throat. The lass' eyes widened in surprise an' she fell. Fetch set his foot on her back an' yanked his blade free. Bugger it, but the old man could scowl.

"Fetch! Thanks..." Kain began, but the old man held his hand up for quiet. He jerked his head off to the side.

Kain followed his gaze to the solitary figure stood on the rooftops behind them. Just far enough away that they couldn't see under that hooded cloak. Like always.

The Watcher.

The figure locked 'em with his eyes. The Watcher were always there. Every time a Cetera Desunt freedom fighter fell, that hooded figure were nearby. Sightin's were reported from the first day Austellus were liberated. No matter what they tried, they couldn't tie the slippy bugger down. He never entered the fight hisself.

Just stood there. An' watched.

Without warnin', he turned an' leapt between the rooftops. In less time than it took to blink, he were gone. Vanished like a shadow.

When he were gone, Fetch smacked Kain right on the back o' his head.

"Ow!" Kain rubbed his scalp. "What were that for?"

"I told you, always finish 'em off. When are you gonna get it into your thick head? You gotta kill them, or they'll kill you. Gettin' pretty sick of saving your arse."

"She were unarmed. I won," Kain said to the floor. Not another damn lecture.

"Aye, and she still almost rammed her hand down your idiot throat." Fetch flicked blood from his blade with a practised flick o' his wrist.

Two bodies lay in the mulch behind him. Bugger it, but the old bloke weren't even sweatin'. Fetch were a right daemon with that slender blade o' his. Made it look easy.

"Clean your sword." Fetch knelt to pick up the dead lass' broken blade. "Look at this. The only reason she didn't carve bells into your balls is because she don't care for her weapon."

"Not the only reason." Kain drew a rag from his belt an' wiped down the steel.

"Nah, you're right. The real reason she didn't gut you like a carp is because I was here. Your technique is still shocking. Swap the blades and she would have had you seven ways and no bones about it.'

Kain frowned, not quite sure he agreed there, but he reckoned it were a sensible time to keep 'is gob shut.

Fetch folded his arms. "Now check her."

Kain grimaced. He hated this bit.

"You used to be fun." Kain knelt in the red-stained muck. The lass had a proper Austelli look to her face, all sharp edges an' scars. A lifetime o' calluses ran down her fingers an' she were even missin' a pinky. Ex-metalworker, perhaps? Or maybe just scars from constant bladework. She were skilled enough.

He patted her down, doin' his best to ignore the how sickly warm she still were, an' found a pouch strapped to her hip. Made his fingers tingle, but he clenched his jaw an' looked inside anyhow.

A spill o' copper rings fell into his palm.

"Damn it," he whispered. There had to be fifteen o' the things.

Fetch grunted an' knelt beside him. "Third lot this week. Seems like the Watcher is stepping his game up, eh?"

"Why does he still persist?" Kain asked. "The Walkers left us be. Without him, there would be no need for all this damn bloodshed." Frustration bit at him.

"Who knows how a madman like him thinks. If it even is a him. Could be a lass for all we know. But he 'ain't fighting us himself. He's findin' others who hold a grudge an' all. Remember, Cetera Desunt 'ain't always been so popular." Fetch shook his head an' pocketed the rings. He pushed himself up with a groan. "Slap my

arsehole but my knees are broken, I swear. Come on kid, on your feet. I'd bet my left nut that they aren't the only ones out."

Kain stood up. 'Cept he couldn't tear his eyes from the dead lass' face. Her eyes were open. Though Fetch finished her, it still felt like he had done it himself. Guilt crawled over his skin like spiders.

Kain swallowed. Six weeks o' fightin' the Watcher's goons an' he were yet to kill anyone. Every time, when Fetch were busy, he let 'em go. Let 'em play dead an' hide in the corpse carts. No matter how much he tried to force it, no matter how he willed it, he couldn't bring hisself to end a life.

Fetch grunted an' Kain looked up. The old man had that look in his eyes that said a bollockin' weren't far away, so he up an' followed him.

They stepped out into the street. Just the sight were enough to get Kain grinnin' again. Austellus were healin'. The streets were clean, swept o' dust an' grime. Houses were re-built an' a bunch o' shops sprang up on all the busy streets.

A patrol group went marchin' by an' Kain joined the rest o' the people in a salute. Cetera Desunt had kicked the Walkers out for one solid reason. They could do a better job. Heroes, the ruddy lot o' them.

In return for keepin' the peace, Dirk gave 'em each a copper ring. Small wounds, injuries, illness, a lick o' fire an' none o' it could harm 'em. Besides the Watcher an' his assassins, no one had managed to kill a Cetera Desunt patrol. Those rings were the ultimate sign o' Dirk's trust.

Kain's eyes fell to his naked fingers. Impotence bubbled in his stomach. One day he would prove hisself worthy. One day, he would show Dirk that he could be a hero too.

One day.

"Sir, here sir, see anything you fancy?" A grubby faced blacksmith wiped his hands down his apron. Ever since Dirk took over, new forges had sprouted up like mushrooms after a rain. "Just made this'n sirs. What do you think?"

Kain took the sickle-sword blade the bloke held up. He frowned. There were a couple o' chips down the side, an' the steel itself were uneven.

"Didn't reckon I'd remember it all, but I figure you can cut a man down with something ugly." The blacksmith grinned. Two o' his teeth were missin'.

"How much?" Fetch stepped towards the tent.

The blacksmith's eyes widened. "Master Fetch! For you there is no charge. Consider it a donation to the cause."

"You sure?" Fetch quirked an eyebrow.

"It's the least I can do." The blacksmith bowed so low he were in real danger o' smackin' his nose against the anvil.

Fetch just shrugged. "Cheers." He jerked his head an' Kain followed him back into the street, blade still clasped in his hands.

Kain chewed the corner o' his lip. "I thought Arx were famous for its steel? This looks..." Useless. "Different."

Fetch sighed. "Arx is. Our Forge Masters were the best of the best. But we... we can't seem to find any of them. So we're making do with apprentices. Which is shit. 'Cause every kid and his sister were a blacksmith's apprentice at some point."

"We can't find the forge masters? Since when?"

"Since we took over. Shut up. It's not public gossip, kid."

"Do you think it has anythin' to do with the Watcher?" Kain asked.

Fetch didn't respond to that. He just looked up to the sky. "Come on. Open Kitchen'll be shut soon." He tossed the blade into a nearby alleyway. It splintered into dusky shards when it hit the cobblestones.

Fetch led 'em down the road an' across a makeshift bridge that spanned a wide swathe o' brown water. Stank like rotten veggies an' off-cuts o' meat, but at least they didn't have to trudge through it no more. Almost as soon as they were over, they saw it. A great, three-storey hulk with glass windows an' a real, brick chimney.

The Open Kitchen were Dirk's biggest gift to Austellus. Winter hit Arx hard an', without Caelum's influence, there weren't enough food to go around. For a week or so, things had gotten real hairy. Then Dirk stepped in. He ordered the construction o' the massive thing an' made sure it were stocked to the rafters. Where he got it all from was anyone's guess, but it meant a body could rock up an' eat their fill right easy.

For a price.

Fetch pushed the door open. Inside, the wooden tables were packed with gaunt, grubby faces. The smell o' unwashed bodies mingled with the scent o' fresh pork in the air.

Couple o' blokes at trenchers turned in shock when they saw Fetch. A few o' them almost dipped their chins into their meals with unpractised bows. Not that Fetch were anyone special, but his copper ring won him respect at a glance.

Fetch ignored 'em. Adulation made him uncomfortable. Instead, he led Kain to the small door at the back o' the room.

Some short bloke burst out. His face were split in a blissful smile an' blue flecks flickered through his brown eyes.

Fetch knocked on the half-open door.

"Come," a voice bellowed from inside.

Fetch led Kain inside. The room were dark an' the stink o' rust an' chains rode the air around the single table. It were covered in endless burnin' candles an' the smoke were so heavy he felt it in his lungs.

Ferra sat at the table. Her arms were folded, tight enough to make her leather apron creak, an' the tattoos on her arm stood out in the candlelight. "Oh good. It's you two."

"How are you doing?" Fetch hopped on over an' sat opposite. Kain shimmied up beside him an' stood over his shoulder.

"Oh yeah, marvellous me." Ferra jerked her thumb to a pile o' iron nuggets on the floor beside her. "Been in Memoria more than my own bed over these last few weeks. Reckon there won't be a single mind in Austellus that isn't cracked before too long."

"Is that so? Well, you're a Mindbreaker. 'Ain't messing about in peoples heads just part of that?" Fetch began to pop his knuckles.

"You keep that up and I'll break your fingers off," Ferra warned. She shook her head. "I almost preferred it when we were a badly kept secret. People have a right to do without poison between their ears, but now..." She kicked at the pile o' iron. "Memories traded for food just seems wrong."

Fetch glanced off to the side. "Well, no one is forced to be here. They come on their own."

"Do they? Hunger is a hell of a motivator." Ferra stood up. A teapot sat over to the side an' she poured herself a mug. The cup looked dainty as a ducklin' in her paws. "You." She turned to Kain. "Stop shifting and siddown. I don't want you looming over me like that. Bloody beanpole boy."

Kain drew a stool an' sat beside Fetch.

"Alright. Enough of my whinging. What do you two want?" Ferra asked.

Fetch pulled the handful o' copper rings from his pocket. "We are under attack. Again."

"Gimme those." Ferra cupped her hands an' Fetch emptied the pile o' copper into them. She closed her eyes an' a single candle in the middle o' the table spat a blue spark.

"They were killed one at a time. Drunk, whoring, unarmed... a single strike in most cases. Take the head an' sever the connection to Memoria. Some of these..." Ferra paused. "Some of these have been used. Dirk... Dirk knows." She caught herself.

"I see," Fetch said without inflection. "Well. That is more than we knew before. Cheers. I'll let Adira know. Maybe she can double patrols for a while or something."

"Might help." Ferra licked her lips an' handed the rings back. "What about you? Maybe you should get yourself some help, things being the way they are."

"Eh, I've got this idiot." Fetch jerked his thumb at Kain.

"Yeah? And how are you, kid? How do you feel?" Ferra asked, her eyes suddenly intent on Kain's face.

"Um, fine." What kind o' question were that?

"Just fine? No headaches, or any bleeding from the ears?"

"Ferra..." Fetch's tone was sharp, but she ignored him.

"No, nothin' like that." Kain scratched at his arms.

"Then you won't mind if I do a little test? Just to check." Ferra folded her arms.

"Kain. You don't have to," Fetch said, but Kain shook his head.

"Nah, it's alright. What do you need?" Kain asked.

"Take my hand and give me your consent."

Kain frowned but Ferra just set her massive hand on the table, palm up.

He set his hand in Ferra's an' closed his eyes. "I, uh, give my consent?"

Remember. The voice came like a whisper inside him brain. Familiar, an' yet like nothin' he had ever head before.

The snick o' a sickle bein' sharpened. The broken length o' a scythe blade in the grass. The sound o' smoke.

Darkness swallowed him. A wisp o' mist rose from the void an' formed into a figure.

Hatred bit Kain's heart as he looked up at his Pa.

The old man stood over him, ten-times the size o' life. His hands were clenched an' his eyes were filled with anger. His lips moved.

You are not strong enough.

Pain, more intense than anythin' Kain could remember, thrashed through him. Arse to spine, it were like bein' tied in a knot, like his bollocks were bein' ripped out from his throat. The edges o' the darkness began to flicker gold.

YOU

ARE

NOT

STRONG

ENOUGH!

"I know!" Kain roared, an' like that the darkness shattered like a dropped mirror.

He opened his eyes. Blood trickled down Ferra's arms. His nails had torn into her skin.

"Don't have to be so rough." Ferra pulled her hand back an' rubbed at the cuts.

"I..." Kain began, but he cut hisself off with a cough. Stupid tears watered his eyes.

"Easy kid." Fetch set a hand on Kain's shoulder. "Breathe."

"Was that Memoria?" Kain asked Ferra. Bugger it but he wished his voice weren't so weak.

"No. I couldn't make the bridge appear for you. Why, what do you know about Memoria?" Ferra sat up, suddenly alert.

"Dirk told me some of it." Two tears fell from Kain's eyes. No more. "Told me he locked it from me. To save me the pain."

"The pain of what?" Ferra asked.

"Memory." Kain shuddered a breath into his lungs. "Of life afore Arx."

Ferra leant in. Curiosity were writ plain on her face. "And what do you remember before Arx?"

Kain let his eyes sag shut. The memories were blessedly fuzzy, but he knew enough. "I were raised on a farm. My Ma loved me. My sister were my best friend. An' my Pa... used to hurt me."

"You actually remember your Father hitting you?" Ferra's eyebrow quirked.

"No. Dirk took that away. But I remember the pain. Like knives in my muscles, razors through my veins. I don't wanna know what my Pa used to do to me. I suspect I couldn't survive if I did. All I remember is that Dirk saved me from it. Sent Fetch to rescue me. I escaped on an old horse. Walkers killed her, but I met Dirk on the road." A smile spread on Kain's lips. "Saved his life an' all. I made it to Arx. Even got to see the Ant speak."

He smiled at the memory. Andross DeGaya. A hero in the flesh.

“Course, the Walkers took me prisoner soon after. They wanted to execute me. So Dirk sent the Saviour to rescue me. Imagine! A man who could control even the Saviour! After that, Fetch took me to the Foundry. Dirk met us there. Told me he would lock my past away. Let me forget the hurt. An’ I reckon he did a damn fine job o’ that.”

“You sure about that?” Fetch’s voice were muted. He stared into the corner o’ the room.

“He told me that life is better when it is simple. Besides, now I can re-pay Dirk for all he’s done for me. That’s where you come in, Ferra. Dirk said he is lookin’ for a special memory. Sommat about the Spire? This memory keeps it locked down, or sommat like that?”

Ferra nodded. “*Aversa* memory. It’s not really a memory, more of a... guardian. With them in place, the Spire is nothing but an eyesore. I know where one is.”

Kain sat forwards. “You do?”

“You’ll need to talk to Dirk.” Ferra looked over to Fetch. “He needs to decide how we do this. I saw it through the eyes of the Heir. He broke easy, but of course he had no idea what he was seeing.”

“What is it?” Fetch asked.

“She carries it with her. It’s a brooch, bronze and engraved.”

“Who carries it with her?” Fetch asked.

“Leanne DeSüle.”

“I see.” Fetch’s voice were cold as frozen grass.

“Damn it. Named Lord. Reckon that’ll be tricky,” Kain said. He stood up. “Best be gettin’ to it then. Thanks Ferra.” He offered his hand to the Mindbreaker.

Ferra drew her bloody wrist to her chest. “No offence kid, but I’d rather not.”

“Right.” Kain scratched the back o’ his head. “Sorry about that.”

“Come on then kid.” Fetch stood up an’ stretched. “Foundry it is. Take care, Ferra. You’re a bigger target than I am.”

Ferra snorted. She touched a hammer set beside the desk. “I think I’ll be fine.”

Kain followed Fetch from the room.

Ferra’s eyes tracked him as he left.

Chapter 30

Balls an' blast it but the Foundry were hot today.

Kain were already half broiled under his shirt. Big, wet droplets rolled down his arsecrack an' beside him, Fetch looked to be meltin'. His head were so shiny with sweat he looked like a half-sucked gumdrop.

But the forge outshone even Fetch's greasy pate. All the old, broken equipment had been repaired or replaced. Cetera members scuttled about, pushin' this'n that here'n there. Anvils, forges, machines. They were gettin' ready for sommat big.

In the middle o' the room, there were a stone bowl. Kain walked over. Could hardly stop hissself. Heartfire bubbled under the stone an' he shuddered. Terror oozed over his skin. Sommat about it, that livin', movin' fire... it made him wanna flee an' never stop runnin'.

He clamped down on that impulse right hard. Dirk wouldn't accept a coward. If he kept panickin' at shadows, he would never earn his ring.

In the bowl itself were a pile o' treasure. Necklaces, earrings, bracelets, anklets, all glimmered like gold in the scorchin' light o' the Heartfire. Iron were the most common, uncut nuggets of ore, but there were enough precious metals to add a glimmer to the proceedin's. A bloody arrowhead caught his eye for a moment, but he weren't quite sure why.

"Fetch. What do you want?" General Adira stepped from the shadows. A pair of hatchets sparkled at her hip an' her eyes were creased with perpetual anger.

As always, Kain felt his mouth run dry. General Adira. Dirk's number two. She were the head o' operations in Austellus an' there weren't a body around that said her name above a whisper.

Rumour had it she even knew the Saviour, once upon a time.

“Need to see Dirk.” No bullshit from Fetch. No friendship either. The pair always seemed... cold with one another.

Adira glared at him for a moment, like she were debatin’ if she could refuse. Then she scowled. “With me.” She turned on her heel an’ made for the metal balcony.

Fetch followed her to the platform. “Come on kid.”

Kain followed along an’ stood, in silence o’ course, beside the pair as the platform began to descend. The screech o’ rusty metal stabbed his ears.

The bottom floor o’ the Foundry were alive with soldiers. Weapons glittered in copper-ringed hands. Swords, daggers, some sort o’ spiky ball on-a-stick he had never seen afore. Sparrin’ took place at a frantic pace.

A small bloke with two cuts over his eyes danced around a woman an’ slashed at her legs with a longsword. The woman reversed her spear an’ knocked his blow aside. She stepped forwards an’ drove her weapon into his chest.

The head squelched out of the other side, covered in blood an’ meat. He coughed an’ gurgled, blood seepin’ from the wound.

The copper ring on the bloke’s finger began to glow, intense like a star were caught in the room. The torches that glowed around the walls burned blue.

When the glow were gone, the bloke fingered the tear in his shirt. Underneath, the skin were smooth an’ unbroken. “Looks like a good touch. Another?”

The woman nodded an’ lifted her spear again. The bloke raised his longsword.

“Such a waste of time,” Fetch said.

“What do you mean?” Kain asked.

"The point of sparring is to learn from your mistakes. Can't do that if you forget them in order to heal the wounds they cause." Fetch shook his head an' sighed. "Come on. Mush, or Adira will kill us."

Kain bowed his head an' followed the old man.

The cavern were enormous. The further Adira led them into the cave, the darker it got. She paused to filch a torch from a wall sconce an' forged onwards, right to the back o' the room. Kain followed that waverin' light.

Adira thrust the torch forwards. There, in the rock, were a set o' cracks. Like someone had taken a hammer an' chisel to the wall an' attacked like a maniac. Fissures big enough that the light got lost in their darkness.

"With me," Adira said.

She stepped towards a crack in the rock an' pressed herself into it. Kain caught a glimpse o' her witherin' eyes afore she disappeared completely inside the rock.

"What were that?" Kain asked Fetch.

"I assume this is our way to get to Dirk."

"No. Bugger it, no," Kain said. Even lookin' at the gap, it seemed tiny. He shuddered.

"Think it's a choice kid?" Fetch sighed an' tucked his rapier down his leg. He stepped towards the crack. "Balls but this is tight. Hey, been a long time since I said that, eh?" He snorted at his own joke.

Kain listened until he could no longer hear Fetch's breathin'.

Then it were just him, alone in the dark.

Kain licked his lips. He glanced over his shoulder. A pinprick o' light picked out the Cetera members.

Picked out their rings.

Kain sighed. Dirk had done so much for him, but he still didn't think he was worthy of a ring himself. Every time he asked, Dirk just smiled, shook his head, and sent him back out with Fetch again.

Kain knew what they said about him. Fetch's favourite. They all laughed at him. The little farmer boy who couldn't earn his ring.

Well. He'd show them!

Kain sidled up to the crack. Oh it was small. So, so small. He ran a hand across. The edges were slick. There was just no way. He pressed himself to the rock. Holy balls but it were snug. He sidestepped into the crack. The rock were cold against his arms.

He shuffled deeper.

Kain tasted his own breath as he struggled forwards. Twist, groan, shuffle. The wall were tight against his chest.

An' just like that, he couldn't breathe.

Kain gasped. He could see the rocks closin' around him. Which way was out? He scrabbled with his fingernails. Rocks everywhere. Entombed in a wall. He was goin' to suffocate. Had to get out, he had to...!

A hand grabbed out and yanked him from the gap. A gash opened up his arm and he stumbled out into Fetch.

"About time," Adira said. Her torch illuminated the cavern with an intense orange light. The rocks around them were smooth. Pathways spidered out before them. Six, seven routes through the rock.

"Where do all of these go?" Kain asked when he had his breath back.

"We don't know most of the routes through the Catacombs," Adira said. "But I know where Dirk is."

Addie led them onwards. Fetch started to whistle. The tuneless noise cracked an' bounced down the tunnel until Adira turned an' shushed him.

The tunnels twisted an' turned, like the veins beneath the skin of a pig. The pool of light was small. Felt like they were walking through an empty sky.

Breathe it in. Breathe it out.

Eventually the pathway opened out. Kain traced the wall with his fingers. A few noises came from further down. The carved rock made way for stone steps an' grates, a couple torches flickered along the walls.

"This way." Adira always sounded angry.

Kain followed her around two grates an' down a winding pathway. It opened out afore them into an enormous antechamber.

A huge pillar o' metal broke through the middle. The base o' the Spire. It were smooth as a fresh-forged blade an' glittered like a ghost.

Dirk stood afore it. His black shirt were tight against the skin an' that odd knife o' blue-silver steel rode at his waist. His ageless face were unsurprised as he watched them approach with those logic-breakin' violet eyes.

Kain bowed as deep as he damn knew how.

"Easy Kain."

He looked up. Dirk was smiling. "Fetch. Good to see you." His voice was light. Like he should be skipping.

"Master," Adira said. "There have been some accidents in Austellus."

"Accidents?" Dirk said. "What, did Cetera soldiers trip and fall on a bunch of swords or something?"

"No, I mean..."

"What we have Adira, is a set of murders. Murders that you should have been stopping. I left Austellus in your hands. Tell me, why has it slipped?"

Adira opened an' closed her mouth a few times.

"Are you remembering, Adira? Is that it? Do regrets cloud your mind? You didn't really love him, did you? Infatuation by proximity at the most." Dirk stepped forwards. The torch in Adira's hand began to burn blue. Dirk gripped her shirt.

"I never loved him," Adira said without inflection. "I did not betray him."

"Good girl," Dirk said. He released her shirt an' shoved her back. "Now do your job. I would recommend spot checks on those disembarking the Mucro would be a good place to start. Send Danni. Her zeal is a welcome change to the usual mud-thick minds I get to play with."

Adira offered a shaky bow an' then scrambled back down the tunnel.

"Kain." Dirk examined his nails. "Let me ask you something lad. What I just did...was it cruel?"

"No."

"Why not? There is no way she could have prevented those murders. In fact, she was right in the Foundry when they happened, just as I commanded her to be. Yet I punished her anyway."

"Yes but..." Kain said. Something was buzzing inside his head. "She deserved to be punished. She let you down."

"You would never let me down, would you Kain?"

"Never!" He practically bellowed the word. Everything was hot. Light popped an' sparked in his eyes. "My life is yours." He had never spoken with such certainty before.

"I know," Dirk whispered. He patted Kain's cheek.

Then he stepped back. The light drained away an' Kain blinked a couple of time.

What?

"I spoke with Ferra," Fetch said. "She's found the second *Aversa* memory."

"Wonderful. I'm glad little Matthew could be useful."

"Aye. I've been thinking about that. Maybe we should let him go Dirk?" Fetch wavered but his eyes didn't drop. "I mean we've got what we needed."

"No." Dirk grinned an' bounced towards Fetch. "I need him. It has paralysed Aurellius. Interesting to watch, the fight between two souls in one body. Caelum is leaderless." Dirk's voice shifted. "But enough of that. Kain, I've got someone I would like you to meet." He held a hand out to the hallway behind them.

Kain turned an' saw the woman standing there. Holy balls she were pretty. Red lips curved in a private smile. Eyes green as a rain-slick meadow. Even the tattoos spiralling across her scalp were exotic.

"Come on kid, wipe the drool away, eh?" Fetch whispered in his ear. "You've seen her before."

"Reckon I would'a remembered that," Kain said.

"Ignis." Dirk stepped forwards an' wrapped the lass in a hug. "So lovely to see you."

Ignis smiled at Dirk. "The pleasure is mine." She stepped back an' bowed low. Kain could o' fainted.

Dirk sat on the floor an' crossed his legs like a child. He patted the stone ground next to him. "My friends, let me tell you a story."

Fetch sat down with a groan an' Kain slumped down next to him. Ignis joined them like a queen takin' court.

"Once upon a time, Arx was a small mining village. The people traded in the ores they dug from the ground and garnered a reputation as a shrewd folk. One day, a metal-smith visited the city. His name was Aurellius. By some accident, he discovered that the metals in Arx had a peculiar quality. With the right

encouragement, they could be used to store memory itself. This discovery propelled him to power and soon, Arx looked to him as their leader.”

Dirk picked at a rock on the cavern floor. “But Aurellius was never content with what he had. He wanted more than mere memories and he was convinced that the metals could be made to obey. One day, he journeyed to the deepest part of the deepest mine and brought his power to bear. He sought to shape the land in his own image. The ore melted from the rock and rushed through the mine in a flood. But Aurellius lost control. The iron found him wanting and he could not prevent what happened next. A spear of metal pierced him, entombed his body, and rose high above the city to challenge the heavens themselves. We now call it, the Spire.”

Fetch cleared his throat nervously.

“The moment the Spire formed, the fertile land to the north evaporated into the sand-swept Deadlands. Trade was hit, bad. One in ten caravans would make it across the desert. The people of Arx built forges, factories, to refine the ores for maximum profit, but it was still not enough. The city was starving.”

Dirk stood up. “In this time of crisis, one young man became fascinated by the Spire. He saw that blue-silver steel every night when he slept and dedicated himself to discovering its secrets. Dreamsteel. After years of study, he was able to communicate with the soul trapped inside the Spire. Aurellius taught this young man many things. Memory magic, and the craft of Dreamsteel.” Dirk touched the knife at his waist. “The young man took an apprentice of his own and together, they used this new power for the good of Arx.”

Dirk returned to the circle. “Years passed and together these two brought peace to the dying and hope to the living. But to forget a problem is not to solve it. Arx was still in trouble, and this man and his apprentice were not enough by

themselves. In a desperate move, they revealed the formula for Dreamsteel.” He smiled a sad smile. “What fools they were. Soon every forge in Arx was bent to craft blue-silver blades. But the hands of the masses are a dangerous thing. Dreamsteel became a crutch. Instead of solving their problems, people chose to drool away in memories of their past.”

Dirk grabbed his ankles an’ rocked. “That was when the man realised he had to do something. He returned to the Spire. For this spear of metal has a very special quality. It can access every mind that has been cracked already. The man used the Spire to access these magic-altered minds and wipe the notion of Dreamsteel from the city.”

Dirk sat back an’ stared at the ceiling. “In order to avoid a repeat, the man decided to travel the peninsula in order to destroy any Dreamsteel left in existence. In his absence, his apprentice managed to access the Spire herself. She spoke with Aurellius. Convinced him that her master was dangerous. The power of the Spire was too much for one man, she claimed. So piteous was her wailing that Aurellius was moved to help her. He granted her knowledge. The *Aversa* memories. A way to lock the Spire.”

Dirk’s face flashed violent for a heartbeat afore it came calm once more. “The first *Aversa* was created by accident. Years before, the apprentice made a mistake. In trying to ease a woman’s pain, she trapped the poor woman’s soul in a band of purest gold. It was not an *Aversa* at the time, but by a single touch the apprentice was able to bring her new knowledge to bear. The woman trapped within agreed to become a guardian of the Spire. Aurellius became the second. The final *Aversa* was the young apprentices husband.”

Dirk stared at his hands. “With three guardians to block me from the Spire, Arx is dying.”

“What do you mean?” Fetch asked.

“I already possess the first Aversa memory that Aer created. Every time I touch it... you cannot imagine the pain. Though I suppose it is only fair. I stole her husband’s death from her. Now I need you three to go and steal his *Aversa* for me.”

“And... what about the third one? The metal-smith?” Fetch asked.

“It is in a safe place. I shall gather it myself.” Dirk smiled.

“And when you have all of these... whatever memories, then what will you do?” Fetch asked.

Dirk were quiet for a long time. “I will activate the Spire and speak to every mind in the city. I will force this bloated city to heal.” He sat forwards. A smile spread across his face.

Kain sat forwards. All of a sudden, he were desperate eager to help. “What do we do?”

Dirk snorted with harsh laughter. “Tell me Kain. How do you fancy going to a Caelum party?”

Chapter 31

Sam shivered.

The Shopping Promenade was deserted. The sun was a far-away diamond in the greasy sky and smog was still thick on the air. She hawked a cough and let fly a ball of black spit.

Lovely.

The brick and glass building before her was still closed but she rapped on the frosted-glass door. "Hello?"

Something shuffled inside. A distorted shadow moved towards the door, all angles and shapes. It opened, just a breath, and a familiar face peeked out.

"I do apologise, but we're not quite open just... oh. It's you."

"Hello Mira." Sam tried for a smile, but it was a rusty thing.

"What do you want?" The seamstress folded her arms. Today's clothier concoction looked to be an abortive mixture of a half-Anais Dress, stitched into a pair of men's trousers and accented by a long jacket that hung almost to her knees. The buttons were made of tiny gemstones, the cuffs sparkled with pearl and, of course, her tits were just flopping about all over the place.

"I've got a favour to ask." Sam rubbed her hands together to try and keep a breath of warmth in the sodding things. Her skin was rough.

"I don't have any jobs for you. I don't do loans. And I certainly don't have an ounce of sympathy." Mira scratched at a beauty spot on her bottom lip.

"Please? It'll only take a moment." Sod it, she hated that whine in her voice.

But Mira was the only chance she had left.

The seamstress gave a long-suffering sigh. "Alright. Get in here."

Sam's face split in a grin and she realised, with no small amount of embarrassment, that her eyes were filled with tears. Had it really been that long since someone did anything nice for her?

Yes.

She curtseyed, the impression only ruined slightly by the shredded hem of the dress that she clutched, and scuttled on inside.

The shop was eerie quiet. Everything was covered in white sheets and the only source of light was a single oil-lamp set on the counter. It threw shadows from the mannequins around the room. Their ridiculous finery and distorted limbs made monsters crawl across the walls.

"Mira, thank you, I..." Sam began, but the older woman just shook her head.

"Siddown girl." She pointed an imperious finger at a covered bench. "Start talking. We open soon." As if in response to her words, pinks cuts of dawn sunlight began to slice through the window over her shoulders.

Sam took a deep breath. Now or never. "Mira, I want you to help me get across the Mucro."

Mira pulled a face. "Why?"

"I want to go to Austellus. To find Matthew and my Mother's ring."

"Matthew? Your ex-fiancé?"

Sam twisted the iron chain on her wrist. "Well, technically he still is my fiancé..."

Mira's earrings glittered. Familiar silver wings. Ones that Sam had once traded for a dress. The seamstress shook her head. "Matthew is dead dear."

The words hit like a stone. "What? What do you know?"

"I know Austellus dear. The boy has been missing for over a month. I'm sorry dear, but your Matthew is almost certainly rotting at the bottom of the Mucro."

Sam shook her head. "But... what if you're wrong?" An image jumped into her mind. A corpse with blue eyes and a curling smile.

All you need to do to keep him alive is leave Austellus in my hands.

Sam shuddered at the memory. "What if, uh, he's out there somewhere. Even if the Walkers could make it into Austellus, they wouldn't know where to look."

Mira sighed. "And you do?"

"No. But I couldn't live with myself unless I tried."

Mira tapped her feet. "I'm disappointed in you Samantha. Not because what you are suggesting is certainly suicide, which it is by the way. Even if we buy into your delusion that Matthew survived, then what? Are you still relying on a man to solve all your problems for you? I thought we were past that?"

Sam laughed. It was a sad sound. The croak of a dying infant. "Solve my problems? The only reason I am permitted to stay in Caelum at all is because he is still missing. The moment Matthew is back, our engagement is over. High Lord DeProleai promised as much."

"Then why?" Mira demanded.

Sam sighed. She folded her hands in her lap. "Do you know what my biggest regret is? That I let him go without me."

"Who, Matthew? I heard he was kidnapped. You hardly 'let him go.'"

"Not Matthew. Jack."

"Who?"

"He was my Forge Master. Taught me everything I know. He was the only person who believed in me, in who I was. He disappeared in Austellus and I never heard from him again. Weeks passed and I hid in the forge he left me. Never even tried to find him. If I had, he might still be here now. I told myself I would never do that again. And yet here we are."

"Then why has it taken you so long to come to me?"

"Because I'm weak," Sam said softly. "I always have been. I thought it was strong to fight against Father and Lizzy. But it's not. What victory is there to be had when you attack people on your side? I want to be better. I want to *do* something. Father was strong enough to go to prison for us. Lizzy was strong enough to marry a man twice her age to keep herself relevant. Even Mother. Mira she was a whore and..."

"Kali."

Sam stopped. "Pardon?"

"Your mother's name."

"Kali. I never knew that," Sam said softly.

"We worked together. Saul too, though he was more muscle than pleasure. How do you think I knew him?" Her voice was hushed and a painful silence followed his name from her lips.

"Mira, I'm sorry, I..."

"It's not your fault girl." Mira sniffled. "Fool man was always looking to get himself in trouble." She gave a tiny smile and her eyes travelled back through the years. "We all loved Saul. The most handsome man, with the kindest heart."

"That sounds about right." Sam's voice was wet. "He always did have a way of making me feel like he could hold back the world."

A painful, sniffing silence followed. Sam dabbed at her eyes and Mira forgot herself enough to wipe her face on her sleeve.

"You, uh, you must be happy to be out of there now then," Sam said.

"Out of where?"

"The brothel, I mean, selling your body like that..."

"What's wrong with my body?" Mira drew herself up.

"No, I mean..."

"Being a whore is not shameful girl. We hired guards to keep the violent ones out and worked for ourselves. There is nothing wrong with sex. Do you think a blacksmith sells *his* body, to sit at the forge all day and breathe in coal smoke in order to craft something for a client?"

"No, *she* doesn't," Sam said.

"Well it was no different for us." Mira's voice was so certain, and yet...

Sam thought back. To the *Lupanar*. The feeling of the *Puto's* hand on her...

She shuddered. Even now, she would rather spend a year sleeping on the streets, than one more moment in that bed.

"I see," she forced eventually. "But we are getting off topic. Mira, please. I need your help. I'll beg if I have to, I just..."

"Oh enough whining. I'm not going to waste my time taking a whiner to Austellus."

Sam looked up. "Does that mean...?"

Mira folded her hands in her lap. "May as well make sure the old place is still standing. I know that one barge still crosses the river. Anyone is free to cross, so long as they are unarmed." She drew two knitting needles from her sleeve and set them on the counter. "I think that is what irritates the Named Lords the most. The loss of fear..." She stood up and dusted her hands down her dress. "Though please tell me that you intend to change. What are you wearing, anyway? Is that a rug?"

Sam hawked a laugh. "Actually, this is a dress you made for me."

"By the Prelude girl." Mira set a hand on her stomach. "There are some of the girls' clothes in the back there. You go change, I'll close up shop."

Sam did as she was told and changed into a homespun shirt and a loose skirt, with a kerchief to hold back her hair. Mira gave a nod.

“Better. Come on then.” Mira held the door for her and together they made their way back out and into the cold. The Ferriway wasn’t far. The streets were deserted and they were close enough to avoid a checkpoint. All they had to do was follow the smell of salt and smoke.

By the time they made it over, pale-as-milk sunlight was just breaking through the smog. Sam tucked an errant strand of hair beneath her kerchief.

The Ferriway was quiet. The water hushed against the bank and six barges rocked against the sludge. The water wheels that ran the chains were locked and beginning to show signs of rust.

“What happened here?”

“Caelum lost girl.” Mira shrugged. “The first few weeks, there was an effort to get bodies across. It was a slaughter. With DeGaya missing and DeKeita overwhelmed, those fancy lords did what they always do. They hunkered down, tighter than ever, in the little space they still had left. If it wasn’t for the parties, I don’t think they would even see each other.”

Sam grimaced. Of course. Even at war, the houses would insist on their sodding dances.

A single barge still splashed in the waters and stood beside it was a Walker, his nose buried in a book.

“He-llo.” Mira beamed at him. “Mr Man! I hope you don’t mind if I ask you just a teeny-weensy...”

“You want over? Get in the bucket.” The Walker didn’t even look up. Just licked his finger and slowly turned the page.

“I... are you sure?” Mira’s cheeks coloured.

“Aye.” The Walker raised an eye, keeping his place in his book with a single, sausage finger. “Only two kinds o’ folk want across the river nowadays. Either

you're off to fight the Austelli, in which case youse are good as dead. Or you are one of them, in which case I don't care. So. If'n you want across. Get in the bucket."

Mira turned her nose up and stepped across the wet gap into the rocking barge. "Well. Aren't you a charming man?"

"Nope." The Walker turned back to his book. "Ready?"

"Hold on!" Sam grabbed the hem of her skirt and leapt across the sludge and into the barge. "Right. Ready when..."

The Walker gave a face-splitting yawn and yanked down on the waterwheel lever beside him. The contraption of gears and winches gave a soft groan and began to turn. A sharp *clank-clank-clank* broke the air and the barge shuddered. The ramp closed up the back of the boat and they began to move across the water.

"Well, I never." Mira folded her arms and glared steel across the river. "Time was, holding the Ferriway was for the best and brightest!"

"What..." By the Prelude, she had to swallow something down quick. "... happened?"

"Time, I suppose. My mother told me that when she was growing up, Arx was a bubbling pot of people from all over, drawn to the metal industry. The rich folks scuttled across the river and built their big houses. Then that damn wall came up and all the foreigners began to disappear. I suppose, with no one else to keep out, it was natural that they turned on each other. Caelum began it, I believe, and as that cult is proving now, whoever holds the Mucro holds the city."

"But Mira..." No. Too much. Sam stepped forwards and let out a hot stream of wet vomit. It splattered against the bottom of the barge with the smell of sour liquor and rancid tea. Looked like carrots and rice.

"Oh now that is disgusting." Mira plucked her skirts closer. "Do crouch down girl. Tuck your head between your legs and try and keep your mouth shut."

Sam groaned and sank to her heels. If anything, not being able to see the water just made things worse. It felt like an eternity before the barge shuddered and *squelch*-ed into the Austellus bank.

Sam stepped off, into Austellus. She knew what to expect. Refuse and waste piled up in the streets. Dead eyed citizens wandering around, each half-a-breath from death by malnutrition. It was awful. It was terrible. It was...

Not that bad, actually.

She looked around. The buildings were a little shoddy, and the cobblestones were uneven enough to give her drunk-steps, but aside from that it was...

Normal.

Mira looked over. "Well what did you expect, girl? Criminals devouring each other in the street?"

"No, but this is just dull."

"Don't count on it." Mira said. She nodded down the street.

"You two! Stay where you are!"

A pair of men, huge as horses, came barrelling towards them. A woman with red eyes followed behind and they were all wearing copper rings.

"Told you," Mira said. "Don't worry. They don't have a problem with Austelli."

"Hands behind your back ladies," the red-eyed woman shouted.

"Hello there dear," Mira said. "No need for alarm, we are simply..."

A fist slammed into her stomach.

Sam turned in shock, but her arms were seized by one of the hulking man-mountains and twisted painfully at her back.

"No bullshit," red-eyes said. "No bollocks. Names. Now."

"Her name is Mira and my name is Sam and if you hit her again, I will be pissed to fuck." The words exploded from Sam's mouth like vomit had moments

before. A part of her knew she would regret them but a bigger, much louder part, was still feeling the effects of the river and she was in no mood to be hauled about by a bunch of grubby faced thugs!

The red-eyed woman approached Sam slowly, and lifted her chin with a finger. "What was that love?"

"Oh please. Save your 'threatening' act for someone who gives a shit." Sam tried to put some bite into her voice, but she could feel a chill all the way down the back of her legs.

"Act? You want my guys to thump you next?"

"Does it really matter what I say?" Sam asked.

The woman scowled. "Claud, Gers, search them."

A rough pair of hands frisked Sam and she sighed. How many times was acceptable to get groped these days? At least the Austelli were professional about it.

"No weapons Danni," the bloke holding Sam said.

"I could have told you that. *Danni*," Sam said.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Mira is from here, you moron. Does she need a reason to return?"

Danni's red eyes narrowed. "Watch your tone. That doesn't explain why you're here. I could recognise a Caelum face a mile away. The Saviour showed us what cowards you are. You vile sinners may have killed him, but those who remain are twice as loyal. And we do not take kindly to you."

Sam licked her lips. A plan formed in her head. A dangerous, stupid plan, but it was the best she had. "I'm here to see Dirk."

At the mention of his name, it felt like even the wind fell silent.

"What do you know about him?" Danni demanded.

Sam smiled. It was a good one. That infuriating sneer that most noble daughters could produce without thought. "If he wanted you to know that, chances are he would have mentioned it to you himself."

"Don't bluff me, girl." Danni snarled. "If you really were one of Dirk's, then where is your ring?"

"If you'll get your meat-mound to let me go, I'll show you," Sam said.

Danni's jaw twitched, but she growled at the bloke and Sam's arm flopped free.

"Thank you." Sam reached into her purse and drew out the copper ring. She rolled it across her palm. "Where else did I get this?"

Danni looked thoughtful for a moment. Sam knew the way Austellus worked now. This copper ring was her way in.

Then Danni began to laugh. Low and hard and sour. "I knew that Watcher was arrogant, but this is next level." Danni pulled a jagged knife from her belt and set it on Sam's bottom teeth. "Did you really think that would work?"

Something bit into Sam's wrists. She craned her neck and caught a glimpse of the manacles that fastened her hand behind her back.

Danni's mouth curled upwards. "Lucky girl. Not a lot of people get to see Ferra. And when she is done with you, we will have all day for you to sing for me."

Cruel laughter broke the smog as Sam was led away in chains.

Chapter 32

Sam was marched through Austellus with a collar around her neck.

Shame coiled around her, tighter than the manacles that kept her hands behind her back. The cuffs on her ankles clanked and her thighs chafed in the cold, wet wind.

And yet Sam clung to her shame. Because if she let it go, then she would have to face the fear that sat, like a lump of ice, in her stomach.

Mira marched behind her. Silent, but her eyes were wide and white. She glanced around, like she was searching for an escape route, but the two hulking guards did not let up for a moment

The street wound around like a lash, and Sam found herself examining each building as it passed. Austellus was not a place for glass and brick, and yet there was something... familiar about them.

She squinted closer. Of course. They were clothing shops.

Sam almost laughed. How sodding fitting. She was being marched to who knows where, and the last thing she would see was dresses.

At the end of the street, a huge building rose from behind the smog. A pastiche of a Caelum home, it was three stories of wood and paint.

Inside, the room was filled with noise. Huge benches were crushed with people slurping soup. Only a few lifted their eyes to see her march past. Far more were focused on their meal.

At the back of the room was a single door and Danni dragged Sam through it with little fanfare.

Inside, a woman sat behind a desk covered in candles and rubbed her temples. She looked up. "Danni? Who are they?" She gestured at Sam and Mira.

"Agents of the Watcher," Danni said.

"No, we're not!" Sam said. "I don't even know who that is."

"Easy way to find out." Danni shrugged. She tossed the copper ring to the woman behind the desk. "This one had that on her. Says Dirk gave it her. Is that true?"

The woman behind the desk sighed. She closed her eyes a moment and a candle on her desk burned blue.

Sam shuddered. Blue flame. Memories of Ignis soured in her mind.

When the woman opened her eyes again, blue flecks ran across them. She shook her head. "No. This is the ring that we sent across the river, the day we took Austellus. Anyone could have picked it up."

Danni turned to Sam with a dangerous light of triumph in her eyes. "So. Now we get to figure out just who you are. Thanks Ferra."

"Just keep them quiet. I've already got a headache."

"Boys, gags."

Sam opened her mouth to speak, but a wad of filthy cloth was forced between her lips and she was dragged to the back of the room. Another door, with a table set beside it.

"Everything off except the clothes," Danni said.

The guard tore Sam's purse free. It clanged to the table, swiftly followed by Mira's.

"All clean?" Danni asked, and the pair of guards nodded. "Good."

She pushed open the door to reveal a single chair bolted to the floor. Sam tried her best, she really did, but her eyes betrayed her and glanced down, to the red and brown splashes that sat beneath the chair.

"Who wants to go first?" Danni asked. Her lips were twisted in a smile.

"Please." Mira managed to spit her gag on the floor. "I grew up not two streets from here. I promise, we aren't the ones you want to be questioning."

"You grew up here?" Danni smiled. "Local lass then. You can go first."

"Please!" Mira's voice rose and Danni wagged a finger at her.

"Don't start. We've got a whole lot longer before you need to start screaming. Come along then."

They vanished into the room with one of the guards. The other was left out with Sam. He produced a hood from his belt and two balls of wax.

He tilted her head and shoved the wax into each of her ears. Sam quivered when his hand fell on her shoulder. The oily taste of the rag filled her mouth and the hood plunged her into darkness.

All she could do, was wait.

Panic gnawed at her mind. Rumours she had heard of the Austelli and their thirst for blood all came roaring back. Her breath was hot inside the hood and snot dribbled from her nose and over her top lip.

Sam felt her knees begin to shake.

It was impossible to tell how long she quaked under the guard's hand, her senses muffled, in the corner of the room. By the time the guard tore the hood from her head, and jammed his thick fingers into her ears to retrieve the wax, it felt like she had been standing there all day.

At the same time, it was over far too quickly.

Sam blinked and the room came back to her. Mira was being shoved up against the wall. Her face was white as a skull and she wept like a waterfall. Two words bubbled from her tortured throat, over and over again.

"My hands. My hands."

Sam looked down and bile rushed into her mouth.

The skin on Mira's hands had been peeled away. It hung from her fingertips like a glove of translucent flesh. The red and purple viscera *pulsed* and the bone ran with blood. Her arms shook uncontrollably and splashes of blood ran down her skirt. Sam couldn't turn away. The inner workings of the hand were exposed like a meat-puppet.

"Your turn." Danni's voice was calm, and flavoured with a lilt of amusement.

The guard dragged Sam into the room and mindless panic took over. She thrashed against him, but he crushed her arms to her side.

She slammed into the chair so hard it felt like the wood had slapped her. Wires fastened her wrists to the arms and the manacles around her ankles were removed so that her feet could slide into the restraints fastened to the bottom.

In a remarkably short amount of time, she was completely helpless.

Danni stepped towards her. "There. Isn't this cosy? Now we're going to play a little game, okay? I'm going to ask you some questions." She pointed her dagger at Sam. The thing was jagged with spines and the blade was flecked with blood.

Mira's blood.

"Did you see your friend?"

Sam nodded.

"Then you know the price of dishonesty. And shall I tell you a secret? I went easy on her. She is from Austellus after all. Not like you. No you're from Caelum. Those same bastards that sentenced me to die." Danni's red eyes glowed like a demon. "I was on the *Caedes* march. The Saviour rescued me himself. He taught me what it is to hate those who deserve it. I've been waiting to get one of you lot under my knife for such a long time."

Sam's eyes began to itch. All of a sudden, she couldn't stop staring at the knife in Danni's hand. Flipping and twisting and twirling. She licked her lips, but her tongue was dry. "I'll tell you anything. Please. Don't hurt me."

Danni stepped over and set the blade of her knife against the wood just between Sam's fingers. "Who are you?"

"Samantha. Samantha DeAcarris." Sam's answer was so fast that spit leapt from her lips. "Daughter of Horatio DeAcarris and sister to..."

Danni set her finger on Sam's lips. "That's enough. See? It's easy. Took your friend Mira a few tries. Next, why are you here?"

Sam shuddered. The knife rested against her thumb. "To find my fiancé. Matthew DeProleai."

"Two for two. Very good, but they only get tougher." Danni tapped her lips with the blood stained knife. "Now. Who sent you?"

"No one." Sam gibbered. "I asked Mira to help me but it was my idea."

Danni danced the knife between Sam's fingers. "Huh. Now how is it I don't believe you? Rich Caelum girl such as yourself got no business in Austellus."

She slipped the tip of the knife under Sam's fingernail. "So why don't we try again? Who. Sent. You?"

"You..." Sam's hand began to shake. The tip of the knife pressed under her nail. "You told me to tell the truth. I came of my own will. I swear."

Danni backhanded her so hard she saw spots. The chair rocked underneath her.

"Don't you dare lie to me! Your friend already admitted it. You are working with the Watcher!"

"No!" Sam dribbled blood. "She just said what you told her to! You were *skinning her hand*! She would have said anything!"

Danni ground the point of her knife into Sam's knuckle. "Bullshit! Who is he?"

She snarled.

"I don't know!"

Blood burst from the side of Sam's hand and she shrieked.

"WHO IS HE?"

"I don't know, I swear it!" Sam blubbered.

Danni stepped back. She ran a hand through her fringe and shook her head. "I swear. Give a girl a chance." She swung her knife before her like a pocket watch on a chain. "You lied to me. And *you know what that means!*"

"No. Please" Sam's heels drummed against the floor.

"Are you left handed or right?"

"Don't!" Sam screeched.

"Left it is. Most people are right anyway and if you aren't... well, tough."

Danni drew a stool and sat down. The knife flickered in her hands and she pinched Sam's wrist. "Don't worry. We can make it fun. See how long you can hold your breath before you scream."

The knife touched Sam's skin.

She screamed.

The door banged open.

"What the fuck is that noise?" A woman bellowed from the doorway. The one from the table. Her arms were thick and spiral tattoos ran across her pale skin.

"Sorry Ferra. I did ask her to keep it quiet."

"Here's an idea. Don't cut people if you don't want them to scream. Or at the least shove something in her mouth to shut her up." Ferra turned to leave.

"Ignis! I know Ignis!" Sam found herself shouting.

Ferra turned back. "A lot of people do. Danni?"

"I'll sort it." Danni nodded.

Ferra set her hand on the door.

"No! Don't leave me with her. I... I know about Dreamsteel! Check my purse outside. Check it *pleaseee*!" Sam screeched.

Ferra turned and flipped something over on the table outside of the room.

"Well. Fuck me."

When she re-entered, she carried an enormous hammer behind her. "Danni. Out."

The woman didn't even blink. She was gone in a heartbeat.

Ferra closed the door behind her. "I would really start talking or Danni will be the least of your worries." Ferra hefted her hammer and levelled it at Sam's face.

"I'll tell you anything, just..., is that a *Talarashi*?"

Ferra blinked. She looked at her hammer. "No. *Arandichi* style. Twice-tough steel makes ironwork easier. Good for strong blades."

Sam nodded. The familiar talk calmed her, somewhat. "I see. I have... had a *Salix* that my forge master made for me. Longer handle, but it made up for my short arms. Allowed for more detailed work."

Ferra slammed her hammer on the floor and leant on the hilt. "You are a blacksmith. And you know about Dreamsteel. What, exactly?"

"Almost everything. I know it can cut metal like it was made of butter, and I know that it can cut more than metal."

Ferra's eyes widened. She gave half a nod, before she caught herself.

"The only thing I don't know is how to make it." Sam licked her lips and dared herself. With the feeling that she was hurling herself off a cliff, she committed. The words spilled out into the room like blood. "That's the real reason I came to

Austellus. My name is worth less than dirt in Caelum. Ask around. I came here to finally learn how to make Dreamsteel. To put my skills at the forge to the test.”

Ferra scratched at a mole on her chin. “Then what was that I heard about you looking for your fiancé?”

“Matthew DeProleai promised me a forge. *The* forge, in the Citadel. I thought I could find the secrets there, but he’s been missing for ages. I came here as an alternative. Before Danni took me captive.”

“You’ll have to forgive her. She was ordered to be on high alert for agents of the Watcher.”

“The who?” Sam asked.

Ferra snorted. “Don’t push it. There is still every chance you are bullshitting us. Every chance that you are waiting, just to plunge the knife in.”

“I’m not. I swear it. If there was a way for me to prove it, then I...”

“Oh, there is.” Ferra grinned. “We are low on blacksmiths, after all. And I always wanted an apprentice.”

Chapter 33

“When Dirk said we were goin’ to a party, I thought it’d be a mite more excitin’ than this.”

Kain rolled his shoulders. Bleedin’ Walker leathers were tight as a tractor on his chest an’ itchy to boot.

“Focus kid. Trust me, you knew the nonsense that goes on back there, you would realise we ’ain’t missing out.” Fetch stifled a yawn.

The mansion reared up behind them. It were enormous. Like three barns all stacked atop each other. The bricks were red but everything else were iron. Window frames, chimney brackets, even the doorknobs were made o’ metal. Had to be the ugliest buildin’ he ever saw.

The driveway were all but clear now. A couple o’ stragglers made their way up the gravel path, but most were already inside. Music broke from the massive buildin’ behind them.

“Name?” Fetch asked the couple as they approached.

“Elizabeth DeSchär. This is my husband, Lance,” the lass said. She were right pretty. Like a fancy oil paintin’, all the paints an’ powders in the right place. Bloke beside her were anythin’ but. His jowls were red an’ he we puffin’ like a porcupine.

Fetch scanned his list an’ nodded. “Here we are.” He stepped aside. “Enjoy the ball.”

The pair nodded their thanks an’ put on a pair o’ weird masks. The girl looked like an osprey an’ the bloke a bear.

“What’s with the masks?” Kain asked when the pair were inside.

“They have fifty o’ these things a year. Gotta come up with something weird to do or it’d all get samey. Once, they banned clothes. Never seen as many bellies

and bollocks. Consider yourself lucky." Fetch scanned his list. "I think that's all of them arrived. Job's a good'un."

"Right. So what do we do now?" Kain asked.

"We wait. Relax kid, don't you remember the plan?" Fetch folded his arms and leant against the door.

"Oh aye. The plan. You mean 'stand out here and wait for me?'" Kain grumped. Ignis were inside. Doin' whatever it was she had to do to get the memory they needed.

"Better'n getting stabbed for a change." Fetch said.

"S'pose." Kain wiped his nose on his hand. "Boring though."

"Boredom is the best part. It's when things get exciting that you gotta worry." Fetch's jaw snapped in a massive yawn.

They watched the night together.

"Fetch," Kain said eventually. "How long have you known Dirk?"

Fetch scratched his head. "Too long. He did a... favour for me, ages ago, and I've been repaying him ever since."

Kain nodded. "Then what he said about the Spire, is it true?" He glanced through the darkness. The metal tower rose in shadow on the horizon. "Can it really alter the mind of everyone in the city?"

Fetch shrugged. "Probably. The only things I know about Dreamsteel are what he's told me. He sent me to join the Walkers when he went hunting the stuff and I never heard a soul mention how to make the stuff. A strange time. Everyone seemed so... lost. Like we were all walking around with half a soul. Spire sucked the life outta all of us."

"But now you are helping him do it again," Kain asked. "Why?"

Fetch looked him in the eye. "You ever tried to say no to Dirk?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Exactly. Just not an option for folk like us, is it?"

"What do you...?"

Fetch uncurled, suddenly alert. "There's someone out there."

"What? Where?" Kain sprang forwards an' reached for the blade at his hip.

"Easy lad, don't give the game away. Just cast a glance up to the building on our left an' tell me if you see something."

Kain flicked a glance at the guardhouse to his side. "Bloke. Cloak with a hood, just hid in the alcove."

Their eyes met.

"Watcher."

Kain gave a nice, fake yawn an' turned to get a better look. The shadow slunk around the top o' the guardhouse an' over to the mansion's roof. He disappeared around the back.

"Bugger is like smoke," Fetch said. "Why is he here?"

"Only one way to find out," Kain said. He glanced over. The guardhouse walls were smooth, but a few paces away were a disused stable. He walked over an' spat on his hands. The wooden beams were jagged an' thick.

"Kid. What are you doing?" Fetch asked.

"Sommat stupid." Kain hefted hisself up. The edge o' the wood planks crumbled under his fingers but the beam held solid enough for him to shuffle up to the flat roof.

"Get down," Fetch hissed. "You're gonna break your idiot neck and wind up crippled again."

"Again?" Kain asked. "What're you talkin' about?"

"Shit. Not important. What is important is that you get down!"

Kain shook his head. "I'm sick o' the Watcher gettin' the drop on us. Now keep your eyes out. Gimme a shout if you see anything."

He glanced across at the guardhouse roof an' rubbed his hands together. He walked to the back o' the stable roof to get a better run up.

"I'm a bleedin' lunatic," Kain whispered.

He took off. Wood crunched under his too-big Walker boots an' the lip o' the stable were approachin' awful quick...

"Kain!" Fetch shouted.

He landed on the roof o' the guardhouse, shoulder first. The Walker leather scraped down his arm like sandpaper.

Kain wobbled to his feet an' looked down to the street.

"Fetch! Your head is right shiny from up here."

"I swear to Dedisco Kain...!"

"Eyes out Fetch. I 'ain't pissin' into the wind up here for you to miss it if the Watcher decided to run." Kain walked up the slope o' the guardhouse roof an' on to DeSüle's mansion.

Bugger but he were high now. He chanced a glance over an' Fetch's head were naught but a dot in the darkness. The roof shingles were sloped further up an' they crunched under his boots.

One slipped free an' Kain went down. He rolled through the shingles an' they went pingin' off the edge. Panic drenched his thoughts. The world went rollin' around his face an' he reached out to grab an' scrabble his nails over the roof.

He caught the lip an' swung over the empty space.

"Not good, not good, not good," he whispered. Blood rushed to his head. Don't look down. Just don't look down.

He heaved hisself up slowly.

"I swear, God o' the Fields. You keep me safe up here an' I'll plant a whole damn orchard for you," Kain whispered. He crept, slow as a snake, over the roof.

A window were open further around. Kain shimmied over. Didn't seem to be anywhere else to go. The roof dropped off sharpish. Either the Watcher could leap like a gazelle, or he were inside. The late night gust pulled the gauze curtain aside. What, was that a wardrobe?

Kain slipped inside.

Yep. A wardrobe. Massive an' stocked with so many dresses he could barely see his hand afore his face. He glanced about, but the Watcher were nowhere to be found.

He poked his head out the door. At the bottom o' the corridor, a shadow vanished down the stairs.

Watcher!

Kain stepped down the corridor with creakin' footsteps. Wooden panels led to a pair o' stairs at the back an' he took 'em two at a time. The banister were burnished gold an' led to a pair o' double doors at the bottom. The noise o' the party broke through an' he swallowed.

Ignis were gonna be so pissed off.

Kain pushed through the doors. Marble. Marble everywhere an' who in their right mind had fountains inside? Larger'n life flowers spurted an' gushed about the place. Made the room look like some massive outhouse.

Right in the middle o' the room were an enormous statue o' some old bloke. Tall enough to brush the massive, domed ceilin', he were carved to look brave an' strong. His hand were outstretched to shelter the guests that mingled beneath him.

"Kain. What are you doing here?"

He spun. Ignis bore down on him like a horse mid-charge. Her dress were red as a sunset an' twice as rich. It hung across her like spider silk. A mask hid her face, orange an' red painted to look like a fancy bird. The languid feathers reached all the way around her head, keepin' her tattoos a secret.

Would'a been right pretty if she weren't so pissed off.

"Didn't I tell you to stay outside?" She hissed an' cast a glance over her shoulder. The other peacocks mingled on the floor behind 'em. None close enough to hear.

"Ignis, I..." he began.

"Don't use that name!" She snarled.

"Alright, but listen. I saw the Watcher! He's here an'..."

The *tink-tink-tink* of a knife against a wineglass silenced the room. Kain looked over to the source. Some old lady walked across a platform at the front o' the room. Her mask were an owl's face, but she discarded it when she turned to face the room. Iron-grey curls spilled down to her shoulders an' her eyes were tired. Leanne DeSüle looked exactly as Dirk had described her.

"My wonderful friends," DeSüle said. "Thank you so much for joining us today. It means the world that even in this time of difficulty, you can still find the time to break bread with me." Her smile were vomit inducin'. "However, before we get to the feast this evening, I will admit my ulterior motive for inviting you all here tonight. Our ulterior motive."

She held out an arm. Of the six seats that surrounded her, for the Named Lords Dirk said, only one was filled an' that bloke stood up. He didn't wear a mask. His salt-an'-pepper moustaches twitched when he spoke. "Good evening."

“Lord DeKeita and I have been in serious conversation with each other recently and it is with a heavy heart that I asked him here tonight so that you may all share his message.”

A murmur started up from the crowd. A couple o’ angry voices grumbled on an’ Kain distinctly heard a few boos ring out.

On the other side o’ the room, a hooded figure began to make his way towards the platform.

Kain mirrored his movements.

“Please!” Leanne DeSüle raised her arms to silence the room once more. “Just allow Lord DeKeita to show you what he has shown me. After that, all those who wish to leave will be more than welcome to do so. Var?”

He stepped forwards. “Listen up. I’m not here to bullshit you.” A couple o’ gasps at that word. “For months now, you have heard me beg for your assistance in re-taking Austellus, and for a couple of months now, most of you have turned a blind eye.”

The grumbling increased, but DeKeita forged on regardless.

“Why would you not? After all, we stockpiled food, the Nest still holds and only one barge can cross the Mucro Why should we do anything to re-take Austellus from that cult?” DeKeita shook his head. “Men, please. Bring him in.”

The front doors were shoved open by a team o’ Walkers. The Watcher stopped movin’ to watch.

A bloke were herded inside. There were sommat about the way he walked... like a child who were just learnin’ how to stay upright. There was sommat else an’ all. Kain leant forwards. What were...?

His eyes. They were gone. Replaced instead, by blue smoke.

“Bring him here, won’t you Stuart?” Var said. His voice were heavy.

One o' the soldiers saluted an' drew the poor bloke forwards. Scruffy black hair an' a rough shave. DeKeita helped him up to the dais.

"What is your name son?" he asked.

The bloke said nothin'. A line o' drool fell from his gob.

"Do you know where you are right now?"

Did he shake his head? It were hard to tell. Perhaps he were just shakin'. Kain felt his heart go out to the poor bugger.

"Can you tell us anything? What is your Mother's name? How old are you? Are you hungry?"

Nothin' changed. The vacant look in his eyes never wavered. The boy just stood there.

"One last question then. Who did this to you?"

Sommat changed. The boy began to shake. His cheeks flushed an' his lips curled an' twisted. Blood mixed with the saliva that raced down his chin an' the lad's hands balled up into fists. A pungent stink broke the ballroom an' a dark stain ran down the boy's trouser leg. His face scrunched up an', finally, he managed a single word.

"Dirk."

What? No. No way. Dirk would never do this to someone. He helped people. That's what his magic were for. It made life easier, not... this.

Yet stood there, watchin' the poor lad's face, Kain could believe it.

"Take him back to the Temple, Stuart," Var commanded an' the poor bloke were led away. Kain watched 'im go.

"Very entertaining Var." A man from a table at front stood up. His mask were shaped like a dog's face. "But what has this got to do with anything? Your own soldiers have given up on re-taking Austellus. Last I heard High Lord DeProleai had

most of your Walkers under his thumb. If our leader doesn't care, then why should we?"

"Because this is still happening!" DeKeita's voice boomed like thunder. "You think that cult will be content with Austellus? It is only a matter of time before they stream through the Nest, across the river. What would you do, my Lord, if this happened to you? To your daughters, your sons? What if this happened to any of you?"

The room lapsed into silence.

The Watcher started movin' again. He slipped between masked folk an' Kain did his best to pretend he were just patrolin' on the other side o' the room. He moved diagonally to try an' cut the bugger off.

"Who is Dirk?" A young bloke stood up. He took off his mask to reveal a scrap o' black hair. "I heard that the Saviour began this revolt, and now General Adira leads it."

"Dirk is the man behind all this," DeKeita said. "He hides in Austellus, but we will find him. With your help..."

Only a few steps between 'em now. Watcher weren't even lookin' at Kain. His eyes were fixed on the raised platform.

He leapt up beside Var.

"Dirk is far worse than you know." The Watcher's voice were sharp.

"Who are you?" DeKeita turned to the interruption.

The Watcher turned to the crowd. "Dirk is the one who plans to melt the minds of all of us sat here." He reached into his pocket an' drew out a gleamin' handful o' bronze.

Rings. He flung them into the crowd.

“Each of these belonged to a member of his cult. I have cut them down where I see them, but it is a thankless task. If you do not kill them instantly, then their wounds disappear and they strike back with twice the fury. I have spoken with this Dirk on occasion. When a soldier dies he can... puppet the corpse. Dirk has boasted of his plans. To raise an army in Austellus. To take the city. The Spire. He seeks... to punish us.”

Kain slid his blade clear. This close he could do it. One strike an’ it would all be over. He stepped up on the platform. A sword length away.

DeKeita didn’t even look at ’im. “Who are you?” he asked the Watcher.

“What, Var? You don’t recognise me?” The Watcher threw back his hood.

Andross DeGaya grinned across the platform.

Chapter 34

The Ant. Andross DeGaya. The Watcher.

Kain scrubbed his face on his sleeve. Nope. He weren't seein' things.

"Andross!" DeKeita sounded right surprised. "Step down, lad," he said to Kain.

"I appreciate your eagerness, but this man needs no permission to stand here today."

Kain shuffled off the platform, but he kept his blade in hand.

"Andross. How are you still alive?" DeKeita said.

"Luck and cowardice." DeGaya gripped Var's wrist in some warrior's greetin', then bowed to DeSüle. "Leanne."

"Andross. I'm glad you survived." She favoured him with a tight smile.

DeGaya turned back to the crowd. "Evil walks the streets of Austellus and it will not be content to stay there. I swear to all of you sat here today, we can win this. But it will take all of us. Without your support, we will all be Gazers before the winter is out."

"What tosh!" The bloke with the dog mask stood up again. "Even if we do believe you, Austelli, who's to say what side you're on?"

A grumble of appreciation met his words.

"This is not a game. It's not about sides. In the Flame Protests, I fought for Arx. I do the same now."

Despite hisself, Kain felt his heart rumble in his chest. There were sommat about the way the Ant spoke, sommat... noble. It were exactly how a hero should sound.

It were exactly how a murderer did sound.

Kain bit his lip. Conflict gnawed at him. Just what were he supposed to do?

"You need proof of my allegiance?" DeGaya asked. "Then allow me to unmask an agent of Dirk who stands here tonight!"

Kain's blood ran cold. He tried to shuffle back, but DeGaya's finger did not point his way.

"Ignis! Show yourself."

Kain glanced over. The lass didn't even pause. She marched forwards an' lobbed her mask to the floor.

"Murderer," Ignis said.

"Mindbreaker," DeGaya responded. Scorn poured from his voice. "You are not welcome here."

The squad o' Walkers beside Kain stepped forwards.

"Hypocrite." Ignis raised a hand. "Aer. Ferra. Ignis. Three apprentices, three approaches." Her copper ring flashed an' a torch at the side of the dais burst with blue flame. A serpent o' livin' fire wound from the top an' launched across the platform. DeGaya shrank back.

But he were not the target.

The flame lashed across DeSüle's skirt. The cloth fell away an' her left leg were exposed.

It were covered with tattoos. Deep, swirlin' ones. They matched the ones on Ignis' scalp. A brooch rode on the scorched hem, right against her skin.

"Sister. Did you forget yourself?" Ignis smiled.

DeSüle sniffed. She lifted the hem o' her dress an' glared at Ignis. "Ignis. I heard you were back. What, Dirk's company is no longer as agreeable as it once was?"

Dog-Mask screeched his interruption. "Just what is going...?" he began.

"My ladies and lords. Please accept my sincerest apologies, but tonight's ball is at an end." DeSüle held out her arms. The air shimmered and suddenly, smoke poured outta the candles that scattered the room. Thick an' red, it swirled like ash in the air. "I do hope you will all consider pledging your houses to the cause." The smoke bellowed around the room like it were bein' forced by some hidden wind.

Guests covered their faces as the stingin' whip o' ash an' grit tore at 'em. The crowd leapt up, screechin' an' hollerin' as the filthy air chased 'em out o' the door.

The cloud o' smoke passed over the Walkers that surrounded Kain an' lashed at their skin with ash an' dust. It stung like beestings.

"Hold lads," DeKeita stood amongst them.

"No," a young bloke whispered. "Mama?" He blinked into the grit. A lass beside him held her arms around herself an' shuddered.

"Stand strong," DeKeita voice were filled with command. "They are just memories. They can't hurt you."

Kain blinked past the grit. He braced hisself, but nothin' happened. No memories to torment 'im. Just as Dirk promised.

Why did that make 'im feel so sad?

When the smoke-storm were over, the guests were gone. Only the Walkers an' DeKeita remained, to watch Ignis face off against DeSüle an' DeGaya.

Ignis' mouth were quirked in a smirk. The smoke had done nothin' to her. "You're weak Aer."

"No. I am kind." DeSüle drew her hand over her head. Smoke gathered about her like a cloak o' darkness. "If you refuse to flee, then I shall not make that mistake again."

Ignis snorted. "Pathetic." She flung her hand forwards. Blue fire leapt from a nearby candle an' wound around her arm. She launched the fire at DeSüle.

It met the smoke mid-air. A clash o' impossibilities, smoke an' fire fought an' spat an' crackled through the air. A wave o' heat almost sent Kain to his knees.

Behind 'im, DeKeita spoke quietly.

"Right lads. We need that bald one. Captured if possible, dead if not. Form up."

Oh no.

"Charge quick and sure. Keep her from the fires. On my mark. One."

Kain licked his lips. Ignis narrowed her eyes at the lazy smile on DeSüle's face.

"Two."

Holy balls. Sweat poured down his neck. What were he supposed to do? His blade were out, but he couldn't take seven Walkers on his own.

"Three!" DeKeita snapped his hand down.

Afore anyone could so much as move, the door to the outside slammed open an' a body came flyin' through the room. It hit the massive statue with a thud an' crumpled at the bottom.

Fetch.

The old man pushed to his feet. His blade were still sheathed an' blood sheeted from a cut on his head.

A boot clanked through the door an' a figure in steel armour stepped into the ballroom.

"Lucianus! What are you doing here?" DeKeita bellowed at the steel soldier.

"My lord." The giant clanged a salute. "Apologies for my intrusion. But that man is Fetch. A traitor to the Walkers and known associate of Dirk. I caught him outside."

"Fetch!" DeKeita snarled. "Good. Kill him."

Fetch wobbled to his feet. His sword were out an' he only had eyes for the...
what did DeKeita call 'im?

Enforcer.

The steel man stepped towards Fetch. He advanced slowly. What were he
waitin' for?

Ah.

Andross DeGaya crept up behind Fetch. His blade were ready. The old bloke
wouldn't even see it comin'

The Enforcer folded his arms. Fetch took a step forwards.

DeGaya swung.

"NO!" Kain bellowed. He tore forwards, boots slippin' on the polished floor.
"Fetch, duck!"

Wonder o' wonders, the old man listened an' crouched down. DeGaya's
sword swung over his head an' chipped the thigh o' the massive statue.

"Soldier! Get back here!" DeKeita were incensed.

"Oh enough of this!" Ignis' voice were loud enough to spit the sky. She yanked
a torch from the wall an' spoke words that Kain couldn't hear.

She dashed the flame against the floor an' a massive wall o' flame erupted
around 'em.

Kain shrank back. God o' the Fields, it were hot. Felt like he were bein' boiled
alive. The tear-blue flame wavered in his vision. Tall enough to scorch the ceilin',
he had never felt so small.

"Alright you two, what the..." Ignis began. A clank o' armoured boots cut her
off.

The Enforcer stepped through the flames. His armour boiled like livin' silver. Blue sparks shot from his shoulders, but he were unaffected by the fire. Like a mountain given movement, there were no stoppin' him.

"How?" Ignis whispered.

"Dreamsteel armour." His voice were as implacable as his slow, steady steps. "When Xarrius fell, Nerva travelled the length of Austellus to get it back. When he died, I crawled across the Mucro. Hand over hand across a greasy barge chain."

"Why?" Kain couldn't help hisself. He raised his sword, but at this distance, it looked like a kiddies' stick compared to the massive Enforcer.

"Dreamsteel armour absorbs the memories of those who die wearing it. My brothers blood guides me." He drew his axe. The blue fire reflected in its blade like a thousand suns. The Enforcer reached up an' tore his mask free. Brown eyes, rich as chocolate, stared at them.

"You will all die here." His voice were soft as a promise.

With impossible speed, that axe came swingin'.

Fetch leapt across a table an' met the strike with a parry of his own. "Kain! We take him together!"

"Right."

The axe came again, a blur that danced between the two o' them. Fetch's short sword held him at bay, but barely. It took both o' them just to hold their own. Kain's sword flickered an' Fetch moved beside him like a river. Never still. Always fightin'.

The axe came cleavin' at Kain. Fetch slammed his sword against the strike, but his sword pinged free. The Enforcer swung again. The strike crushed Kain's blade to the floor.

The Enforcer raised his axe. There weren't even a drop o' sweat on his face.

Then his armour began to glow. To shine. He looked down. Without warnin' the metal burst with light.

"What... is this?" The Enforcer's voice were poisoned with panic.

Something snapped. Light reversed. Black became white. Heat became cold.

An' the Enforcer fell with a soul shudderin' crash.

Ignis stood behind the prone Enforcer. Her hand were scorched, but her lips were spread in a terrible smile. "Ferra warned me of these Enforcers' strength, but wearing Dreamsteel before a Mindbreaker? What an idiot." Her voice were cold as a frozen ocean.

"I tried to convince him to take it off." A voice broke through the crackle'n spit o' the blue-fire that surrounded 'em. Leanne DeSüle. No. Aer. Her dress were untouched by the flame an' she walked through the fire, shielded by that unnatural smoke that swirled around her. "But he seemed to think it was a point of pride. And, I daresay if you hadn't been here, he would have won. Sister."

Ignis turned to face her down. Kain caught a glimpse o' Ignis' eyes. Violet flecks swirled through the iris. "You sacrificed our sisterhood when you turned on Dirk. Tell me, was it worth it?"

"Every day. Do you know what you master intends to do to us?"

Ignis blinked. The violet shards in her eyes swirled like a blizzard. "I do. That is why I am here. To help him achieve that goal. To heal the city."

"Heal it?" Aer's voice was shrill. "Is that what he calls it? I call it rape. Minds are not ours to destroy Ignis. Just look at the boy!"

Kain started. Aer's finger was pointed firmly in his direction.

"Oh yes, look at him! Healthy. Happy. Filled with purpose. What a tragedy."

"He said no!" Aer bellowed. "As would anyone else. Did we not learn from the Saviour? You can't change people by destroying their past. You shouldn't. Mistakes

are a part of life. Without them, we will never grow. Dirk never understood that. How could he? He doesn't remember ever making one."

"Pretty words to excuse your cowardice, Aer. But you're wrong. Dirk remembers everything. Every mistake forged into Dreamsteel belongs to him. He knows the soul of humanity better than anyone and he still thinks this is the best course of action. Who are we to stand in the way?"

"We are those who should know better! Ignis. It doesn't have to end like this. Stand beside me and together we can stop him."

She cut off when Ignis laughed.

"How swift you forget." A storm of violet flecks blew across her eyes. "I swore my life to Dirk. You will not convince me now. Not when we are so close!"

Aer shook her head. "Then you are as lost as he is. I'm sorry Ignis."

"Save your apologies. It's three on one..." Ignis began.

"Not quite."

Kain looked up. There he was! Somehow, the Watcher had stacked a bunch o' tables atop each other an' he were standin', somewhat unsteadily, on the top one. With a grunt, he flung hisself on to the arm o' the massive statue in the middle o' the room an' slid down to land beside Aer. Outside the circle o' flames came an almighty *crash* as the wooden tables fell splinterin' across the floor.

"Andross. Thank you," Aer said.

"Var has the Walkers ready. As soon as this fire dissipates, we can take them."

"It dies when she does." Aer pointed at Ignis.

Andross DeGaya drew his blade. "Very well."

Fetch stepped across Ignis. He plucked his blade from the polished floor.

"Watcher. I've been waitin' for my chance at you."

DeGaya spun his blade around an' bowed with it. "Master Fetch. I've heard your name whispered over these last few weeks. Let's see if you are as good as they say you are."

Aer held out her hand an' smoke began to gather around her wrist.

"What are you...?" Ignis began.

Aer just smiled. "Air smothers fire. Did Dirk never teach you that?"

The smoke raced forwards an' wrapped around Ignis. Her mouth were open slack. Her hand moved up, but it were slow, like she were movin' through treacle. Aer clenched her fist tighter. Sweat beaded on her forehead, but still Ignis moved.

Beside her, DeGaya charged. Fetch leapt forwards to clatter his strike aside an' pressed him back. Their blades clanged an' smashed together.

An' Kain just stood there. Dumb as a corpse. Ignis groaned. Aer scowled. The wall o' fire shot gouts o' flame through the air.

DeGaya forced Fetch back. He flicked Fetch's blade outta the way an' raised his own.

"Fetch!" Kain bellowed. Hero or villain, he couldn't just stand there an' watch the Ant gut his friend. He leapt over a splintered table an' met DeGaya's strike afore it connected.

The clang o' steel melded with the roar o' flame that surrounded 'em.

Another strike sent Kain back, an' Fetch leapt in to push DeGaya across the room. The Watcher were good. Incredible even. His stance were perfect an' each strike fell with absolute precision.

His eyes glowed with a blue light. Behind him, one of Aer's iron necklaces was glowin'.

"Just as we practised, Andross," she said. "Forget your weakness and fight!"

"You will never take my city from me!" DeGaya's voice boomed like a doomsday bell. With a duck o' his shoulder, he shoved Fetch outta the way an' came for Kain.

One, two, three, the strikes struck sparks from his blade an' drove Kain back. It were all he could do to keep the steel from his flesh.

Heat, intense, roared into his back.

Kain spared a glance over his shoulder. He were right against the fire. Close enough to start cookin' his arse.

An' the Watcher were bearin' down on him.

Fetch were runnin', but he weren't gonna make it. Kain took the Watcher's next strike on his blade. The second hit twisted the grip from 'is sweaty hand. His blade went spinnin' through the fire.

The Watcher's blade flashed towards his heart.

"Get down!" Ignis' shout pierced the soupy air. Kain looked over. Her arm were outstretched. In an instant, the wall o' flame wavered.

Blue fire rained from the sky. Craters *boomed* into existence across the polished floor an' DeGaya were forced back with his hands shieldin' his face.

"Foolish girl." Aer grinned. "To waste your strength on such a useless boy." She clenched her hand an' the black smoke gathered around Ignis like night itself, wrappin' her in soot.

Ignis eyes began to glow. Blue light shot from her face. Her wail split the sky. A heart o' stone would'a broke to hear it.

Fetch leapt at DeGaya. His blade licked across DeGaya's forearm. In response, DeGaya sliced a deep, red cut across the old man's chest.

Kain picked himself up. Ignis were still wailin, louder'n louder. He couldn't take it. It had to stop! But Aer were in no mood to put an end to it. Her lips were narrowed in a victorious smile.

The brooch glittered at her hip. Sharp as a star.

Kain began to run. He pounded at Aer. She turned to him, black smoke gathered in storm o' power afore her.

Kain ripped the brooch free, just as the smoke slammed into him.

It hit like a boulder. Sommat ripped at his side an' he were sent sprawlin' across the floor like a deer on ice. His head slammed against a table leg an' his shoulder shattered into a chair.

The impact forced his fingers open. The brooch went skitterin' away.

He peered up through the tears in his eyes. The look on Aer's face were pure fury. "How could you touch it?" She shook her head, so hard her grey curls were set to dancin'. "He did it, didn't he? Locked Memoria from you. The coward! If he can't face the pain of a single soul, how does he expect to harness the spirits of an entire city? Well this ends here! A lock can always be opened by those with the right key."

The storm o' smoke gathered around Aer. Her eyes flashed green. Power, bolts o' blue, flickered in the dust. This smoke were unlike Kain had ever seen. It boiled an' swirled like damnation itself. So much power. He shrank afore it.

"Remember Kain. Remember who you are. Remember your pain!" Aer screamed an' sent out the storm towards him.

"Not a chance!"

An' there were Fetch. Boltin' across the floor like a goddamn hero, his cloak streamin' out behind him. DeGaya's blade licked out across his legs, but he ignored it like it were nothin' more'n a fly.

He stood over Kain, arms outstretched.

Fetch!" Kain shouted.

The storm hit.

Fetch screamed.

The old man fell to his knees, blade dropped at his side. Blue smoke curled from his ears.

"Jenny. Oh lord. Jenny. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry. *I'M SORRY!*" His fingernails dug into the skin around his eyes. Bloody tears ran down his face.

"Lucky boy." Aer stepped closer. DeGaya were at her side. The edge o' his blade were pink. He levelled his blade at Kain.

"Leanne? My love, are you there?"

Everybody turned. A figured moved through the room. A body made o' fire. It looked...

It looked just like the statue in the middle o' the room.

"Vincent?" Aer's voice transformed. She was... unsure. Uneasy. She took a step towards the fire. "Is that you?"

Ignis crouched in the corner o' the room. Her hand were smokin', blistered, wrapped around the brooch. A vicious snarl split her face.

"Leanne. My heart, I have missed you." The fire-spectre opened his arms. *"It is so dark after you die. Why did you leave me, Leanne? Why must I suffer alone?"*

"Leanne, don't!" DeGaya held out his hand, like he would pull her back.

But it were too late.

"Vincent. I never wanted to hurt you." Aer's eyes were sparklin' with tears. "I regret it every day. Please. Vincent. I never meant to forget you."

The fire-figure just opened his arms. *"Leanne. My darling. Come here."*

Aer sniffed back her tears. She raced into the arms o' the phantom.

"I love you."

In the heart o' the fire, Aer smiled. Her eyes glittered with blue fire.

She burned silently. Kain watched it all. First her hair sizzled from her head.

Then her dress wisped to follow it. Her flesh crisped an' sizzled.

"We are together now. We will always be together..." The fire whispered.

Aer were smilin' as her body were engulfed in a whorl of white-blue flame.

Her skin blackened, cracked, an' her flesh fell free in chunks. A slurry of blood an' smoke poured from her body.

The fire *whooshed* around her.

An' she were gone. Nothin' left but a pile o' charred bones.

"What... was that?" DeGaya whispered. He lowered his blade an' took a tentative step towards the corpse. The Watcher. Distracted. Helpless.

Kain stood behind him. He plucked Fetch's blade from the floor beside him. The old man had dropped it when the storm o' smoke hit.

Kain lifted the blade high. Here were the man who killed his friends. The Watcher. Austellus needed him dead. Dirk needed him dead.

The blade whistled down.

But a man needs his heroes.

At the last moment, Kain flicked his strike to the side. Instead of the Watcher's neck, he caught his hand at the wrist an' lopped it off with a grunt.

DeGaya turned with a shout o' pain. He fell to his knees an' glared at the stump.

"Kain. Help me," Ignis whispered.

He glanced over, just in time to see her eyes roll back into her head. The brooch dropped from her fingers.

The curtain o' fire came down.

Walkers. A wall o' blackcloaks advanced on them.

It felt like time stopped. Kain had three bodies afore him. Fetch. DeGaya.

Ignis. The Walkers were comin' fast. There was only enough time for one.

Fetch wept blue-fire tears. The Watcher's stump bubbled blood.

Ignis held the brooch in her scorched fingers. Sommat slammed into Kain.

Compulsion. Choice were wiped away an' he found hisself racin' towards the Mindbreaker. A tiny voice in his head screamed at him.

Kain sprinted over to scoop Ignis up in his arms.

"Kain," Ignis whispered, so soft. "We need to run."

It were like tearin' out his heart. Fetch were swamped in black cloaks. Kain only had a moment, just a heartbeat, afore they surrounded him'n all.

Broken, Kain sprinted past Var DeKeita, close enough to see his eyes. The Walkers reacted, but not quick enough. A few blades found his flesh, but he forged on past. With Ignis in his arms, he leapt out of the door.

Out, into the night.

Chapter 35

“Goodbye Mira.”

Sam waved the seamstress into the barge. The air stank of smog and rotten flesh.

Mira’s steps were unsteady. Beside her, Ferra leant against a nearby warehouse, her hammer slung over her shoulders. A quiet threat.

“Samantha.” Mira stared down at her hands. A length of grimy bandage was wrapped around each and it was already stained with red. The dog-leech that had sewed the skin did not sound hopeful that they would ever heal properly. “I’ll come back for you.” She blinked a few times.

“It’s okay.” Sam tried to force the corners of her lips upwards. “Whatever happens, it is my responsibility. I’m just sorry you got caught up in this.”

“So am I.” Mira spoke slowly and Sam winced. The seamstress stepped off the ramp and deeper into the barge.

The back of the barge rose and Mira disappeared behind the wall of metal. The barge was drawn across the river with a screech of chains.

“You’re not going to start crying, are you?” Ferra stepped forwards. “If there is one thing I can’t stand, it’s a weepy woman.”

Sam forced a gurgled laugh. “I don’t cry.”

“A brave boast to make in Austellus, don’t you think?”

“Is that a threat?”

Ferra smiled. “You’ll know if I threaten you.”

Sam licked her lips. “Alright. I get it. You are very scary. If I had boots, I would quiver in them.”

Ferra snorted. “Very funny. Come on then. We’ve got work to do.”

Sam rubbed her hands together. Despite everything, a flicker of excitement sparked in her heart. It had been so long since she had last been behind a forge. The heat, the sweat, the fire... it taunted her dreams.

Ferra led them down a side-path, between two houses. The windows were broken and the sound of families, squabbling and laughing, filtered from inside.

Sam swallowed the fist-sized lump in her throat.

The path widened towards the end, and it was swamped with an enormous puddle of brown sludge. Down from the sludge-road, Ferra led them towards a cluster of buildings. The sounds of people faded into the muted whistle of wet wind. The buildings were familiar. Smithies, picked out by the sandstone chimneys, cluttered like grapes on the stem. Girders, dropforges, fire-stacks and even a blast forge gleamed dully. She peered closer. The metal was dusty with disuse, but was still clearly serviceable.

"Where are we?"

"Rustsrape. This is where it all happened. Steel to rival the very best. Until we burned it all down."

Sam ran a finger across the window of a forge. It was thick with soot. "Why?"

"Rumour has it that we Austelli were tired of working for our heartless Caelum masters and so burned our tools in a heroic rebellion."

"I didn't ask what rumour says. I asked what happened," Sam said.

Ferra considered for a moment. "Dreamsteel died and the forges with it."

Dreamsteel! Sam's heart quickened. "What does Dreamsteel have to do with it?"

Ferra shook her head. "It was eating the soul of the city like a cancer. Dirk destroyed what he could, but it always seems to find its way back. I hate the stuff.

Even that Seed you brought with you..." she shuddered. "I couldn't wait to get rid of it."

"My disk... it's gone?"

Ferra nodded vehemently. "Oh yes. It's safe with General Adira for now, but if we are lucky, Dirk will have it melted down. Dreamsteel. It's a vile thing."

Sam's heart sank a little. First Mother's ring, then Jack's Dreamsteel. Was there anything she had been entrusted with that she hadn't lost?

Further down the street was a long building. The door was wood, engraved and polished to shine, but the walls and roof were stone.

"My home," Ferra said.

Sam glanced through the window. The inside was cramped. There were candles everywhere, but a comfortable chair and a well-used kettle gave it a homely feel.

"Why is that one door made of metal?" Sam asked. She squinted through the grime on the window. The steel portal glimmered with a faint light.

"Pray you never have to find out. Come on. The forge is waiting."

At the side of the house was an Arxian-style forge. The tent was clean and well put together. Inside, the forge oven was freshly swept and the anvil was carved to resemble a bull. Beside it was a rack of hammers and six brass-bound quenching barrels. Compared to the Citadel forge it was almost embarrassingly provincial, but in a way, Sam preferred it. It had everything she needed.

"Set up," Ferra said.

Sam lit the forge and stoked it until the flame was a solid white gold. The smell of scorched stone and charred metal filled her lungs and, before she knew it, the smoke was dancing around a smile.

The rack of hammers was arranged by weight. Sam took her time in selection. A blacksmith's hammer was an extension of her arm and each option deserved proper consideration. She ran her finger across the cool metal and a thrill sparked down her back.

Eventually, she settled on an *Abies* design. The shaft was a little shorter than she was used to, but the oval curve to the head made it a far more effective 'all-rounder'. It was nothing on the *Salix* that Jack made for her, but it would serve.

"Good." Ferra nodded. "Now make me a sword. And remember, if you fuck this up then I'll send you back to Caelum in pieces."

Sam twirled her hammer. "How wonderfully threatening. You want a sword? I'll show you a sword."

...

The quenching barrel *hissed* with steam.

Sam leant against the anvil and wiped the river of sweat from her forehead. Her arms ached, and somehow her hammer had mysteriously managed to double in weight.

Ferra was still silent. She had ducked out of the tent just once, when Danni arrived to bring her a note. That evil red-eyed bint had the gall to wave at Sam whilst she worked.

Sam turned back to the barrel. This was the apex point. Iron was a lot like people. Sometimes, the roar of the oven transformed it and the clash of the hammer gave it strength. Just as some people face the blows of fate head on and fight to overcome them.

Others crack and crumble, unable to handle the stress.

Sam picked up a pair of tongs and, very slowly, began to draw the blade free.

Oh yes.

The iron was perfect. A ripple of metal, it was folded like waves against the shore. True, it was missing a handle and some work needed to go into polishing and sharpening the thing, but for a base piece, it was wonderful. It fit her hand like a glove.

Sam spun the blade towards Ferra. She had some notion that it would stick, point first, in the dirt between the woman's feet, but it twisted in the air and just kind of skidded to a stop, a few inches away.

"Is this it then? The best you could do?"

Sam shook her head. "No. But you asked for a sword."

Ferra lifted the blade to the late-afternoon light. "You've folded it well. That blood channel is straight and the double-edge style is certainly an effective design." She lowered her eyes. "What's wrong with making swords?"

Sam smiled. "If you are going to make something, make it beautiful. That is what craftsmanship is all about. Make people smile, don't make them bleed." Even after all these years, Jack's words came easy.

"Horseshit."

Ferra tossed the blade to the ground, careless as one might discard the rind of a cheese.

"Excuse me?"

"Blacksmithing isn't about beauty. It is about utility. Who the fuck cares what a sword looks like? You spent all afternoon making this weapon. It's pretty. Good job. I could have made twenty in the same time."

"Perhaps, but there is more to blacksmithing than just swords."

“Undoubtedly. In an age past, I’m sure blacksmithing was an art. But we don’t have time for art. Something deadly is coming and we need to be prepared.”

“Deadly?” Sam shivered a little. “What do you mean? I thought the uprising was done and dusted? Isn’t Austellus all but self-governing by now?”

Ferra shook her head. “Done? No. This can’t end. The gulf in ideology is too great. Your noble friends see us as murderers. A bunch of lunatic psychopaths bent on destroying the order they worked so hard to impose. The Austelli see us as freedom fighters.” She snorted. “As their saviours. A taste of self-determination is a heady thing. Why would they let that fade now?”

“So what?” Sam asked. “The only solution is... destruction? Of one side or the other?”

“Normally,” Ferra said. “But history is written by the victors. Thanks to Dirk, we can re-write that past before it even happens. Unity exists only in shared experience. The end is coming. We must be ready.” She sighed. “But I suppose that’s not really any of your concern. You are free to leave.”

“What? Why?” Sam asked. “I... I thought you didn’t trust me.”

Ferra’s smile was sour. “I don’t. But Danni brought a message from our Caelum agents. The Watcher has been defeated.” Her laugh was devoid of any humour. “Our timetable has been moved up. I can’t waste my time babysitting you anymore and, despite what you might think, it would bring me no joy to let Danni mangle hands capable of such fine work. I have some pride left.”

Sam grinned like a child with a handful of sweets. Freedom! All she had to do was cross the river and she could get back to...

Back to what? She paused. Home? It was gone. Family? Father was locked away and Lizzy was trapped in the embrace of DeSchär. Friends? Saul lived in the

Temple, with priest to teach him how to eat, and Mira certainly would not want to see her again.

Which begs the question why? Why was she so desperate to leave?

Sam looked at Ferra. The woman hadn't even waited for her to leave, and she was working. Ores were thrown into the smelting oven and her hammer rolled against the side of the anvil in a swift *tink-tink-tink*.

Sam blushed. "I could stay. If you wanted me. You've seen my work. You know I'm good."

Ferra snorted. "You are. But who says I want you to stay?"

"Those bags under your eyes. Come on Ferra, you can't expect me to believe you'd rather do this on your own?"

"Perhaps not. But you know what I am making. Weapons. Blades to cut down your family and friends. How can you possibly want to help with that?"

"I don't." Sam said. "But I will. Here's the thing. You talk like you are some monster, but there is something else. You don't want this to end with blood. Well, that makes two of us. You said it yourself. Unity through shared experience. One of us has to take the first step. Perhaps I can convince you to remember the beauty of the forge. It was an Austelli that taught me, after all."

Ferra looked at her for a long time. "You're wrong about me. I'm not a monster. A monster is blameless. Instinct and emotion. I know what I am doing. That makes me far more evil than any bogeyman you can imagine. You'd know that if you could ask the last person that trusted me..." Her eyes glittered. "That being said... you are more than welcome to try."

Sam knelt to lift her hammer once more.

"Then let's get to it."

Chapter 36

Sam left the forge and stretched out the knots in her back.

The pale winter sunshine had all but faded and darkness was beginning to creep across Austellus. The cold wind was like a frozen slap and thick clouds were gathering overhead.

She twisted her hips until she heard a *click*. A week of forge work and she was only just beginning to get her stamina back. Felt like every muscle she had was aching.

The feeling had been sorely missed.

"Y'alright, Sam?"

She turned. Reggie waved as he shuffled on past. His curly beard made him look a bit like a sheep, but the local cobbler always had a smile for her and a bit of casual conversation.

"Hey Reggie. How's it going?"

"Can't complain, can't complain. Well, I could but 'ain't no one listening." He laughed at his own joke. The same joke he told every day. "Got caught at the pub. General Adira had those soldiers of hers running drill through Rotheart again."

"Yeah?" Sam winced. "Any idea why?"

Reggie chewed his lips. "Maybe I heard a rumour. But it's bollocks. It has to be."

"What?" Sam asked.

Reggie huffed. "Never had you pegged for a curtain twitcher. If you must know, then..." he leant conspiratorially closer, "it's being whispered that the Saviour is back and he is not best pleased with the way Cetera Desunt have been acting in his absence."

Sam felt like her heart had just been dumped in a vat of ice. "The Saviour is dead."

Reggie laughed. "I know. Honestly, the things people believe when they are bored, eh? I'd say it is wistful thinking, but the Saviour was a maniac at the best of times." He coughed and wiped his sleeve on his mouth. "Bloody smog. I swear it's gotten worse lately."

Sam looked at the sky. Reggie was right. It was thicker than before. A constant, low-hanging cloud that threatened her lungs every time she stepped outside. It was different to the honest grey of forge smoke. More... lively.

She squinted. Was that a person? A silhouette in the smog?

Sam shivered. Sodding Austellus was getting to her. There were no blue eyes in the darkness. Just talking about that Saviour had her jumping at shadows.

"We're better off with him dead," Sam said.

"I'll drink to that. And most things, to be honest." Reggie gave a sour burp that smelled like the truth. "Take care of yourself girl. Don't let that Ferra work you too hard."

Sam waved him off.

"Sam. You finished out here?" Ferra called.

"I am." Sam ducked inside the house.

Immediately, the smell of cooking warmed her. One of Ferra's more pleasing surprises was that she was quite an adept chef. A pot of soup bubbled over the stove and room smelled like spice and salt.

"Sit." Ferra pointed to what had become Sam's seat at the table, and she was only too happy to slump down. "We are celebrating."

"We are?" Sam drew her chair towards the table. "Celebrating what?"

"You've been here a week and you haven't tried to kill me in my sleep," Ferra said. Really, her voice was far too cheery for what she was saying.

"Did... you expect me to try and kill you?" Sam asked.

Ferra shrugged. She spooned soup into two bowls and set them on the table. "Not expected, more like... wouldn't have been surprised by." She reached to the side of the table and drew forth a bottle.

Wine. Real wine. "What is it?"

Ferra pulled the cork with her teeth and gave a sniff. "Red."

"From...?"

"From a bottle." She splashed wine into a pair of glasses and slid one over to Sam. "Cheers?"

Sam clinked her glass with Ferra. Moments later and they were silent, each focussed on the bowl before them. The soup was hot and tasty, with far too much pepper because Ferra was obsessed with the sodding stuff.

When the last drop was spooned from her bowl, Sam set it aside and drew her wineglass back.

Ferra leant across the table, her own glass raised. "To air, fire and iron."

"What an odd toast." Sam clinked her glass with Ferra. Their fingertips were almost a matching shade of soot.

The glass was emptied. As was the next one. Then another bottle appeared from under the table and that disappeared quite swiftly as well.

Sam slumped into Ferra's armchair. She twisted her wineglass between her fingers. "Ferra. Is the Saviour dead?"

"What?" For all of a moment, Ferra's voice was spiked with panic. She leapt up from her seat. Her steps were unsteady, but she managed to make it to the side of the table. "Why do you ask?" she asked in a calmer tone.

"Reggie... he mentioned that your General Adira was running drills in Rotheart."

"Ah. Don't worry about it. I told you before, our timetable has been moved up. General Adira is running drills to make sure her soldiers are fresh before... the final push."

"Push towards what?" Sam asked.

"Come on Sam, you know I can't tell you that."

Right. The fight. Over the last week, it had been easy enough to ignore the niggling thoughts. The smoke of the forge was an excellent blanket to hide from the truth that every weapon she finished would soon be used to cut through Caelum.

Wine brought clarity like a thunderbolt.

"I am a traitor," Sam said quietly.

"No, Sam. You just picked the right side. If we're lucky, those blades of ours won't see any action beyond a rattle in their scabbards. Dirk will put a stop to it all, soon enough."

"Dirk," Sam said. "He stole my Mother's ring, you know. Kidnapped my fiancé. I hate him."

"Easy there. Dirk is my teacher. I would watch what you say." Ferra's words were slurred a little, but the steel was there behind them.

"It's okay, it's okay." Sam wiggled her nose with the palm of her hand. "But I liked my mother's ring. It had memories inside."

"It did." Ferra's voice was soft.

"Mmm. Many memories. Many magical memories." Sam giggled. Then she began to sob.

"Hey, what's this? I told you, I'm not about weepy women!" Ferra's clomping footsteps brought her over to the armchair and she perched on the side. "Uh. There, there?" She patted Sam's head as awkwardly as a priest in a brothel.

A brothel.

"Ferra. My mother was a prostitute. Did you know that?"

"I didn't."

"That's how she met my Father. They were... you know." She shuddered.

"Why? Why would anyone seek out that... depravity?"

"Sex isn't depraved, Sam. Some of us actually quite enjoy it."

"Well not me! At least, I don't think I would. It's not like I've ever..." She tapped her index fingers together.

"You just need to find the right person. I'm sure whatever bloke you choose..."

Sam snorted, so violently it snapped her head back. "Nope. Nope, nope, nope." She tapped Ferra on the nose. "Boys are not my thing."

Ferra perked up a little. "Then... women?"

Sam licked her lips. "I don't know. I've kissed a boy. Didn't like it. Never kissed a girl. How should I know if I like that?"

For some reason, Ferra's cheeks began to burn. "Well. You could try it?" Her voice was tight.

"Yeah. Right. I don't know if you know this Ferra, but you can't just go kissing people willy-nilly. They have to like you first. I wouldn't even know how to go about finding someone who wants to kiss me."

"Maybe they would suggest you try kissing them?" Ferra said.

Sam blew a raspberry between her lips. "If that's the case, then I am most certainly screwed. I've not even told anyone."

"It's like talking to a teenager," Ferra huffed. "What if someone did know? And they still wanted to kiss you?"

"Well then, once I got over the flying pigs, I'm sure I would jump at the chance. Just a matter of waiting I suppose." Sam cradled her head in her arms. "Always waiting."

"Oh for the love of... Samantha. Do you wanna fuck?"

The words clattered over her like a cold shower. Sam looked up. "What?"

Ferra's eyes were wide and her lips were parted. "Do you. Want. To fuck?"

Sam could have been knocked out by a light gust. Her jaw fell so far it clicked. Muzzy, wine-laced thoughts drowned in her head and, in that exact moment, she couldn't think of a single reason to say no.

"Why not?"

...

"I'm sorry, this isn't working. Would... would you mind putting your shirt back on?"

Sam curled up under Ferra's enormous duvet. The room smelled like metal and fire and ash.

"Yeah." Ferra hiccupped into her hand. "This probably wasn't the best idea. Maybe another time. When we aren't so drunk."

"No," Sam blurted. "It... it won't happen again."

"Why is that? Am I not...?"

"No! By the Prelude, no, it's nothing like that. It's just..." She shook her head. How could she possibly say it? It was exactly the same was with Matthew and that *Puto*. The touch of flesh on her skin made her ill, no matter who it was.

What was wrong with her?

"I'm sorry," Sam moved to the edge of the bed.

"You don't have to go," Ferra said, just a little too quickly. "You could sleep here. If you wanted to."

"Why?" Sam asked.

Ferra sighed like a bellows. "Because it's been a long time since anyone wanted to sleep beside me."

Sam winced. The truth was ugly late at night. "Move over then. And keep your elbows to yourself."

...

The next morning, Sam woke alone. The curtains were open. The day was cold, but bright.

It wasn't until she stood up that the hangover decided to ruin everything.

Sam gasped and held her fingers to her temples. Oh by the Prelude, Dedisco and Retinentia why would you punish a girl like this? It felt like a donkey was kicking her in the head. She could hear her blood thumping in her ears. She did not so much as walk to the kitchen, but crash through the door like an ox.

"Here." Ferra was already up and dressed. She held out a cup. Water. Precious water. Had grit and slime ever tasted so good?

"Thank. You," she croaked.

"How are you feeling?" Ferra asked with a smirk.

"Like death. You?" Sam collapsed to her chair.

"I feel... good," Ferra said. "I've decided to trust you."

"Good. Wait, you didn't trust me before? Then why did you get naked with me?"

“Lust.” Ferra said with a wink. Then her face fell. “But there is more to it than that. Despite my better judgement... I’m going to teach you how to make Dreamsteel.”

The word fell like a china plate on pavement.

“Oh Ferra, thank you! You have no idea how...” she began, but Ferra was already shaking her head.

“You will not enjoy it. I will not enjoy it. But Dirk is insistent, so we shall persevere. You will have to listen to me and do everything I ask, without question. Does that sound like something you can do?”

Sam licked her lips. It wasn’t even a question. “Of course.”

Ferra nodded, her lips a line. She walked to the metal door at the back of the room and set a key in the lock.

The room was dark. All Sam could see were shadows. Ferra produced a small oil lamp, but it barely pierced the inky blackness. Just enough light to let them know they were still alive.

Something groaned in the darkness and Sam shivered.

In the middle of the room was an anvil. It was so dark, it seemed to steal the light from the lamp and draw the room even further into darkness.

“Stay here.” Ferra’s tone had changed. It was once more the cold, commanding tone of when Sam had first met her. When she returned, she held her hammer and a single, silver nugget of unrefined metal.

“What is that?” Sam breathed.

Ferra set her hammer against the side of the anvil and made the nugget of ore dance between her fingers. “This. Is a gateway metal. It can store Manifest Memories. Those are...”

"Memories we have that are tinged with strong emotion. Right?" Sam remembered that much from Ignis.

"Exactly. This is our base." Ferra pulled a sack from her waist and produced four small pieces of coal. She set them in a square atop the anvil, then set the dark metal inside. Five dull rocks on a black platform.

"Does... does it matter what kind of memory is in the metal?" Sam asked.

"No. Just that it has one. This piece contains one of mine. When I was little, my Mother used to send me out picking purses on busy days. One time, a man with quicker hands than mine took exception to my work, and hit me so hard with his cane my jaw came clean off. Dying children are nothing new in Austellus. Everyone just left me to drown on my own blood. Except one. That was the first day I met Dirk. He removed this memory from me, so that I could heal." Ferra licked her lips.

"I see. But, you just told me what happened. How can that be, when this memory has been cut away?" Sam asked.

"Oh, I know what happened. But there is no connection anymore. Facts are easy. Emotion is hard. My body doesn't remember it, so why should my mind?"

How could she explain that so calmly?

"I only tell you because of what you are about to see. I am going to heat the metal and you are going to flatten it. That's it. Just pound the metal down into a sheet, just like that disk you used to carry. That's a Seed. We can then use that to temper the Dreamsteel proper. Okay?"

"Right." Sam took up Ferra's hammer. It was beautiful, a perfect construction, even if it was heavier than she was. She readied herself.

"Listen. As the metal heats you are going to... see things, in the smoke. Remember, it is just a memory. It can't hurt you. If you flinch, if you accept this

truth, then it can become real. You have a pretty face. It won't look so good without a jaw. Do you understand?"

Sam swallowed. "Yes."

"And do you still wish to continue?"

"I do."

"Very well. Last thing." Ferra drew a flint and steel from her belt and got a few orange sparks to dance over the coals. "There are only two sources that are hot enough to forge Dreamsteel. The first is Heartfire. The second," she rolled up her sleeves, "is our fire. The Fire of Remembrance."

Ferra closed her eyes.

Remember.

The word came like a whisper from the darkness.

The orange sparks shot with a pulsating blue light. A column of blue fire raced upwards, the blinding after-image searing into Sam's eyes. Thick, red smoke boiled around Sam's face.

"Now," Ferra said.

Sam brought the hammer crashing down.

The smoke began to twist. To morph and gather into figures. Sam could see a man, twice the size of her. He looked at her with eyes of boiling red.

"Not real," Sam whispered as she attacked the metal.

But the smoke-figure drew closer. Sam could feel him. Like standing in the shadow of a giant.

"It's not real," she said. Louder this time, almost as loud as the crash of the falling hammer.

The smoke figure boiled beside her. So hot. Her face felt like it was melting. The giant of smoke and fire drew back a hand. A cane formed in his hand.

It was going to strike her.

"It! Is! Not! Real!" She was barely aware of the slamming hammer.

The figure swung.

"ENOUGH!" Ferra's voice boomed out and the blue fire vanished, the smoke-man with it.

Sam panted. Sweat coated her and dribbled down her arms. Ferra's hammer fell from her nerveless fingers. On the anvil sat a single disk of blue-silver metal. A mirror image of Jack's gift.

"Congratulations. A Seed is the heart of Dreamsteel. It can cut away memories and slice through pretty much everything in the physical world. But there is no control, no finesse to it. A Seed is an unknown. You never know how it might react. To get that control, to slice to Memoria itself, we must take one final step."

Sam licked her lips. "Which is?"

Ferra sighed. Her face fell in a look of abject sorrow. "I'm sorry Sam. I truly am."

She stepped into the darkness and tugged a lever. The harsh clank of chains sounded from above and Sam squinted into the darkness. Something was being drawn towards her. A lump. No. A body.

It hung over the anvil. A wretched, thin thing. Why would Ferra keep a corpse in here?

It coughed and Sam leapt back. By the Prelude, it was still alive! It was a he, she could tell that much from the wiry growth of filthy beard, but beyond that... Lank hair hung over his eyes and his ribs stuck out painfully from his naked chest. An odd scar cracked on his wrist. Looked like a chain had been branded against his skin.

The body looked up. He blinked and looked at her.

His eyes were grey and intensely familiar.

No.

"Matthew," she barely whispered it.

"I'm afraid so." Ferra emerged once more from the darkness. "That night that Dirk ordered him taken, he brought him to me. I... tortured his mind to find what Aer was hiding from us."

"Ferra." Sam stepped back in revulsion. "Why would you tell me that?"

"Because if you want to make Dreamsteel, we are going to need to kill him."

Silence fell like a noose.

"You have got to be joking," Sam said. "You know I would never agree to that!"

"Dirk demands it Sam. I told you I hated Dreamsteel. I wanted to shield you from this..." Ferra said.

"Ferra. This is madness."

"War makes villains of us all."

"I can't believe it. You had him down here all this time. I trusted you. I... I got naked with you, and now..." Sam shuddered. She opened her mouth to continue, but Matthew got there first.

"It's okay. I'm ready."

"What?" Sam looked up at his emaciated body.

"I'm glad... I'm glad you are the one to do it."

Sam's mouth opened, but no words came out. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "This is all so wrong!" she said. "Matthew, you are not going to die. I'm getting you down from there and we are taking you back to your damn Father!"

"Sam. I can't let you do that," Ferra said.

"I don't care what you..." Sam began.

Ferra's fist hit her square in the nose and she smacked the stone floor with her face.

Sam looked up through her tears. Ferra's ring began to glow and she closed her eyes.

When she opened her eyes again, they were violet.

"I knew you were weak. Ferra really should have known better. But, I am merciful. I'll kill you for her."

Sam cowered. "Ferra. Please."

"She can't hear you. Her mind is trapped in Memoria. I am the owner of her body for now."

"About time."

Sam turned her head. A figure stood in the doorway, a tall silhouette against the metal.

"How else was I going to kill her?"

The figure leapt across the room. His dagger slid across Ferra's throat and she gasped. The hammer fell behind her and her fingers grabbed at the blood pouring from her neck. The man ripped the copper ring from her finger and hurled it away.

"Enjoy her *Death Echo*, Dirk. Yours is coming soon enough."

Ferra's body slumped to the floor with a gurgle.

The figure looked down at Sam. For the first time, she saw his eyes in the lamplight.

They were blue as frozen smoke.

Chapter 37

Tears filled Luke's eyes, even as his mouth spread in a slow smile.

He knelt beside Ferra's body and closed her eyes. "Ferra. Daughter of Retinentia. I forgive your transgressions against me and pray that you find peace in the Prelude." He let the tears drip from his nose.

The prayers came easy now, almost like breathing. Retinentia's light beat in time with his heart. He no longer tried to deny its presence. The joy of worship was worth the curse of self-awareness. After all, murder was not the act of a pious man.

But he had long since accepted his pending damnation.

Luke forced his sorrow aside. There would be time to grieve when Arx was burning. For now, he had to figure out what to do with these two.

The girl's eyes were wide and trained on him like she had never seen a man before. The boy hung from the ceiling like a steak on a hook. His wrists and ankles were shackled to some mechanism high above. There was something familiar about him. Behind the bruises and the grime, the lad's face was one he had seen before.

"Matthew. You've grown." Luke grinned. The image of a sharp-faced little boy that ran through the Midnight Chamber like it was his personal playground overlaid the dishevelled man that was chained to the ceiling.

"Who... are you?" Matthew's voice sounded like someone had taken a sheet of sandpaper to his throat.

"I am the Saviour."

"No. You are a thief. And a murderer." The girl glared at him.

"I am. But from where I was standing, Ferra was ready to crack your skull with that hammer of hers. I saved your life." He folded his arms.

The girl just folded hers back. "Very probably." Her eyes fell to Ferra's corpse. Blood had thickened around the Mindbreaker's throat, but the girl didn't seem happy to see her would-be-murderer dead. "But that does not excuse your actions up to this point. Not by a long way."

"I know. I stopped praying for myself a long time ago. Such is the price of clarity. Some of us are born for innocence." An image struck him. Lara. A daughter in his arms. Eyes of softest brown, so wide. Like they could swallow the world. "Others are forced to accept the darkness." Blood on her blanket. Skin that sloughed down her sides. A final gurgle. Tears down porcelain cheeks.

Rage kindled in his heart and he let it burn.

"You are insane," Sam whispered.

"No. For the first time, I truly know my own mind." Luke's smile was wide. "It is so simple. I fought for the Austelli once. I died for them. But I was doomed to failure from the start. I sought to give them an Arx that could not exist. The fault lines are too pronounced. The problems too entrenched." Luke's smile was wide. "Fire cleanses all."

"Of course. More fighting. More death. But what happens next? When the smoke clears and people have gorged on death until they are sick of it? What then?"

Luke shrugged. "Every man for himself. When the mistakes of the past are erased, everyone is equal. I believe in people. They will decide what happens next."

"The word you are looking for is anarchy. That is not a belief in people. It is a belief in chaos."

"Of course. Chaos is what defines us. Dirk seeks to keep everything ordered. To cut and slice our memories until everything goes back to the 'way it was.' It is nothing but a stall. What he would alter, I will destroy. For the good of Arx."

And for revenge. There was no point in lying to himself. Base instinct clawed at his throat. Leanne was dead. Murdered on Dirk's orders.

It would make his death all the sweeter.

"But that should not concern you. For now, all you need to worry about is how we are getting Matthew down to ship you two off home."

"Don't." Matthew spoke up. "I told her... everything. I can't face my Father after that. I deserve to die" His head wavered and sank. His legs twitched around the mottled bruises on his knees. The imprints of Ferra's hammer were clear.

"Matthew. You are sick, injured, starving, and I'm pretty sure you could weapon-ise your stench, but you betrayed no one. You were tortured. Anyone would have talked. So stop being so damn maudlin. You are not going to die here. I won't allow it."

Luke smiled. "Good for you, girl."

She drew herself up to the top of her meagre height. "My name is not girl. It is Samantha. Samantha DeAcarris. Now, help me get him down."

Luke nodded. He closed his eyes and touched the side of the oil lamp set on the anvil.

He focused his thoughts on the fire. Allowed it to flicker behind his eyelids. With a single thought, he united his conscious and unconscious mind and made his will manifest.

Remember.

He opened his eyes. The oil lamp flickered blue and he cast his hand about the room. Candles burst into life and blue fire lit the room with an unearthly glow.

Fear was printed on the girl's face, but she did a good job of trying to hide it. Now that the shadows had been dispelled, the room was revealed for all of its depravity. More chains, thicker than Luke's arms, hung from the walls. And that

wasn't all. Hooks, splattered with red rust, were attached to the edge of some.

Others held braziers with half-eaten coals inside.

"You're lucky I was here," Luke told the girl. Her eyes were wide and trained on the bloody tools. "Those rings make people so damn hard to kill. The Watcher's men managed it through the element of surprise. Memoria is too vast for even Dirk to be in every mind at once. But he would never leave Ferra so unguarded. The only way to do her in was to wait until he took over her body. With her mind trapped in Memoria, there were no memories that could be sacrificed to prevent her death. I doubt anyone else could have saved you the way I did."

The girl said nothing, but it was okay. He was used to ingratitude by now.

A winch-system was set up beside a lever and Luke gripped the polished wood handle. He pulled it towards him and Matthew began to clank down from the ceiling, his body flopping against the anvil directly beneath him.

The moment his skin touched that black metal, he began to scream.

"No! *No!* NOOOOO!" His shrieks shattered the air into shards and the girl covered her ears.

"Easy lad, easy." Luke set his hand on Matthew's shoulder.

"No! Don't touch me! Not again! Don't *touch meeee!*"

"Hold his legs," the girl, Samantha, shouted.

Luke pressed Matthew's legs to the cold iron and did his best to ignore the sobbing shrieks that burst from the boy's lips.

Samantha knelt to examine the shackles. "Not a key, looks more like a... *tenguin* puzzle?" Her thumbs moved across the cuff and, after a few moments, it released with a *click*. "Clever, how did she keep so many moving parts in such fantastic working order?"

“Who cares? You want to hurry and deal with the rest of them?” Luke bounced across Matthew’s back. For such a skinny lad, he couldn’t half shift.

“Right.” Samantha scuttled around the table and released the other three clasps.

Matthew slumped from the anvil to the floor. His thrashing stopped, but the sobbing continued.

Samantha rushed over to hold the boy. “Matthew. Matthew, it’s okay. Here, here, it’s alright.” She led him to his feet. “Let’s get you out of here.”

Luke followed them out of Ferra’s workroom, through the shack and back outside.

The smell of the Rustscape smacked him like an unpaid whore. Mist rode the wind and a fine drizzle had everything as slick as slaughter. Matthew took all of two steps outside and then tried to sink to his knees again.

“Come on Matthew. You can walk. We can make it.”

“Oh no.” Luke stepped forwards. “You aren’t getting away just yet, girl.”

She turned to him. “What do you mean?”

“You’re my prisoner. What, you thought I was just saving you out of the goodness of my heart?”

“Then why...?”

“I know that Ferra taught you about Dreamsteel. You are too valuable to let go.” He let a knife dance over his fingers. “Unless you want to try to run?”

She shuddered. “I see. Well then, Matthew. It seems you’ll have to do this on your own.” She reached into her pocket and pushed a copper ring between his fingers. “Go to the river. Show them this. The Watcher is dead so they should let you across...” She did not sound all that certain.

The lad shuddered, but he seemed to take a little strength from the sound of her voice. "I'll go. I'll tell Father... that you are here." He looked at his feet. "Listen, Sam. I... I've had a lot of time to think whilst... well. Anyway. Thing is. I think I love you."

The girl didn't even pause for a breath. Her laughter was sour, hailstones against sheet metal.

"I know!" Matthew grabbed her sleeve. "But listen, I think that's why I kept such an eye on you. I wanted to propose, and even that first kiss... I love you Samantha DeAcarris. Truly."

"Well I don't love you," she said.

The certainty in her voice even made Luke's cynical heart twinge with pity for the lad.

The girl continued. "We spent what, three weeks together? Besides, you've just spent a month or so getting smacked about for fun. It makes sense that you are reaching out for whatever connection you had, but even for you this is a stretch. You barely know me."

"Do you think, one day, that we might be able to talk about this? And if I do love you, then...?"

"I won't change my mind. I don't want you. I don't want any man. Or woman as it turns out. For such a long time, I wanted to be alone. Now, I realise that I deserve to be by myself."

"Please. Just a kiss? Something soft after..." Matthew looked up with piteous eyes.

"No. Now get going. It'll be dark soon." Samantha stood up and folded her arms.

Matthew looked like he might continue talking, but the steely look on her face convinced him it was useless. His head dropped. Without another word, he shuffled off between the rusty buildings.

“And I thought I was a bastard.” Luke shook his head.

“Why should I care what you think?”

Luke shrugged. “The kid’s been tortured something fierce. A kiss is not a big thing to ask.”

“I don’t want to kiss him. And that matters.” Samantha’s voice was small, but fierce. She looked at the chain that wrapped around her wrist.

“If you say so. Come on then. Let’s get you with the others.” Luke grabbed Samantha’s shoulder and forced her to march in front of him.

Together, they made it down the street and through a pair of alleyways that separated Rustscape from The Bricks. A stone building rose before them. It was one of the few that was still intact.

“We’re here.” Luke fumbled at his belt and drew out a long, iron key. He unlocked the door and pushed it open.

A low fire burned in the back, but the room was cold. He felt the girl shiver beside him, but he paid her little mind.

The blacksmiths looked up at him. The seven that survived the cull. The seven that chose mutilation of the body, rather than of the mind. He had seen their memories. As Dirk struggled to control Austellus, he had gathered them all together.

Dirk sought to erase the memory of Dreamsteel. It threatened him.

So Luke would bring it back.

“Did it work?” Luke asked.

The closest blacksmith shook his head. His white hair was burned down almost to his scalp and a huge, sweeping scar threatened the corner of his mouth. He held out an arm and gestured to the stone slab at the back of the room.

Luke walked over. Kuyt's body lay atop the stone. His lungs rose and fell around the blade that was dug into his chest.

Luke pulled the knife free. It slid out without a drop of blood. The steel was black, black as the gateway metal that had constructed it had been, and the design was plain. "What is this then?" he asked.

The blacksmith just shrugged.

Luke moved to test the edge with his thumb, but the blacksmith grabbed his wrist and shook his head.

"Dangerous, huh?" Luke asked, and the blacksmith nodded.

So Luke rammed the knife into the blacksmith's chest instead.

Instantly, Luke felt his mind expand. The blacksmith's body fell back. Dead. But his memories were alive. They poured into him like a waterfall into the night. Knowledge assailed him. Kuyt had not been enough to temper true Dreamsteel. His fractured mind could only craft this. A knife that drank the memories of those it cut.

"Now this is perfect," Luke said as the final memories from the blacksmith filtered through his mind. Those last ones were tinged with vitriol for the man who had imprisoned him.

Luke drank the self-hatred down like bile, thick and bitter.

He moved to the door. "Keep working, all of you." He shoved the girl deeper into the room. "Enjoy your new home, Samantha. I am sure the others will make clear the price of failure."

He slammed the door and locked it behind him.

Chapter 38

Luke leapt up to the rooftop.

Memories of a childhood spent racing across the Austelli skyline flitted through his mind like dandelion seeds in a gust of wind. Grown-ups never looked up. Stealing sausages from Caelum on a whim and lifting purses for sport. Had he ever been so innocent? So wise.

His memories as Flynn were tinged with a sombre fondness that was lacking from his other lives. Lloyd. Vincent. Harri. Reilo. Luke. He had so many memories.

And yet still, something was missing. His original name. The one that Dirk had stolen from him.

Luke threw himself from the roof slats and on to a flat, stone roof. He glanced down through the blanket of smog. A pair of copper-ring thugs grunted down the street beneath him. Damn it, but there were so many of them. It would take something big to take down Cetera Desunt.

Something... violent.

He followed the rooftops around Rotheart plaza with a smile. A few more streets and he would be in Rustscape. Cetera Desunt still used the Foundry. It was about time he kicked them out.

But then he heard a voice and all those plans vanished.

"My friends. Tonight is the night we rise together!"

Luke crouched on the edge of the rooftop. The plaza was packed, but there was something different about it. The Scaffold. It was naked. The nooses had been removed and replaced by two burning sconces that lit either side of the wooden platform.

Adira stood between the flames.

The sight of her sent a twinge through his whole body. Lust, love, hatred, anger, he couldn't tell. He strained his ears to pick out what she was saying.

"The Nest has been primed and evacuated. Tonight. We fight!"

Her diction had not improved. A few, doubtless copper ringed shills, gave a weak cheer at her words, but the rest of the crowd just sort of... stood there.

"Uh, and I have just received word that Ferra, the Mindbreaker who has helped so many of you, has been killed. A young man was seen leaving her home shortly after. Matthew DeProleai, heir to Caelum!"

That got some of the crowd going and a low grumble swept through the Austelli, loud enough that even Luke heard it.

But Adira had always been good at reading people. She knew what she had offered already was not enough. She had to do something more. Something to really get them on side.

"This is the work the Saviour started! This is the work that he fought, bled and died for. We will take Caelum in His name. Arx belongs to us!"

That did it. The roar from the crowd was loud enough to rock the rooftop that Luke was crouching on. Apparently he was far more popular dead than he ever had been alive.

Well. Time to change that.

"I would think that I get to decide what I died for." He pitched his voice to carry and leaped from the rooftop.

The crowd turned silently. Adira stood behind them. The look on her scarred face was one he had never seen before.

She looked like she had seen a ghost.

In an instant the look was gone, replaced instead by snarling anger. "Traitor!" she screamed, far more convincing than Kuyt had ever got out of her. "How dare

you blaspheme His name? People of Rotheart, I demand that you seize that man. In the name of the true Saviour!"

The crowd reacted. A burly bloke with a shirt so tight he might as well be naked stepped up, and grabbed Luke's arm.

Luke slammed his black knife through the man's face. Blue smoke boiled from his ears and his eyes wisped out in a blaze of fire.

Memories filtered into Luke's mind. A life spent working on the Patriae wall. A son, dead in the Flame Protests. Yes. This new past became his. The void retreated.

A body fell. Not enough left to even make a Gazer.

"Adira! I don't want to harm my people. If you truly stand for the Saviour, then fight me yourself!"

"Very well. Luke." Adira's voice was thick. For a moment, she sounded... sad.

The crowd parted. She tore towards him, hatchets flashing.

Luke stepped aside and rolled her attack. He ripped forwards, knife outstretched. She held up a forearm to block, a small metal buckler strapped to her skin, but she may as well have tried to ward off his attack with a sheet of paper.

Clannggggg!

What?

Addie bit a smile and lashed out with her fist. It slammed into Luke's mouth and he squealed. He staggered back and spat, salty blood dribbling down his chin.

"Dreamsteel." Addie held up her buckler. "Confiscated it from some rich girl."

She came again, her hatchets flashing. Luke swept up to block with his knife, but she avoided the cut like he was moving through water. Her weapons licked out across his back and left an X of stinging pain just above his arse.

"You fight dirty," Luke hissed, his back to the Scaffold. He flicked the black knife at her buckler and she smiled. She was still smiling when the knife in his off-hand sliced into the meat of her cheek.

"Fuck. You," she snarled.

The ring on her finger began to glow. Black smoke curled around her jaw and when it disappeared, the cut was gone.

"Hardly fair."

"Fighting's not fair." Adira took a breath and launched herself at him. Luke barely had time to duck as her hatchets came crashing towards his neck. The smog steamed from her body and her movements were so much faster now!

Luke danced back. No way he could attack, it was all he could do to keep her blades from biting too deep.

His back slammed into the Scaffold and he rolled to the side. Addie's hatchet bit into a plank of wood and sent it spinning to the floor.

"Die, phantom!" Her breath was hot as the fire that burned over his shoulders.

Fire.

Adira's hatchet began to descend. Luke saw the glint of steel, the muscles bunched in her bicep. He forced his focus outwards, to the flames that flickered on the Scaffold. They began to burn blue. To rise and curl around the two of them.

Addie's hatchet still fell. The ring on her hand flashed.

Remember.

Rotheart plaza faded into the mist. Addie's hatchets vanished, lost in reality, as Memoria formed around them. Buildings disappeared into the endless smoke. Luke leapt back, black knife still held tight.

High overhead, a violet eye stared down from over the Spire.

"Luke."

"Dirk. Come and fight me, you coward!"

"Why would I do that when I can have the one you loved kill you instead?" The eye blinked. A thick copper tendril speared out from the iris and slammed into Adira's back. She screamed. The power of her voice rocked Memoria and Luke held his hands to his ears.

Her eyes opened and they were violet as Dirk's. The tendril in her back brought her into the sky. The mist split before her and silver orbs danced around her body. Two hatchets appeared in her hands.

Luke twirled his blade in readiness.

Adira launched through the sky. Luke braced his feet and waited for the strike. Her hatchets connected with his knives.

Then vanished into smoke.

What? Luke watched as her weapons disappeared. And then re-formed inside his guard. They slashed at his chest and bit deep.

Luke roared and phased back. The mist rose to claim the blood that dripped from his flesh and grew thicker. A silver orb spun beside him, the memory of this newest scar. He lashed out and slammed a knife made of mist into the orb. It vanished along with the cut across his chest.

Luke raced forwards. Knives flew from his hands as fast as he could imagine them into existence. Dirk's violet eye blinked. His knives exploded into mist.

Adira charged again. Luke stood his ground. This time, he let his knives fall. Her hatchets twitched and he grabbed her wrists.

A shockwave blew through the mist around them. He gripped her arms and strained. She pushed back, willing her hatchets at his flesh. It was more than a

battle of strength. It was a battle of wills, fuelled by memories. Adira's eyes flashed and the copper tendril pulsed. What memories was she losing to stay so strong?

The hatchets twitched an inch closer to his flesh and Luke began to sweat.

He wasn't going to win this.

His will was strong, but Dirk was the master of Memoria and Adira had always been stubborn. He just didn't have the memories.

At least... not to fight her with.

Luke closed his eyes. He could feel the hatchets move closer. A breath more and he was done. He had to work fast. He forced his mind back and dragged the scrap of an old memory from the depths of his consciousness.

A memory of a kiss on the banks of the Mucro. The feel of her lips. The bolt of feeling that came with them.

It touched Adira's mind. She twitched. For all of a heartbeat, her strength faltered.

Luke threw her hatchets back. With superhuman effort he ducked under her arm. The black knife danced over his fingers.

He sliced at the tendril of copper attached to her back.

His knife slid through easy. A scream broke the sky over Memoria. Luke pulled Adira towards him as the tendril thrashed through the mist. Silver orbs vanished instantly. Buildings were slammed into nothingness and mist whipped around in a frenzy. The eye closed. The copper tendrils vanished.

With Adira still in his arms, Luke drew on the blue fire back in Rotheart.

The square appeared around them. People popped into existence and the wooden boards of the Scaffold phased in behind his head. Buildings and muck splattered into the world. The crowd stood back. Confused and cold in silence.

"Luke." Adira's voice was weak. He knelt with her in his arms. Her eyes looked up at him. Not violet. Not blue.

Amber. Burnished like her soul.

"You saved me," she said in a little cat voice. A tremulous smile spread across her face. The copper ring split and fell from her finger.

"I always knew I would." Luke smiled down at her. "How are you feeling?"

"Weak." She blinked and took a shuddering breath. "Like I've been asleep for... such a long time." She grabbed his arms. Tears streamed down her face.

"Luke. I betrayed you."

He looked down at her. At that beautiful face. At those eyes. He nodded. "You did."

"It wasn't me. You have to believe that. Please. Dirk... he hates you. Hates you to insanity."

"I know, Addie."

"Addie. It's been so long since anyone called me that." The smile that spread across her face was like the sun coming out from behind the clouds. Her voice shook. "I am so sorry. For everything."

Luke sighed. He squeezed her hand and leant in to kiss her. A velvet whisper. It was a healing kiss. A kiss of forgiveness.

"Me too."

His black knife slid effortlessly into the soft spot just below her jaw. The last look her eyes held was one of surprise. Then they burned from her face and Addie's limp body fell. Lifeless.

The blue fire flickered beside him. Her memories bubbled through his mind, an open book with pages for him to peruse. Her love pulsed within him and strengthened his body.

Knowledge of Dirk burned like a brand in his heart. How close he was to accomplishing his goal. The *Aversa* Memories... they were as good as broken.

It was time to end this. And to do that, he would need an army.

Luke turned to the Austelli. "My friends. You are free!"

The crowd roared. People actually turned and hugged each other. Luke shook his head. How many of them would have cheered just as loud if he had died?

"Cetera Desunt's grip on this city is gone. Those false prophets blasphemed my name, but I stand here to take it back. Are you with me?"

Another cheer.

Luke smiled. Blood stained his cheek. "Go now! Find your weapons. Their rings are useless, but only if we act quickly." It would take time for Dirk's eye over Memoria to re-open. He could only hope they were fast enough. "Fire and steel. We cannot suffer any to survive, for tomorrow we start our assault on Caelum!"

"No!" A woman screamed. She leapt out from the crowd to stand beneath Luke. The copper ring glittered on her finger and her red eyes were filled with tears. "My Saviour! They told us you had died. They told us... they told us you wanted Cetera Desunt to take over. Please! You must understand, we would never..."

Luke just pointed at her.

Like a pack of wolves, the Austelli fell on the woman. Knives rose and fell in a bloody mist. By the time they were finished the woman was unrecognisable. Meat, blood and rags.

And she was only the first.

Chapter 39

"Kain. We have to go."

Kain glanced up. The cavern were nippy. Even the bandages on his arms seemed to have goosebumps. "Right."

'Course, Ignis didn't seem to be in the mood to get movin'. In fact, for all o' the last week that they spent hidin' out in the caverns under the city, all she had done were sit before the Spire an' stare at that damn brooch.

Kain still wondered if she felt bad about what she did to that woman. Probably not. Aer had been an enemy after all. Defeatin' those who opposed you were just part o' bein' a hero. Just as he always wanted to be.

Leavin' your friends to the Walkers though. That were the action of a coward.

"You need to stop killing yourself over him," Ignis said.

"How d'you know?" Kain asked.

She smirked. "You are not a subtle man, Kain. But your frustration is ill founded. If you want to beat yourself up for cowardice, do it because you let the Watcher live. Not because you couldn't cut through an army of Walkers to save Fetch."

Kain licked his lips. It were wrong, beyond wrong, but some part o' him did feel a little better. Which, o' course, just made the shame strike even harder. Bugger it, what were wrong with him?

"We are going to have to do far worse to win this."

"We are?" Kain were already sweatin'.

"A surgeon must cut away the dead flesh before the wound can begin to heal. Don't worry. Dirk will face the brunt of it. You and I are just... there to assist. Now,

follow me. These caverns can twist a smart man around, and if you wander off I'll not come looking for you."

"No one asked you to," Kain huffed.

Ignis just shot him that infuriatin' smile o' hers an' walked down the dark pathway. Kain followed behind. Not too close, didn't want to give her the satisfaction, but enough to stay in the pool o' light from her torch.

The cavern were dank an' stank o' mould. The walls were slick with condensation an' his boots slipped on the slimy floor. They walked in silence, but it didn't take long 'til they reached a massive, metal ladder an' Ignis set her torch in the bracket on the wall.

"This it?" Kain asked.

"No. I just wanted to give you a peek under my skirts." Ignis' boot slammed down on the first rung o' the ladder like she thought it were Kain's skull an' she pulled herself up.

When she were all but gone, Kain joined her. Rust flaked off against his hand an' he almost slipped from the slimy rungs.

At the top, he emerged from a great, hulkin' trap door an' into some forge. Gleamin' metal an' big ovens looked to be the order o' the place.

"Where are we?" he whispered to Ignis.

"Citadel Forge." She didn't bother to lower her voice. It were like a brass bell.

"Then why are you shoutin'?" Kain asked. "It don't rightly sound like a place we should be trespassin'."

Ignis smirked. "I don't think we have anything to worry about here."

She threw the doors open wide.

Outside, the wind were really givin' it a good go. Kain were almost forced back inside by the strength o' the gust.

The strength o' the smog.

The clouds were enormous. Whackin' banks o' grit an' dust rolled low through the sky. He had to hold his hand in front o' his face just to keep from swallowin' the damn stuff.

"What is all o' this?" he shouted through the haze.

Ignis didn't even turn. "It means Dirk has almost succeeded."

Her laugh were unholy in its joy.

She led him through some sorta courtyard. A mini-Spire fountain spurted rust-tainted water from the tip. Overhead, the real thing glittered in the sky like a sword about to fall.

Ignis kicked open some door that were engraved with all the phases o' the moon.

"Would you stop makin' so much noise?" Kain asked her.

"Why? Do you think he cares?" She jerked her head to the side.

Who...?

Oh.

The servant were very dead. His shirt were stained with red an' the hole in his chest were matted with black blood.

His eyes were open an' empty.

"Don't reckon he does, no," Kain said softly. The all-too familiar stink o' death an' flies were thick in his nose.

A few steps further in an' it got so much worse.

The room were set up all fancy like, six high-backed chairs set around some circular table. Four o' the chairs were empty, but the other three were filled with bodies.

"DeMori. DeWhit. DeSané," Ignis noted. "Such humble ends for such noble souls. The Named Lords are all but gone. With DeSüle's immolation and DeGaya's mutilation, it is only DeKeita we have to watch for."

"DeKeita is almost finished," a familiar voice spoke from the back o' the room. A single chair were set before the chunk o' the Spire that broke through the floor an' up through the ceiling. Dirk stepped clear o' the chair an' walked over to them. "Kain. Ignis. Good to see you both" He shook Kain's hand like he were tryin'a rip it outta the socket.

"Dirk. We have the *Aversa*," Ignis said. She held the brooch out to him.

"Good. Then we are almost there," Dirk said.

"Almost where?" Kain asked. "What do these *Aversa* things even do?"

"Think of it this way. If a Death Echo is the sum of a person's life, then the *Aversa* memory is their soul. Each of these souls trapped in metal agreed to become a guardian of the Spire."

"So..." Kain paused. "You're sayin' that three people gave their very souls to stop you from doin' this?"

Dirk nodded, a proud smile on his face. "Oh yes. Poor Aer. She never realised. Had she taken a memory from her husband, she could have spoken with his shade. An *Aversa* can appear before those who share a piece of their mind, you know. But she was so focused on making the damn thing that she left him to die alone. Well. Until I arrived. I relieved him of his Death Echo. Gave it to the Saviour." Dirk shook his head. "Such a waste. Even if he did survive."

"Wait, the Saviour survived?" Kain gasped.

"Yes." Dirk scowled. "He has destroyed Cetera Desunt and is currently gathering a force in Austellus to attack Caelum."

"Hold on." Kain's mouth were dry. "Cetera Desunt is... destroyed?"

Dirk's laugh were like molten silver. "Completely. But they served their purpose admirably" He ruffled Kain's hair like he were a dog. "Don't worry. The Saviour will be taken care of in time."

Kain's stomach roiled with unease. Cetera Desunt... dead. How was it even possible? An' by the Saviour o' all people! Weren't he supposed to be on their side? Why didn't Dirk care? This all felt wrong.

"Don't look at me like that Kain." Dirk's voice were playful, but it were a command, not a request.

Instantly, Kain felt his face relax. What had he been so grumpy for? Dirk were smilin'. What did he have to complain about?

Still, that feelin' in his stomach would not go away.

"Now. Come quick. We have a final *Aversa* to tame."

"But Master, how can you touch it? I thought Aer had turned the memories against you? The pain..." Ignis began.

Dirk laughed. "You are right, my final apprentice. But this one is no longer trapped in metal. We really should bow. Ignis. Kain. Allow me to introduce you." He spun the chair before the Spire around. "Simon DeProleai. High Lord of Arx."

The bloke were tied to the chair with so much rope his skin looked like a fishin' net. His mouth were wadded with a stuffed up shirt, but his eyes were wide an' bloodshot.

"Or do you prefer Aurellius?" Dirk bowed deep. "Such a shame. You survived so long, only to die as your nightmares came to pass."

He slapped the bloke so hard the chair crashed to the carpet.

"This is what you get for listening to Aer. Oh, but she was a clever one, wasn't she? Can't find the *Aversa* if it no longer exists. I found the knife your soul was in. Imagine my surprise when it was empty."

Dirk yanked the chair upright an' sat on the arm. He pinched a hair from DeProleai's beard. As he spoke he pulled it, ever so slowly, from the bloke's face. "I never suspected than an *Aversa* could actually reach out and inhabit a new body. Truly, even now you are my inspiration. It's a shame DeProleai was unwilling to let you take it. He stopped you from bringing your power to bear, didn't he? All that knowledge and nothing to do with it. No wonder you were so angry."

Dirk leapt from the chair an' dragged it towards the window. He grabbed DeProleai's face an' rammed it into the glass. "You see them out there? The Saviour and his army. I might have created the little bastard but you armed him."

He dragged DeProleai back to the Spire. "This is your legacy, Aurellius. You destroyed the city and now I have to put it back together again. And the only way to do that, is to unlock the Spire."

He turned to Kain. "There is a ring on the table. Bring it here."

Kain did as he were told. The gold band glimmered warm in his hand.

"Ignis. The brooch."

She nodded an' handed the thing to Kain.

"Place them on the Spire, Kain." Dirk blinked an' a candle shot a gout o' blue flame. It wound around the Spire. A trail o' red smoke followed behind it.

Kain moved like his body weren't his own. He felt hisself press the ring an' the brooch into the Spire. They glittered, blindin' brilliant, an' held there.

The ground shook in a small tremor. The air screamed like stuck gears.

Dirk just grinned wider. He forced the chair back so that DeProleai's head were pressed against the Spire. He tore cloth from between the bloke's lips. "Any final words?"

"I just... want to see my son again." DeProleai's voice were thick with tears.

Dirk shook his head. "How pathetic." He drew a long blue-silver knife from his belt. "Kain. Take this. Dreamsteel is the only way."

Kain's fingers settled around the cool hilt o' the knife.

"Now. Kill him."

"What?" Kain asked. A faint roar sounded between his ears.

"Through his heart and into the Spire. It will break the seal."

"But..." Kain's tongue flapped. His hand shuddered.

"Do it!" Dirk commanded.

Kain blinked. Sommat protested inside him, but the voice were quiet. He raised his hand. The knife glittered.

"Remember how many are suffering? This is his fault. First Aurelius, then DeProleai. He deserves to die. Kill him, Kain and you earn your ring. Kill him and you will be a hero."

Kain's hand twitched. Sweat ran down the side o' his face. The knife were the heaviest thing in the world. How easy it would be to slam the thing down an' be done with it. Dirk's violet eyes opened inside his mind.

OBEY.

It were all he could think, a storm inside his head. He had to do it. Had to!

But he couldn't kill someone. It just weren't in him. He could no easier lift the floor over his head than slam the knife down.

Two sides warred within him. A tempest o' voices, all screamin'. He couldn't take it anymore! How were a body supposed to deal with it all? It had to end. He had to act.

"Kain! Do it, now!"

He drove the knife down with all his strength.

The arm o' the chair splintered beneath the blow.

An' Kain sat back, pantin'.

Dirk's mouth were open in a look o' shock like Kain had never seen before.

"No. No that's not *possible*! I fixed you. You mind, your memories... you have to do as you are told." His lips curled in a snarl. "So. Another failure. This is harder than I thought. First the Saviour self-destructed, and now your cowardice fucks me. Ignis!"

"Master?" She bobbed beside him.

"Take the knife."

She didn't hesitate. Dirk crouched beside Kain an' took a tight grip on his hair. "You caused this. You think that just because you don't wield the knife, you can't be responsible for a death? Ignis' mind is not shielded like yours."

Kain's lips moved, but no sound came out.

"Ignis. Do it." Dirk commanded.

Her eyes glittered with violet flecks. A small smile danced across her lips an' she plunged the Dreamsteel into DeProleai, pinning his body to the Spire.

The ground shook again, harder'n before. Felt like the world were crackin' apart. The Spire *burst* with light. The ring an' brooch vanished into the blue-silver steel. DeProleai's blood raced through the Spire, visible like veins under the steel. His body slumped forwards.

Ignis' eyes were bright with fervour. She still held the Dreamsteel knife. Her arms began to shake. Her head twitched. A frown creased her brows. "What is..." she began.

Then she screamed. A raw, wet sound.

"No!" She jerked her head. "What is...?"

Another pulse o' light. Another scream.

"Pain, Ignis. Three angry souls inside your head." Dirk stood up. "It is going to kill you."

"Help..." she cut off with a cry. "Help me!"

Dirk folded his arms. "I am the only true Mindbreaker. I cannot risk you turning against me."

"Dirk. Please!" Ignis screeched. Her fingers twitched but she couldn't let go o' the knife. "DIRK!"

Her head snapped back an' her mouth opened wide in an undulatin' scream. Kain covered his ears, but it did nothin' to stop the sound. Blue fire burst from her eyes an' raced down her body. All the while, Ignis thrashed an' juddered an' wailed.

When the sound stopped, she crumpled backwards. Dead.

Dirk tore the Dreamsteel knife from DeProleai's chest. There weren't so much as a cut in the shirt. He turned to the Spire.

"Dirk." Kain found his voice. "What are you gonna do?"

Dirk turned. The look on his face were cold. "I'm going to rid the city of weaklings like you. That is the only way we are going to survive. Cut away the weakness and leave the strong. Goodbye Kain. Always remember what a disappointment you were."

Dirk stepped through the Spire like it were a door an' disappeared.

A heartbeat after an' a voice broke through the room.

"Dad? I'm back. I wanted to... oh no. By the Prelude, no!"

A young lad stood in the doorway. His face were a mask o' terror an' he were so thin he looked like a breath o' wind could knock him down.

"GUARDS!" he screeched.

Instantly, a full squad o' seven Walkers raced into the room. Their blades formed an iron wall around Kain.

He looked around. All the corpses, an' no Dirk to take the credit. No Fetch to save him, no Ignis to talk her way around it.

Kain's head fell. This time, he reckoned there would be no escape.

Chapter 40

Finally, Luke stood in Caelum with an army at his back.

The smog was thick. So thick it blocked out the sun. He drew it in with every breath.

The Austelli behind him shifted. They had followed him through the Nest without question. He would be surprised if so much as a child was left in Austellus. They had all wanted to play their part in the cleansing of Arx.

Breaking Cetera Desunt was simple. They had built a legacy on his name. All he had done was take it back. He had spent the night in Memoria. Dirk's eye remained shut throughout. Every death *pulsed* in Memoria as another copper tendril was severed. That moment of surprise when a neighbour burst into their home and sliced their throat as they slept. That razor-edge of betrayal as a wife turned on a husband. The shock of a child stabbing his mother. Austellus was dyed red with the blood of cowards and their bodies were used as kindling to light the Scaffold on fire.

On top of that burning platform, was a pile of split and crushed copper rings. They burned like miniature suns and melted the Scaffold into a smoking crater.

Luke licked his lips. Now it was Caelum's turn.

Walkers stood across the street. A bank of blackcloaks, far darker than the smog that swirled overhead. The Nest led out to Warmarch Street. Designed as a killing field, it was flat and open. A final layer of protection against the Austelli.

Today it would be put to the test.

Behind the Walkers, stood on top of a hastily erected wooden platform, was Var DeKeita. Just the sight of him sent a twist of anger through Luke's mind.

Luke touched his chest. It was almost like he could still feel Var's blade in his heart. His life as Reilo ended to that cold steel. It was only fair that this time, he returned the favour.

"Saviour. I would speak with you."

"Then talk, Var." Luke stepped free of the Austelli. "Make your pleas. Then we can end this."

"Come. All fighting is just a pre-cursor to conversation. Why not just tell me what you want? What can we offer you and your Austelli to convince you to stop this insanity?"

"This is not insanity. It is justice."

"Saviour. No. It's Luke, isn't it? Listen lad. I fought in the Flame Protests. I've done city fighting. It is ugly. No one wins. I have no desire to do it again. I swear on my name and my life that I will do what I can to end this amicably. So, I ask again. What do you want?"

Luke took another step forwards. "What do I want? I want this whole city to burn. You want to negotiate for your lives? Those are all I seek to gain from this! I will water the ruins of this city with your blood and ensure not so much as a weed can grow from the ashes!"

"But..." DeKeita's voice was choked. "What can you hope to accomplish with such violence?"

Luke pulled the black knife from his belt and pointed it at Var. "Vengeance."

DeKeita was silent for a moment. "I can see this is pointless. I've killed zealots before. Know this, Luke of Austellus. Every death today was preventable."

For a moment, icy fingers numbed Luke's heart. "My soul is black, Var. More blood is nothing when you are already drowning in it."

DeKeita didn't respond. He began to shout commands and his Walkers formed up. Two phalanxes on either side, his main force concentrated in the middle. Simple, but effective. The sound of swords being unsheathed rattled through the cold air.

Luke turned to his own fighters. Their discipline was noticeably less impressive. The overwhelming look was one of worry and confusion.

"Men. Women. Children of Austellus all. Hear me! Today, we fight!"

Over his shoulder, Luke heard the unmistakable sound of Walker boots pounding the pavement. Their charge had begun. He could see the fear in his soldiers' eyes.

"Years of Caelum control have made you miserable. They stole your wealth, destroyed your health and left your children to die."

The sound of boots was getting louder. A roar rumbled from the street behind him.

"Today we fight back. There is no other option. Fight. Die. Win."

He turned. The Walkers were closer now. Close enough that he could make out individual snarls in that sea of black.

"We do not step back. We do not retreat. And if any of you thought that was an option, allow me to disabuse you of your fantasy!"

Luke raised his black knife high and sent out a pulse from his mind. A discarded torch at the foot of an Austelli fighter gave him the spark he needed, and it did not take long to find the barrels. They were still set up in every corner of the Nest. Fire oil. Nasty stuff.

The Nest exploded in a conflagration of perfect, azure heat. The Walker charge stumbled at the sight. It washed across Warmarch, an angry spirit of flame.

Luke drew the power into him. Fire and fury roared inside his heart.

Memories were incinerated in those Fires of Remembrance and his body began to twitch, to shudder, with power and violence.

"I remember!" Luke screamed.

The smog drained from the sky. It raced towards him and surrounded his body in a cloak of power and violence. Bolts of fire skittered through the cloud. It pulsed with energy.

Luke leapt to meet the Walkers. The Austelli charged with him.

The two sides met in a crash of bodies and blood.

Luke sheared through the neck of a Walker before he even had the chance to swing. The black blade faced no resistance and memories drained into him.

Luke turned and slashed through a Walker's blade like it was made of paper. What was steel before a knife that could slice a man's very soul? That black blade took the Walker in the side of his head and he collapsed before he could even scream.

More memories. More power to feed the flames. More strength.

Chaos boiled around him. Austelli and Walkers. Blades and bone and blood. A hammer shattered a Walker's face. A blade carved the jaw from an Austelli. Boots slipped on that too-red gore and bodies tripped their living companions.

A blade slashed into Luke's arm. The smog swept around the dripping line of red and the cut vanished. He turned and slashed the throat of the Walker who held the blade.

It was almost too easy. Luke backhanded a Walker that thought he could sneak up on the Saviour. His black knife rammed into the bloke's groin.

At his side, the Austelli line buckled. A group of Walkers burst through, their faces tight and focused. Two Austelli died in a spray of blood and steel. A handful

turned and ran. They made it as far as the wall of fire that had once been the Nest. They cowered before the force of the fire and the Walkers were on them in a heartbeat.

Luke roared. The Austelli would not fall here. He would not allow it! His black knife slid under the guard of the closest Walker and boiled the eyes from his face. The air gave him speed, the fire gave him power and the steel gave him strength. He tore through the squad like a scythe through wheat. Every swing he felt his muscles crack. He drank the pain and got drunk with it. This was what he wanted! So many years of waiting, but finally, the Walkers knew his righteous fury.

All too quickly, there was just one left from the squad of ten. A tall man with pimples on his face. He met Luke's glare for all of half a breath.

Then he fled.

Luke gave chase. The thrill was just too much. Together, they broke from the melee and into a side street.

Fear gave the bloke speed, but Luke was still faster. A barricade rose across the abandoned street. Stone and wire, it was clearly set up to halt an Austelli advance. No way through.

"Nice try, Walker." Smog escaped Luke's lips as he spoke. "But this is where it ends."

The Walker shuddered. He held his blade in shivering hands.

"What is your name?" Luke asked.

"A... Andre. Andre Fort," the Walker said.

"Are you afraid, Andre Fort?" Luke whispered.

Despite himself, the Walker nodded.

"You should be." Luke laughed. "But I am a merciful God. I'll let you have the first strike." He held his arm out from his chest.

The Walker's eyes were wide. He glanced over his shoulder, desperate to flee, but there was no escape. In a daze, he slashed with all the strength he could muster.

The blade bit deep into Luke's outstretched arm. Skin and muscle was sliced clean in two and his bone crunched against the metal. He dropped the black knife from nerveless fingers.

Luke guzzled the pain like brandy.

With his off-hand, he drew his ClipPoint blade of steel and rammed it into the Walker's chest. Right about where his heart was. The bloke fell back, his hands gripping the steel.

"Looks like I win." Luke snickered. Already, the smog boiled around the gory slice. A moment later and it was gone. He knelt to scoop up his black blade.

"Finally."

The corpse rose from the muddy ground. The dead Walker's eyes boiled with blue smoke and he stood up.

"You have no idea how annoying that little knife of yours is Luke. I can hardly control their minds if you keep draining them away now, can I?"

"Dirk. I thought you needed a ring for this?"

"That fire you ignited in the Nest is a source of power like nothing else. I suspect only Heartfire could match it."

"Is that so? Tell me something, Dirk. Did you enjoy last night? When your soldiers died?"

The corpse laughed. A harsh, grating sound. *"Please. They held Austellus for me. Bought me time to unlock the Spire. Cracked most of the minds in Austellus. They did their job. All the pieces are in place Luke. Well. All but one. I am just waiting for you."*

"I am taking this city. Burning the mistakes of the past. Why would I come to you?"

The corpse flung out a hand and the cloud of smog that surrounded Luke blew away. Dust in the wind, it rose through the sky and disappeared into the clouds. *"Because the Spire holds your true name. And I hold the Spire."*

Luke felt his heart slam in his chest. "What do you mean?"

"Time to choose, Luke. Either you fight here, win Arx, and destroy the city that so wronged you. Or you can finally know the truth of who you are."

"You've lied to me before, Dirk. Why would I trust you this time?"

"I didn't lie. Regardless, I don't expect you to trust me. The Spire holds the answer, not me. Time to choose, Saviour. Who do you want to be?"

The corpse smiled with blood stained teeth. Moments later, the light vanished from its eyes and the body fell to the ground once more.

Luke spun to the fight. The blackcloaks had surrounded the Austelli line. Their training was beginning to show. He could see it like it was written before him. The Austelli would break. They would spill from the battleground and into the streets.

They needed their Saviour. Without him, they would lose. It was that simple.

A trio of Austelli went down to a crush of blackcloaks. Their dying words were to cry for the Saviour they had followed. Blue fire roared through the sky overhead.

Luke left them to die. The Spire awaited him.

Chapter 41

Kain sat in prison.

The cell were small an' cold. Window-bars spilled light across the floor an' picked out the steel at the Captain's waist. The man kept his eyes on Kain. Barely seemed to blink.

Kain hid in his silence. He hadn't said a word since they took him. Not since Dirk vanished.

An intense pain burst at his temples. He loved Dirk. The man had saved him from a life o' misery an' pain. But he were also responsible for so much death. So much evil.

Kain didn't rightly know how to feel anymore.

Outside o' his cell, the sound o' screamin' burst through the window like a piece o' shattered glass. The Walker Captain's hand fell to his blade an' he glared outta the window.

"What's goin' on?" Kain asked afore he could stop hisself.

"Austellus. We broke them on Warmarch but they scattered through the streets. It's a bloodbath out there." He shook his head. Then he started. Seemed to recognise who he were talkin' to an' fixed a right snarl on his face. "No talking."

"You the one doin' most of it. If there is fightin' outside, then why are we locked away in here?"

"Is that a joke? You slaughtered four Named Lords, and Simon DeProleai to boot. This is far too serious to ignore!"

"Then sentence me. Lock me away, whatever it is. You're a Captain. They need you out there."

"I know," the Captain hissed. "But this goes way over my head. We're waiting for someone suitable to question you first. Then we can see if there is anyone left in this city to save."

"Who counts as 'suitable'?" Kain asked.

"I do."

The Captain stepped back an' held a fist to his chest at the sound of the voice. A familiar face crept into the cell behind him.

Andross DeGaya.

The Watcher looked a lot worse for wear since last time. His face were gaunt an' his clothes hung from him like a scarecrow. Kain couldn't help but look at the stump where the man's hand used to be. It were wrapped in bandages, but it still made him shudder.

"Legal precedent dictates that I must inform you that you are to give testimony in front of myself, Sky Lord DeGaya, Captain Vernix here, and Legal Representative Reece DeFurle." The Watcher held out his arm an' some young bloke with yellow teeth scuttled into the room an' set up a foldin' desk in the corner.

The bloke looked up an' gasped. "You!"

"Me what?" Kain said.

"The crippled boy. How is it that you are sat here? I've already sentenced you to death once."

"Crippled?" Kain asked.

"He already has a death sentence?" DeGaya's question came hot behind.

"Yes." DeFurle flicked through the pages of his enormous folder. "On the fourth of Impes, a young man with a severe physical deformity was arrested for theft. Interrogation took place a few days later, with the prisoner admitting to ten

counts of theft. Due to lack of remorse, said prisoner was sentenced to death.

Addendum. He will join the *Caedes* March with the other prisoners." DeFurle looked up. "Kain."

"Uh. Well, that's my name. But what are you talkin' about 'severe physical deformity?' I'm fit as a fiddle."

DeFurle squinted at the page. "It was your spine. Yes! I remember it myself. You sat across from me and groaned with every movement. How is it that you are not crippled anymore?"

"Memory magic," DeGaya snarled. "Only explanation, right?"

"I guess," Kain said. His thoughts were jumbled in his head. It felt like he were hearin' the truth, but it clashed with what Dirk had told him. "Bugger it but my head hurts."

"Cry me a river." DeGaya set his stump, gingerly, on the table.

"Ah. Right. I'm sorr, but the Watcher killed so many people. I had to put an end to it..."

"What else would you have me do? Austellus was in the hands of a cult. Would you not have done the same to protect those you love?"

"Me? Probably not. Probably would'a just run an' left it for someone else. But then, I'm not a hero like you."

"A hero?" DeGaya said. "No. I was never a hero. The heroes died in the Foundry that day. A hero would never have let things get this far. I am a hero to no one."

"The Ant were a hero to me. Just like the Watcher were an enemy. Reckon that Lord DeGaya can choose either side to fall down on." Kain cleared his throat.

For a moment, an odd sort o' peace settled across the room. DeGaya cleared his throat "Tell me what happened in the Midnight Chamber."

Kain sighed. He knew it for a fool's idea, but there were only really one choice.

He told the truth. All that he knew.

When he were done, DeGaya sat back an' rubbed his chin.

"Dirk is a Mindbreaker," DeGaya said eventually. "I've seen that much. Leanne DeSüle had the same skills. She... took memories from me. In return I was... fast. Strong."

"Yep. DeSüle, uh Dirk called her Aer by the way, she were an apprentice. Dirk is the one behind it all."

"You say he disappeared into the Spire?"

"Wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't seen it." Kain spoke to the floor. "Did you check DeProleai for injuries? Ignis stabbed him, but when Dirk vanished, the knife-wound did an' all."

DeGaya glanced at DeFurle. "There were no visible wounds on Simon DeProleai."

"Dirk called it Dreamsteel. Said sommat about a bridge to the Spire? He were obsessed with that thing."

"Why?" DeGaya asked.

"He said he could use it to... change people. Make them think the way he wanted to." For the first time, Kain spoke of the real fear that had built in his heart. "Reckon that's what he did to me an' all."

DeGaya moved to wipe his fringe from his eyes. Then he realised he was trying to use his stump. He set it back on the table. "If this is true, and it's a big if, then how do we stop him? If he is inside the Spire. Do we break it? I wouldn't even know how to go about that..."

A huge *crash* sounded from outside. DeGaya turned to the Walker Captain right sharpish. "Vernix. Go and see what that was."

The Captain saluted an' scuttled from the room.

"I... I wanna help you." Kain spoke past the lump in his throat.

DeGaya snorted. "Even if I did believe you, there are far too many holes in your story to let you go so easy."

"The Ant fought alongside criminals once before," Kain said. "Reckon he could do it again..."

He cut off when the Walker Captain burst back into the room. The side o' his face were sheetin' blood. "My Lord. We have to leave. This location is no longer secure."

DeGaya leapt to his feet. "Reece, with me. Kain, follow him. The Captain will bring up the rear." In no time at all, they were arranged in their little line, an' DeGaya led the way out into the street.

Outside, the smog were thicker'n breath. Tasted like blood in the back o' his throat. They took off at a jog. Some massive sheet o' blue fire curled in the distance. Bugger, what were goin' on?

A barricade rose up around the street. Impossible to pass, a small group o' Walkers were set up beside it.

"Captain Vernix, with me. Reece, take the prisoner to the Walkers and keep your eye on him," DeGaya ordered.

"Yes my lord." DeFurle bowed.

Kain were led over to the Walkers. There were only five o' them, an' their cloaks were scorched an' filthy. A bolt o' panic shot down his arms. Reckoned any Walker would not be best pleased to see him.

"Men. Keep this man under watch." DeFurle pawned him off on them.

A few Walkers saluted. The nearest one nodded the back o' his head an' turned around. His eyes widened in a familiar face.

"Hopalong. Just what in the name of the holy fuck are you doing here?"

"Fetch. No. You're dead!" Ugly tears formed in the corner o' Kain's eyes.

"Not just yet." Fetch lumped his big paw on Kain's shoulder.

Kain just shook his head. "But, the Walkers... I left you..."

"Relax kid. It were for the best."

"What do you mean?"

Fetch grabbed Kain's arm an' led him over to a stack o' cinder blocks an' they both sat down.

"So... you're a Walker now?" Kain sniffled.

"I always was." Fetch looked down at his hands. "It's an odd thing, getting your memory back. Like waking up from a long dream. I was a Walker for a long time. Fought in the Flame Protests, guarded the Named Lords, the whole shebang. Then my wife died."

He swallowed. The lump in his throat bobbed up an' down.

"First, I got drunk. Then I got violent. Then I got stupid. Dirk found me. He promised... peace." He ran a hand over his scalp. "From that day, I did everything he asked. I've been a bad man Kain. Worse'n anyone in this city. You can ask. I wouldn't lie to you. But, you gotta know, it wasn't really me back then. It was..." He shook his head wordlessly. "Anyway. The Walkers took me back sharpish after I stopped 'em from getting cut down by a knot of Austelli."

Kain nodded.

"You must have questions kid." Fetch winced and seemed to brace himself.

"Go for it."

"What were her name?"

"What?" Fetch's brows drew together.

"Your wife. What were her name?"

Fetch's eyes were bright with water. "Jenny," he said. "Thank you. For asking." He cleared his throat. "It hurt to lose her kid, but I'm glad I got it back. The memories, the happiness and the wonderful years we had together. That's worth the pain ten-times over, don't you think?"

"Makes sense." Kain shrugged. "But then, I 'ain't never been married."

"True. But you have forgotten. Way more than I ever did." Fetch cleared his throat. "I don't have any o' that blue fire power, but I can tell you what happened. If you want me to."

Kain paused for a moment. His heart were heavy in his chest. He nodded. "I were crippled. Right?"

"Yeah. Wait, you remember that?"

"No. But he does." Kain pointed at Reece DeFurle. The snooty lord arranged a handkerchief to perch on. "Says that the first time I were arrested, I had some kinda physical deformity."

"He 'ain't wrong. You told me it hurt just to walk. Could tell just by lookin' at you. That's what Dirk used to control you. Said he could take the pain away. By the sound o' things, he forced it all into your memories of your Pa. All the hatred you feel, the pain when you think o' your old man... Dirk deserves that, not your Father."

Kain stared at his hands for a moment. "I don't remember any o' that. Whenever I think o' the old man, I just..." His hands balled into fists.

"It's true. I swear it."

"Oh, no. I believe you." Kain sighed out a calmin' breath an' relaxed his hands. "I just don't remember it. But the truth is stronger than my feelin's, I reckon. Maybe one day... I'll go see my old man. When all this is over."

"I think that's a good idea." Fetch smiled. He opened his mouth, then his eyes widened in alarm. "Shit. Austelli. Stay here."

He ripped his blade from its scabbard an' raced to join the other Walkers. He were right. A group o' ten or so Austelli came screechin' 'round the corner, weapons raised an' faces snarlin'.

The Walkers clumped together. Odds didn't look good. The Austelli came slower now, eyes wide an' wary. Weapons swung in their hands. How many people were gonna die today?

An' all of a sudden, Kain were sick o' it.

He marched hisself over to the Walkers an' snatched Fetch's blade from his hands.

"Kid what're you...?" Fetch began.

Kain stepped towards the Austelli an' chucked the blade at their feet. A couple danced away from it, lookin' around for a trick.

Kain held his arms out. "Alright. So now I'm unarmed. Which of youse wants to kill me?"

"Kain!" Fetch hissed.

"You!" Kain pointed at the bloke stood at the front. He held a greasy spear in practised hands. "Or you?" He gestured to the bloke beside him. The man were short, like a kid with an adult's face. Some right nasty whip swung from his hands.

"Don't tempt me," he said. "You threaten a man's survival, you best be prepared for the consequences."

"Bollocks. You wanna survive, you don't go pickin' fights." Kain folded his arms. A tiny voice in his head screamed that he were bleedin' insane, but he forced it quiet.

The bloke spat. "I've been fighting Caelum all my life. Only way to survive is to kill them first."

"You ever tried talkin' to 'em?"

"Me? No. But Quinn has." The bloke pointed to the tall fella beside him.

The tall lad, Quinn, dragged his sleeve up. A massive, twistin' scar, all red an' white edges curled up his forearm. "Didn't go well."

"Quinn. Ziplok. I remember you two."

Kain glanced 'round. DeGaya forced his way to the front o' the crowd, despite the Walkers best efforts.

"You know each other?" Kain asked.

"We fought together in the Flame Protests," DeGaya said. "I sewed that wound closed."

"Ant." The bloke, Quinn, twisted his face sommat fierce.

"Traitor." Ziplok turned to Kain. "This is why we don't talk. First the Ant, then the Saviour. I'm sick of following men who turn on you the moment they have what they want!"

"Ziplok, I..." DeGaya began.

The bloke stepped forwards. His whip began to spin.

"Easy." Kain darted in front of DeGaya. "You wanna kill a man, then I go first. But let me ask you sommat. What do you want?"

"Revenge!" Ziplok spat the word. "Revenge on the Ant for betraying us, the Saviour for abandoning us and the whole of Caelum for every evil they could imagine!"

“Alright. Go kill DeGaya then.” Kain stepped aside an’ left DeGaya front an’ centre.

Ziplok stepped forwards.

“Course, then I get to kill you, right? Then your mate with the spear there can kill me. Then Fetch can kill him. Fair bein’ fair an’ all.”

“Fair? None of this is fair!” Ziplok shouted.

“No. But it could be,” Kain said. “Put down the weapon lad. Make a real change. Here. Today. You won’t regret it.”

“He’s right Ziplok,” DeGaya said. “I deserve your anger, but blood only begets more blood. I swear, I will do right by you.”

Ziplok just looked at him. He turned to Quinn. The tall man licked his lips.

“Trust,” Kain said. “Just one day o’ trust can change everything.”

Ziplok turned over his shoulder. The men an’ women behind him were pantin’ exhausted. The dirt were thick on their tired faces an’ more’n one o’ them were bloody.

“If I catch even a hint of betrayal,” Ziplok turned back, “then I’m going to gut you and roast you over a flame.”

Kain grinned an’ grabbed the bloke’s wrist. “Thanks for makin’ the right choice. Come on. It’s time we put an’ end to all this.”

Chapter 42

Luke stepped into the Spire.

It welcomed him like a pair of willing arms. There was no blue-fire bridge to cross. No Memoria to navigate. His feet floated over a river of silver. The sky was filled with countless stars.

"Luke. Welcome."

Dirk stood, waiting in the darkness. This was no shadow of personality, no subconscious projection. It was him. Flesh, blood and bone.

"Dirk. I'm here." Luke stepped towards him.

"You are." Dirk smiled. "In fact, you have done everything I could have asked and more. I apologise Luke. I gave you up as a lost cause. But you have surpassed my expectations."

"I am my own man, Dirk. Not one of your pawns."

"Oh, I wouldn't dare suggest that I planned all this. Even the thought... it smacks of arrogance, don't you think?"

Luke glared at Dirk. Beneath them, the river of silver clashed in a mountainous wave.

"What is that?" Luke glanced down.

"Memories. That river is the consciousness of everyone who has died in this city from the moment the Spire was created."

"How is that possible?"

"Who knows? Perhaps this is the Prelude? A place of universal memory. Don't go for a swim though. That many voices... they would deafen you."

Luke glanced down. The river of silver crashed against the Spire but there was something else. Something hidden in those hoary depths.

Hands. Faces, caught in screaming masks. Each wave was made of fingertips.

Luke shuddered. He reached to his belt. All his steel knives had vanished, but that black steel still glittered like death at his waist. He drew it slowly and levelled it at Dirk. *"You owe me, Dirk. I've done my time, paid my price ten-times over. Tell me. Who am I?"*

A look of abject puzzlement crossed Dirk's face. *"Why... you are the Saviour. Luke of Austellus, isn't that what DeKeita called you? I like it. Rolls off the tongue. Or from the mind, in our case."*

"Enough!" Luke's thought thundered through the sky. It was so loud, even the river of memories seemed weak. *"WHO AM I?"*

Dirk reached his hand out, palm up, in front of him. A silver orb grew on his palm. A Manifest Memory. It was so small.

The orb expanded in an instant and swallowed them both.

...

"Did it work?"

Luke blinked. The memory settled around him and Dirk's body wrapped his mind.

He was panting. A feeling of power shot through his arms. He felt exhausted. Broken.

Godlike.

"I don't know," a woman spoke from beside him. Luke glanced over. Aer. Her brown hair bounced in curls down her back. "I still remember Dreamsteel, but I was there with you. I suppose it might be a while before we discover the depth of what we did today."

Luke nodded. The Spire gleamed before him. A mirror of the heavens, it shone like life itself. Bolts of blue raced down the surface and cracks had appeared in the cavern walls around it.

He could still feel it, inside his head. An echo of the power he found there... it called to him.

"We should get out of here." He forced the craving aside. He had accomplished what they set out to do. That was enough. "Who knows how much damage we did to these tunnels. I wouldn't want to get trapped down here." He shuddered.

"You go ahead," Aer said. "It is probably for the best that we are not seen together. Especially if... we failed."

Luke nodded to that. He bid Aer farewell and made from the tunnels, and out into Caelum.

The sun was strong. The day was glorious. The kind of breezy sunshine that felt like creation itself. Luke glanced down. For the first time, he noticed what Dirk was wearing.

Robes. Of a priest.

Around the corner, he took the steps up to the Temple two at a time. The door opened swiftly to his hand and the inside bustled with priests and supplicants. The air was filled with talk and laughter.

Luke nodded his head to a fellow priest and marched down the corridor. He made for the hospital. If their work at the Spire backfired, then it was about to get a whole lot busier. Who could guess the consequences for destroying a small part of so many minds at once?

The inside was quiet and dusty. A few beds groaned under the weight of their patients and the faint sound of moaning broke the still air.

"Dirk. Nice of you to show up."

Luke whirled his head around. High Priest Heiracho stood beside one of the beds. An instant spike of hatred bit at his heart. The head of the Temple hated him and the feeling was more than mutual.

The High Priest glared at him with ice blue eyes.

"Heiracho." Dirk's knees quirked in a bow. "I am here to tend to the sick, as is my duty and joy."

"Oh yes. And shouldn't they be so grateful that you can spare them a moment of your time." Heiracho launched towards him. "Your commitment to the Temple has been sorely lacking Dirk. Why, I can't remember the last time I actually saw you in here!"

"If you knew what I do..." Dirk grumbled.

"Don't talk back to me!" Heiracho slapped Dirk and silenced him, more with anger than with pain. "I am assigning you triple shifts here for the next month. A new Gazer was dropped off last night. Make him your purpose. If you can't, then maybe we should re-think your priesthood!"

"Aye, maybe we should," Luke said after the High Priest left. Anger ate at him. Heiracho. All he wanted to do was sit in his Temple and pray. No matter how much was going wrong, he was loath to do anything about it.

One day, one day soon, he would get what was coming to him.

Luke sighed and sat beside the Gazer. "Well then. I guess we should get to know each other, huh? My name is Dirk and I'll be taking care of you."

The Gazer rocked forwards. His hair danced out from his face.

A familiar face. Strong jaw. Clear skin. The only thing missing were the blue eyes. For now, they were nothing but blue smoke.

Luke stared at his own face and the memory shattered into shards.

...

"NO!" Luke fell to his knees. Weakness flooded him.

"Oh yes!" Dirk's projection was thick with relish. "You were my experiment Luke. My tame Gazer. I forced those Death Echoes inside your head. They combined to create your personality. You ever wonder why you are the only person with solid blue eyes? Frozen smoke."

"That can't..." Luke's thoughts were so muddled he barely managed to project them. *"But, who was I... before?"*

"Who knows? Give me some credit. I did try and find out. It would have been a wonderful way to keep Heiracho off my back whilst I continued my experiments. But no one knew who you were. Family, friends, Austelli or Caelumite. Nothing. You were just some junkie who went too far. There is only way you will find your memories." He jerked Luke's head down. *"Go swim for them!"*

"Then... my name..."

"Ah yes. In my defence, it wasn't supposed to be Luke. I called you Look. You know, because of the eyes. But when the Death Echoes built you, you stared calling yourself Luke and I just went with it. Don't suppose it matters in the end, eh?"

"Then... everything I am... is a lie."

Dirk strode forwards. *"You were my blank canvas. My experiment. Nothing more. But you taught me something. People are weak. Without a holding hand, a parent to teach them right from wrong, they will continue to make the same mistakes. Again and again and again."*

Dirk grabbed Luke's hair and slammed him into the Spire.

"Do you want to know what I did for the two years I left you in Arx? I went searching for Dreamsteel. It is easy to destroy, when you know how. I travelled the whole peninsula. I raided Vos and Tear and every hovel from here to the Saltiron Sea. I even travelled the Deadlands and searched the sand for any I had missed. Well, as far as anyone from Arx can do."

"Why... is Dreamsteel such a threat?"

"Because it allows anyone to cross the gap to Memoria. Pierce the Spire and anyone can enter our world. Cutting memories is nothing. Without Dreamsteel, the Spire is safe. Without Dreamsteel, the Spire is mine!" He drew a knife from his belt. Blue-silver steel.

"What are you going to do, Dirk?" Luke asked. His fingers twitched at his side. It was all he could do.

"I'm going to cure this city of its cycle. Free it from time. The Flame Protests. The Saviours Revolt. So similar, don't you think? The same things always happen. A group gets angry. They rebel against those in charge. They get their revenge. Revenge breeds resentment. Resentment breeds anger. Suddenly, a whole new group is in charge, and those they overthrew are angry with them. Angry enough to rebel. It is all politics. Leaves a bad taste, does it not? History repeats and we are doomed to watch it continue. Well, no longer! Do you know what those stars are Luke?" He pulled Luke's hair to force his eyes upwards. *"Those are minds. Every cracked mind in Arx, and thanks to Ferra that is most of them. The Spire connects us all."*

He slammed Luke into the Spire once more. The metal spear groaned and light flashed from the tip. Countless lines of blue fire raced from the top of the Spire and connected with the stars.

"Arx will forget memory magic. Forget Dreamsteel. Forget these silly disagreements, Austellus and Caelum, rich and poor, healthy and unhealthy. All will

vanish. Instead, they will learn brotherhood, tolerance, compassion. I will force peace down their throats until they choke on it! I will create a golden age in Arx. A living paradise."

A violet eye opened in the sky.

"Paradise, under my watch. Goodbye Luke. It's been fun, but all good things come to an end."

"I won't... fade like this..." Luke tried to struggle, but it was useless. He was a child, caught in the grip of his father.

Dirk grinned. *"How soon you forget. A battle in Memoria is a battle of wills. And thanks to that idiot farmer, I have more will than I know what to do with."*

Dirk blinked and shadow forms burst from him. Scores of them. Their mouths and faces moved, distorted and unnatural.

"Do you have any idea how difficult it is to work with thirty four voices screaming in your head? Each with their own ideas, their own thoughts and wants? It's maddening."

"You couldn't... dominate them. Could you?" Luke asked. *"Even now... you are weak. You didn't suffer... as I suffered."*

"What does that mean? No mind can dominate another. Every thought is of equal strength. Their ideas melded with my own. The only reason I still call myself Dirk is because I have far more memories under that name."

"It is a shame. It stopped you from... true power." With the last of his strength, Luke raised his hand.

"You can't set your will against me Luke."

"Why would I do that? No. I don't set my will against you." He met Dirk's violet eyes. *"I dominate you."*

The nearest shadow burst like a bubble. Silver Manifest Memories swarmed into Luke.

And he felt strength wash through him.

He cast his hand out, and each shadow burst into a hail of Manifest Memories. They rattled into his body and he drew himself up. Power. Strength.

Glory.

He tore from Dirk's grip. *"I gained this power from destroying the mind of my best friend. You really thought you could stand in my way?"*

He ripped the black knife from his belt and plunged it straight into Dirk's heart.

The last Mindbreaker gasped. He jerked over the knife and glanced down. His violet eyes were open.

"No..."

And his memories swarmed into Luke.

Knowledge and power in equal measure boiled through Luke's mind like acid. He screamed. He laughed. He wept as Dirk's mind melted into his own.

When he was done, he cast the husk that had been Dirk to the silver waves below. Luke ripped the knife free. His hands were shaking, shuddering with *power*. So many memories.

But still not enough.

He slammed the black knife into the Spire. Trails of blue fire burst into life. In an instant, power, rich and real as gold, flooded into him.

It broke him. Tore his mind in two. He discarded his weak, weeping prison of flesh and ascended, high over the Spire. The darkness, the empty past of a Gazer. It was a void. A void he had to fill.

He could feel them. Every mind in Arx, connected to the Spire. To him. Their memories were his to observe. No. His to take. With a pulse of unimaginable power, the Saviour exercised his will.

And the memories of Arx began to drain into him.

Chapter 43

Kain stood beside the wide table an' licked his lips.

It has been hastily put together, right in the middle o' the street an' five blokes stood on opposite sides. On one edge, Andross DeGaya stood beside Var DeKeita. The Steel Lord's hair were matted with blood. He had been in the thick o' the fightin from the start. Beside 'em were Quinn An' Ziplok.

Then there were him an' Fetch, lookin' like kiddies at the adult table.

It had started so well. With Ziplok an' his mates on side, Kain's little group had combed the streets o' Caelum lookin' for those still fightin'. A word from DeGaya an' Quinn, backed up by the steel they carried o' course, managed to break most o' the skirmishes. Their group had grown with bodies o' those too tired, or too injured, to keep fightin'.

Hadn't all been smooth sailin' though. Often times they arrived too late. An' street-fightin' were a vicious sort. Fat nobles an' scrawny kids were slumped in doorways, Walkers lay like leaves crushed underfoot. Austelli screamed their deaths to the sky.

But it were the best he could do. An' now he worried that it wouldn't be enough.

"Patently ridiculous," DeKeita said. "Reparations? I was there. The Saviour burned down the Nest himself."

"You seen him lately? 'Cause I haven't," Ziplok said. "Besides, those fire barrels were your idea. You break it, you fix it. Or was your promise nothing but the empty words we expect from Caelum?"

"Easy Ziplok," DeGaya said. "We can be fair about this."

"There's that word again." Quinn narrowed his eyes. "I notice that your houses haven't been burned down."

"Not through lack of trying on your part!" DeKeita slammed his fist on the table. His ears were pink.

"Careful old man." Ziplok uncurled the whip from his waist an' sent it skitterin' over the table, upsettin' inkpots an' splaterin' paper. "You wouldn't want to say something you regret!"

"Enough!" Fetch bellowed. "This is pointless. Posturing gets us nowhere. I don't know if you've noticed, but the Nest is still on fire! And the Temple is packed to bursting with the injured and dead. The longer we argue, the more people die." He licked his lips. "I suggest we take a break, get sommat to eat, and then hammer this out. Screaming at each other is pointless."

Kain held his breath. 'Sides himself, Fetch were the least important bloke at the table.

But, wonder o' wonders, they actually listened to 'im. The four o' them filtered off, down different streets mind, towards the smell o' beef an' carrots. DeGaya had ordered food when the fightin' stopped. Reckoned it would draw any stragglers, not to mention it were right difficult to argue with a gobful. The atmosphere around the cook pot had been tense, Austelli an' Walker tryin' to break bread together, but at least the blades were still in their scabbards.

For now.

"How did that work?" Kain folded his arms.

Fetch smirked. "What, you thought this was gonna be all sunshine and rainbows? Don't blue sky it kid, we're gonna be here for a while."

"Yeah," Kain grumbled. "But what happens next time, when Ziplok gets angry an' attacks DeKeita or sommat?"

“He won’t.” Fetch smiled. “It’s all just Billy-big-bollocks negotiating. Now the fighting is over, it would take something truly huge to spark it off again. The Austelli are tired and Caelum is terrified. An uneasy mix, but a useful one.” Fetch clapped Kain on the shoulder. “You did good kid. Don’t sulk now it’s getting boring.”

Kain smirked at that.

They chatted for a bit longer, afore the others arrived again. Fetch were right. They looked a lot better with a bit o’ food in their bellies.

“Right,” DeGaya began briskly. “How about this. Before we negotiate the terms, how about we just sign the Paper of Disengagement? Myself and Var will sign for Caelum, you two for Austellus, and then Kain and Fetch can sign as... neutral parties. That way, we are no longer at war. It seems prudent to make it official.”

Ziplok scratched a deep scar on the side o’ his face. “For now.”

“Good!” DeGaya gestured behind him an’ Reece DeFurle scuttled over with a document in hand. He smoothed it down on the table.

Fetch scanned the thing. “Says these two are signing under ‘Lords of Austellus.’ You guys take a vote or something?”

Quinn snorted. “No. But someone has to sign to it.”

“Besides, do you think anyone actually reads these things?” DeGaya shook his head. “You know what I signed under after the Flame Protests? Lord of Fire and Souls.”

“Well. Whatever it takes to get things done.” Kain shrugged.

“Excellent.” DeKeita dipped a pen an’ signed his name with a flourish.

The document passed around the table until it reached Ziplok.

“Doesn’t seem right,” he said. “I followed the Saviour here.”

"What, you reckon he'd want to sign it?" Quinn asked. His own name were already set in black ink.

"Nah. That man was insane. I reckon he didn't even remember us when he saw us. Damn it, I followed that bloke twice." He looked up the table. "Revenge both times. Fuck it, how easy that becomes. I can't remember the last time I even thought of anything else."

"It's addictive," Fetch said. "Starts off reasonable. Why shouldn't I hurt him? He hurt me. Then it begins to stretch. Sure they were innocent, but others wouldn't be. What does it matter if a few of them fall? As long as I survive."

"Aye." Ziplok scratched his nose an' left a smear of ink down his cheek. "But by then your hands are so red... How can they sign for peace after that?"

"People change, Ziplok." DeKeita turned to him with a sigh. "At least... they can. We just have to try and do better."

An odd spark o' respect seemed to pass between the two blokes.

"Aye. We do."

Ziplok scrawled his name an' it were done.

Peace. In Arx. It were finally over.

Then the earthquake struck.

It felt like the city were breakin' in two. Kain looked over an' a chunk o' buildin' came soarin' out o' the sky. It *slammed* into the street, splinters o' pavement flyin' through the air.

"Fetch! What's goin' on?" Kain asked.

The old man just shook his head.

"Look at the Nest!" Ziplok shouted.

The fire roared in the distance. It were no longer blue. The wall o' flame were gone. In it's place were a massive pillar o' pure white fire. It burned a hole in the clouds.

Then it began to spread.

"No..." Ziplok whispered. The flames raced from the Nest towards the nearby buildings. They tore through stone an' wood like it were nothin'. In no time at all, the Nest were decimated. A pile o' rubble an' ash.

Overhead, the sky began to twist. Black clouds swirled together, a maelstrom o' smoke an' smog. It fell on the city like ash. The moment it touched the street, it flickered from black to white. A pure white mist, it soaked through the street.

"What is this?" Kain asked. The street were thick with white smoke an' yet, none of it touched him. He looked over. Fetch, DeKeita, Ziplok an' Quinn were likewise untouched.

DeGaya twitched. The smoke poured into his ears, his mouth. His head fell forwards an' his eyes closed.

"Andross. Are you okay?" DeKeita stepped forwards.

In the heart o' the maelstrom overhead, an eye opened. It were ice blue.

DeGaya's head jerked up like someone grabbed him by the hair. He opened his eyes.

They were gone. Instead, the sockets boiled with blue smoke.

"Andross? What's going...?" DeKeita began.

He cut off when DeGaya's blade sheared through his throat. DeKeita fell with a gurgle, his blood splattered over the papers set out afore him. The papers that had been signed to bring peace.

"Andross! What are you doing?" Fetch bellowed. He leapt at DeGaya an' his blade lashed out. The Sky Lord only had one hand. He were no match for...

DeGaya's blade flickered forwards. In a single strike, he tore Fetch's blade from his fingers an' sent it slidin' across the floor, right up to Kain's toes. His stump came 'round an' *crunched* into Fetch's nose. The bandage were soaked with blood, but he didn't even twitch. It were Fetch that fell. Lumped to the floor like someone had smacked a hammer into his face.

DeGaya knelt over Fetch, his blade drawn back to strike.

Kain scooped up Fetch's blade. Didn't think. Didn't need to. He just darted forwards an' lashed a fierce cut, right at DeGaya's neck.

The Ant's head fell free of his body an' rolled to the side o' the table. It hit the leg with a little *click*.

Fetch wiped his hands down his shirt. "Kid. Thank you."

Kain blinked. DeGaya's headless corpse slumped to the floor.

"Fuck me. What is going on?" Quinn asked. His eyes were wide an' white.

"This is what Dirk wanted," Fetch said. "Either of you ever used a Mindbreaker? Are you cracked?"

Both Ziplok an' Quinn shook their heads.

"Fetch... you did." Kain turned to the old man.

"DeSüle returned my memories." Fetch swiped a hand towards the mist. "I think I'm okay."

They shared a look.

"Would one of you tell me what is going on?" Ziplok demanded. His whip twitched in his white-knuckled grip.

"This mist can control people. Dirk told me about it. He said he were gonna use the Spire to... cut away the weak people an' leave only the strong." Kain swallowed an' looked up to the sky.

"That eye overhead. It belongs to the Saviour," Quinn said. "I'd recognise it anywhere."

"What do we do?" Fetch asked.

No one had an answer to that. They fell into silence, soon broken by the sound o' screaming.

"Bollocks. That's comin' from the camp," Fetch shouted. The others followed behind him as he raced around the corner.

What they saw there were carnage.

The camp were complete chaos. Where once the Austelli an' Walkers had sat eatin' together, there were nothin' but bodies an' blood. Greasy soup soaked around the corpses. A small group o' Walkers an' Austelli were pressed up against a buildin', fightin' for their lives against the swarm o' fog-eyed fighters. There were so many. They didn't have a chance.

But didn't mean they wouldn't try. "Come on. We gotta cut through to that group at the back. They need our help." Kain's hands shook. Blood dribbled down the sword, but there weren't time to think about that now.

"Aye, they do." Fetch stepped forward an' plucked his sword from Kain's fingers. "But not yours."

"Fetch? What are you...?" Kain began.

"Don't argue kid." Fetch said. His voice were oddly... peaceful. "I need you to do as I say and run."

"Run? Where? I'm no coward Fetch!"

"I know. That's why you get the hard bit. Do you remember what Dirk said? He protected your mind from this magic. I reckon that means you are the only one who can put a stop to this. Get to the Spire. You leave dying to us." Fetch said. He turned to Ziplok an' Quinn. They drew their weapons an' nodded with him.

"Fetch! I can't just leave you to die." Stupid tears formed in Kain's eyes.

"Yes. You can. I owe you, after all."

"What are you talkin' about?"

Fetch licked his lips. "When Dirk stole your memories... you said no. You didn't mind the pain. You just wanted to go home. He... he did it anyway. Took you against your will. And I stood there and let him." Fetch shook his head. "I only got one life, but I decided that day that it belonged to you. Now go kid. Go!"

Fetch pushed Kain back. Then he were runnin'. The years seemed to melt from the old guy's bones as he charged the fog-eyed soldiers. Ziplok an' Quinn charged with him an' together, they cut into the mass o' bodies.

Stupid, stupid heroes.

Kain's eyes dripped with tears. "You idiot Fetch. You stone cold idiot..." he shook his head.

Tears rollin' down his cheeks, he ran towards the Spire.

Chapter 44

Sam huddled in the corner of the forge.

The slice of sunlight that threw shadows from the bars over the window made it late afternoon, but none of the mute blacksmiths had yet emerged.

Which, all things considered, was probably for the best. Her own night had been disturbed by constant nightmares. That black knife. The Saviour's blue eyes.

The mindless body that whimpered at the back of the room.

She couldn't tear her eyes away. The body was old, emaciated. His eyes were open but they boiled with a faint blue smoke.

Even the corpse of the blacksmith the Saviour killed, slumped in the corner, did not haunt her thoughts like the mindless man did.

Sam shook. Was this where it ended? Was she fated to end up as a mindless body that worked to the bidding of the Saviour? No connections to anything or anyone.

Perhaps this where she belonged.

Alone.

A clatter. Sam looked over. One of the blacksmiths was up and bustling around their little kitchen area. It wasn't long before the smell of porridge filled the room and he wandered over with two bowls.

He bent to offer her one.

"No. Thank you." Sam turned to the soot-faced man and shook her head. "I... I can't eat just now."

Both bowls clattered to the clay-covered ground. Boiling porridge splattered against her arm.

"What?" Sam scrabbled into the wall.

The blacksmith knelt beside her. He grabbed her arms with thick, meaty hands. "Uh."

"Get off!" Sam tried to struggle free.

"Uh. Ah. Uh." His glistening stump of a tongue thrashed between his lips. Spit flecked at her.

"Sorry. I'm sorry okay. I'll eat the porridge, I'll do whatever you want, just please stop." She shrank back against the wall.

The blacksmith raised a hand to her cheek. It was... oddly tender. She looked up at him and he smiled.

"Uh. Ah. Uh," he said.

She looked at his eyes. The crinkles over the bridge of his nose. The corner of his jaw where the beard didn't quite come through. The skewiff curve of his smile.

"Jack." She barely breathed it. It couldn't be. "Jack Mendy."

But the look on his face was pure relief. He nodded.

Sam threw her arms around his neck.

Everything inside her chest was all jumbled. Her throat was tight but there were tears in her eyes and she couldn't stop laughing.

"I can't believe it. I can't believe I found you, after all this time."

His hands slipped around the back of her head and brought her forehead to press against his.

Sam closed her eyes and for a moment, they just knelt there. For the first time in what felt like forever, she felt at peace.

Then the earthquake struck.

Jack wrapped her in his arms and held her to his barrel chest as the world tried to flip around her. An enormous, shuddering *crash* shuddered through the

building. A chunk of masonry shattered through the roof. A red smear was caught underneath it. One of the blacksmiths.

The other four were awake now. Fingers pointed and arms waved. Jack uncurled from around her and all of them approached the hole in the wall. Something was seeping in from outside. It looked like... mist?

White tendrils crawled through the gap and into the room. Sam glanced down. A small pocket of space surrounded her, an empty gap where the mist would not touch her. The same was true for Jack.

The other four began to scream. Tongue-less, wordless screams.

Blue mist boiled where their eyes should have been.

The closest grabbed a hammer. Without pausing, he swung it at Jack.

"Jack!" Sam shouted.

He twisted around the blow and caught the hilt on his side. Jack grunted against the force. He reached out and grabbed the hilt and yanked the hammer free.

Jack swung at his attacker's head. The blacksmith hit the floor with a wet smack. Gobs of blood sprung from his skull and splattered the wall.

The body twitched. Groaned. And stood up. Blood leaked from the crater in the side of his skull. Sam could see his brain, beating and pulsing in the crack. She dribbled sour spit and Jack turned to look at her. His eyes were wide and panicked.

Without a word, they leapt through the hole and out into Austellus. The scrabbling sound of the four blacksmiths followed them out.

The street was on fire.

Sam cowered back from the heat. White-gold whorls of flame ripped through the streets. It incinerated buildings, roads, everything. All was reduced to ash.

They ran for the Mucro. The streets passed in a zigzag haze of fear and fire.

But it was too late.

The barge was engulfed in flame. It erupted with sparks and thick, black smoke. It sank and the final route into Caelum was lost.

“What do we do now?” Sam asked.

Jack just shook his head.

At his side, the street *exploded* with flame. Fog-eyed bodies, there had to be fifteen, shuffled from the fire. Their clothes were scorched, their skin sloughed off with burns.

Jack squeezed her hand. With a grunt, he barrelled through them and dragged Sam down the street behind him. Hands and fingers tore at him, but he pushed on through and soon they left the fog-eyed behind.

Entire buildings groaned and collapsed. A massive, three-storey wooden structure burst and crashed to the ground as they sprinted past. Where was safe when a city was burning to ash?

Jack’s feet slowed and Sam skidded into his back. She glanced around him. The street was empty. Nothing but a pair of broken iron gates and a hole in the ground.

Her heart was cold. Was this it? A dead end? The fires burned behind her. Her skirts were scorched and her hair was frazzled. The city was a furnace and they were trapped right in the heart.

And yet Jack just ran forwards. Towards a pit, so dark that the white-gold flame could not brighten it.

Sam followed Jack down into the darkness. If the streets were a furnace, then the pit was a coke oven. Her tongue was thick in her mouth. By the Prelude, what she wouldn’t do for a drink.

No such luck. The cavern was filled with... forge equipment. "Where are we Jack?" she asked.

"Ow. Ry."

Right. Tongue missing.

She nodded anyway and made her way through the chamber. Right in the middle, something glittered and drew her eye. She walked over.

Metal. An enormous pile of it, all stacked inside a gigantic stone bowl. Sam ran her hand through the pile. It trickled between her fingers. The ore on top looked familiar. Almost like...

Of course! It was the exact same as that gateway metal Ferra had shown her. But there was so much of it. The whole city had to have memories stored in that enormous bowl. Why was it there?

"Ee. Ee. Uh," Jack said.

"What? Jack. I can't understand you," Sam said.

He waved her over to the side of the room. There was a woman set out on a stone platform. She was unmistakably dead and lain out for funeral rites, but there was something familiar placed on her chest.

Jack picked up the disk he had given Sam all those years ago and tapped it with his knuckles. "Ee. Ee. Uh," he said.

Sam nodded. "Dreamsteel. Do you know how to make it?"

Jack nodded. A soft sadness spread across his face.

"I've learned some. We use your disk as a seed, but... Do we have to use one piece of gateway metal at a time?"

Jack shook his head. He held a single finger up and tapped her on the head. Then he held up five and crushed them into a fist. He mimed, thankfully, thumping her head.

“Right. The more we use, the stronger it will be?” she asked.

Jack nodded.

“Okay. But I don’t know how to temper it. The woman who taught me she... died before she could reveal the final step.”

Jack just smiled that sad smile and tapped his nose.

“Right. But wait, I was told... don’t we need that blue fire for this to work?”

Jack shook his head again. He pointed at a gap under the stone bowl and Sam looked down.

Heartfire. She had never seen it before, but she recognised it immediately. Jack had told her about it when he taught her how to forge. A fire hotter than any man made fire could be.

A fire, that Ferra said, could rival that blue fire of a Mindbreaker.

Sam smiled at Jack. Together, they set their hands against the winch. The chains attached to the stone bowl began to screech and whine. It sounded like the axis on which the city turned had ground to a halt.

Inch by inch, screech by screech, the metal descended into the Heartfire.

A column of blue fire roared from the heart of the pit. Sam shielded her eyes from the brilliance.

When she opened her eyes again, the chamber was filled with shadows. Ghostly apparitions, with claws of fire

Jack forced her back. He stood before Sam and the shadows, that disk held out like a puny shield. There was no way he could hope to protect them both.

Jack swung and twisted to keep her from the smoke. Claws of red smog sliced into his skin, teeth of fire ripped at his arms. But he did not stop. With each new shadow that approached, he stood firm. The Dreamsteel disk glowed like the heart

of a star. He held it out and one by one, the shadows leapt into it. The disk wavered with heat and Jack's hands were scorched and blistered with the heat.

When all the shadows were gone, blood stuck Jack's clothes to his skin and a chunk of his ear was missing.

Sam was untouched.

"Jack! By the Prelude, we need to..." she began.

Jack just shook his head. Slowly, with limping steps that dribbled blood behind him, he made his way back to the bowl and began to pull the winch.

When the stone emerged, it did so with a pool of bright silver sloshing in the middle. Jack wasted no time throwing the seed into the mix. It bubbled and seared and was lost in the molten metal.

A drop of his blood flew with it. The moment it touched the metal, it began to swirl. To rock and bubble with blue bolts of power.

"Jack. What are you doing?" Sam asked. Her heart was lodged somewhere between her teeth. What had Ferra said?

Dreamsteel requires a death.

"No. Jack, don't you dare!" Sam shouted. She grabbed his arm. "I've just found you again. I can't lose you. Not now. We'll find another way. Please."

Jack just turned to her. He pulled her into a rough embrace. She looked up into his face. Into his deep, honest eyes.

They sparkled for her.

Then Jack pushed her back, hard enough to send her skittering across the floor.

"JACK!" Sam reached out, like she could cross the distance in an instant and yank him back.

She watched as he stepped into the molten metal. Instantly, his body was engulfed in fire. But he did not cry out. Did not scream. He turned to her. A smile, wide as the Mucro split his lips.

Smoke and shadows burst from his body. Jack's memories played out as his life drained into the Dreamsteel.

Every memory was of her.

Sam wept, unashamed, as she watched herself learning the forge. She watched him forge her hammer, watched that first dagger they ever made together, watched him juggle coin pouches and toss them into a lockbox beneath his desk. They had never done it for the money.

"I never had a daughter of my own. But thanks to you, I am luckier than most. Goodbye Samantha."

Jack's voice spoke inside her head. A light burst from his figure stood in the molten metal.

Sam rubbed her eyes. Jack was gone, and the pool of metal with him.

Instead, a blade stood up in the stone bowl.

Sam took the handle. It shone like a spring morning. Frost gathered on the edge and a pattern ran down the blade. It looked like a mixture of rose thorns and starlight.

Jack had finally mastered Dreamsteel. And it was just as beautiful as he promised it would be.

"It's still a blade though, Jack," Sam said softly. "We still fell that far."

A roar interrupted her from behind. Sam spun.

An army of fog-eyed were shuffling down the steps towards her. The Dreamsteel must have attracted them. She glanced around. No way out. Even with a Dreamsteel blade, she couldn't hope to cut through that many.

A golden light seemed to *pulse* from the side of the room.

Sam squinted. A crack in the wall was illuminated with a golden wash. She raced over. There was a fissure, just large enough for her to squeeze through.

Darkness peered through the gap in the rock.

Sam squeezed into the darkness as the Foundry filled with fog-eyed ghosts.

Chapter 45

Inside the rock, white mist wisped around Sam.

She thumped the wall. The Dreamsteel sword dragged against the floor and she walked, slowly, deeper into the crevice. The scratch of Dreamsteel against rock would hopefully lead her back, should she get lost.

Back to that furnace, surrounded by the fog-eyed.

Sam stepped out and into an intersection cut into the rock. Countless paths split and curved away from her. It was impossible to guess the right one. All at once, in a sick swirl of cloying certainty, she knew she was going to die down there, wandering through the rocks beneath the city.

Forgotten.

Sam fell to her knees. The mist wisped around her, closer now. Tendrils of white smoke curled around her wrists, her ankles. It almost felt... comforting. Like a deep blanket she could sink into and sleep forever.

The Dreamsteel slipped free from her fingers and Sam closed her eyes.

"Don't you fucking dare!"

She snapped her eyes open. A tiny light seemed to zip from one of the split pathways. It illuminated the walls around it like a torch and bobbed right in front of her face.

"My daughters do not give up!"

The light began to rotate. To expand and grow, a perfect golden figure that forced the mist aside. It vanished like fog in the sunshine and there, stood before Sam, was a golden figure.

Mother.

The resemblance was uncanny. It was like seeing herself and Lizzy melded into one, but for the short hair. Even the colour was familiar. It was the exact shade of gold that her ring had been.

“Mother.”

“Not quite. I am her Aversa.”

“What’s that?”

“I am... the soul of your Mother, given form by the memories left in the ring she gave you.”

Sam rubbed her eyes. “That... makes no sense.”

“All that matters is that I am here. Stand up Samantha. You do not belong on your knees.”

Sam rocked back on her heels. “What does it matter?”

“You spent your life searching for Dreamsteel, Samantha. I watched you. Now, when you finally succeed, you are ready to give up?”

“Yeah. We made a blade of Dreamsteel. The forging was like... it was like magic. Working with Jack again, breaking open the great Arxian secret. It was incredible. But it wasn’t worth his life. All I want to do is find the biggest pit in the city and lob this sword to rot there.” Sam shook her head.

“Samantha. Let me show you something.”

The golden figure began to move backwards, down the path it had emerged from. Sam scooped up the Dreamsteel blade and, though it felt like she was lifting the entire weight of Arx on her shoulders, began to set one foot in front of the other.

It wasn’t long before she found herself in a chamber underground. A chunk of the Spire pierced the room like a metal tooth.

Sam glanced down at the blade in her hand. It held the exact same blue-silver glow as the Spire itself.

She gripped the blade in readiness. A man sat before the Spire. Broad and homely, he held his head in his hands.

"Who are you?" Sam shouted.

The man turned. His eyes were streaked with tears, but they still shone brown as muck. Not a Gazer then. "Kain."

"Kain. What are you doing down here?" Sam licked her lips.

The man stood up and moved to approach her.

"Far enough!" She levelled the sword at him. "This is Dreamsteel. Do you know what Dreamsteel does?"

"Aye." Kain stepped closer.

He grabbed the sword by the edge of the blade.

"Stop, you moron, you'll..." Sam began, desperate to yank the blade back before the idiot lost his mind.

But nothing happened. He didn't even bleed. Kain just sighed and pushed the blade aside.

"That's the problem lass. Memoria all nice'n locked away. Dreamsteel 'ain't got no effect on me and I don't got no effect on it. So I can't get inside the Spire. And I can't stop Fetch from dyin' out there." He shook his head. "Who a' you?"

"Samantha."

"Damn it, Samantha. Why did we end up here? Huddled underground like insects."

"You are both exactly where you need to be."

Kain leapt a foot in the air as Mother's image burst into existence beside him.

"Hello Mother," Sam said.

"Your Ma's a ghost?" Kain whispered.

"No. She's an *Aversa*. That means..."

Kain visibly relaxed. "Oh. I know those. Sent to protect the Spire from exactly what is happenin' right?"

"Precisely."

Kain looked up with a sickly smile. "I can't go into the Spire 'cause Dirk locked me out. But you lass, you could make it. Even got the Dreamsteel an' all."

"Go... into the Spire?" Sam asked.

"She could. Then she would die. An unshielded, untrained mind has no strength in the Spire. Not now the Saviour controls it. I brought you down here so that you might help each other."

Silence. Sam turned to Kain.

"What do you mean, Mother?"

"Samantha. You create the bridge. Kain, you walk it. Together, you can enter the Spire and do what is needed."

"How... how do we do that?" Sam licked her lips.

"Pierce the Spire Samantha. You will see a ribbon of steel, a path into the Spire. Kain, you must walk that path."

"That sounds... easy?" Kain said.

"It is not. Samantha. You will face the agony of all the memories you have forged into that blade. Every negative emotion, every shard of consciousness lost, will pierce you. If you give in, if you let go of the blade for an instant, then Kain will fall into the Sea of Memory. Death would be kinder."

Sam gulped. Kain eyed her with a strained look on his face.

"Kain. Should you let the Saviour take your mind in there, then it will reflect down the Dreamsteel path. His power is boundless. It will steal Samantha's mind, easy as snuffing out a candle."

This time, it was Sam's turn to look worried.

"But Mother..." Sam began.

The golden figure shook her head. *"There is no more time to discuss it. The fate of our city rests on both of you. The Saviour... even now he drains my power. I leave the choice up to you."*

Mother's golden figure resolved once. Her eyes were sad. *"It is a shame we didn't have more time together, Samantha. But I watched you through the ring you wore. I..."* Her voice cut off as the mist rose around her. In a blink, Mother vanished.

"Mother..." Sam whispered. She choked back tear and turned to Kain. "Sod it what do we do?"

He looked over. "Ain't much of a fan o' prayin' you don't drop me."

"And what if you lose? I have no desire to lose my mind."

Silence for a moment.

Then Kain burst out in laughter.

"What, exactly, is so sodding funny?" Sam asked.

Kain wiped his eyes and shook his head. "I'm a goddamn hypocrite. There I am, stood out there an' tellin' Ziplock that one day o' trust can change it all, an' I canne even stick by it when it comes my turn." He sighed. "Here's the thing Samantha. I figure most folk are pretty decent when it comes down to it. It's only when we start to hide from the past, to cut it away, that we get right bugged." Kain took a deep breath. "I trust you. Your eyes are the right colour."

He swallowed. Clearly, it was not a particularly strong trust.

“Kain... even following your logic. You admitted to losing your mind. How can I trust you?”

Kain shook his head. “You can’t. Sorry lass. I wish it were easier. I guess, you gotta be the bigger person. Tell me, do you believe in people?”

Sam ran a hand through her hair. What a question! “I don’t really know,” she said. “I don’t... really connect with others all that well.”

A worried look shot over Kain’s face.

Sam steeled herself. “But I do believe in myself. Come, Kain. Take the hilt with me. Let us put an end to this.”

He placed his hand over hers on the hilt of the Dreamsteel.

“Ready?” Sam looked over to Kain.

He licked his lips. “As I’ll ever be. Let’s do it.”

They lunged. The Dreamsteel blade pierced the Spire.

And phantoms formed around her.

Chapter 46

"I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU. KAIN."

Kain stepped out o' the Spire. A sky o' white light blazed overhead an' a tiny platform o' metal, just wide enough for his two feet, moved underneath him. He held the Dreamsteel out afore him.

Beneath his toes, a river o' silver crashed against itself like the sea in a storm.

"Then where you hidin'?" Kain called out.

"HIDING? HOW LITTLE YOU UNDERSTAND."

Sommat shuddered in the sky. Kain looked up. Two enormous shadows resolved overhead. So wide, they blocked the light from the sky and cast 'im in shadow.

A pair o' blue eyes opened up.

"Whadda you want, Saviour?"

"MEMORIES." The thought *pulsed* like an earthquake. Kain shrank down. The sea underneath thrashed like a tortured animal.

"Why?" Kain asked.

The Saviour's eyes roamed his domain. *"BECAUSE THE PEOPLE OF ARX DO NOT DESERVE THEM."*

His boomin' laughter blasted at Kain like storm winds. It forced his back to the Spire, slammed him into the metal an' knocked the breath outta him.

"DIRK WAS A FOOL. HE SOUGHT TO ALTER THE MEMORIES OF THE CITY. TO ALTER THE PEOPLE THROUGH COMPLEXITY AND PRECISE TAILORING OF THEIR MINDS. IDIOCY. HOW LONG WOULD SUCH A SOLUTION LAST? A GENERATION? NO. SIMPLICITY IS BEST. MEMORY BRINGS SUCH UNHAPPINESS. I WILL ERASE IT ALL."

"Bullshit." Kain couldn't stop himself. "Where do you come up with that kind o' crap? I've drank from your fountain, Saviour. Had some choice cuts o' my mind sliced away. It's bollocks. Pain don't go away. It just hides deeper."

"THEN WHY DO YOU STILL HURT KAIN? ANDROSS DEGAYA'S DEATH TEARS AT YOU, DOES IT NOT? I COULD TAKE THAT PAIN FROM YOU. RELEASE YOU FROM YOUR GUILT."

"Not a chance. Aye, it hurts. My stomach is crawlin' with it. But I earned this pain. I reckon I owe the Ant that much."

"NO. YOU ARE BETTER WITHOUT PAIN. STRONGER. THE TRUTH DOES NOT MATTER WHEN YOU CAN UNMAKE IT. REALITY IS MINE TO DICTATE."

"How can you possibly think that?" Kain shook his head. "'Course the truth matters."

"AND YET YOU ONLY STAND HERE BECAUSE YOU REJECT THE REALITY OF YOUR PAST. I HOLD YOUR MEMORIES NOW, KAIN. I CAN SEE WHAT YOU WERE RUNNING FROM."

"My memories were stolen from me. I would do anything to have them back."

"A ROAD I TRAVELLED MYSELF. AND YET, IT WAS THE TRUTH THAT HURT THE MOST. VERY WELL KAIN."

A silver orb grew between the Saviour's eyes an' slammed into Kain like lightning from a clear sky. Darkness swallowed him.

"REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE!"

A headache began to pulse behind Kain's eyes. Like a coil wound, tighter an' tighter, it began to get more intense. Felt like sommat were goin' on in his head. Like his eyes were bein' forced from his face an' his mind were... expandin'.

Visions snapped through his eyes. Memories returned, like puzzle pieces snapped into the bigger picture. Laughin' with Pa. Abi trippin' flat on her face. Ma

smilin'. Kain felt his own lips mirror the recollection. What were the Saviour talkin' 'bout? This weren't...

A shockwave shuddered through his limbs. His muscles twitched an' twisted. Painful like. Kain grit his teeth an' waited for it to pass.

But it only got worse.

"What... are you doin' to me?" Kain gasped. Felt like his back were bein' snapped in two. Every inch o' his body were beginnin' to contract. To squeeze in on itself. Like each drop o' blood were tryin' to strangle him from the inside.

"THIS IS YOUR PAST KAIN. AS YOU REMEMBER IT, SO TOO DOES IT BECOME YOUR FUTURE."

Then the real pain began.

Kain were paralysed with agony. Tears squeezed from his eyes an' blood began to dribble from his nose. The pain came in waves, each one higher than the last. Felt like rusty hooks were tryin' to pull his spine outta his mouth an' he squirmed. His body began to shift. To twist an' warp like a cloth wrung out to dry. He bent over, unable to stand straight no more.

Memories blasted like visions though his mind. He saw hisself. Saw his body in the mirror in Ma's room. The red an' purple lump on his side. The way his back twisted up to keep him bent double. Odd bit's o' flesh hangin' from his hips.

He saw Pa. Saw the shake o' his old man's head. Saw his Ma bendin' to help him stand up. Saw that terribly familiar look in their eyes.

Even as his body roared out, it were the shame he saw there that hurt the most.

Kain screamed at the lightning bolts o' agony that tore through his body. "Make it stop. Just make it stop!"

"PAIN NEVER STOPS. IT ONLY GROWS. SEE NOW, THE TRUTH YOU SO DESIRE."

The visions began to warp an' change. Kain sweat an' panted as a shadow figure rose up afore him.

Fetch.

The old man were cornered. Six fog-eyed had him right down the end of an alleyway. He were covered in blood an' it looked like he could barely lift his blade no more. Ziplok an' Quinn were already dead, slumped on the floor at his feet.

Fetch took a deep breath an' charged into the fog-eyed. His blade took one through the neck an' he backhanded a cut to slice the head from one who snuck up at his side.

But the others fell on him. Knocked his blade spinnin' from his fingers. Forced their hands down his throat. Tore his skin from his body. Fetch screamed an' gurgled.

An' died.

"Fetch. No..." Kain sobbed, but there were nothin' he could do.

Another vision swirled into existence. Samantha, the girl he met at the Spire. Her hands still held the Dreamsteel blade, but her eyes were pourin' tears an' her body shook like she were bein' set on fire from the inside out.

"ALL THE PAINFUL TRUTH LOST FROM ARX IS RADIATING THROUGH HER. THIS IS WHAT IT IS, TO REMEMBER PAIN."

"Stop. Please. Just stop it," Sam wept. Figures o' smoke danced about her. Fightin'. Hurtin'. Dyin'. They leapt into her an' began to scorch her skin. *"Kain. Please. Hurry..."*

Her hands wavered on the hilt o' the blade.

Then the image were gone, vanished into the swirlin' darkness. Another vision began to build. Sommat familiar. Trees rose up around a shadow river.

The Kink.

A body sat on the river's edge. Kain's heart were sliced into ribbons. Pa. He sat with a bottle in his hand an' a knife plunged into the dirt beside him.

"Son. I should have prepared you better. I could have kept you safe, I..." Pa shook his head. He chucked the empty bottle into the Kink with a splash. *"Least I can do is join you."* Pa lifted the knife high.

"Pa, no!" Desperation ripped through Kain's limbs an' he moved. The darkness shattered around him an' the Spire returned. Love, real as roses, burst in his heart.

"THAT IS THE PRICE OF TRUTH, KAIN. IT IS BETTER TO JUST LET IT GO. I WILL TEAR THE TRUTH FROM YOUR MIND. YOU WILL NO LONGER SUFFER. LET GO KAIN. LET GO OF EVERYTHING."

Kain's eyes sank to the metal platform beneath him. Pain still ripped through his body like an animal. The point o' his blade wavered an' fell.

"Don't listen to him..."

Kain started. He looked around an' caught the glimpse o' sommat around the side o' the Spire. Were that... a body?

Kain managed to wobble to his feet. Every step felt like it would break him, but he kept on goin'. A lad were sat beside the Spire. His eyes were open, the same all-ice blue as the eyes overhead, but red tears ran down his cheeks.

His chest were pinned to the Spire by the blade of a black knife.

"Who are you?" Kain asked.

"Luke."

"Luke. Aren't you the Saviour? What have you done?"

A river o' blood dripped from the lad's eyes. *"What you almost did. I surrendered my mind years ago. I just... wanted to fill the gap. But there is only so much that a lie can do. I have every memory in Arx coursing through my head, but I am still so empty."* His head sank. *"I didn't want... any of this."*

Kain forced himself to his knees beside Luke. "Stay with us lad, come on."

Luke's head wavered from side to side. *"You can... stop this Kain. Please. Don't let anyone else suffer... the way I suffered."*

"How?" Kain asked.

"Without the Spire, there is no Memoria. Without Memoria, there are no stolen memories. It will force the truth back into Arx." He lifted his head an' blinked at Kain. *"And all the pain that comes from it."*

"IDIOCY! YOU FEEL THE PAIN OF THE TRUTH, KAIN. THE PAIN THAT EVEN NOW EATS AT YOU."

Kain stood up. Nice an' slow. His legs wobbled an' his back screeched like a cat gettin' skinned. "Aye, I can feel it alright. Don't reckon anyone would want to experience this."

"THEN SURRENDER!"

"Thing is, when I lost the pain, I lost the rest o' it as well. Without the bad, there 'ain't nothin' good, an' that's a fact. We 'ain't nothin' without memory an' we certainly 'ain't gonna *be* anythin' if we hide from everythin' that hurts. No. This time, we'll face it. Together." He hefted the Dreamsteel blade in his hands an' pivoted, awkward an' painful, to the Spire.

"NO! I WILL NOT ALLOW THIS!" The blue eyes overhead began to glow.

Underneath, the ocean o' silver rose up. It twisted an' spiralled. Faces an' hands seemed to push from inside. The shadow o' sufferin'.

"DROWN IN THE PAIN YOU SEEK!" The blue eyes blinked an' that enormous river roared towards Kain.

He swung his blade at the river. The silver flow were sliced in two. It tore around the Spire an' fell back to the darkness below.

Red bolts pulsed through the all-ice eyes overhead. *"NO! HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE? HOW CAN THE WILL OF SO FEW SURPASS THE WILL OF SO MANY?"*

Kain found a small smile dancin' across his lips. He lifted the blade once more. "Hope is always stronger than pain."

Kain swung once more. The Dreamsteel blade sheared through the Spire in a single swipe.

Screams.

Agony.

Memory.

The Spire crumbled an' everything faded into white.

Chapter 47

Sam sat in the ruins of the Midnight Chamber and wondered how they were ever going to go on.

“A curious thing,” the elderly man was saying. He sat on the splintered remains of a Named Lord’s high-backed chair, still ripe with bloodstains. “It seems that we had all forgotten so much.”

He blinked his eyes. They were blue now. So many were.

“We fought the creation Dreamsteel because we knew what it could do to a person’s mind. But to destroy it, we opened a path far worse than anyone could have imagined. The Spire... such a terrible violation.”

His eyes fell to the carpet. Not three feet away, a chunk of Spire was slammed into the wall. It no longer glowed white or blue. Now, it was only black.

“I was only a child, but...” he shuddered. “They stole the memories of all of us who were involved. No wonder I ended up hating memory magic so badly.” He shook his head. “I wonder how many of us remember dying now?”

“Do you regret it? If you could lose those memories once again, would you do it?” Sam asked.

The old man tapped his chin for a moment. Then he shook his head. “No. No, I don’t rightly think I would. It hurts, the boy was like my son, but I’ll recover. We all will.” He smiled and shuffled to his feet.

Sam inclined her head. “Thank you for your time, Mr... um, sorry what was it again?”

The elderly man smiled up at her with crinkled eyes. “Kuyt.” He waved his farewells and scuttled out of the door.

Sam sighed out a deep breath and moved over to the window. Workers toiled in the cold spring sunlight. So many blue eyes...

The destruction was terrible. Austellus was almost completely razed. The Nest was nothing more than ash, and Caelum had not fared much better.

Yet as she watched, a pair of men laughed at a joke. They forced up a new wall and wiped the sweat from their faces. One wore the tattered remains of a fashionable jacket; the other had a leather smock around his scarred shoulders.

Austellus and Caelum united. If only it hadn't come at such a cost.

She glanced at the chain on her wrist. The silver link was dull and black. It still baffled her. The moment the Spire exploded, her blade had snapped and a wave of *power* had slammed into her. She was knocked into darkness.

She woke the next morning in the Temple hospital with no idea how she got there.

The first petition had arrived almost as soon as she got out of bed. A set of Lords who wished to employ Austelli workers to help them re-build their homes. Their payment would be a space in Caelum, access to the stone and brick that DeMori had spent his life stockpiling. No sense in staying so spread out. Not now there were so few people left.

"Why ask me?" Sam had asked.

The trio of lords just shrugged. "You are engaged to Matthew. We all know the lad is... somewhat troubled. With all the Named Lords dead, you are next in line."

She shrugged them away. They would realise soon that she was just a silly girl in way over her head. It would not take long for them to replace her.

Except, the petitions kept coming. And not just from Lords. Austelli approached her in the streets and requested access to metal, to wood and supplies.

One enterprising young man had the idea to set up a communal kitchen, right on Warmarch Street. Said he got the idea from Dirk, which made her wary, but he seemed a good enough sort. It wasn't long before groups of people were gathering for a hot meal at the end of every day.

Sam smirked. All she ever wanted was to be left alone, to hide away in her forge and pretend the outside world did not exist. Yet now she was stuck on the High Seat of Arx.

A heavy hand fell on her shoulder. "What's that smile for?"

Sam turned. Saul stood, attentive over her shoulder. She snuggled into his hand. "Just how bizarre all of this is. How did I of all people, end up here?"

"Right place, right time." Saul shrugged. "And you were always destined for brilliance. Why do you think I took such good care of you?"

Sam laughed at that. Saul had been beside her the moment she woke up in the Temple, mouth smiling and tongue wagging. It was like nothing had ever happened.

He could not imagine the balm that was for her soul.

She picked his hand from her shoulder and kissed it before standing up. "I'm going to the hospital," she told him. "Perhaps... you could go and see Mira? See if... she is ready to talk to me yet? We could have dinner."

Saul bowed. "I'll ask. But don't hold your breath lass. Some pain... it takes a while to heal. But she'll come around." He squeezed her shoulders before he slipped from the room.

Sam followed him outside. As always, the taste of the air shocked her.

It was just so clean.

Sam walked to the Temple and made straight for the hospital. So many wounded... after the Spire exploded, there were widespread reports of people

being afflicted with injuries, with cuts and pain, that they had once forgotten. The priests worked alongside the surgeons, but there was always more to do.

Deeper into the room, past the bodies and the blood, was the patient she had come to see.

“Hello Matthew,” she said.

He was looking better. Relatively speaking. He had put on weight, his beard was neatly trimmed, and the shadows around his eyes were just a shade lighter.

Sam sat beside him and took his hand in hers. The destruction of the Spire only worked to return the minds that memory magic stole. It did nothing for a mind that was broken from the inside.

“We’ll get you back. I promise,” Sam said softly.

She blinked in surprise as his head came down to rest, gently, on her shoulder.

“Sam. What are you doing here?” Lizzy wiped her fringe from her face. She had worked in the hospital since the Spire fell. DeSchär was not a rich lord, but he had come out of the cataclysm relatively unscathed. It was thanks to him that the hospital had the supplies it needed.

“Just checking on him,” she said.

“Well you don’t have time for that. There are some men by the Mucro, they want your permission to get the barges running again.”

“Tell them they can do as they please,” Sam said.

Lizzy grumbled. “It doesn’t work like that. It has to come from you.” She was dangerously close to stomping her feet.

Sam just laughed. “Don’t ever change, Lizzy.” She reached over and smoothed Matthew’s hair.

Lizzy huffed. “How is he?”

"I suspect it is time he needs more than anything else. Time to grieve."

"Don't we all," Lizzy said in a small voice.

Sam bit her lip. The quakes had spared no one. Father cell had been sheared in two. His body...

No. She would not remember him like that.

Lizzy sat beside Sam and shuffled closer. "I miss him, Sammy."

"Me too."

"I've been thinking. You and Matthew. When he... gets better, you need a baby."

Sam's eyes goggled. "Why would you say that?"

"Everyone is coming to you because they crave something familiar that they can hold on to. Your connection to DeProleai is the strongest they can hold on to. You need a baby. To give them hope."

"Not going to happen," Sam snorted.

"Why?" Lizzy asked.

"That's just not who I am. Romance, sex, marriage, none of that interests me. For a long time, I thought that meant there was something wrong with me. I wanted to cut ties with everyone. I was so convinced that I could never connect with another person. But I no longer believe that is the case. Love exists in so many forms. Parent and child, friend to friend." She patted Lizzy's hand. "Sister to sister. So I don't fancy people. So what? That is not wrong. It is just different. I can still take care of Matthew, of you, of anyone who requests it of me."

Lizzy shook her head. "I... can't even imagine. But, as long as you are happy, I guess."

Sam nodded. "Can I tell you something, Lizzy? That day, at the Spire. When I was connected to it, I could feel... so many things." Even now, she shuddered at the

memory. "I saw the Saviour, Lizzy. He was so alone. Even in his own mind. He burned the city down to try and connect with something and I... I understood. I was so close to being just like him."

"What changed your mind?" Lizzy asked.

Sam smiled. "You did. Jack did. Mother did. Father did. Mira did. Saul did. Without each of you, I would not have survived. It was those bonds, those memories, that protected me. That allowed me to hold on to the Dreamsteel through the pain."

"So. That's the secret of the great Heroine of Arx."

She snorted at that. "Hardly a heroine. Kain did the hard part." Her voice glowed with warmth.

"Kain. I wonder where he went? Whispers have him all over the city."

Sam's laugh was quiet. She had seen his mind from inside the Spire. She knew exactly where he would be. "I can make a guess. He was never cut out to be a hero anyway."

Chapter 48

Kain groaned.

The ground were hard as diamond, but he kept on an' eventually, he had three holes about the right size.

He walked over to the first body an' unwrapped the shroud. "Fetch." He knelt beside the body, heedless o' the jolt o' pain that needled his back. "Sorry I were too slow. I hope you found Jenny over there. I reckon you two deserve a bit o' peace."

He scooted over an' scooped Fetch up in his arms. The old man were light. Like the loss o' his spirit had taken all the weight from his bones.

Kain placed the corpse in the grave.

"Goodnight, my friend. May the God o' the Fields keep you growin'."

He bowed his head an' filled the grave in.

When he were done, he turned to the second body. This one, he were a bit more nervous about.

Andross DeGaya. His head were set atop his body, but there were no disguisin' that it were no longer attached. Kain wrapped it up in a shroud to keep the bits from seperatin'. The thought made his stomach hurt.

"DeGaya. The Watcher. The Ant. You were my hero, my enemy an' one o' the best men I ever met." Kain lowered his head. "Sorry about your hand." The sight of his blade though DeGaya's neck burned in his mind. A memory he could never forget.

A memory he should never forget.

He placed DeGaya in his grave an' covered him up, with a little sweat an' swearin'. Kain scattered a couple o' seeds over the dirt for good measure. Best way to show respect, he reckoned.

The last grave, he left empty. The hilt o' a knife stood up as a headstone. Kain turned to the sky an' smiled.

It were blue.

He turned his back on the graves, on Arx, an' started to limp off into the grasslands. It hurt, but he didn't care.

After all, what were a bit o' pain?

The days passed slowly, but he didn't stop for nothin'. His limpin' steps just brought him closer'n closer until eventually, he made it.

He knocked on the cottage door. Ma opened it.

"Kain. My son..." Her voice were thick an' wet. She reached out an' touched his face, then dragged him into a hug so tight it felt like it were gonna break 'im.

"Easy Ma. Bugger it, I'm a cripple remember," he pushed her gently away an' held on to her arms.

"Who taught you to swear like that? I knew the city would be a bad influence on you." The tears were flowin' free now. Ma lifted her apron to dab at her eyes.

Sommat crashed behind him. Kain turned.

Abi stood, jaw open enough to catch a bird with her teeth. His old fishin' stool were in splinters at her feet.

"This isn't another dream, is it?" Her voice was so quiet. So worried.

Kain opened his arms. "It's me, Abi. For real an' for true."

Her arms wrapped around him an' together, they slammed into the ground. Kain's eyes watered with the pain, but he didn't care. He grabbed Abi close to his chest an' laughed with her.

Eventually, she helped him to his feet.

"I'm so glad you are home," she said.

"Me too," Kain said around a lump in his throat. "I know about Pa. What he did. I... I won't never forget him."

"What the are you talkin' on lad?"

Pa poked his head around the door. His gruff voice were tight.

"But... the Kink, the knife..." Kain rubbed his eyes. No. This couldn't be. Was his mind still...?

Shame creased Pa's face. "I don't know how you know about that. It's true, I did fall down a... bad path. But I realised sommat, sat there."

"What?" Kain whispered.

Pa grabbed his shoulders. "I realised that I trusted you more'n misself. I knew you would come back to me, son. Come back so I could tell you... how proud I've always been."

That were it, naturally. The world disappeared into tears an' Kain fell into his Father's arms.

He were finally home.

Dawnsmoke and the Influence of Character Tropes on
the Construction of Fantasy Fiction: An Exegesis

Introduction

Fantasy literature, as with most genre fiction, will always face the accusation that it is formulaic.

The logic behind this charge is understandable. After all, the prospective reader selects a fantasy novel with a good expectation of what to expect and a too-sharp deviation from that expectation will leave the reader unsatisfied. Therefore, it is important to look deeper in order to unearth the allure of genre fiction.

Thomas J. Roberts provides a useful analogy to explain this attraction to genre:

The writers are like the jazz musicians who give us a familiar melody at the opening of the piece so that we can understand the variations that follow. We do not listen for that melody. We listen for the variations.¹

These variations emerge when pre-existing tropes are re-examined through a fresh perspective. This study examines the evidence of these variations in popular fantasy.

My appreciation for fantasy has been shaped by the manner in which Joe Abercrombie's *The First Law* continuity, Robin Hobb's *The Farseer Trilogy* and *The Liveship Traders Trilogy*, George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and Brandon Sanderson's *Stormlight Archive* utilise and subvert the tropes typical of the fantasy genre. In writing *Dawnsmoke*, a contemporary fantasy novel, I studied these and other fantasy works in order to gain working understanding of the tropes present in these popular strands of the fantasy genre. Awareness of these recurrent themes would then aid the evolution of *Dawnsmoke*.

Fantasy is difficult to define. Rosemary Jackson offers the following:

¹ T. J. Roberts, *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 166.

There is no abstract entity called 'fantasy'; there is only a range of different works which have similar structural characteristics and which seem to be generated by similar unconscious desires.²

Jackson also posits that some of the allure of fantasy comes from this very resistance to definition.³ I begin by analysing the critical definitions of fantasy offered by Jackson and her contemporaries, Manlove, Irwin, Apter and Todorov. I contrast these definitions with those offered by a selection of modern authors, including Neil Gaiman, George R. R. Martin, Ursula LeGuin and Kazuo Ishiguro. This comparison leads to the formulation of my personal definition of fantasy, which provides a common heading that unifies *Dawnsmoke* with the works considered in this study.

Contemporary fantasy is often further defined by a fractured and overlapping set of sub-genres. I examine four sub-genres that have influenced *Dawnsmoke*: Epic Fantasy, Heroic Fantasy, Sword and Sorcery and Magic Realism. From these categories, I determine a scattered set of commonly seen character tropes, each of which influenced the inception of the principal protagonists in *Dawnsmoke*.

Ursula LeGuin suggests that: 'Straight fantasy, the modern descendant of folktale, fairy tale and myth... deals with archetypes, not with characters.'⁴ The debate between character-focus and plot-focus in genre novels is a hotly contested one. James Patrick Kelly writes: 'You'll find any number of published, award-winning writers who will "skimp" at times on characterisation while they dazzle us with the brilliance of their ideas.'⁵ Whereas, from a more literary perspective, David Lodge asserts that: 'Character is arguably the most important single

² R. Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 7-8.

³ *Ibid*, 1.

⁴ U. LeGuin, 'Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown' in S. Wood (ed), *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 106.

⁵ J. P. Kelly, 'You and Your Characters' in Dozois et al, *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 42.

component of the novel.’⁶ My intention in *Dawnsmoke* was to place character at the forefront and allow the story to develop through the creation of each character’s personality and desires. I did not seek to create a ‘character-focused’ novel, but instead to embrace, subvert or otherwise utilise specific character tropes to facilitate the construction of each narrative arc.

Each principal protagonist was conceived in relation to a set of character tropes and I examine the expectations that these recurrent themes elicit. Luke was formed principally through the trope of the Amnesiac Hero. I compare the manner in which this trope defines him in relation to Robin Hobb’s Fitzchivalry Farseer, in order to gauge the scope of a narrative arc that follows a protagonist with limited memories. Samantha faces thematic expectations born of her sex. I reflect on my use of the Tomboy trope, contrasted against Robin Hobb’s Althea Vestritt and Brandon Sanderson’s Vin. Kain emerged from the Farm Boy Hero trope and I examine the creation of his personality and provide a comparison to Robert Jordan’s Perrin Aybara.

Each trope carries a narrative expectation. To follow or subvert these expectations is the creative choice of the writer and each choice made forms a variation on a common theme. I compare Luke’s narrative arc with that of Joe Abercrombie’s Logen Ninefingers and detail my protagonist’s descent into the role of Anti-Hero. Samantha’s journey provides an inverse of the Damsel-in-Distress narrative, as well as a subversion of the expectations for female sexuality in fantasy fiction. I also discuss Kain’s evolution from wistful hero-in-waiting, to fledgling pacifist as he baulks at the expectations of a fantasy hero to kill, fight and otherwise maim.

⁶ D. Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Vintage, 2011), 66.

The impact of a character cannot be measured merely by the actions that they take and the words they say, but also by *how* they speak and relate to the world around them. I examine the impact of each protagonist's voice in *Dawnsmoke*, both dialect and idiolect. The construction of these perspectives works to demonstrate the logic of each character.

Finally, I examine realism in fantasy and the popularity of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. I look at how Martin creates a sense of unease throughout his novels with the ever-looming threat that any protagonist can die at a moments notice. I detail why I discard this philosophy in *Dawnsmoke*.

I end with a defence of the creative choices in *Dawnsmoke*, drawing on the conclusions made as a result of my examination of tropes and expectations found in popular fantasy. This leads to the resolution of Luke, Samantha and Kain's individual stories, which each provide my own personal variation on the fantasy genre.

A Fantastic Definition

There is no adequate definition for the word 'fantasy.'

This caveat serves to clarify that any definition of fantasy will be unsatisfactory. As E. F. Bleiler writes in his introduction to *The Checklist of Modern Fantastic Literature*: 'If anyone were to ask me what is meant by the term 'fantasy', I fear that I would have to admit my ignorance. ...[F]antasy may be almost all things to all men.'⁷

One reason for this struggle comes from linguistic inconsistency. W. R. Irwin notes that some, 'make "fantastic" a synonym for "untrue"; for some it means only "exotic," "implausible," or "deviant" or "escapist."' ⁸ Rosemary Jackson also comments that:

As a critical term, 'fantasy' has been applied rather indiscriminately to any literature which does not give priority to realistic representation: myths, legends, folk and fairy tales, utopian allegories, dream visions, surrealist texts, science fiction, horror stories, all presenting realms 'other' than the human.⁹

To navigate this linguistic struggle, I will first analyse the critical definitions of fantasy offered by Manlove, Irwin and Apter, whose work forms part of the wave of fantasy criticism that arose between 1970 – 1985.

Manlove suggests that fantasy is: 'A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal

⁷ Bleiler quoted in C. N Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 1.

⁸ W.R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Urbana; Chicago; London: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 5.

⁹ Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, 13-14.

characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms.’¹⁰

To unpack this, Manlove offers further explanation for the word ‘supernatural’ as ‘of another order of reality from that in which we exist and form our notions of possibility.’¹¹

The concept of the impossible exists at the heart of many definitions of the fantastic. It is the impossible that forms the spells of *Harry Potter*, the monsters and hobbits of *Lord of the Rings* and the Great A’Tuin, a space-faring turtle that carries the titular *Diskworld* in Terry Pratchett’s series. If all things were possible then the concept of ‘fantasy’ could not exist. Imagination and curious inquiry are irreducibly human and it is through the consideration of that which cannot be that fantasy is born.

This is not to say that fantasy does not draw from reality. George R. R. Martin refers to The Wars of the Roses as ‘probably the single biggest influence’ on *A Song of Ice and Fire*.¹² Tolkien drew influences from his experiences during World War 1.¹³ This serves to indicate that, for the fantasy writer, the real and the non-real exist like light and shadow. One is not possible without the other. If there is no engagement with the real, then there can be no speculation on the ‘un-real’ – the gaps between the lines only exist when one considers the relative certainty of the lines themselves.

S.C. Fredericks writes: ‘Indeed, typically the “impossible” worlds conceived by the Fantasist are based on conventional and outmoded forms of intellection,

¹⁰ Manlove, *Modern Fantasy*, 1.

¹¹ Manlove, *Modern Fantasy*, 3.

¹² Channel 4 News, *George R. R. Martin: Game of Thrones to have ‘a bittersweet ending’* [Video]. Available online: <https://youtu.be/HaFViB8mZ9I> [Accessed 20/04/2017]

¹³ S. Tolkien, ‘Tolkien’s grandson on how WW1 inspired The Lord of the Rings’ *BBC* (2017). Available online: <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20161223-tolkiens-grandson-on-how-ww1-inspired-the-lord-of-the-rings> [Accessed 12/04/2017].

like old theologies, myths and myth-like concepts... and recognizably outmoded philosophical systems, especially Idealistic ones.’¹⁴ This argument suggests that fantasy is formed, not from an ineffable impossibility, but rather from an amalgamation of ideas, stories and personal morality that combine in impossible ways.

For contrast, Robert Scholes writes that: ‘all fiction contributes to cognition... by providing us with models that reveal the nature of reality by their failure to coincide with it.’¹⁵ To combine this line of thought with the aforementioned argument from Fredericks is to reflect on the nature of where a writer might draw their impossible concepts. The impossible can be taken from reality, in order to reflect that experienced reality anew. It is through this utilisation of the impossible that fantasy can provide a viewpoint on the nature of the reality that so inspired it.

Impossibility in a vacuum does not create fantasy. Irwin offers a purpose for this impossible in his definition. He refers to fantasy as: ‘a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into “fact” itself.’¹⁶

This transformative aspect separates fantasy from abstract impossibilities. The word ‘goblin’ or ‘magic’ is not a fantasy. Whilst these words might draw an image of an impossibility it is not fantasy until it becomes *real* within the narrative, either through the characters, the reader, or both.

¹⁴ S. C. Fredericks, ‘Problems of Fantasy’, *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1. (1978), 40. Available online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239155> [Accessed 12/04/2017].

¹⁵ R. Scholes, *Structural Fabulation* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 7.

¹⁶ Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible*, 4.

T. E. Apter offers a method by which this impossible narrative can develop. She argues that fantasy is 'a story proceeding logically from a fantastic premise.'¹⁷ The internal logic of a fantasy narrative can differ greatly from the experienced logic of the 'real' world. However, by demonstrating a consistent system that provides context for this 'new' logic in terms the reader can identify with, the fantasy author can ensure that both the characters, and/or the reader, become cognisant of these elements of the supernatural.

Brandon Sanderson's novel *The Final Empire* demonstrates a clear point at which this shift in logic occurs. Protagonist Vin is encouraged by mage-and-mentor Kelsier to leap over a wall and, instead of plummeting to the dark street far below, to use magic and float between rooftops. Naturally, Vin's response is "'You're insane!'"¹⁸. This response is a logical one, both in the world of the reader and the 'secondary' world of Luthadel in *The Final Empire* – it is not rational in either plane to expect that leaping from the edge of a tall building will not result in injury.

Vin is a perspective character in *The Final Empire*, one that the reader is encouraged to empathise with. Thus, when she eventually conquers her fear and jumps, the reader also takes a plunge from the expected rationale into this new world of magic and impossibility. When Vin uses magic ('Allomancy') to keep herself safe, the shift is complete and both the character and reader have wilfully descended into a new plane of logic – the 'secondary' world.

However, this logic does remain congruous with the logic that the reader has experienced in the 'real' world. When magic is being explained to Vin, Kelsier states that "'Every action we take has consequences... I've found that in both Allomancy and life, the person who can best judge the consequences of their

¹⁷ T. E. Apter, *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 2.

¹⁸ B. Sanderson, *The Final Empire* (London: Gollancz, 2006), 145.

actions will be the most successful.”¹⁹ This applies to all of the uses of Allomancy in Sanderson’s novel. For example, metal can be pushed upon using magic, but that same weight will push back on the mage. Though the method of pushing is different, the result of the action is the same and Newton’s Third Law applies – for every force applied there is a reaction of equal and opposite force. This logic is consistent with the logic of the reader’s existence and this provides a logically sound perspective for the reader to experience the intricacies and conflicts that arise from this magical world.

Conflict arising from the impossible fits a further qualification of Irwin’s definition. He argues that: ‘No matter what is the central arbitrary nonreality that generates the fantasy-illusion, all elements of the narrative are determined by it.’²⁰ To return to *The Final Empire*, the magic system influences every aspect of the narrative. The antagonist uses magic to keep himself immortal, the economy is based on the sale and trade of metals that can be used for magical purposes and the protagonist and her companions all use magic to further the plot – it is woven inextricably through the fabric of the story and as such, the impossible remains at the heart of this fantasy.

Tzvetan Todorov offers a more thorough treatment of fantasy-as-the-impossible. His book *the Fantastic: A structural approach to a literary genre* is described by Rosemary Jackson as: ‘The most important and influential critical study of the fantasy of the post-Romantic period.’²¹ In this study, he argues that the fantastic requires the fulfilment of three conditions:

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may

¹⁹ Sanderson, *The Final Empire*, 144.

²⁰ Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible*, 10.

²¹ Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, 5.

also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work – in the case of naïve reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations.²²

Todorov also notes that these three conditions are not of equal importance, and that the: 'first and third... constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled.'²³

Todorov's definition follows a similar pattern to Manlove, Irwin and Apter. The first condition once more argues for the importance of the impossible and the supernatural, but there is a second layer of nuance present in Todorov's argument. He argues that the reader must 'hesitate' between a natural and supernatural explanation and refers to fantasy as a: 'more general category of the "ambiguous vision."²⁴ This ambiguity provides a slight deviation towards contemporary fantasy – in the aforementioned *The Final Empire*, the reader is under no illusions that the events that occur do so on the plane of impossibility and as such, it seems that Todorov might suggest that we do not classify this work as fantasy.

However, when this initial criterion is combined with Todorov's third criteria, it retains the clarity of previous examples. The reader is required to reject allegorical and poetic interpretations. Therefore, the reader is expected to take the word of the text, at least in a naïve reading, at face value. The elements of the fantastic do retain a degree, however small, of uncertainty. The magic of *The Final Empire* is generated by the mage or 'allomancer' ingesting metals and 'burning' them in order to access different powers. There is no *absolute* certainty that an evolution of human physiology could not result in certain magnetic charges being

²² T. Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, (Cleveland; London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), 33.

²³ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 33.

²⁴ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 33.

produced from the consumption of metal, which would lead to a seemingly 'magic' effect. However, as rational beings we are of course expected to imagine that such power belongs firmly in the realm of the supernatural and that Luthadel could not exist on Earth as we understand it.

To draw on the secondary criteria, that of the character experiencing the hesitation of the reader, is to complete *The Final Empire's* categorisation. As in the previous example, Vin shows the hesitation to accept the 'magic' as it clashes with her sense of the 'possible' within the world of the novel. Thus, hesitation is exemplified through the character and though it is a short hesitation, it connects the reader to this liminal space of real or un-real. Todorov's definition therefore categorises *The Final Empire* as fantasy.

It is also important to note that Todorov does not expect the reader to remain in this state of uncertainty indefinitely. He allows that, by the close of a novel, the reader will decide that the events they have vicariously experienced were either natural or supernatural and that the reader: 'thereby emerges from the fantastic.'²⁵ Therefore, no matter how swiftly the reader concludes that Allomancy is impossible, it does not preclude a fantasy categorisation.

Fantasy has evolved over the last 40 or so years and now encompasses a far larger range of modes and genres. As an evolving genre, fantasy has collected a wide set of characteristics that can be applied to literature that seeks to take on the fantasy genre tag. This evolution is offered by David Sander as a core part of the fantastic mode:

However, despite claims... for the fantastic's compelling and defining relationship with the "new" realistic novel, that is, despite a claim for an "originary" moment of modern fantastic literature in the eighteenth century,

²⁵ Todorov, *the Fantastic*, 41.

that century's various names for the genre – from fables to the Gothic to fairy to wonder tales to romance – emphasise its continuing instability as a form.²⁶

The instability of the fantastic form is a key part of the genre's evolution. The term 'fantasy' subsumes preceding, inspirational and subsequent genres. I now turn to contemporary sources to provide a modern definition of fantasy that is both a part of, and separate to, the threads of genre that relate to it.

Neil Gaiman offers a very literal definition for contemporary fantasy that focuses on the specific characteristics common to the genre. Gaiman writes that fantasy is a branch of fiction that '[deals] with magic, elves, quests for or to get rid of magical artefacts, not to mention witches, wizards and so forth.'²⁷

This idea of common characteristics relates back to the overarching theme of this thesis – tropes. These repeated themes provide a sense of stability when defining the fantastic. Should a wizard ask a young girl to go on a quest in order to find a special herb that just so happens to be the only way to heal her mother then the story would be fantasy. However, should a doctor ask a child to make the dangerous trek across New York to fetch a prescription of Epinephrine in order to save her mother, then that would perhaps be defined as a thriller or a drama.

Once again, the concept of the impossible is shown stark. If the *context* is not possible, then the narrative is termed a fantasy. This is perhaps where the 'and so forth' comes from at the end of Gaiman's definition. One cannot list all impossibilities, by the very nature of the word, and so Gaiman offers the more common impossibilities that derive from the evolution of fantasy – and this commonality of expected themes will be discussed later in this section.

²⁶ D. Sandner, *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader* (Connecticut; London: Praeger Publishers, 2004), p.9.

²⁷ N. Gaiman, 'Influences', *Neil Gaiman's Blog*. (2002). Available online: <http://www.neilgaiman.com/FAQs/Influences> [Accessed on 14/01/2017].

In opposition to this literal treatment of the genre, George R.R. Martin offers that:

The best fantasy is written in the language of dreams... Fantasy is silver and scarlet, indigo and azure, obsidian veined with gold and lapis lazuli. Reality is plywood and plastic, done up in mud brown and olive drab. Fantasy tastes of habaneros and honey, cinnamon and cloves, rare red meat and wines as sweet as summer. Reality is beans and tofu, and ashes at the end. Reality is the strip malls of Burbank, the smokestacks of Cleveland, a parking garage in Newark. Fantasy is the towers of Minas Tirith, the ancient stones of Gormenghast, the halls of Camelot. Fantasy flies on the wings of Icarus, reality on Southwest Airlines.²⁸

Martin's definition is an ode to the ineffable nature of fantasy, and yet the heart of his words is still the same – fantasy exists in opposition to reality. The difference being that for Martin, fantasy is *better* than reality. As he states at the end of the aforementioned passage: 'They can keep their heaven. When I die, I'd sooner go to middle Earth.'²⁹

The focus here is on the more experiential side of fantasy. Martin references tastes and sharp colours and suggests that fantasy is designed to generate wonder, awe and wistfulness in order to provide a more visceral experience. Fantasy is designed to speak to 'the child who dreamt that one day he would hunt the forests of the night.'³⁰

Martin's definition also relies on the use of characteristics. He refers to the towers of Minas Tirith and the halls of Camelot. These examples, taken from *The Lord of the Rings* and Arthurian legend, both serve to offer a common ground for fantasy novels to draw from. The use of such expected tropes *is* what makes a novel a fantasy.

²⁸ G. R. R. Martin, 'On Fantasy', *George R. R. Martin's Blog*. (2017). Available online: <http://www.georgerrmartin.com/about-george/on-writing-essays/on-fantasy-by-george-r-r-martin/> [Accessed on 14/01/2017].

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Martin, *On Fantasy*.

This opinion is not a universal one. Ursula LeGuin writes that these surface elements of fantasy, such as ogres, dragons and knights, do not make a novel a literary fantasy. She defines literary fantasy as: ‘the result of a vivid, powerful, coherent imagination drawing plausible impossibilities together into a vivid, powerful and coherent story.’³¹ This split in definitions falls on the same fault lines of those examined earlier – is a story fantasy because of the characteristics it displays, or because it is an impossibility? It is also important to note LeGuin’s use of the word ‘plausible,’ which links her definition with the ‘logic of the other’ discussed previously.

LeGuin’s definition arose in response to the publication of an interview with Kazuo Ishiguro on the topic of his novel *The Buried Giant*. In this interview, Ishiguro asks if his readers will: ‘follow me into this? Will they understand what I am trying to do, or will they be prejudiced against the surface elements?’³² LeGuin responds by accusing Ishiguro of a form of literary snobbery, whereby: ‘It appears that the author takes the word [fantasy] for an insult.’³³ LeGuin’s argument provides a degree of consistency with her claims that fantasy is often resigned to the ‘Literary Ghetto’.³⁴

³¹ U. LeGuin, ‘Are they going to say this is fantasy?’, *Book View Café* (2015). Available online: <http://bookviewcafe.com/blog/2015/03/02/are-they-going-to-say-this-is-fantasy/> [Accessed on 14/01/2017].

³² Ishiguro quoted in A. Alter, ‘For Kazuo Ishiguro, ‘The Buried Giant’ is a Departure’, *The New York Times* (2015). Available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/books/for-kazuo-ishiguro-the-buried-giant-is-a-departure.html?_r=0 [Accessed on 14/01/2017].

³³ LeGuin, *Are they going to say this is fantasy?*

³⁴ LeGuin quoted in R. Rivers, ‘LeGuin on Fantasy as a Literary Ghetto’, *R4SFF* (2015). Available online: <http://r4sff.blogspot.co.uk/2015/11/le-guin-on-fantasy-as-literary-ghetto.html> [Accessed on 14/01/2017].

However, in an article published in *The Guardian*, Ishiguro denies this claim, stating that he is: 'on the side of the pixies and the dragons.'³⁵ Instead of a rejection of fantasy, Ishiguro argues that the boundaries between different genres of fiction are breaking down and that instead of attempting to unify a fantasy genre, all the characteristics should be open to any author who chooses to use them, without needing to term the book as fantasy.³⁶

Other authors have expressed similar sentiments. Terry Pratchett argues that:

Pigeonholing [a story] according to the clothes the people happen to wearing, or saying it must be fantasy because it's got mountains and forests in it, is just following the booksellers and publishers. Therefore no one should set out thinking, "I'm going to write a fantasy novel." They should say, "I'm going to write a novel, and in the course of it I will make use of certain aspects of fantasy."³⁷

This feeds into a similar argument that Ishiguro makes for *The Buried Giant*. He notes that, in creating this novel, he took certain fantasy elements and utilised them only to better tell his story, rather than to craft a delineated fantasy novel. The effect of this is to allow the story to develop naturally, with an internal logic and depth of understanding:

So I'm a little bit naïve, maybe, about what the finished thing will look like in terms of genre. It's sort of like I've wandered into people's countries without knowing where I've landed. And after I've been there for quite some time, someone says 'you realize you're in Poland now.' And I say, 'Oh really? I just followed this trail of stuff I needed.'³⁸

³⁵ Ishiguro quoted in S. Cain, 'Writers' Indignation: Kazuo Ishiguro rejects claims of genre snobbery', *The Guardian* (2015). Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/08/kazuo-ishiguro-rebuffs-genre-snobbery> [Accessed on 14/01/2017].

³⁶ Ishiguro quoted in Cain, *Writers' Indignation*.

³⁷ Terry Pratchett, 'Leaves the Furniture Alone' in S. Nicholls, (ed.) *Wordsmiths of Wonder* (London: Orbit, 1993), 343.

³⁸ Ishiguro quoted in E. Chang, 'A Language that Conceals: an interview with Kazuo Ishiguro, author of *The Buried Giant*, *Electric Literature* (2015). Available online:

This argument to ignore the concept of genre and instead just ‘take as needed’ is a seductive one as it speaks to the ineffable side of fantasy – this section has heretofore examined the stringent difficulties in defining fantasy. Would it not be simpler to do away with the necessity of definition?

However, there is a middle ground between LeGuin and Ishiguro that placates both sides of this argument and allows a universal access to fantasy characteristics, as well a clarity and pride for those who don the fantasy genre tag. This middle ground is expressed through a twin definition, which draws on all the sources mentioned thus far.

The first definition is the looser of the two. For a work to be considered ‘a’ fantasy, it must draw from impossible sources. For example, dreams are a fantasy as they provide a landscape of impossibility. Dragons are a fantasy, so too ogres and pixies and as such, Ishiguro’s utilisation of these concepts can provide a fantasy glamour for his work, without requiring the acceptance of the hard ‘fantasy’ genre tag.

The fantasy *genre* requires a more stringent definition. I submit that fantasy is: *a genre that utilises the concept of the impossible through an observable tradition of setting, story or any other characteristic, in order to craft a prism through which the reader can experience their reality in new, strange or unusual ways.*

The concept of the impossible. This phrase covers all things beyond the plane of reality. It is a central part of all definitions that have previously been offered. *Lord of the Rings* shares no connection to the real world; we cannot travel to Middle Earth. Neither can we obtain a wand and begin casting spells a-la *Harry*

Potter. In order to define fantasy, we must accept that the events as written are not possible. As Manlove suggests: 'The science-fiction writer throws a rope of the conceivable (how remotely so does not matter) from our world to his: the fantasy writer does not.'³⁹

An observable tradition of setting, story, or any other characteristic. This refers to the tropes of fantasy literature. I reject the word 'recognisable' as it reduces the independence of the fantasy writer's creation, and in many cases fantasy arises from a rejection or subversion of these accepted tropes. However, these observable characteristics provide a unity for the genre and allow fantasy stories to engage with the expectation that this genre categorisation provokes.

A prism. This word is used to encapsulate the transformative aspect of fantasy. Fantasy does not reflect reality as we experience it, it refracts and alters and changes it. Yes, the reader may be able to see the source but it is permanently transformed into the fantastic and the wondrous.

Finally *a reader can experience their reality in new, strange or unusual ways.* This is key to the contemporary evolution of fantasy. It can be wish-fulfilment and escapism, but not *mere* escapism. The reading of a fantasy novel allows the reader a new experience. A fresh perspective on real-life experiences or expectations, drawn from a non-real, fantasy premise.

From this definition, I now turn to examine the fantasy influences that have helped to shape *Dawnsmoke*.

³⁹ Manlove, *Modern Fantasy*, 7.

The Tropes of Categorisation

It is Tzvetan Todorov who asks: 'are we entitled to discuss a genre without having studied (or at least read) all the works which constitute it?'⁴⁰ He pictures the graduate student who attempts to read multiple volumes a day and despairs over the rate at which new volumes are written in his/her attempt to consume an entire genre.

A canon of fantasy work is not a feasible study. Even to present a history of fantasy is to struggle with a point of origin. Chronological lines may be followed but any 'genesis moment' will come with a sense of arbitrary choice. One could choose to start with *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and by doing so begin with one of the earliest sources of epic poetry. To garner a more specific 'fantasy' focus, a study might begin with George MacDonald's *Phantastes* and William Morris' *The Well at the World's End*, for a source on the first 'fantasies' and complete fantastic worlds. Equally, a study of modern fantasy might begin with Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. As the first globe-spanning fantasy its influence on the genre cannot be denied.

History is rarely concerned with the origin of things, but with the evolution of them. As such, I have selected four sub-genres as avatars for my study of the modern fantasy tradition. The choice of four was made in order to provide a wide span of concepts that have influenced the evolution of *Dawnsmoke*, without the dilution of ideas that a large selection would ensure.

I begin with Epic Fantasy. Epic Fantasy is perhaps the most popular sub-genre of fantasy literature at the time of writing. It can claim luminaries such as

⁴⁰ Todorov, *the Fantastic*, 3.

Tolkien, Robert Jordan and George R. R. Martin and represents much of the serialised fantasy that exists today.

Heroic Fantasy provides much of the joy and child-like wonder that fantasy is often synonymous with and I examine its status as such an 'Alpha' sub-genre. In opposition to Heroic Fantasy, I also look at Sword and Sorcery in order to provide a counterpoint. Sword and Sorcery is a more visceral sub-genre, one which is concerned with pain and suffering and violent acts of bravery.

The fourth sub-genre I examine is Magic Realism. This sub-genre was chosen as an outlier; a more literary genre that can provide context and contrast to the sub-genres that draw more thoroughly from the pool of commercial fantasy expectations.

Finally, I engage in a brief discussion on Young Adult Fiction and provide an example as to how *Dawnsmoke* attempts to straddle both Young Adult and Adult fiction simultaneously.

The purpose of this section is to deconstruct these selected sub-genres into the tropes that can be found within. These tropes would then provide inspiration for how the characters in *Dawnsmoke* evolved.

Epic Fantasy

Derek Buker defines Epic Fantasy as: 'serial fantasy [that] makes up most of the fantasy that is written today.'⁴¹ This definition also comes with a range of claimed characteristics. He notes that Epic Fantasy must have a low-limit of a trilogy of novels, a time span of many years, and a sense that these novels barely scratch the surface of the world that they inhabit.⁴²

This definition provides context for the popularity of Epic Fantasy. For the reader, these novels are not restricted to the act of containing a single narrative. Instead, they become an investment of time and a constant companion. Readers are encouraged to allow the imagined world to develop inside their mind and there is always more information to draw on as the series progresses.

Publishers too have reason to champion Epic Fantasy. It is financially astute and allows a degree of certainty over expected units sold – at around 70% reader retention for each sequel novel produced.⁴³ Beyond the financial incentives, the average fantasy chapter tends towards the longer end of the spectrum. For example, Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* trilogy has an average of 5,460 words per 39 chapters whereas Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* averages at 7,553 words per 62 chapters.⁴⁴ The recommended length for a fantasy novel is 125,000 words per

⁴¹ D. Buker, *The Science Fiction and Fantasy Readers' Advisory: The Librarian's Guide to Cyborgs, Aliens and Sorcerers* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2002), 118.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ I. Irvine, 'The Truth About Publishing', *Ian Irvine's Blog* (2005). Available online: <http://www.ian-irvine.com/on-writing/the-truth-about-publishing/> [Accessed on 12/04/2017].

⁴⁴ J. Smith, 'Analyzing chapter lengths in fantasy fiction', *Creativity Hacker* (2013). Available online: <http://creativityhacker.ca/2013/07/18/analyzing-chapter-lengths-in-fantasy-fiction/> [Accessed on 12/04/2017].

book.⁴⁵ With such a heavy number of words-per-chapter, it is not surprising then that fantasy writers turn to a more serial format in order to communicate their work.

Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* is Epic Fantasy of precisely epic proportions. The fourteen book series is written with 3,304,000 words.⁴⁶ To admit a writer's preference, this series was a constant part of my formative years and as such, I cannot adequately express its impact. It is, therefore, no surprise that *Dawnsmoke* began as a projected nine-book series that would span an imagined globe and tell the story of an epic battle between man and demon. Later developments refined this nine-book plot down to a more common trilogy that detailed the journey of a protagonist from orphan to rebel to king.

However, as *Dawnsmoke* grew, issues began to develop from my assumption of this serialised framework. Plot lines were truncated. I could not have a character discover vital information, or change their perspective, or grow in any meaningful way, as I had to 'hold something back' for the next instalment – the biggest challenge was always yet to come.

This desire for serialisation destroyed my fledgling narrative. Instead of a solid, compact story, cliché emerged in moments of climax in order to mask the 'true' narrative that was intended to emerge from later books; so desperate was my desire to over-extend.

It was with this realisation that I rejected Epic Fantasy and took the creative decision to compress *Dawnsmoke* into a single volume. This was not a step taken

⁴⁵ C. Sambuchino, 'Word Count for Novels and Children's Books: The Definitive Post', *Writer's Digest* (2012). Available online: <http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/guide-to-literary-agents/word-count-for-novels-and-childrens-books-the-definitive-post> [Accessed on 12/04/2017].

⁴⁶ Abalieno, 'Wordcount of popular (and hefty) epics', *The Cesspit* (2009). Available online: <http://cesspit.net/drupal/node/1869/> [Accessed 12/04/2017].

lightly. I have already noted the financial and practical reasons for the popularity of Epic Fantasy, but it also functions as a source of creative comfort. All the work that goes into creating a world, and the characters, is not 'spent' in a single volume, and there is a sense of contentment in continuation when there is always another project to move on to.

However, at its core, *Dawnsmoke* is about isolationism and singularity. In order to remain faithful to the ideology that I explored within the novel, I had to reject the wider span of Epic Fantasy and instead, focus on an epicentre of action, a single city, a smaller cast and a downsized world, to allow *Dawnsmoke* to tell its story in the best way possible.

Kain demonstrates this perspective. When stood atop a hill and looking over at the city of Arx, he refers to it as: 'a wide-mouth bass what swallowed the land.' (p.49) Arx is all and what lies beyond is neither considered nor important in the scope of *Dawnsmoke's* narrative.

That is not to say that *Dawnsmoke* rejects all of Epic Fantasy convention. To return to Buker, a key characteristic he notes is that Epic Fantasy allows the world to breathe behind the text.⁴⁷ There is a sense that so much more is happening, outside of the narrative that the reader experiences. Throughout *Dawnsmoke*, I combined this sense of a living, breathing world, with advice set forth by Wolfgang Iser, that: 'no author worth his salt will attempt to set the 'whole' picture before his reader's eyes. If he does, he will very quickly lose his reader.'⁴⁸

This is not a veiled attack on those authors who show us the minute details of their protagonists, but rather an exhortation to allow the world of a fiction to exist

⁴⁷ Buker, *The Science Fiction and Fantasy Readers' Advisory*, 118.

⁴⁸ W. Iser, *The Implied Reader – Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 282.

as a world. No matter the details an author provides, it is impossible to detail *all* that is happening or else we arrive at an infinite-page novel, which details the daily activities of every character, from protagonist to background, in excruciating detail.

Epic Fantasy novels show the edge of their worlds through size and variation. Instead of using the length to detail every breath in a single city, Epic Fantasy writers show an overview of an entire planet or universe of characters. Whilst the reader is encouraged to follow a set number of protagonists, they are shown just enough to imagine the lives that exist in tandem to the main narrative and to build a world around that narrative.

Sanderson's *Stormlight Archive* demonstrates this well. These novels include a limited number of primary protagonists that span multiple chapters and whose actions propel the narrative. However, Sanderson also includes multiple 'Interludes'. These sections provide 'slice of life' moments from other characters, which often only appear in a single chapter. This provides colour and context for the rest of his created world that the reader is not being shown.

For example, in *Words of Radiance*, the reader follows the story of Shalan as one of the principal protagonists. The second 'Interlude' in this book features instead her brother, Nan Balat. This section provides the breath of the world: 'the sitting green, a place where cultivated grass was grown and kept free of vines.'⁴⁹ Beyond these sensory details, this interlude also gives context and a sense of danger to the primary narrative:

"Balat!" a voice cried. Wikim appeared on the porch. The younger man was past his recent bout of melancholy it appeared.
"What?" Balat said, standing.

⁴⁹ B. Sanderson, *The Way of Kings*, (London: Gollancz, 2010), p.173.

Wikim rushed down the steps, hurrying up to him, vines – then grass-pulling back before him. “We have a problem.”⁵⁰

This symbiotic relationship allows *Words of Radiance* to evolve as a fictional world and thereby garner a closer relationship with the mind of the reader.

Dawnsmoke seeks to achieve this on a smaller scale. The city of Arx was designed to be larger than Luke, Samantha and Kain’s perception of it and therefore have a life of its own. Public opinion and the perception of events have been designed to show a truthful reflection of matters that the protagonists would rationalise or otherwise distort through their perspective.

An example of this is shown as Luke celebrates a violent victory over the Walkers that he sees as the oppressors of Austellus. He asks Adira why more people are not joining their cause, and she responds that: “Austellus won’t follow us for petty revenge. The cost is too high.” (p.132) This is designed to show the outer-workings of the story, to separate this character-led narrative from the minds of the protagonists and provide the reader with a more in-depth world to enjoy.

Kain also provides space for the reader to alter their perception of Luke’s claims of victory. When listening to his hero Andross DeGaya discuss the problems in Austellus with some of the workers by the Scaffold, Kain overhears:

“Fuck you Sky Lord!” One bloke from the crowd shouted. “And fuck the Saviour and all. How about you two fight it out amongst yourselves and leave us out of it? We don’t wanna fight. We wanna work!” (p.147)

This conversation directly contradicts Luke’s assumption of deference from the Austelli populace and allows the reader the space to see Luke as an unreliable narrator – an aspect of his character which worsens as the book progresses.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*,174.

A further aspect of Epic worldbuilding offered by Brandon Sanderson is his three 'Laws of Magic', which exist as the following:

Number 1: 'An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL to how well the reader understands said magic.'⁵¹

Number 2: 'Limitations > Power.'⁵²

Number 3: 'Expand what you already have before you add something new.'⁵³

Rule Number 1, on the surface, seems obvious and can be applied to any number of skills that an author wishes to portray. For example, a reader cannot experience the thrill of a high-level sporting contest without knowing the rules as well as the emotional and physical cost of the sport. However, in the case of magic, the counter-argument is that magic, for so many, has the requirement that it generates wonder. How can such wonder exist, if the reader is inundated with the rules and regulations for each bit of sorcery that they experience?

Sanderson's defence of this rule is to argue that, without it, we are left with magic operating as a Deus Ex Machina. It exists only to solve issues and can do so in any way it chooses, thereby losing a sense of tension and personal victory for the characters. They did not solve their problems – magic did.

However, whilst a Deus Ex Machina moment of magic can serve to harm a novel's credibility, it can be argued that excessive magical detail can distort a novel. In the appendix to *The Hero of Ages*, the reader is shown a table of 14

⁵¹ B. Sanderson, 'Sanderson's First Law', *Brandon Sanderson's Blog* (2007). Available online: <https://brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-first-law/> [Accessed on 12/04/2017].

⁵² B. Sanderson, 'Sanderson's Second Law', *Brandon Sanderson's Blog* (2012). Available online: <https://brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-second-law/> [Accessed on 12/04/2017].

⁵³ B. Sanderson, 'Sanderson's Third Law of Magic', *Brandon Sanderson's Blog* (2013). Available online: <https://brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-third-law-of-magic/> [Accessed on 12/04/2017].

different metals, with three distinct magical effects each can have, for a total of 42 different magical permutations. This level of detail for the system of magic introduced by Sanderson is impressive, but it also necessitates a shift in focus. In order for the reader to truly grasp the separate magics that are pivotal to the story, the narrative itself must expend a great deal of effort to communicate the power of these magics.⁵⁴

Though the Memory Magic in *Dawnsmoke* is also linked with metal, I approached the supernatural elements of magic in a different manner. I decided on one ultimate premise: certain people (Mindbreakers) can cut memories from a subject's mind. This was designated as the only 'problem-solving' magic in the novel. Whilst other magical powers are used, they are instead akin to a character being proficient with a blade or other method of causing harm – the smoke and fire magics exist as a threat to be overcome, not a solution to a pre-existing problem.

Sanderson's second rule is crucial to the magic of *Dawnsmoke*. To explain this argument, Sanderson uses the example of superman:

If I were to ask you about Superman's magic, you'd probably talk about his ability to fly, his super strength, the lasers he can shoot from his eyes. You may go from there to his invincibility... [h]owever, is this what makes Superman interesting?

I'd put forth that it is not. There are lots of people... who can fly and who are invincible... What makes Superman interesting, then? Two things: his code of ethics and his weakness to kryptonite.⁵⁵

In a similar fashion, Luke's character arc is also heavily influenced by what he can and cannot achieve from the memory magic featured in *Dawnsmoke*. This desire to test the limitations of this magic is what drives the character towards his climax and ultimate end in the novel.

⁵⁴ B. Sanderson, *The Hero of Ages*, (London: Gollancz, 2008), 727.

⁵⁵ Sanderson, *Sanderson's Second Law*.

Finally, Sanderson's Third Law can be summarised as: bigger is not always better. Magic does not need to grow beyond the means of the novel in order to be interesting – it can instead be formed of a few sharply considered powers that work within the fabric of the story being told. Memory magic certainly fits this ideal. In order to provide space for the story to exist alongside the magic, *Dawnsmoke* utilises a very select number of powers in order to provide obstacles, heighten the stakes of the narrative and deepen the impact of the overall arc.

Sanderson himself admits that his 'Laws' are not designed as: 'rules that everyone must follow in developing their magic systems. Instead, these are observations about what have made my own magic systems better.'⁵⁶ The guiding principles behind these 'Laws' were perhaps more useful than the 'Laws' themselves. *Dawnsmoke* draws on Sanderson's principles without being confined by them.

In the same way, whilst Epic Fantasy does not define *Dawnsmoke*, the world of Arx draws deeply from the traditions enshrined within. Epic Fantasy provides space for the narrative world to take on a life beyond the main characters, to bubble, unnoticed, in the back of the reader's mind. This allows a more thorough suspension of disbelief and commitment to the world of the narrative and it is that level of engagement that *Dawnsmoke* seeks to achieve.

⁵⁶ Sanderson, *Sanderson's Third Law of Magic*.

Heroic Fantasy

Heroic Fantasy is widely seen as one of the first fantasy sub-genres to receive a true attempt at a conclusive definition. A good summation of this definition comes from John Flynn, who defines Heroic Fantasy as:

A subgenre of fantastic literature, which chronicles the tales of heroes and their conquests in imaginary lands. Heroic Fantasy emphasises the conflict between good and evil, and often casts a reluctant protagonist (human or hobbit) in the role of champion. Though he may not always be saintly, the hero's strength, wit and resourcefulness help him triumph over evil forces... Heroic fantasy is as old as the first stories told (and written down) about heroes and their legendary deeds.⁵⁷

This definition offers an insight into the level of overlap between sub-genres.

Flynn's use of 'hobbit' clearly demarcates *Lord of the Rings* as Heroic Fantasy.

However, this does not serve to remove the Epic Fantasy connotation from this series. Instead, any novel can claim characteristics of any number of sub-genres.

To examine the details of Flynn's definition is to examine the sense of the ancient that he requires from a Heroic Fantasy. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is perhaps the most ancient source available that has provided inspiration for fantasy and this epic poem subscribes to Flynn's expectations:

It tells of one man's heroic struggle against death – first for immortal renown through glorious deeds, then for eternal life itself; of his despair when confronted with inevitable failure, and of his eventual realisation that the only immortality he may expect is the enduring name afforded by leaving behind some lasting achievement.⁵⁸

Death is the evil force, and an exotic background is provided by Úruk, the city-state that Gilgamesh rules as king at the start of the epic. George provides further

⁵⁷ John Flynn, quoted in J. Parache *Howardiana #1* (Robert-E-Howard: Electronic Amateur Press Association, 2001) 4.

⁵⁸ A. George (trans.) *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), i.

evidence of parallels between *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Heroic Fantasy as he notes that:

The fear of death may be one of the epic's principal themes but the poem deals with so much more. As a story of one man's 'path to wisdom', of how he is formed by his successes and failures, it offers many profound insights into the human condition, into life and death and the truths that touch us all.⁵⁹

The triumph of good over evil and the story of gaining wisdom fits with Flynn's understanding of Heroic Fantasy and allows a prospective reader of this sub-genre to appreciate the legacy that any new story might draw from. Heroic Fantasy is as ancient and pure as children pretending that the sticks they play with are swords.

This concept of play, drawn from Heroic Fantasy, is not an entirely well received one and can lead to the claim that fantasy exists as mere wish-fulfilment. The Heroic Fantasy framework provides further strength to this argument, as it allows space for good to defeat evil and tells the stories of heroes and their legendary deeds.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with wish-fulfilment and escapism. Scott Lynch, a best-selling fantasy author, offers a particularly vehement defence of one of his characters fulfilling this role in *Red Seas Under Red Skies*, stating: 'Yeah, Zamira Drakasha, middle-aged pirate mother of two, is a wish-fulfilment fantasy... and you know what? I fucking embrace it. Why *shouldn't* middle-aged mothers get a wish-fulfilment character?'⁶⁰

However, it is that word 'mere' that serves as a sneering dismissal of this avenue of popular culture. The dismissal of something that does not represent reality, but instead tries to draw the reader away from it. As John Fisk writes:

⁵⁹ George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, i.

⁶⁰ S. Lynch, 'Touched By A Crazy Person', *Scott Lynch's Blog* (2005). Available online: <http://scott-lynch.livejournal.com/159686.html> [Accessed on 01/06/2017].

[D]ismissing escapism as 'mere fantasy' avoids the vital question of *what* is escaped from, *why* escape is necessary, and *what* is escaped to. Asking these questions gives escapism or fantasy as strong a sociopolitical dimension as representation, and begins to erode the difference between the two.⁶¹

In response to claims of superiority, the fantasy genre is peopled with authors such as Terry Goodkind, who is: 'not interested in being critically reviewed, and I don't care if I win any awards. What I want is every man, woman and child in the country to buy my books, read them and love them'⁶² There is something to be said for the willingness of an author to dismiss some inherent value of their work and focus instead on those it can communicate with. However, it is also important that the value of wish-fulfilment is not ignored, and neither is it used to drown entire sections of literature by association.

From this escapist principle, it is easy to render Heroic Fantasy down to the very basis of the sub-genre – that it portrays a hero. This assumption of heroism is strong and as such, it allows a writer the freedom to craft an unlikable protagonist safe in the knowledge that the reader will attempt to term them as 'hero' until proven otherwise. This allows a writer the freedom to twist these expectations and gives space for the reader to assume a connection with any character, regardless of their morality or role in the story. In this sense, *Dawns smoke* draws on the ancient works of Heroic Fantasy for an expectation of heroism that Luke delights in subverting.

Modern fiction can become a welter of misery. In a *Guardian* article, written in 2013, writer and editor Richard Lea notes: 'I'm hard pressed to think of anything

⁶¹ J. Fisk, 'The Popular Economy' in J. Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, a reader* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 3rd edition, 2006), 544.

⁶² T. Brooks, 'Majors in Myth', in Nicholls, *Wordsmiths of Wonder*, 303.

I've read recently with a straightforward happy ending.'⁶³ The innocence of a happy ending is reflected in the innocence of Heroic Fantasy. To resolve a Heroic Fantasy narrative is to provide an ending that uplifts and concludes in a satisfactory manner. It was Tolkien who coined the term 'eucatastrophe' – 'a sudden and favourable resolution of events in a story; a happy ending.'⁶⁴

Dawnsmoke has a happy ending. Whilst I will examine the details of its resolution in a later section, in simple terms the 'bad guy' is defeated and the city is saved. This ending is not wholly 'good,' there are shades of grey in every achievement that is counted at the close of *Dawnsmoke*. However, the influence of Heroic Fantasy on *Dawnsmoke* is to show the necessity for positivity in fiction. Kafka once wrote that: 'the task of accomplishing the negative remains imposed upon us [the author]; the positive is already given.'⁶⁵ In the modern world, with easy access to misery and global-ills with the touch of a Smartphone button, there can perhaps be a shade too much negativity already. There is no shame in offering the comfortable, joyous resolution that Heroic Fantasy champions.

⁶³ R. Lea, 'Literary fiction has a problem with happy endings', *The Guardian*, (2013). Available online:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/dec/06/literary-fiction-happy-endings> [Accessed on 12/04/2017]

⁶⁴ Tolkien quoted in H. Carpenter & C. Tolkien (eds.) *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2014), 100.

⁶⁵ Kafka quoted in S. D. Dowden, *Kafka's Castle and Critical Imagination*, (Columbia: Camden House, 1995), 64.

Sword and Sorcery

Sword and Sorcery provides a counterpoint of morality to Heroic Fantasy. To allow for the inevitable oppositions, I return to Flynn who defines Sword and Sorcery as:

[A] sub-genre of fantasy which deals with the swashbuckling exploits of violent, amoral swordsmen and their (often) bloody confrontations with agents of evil in imaginary lands... Sword-and-Sorcery focuses on the darker, more sinister and often brutal nature of that struggle... The protagonist... can also be savage, barbaric and brutally ambitious to the point where he often negates his goodness... While he doesn't necessarily deserve to triumph over these [evil] forces, the hero's physical courage and tenacity nonetheless make the victory possible.⁶⁶

Sword and Sorcery is the sub-genre of *Conan the Barbarian*. It puts the strongest, most dedicated characters to the fore and asks that the reader accept their physical prowess as superior to those who surround them. As such, the moral high ground is often as muddled at the battlefields that these stories take place on, and those with ruthless, violent tendencies tend to come out on top.

This concept of a clouded morality is demonstrated throughout *Dawnsmoke*. Luke, as the primary protagonist, demonstrates his ruthlessness through actions taken from the very first Chapter. He murders those who put their lives in his hand in order to progress his own personal sense of the 'greater good.' This violent pragmatism becomes a defining characteristic for Luke and his character warps from revulsion at the necessity for violence, to a desperate hunger to burn everything to ashes by the book's close.

However, as has been discussed in relation to Heroic Fantasy, *Dawnsmoke* was intended from its inception to have a happy ending. As such, the 'might is right' philosophy of Sword and Sorcery became incompatible. Whilst Luke displays the gory determinism of a Sword and Sorcery protagonist, both Samantha and Kain

⁶⁶ Flynn, quoted in Parahce, *Howardania* #1, 4.

reject this philosophy and this conflict fuels much of the conclusion to *Dawnsmoke's* narrative.

If Luke represents the vicious certainty of Sword and Sorcery, then Kain exists as a complete opposition to these ideals. He represents the simple, and the human elements of a protagonist. He begins the novel in constant pain, due to his physical condition. Not only is he incapable of violence, but he understands the cost that physical pain can have on a person. As such, even when he is 'cured' by Dirk, he is still unable to kill, even to save his own life. This rejection of both gore and violence provides a counterpoint to Sword and Sorcery and the innocent nature of Kain's character works in opposition to the darker elements of *Dawnsmoke*.

Luke is stronger than Kain. Not just physically, but through the callous strength of those who do not care who they hurt. Not only that, but he is also imbued with magic and able to force his body beyond the realms of human physiology. However, through his survival, Kain forces the narrative of *Dawnsmoke* to expand beyond a modern pastiche of misery and into a more nuanced understanding of the brighter side of the human condition.

That is not to say that *Dawnsmoke* does not cannibalise certain aspects of Sword and Sorcery. At its core, *Dawnsmoke* is a novel concerned with shadows. From the constant smog that darkens the air, to the blood and suffering that laces the narrative, *Dawnsmoke* is a novel about rebellion and regret. However, much as Kain subverts Luke's status as Lord of Misery, so too did I seek to subvert the

concept that a narrative for rebellion must have: 'tyrants as recognisable and unambiguous villains,'⁶⁷

This is best displayed by the character Andross DeGaya. An ex-rebel himself, he shows the 'other' side of those who Luke seeks to destroy. His concern is for the downtrodden and his genuine care provides a stark contrast to Luke's abject dismissal of most people he meets. Samantha overhears him state that:

"The people of Austellus hate the Saviour as much as we do. He is an aberration, not an ideology. But they *will* fight us if the only other option is to starve. And we deserve it." DeGaya rubbed his temples. "How did it ever come to this?" (p.182)

DeGaya serves to encapsulate the desire to avoid a clear cut 'good vs. bad' narrative. It is my intention that the reader is provided the space to make her/his own decision about each action and choice made in *Dawnsmoke*, thereby encouraging a deeper engagement with the novel as a whole.

It is argued that "'sword and sorcery" is an outdated term today, one that may never regain the status or popularity it enjoyed during the last century.'⁶⁸ However, many of the concepts that make up Sword and Sorcery, such as amorality and a darker view of the struggle, are still relevant to fantasy and it is those aspects that I sought to incorporate into *Dawnsmoke*.

⁶⁷ L. Kimmel, 'Rebellion', in, G. Westfahl (ed.) *The Greenwood Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy – Themes, Works and Wonders*, (Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press, 2005), p. 655.

⁶⁸ J. R. Fultz, 'The Mud, the Blood, and the Years – Why Grimdark is the New Sword and Sorcery', in M. Ward, *Grimdark Magazine: Issue #4*, [e-Book] (Grimdark Magazine, Online Copyright 2014).

Magic Realism

Magic Realism is the final sub-genre that I will examine in relation to *Dawnsmoke*.

Magic Realism is defined as a combination of magic and realism in which: 'the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted and accepted.'⁶⁹

There are certain literary strategies at play in this sub-genre, which work to influence the creation of aspects of *Dawnsmoke*'s narrative. The Magic Realism inspired novels that I drew on include *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the influence I took from these novels was in their treatment of the Special World.

The phrase 'Special World' is used by Christopher Vogler to refer to a liminal space that blurs the boundary between the hero's known world and the unknown 'other.'⁷⁰ The moment at which the protagonist passes into the Special World is a moment of liminal transgression that moves the reader from the real, to the impossible. As such, it is a key moment in any fantasy-based novel that seeks to engage its reader with the impossible.

An example of a protagonist exploring this 'Special World' is found in Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. In this novel, protagonist Tohru Okada accesses the Special World in two states. The first is through his dreams. This occurs as early as Chapter 1, when Okada is searching for his cat, Nobura Wataya. He falls asleep and the reader is presented with a sensation of the uncanny as he sees a vision of his missing cat:

⁶⁹ L. P. Zamora & W. B. Farris, (eds.) *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1995), 3.

⁷⁰ C. Vogler *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, (California: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007).

My body felt like a corpse – someone else’s corpse – sinking into the canvas deck chair.

In the darkness, I saw the four legs of Noburo Wataya, four silent brown legs above four soft paws with swelling, rubberlike pads, legs that were treading the earth somewhere without a sound.⁷¹

This sense of the uncanny is expanded upon in the next paragraph with the phrase: ‘Sometimes ten minutes is not ten minutes. It can stretch and shrink.’⁷² To unpack this is to discover a moment of transgression. Murakami’s use of the Special World begins with a sense of innocence – any person can dream of things that are not possible. However, this reflection on these un-real sensations is what provides the sense of the uncanny. This works to deepen the desire of the reader to follow the protagonist into the Special World as they are allowed, and expected, to accept the premise it is built on.

In order to access his dreams more directly, Tohru Okada descends to the bottom of a well. Throughout *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Murakami makes use of these spaces as portals into the Special World. The language at play here allows the reader to transition from the recognised reality of the rest of the novel, and into the new reality of the Special World:

Here in the darkness, with its strange sense of significance, my memories began to take on a power they had never had before. The fragmentary images they called up inside me were mysteriously vivid in every detail, to the point where I felt I could grasp them in my hands. I closed my eyes and brought back the time eight years earlier when I had first met Kumiko.⁷³

An examination of the words used here shows phrases such as: ‘strange sense,’ ‘power they never had before’ and ‘mysteriously vivid.’ This language is at once both direct and ‘special.’ The reader is encouraged to make sense of the impossible moment and the accessible language provides a platform from which to do this.

⁷¹ H. Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* [Jay Rubin trans.] (London: Vintage, 2003), 21

⁷² *Ibid.* 21

⁷³ *Ibid.* 22

The sense of the un-real bleeds through the words chosen and ensures that the reader is not left behind as the character journeys into a new realm.

This supports the idea that Magic Realism provides a very 'ordinary' sense of magic. Simple language is effective because it builds on this sense of the 'ordinary' and therefore encourages the reader to think of the magic as merely another simple aspect of the story – without requiring any strict 'Laws' or rules to contain it. I sought to implement such simplistic and yet evocative language throughout *Dawnsmoke* to better describe the magic therein. Specifically, I chose to use this language at two distinct points where the reader is asked to suspend their disbelief and journey into a Special World.

The first occurrence functions almost as a prologue to the story:

Everything rusts.
Sharp becomes dull, flames become ash and truth is re-forged as a
comforting lie. Time passes and link-by-link we are chained by falsehoods.
To remember then, we must forget.
Forget certainty and unlock the imaginary. In dreams of chaos, behind
the smoke and the sweat, the steam and the dirt, is the place where memories
come to die.

Arx. A city of metals and men. (P.3)

Dawnsmoke is a fantasy novel. As such, the reader is required to suspend their disbelief and journey into a Special World so that the story can be experienced. Inspired by Murakami, I use phrases such as 'forget certainty', 'unlock the imaginary' and 'In dreams of chaos' in order to show the reader the edges of the impossible world that *Dawnsmoke* exists within.

A secondary invocation of the Special World comes when the reader is asked to journey into Memoria. This shift is also handled with similar language: 'Reality bent. Luke's mind opened. A bridge of blue fire spread out before him. He crossed over and the pain vanished.' (P.65) This is a marked improvement on earlier drafts, which struggled with the crossing over into Memoria. The language used

was too ethereal and refused the certainty of the more straightforward style: 'She spoke words, but Luke's ears refused to hear them. All but one word. *Remember*. At once he was both strapped to the table and lost in his own mind.'⁷⁴

This development allowed me to simplify Memoria. The first point of transference is crucial as it sets the image in the reader's mind for every other journey into Memoria. This led to the creation of a blue-fire bridge, in order to provide a physical symbol of 'crossing the boundary.' Though the bridge is not always referenced when characters continue to visit Memoria, its place in this first shift provides a platform for each reader to follow Luke, Sam or Kain into this Special World.

Of course, *Dawnsmoke* is not a Magic Realism novel. It does not deal with any replication of the physical 'real world' and instead is completely set in the impossible. However, Magic Realism has provided technical and strategic inspiration for *Dawnsmoke*, just as Epic, Heroic and Sword and Sorcery fantasy have, and therefore must be counted in this quest for definition.

⁷⁴ Early draft manuscript, author's own archive.

Young Adult Fantasy

When writing *Dawnsmoke*, I did not consider that I was writing a Young Adult Novel. It is only since receiving feedback upon the completion of this novel that I have begun to consider *Dawnsmoke's* status as a Young Adult Novel. Upon reflection, I do not believe that *Dawnsmoke* is entirely a Young Adult Novel. However, I do believe that it shares a number of tropes with Young Adult Fiction and it is my earnest hope that *Dawnsmoke* appeals to both young adult and adult readers alike.

The major trope that provides contrast between *Dawnsmoke* and Young Adult Novels is the trope of nonchalance about death:

This trope is often found in the genres of science fiction and fantasy. When caught in a near-death situation... the main character often faces it with an almost nonchalant attitude. He or she will immediately brush off the experience and say or think something humorous, recovering from the incident immediately.⁷⁵

This element of Young Adult fiction is both present and rejected in *Dawnsmoke*, depending on the perspective character. Luke is very nonchalant about death. Often, he fights, kills, and then makes a joke or brushes off the experience like it was nothing. However, this is not done to ignore or to minimise the impact of these near-death experiences. Instead, this approach is chosen so that Luke's fractured mind can be shown as it descends into the entity that will eventually be known as The Saviour. Luke *is* impacted by the death that he brings, and the risk to his own life, but he allows Ferra to remove these memories from his head in order to make himself more uncaring and far more dangerous. This loss of empathy and risk

⁷⁵ J. Ho, "Tropes in young adult novels – 6 cliches," *Ka Leo* (2017). Available online: http://www.manoanow.org/kaleo/features/tropes-in-young-adult-novels/article_a9370034-7b22-11e7-97dc-9f28ff872f4d.html [Accessed on 18/10/2017]

becomes an integral part of Luke's character and eventually leads to his loss when faced with Kain at the end of the novel.

If Luke embodies this trope of nonchalance, then Kain rejects it outright. He is a far more conscientious individual and spends most of *Dawnsmoke* as an ardent pacifist. His first experience of death comes from Fetch killing a man in order to save Kain's life. Whilst Fetch brushes it off as a consequence of living in Arx, Kain is traumatised by the experience – physically vomiting and shivering due to the death he has seen. Even when he is forced into combat situations later in the novel, he still retains this level of pacifism, admitting to the reader that: 'No matter how much he tried to force it, no matter how he willed it, he couldn't bring himself to end a life.' (P. 296). Though he eventually kills Andross DeGaya, this death carries a heavy impact with it and it is no coincidence that in the final chapter, Kain is digging three graves. He regrets his action, it carries a traumatising impact, and yet he refuses to let himself forget or to dismiss it – precisely because it *is* so important.

I do not carry any ill-will towards the tag of Young Adult Fiction. Much as *Dawnsmoke* draws from the four sub-genres mentioned previously, it also draws from the Young Adult Spectrum. The ages of the characters, as late-teens and young adults, if nothing else places this novel within the realm of Young Adult Fiction. However, just as I believe that *Dawnsmoke* can claim shared characteristics with the aforementioned four sub-genres, without being subsumed by them, I also believe that I can claim the same status with Young Adult Fiction. I would not be disappointed to find *Dawnsmoke* on the shelf of a bookshop under the heading 'Young Adult', but much as any adult can learn from those younger than themselves, I do not believe that the shared characteristics between *Dawnsmoke* and the Young Adult cannon forces it into the realm of *just* Young Adult, or that

these characteristics preclude anyone but a Young Adult reader to appreciate or enjoy the novel.

The Inception of Character

It is a rare writer that creates their character from the moment of biological inception.

The imagination tends not to gestate as humans do. Characters do not emerge from foetal tissue, birth canals and a squalling childhood. Far more likely, the character is formed in an instant – a moment of clarity in which a collaboration of dominant traits group together in order to present a 2D picture of a character to the writer. These traits are often ill defined and draw on clichés and tired concepts that are familiar to the writer’s imagination. In order to fully actualise a character, the writer must then flesh out this 2D sketch in order to provoke the reaction of a ‘real’ character being displayed on the page.

This is especially true in fantasy. As Flannery O’ Connor writes: ‘the person writing a fantasy has to be even more strictly attentive to the concrete detail than someone writing in a naturalistic vein – because the greater the story’s strain on the credulity, the more convincing the properties in it have to be.’⁷⁶ The examination of sub-genres above provided a platform for each of my protagonists to claim characteristics, tropes and commonality with the other characters that exist within fantasy literature. The next step was to personalise each character – to make them believable actors in their fantasy setting.

One method I utilised for this personalising is mentioned by Brandilyn Collins. Collins suggests a five-step process that translates the techniques an actor might use to embody their character, into the literary form:

⁷⁶ F. O’Connor, ‘Writing Short Stories’ in S. Fitzgerald & R. Fitzgerald, (eds.) *Mystery & Manners* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), p. 97.

- Step 1. Begin a line of questioning with your character and pursue it until you 'hit bottom'...
- Step 2. The final 'So what?' question will reveal a core truth or 'inner value' about your character.
- Step 3. In turn, this inner value will give rise to a trait.
- Step 4. Then pursue this line of questioning even further to see if you can hit bottom a second time.
- Step 5. If you can hit bottom again, you will discover a specific mannerism based on the inner value.⁷⁷

This detailed level of questioning is designed so that the writer avoids 'easy' answers when crafting their characters and instead is encouraged to examine each aspect of characterisation from a fresh, honest perspective. This approach allowed me to defamiliarise the expectations that *Dawnsmoke* carries through its assumption of the fantasy genre.

Defamiliarisation is the common English translation of *ostranenie/ostraeniye*, literally to 'make strange.' The concept was coined by the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky, who argued that the main function of art is to 'make strange' the expected familiar:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife and the fear of war... And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.⁷⁸

To return to the definition of fantasy set out previously, the fantasy genre ensures that *a reader can experience their reality in new, strange or unusual ways*. This links fantasy with defamiliarisation on a conceptual level. Fantasy 'makes strange' reality, in order that the reader might encounter the ordinary in a new way.

Beyond the overall impact of fantasy, there is a second level of nuance that fantasy can glean from defamiliarisation. As previously mentioned, a common

⁷⁷ B. Collins, *Getting into Character – Seven Secrets a Novelist can learn from Actors*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 15.

⁷⁸ Victor Shklovsky quoted in Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 53.

perception of fantasy is that the stories, structures and themes are all somewhat familiar. A direct separation between a story and this tradition runs the risk of disassociation – if a novel contains nothing that is recognisably fantasy then it cannot be termed as such. Therefore, in order to craft fantasy that can re-capture the wonder and strength of these old stories, a writer is charged to ‘make strange’ the already impossible traditions of fantasy.

One such tradition that I sought to alter was the accusation that fantasy, and all genre fiction, ‘tends to be far more plot-driven than character-driven. Genre fiction, we might say, is the natural home of the flat character.’⁷⁹ Whilst I use the word accusation, this claim is not an insulting one. Fantasy, as has been discussed, can create a sense of wish-fulfilment and escapism for the reader and this is not, by any means, a negative trait. Perhaps it is denigrated by association. Children are often given to flights of fancy, fully realised realms of imagination and dream-life fantasies. As children grow, they are often encouraged to set aside these fantasies so that they might ‘grow-up’. Fantasy authors, we might therefore claim, are those who retain this sense of child-like wonder and imagination. As C. S. Lewis quipped, ‘When I became a man I put away childish things; including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.’⁸⁰

Whilst the claim that fantasy is plot-driven is not a negative one, *Dawnsmoke* seeks to put forth a story that is led, not merely by the events it reveals, but by the people who experience these events. One reason for this is, as Christopher Booker writes:

Without in any way wishing to detract from the genius of our great storytellers, if there is one thing we have seen... it is the extent to which

⁷⁹ A. Cowan, *The Art of Writing Fiction*, (Edinburgh: Pearson, 2011), 99 (Footnote 10).

⁸⁰ C. S. Lewis quoted in L. Walmsley (ed) *C. S. Lewis Essay Collection; Literature, Philosophy and Short Stories* (London: Harper Collins, 2002) 99.

stories told by even the greatest of them are not their own. Their skill lies in the power with which they manage to find new outward clothing in which to dress up a theme which is already latent, not only in their own minds, but in those of their audience.⁸¹

As such, *Dawnsmoke* is not concerned with telling a 'new' story, I have already mentioned the predilection of fantasy to drawn on classic themes, but instead with telling a *truthful* story – a logical progression of events drawn from the human nature of the characters who experience them, with a fantastic and fraught setting. This character-led plot structure is summarised well by Isaac Asimov, who states that an author can: 'use the plot to develop an insight into the character of the individuals who people the story.'⁸²

Asimov writes that this style is chosen by those who write 'great literature.' However, I believe that such hierarchical ideas have no place in literature. What is a meaningful book for one person can be a narrow-minded slog for another. I have previously mentioned LeGuin's passionate defence of the fantasy genre. At this stage, I must also confess that in writing *Dawnsmoke* I did not set out to construct anyone else's ideas of great literature. I only sought to craft what I myself considered as great as I was capable throughout the three-year process. The greatness I seek is through writing fantasy literature and I stand in vehement denial that genre literature, fantasy literature, cannot be elevated to the status of 'great.'

However, I chose to settle on this style of plot in order to draw on the pre-existing strength of fantasy. The stories told in these impossible worlds, ancient or otherwise, have an allure and strength built-in. Therefore, in order to craft

⁸¹ C. Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 543.

⁸² I. Asimov, 'Plotting', in Dozois et al (eds.) *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 30.

Dawnsmoke as a complete experience, I felt confident to let the plot 'take care of itself' to a degree and instead focus on the characters that experience it.

As I have mentioned, *Dawnsmoke* is not a 'character-focused' novel. Whilst I sought to fully realise the internal world of each character, and to allow a logical understanding of each protagonist's personality to lead the events of the novel, I did not intend that these events take a 'back-seat' compared to the inner-realizations of the characters that experience them. Instead, I chose to meld the events and character together in order to both embrace, and defamiliarise, the fantasy experience.

When creating each of my protagonists, I began from a single trope of fantasy characterisation. The reason for this is linked to the concept of defamiliarisation – I sought to 'make-strange' the expectations that each of these tropes carry. In the following sections, I examine the tropes that led to the inception of Luke, Samantha and Kain in order to set the stage for the subversion and alteration of their in-built expectations as the novel progresses.

Luke the Amnesiac Hero

Luke's inception began in his pockets.

Susan Perabo writes that the contents of a character's pockets allow them to: 'be defined with minimal exposition.'⁸³ To further minimize the requirements for definition, there is a single article that represents the inner-truth of Luke's character. A piece of iron ore, or 'gateway metal.' Gifted to Luke in Chapter 1, this piece of metal is carried as a constant reminder of the past that he has lost – the only qualitative criteria for his status as an Amnesiac Hero.

The Amnesiac Hero, defined simply as a character that cannot remember aspects of her/his past, is a trope that exists beyond fantasy. From children's television and video game protagonists to Jason Bourne, this trope allows the writer to craft a story of discovery wherein the reader follows the protagonist in their quest to re-discover the memories that they are missing.

A contemporary embrace of this trope in fantasy comes through Robin Hobb's Fitzchivalry Farseer. At the opening of *Assassin's Apprentice*, Fitz remarks that: '[m]y memories reach back to when I was six years old. Before that, there is nothing, only a blank gulf no exercise of my mind has ever been able to pierce.'⁸⁴ Whilst Fitz' 'amnesia' begins at a young age, and therefore precludes the desire to re-discover those lost memories, it does set the character up as an unreliable narrator. The reader is shown, from the outset, that the recollections as presented may not accurately represent the events as they transpired:

Sometimes it seems too complete, and I wonder if it is truly mine. Am I recalling it from my own mind, or from dozens of retellings by legions of kitchen maids and ranks of scullions and herds of stable-boys as they

⁸³ S. Perabo, 'The Things They Carry' n J. Bell & P. Magrs (eds.) *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, (London: Macmillan, 2001), 102.

⁸⁴ R. Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice*, (London: Voyager, 1996), 2

explained my presence to each other? Perhaps I have heard the story so many times, from so many sources that I now recall it as an actual memory of my own.⁸⁵

This admission fuels the narrative of the entire *Farseer Trilogy*. Fitz is cast in the role of both assassin and diplomat and is often charged with discovering the truth of murky events. The reader is given a choice – do they accept Fitz’ recollections, or do they seek for hidden meanings throughout the text that might provide an alternative narrative?

One important deviation of the Amnesiac Hero trope featured in Hobb’s work is the absence of a full quest to re-claim lost memories. Instead, in the final book of the trilogy, the reader is shown the moment at which Fitz sacrificed the memories that he has heretofore been unable to recall, by using magic to imbue them into a stone dragon:

*Take my memories of my mother... Take the ache in my throat when I think of Molly... Take my days and nights in Regal’s dungeons... Take my hurt that I never knew my father.*⁸⁶

In the context of this series of novels, this moment is of great importance to the reader, as it informs the decisions and emotional changes that Fitz has undergone. It explains both the *why* and *how* of Fitz’ internal conflict and by doing so, provides much needed resolution to his character arc.

Luke shares this status as an unreliable protagonist. At the opening of *Dawnsmoke*, he remarks:

“Two years.” Luke’s hands shook. “That is as far back as I can remember. Before then there is nothing but echoes in the mist. I have no desire to go through that again.” (p.8)

⁸⁵ Hobb, *Assassin’s Apprentice*, 2

⁸⁶ Robin Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest* (London: Voyager, 1998), 791

A common aspect of character creation is to provide a 'lived' history – a past which is not revealed to the reader but that the writer uses to help define the personality and actions of the character. Without memory, the Amnesiac Hero is unable to draw from expectations and experience, and thus the writer is charged with providing a believable character from a void premise.

In many ways, this void premise is as controlling as an imagined history. The loss of memory gives heavy weight to a quest narrative – the re-discovery of this forgotten past. In *Dawnsmoke*, I sought to follow this traditional route for an Amnesiac Hero. Luke makes it clear throughout *Dawnsmoke*, that the most important desire of his heart is to reclaim the past he no longer remembers.

To counter the sparse history that Luke's damaged psyche can recall, I chose to ensure that Luke drew from the void of his past in the same manner that an ordinary character might draw on the actual events of *their* past. This shades his perception of the world. From Luke's perspective, Arx is grey. He does not seek details, but rather the dull, darkness indicative of his mental state. His attitude to other people is similarly dismissive and insulting, commonly using words such as 'idiots' or 'bastards' to refer to others.

However, when he shifts into Memoria, his perspective changes. This mental world is allowed a slight richness of detail:

Memoria. Arx seen through his memories. Austellus was perfect. Twice as large as its real life counterpart and detail as a prayer. He could see everything with perfect clarity. The shop that sold his favourite pasties. The corner where he killed his first Walker. The river Mucro that split the city like a serpent's fang. (p.66)

The world of Arx is a source of misery for Luke as it is a constant, and often bloody, struggle. Memoria provides him with relief and this conflict between his 'real' experiences and his remembered ones becomes central to Luke's journey.

Of course, Luke's memories are not just missing. They have been replaced by the phantom past of strangers. This adds another layer to his internal conflict. Luke is not only conflicted between forgetfulness and the truth, he is also in opposition to aspects of himself. Reilo, Harri, Vincent, Lloyd and Flynn provide elements of this missing personal history. As Dirk comments:

"Death Echoes are unlike any other memory. You've heard the expression 'my life flashed before my eyes'? That is what a Death Echo is. The brief sum of a lifetime of experience. You can feel them, can't you?" Dirk tilted his head. "Reilo Sandrasova and Harri DeGlan. You are a bit of both, aren't you? A rebel and a priest." (p.160)

From the outset, Luke is opposed to the idea that anyone could influence his sense of self. This sets him in opposition to the voices inside his head. As the novel progresses, this opposition is worn away as Luke continues to disregard the truth for the relative ease of a lie – a key concept that *Dawnsmoke* examines.

This embrace of the ease of falsehoods fuels Luke's status as an unreliable character. In order to display this unreliability, I reverse a technique demonstrated by Joe Abercrombie in his *First Law* trilogy. The character Logen Ninefingers is shown to the reader as a proficient warrior and a light-hearted individual. However, towards the close of *The Blade Itself*, the first novel in the series, the reader is shown a darker side to this character that emerges when he is just about to die in battle:

There was a cold feeling in Logen's stomach, a feeling he hadn't felt for a long time. 'No,' he whispered. 'I'm free of you.' But it was too late. Too late...
... there was blood on him, but that was good. There was always blood. But he was kneeling, and that was wrong. The Bloody-Nine kneels to no man... His leg hurt and he smiled. Pain was the fuel that made the fires burn. Something moved in front of him. Masked men. Enemies.
Corpses, then.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ J. Abercrombie, *The Blade Itself* (London: Gollancz. 2006), 574.

This darkness grows throughout the continuation of the trilogy. The reader is shown that Logen has misled them and is responsible for many of the atrocities that he is currently fighting against. The final reveal occurs in conversation with Bethod, one of the chief antagonists. Logen's motivation has been explained throughout the series as a desire to fight back against his cruel ex-master, yet when they finally speak, the reader is confronted with a betrayal of the trust they placed in Logen's revelation of events:

The King of the Northmen gaped down, eyes wide. 'No one else to blame? Me? How soon we all forget!' He grabbed the chain round his shoulders and rattled it. 'You think I wanted this? You think I asked for any of it? All I wanted was a strip more land to feed my people...' 'Who was it that always had to push a step further? Who was it would never let me stop? Who was it had to taste blood, and once he'd tasted it got drunk on it, went mad with it, could never get enough?' His finger stabbed down. 'Who else but the Bloody-Nine?'⁸⁸

The 'amnesia' that Logen experiences is self-induced. The character does not want to think about his questionable, and often immoral, past actions. Therefore the reader is forbidden from knowing the truth

Luke operates in on a similar principle to this technique, but used in reverse. Instead of his memories, Luke hides which moments he has *forgotten* from the reader. Often revealed in his conversations with Kuyt and Adira, Luke's weakness is his addiction to forgetting painful moments from his past and by doing so, he shades his experiences in a far more positive light than they actually occurred.

This false positivity is a crucial part of Luke's violent tendencies. Luke is a vicious character; he hangs his allies and murders his enemies. Though he blames the voices in his head for this vitriol, he is often quick to turn to the goriest solutions to his problems and sees no issue with doing so.

⁸⁸ J. Abercrombie, *Last Argument of Kings* (Gollancz: London, 2008), 351.

When ascribing such violent tendencies to a protagonist, the task of the writer is to ensure that the character does not alienate the reader. If Luke is merely an 'evil' character, then the reader is prevented from empathising with him and instead stands in judgement of the violence he perpetrates. This can lead to a loss of engagement as reading the evil exploits of an evil character can become very dull and disenchanting very quickly. The complexity of Luke's character comes from his public goal in *Dawnsmoke*: revolution against the unforgiving overlords. This allows him the pretence of a 'higher' purpose, which shapes the perception of each action. To kill a man is to be condemned. To slay a man in a battle for freedom is heroic.

Thus, Luke is afforded the space to take the violent option, to do things that are designed to shock and horrify, so that he can provide something *better* and by doing so, aims for the reader's sympathy. Not through empathy, but through determination.

Samantha the Fantasy Heroine

To write a character of the opposite gender is to write as an outsider.

It is perhaps a part of our binary society that a writer may find it easier to imagine any number of evil deeds than to imagine a different set of genitals between their legs. The writer writes, first and foremost, for themselves as the audience – we are the first eyes that read each sentence. When crafting any character, the writer must be diligent in their research of past and personality in order to generate a sense of truth to each character's actions. To craft a character of the opposite sex is to require one additional stage of creation – the embodiment of a biology that the writer does not share.

Fantasy has long been accused of lacking a fair representation of female characters. As one article puts it:

Oh, everyone knows how to write about rape. It's a popular way to include women in an epic fantasy or historical narrative... Fantasy novels are littered with raped women, possibly more raped women than women serving any other plot function except sex work.⁸⁹

This cliché infected *Dawnsmoke* and early drafts included Samantha being raped by Luke. Through feedback and personal reflection, I realised that to use an event in such a way was to do a disservice to the role of this female protagonist. However, the over-saturation of rape in fantasy did influence the creation of another character. Adira begins the novel as a strong, brave and tenacious character. She has successfully mastered this darkness in her past. It is perhaps one of Luke's most evil acts that he destroys this strength on a whim by deciding that he can choose how Adira deals with this event. Importantly, I sought to ensure

⁸⁹ K. Elliott, 'Writing Women Characters Into Epic Fantasy Without Quotas', *Tor* (2016). Available online: <http://www.tor.com/2016/03/23/writing-women-characters-into-epic-fantasy-without-quotas/> [Accessed on 01/06/2017].

that Adira's rape was not sensationalised. As she states of her rapist: "Him being dead won't change anything." (p.136) Adira's story is not of a rape victim. That is merely one aspect of her complexity.

For Samantha, a key trope that she embodies is that of the: 'masculine aspect... [with] tomboyism [as] the first indication.'⁹⁰ This Tomboy trope is embodied by the character of Althea Vestrit in Robin Hobb's *Ship of Magic*. Her mother states that:

"He [your father] always treated you as if you were one of the sons we lost... back when the boys were alive, he always said the land would go to his daughters, the ship to his sons. And although he never said so plainly, after our boys died, I believe that he intended [your sister] Keffria to inherit the land holdings, and you the ship."⁹¹

This status as tomboy informs the narrative of the story. Althea's quest is therefore to make her way into the male-dominated world of sailing. The trope does not serve to limit Althea's actions, but instead provides the reader with a context and a sense of rebellion and stubbornness that is generated by this 'going against the grain.'

This works to fuel the narrative, as Althea finds herself on a slaughter ship in order to prove herself 'worthy' of this masculine role. Though she admits on this journey that 'she *had* been her Papa's spoiled little darling, doing no more than playing at being a sailor'⁹², she grows from the experience, retains her tomboy status and thus provides a positive sense of rebellion and spirit.

Samantha shares this sense of rebellious spirit in the very first line from her perspective: 'Samantha DeAcarris scratched her tits.' (p.22). This vulgarity, combined with a typically 'unladylike' action is designed to provide the reader

⁹⁰ A. K. Kaler, *The Picara: From Hera to Fantasy Heroine*, (Ohio: Bowling State University Popular Press, 1991), 108.

⁹¹ R. Hobb, *Ship of Magic*, (London: Voyager, 1999), 235-236.

⁹² Hobb, *Ship of Magic*, 392.

with an instant connection to the heart of Samantha's character. Context is provided through her ruminations on growing up with the desire to become a blacksmith:

Her fire-frizzy hair, sooty face and bloody knuckles kept her distant from the other girls, just as their sour perfumes, 'training heels' and gossip bored her in a way that Jack's lectures on forge safety never could. (p.26-7)

From the start of *Dawnsmoke*, the reader is encouraged to see Samantha in fairly masculine terms. However, in order to continue to develop Samantha as a *true* character, I sought a balance between both masculine and feminine characteristics in order to alter the expected result of the tomboy trope.

To examine one such character is to return to Brandon Sanderson's Vin. An orphan who was constantly threatened by her status as female, Vin finds herself on the cusp of both masculine and feminine stereotypes. In *The Well of Ascension*, the second book in Sanderson's *Mistborn* trilogy, Vin visits a dressmakers and, though she admits to enjoying the accoutrements of femininity, comments that "When wearing a dress like that, it's too easy to forget who you are... I need to be something else. Something harder."⁹³

Just as Althea's Tomboyism works to shape her character arc, so too does Vin's internal conflict between typically masculine and feminine norms. She approaches the world from the perspective of an outsider on multiple levels and as such, her overall quest to win victory in her fight against evil is informed by her personal quest to accept herself for who she is.

Samantha, through subscribing to this trope, also faces a quest to accept herself. In her case, this acceptance comes from her sexuality. Physically, Samantha

⁹³ B. Sanderson, *The Well of Ascension* (London: Gollancz, 2007), 282-283.

carries connotations of the cliché of ‘mannish lesbian.’⁹⁴ She works at a forge, comments on the size of her arms, and is repulsed by the thought of a man touching her. This introduction simulates a homosexual discovery narrative – often a key component for those who follow the Tomboy trope. Throughout the early stages of *Dawnsmoke*, Samantha assumes that she *must* be a lesbian, merely by dint of the fact that she does not enjoy male attention.

The subversion of this expectation of lesbianism comes later when Samantha realises that the concept of female attention is just as repellent as male attention. This is done through a mirrored moment of discovery. When Samantha first speaks to a male prostitute, she states: “I’m sorry, this isn’t working. Would... would you mind putting your trousers back on?” (p.70). Similarly, when she is faced with the prospect of sex with Ferra, she repeats: “I’m sorry, this isn’t working. Would... would you mind putting your shirt back on?” (p.369)

The heart of Samantha’s subversion of her ‘expected’ role comes through her reversal of the ‘Damsel-in-Distress’ trope. This trope is at the heart of many fantasy stories. Sansa Stark in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, when trapped in a castle, believes that ‘Ser Dontos was her only hope. *I have to look pretty, Joff likes me to look pretty.*’⁹⁵ Similarly, Niënor Níniel in *The Silmarillion*, when captured by the dragon Glaurung, ‘sat and shuddered beside the falling water, and at the voice of Glaurung her darkness crept upon her again, so that she could not stir from that place of her own will.’⁹⁶

The purpose of the Damsel-in-Distress is simple – it provides both the reason and reward for a protagonist to embark on their quest. However, Samantha is an

⁹⁴ Kaler, *The Picara*, 108.

⁹⁵ G. R.R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, (London: Harper Voyager, 2011), 440.

⁹⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien & Christopher Tolkien (ed) *The Silmarillion* [e-book] (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2nd ed, 1999).

active participant in her own life and as such, takes on the role of quest-seeker, as opposed to quest-reward.

This was not always the case. When Samantha is first introduced she remembers that, when her mentor Jack Mendy disappeared, she sat about and waited for him to return to her. The regret from this inaction is expressed in a conversation she has with Mira, when Samantha states: “Do you know what my biggest regret is? That I let him go without me.” (p.317). This regret fuels her desire to never again sit back and wait for things to happen around her. Thus, when her fiancé disappears, Samantha sets out to fetch him back.

Reflections of this Damsel-in-Distress trope are designed to shine through when Samantha eventually succeeds in her quest. Matthew is given the role usually reserved for the woman, and weeps with a desperate sense of affection and longing for his rescuer. He admits his undying love and pledged his heart to his saviour, Samantha.

The final expectation that Samantha delights in subverting is a common one amongst female character – the search for love. As such, when they first meet, she tells Matthew that: “I don’t want your heart, and you won’t get mine.” (p.81). This attitude does not change, and when Matthew confesses his love to Samantha, her response is to laugh and state, categorically, that: “Well I don’t love you.” (p.382) It is in this respect that Samantha remains true to her character – she is asexual and a-romantic and the conventions of fantasy will not change that.

The inclusion of Samantha’s asexuality developed from an organic exploration of her character. I did not set out to write an asexual character into my novel. Instead, it became clear through researching into Samantha’s character that this would be the sexuality that suited her worldview and actions.

However, when I discovered that Samantha was as an asexual character, I did not shy away from including this a key part of her journey. I did not want to hide from this level of inclusivity and instead sought to embrace this side of Samantha and allow it to flow through her development throughout *Dawnsmoke*.

Samantha's struggle with sexuality comes in very direct moments. I have already mentioned the mirrored moments in which she rejects both male and female attention, as well as her rejection of Matthew's love. These moments exist as clarification for Samantha, they allow her to express the hidden thoughts she has about her sexuality in a very direct way.

Unlike Kain, whose physical disability infects almost every line of his narrative, Samantha's sexuality is a far more insidious and subtle influence on her character. This approach was chosen deliberately, as I did not believe that Samantha would spend every moment considering her sexuality. Instead, her desire is to hide and force it from her mind is very much evident. When she leaves the brothel in Chapter 5, she hides inside her hood in order that no one will notice what she has done. Whereas Kain's physical pain infects his every waking moment, Samantha's emotional turmoil becomes something that she represses, she forces down until it rises up to bite her – such as when she agrees to spend the night beside Ferra or when she succumbs to loneliness when she collapses after Luke has captured her.

I am not asexual. In order to craft Samantha in a truthful manner, I sought to keep a measure of understanding and respect for a sexuality that I do not share. However, I did not seek to research and discover the academic definition of asexuality. I believe that sexuality is messy and fluid and as such, to try and portray an idealised version of asexuality felt a dishonest path to take. Instead, I spoke with friends and colleagues about their experiences with non-normative sexuality, how

the moments of discovery felt and how the thoughts played on their mind. I combined this with Samantha's mental determination *not* to think about something she does not wish to, as well as her façade of being uncaring when it comes to inter-personal connections and crafted her asexuality in a way that I felt best reflected how she would deal with it.

Should an asexual person read *Dawnsmoke* and discover a great deal of unity with Samantha, then I would be delighted to have provided that platform. Equally, should an asexual person find nothing to agree with in Samantha's engagement with her own sexuality, I would be equally happy. I did not want to describe an idealised asexuality. I wanted to respect the individuality and personal nature of sexuality and provide Samantha with a truthful feeling for her character, rather than an idealised one.

The phrase 'strong female character' is as tired as the most ancient clichés in storytelling. When creating Samantha, I did not seek to craft a 'strong woman' but rather a truthful one. Sam is a product of her surroundings and the subversion of these tropes of expectation, as well as her asexuality, allowed me the ability to follow through with this creative instinct.

Kain the Farm Boy Hero

In literature, not all farms have animals or crops.

Rather, these locations that open many novels do so instead through the connotation of isolation and 'newness.' The farm might be represented by a hole in the ground. It might also be represented by a sheltered childhood or a foreigner in a strange land. The purpose of the farm is not to display sheep, pigs or cows in their natural glory, but instead is to be 'out of the way.' It is from this outside perspective that a character can emerge, naive to the nuances of the fantasy world that they exist in and can provide a fresh pair of eyes to examine the conventions of this world anew.

Kain is born of this tradition and naivety is layered through his character. He has spent his life in his parent's home, a farm far away from civilization. He has no friend or love-interests and knows very little beyond fishing and farming. Therefore, each new experience is a source of wonder and excitement for Kain and his eyes reflect the true nature of Arx as an outsider.

Kain, as Farm Boy Hero, is an exemplar of 'making strange.' Not only through his naive perspective on the world, but also through his body. Kain is afflicted with a physicality that causes him pain with every movement. As such, though any other person would ignore the way they walk or sit or stand, as it has been done so many times as to become mundane, Kain expresses every step as a new experience through the pain that it brings.

This is highlighted from the start of his journey, where even the act of walking down to the river is highlighted as an intense struggle: 'His legs were sore an' his head were poundin'. Every step made him jerk like a chicken in the thresher but that weren't gonna stop him.' (p.44). This physical isolation from 'ordinary'

people creates a barrier between Kain and his father, and ultimately provides the spark that ignites his narrative journey.

The 'outgrowing' of the family is a common moment for Farm Boy Heroes as it forces them out of their comfort zone. Often, a hero will see/hear of their parents death, which comes as a handy excuse to leave behind all they have known and strike out by themselves. This is not the case for Kain as I did not want to shirk the truth of his character, and the strength therein. Kain *chooses* to leave his family behind, he wants more than his isolated world of the family farm, and thus forces himself on the path to Arx and adventure.

Beyond reflecting the 'truth' of his character, Kain's innocent eyes also allow space for a description of Arx that is lacking before he arrives. I have already discussed the Luke sees Arx as grey and not much more. Kain represents the opposite end of the spectrum. When he first arrives in the city, each of his senses is taunted by the onslaught of detail:

He took his first steps into Arx.

People everywhere. Kiddies scuffled an' screamed down the street like puppies fightin' over a stick. The noise were deafenin'. The wall must o' cut it sommat fierce. Inside were a storm of voices that demanded to be heard. (p.142)

This provides a counterpart to Luke's acceptance of Arx as 'ordinary' and links Kain's perspective to that of the reader – every sight, sound and taste is new in this Special Word.

The role of the Farm Boy Hero is more than just a touchstone for the reader's experience. Also called Brave Little Tailors, from the Brothers Grimm fairytale of the same name, they are described as: 'the unheroic hero... who adopts or is thrust into a role initially far too large for him, and successfully grows to be worthy of

it.⁹⁷ It is this sense of heroism that would go on to inform the full creation of Kain's character.

A notable Farm Boy Hero that influenced Kain's genesis is Robert Jordan's Perrin Aybara. Perrin embodies the 'unheroic hero' and often shows a great deal of reluctance in being termed as one. He does not want the power he is given, nor does he feel worthy of it. Instead, he spends most of the *Wheel of Time* proclaiming that he is nothing more than a simple blacksmith.

This rejection of heroic norms is shown in one of the first passages that the reader is introduced to Perrin. When speaking of himself, Perrin states that: "I'm afraid that Rand and I are just ordinary folk, Master Merrill, not made-up creatures from your stories."⁹⁸ This insistence of his ordinary nature dogs Perrin's narrative and provides the reader with a sense that every accolade thrown his way is genuine, as he would never seek such praise.

Kain's journey towards heroism begins in the opposite fashion – he is desperate for the excitement and praise afforded heroes. This desire beats at the heart of his character and stems, in no small way, from his physical limitations. It is natural that a boy who is unable to make it to the bathroom without severe pain would idolise those who can fight, march and kill without a thought.

It is through a rejection of the 'heroic' act of killing that Kain subverts his Farm Boy Hero origins as he does not seek to grow into the role of a 'hero.' However, in order for this subversion to take hold of the narrative, Kain needed to be *able* to kill, but still unwilling to do so. This shift comes from Dirk, who heals Kain of his physical limitations, and in return forces an unnatural loyalty into Kain's head.

⁹⁷ J. Clute & J. Grant (eds.) *The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* (1997). Available online: http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=brave_little_tailor [Accessed 12/04/2017]

⁹⁸ R. Jordan, *The Eye of the World*, (London: Orbit, 1990), 49.

However, despite these changes, Kain retains his innocence and thus is unable to kill someone, even in self-defence. This forms the heart of his narrative and works to subvert a core concept of many fantasy stories – that killing and death-dealing are just ‘par for the course.’

Kain’s aversion to bloodletting is so strong that, when Dirk presses on his magically-imbued sense of loyalty, it is the magic that breaks before Kain’s resolve does. He cannot, even when being coerced from inside his own mind, force himself to kill in order to be a hero.

This attitude that heroism may not be as romantic as it is often portrayed is displayed well in *The Heroes*. The narrative of this story focuses on battle and Joe Abercrombie provides a scathing examination of the harsh realities of war and battle. This is best expressed in a single line of dialogue: “‘So you love war. I used to think you were a decent man. But I see now I was mistaken... You’re a *hero*.’”⁹⁹ *Dawnsmoke* examines heroism in a similar fashion. Kain represents the mind of every young boy who has dreamed of glory in battle. His story is a reminder of the realities of such a course and as such, it is no surprise that he clings to his pacifistic tendencies.

However, Kain does take one life. That of *his* hero, Andross DeGaya. However, the context for this death is of vital importance to Kain’s character arc. For he does not kill for a heroic victory, nor does he kill in self-preservation. No, the only way Kain can bring himself to kill is in order to protect his friend. Much as Perrin rejects the mantle of hero through his modesty, Kain rejects it for the violent expectations that heroism brings. As such, he is far more heroic than he himself could ever comprehend.

⁹⁹ J. Abercrombie, *The Heroes* (London: Gollancz, 2011), 489.

Voice and Attitude

If a character's perspective can reveal the events of a story, then it is their voice that provides the colour.

More than that, the inner-workings of a character's mind invariably add a level of depth and engagement with the narrative that they are a part of. A protagonist can brighten a sad event with hope for a better future, or darken a time of happiness with morose musings. It is due to this depth that I chose to use a primarily free indirect style of storytelling in *Dawnsmoke*, through a close third-person narrative, in order to open up the back of a character's head and show the reader their thoughts as they progress throughout the novel.

The benefits of this approach are that it allowed *Dawnsmoke* to become a story told by people, as opposed by a strict narrator. It provides context and emotional gravity to any given situation and allows the reader to follow the thoughts and desires of each character more closely and therefore understand, empathise, sympathise or even condemn the actions that a character takes.

The inspiration for this approach comes from an informal discussion I had with writer Simon Kerr. He argued that the reason that we love people is because they gossip with us. They lie in bed at the end of the day and tell us that, though they were polite, or even nice, to a certain person throughout the day, the truth of the matter is that they truly detest that individual. This sharing of secret thoughts, he claimed, is why we love people. As such, when a book gossips with the reader and shows them the inner working of a character's mind, especially in opposition to the way in which the character expresses themselves in their fictional world, it

provides this same level of intimate gossip. He argued that this is what causes a reader to 'love' a book and its characters, rather than merely enjoying it.

That is not to say that this approach is not without its dangers and pitfalls. The key component that required careful thought throughout *Dawnsmoke* was the concept that if the reader is aware of a character's thoughts, then how can they be surprised? How can the character make shocking choices if the reader knows what they are thinking?

The method by which I sought to avoid these issues is to ensure that *Dawnsmoke* does not show each and every thought a character could have at any given time. Instead, the focus is given to the moment that is currently occurring. For example, in Chapter 9, when Luke is fighting with a group of Walkers, his thoughts are very much focused on the task at hand – he does not have time to think about the wider rebellion, or Kuyt's opinion on his actions, or even on his frequent visits to Ferra to have his memories altered. It is only when the battle is finished, that he turns to reflect on the previous three weeks, which the reader has not been shown.

This method of controlling the specific thoughts that the reader is given access to allows for a level of intrigue and suspense to remain, despite the free, indirect style used as the reader does not know *every* thought that they might wish to. This fits in with how thoughts act in reality – a man in the process of being mugged is unlikely to think about picking up his dog at the vet later, for example. The segmented nature of the chapters in *Dawnsmoke*, with time-skips and events that remain unseen, allows this mental sleight-of-hand to both provide a familiarity between the reader and the characters, as well as keeping important moments relatively secret.

However, this does not remove the hints that a engaged reader might pick up on. For example, at the end of Chapter 13, Luke says: “I’ve got a plan. It starts with getting some big locks made. Tell me, how many black cloaks do you think you could get hold of in four days?” (p.199). The chapter then ends, and Luke does not mention this aspect of his plan again – nor does he think about it – until it comes into action. This allows each surprise or twist to be ‘earned’ as the moments do not come from nowhere, but the reader is intentionally given very little information about it. Luke then ruminates on the success of his plan after it has occurred, allowing *Dawnsmoke* to retain a level of suspense and excitement in these crucial moments.

Beyond the free-indirect style chosen, in this section I examine the voices of Luke, Samantha and Kain, as well as how they interact with the world of *Dawnsmoke* and how this interaction can provide a greater depth of understanding for the reader.

There are, of course, as many styles of voice as there are writers to create them. However, in order to provide a set of simple categories I submit that there are three styles most commonly found in fantasy literature: Archaic, Modern and Experimental.

Archaic voice refers to novels that utilise an older style of writing. This style, whilst not always reflective of a distinct dialect from the past, has all the pieces that are expected of a more formal and ancient style of discourse. The world of the novel is given a sense of history and gravitas through this linguistic flourish. For example, Robin Hobb’s characters address one another in a time befitting the novel’s setting of kings and castles. This is most evident in the letters written between characters:

*...And I trust the hounds will reach you in good health along with this missive. If it be otherwise, please have a bird sent me with such tidings, that I may advise you as to their care. In closing, I ask that you please pass on my regards to Lord Chivalry Farseer. Inform him, with my greetings, that the colt he entrusted to my care still suffers from too abrupt weaning from his dam...*¹⁰⁰

Most commonly found in mediaeval-esque fantasy, this style provides a sense of history and dust. It draws on the strength of fantasy to invoke outmoded philosophies and locations and allows the richness of the genre to bleed through.

Modern voice refers to the fantasy that is written in the style of contemporary discourse. The reader encounters a vernacular that they are familiar with and is not required to parse the language used in order to appreciate it. Authors such as Brandon Sanderson utilise this style, to mingle slang and modern terms, in order to allow the world to co-exist with the language of the author. Words such as ‘Wow’¹⁰¹ appear in *The Way of Kings*, for example.

However, it should also be noted that Sanderson is an author who uses a style of ‘Earned Language.’ Earned language refers to authorial inventions. It is a common occurrence when the world of the story grows large enough that it affects the very language of the narrative it is told in. It is usually seen when a modern word or phrase is replaced by a world-specific term. An example from *The Way of Kings* is that the word ‘Stormfather!’ is used as a curse in the same manner that a modern reader might use the expression ‘Oh God!’¹⁰²

Experimental voice refers to those authors whose use of vernacular, idiolect and dialect stands out. These authors utilise such thick accents and entire chapters of Earned Language that the voice itself becomes inextricable from the story. David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* contains a clear example of this style:

¹⁰⁰ R. Hobb, *Fool’s Errand* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 154.

¹⁰¹ Sanderson, *Way of Kings*.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

Adam, my bro, an' Pa'n'me was trekkin' back from Honokaa Market on miry roads with a busted cart-azle in draggly clothesies. Evenin' caught us up early so we tented on the southly bank o' Sloosha's Crossin', 'cos Waipio river was furyin' with days o' hard rain an' swollen by a spring tide.¹⁰³

The challenge is to craft a system of language that is different enough to create the feeling of the alien, and yet is similar enough to our own to be understood. Phrases such as 'draggly clothesies' in the above example are effective because they create a visual language. The reader can picture what is being described with little difficulty, which allows them to accept the language without being blocked by its non-standard nature.

Dawnsnake is not designed to replicate any of the three styles mentioned so far. Instead, it borrows from each of them. Much as is done in *Cloud Atlas*, *Dawnsnake* changes vernacular based on the character that is performing the role of narrator in any given chapter. It was my intention when writing *Dawnsnake*, that the reader would be able to know which character is narrating from the first line of each chapter. As such, I worked to ensure that each voice was distinct and personalised to the character that it belonged to.

Kain's voice is based on a mixture of dialects, primarily from Birmingham and Cornwall, with a little Norwich for flavour. By basing his voice on an assumed understanding of a range of English dialects I was able to ensure that Kain was never 'trapped' by the words and phrases that he could use. His vernacular evolved with him and the flourishes and odd phrasings that he coins stem from this amalgamated background of English slang.

Each dialect that is featured in Kain's voice provides a background suitable to his character. The Cornish accent is stereotypically seen as a 'farmer's' accent, with

¹⁰³ D. Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, (London: Sceptre, 2004), 249.

a post-vocalic ‘arr’ sound prominent as well as the dropped ‘h’. Kain uses the expression “im’, as opposed to ‘him’, frequently. Whilst there is no design on the text to make the ‘arr’ sound directly, it is my intention that the thick accent Kain possesses will encourage each reader to ‘hear’ a voice that resonates with his rustic charm and upbringing.

This dropped ‘h’ is also present in a thick, Black Country accent, as well as ‘g-dropping,’ which Kain subscribes to. No word written from his perspective ends in ‘ing’. I wanted to avoid adherence to one dialect directly, after all Kain is not from Cornwall he is from a farm outside of Arx, and so this combination of Black Country and Cornish dialects allows him a thick accent that does not ‘place’ him in any one specific ‘real life’ location.

Samantha voice is a mixture of Archaic and subversive. As a member of the upper class, Sam’s voice is informed by a ‘higher’ manner of speaking. However, the key word here is ‘informed’, as opposed to ‘shaped’. Whilst Samantha’s vernacular has a higher register than Kain or Luke, I did not want her to utilise the ‘noblespeak’ trope as seen in an array of novels, including *The Final Empire*:

“Lady Valette Renoux?” the young man asked... “I am Lord Rian Strobe. Would you care to dance?”

“My Lord,” Vin said, glancing down demurely, “You are kind, but this is my first ball, and everything here is so grand! I fear that I’ll stumble from nervousness on the dance floor. Perhaps next time...”¹⁰⁴

This trope can also be seen in *A Game of Thrones*:

“Your Grace,” Ned said. “Your pardons. I cannot rise.”

“No matter,” the king said gruffly. “Some wine? From the Arbor. A good vintage.”

“A small cup,” Ned said. “My head is still heavy from the milk of the poppy.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ B. Sanderson, *The Final Empire* (London: Gollancz, 2006), 223.

¹⁰⁵ G. R.R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (London: Harper Voyager, 2003), p. 412.

Whilst such language can add a sense of formality and gravitas to a situation, Arx is not a city that is overly concerned with rules and polite language. An earlier draft even included a direct comment from Samantha, when speaking with Matthew, about her desire to avoid over-formalisation:

“Well well, someone *has* been paying attention to his elocution lessons.”

“Pardon?”

“Oh nothing, kind sir. I thank you for the company, but now I shall take my leave. Fare thee well, my young Lordship. Sir.”¹⁰⁶

However, by mocking the formal aspects of conversational convention, *Dawnsmoke* began to lose all sense of intelligent discourse. The problem therein is that the reader is not provided with any *fresh* language and therefore the voices run the risk of becoming stale. In order to combat this, I utilised Samantha’s educated background to provide moments of debate, which come as a counterpoint to the visceral, ‘low’ language common in *Dawnsmoke*. An example of this is found in her conversation with Luke towards the close of the novel:

“Of course. More fighting. More death. But what happens next? When the smoke clears and people have gorged on death until they are sick of it? What then?”

Luke shrugged. “Every man for himself. When the mistakes of the past are erased, everyone is equal. I believe in people. They will decide what happens next.”

“The word you are looking for is anarchy. That is not a belief in people. It is a belief in chaos.” (p.378)

This freedom of language allowed me to ensure a balance between the guttural language of Arx and the higher register of some of its characters in order to allow fresh language to blossom throughout the text.

Luke’s voice was a challenge. Whilst Kain and Samantha had distinct starting points due to their background, Luke’s lack of past gave me more freedom to craft a voice that was uniquely his. Due to the harsh nature of Austellus, I began to

¹⁰⁶ Early draft manuscript, author’s own archive.

experiment with a crude, obscenity-filled voice that summarised the collective attitude of the beaten down and dismal people that Luke sought to represent.

As a result, the use of vulgarity became a crutch for *Dawnsmoke* in earlier drafts. When I had decided that Luke would swear with regularity, I began to use the word ‘fuck’ as an all-purpose adjective, and little else. An example of vulgarity gone too far occurs in a rejected draft of a fight scene for *Dawnsmoke*: ‘Luke growled. He was already spent, and bleeding like it was his time of the month all over.’¹⁰⁷ Whilst this phrase is fully within the range of Luke’s vernacular, feedback indicated that it was *too* crass and instead of adding a sense of grit and realism to the scene, it ran the risk of alienating the reader.

This concept of overt vulgarity, carelessly used, is discussed by Isaac Asimov, who writes that:

Ordinary people, who are not well educated and who lack a large working vocabulary, are limited in their ability to lend force to their statements. In their search for force, they must therefore make use of vulgarisms which serve, through their shock value, but which, through overuse, quickly lose whatever force they have, so that the purpose of the use is defeated. Writers, on the other hand, have (it is to be presumed) the full and magnificent vocabulary of the English language at their disposal.¹⁰⁸

Whilst I do not agree that vulgarisms only exist for their shock value, due to our widespread acknowledgement of such language in modern speech, I *was* struck by the concept that a writer should be able to seek a wider range of words in order to vocalise strong emotions and realistic feelings. This created an interesting conflict through the final drafts of *Dawnsmoke*. On the one hand, I felt honour-bound to remain accurate to the view I had of Luke, from his life in this boorish and vulgar

¹⁰⁷ Early draft manuscript, author’s own archive.

¹⁰⁸ Isaac Asimov, ‘Dialogue’, in eds. Gardner Dozois, et al, *Writing Science Fiction & Fantasy*, (1991), p. 36.

half of the city. On the other, I did not want vulgarity to become a tired concept. In the end, I settled on a compromise of two parts.

The first was to re-invent the vulgarity. Luke needs to swear. Any character in his world and his position would do so. However, to make this more palatable for the reader, I sought to freshen this vulgarity with original curses and to provide a context to his more foul-mouthed tirades. An example of this occurs when Luke believes he is going to die and verbalises his frustration with the surgeon, describing him as a: 'Pedantic, superior, cocksneffing, wet-nosed, smart-arse bastard!' (p.60)

I also sought to allow Luke a master's reflection. Whilst an uneducated man would not, perhaps, possess the language to engage in high dialogue in general conversation, that same man would utilise the technical language of a professional practitioner when discussing things that he has a great deal of experience with. As such, Luke gains a measure of complexity and linguistic engagement when he discusses topics that are close to his heart, such as knife fighting:

"Besides, you don't 'fight' with a knife. You survive with one. Trade a cut for a kill and you are on the right path. But you have to be quick. Efficient. Vicious." (p.86)

This shift allowed a measure of freedom. Instead of his third-person limited voice being a source of entrapment, Luke is able to both express a verbal level of truth about his outer-self, as well as a more reflective, sombre consideration of his inner-world.

Realism and Resolution

‘George R. R. Martin revolutionised how people think about fantasy.’¹⁰⁹

The above is the title of a *Guardian* article from 2015, which discusses the impact that *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as well as the T.V adaptation *A Game of Thrones* has had on the fantasy genre. This article carries a central quotation from George R. R. Martin’s editor, Jane Johnson who states “‘I was a huge fan of all sorts of fantasy, but *A Game of Thrones* felt so realistic.’”¹¹⁰

There is a lot to unpack in this concept of ‘realism.’ Fantasy, as has been discussed, is a bastion for the impossible. Whence then should any concept of ‘realism’ come into it? The answer to that can be found in the characters. A fantasy character should *feel* like a real person. Their world might have dragons, magic and Gods that walk beside them, but through the narrative we expect them to act, react, hurt and heal just as we do.

To examine the central ‘reality’ in *A Game of Thrones* (for that is the name the series is more commonly known by) is to examine the death of main characters and principal protagonists. As Martin notes: ‘a writer, even a fantasy writer, has an obligation to tell the truth and the truth is, as we say in *Game of Thrones*, all men must die.’¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ A. Flood, ‘George R. R. Martin revolutionised how people talk about fantasy.’ *The Guardian* (2015). Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/apr/10/george-rr-martin-revolutionised-how-people-think-about-fantasy> [Accessed 14/01/2017].

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹¹ A. Flood, ‘George R. R. Martin: *Game of Thrones* characters die because ‘it has to be done.’ *The Guardian* (2015). Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/17/george-rr-martin-game-of-thrones-characters-die-it-has-to-be-done-song-of-ice-and-fire> [Accessed 14/01/2017].

Martin is not the first author to kill off a character. Neither is he the first to eliminate a protagonist or hero 'out of the blue' in order to generate an emotional response from the reader. However, *A Game of Thrones* has popularised the idea that 'all men must die' and by doing so Martin shows the difference between a *resolution* and an *ending*.

To select a single death from *A Game of Thrones* as an exemplar was no easy task. However the death of Eddard Stark is perhaps one of the more iconic moments in this series. Martin provides the literary flourishes required to invest the reader in Eddard's plight before his eventual death. As such, in the final chapter written from Eddard's perspective, he is offered the chance to save his own life and the life of his daughter:

"I want you to serve the realm," Varys said. "Tell the queen that you will confess your vile treason, command your son to lay down his sword, and proclaim Joffrey as the true heir."¹¹²

Eddard does as he is told and the reader is led to believe that this will result in his salvation, not just through the words of the characters around him, but by narrative convention. Eddard Stark is a key protagonist. We do not expect our heroes to die. That expectation lasts up until the moment that Eddard is beheaded.

Such an act is the *end* of Eddard Stark. It is shocking, visceral and deepens the reader's interest in the wider story. However, the weakness of Martin's prose is that such a death removes a sense of *resolution* from his characters. Eddard does not grow from his imprisonment. He does not learn from his mistakes, nor does he change due to his harsh treatment. He just dies.

This is the trade-off. Martin sacrifices resolution for emotion. This creative decision builds on Martin's definition for fantasy offered earlier in this study – he

¹¹² Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, 613.

seeks the *feeling* that comes from fantasy. The shock and the spice. As such, his work is designed to prey on the emotions of his readers; to cause shock and surprise and visceral reaction. It is, in many ways, the ultimate subversion. The destruction of the plot-armour that has guarded heroes for millennia. It is no surprise that *Game of Thrones* is hailed as an evolution of fantasy, a new generation of storytelling.

Ultimately, *Dawnsmoke* rejects this philosophy.

It should be noted that *Dawnsmoke* has a fraught relationship with death. On the one hand, copper rings exist within the narrative to save any character from a wound no matter how deadly. On the other, for a narrative with a relatively small cast of characters, a good percentage of them are no longer breathing at the close of the story. The line between the living and the dead gets sharper as the story reaches its conclusion. Men and women are forced into a mindless state. They wander, undying, killing those who do not share their madness. This comes from the magical behest of Luke. The Saviour.

The final confrontation of *Dawnsmoke* stems from Luke's wilful disavowal of the truth. This is hinted at early on, as Luke states that: "My belief is *stronger* than the truth. Can't you see how amazing that is?" (p.80) His status as an Amnesiac Hero forces him into the Spire and yet when he is faced with an unfulfilling truth, he rejects it. Luke's past is gone. Torn away by his own hand. This would be a difficult thing for a man with a complete mind to accept. For Luke, it is impossible. This disregard for the truth tears him into a separate being. This new being is a paragon of falsehoods: '*THE TRUTH DOES NOT MATTER WHEN YOU CAN UNMAKE IT. REALITY IS MINE TO DICTATE.*' (p.454)

Luke has been irrevocably changed by his experience in a very direct way. His Saviour persona becomes a separate entity and decides to destroy Arx.

However, what remains of Luke assists Kain in defeating the Saviour and by doing so, Kain champions personal acceptance over wilful ignorance: "Hope is always stronger than pain." (p.459)

The truth in *Game of Thrones* might be that all men must die, but the truth in *Dawnsmoke* is far more ambiguous. Luke's fate is not revealed in the final chapters of *Dawnsmoke*. The Saviour is defeated, but of the man there is no sign. This may seem an odd choice. I have already mentioned my desire to *resolve* a character, as opposed to just *end* them. However, the lack of a concrete conclusion for Luke is not done to divest myself of authorial responsibility. Death is boring. It is finite and certain and real. Such an end does not suit Luke, a man who would tear the memories from his head rather than face what he does not want to acknowledge. Neither is his survival particularly interesting. Luke's journey is over. He has no place left in Arx. The Amnesiac Hero, his narrative is focuses on what he has forgotten and this is where his resolution lies. At the close of *Dawnsmoke*, Luke is forgotten beyond an empty grave under a bright blue sky. Thus I leave his fate in the readers' hands.

Samantha's resolution is largely in opposition to Luke's and it is earned for much the same reason. Where Luke hides from himself, Samantha embraces the sharp edges of the truth she has discovered:

"That's just not who I am. Romance, sex, marriage, none of that interests me. For a long time, I thought that meant there was something wrong with me. I wanted to cut ties with everyone. I was so convinced that I could never connect with another person. But I no longer believe that is the case. Love exists in so many forms. Parent and child, friend to friend." She patted Lizzy's hand. "Sister to sister. So I don't fancy people. So what? That is not wrong. It is just different." (p.464)

Samantha regains the connection with those who she once pulled away from and by doing so, finds resolution within herself. In opposition to *A Game of Thrones*,

Dawnsmoke seeks emotional resonance from the characters that *survive*. Both Kuyt and Saul feature in Samantha's final chapter, men who were rendered mindless, and almost as good as dead, earlier in the narrative. This survival is indicative of Samantha's resolution. She loses her father, but retains her sister and those dear to her. She grows.

The creative choices in *Dawnsmoke* are a proud fantasy. The aim of this novel was not to re-invent the genre. I chose instead to embody, subvert and renew old, tried and tested tropes of character. I set out to examine the strength of a fantasy novel that put character, if not *before* the plot then certainly on equal footing with it. My aim was simple. To open up a new space on the shelf of fantasy. To re-forge a new story from old traditions seen anew. An Amnesiac Hero with no secret past to be discovered. A Tomboy with a-romantic leanings. Luke and Samantha represent this amalgamation. Their tropes define them, in opposition or acceptance to the expectations that come with such tropes. Their resolution is therefore built into their inception. Luke falls into the darkness he has forgotten. Samantha rises through a hard-won sense of self-acceptance.

And Kain digs three graves.

His is the final chapter and thus the final subversion. Kain is presented with perhaps that most ancient of conventions – the expectation of heroism. He rejects it. To accept the trope would be to betray the truth of his character. He buries both the only man who died for him and the only man he killed and limps back home. Whilst other heroes rise to power, die, or otherwise remain heroes (even the hobbits return to fight off some bandits that are attacking the Shire) Kain chooses the other. *Dawnsmoke* is a fantasy story. I am allowed one final impossibility. Kain earns his eucatastrophe. Heroism belongs in a storybook and Kain's is the voice that brings mine to a close. He chooses simplicity, self-respect and ditches heroism.

He is better off for it.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Abercrombie, J. *The Blade Itself*. London: Gollancz, 2006.
- Abercrombie, J. *Before They Are Hanged*. London: Gollancz, 2007.
- Abercrombie, J. *Last Argument of Kings*. London: Gollancz, 2008.
- Abercrombie, J. *Best Served Cold*. London: Gollancz, 2009.
- Abercrombie, J. *The Heroes*. London: Gollancz, 2011.
- Abercrombie, J. *Red Country*. London: Gollancz, 2012.
- Atwood, M. *Oryx and Crake*. London: Virago, 2013.
- Atwood, M. *The Year of the Flood*. London: Virago, 2013.
- Atwood, M. *MaddAddam*. London: Virago, 2014.
- Canavan, T. *The Magician's Guild*. London: Orbit, 2006.
- Canavan, T. *The Novice*. London: Orbit, 2006.
- Canavan, T. *The High Lord*. London: Orbit, 2006.
- Canavan, T. *Priestess of the White*. London: Orbit, 2007.
- Canavan, T. *Last of the Wilds*. London: Orbit, 2007.
- Canavan, T. *Voice of the Gods*. London: Orbit, 2008.
- Gemmel, D. *Waylander*. London: Orbit, 2009.
- Gemmel, D. *Legend*. London: Orbit, 2009.
- George, A. [trans,]. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Feist, R. E. *Magician*. London: Harper Voyager, 1997.
- Hobb, R. *Assassin's Apprentice*. London: HarperCollins, 1996.
- Hobb, R. *Royal Assassin*. London: HarperCollins, 1997.
- Hobb, R. *Assassin's Quest*. London: HarperCollins, 1998.
- Hobb, R. *Ship of Magic*. London: HarperCollins, 1999.

Hobb, R. *The Mad Ship*. London: HarperCollins, 2000.

Hobb, R. *Ship of Destiny*. London: HarperCollins, 2001.

Hobb, R. *Fool's Errand*. London: HarperCollins, 2002.

Hobb, R. *The Golden Fool*. London: HarperCollins, 2003.

Hobb, R. *Fool's Fate*. London: HarperCollins, 2004.

Hobb, R. *Shaman's Crossing*. London: Harper, 2008.

Hobb, R. *Forest Mage*. London: Harper, 2008.

Hobb, R. *Renegade's Magic*. London: Harper, 2008.

Hobb, R. *Fool's Assassin*. London: HarperCollins, 2015.

Hobb, R. *Fool's Quest*. London: HarperCollins, 2015.

Ishiguro, K. *The Buried Giant*. London: Faber and Faber, 2015.

Jordan, R. *The Eye of the World*, London: Orbit, 2004.

Jordan, R. *The Shadow Rising*, London: Orbit, 2004.

Jordan, R. *The Great Hunt*, London: Orbit, 2005.

Jordan, R. *The Dragon Reborn*, London: Orbit, 2005.

Jordan, R. *The Fires of Heaven*, London: Orbit, 2005.

Jordan, R. *Lords of Chaos*, London: Orbit, 2005.

Jordan, R. *A Crown of Swords*, London: Orbit, 2005.

Jordan, R. *The Path of Daggers*, London: Orbit, 2005.

Jordan, R. *Winter's Heart*, London: Orbit, 2005.

Jordan, R. *Crossroads of Twilight*, London: Orbit, 2005.

Jordan, R. *Knife of Dreams*, London: Orbit, 2006.

Jordan, R. *New Spring*, London: Orbit, 2007.

Jordan, R. & Sanderson, B. *The Gathering Storm*, London: Orbit, 2009.

Jordan, R. & Sanderson, B. *Towers of Midnight*, London: Orbit, 2010.

Jordan, R. & Sanderson, B. *A Memory of Light*, London: Orbit, 2013.

- LeGuin, U. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. London: Hachette, 1969.
- Lynch, S. *The Lies of Locke Lamora*. London: Gollancz, 2006.
- Lynch, S. *Red Seas under Red Skies*. London: Gollancz, 2007.
- Lynch, S. *The Republic of Thieves*. London: Gollancz, 2013.
- Marquez, G. G. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, London: Penguin, 2000.
- Martin, G. R. R. *A Game of Thrones*. London: Harper Collins, 2003.
- Martin, G. R. R. *A Clash of Kings*. London: Harper Collins, 2003.
- Martin, G. R. R. *A Storm of Swords 1: Steel and Snow*. London: Harper Collins, 2003.
- Martin, G. R. R. *A Storm of Swords 2: Blood and Gold*. London: Harper Collins, 2003.
- Martin, G. R. R. *A Dance with Dragons 1: Dreams and Dust*. London: Harper Collins, 2011.
- Martin, G. R. R. *A Dance with Dragons 2: After the Feast*. London: Harper Collins, 2011.
- McClellan, B. *Promise of Blood*. London: Orbit, 2014.
- Mitchell, D. *Cloud Atlas*. London: Sceptre, 2004.
- Murakami, H. [Rubin, J. Trans.] *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*. London: Vintage, 2003.
- Rothfuss, P. *The Name of the Wind*. London: Gollancz, 2007.
- Rothfuss, P. *The Wise Man's Fear*. London: Gollancz, 2007.
- Sanderson, B. *The Final Empire*. London: Gollancz, 2006.
- Sanderson, B. *The Well of Ascension*. London: Gollancz, 2006.
- Sanderson, B. *The Hero of Ages*. London: Gollancz, 2006.
- Sanderson, B. *The Way of Kings*. London: Gollancz, 2010.
- Sanderson, B. *The Path of Radiance*. London: Gollancz, 2014.
- Stephenson, N. *Anathem*, London: Atlantic Books, 2009.
- Thomas, S. *The Seed Collectors*, London; Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2016.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings – 1. The Fellowship of the Ring*. London: Unwin Books, 1976.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings – 2. The Two Towers*. London: Collins, 2001.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings – 3. The Return of the King*. London: Unwin Books, 1976.

Tolkien, J.R.R & Tolkien, C. (ed.) *The Silmarillion* [e-Book] Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2nd ed., 1999.

Secondary Sources

Abaleno, 'Wordcount of popular (and hefty) epics', *The Cesspit* (2009). Available Online: <http://cesspit.net/drupal/node/1869/> Accessed 12/04/2017.

Alter, A. 'For Kazuo Ishiguro, 'The Buried Giant' is a Departure', *The New York Times* (2015). Available Online: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/books/for-kazuo-ishiguro-the-buried-giant-is-a-departure.html?_r=0 Accessed on 14/01/2017.

Altman, R. *A Theory of Narrative*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

Apter, T.E. *Fantasy Literature, An Approach to Reality*. London: Macmillan, 1982.

Attebey, B. *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1980.

Bell, J. & Magrs, P. (eds.) *The Creative Writing Coursebook*. London: Macmillan, 2001.

Booker, C. *The Seven Basic Plots – Why we tell stories*. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.

Buker, D. *The Science Fiction and Fantasy Readers' Advisory: The Librarian's Guide to Cyborgs, Aliens and Sorcerers*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2002.

Cain, S. 'Writers' Indignation: Kazuo Ishiguro rejects claims of genre snobbery', *The Guardian* (2015). Available Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/08/kazuo-ishiguro-rebuffs-genre-snobbery> Accessed on 14/01/2017.

Carpenter, H. & Tolkien, C. (eds.) *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2014

Chang, E. 'A Language that Conceals: an interview with Kazuo Ishiguro, author of The Buried Giant.' *Electric Literature*, 2015. Available Online: <https://electricliterature.com/a-language-that-conceals-an-interview-with-kazuo-ishiguro-author-of-the-buried-giant-9673849885c7#.dppo3u5mo> Accessed on 12/04/2017

Channel 4 News, *George R. R. Martin: Game of Thrones to have 'a bittersweet ending'* [Video]. Available Online: <https://youtu.be/HaFViB8mZ9I> Accessed 20/04/2017.

Clarke, A. C. *The Collected Stories of Arthur C. Clarke*. London: Gollancz, 2000.

Clute, J. & Grant, J. (eds.) "Brave Little Tailor." *The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy*, 1997. Available Online: http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=brave_little_tailor Accessed on 12/04/2017.

Collins, B. *Getting into Character – Seven Secrets a Novelist can learn from Actors*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002.

Cowan, A. *The Art of Writing Fiction*. Edinburgh: Pearson, 2011.

Cunningham, J. 'B&N Bestsellers in Science Fiction & Fantasy: January 2017.' *Barnes and Noble*, 2017. Available Online: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/sci-fi-fantasy/bn-bestsellers-science-fiction-fantasy-january-2017/> Accessed on 12/04/2017.

Dowden, S. D. *Kafka's Castle and Critical Imagination*. Columbia: Camden House, 1995.

Dozios, G., Lee, T., Schmidt, S., Strock, I. R. & Williams, S. (eds.) *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1991.

Eagleton, R. *Contemporary Fiction – A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Elliott, K. 'Writing Women Characters Into Epic Fantasy Without Quotas', *Tor* (2016). Available Online: <http://www.tor.com/2016/03/23/writing-women-characters-into-epic-fantasy-without-quotas/> Accessed on 01/06/2017.

Faktorovich, A. *The Formulas of Popular Fiction – Elements of Fantasy, Science Fiction, Romance, Religious and Mystery Novels*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 1981.

Fisk, J. 'The Popular Economy' in J. Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, a reader*, London: Pearson Education Limited, 3rd edition, 2006.

Flood, A. 'George R. R. Martin revolutionised how people talk about fantasy.' *The Guardian* (2015). Available Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/apr/10/george-rr-martin-revolutionised-how-people-think-about-fantasy> Accessed 14/01/2017.

Flood, A. 'George R. R. Martin: Game of Thrones characters die because 'it has to be done.' *The Guardian* (2015). Available Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/17/george-rr-martin-game-of-thrones-characters-die-it-has-to-be-done-song-of-ice-and-fire> Accessed 14/01/2017.

Fredericks, S. C. 'Science Fiction Studies', Vol. 5, No. 1. *Indiana: SF-TH Inc*, 1978. Available Online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239155> Accessed on 12/04/2017.

- Gaiman, N. 'Influences.' *Neil Gaiman's Blog*, 2017. Available Online: <http://www.neilgaiman.com/FAQs/Influences> Accessed on 12/04/2017.
- Ho, J. 'Tropes in young adult novels – 6 cliches,' *Ka Leo*, 2017. Available online: http://www.manoanow.org/kaleo/features/tropes-in-young-adult-novels/article_a9370034-7b22-11e7-97dc-9f28ff872f4d.html Accessed on 18/10/2017
- Irvine, I. 'The Truth About Publishing.' *Ian Irvine's Blog*, 2016. Available Online: <http://www.ian-irvine.com/on-writing/the-truth-about-publishing> Accessed on 12/04/2017
- Irwin, W. R. *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*, Urbana; Chicago; London: University of Illinois Press, 1976.
- Iser, W. *The Implied Reader – Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974.
- Jackson, R. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London: Routledge, 1998.
- James, E. & Mendlesohn, F. (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Kaler, A. K. *The Picara: From Hera to Fantasy Heroine*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991.
- Lea, R. 'Literary fiction has a problem with happy endings.' *The Guardian*, 2013. Available Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/dec/06/literary-fiction-happy-endings> Accessed on 12/04/2017.
- LeGuin, U. 'Some Assumptions about Fantasy.' *Ursula LeGuin's Blog*, 2004. Available Online: <http://www.ursulakleguin.com/SomeAssumptionsAboutFantasy.html> Accessed on 12/04/2017.
- LeGuin, U. 'Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown' in S. Wood (ed.), *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, New York: HarperCollins, 1989.
- LeGuin, U. 'Are they going to say this is fantasy?', *Book View Café* (2015). Available Online: <http://bookviewcafe.com/blog/2015/03/02/are-they-going-to-say-this-is-fantasy/> Accessed on 14/01/2017.
- Lodge, D. *The Art of Fiction*. London: Vintage, 2011.
- Lynch, S. 'Touched By A Crazy Person', *Scott Lynch's Blog* (2005). Available Online: <http://scott-lynch.livejournal.com/159686.html> Accessed on 01/06/2017.
- Manlove, C. N. *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

- Martin, G. R.R. 'On Fantasy.' *George R.R. Martin's Blog*, 2017. Available Online: <http://www.georgerrmartin.com/about-george/on-writing-essays/on-fantasy-by-george-r-r-martin/> Accessed on 12/04/2017
- Morrell, J. *Bullies, Bastards and Bitches: How To Write The Bad Guys Of Fiction*. Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2008.
- Nicholls, S. *Wordsmiths of Wonder*, London: Orbit, 1993.
- O'Connor, F. *Mystery & Manners*. London: Faber and Faber, 2014.
- Parache, J. *Howardiana 1* [e-Book] Robert-E-Howard: Electronic Amateur Press Association, 2001.
- Potts, R. 'Light in the wilderness.' *The Guardian*, 2003. Available Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/apr/26/fiction.margaretatwood> Accessed on 12/04/2017.
- Richards, L. "Terry Pratchett." *January Magazine*, 2015. Available Online: <http://januarymagazine.com/profiles/tpratchett2002.html> Accessed on 12/04/2017.
- Roberts, T. J. *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012.
- Roberts, J. & MacCallum-Stewart, E. (eds.) *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy – Beyond Boy Wizards and Kick-ass Chicks*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Rivers, R. 'LeGuin on Fantasy as a Literary Ghetto', *R4SFF* (2015). Available Online: <http://r4sff.blogspot.co.uk/2015/11/le-guin-on-fantasy-as-literary-ghetto.html> Accessed on 14/01/2017.
- Sambuchino, C. 'Word Count for Novels and Children's Books: The Definitive Post.' *Writer's Digest*, 2012. Available Online: <http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/guide-to-literary-agents/word-count-for-novels-and-childrens-books-the-definitive-post> Accessed on 12/04/2017.
- Sammons, M. C. *War of the Fantasy Worlds: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R Tolkien on Art and Imagination*, California: Praeger, 2010.
- Sanderson, B. 'Sanderson's First Law.' *Brandon Sanderson's Blog*. 2007. Available Online: <https://brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-first-law/> Accessed on 12/04/2017.
- Sanderson, B. 'Sanderson's Second Law.' *Brandon Sanderson's Blog*. 2012. Available Online: <https://brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-second-law/> Accessed on 12/04/2017.

Sanderson, B. 'Sanderson's Third Law of Magic.' *Brandon Sanderson's Blog*. 2013. Available Online: <https://brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-third-law-of-magic/> Accessed on 12/04/2017.

Sandner, D. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, Connecticut; London: Praeger Publishers, 2004

Saricks, J. C. *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2009.

Scholes, R. *Structural Fabulation*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.

Smith, J. 'Analysing chapter lengths in fantasy fiction.' *Creativity Hacker*, 2013. Available Online: <http://creativityhacker.ca/2013/07/18/analyzing-chapter-lengths-in-fantasy-fiction/> Accessed on 12/04/2017

Storey, J. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, a reader*, London: Pearson Education Limited, 3rd Edition, 2006.

Todorov, T. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973.

Tolkien, S. 'Tolkien's grandson on how WW1 inspired The Lord of the Rings' *BBC* (2017). Available Online: <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20161223-tolkiens-grandson-on-how-ww1-inspired-the-lord-of-the-rings> Accessed 12/04/2017.

Tolkien, J.R.R. 'On Fairy Stories.' Full Text available. *Brainstorm Services*, 2004. Available Online: <http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2004/fairystories-tolkien.pdf> Accessed on 12/04/2017

Vogler, C. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, San Francisco: Michael Wiese Productions, 3rd Edition, 2007.

Walter, D. 'Fantasy must shake off the tyranny of the mega-novel.' *The Guardian*, 2015. Available Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/may/15/fantasy-tyranny-mega-novel-george-rr-martin> Accessed on 12/04/2017.

Ward, M. (ed.) *Grimdark Magazine: Issue #4*, [e-Book] Grimdark Magazine, Online Copyright, 2014.

Westfahl, G. (ed.). *The Greenwood Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy – Themes, Works and Wonders*. London: Greenwood Press, 2005.

Walmsley, L (ed.) *C. S. Lewis Essay Collection; Literature, Philosophy and Short Stories*, London: Harper Collins, 2002.

Zamora, L. P & Farris, W. B. (eds.) *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1995.