

Coalesce

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Prologue

It was good wine. Sixten had no trouble saying that and with his considerable experience with enjoying such drinks he could feel comfortable calling himself an expert. But he didn't drink things because of their taste.

He drank to get drunk.

He drank more than before.

Having been left behind at the hands of the Lord Saviour had been unexpected. Having sat alone at the table with him, after everyone else had Alternated away, he had been certain the next thing he'd experience would be death. To his surprise that had not been the case.

Instead he'd found himself having a job offered to him. Owning an Alternating business was something the Lord Saviour saw benefit from. And having lost Vincent and his operation meant he was in the market for a new one. Saying no would have brought about the death experience so he had not had real choice in the matter.

He now worked for the maniac that wanted to destroy the worlds.

"Fuck this shit," Sixten muttered and felt around the table, hoping to find more to drink. Laying on the floor meant he had to do it blindly. Finally, his hand found a familiar shape and grabbed it. It felt full so he took a swig and grimaced.

It wasn't good wine.

He took another gulp.

It tasted slightly better.

He chuckled to himself and laid back down on the floor. He'd been put in the same room where there had previously been three people. There was plenty of room for him, though the only space he used was the table for his drinks and the floor on which he laid.

It was easier not to climb into bed. The floor wasn't that hard after you'd drunk enough.

He spilled some wine over himself when the door slammed open.

"Sixten!" the Lord Saviour roared and looked around the room before finally spotting the man laying down behind the table. He walked over and stared down

at him with eyes that sobered him up like a cold bucket of water.

“Yes, my lord?” asked Sixten with a drunken smile.

“It's time to stop marinading your liver,” said the Lord Saviour.

“Oh?” a burp escaped Sixten.

The Lord Saviour frowned. “Something has happened. An opportunity presents itself to us. You need to go back home and start preparing.”

Sixten smiled and took a swig of wine. “Home it is then.” He tried to get up, but his balance was way off and demanded some support from the floor and then the table before he was up on unsteady feet.

The Lord Saviour gave him a doubtful look, but said nothing more.

He only hoped the man would do as told.

If he didn't, he'd be easy enough to kill.

Chapter 1

Where there had been a crater there was now a mishmash of things. Carl could see half of a skyscraper that could have been from his own world. There was a slice of a mountain and right next to it a patch of jungle with all the animal noises such a thing brought with it. All in all there had to be patches from a dozen worlds.

All of them filled the place where Siver had once been.

“I didn't mean for this to happen,” said Carl as he continued to look down on the sight. There was no sign of the army that had been there nor of the lizard men that had fought to keep the city. The crater had extended well beyond where the command post had been so it seemed unlikely anyone had escaped it. Where they all had ended up was a complete mystery.

“It wasn't all your fault,” said Eve, her voice deep because of the dragon form she was in. Carl was straddled on her neck, in a spot she had moulded on herself to make it comfortable to sit there. “The children of Tina used an attack that was dangerous to begin with. She had not taught them anything it seems. The result was a catastrophe.”

“I'm glad you taught me at least a little bit,” said Carl. He'd been using his powers without any understanding how dangerous it could be. It was a small miracle nothing had gone wrong before. The first time he Alternated could have easily turned as destructive as the battle at Siver.

“There is a lot you need to learn before you can use your power safely,” said Eve and circled around the site. There were small figures walking about here and there. Unfortunate creatures caught in the event, ripped from their worlds into a foreign one, slammed together with dozens with the same fate.

It wasn't only that portions from other worlds had been brought there.

The way was still open to some.

Looking closely they could see shimmering portals here and there. Each led to the world from which the spot of land had come from. How long those pathways would remain open was anyone's guess, but the fact they remained so

was worrying. The barriers that held the worlds apart had weakened. Any further stress might be enough to completely break them down and that would lead to exactly what the Lord Saviour wanted.

Worlds spilling into each other in utter chaos.

“Is there any way to find out where everyone ended up?” asked Carl. He was worried about his friends. They couldn't have escaped the event and were now in some other world. None of them had a way to get back home. Carl was their only hope, but he had no place to start looking.

“All we can hope to do is identify each world down there,” said Eve. Identifying a random piece of jungle to be from some world looked like an impossible task. “Then search all of them.”

Finding a few people in a foreign world wouldn't be an easy task. They could have ended up anywhere on them. It could have meant years of searching in each one and even then there was no guarantee of finding anyone.

“That sounds like an impossible task,” said Carl in a disappointed voice.

“It is,” said Eve with a sympathetic voice. A dozen worlds was only a small slice of what was out there, but even that was a massive area. A needle in a haystack was easy to find compared to what they were facing.

“But that's not our only problem,” Eve continued. “This is exactly what the Lord Saviour has been waiting for. He has no doubt felt what has happened, if he's even half of the creature he's killed. He will start to act and that's a bigger concern for us.”

Carl struggled. He wanted to find his friends. What could he do against the Lord Saviour? Nothing. At the same time he knew there was little he could do for his friends. They would have to fend for themselves where ever they were. But he'd keep his eyes and ears open. Any sign of them and he'd jump at it to find them.

“I'm not sure what I can do about that,” said Carl and looked down on the weird puzzle of different land areas. From above it looked almost like art. On the ground level it would have been much more unnerving, of that he had no doubt.

“You will need some more training,” said Eve and circled the area once more. It was a calm day with a cloudless sky. The sun brought with it warmth even high

in the air.

“And then?” asked Carl. He did not like the way she was setting him up to be some sort of champion. “I’ll go face the Lord Saviour all alone and win the day?” He laughed at the idea.

Eve remained silent for a moment. “You can’t do it alone,” she admitted and glanced back at him. Her long neck could bend in surprising ways so she had a clear view of the man riding her. “I will help you. If this is only the beginning then I can not stand by the sidelines and let the man destroy everything.”

“Are there any others that might help us?” asked Carl. While her help alone would be significant, would it be enough? The more help they had the more likely they were to be successful. Given what Eve was, she was bound to know creatures as powerful as she was who could contribute significantly in the fight.

“Perhaps.” Eve did not sound too hopeful, but it was a possibility. There was hope.

“Let’s head south for a bit. I want to see if any of the army escaped.” It seemed unlikely given the range of the crater, but maybe someone had been lucky. Carl clung to what pieces of hope still remained.

Eve did as told and started flying south. They passed the edge of the crater and followed the road. From high up it was easy to see a large area, but there was nothing moving on the ground. Some scattered equipment and stray horses were all that told of an army having been there. It told some might have escaped, but the majority of the force had already been decimated by Tina. The survivors from that wouldn’t have had time to run away far enough.

He didn’t know the survivors from Siver had been brought along. The general had been so confident about the coming victory that many had agreed to follow him back north with their families. Those people were now gone as well.

Had Carl known that he might have spent some more time looking around.

“Doesn’t look like we’ll find any survivors,” said Carl and looked around once more. Nothing but empty landscape.

“They might be afraid of me,” said Eve.

“Possibly,” Carl admitted. It had been a creature much like her that had taken down an entire army. Anyone that had seen that would be hiding under the

closest rock they could find when seeing her. They wouldn't be out in the open.

For a moment they flew in silence, both observing the ground below. They could have gone far south if they wanted to. She could fly at an incredible speed if need be. There just didn't seem to be any point in doing so.

"Let's go back," said Carl.

"To the crater?" asked Eve.

"No. Your home."

"All right," said Eve. "Do you want to do it or should I?"

"Best you do it," said Carl. He was too distracted by his own thoughts. He couldn't let go of the feeling that he had failed his friends. That the whole thing was his fault. The guilt of not being able to fix it pressed on heavily as well.

The bright flash made him blink furiously to regain his vision.

There was a slight change in the air. It was more warm. There were smells that had not been there before. Looking down Carl could see the temple the grey men had built for Eve. It wasn't that far down, being on top of a mountain, but the valley below was far away enough to make it difficult to see details. All you could really see were the patches of different fields, the roads that cut through them and the occasional clusters of buildings. The river sparkled in the sunlight like a diamond necklace.

Eve circled the temple a few times before starting her descent. She didn't go for the main entrance, but rather the large stone balcony on the back side. It was big enough to handle her dragon form and there were large doors that allowed her access back into her chamber.

Her wings kicked up dust and sand when she landed. She gracefully lowered her head to allow Carl to climb down. The mountain wind rustled his shirt and the large sleeves. It was an attire the priests had gotten him and followed the style of the local peasantry. The trousers were loose and allowed for good movement. They were a practical set more than anything. No bright colours to draw attention to you, unlike in the priests robes.

Before Eve could even take her human form, a door was opened and a group of priests rushed out to meet her. They gave Carl some glares and looks of disapproval. Though none of them had spoken with him it was clear they did not

want him to be there. They wanted Eve all to themselves and were upset that a complete stranger was taking up most of her time. More troubling than that was the fact they had to somehow fit him in with their beliefs. That was not an easy task when they knew next to nothing of who he was and why he was there.

The priests started their hand waving and by the looks they gave Carl, he was the topic of the discussion. The look of disapproval from Eve did nothing to deter the group.

At first Carl had had trouble telling each of them apart, but having had some time now, there were clear differences in them. Some of the grey men had a more deep tone to their skin, some had spots on their skin, some had less hair than others, but still the most distinguishing feature among the priests was their clothing. They were like peacocks, calling the world to look at their assortment of colours in admiration.

Their hand motions were becoming increasingly aggressive and the expression on Eve was growing ever more disapproving. She motioned back at them, her move short and crisp, telling the weight of her words. The priests did not relent, but eventually Eve seemed to get them to appreciate her point of view and the group left, but not without giving glares to Carl.

“What was that about?” Carl asked as the last of the priests disappeared inside the temple. He had a bad feeling about the entire thing.

“They are just concerned,” said Eve.

“About me?”

“Yes.”

“Should I leave?” asked Carl. There were other places he could go. Going home wasn't out of the question though he suspected the police were still interested in finding him over the shooting incident. But what was at play here was something far more dangerous. Interfering with other peoples faith rarely resulted in anything good. The potential for misunderstanding and even violence could no be discounted. And when the religious decided it was time for violence there was little to be done about it.

“I've convinced them that you are a servant to me,” said Eve.

“You don't treat me like one,” Carl noted. The priests weren't stupid. They

would know the difference between a servant and what he was. He was more an apprentice than anything and that was a worrying prospect for priests that no doubt hoped they were the ones in such a position.

“Should I start to?” Eve turned to regard him with a sly smile. Despite her similarity to Tina there was no denying she had her own sort of charm. She had a more refined and mature feel about her that distinguished her from her daughter.

“Would that help anything?” Carl had his doubts. The priests saw what they wanted to. Going away was the only thing that would ease the situation.

“Probably not. They're a stubborn bunch,” said Eve and started towards the door.

“I find it odd that they argue with their god so much. You'd think they'd be more obedient,” said Carl and followed her inside. They'd used the smaller door the priests had and it led them straight to the large hall where they had first alternated into the world with Seth and Tanya.

“I'm afraid that is my own doing,” said Eve with a resigned voice. She started towards her own chambers. “I never demanded strict adherence to everything. I never wanted the religion to be stuck relying on thousands of years old text to guide them in the now. No words are that timeless. The world around and the people in it evolve and change. So do their values. So I encourage them to question things, even the decisions of their god.”

“Isn't that a bit contradictory? A gods word is supposed to be infallible.” They entered her chamber. There were chairs there, left over from their previous session. She had managed not to crush them this time.

“Where does it say a god must be perfect?” Eve asked and took a seat. She kept Carl under her gaze.

“Nowhere I suppose,” replied Carl as he took a seat. The conversation had been a good distraction from the problem at hand. Now all the worries rushed back to haunt him.

“What are we going to do?” Carl asked and gave Eve a look, hoping for some reassurance that everything would work out, that his friends could somehow be found and brought back from where ever they were.

Eve regarded him with a sympathetic eye. “We need to train you some more.”

Carl nodded. The event had been a sobering reminder how little he knew. It was terrifying to realize the scientist that had discovered Alternating had no idea what was involved. Their first attempt could have been a disaster. "We don't have infinite time on our hands."

Eve nodded. "We'll train as long as we can."

"What about those possible friends of yours who might help us?"

Her expression grew darker. "A creature like me has more enemies than friends. But there are a few. They're hard headed and unlikely to take action, but I will ask. Too much is at stake to ignore the help they might provide, even if the chance for it is small."

"You lose nothing by asking," said Carl and adjusted his position. A feeling of weakness washed over him.

"Are you all right?" asked Eve and examined him with a worried look.

Carl gave her a weak smile. "No. A lot has happened. Very little of it good. Everything seems to go to hell as of late. Ever since Rand killed his wife, nothing good has happened. It has been one disaster after another. I can't help but feel like our small group is cursed."

"The only curses in this world are the ones you make yourself," said Eve. She could understand why the man was feeling down. There was only so much one could take before the bad feelings drowned out the good ones. He needed something good to happen. She was unsure what that could be. What could she do?

"If that's the case then I'm a master at making them," said Carl and laughed a little. It wasn't a joyous laugh. It was one filled with irony and self pity. He couldn't quite account why his mood had changed so quickly. Maybe it was because it was the first quiet moment since the Siver incident? His thoughts finally had time to arrange themselves and start pressing on him.

"Come on, let's do some training." Eve hoped that would get his mind off the burdens placed on his shoulders. If nothing else at least he'd be too busy to think about them for a while.

Carl nodded and they started. Eve continued from where they had left off during the three day session they'd previously had. When Eve had Alternated

both of them away from the calamity at Siver they'd spent a day getting themselves back together. The event took that long to settle down and Carl had needed the rest. Even after a day Eve had been hesitant to return there, but Carl had convinced her that either she came along or he'd go in alone. She had not wanted that given what could have been waiting.

And while she did not admit it to him, she had been curious to see what had resulted from it.

The training was always a good distraction. It forced Carl to empty his mind of everything else and focus on listening and doing what he was told. The physical strain built up over time and made him feel like he'd taken a long bath. At least after the initial discomfort went away.

They had already gone through what had triggered the event at Siver and Carl now knew it was not entirely his fault. His opponents had not known what they were doing and that had resulted in the catastrophe. Now, Eve drilled into him the many rules she had found to keep herself safe even against opponents that knew little about the power they were wielding.

It wasn't all theory. They went through practical things as well. Carl used his powers more than ever before and felt the strain of it harder than before. At the same time he had to admit he was getting more accustomed to it and could do more at a time.

By the time they were done it was dark outside.

"I think that's enough for today," said Eve and stood up.

Carl let go of his powers and the column of air that he had been controlling dispersed, rustling some of the papers that were loose in the room. He let out a long sigh and wiped some sweat from his brow.

"Tomorrow we'll visit a friend and see if we can get some help," Eve continued and stretched. Carl had a hard time keeping his eyes off her. Despite what she was, few men could have kept their eyes off her.

"Is he here or in another world?" asked Carl.

Eve shrugged. "He travels. There are a few spots we can try. Maybe we'll get lucky."

"That's not much to go on," said Carl. Still, he wasn't surprised. Creatures

like her seemed the sort that would either carve a place for themselves somewhere or never settle anywhere for long. They either wanted to keep exploring or make their own place.

“That's how some of us are,” said Eve and looked out the window. “I travelled long and through many worlds before I settled here. Even then I still sometimes feel like venturing out to explore and leave everything behind.”

“I wonder how many of your priests would kill themselves in the resulting religious crisis,” said Carl in a wry voice.

Eve laughed. “All too many. I've chained myself down pretty well.” Part of her sounded regretful over the fact while another part seemed happy that there was a place where she was regarded so highly.

“There are worse prisons to be in,” said Carl.

Eve glanced around the room. The piles of books made it feel like home to her. A few pesky priests were a small price to pay for having a place that made you feel that way. “You're right,” she admitted and gave the man a smile.

“Well, I suppose I'll be going now. Hopefully my supper has been prepared.” Carl turned to leave.

“If they haven't, let me know. I'll whip them some,” said Eve. It was clear she was making light of it.

“I will. Good night,” said Carl and gave her a smile before closing the large door behind him. He wasn't sure whether she needed sleep, but even she didn't, he did. The large hall echoed empty when he walked through it and into the quarters assigned to him. The small room at the end of the corridor had the familiar table and chairs.

Carl was pleased to see a tray with food resting on the table. He sat down and enjoyed a quick meal. The training had sapped his energy and the tender meat along with the vegetables gave him a much needed boost. He went out to the stone balcony to let the food settle down. He had a cup of what could only be called the local wine. It was sweet, but had a nice warmth to it when going down your throat.

He watched the sun set behind the mountains surrounding the valley before finally going to his room and settling down for the night. Though the bed wasn't

the most comfortable one, Carl was too tired to notice. The wine had loosened his muscles and had him feeling more drowsy than before.

It wasn't long until he drifted to sleep.

The awakening was rude.

Hands grabbed him and pinned him down on the bed. In the darkness it was difficult to see what was going on, but the flash of familiar shapes told him enough.

The priests had not been satisfied with Eve's words.

He tried to struggle, but the hold on him was firm. Before he could yell, his mouth was covered and eyes blindfolded. Before he could muster his power he was struck on the head hard enough to make him see stars. It made it impossible to focus his mind enough to do anything.

Carl was helpless when he was hoisted up and carried from the room.

Chapter 2

Even though it was distant the sound of artillery fire carried over the bay clearly. In the darkness of night bursts of light could be seen when the projectiles landed on the hillside. Fires broke out and painted a disturbing orange in the blackness.

Seth watched it from the balcony with a drink in hand.

It felt unreal.

A battle raged not far from where he was, yet he had an air-conditioned room and a drink with a small umbrella in hand. He sipped some of the milky white liquid and let out a satisfied sigh. The ice cubes ensured it was cold, just as intended.

Tanya had assured it was safe. The city they were in was a popular tourist place. It was easy to believe that with the beach that stretched for miles and the sound of music coming from the various night clubs in the distance. Neither side in the local war wanted to touch the city.

The leaders on both sides had their vacation homes along the beach. Many of their wealthiest supporters had similar interests in the area. Money spoke harder than ideology and both sides had agreed to leave the city alone and keep a safe zone around it.

It was a stroke of luck they had landed where they had. It had been only a short walk to one of Tanya's hideouts. Though it had been made more difficult by their nakedness and the fact one of them had been unconscious. But they had made it.

There was only the penthouse above the apartment. Plenty of room with a living room, full kitchen, a bathroom and three bedrooms. They'd stashed the unconscious girl in one of the rooms and tied her down. They didn't want her waking up and escaping. He was an enemy after all.

Tanya had had clothes for herself, but she'd had to make a run to get something for Seth when morning broke. Her taste left something to be desired. She'd brought a pair of white pants that were cut off at knee height and a t-shirt

that looked like a warehouse full of different coloured paints had spilled on it. But there was no denying they were made for the hot climate they were in and they were comfortable to wear.

Seth sipped some more of his drink.

He had to admit to himself he was lost on what to do. He had no chip with which to return home. Tanya had one, but she couldn't take him with her and without her he was lost in the world they'd arrived at. His only luck was they had landed in the safest place available. Ten miles north and they'd have been in the middle of a war zone.

But that still left him stranded.

There was no way to go back and reunite with his friends. If they were even alive. The event had been disastrous enough that it could have sent them to a place that saw them dead upon arrival. Or they could have died when the shimmering wall hit them. There was no way to know.

The balcony door slid open and Tanya joined him, drink in hand. She had a colourful piece of cloth wrapped around her waist, acting the part of a makeshift skirt. A bikini top was all she wore to cover her upper half.

"They must be really going at it if we can see flames all the way here," she said and looked at the distant orange glimmer. The distant booms told the fight was far from over.

"Seems so," said Seth and took another sip. He knew it was strong stuff, but the taste made him think it was nothing stronger than milk. Treacherous substance.

Tanya glanced at him. The light from inside the apartment cast shadows on his face that made him look more worried than he was. "We'll figure something out."

"How's our guest?" asked Seth. He didn't feel like talking about possibilities that were slim to none. The only thing he could think that would save them was if Carl was alive and he somehow found out where they had ended up. Maybe Tanya would be able to get him a message in their home world, but even that was unlikely.

And it all hung on him still being alive and looking for them.

“Still unconscious,” said Tanya. She had not said much about her. She agreed it was likely she was the dragon that had crashed into them, but she had refused to talk about what to do with her. Other than restrain her.

“We should just kill her,” said Seth. If she woke up it would be much harder. She might even escape, despite the restraints.

“She could be of use to us,” said Tanya and sipped her drink. It was blood red and thick, almost like syrup. “If she's like Tina then she might be able to Alternate.”

“Not likely she would help us,” said Seth and enjoyed the brief breeze that blew from across the bay. There was a hint of smoke mixed in with the saltiness.

“If we kill her we won't have even that slim chance,” said Tanya and leaned against the railing.

Seth glanced at her again, his eyes wandering down from her face. Her bikini left exposed a small beauty spot on her right breast that begged for attention. He quickly returned to admiring the view over the dark bay.

“You're probably right,” he admitted and gulped down what remained of his drink.

“But there are worse places to be stuck in,” said Tanya in a light hearted voice. “With your power you could be a great help in my work. We could live like kings here.”

“Off the blood of others?” asked Seth and started to shake his head, but stopped. He remembered the peasants he had cut down to escape in Siver. His hands were already stained with the blood of innocents. No, making money like that wasn't an option.

“All money is stained in someone's blood,” said Tanya. “Be it the miner that dug out the coal and died in the cave-in or the woman who worked twelve hours a day to assemble your phone and then killed herself because of stress.”

“You have a dark view of the world,” said Seth. Even though he wasn't a positive person himself, even he didn't see the world so dark. There were good ways to earn money that hurt no one. He had had one back home.

“It's not my fault if the world is dark,” said Tanya and sipped her drink.

Looking at her it was hard to come to terms with the fact she was an

assassin. She had made a living by killing people and her most successful arena had been Benevez, the world they were in right now. While her body was well toned it was hard to call her anything but innocent looking. That deceptive appearance was one of the reasons she was so successful.

“I need a refill,” said Seth and turned to open the balcony door. Tanya remained behind to enjoy the fresh air. Inside the apartment it was much cooler than outside. Air-conditioning had its benefits, not the least of which was the moisture it sapped from the air, making it that much more bearable.

Seth walked over to the small table by the sofa arrangement and started mixing himself a new drink. A handful of ice from a small bucket, several large pouring from three different bottles and he had a new glass of the same drink he'd enjoyed before.

Taking a sip from it and nodding with approval, he made his way to the corridor and peeked in through the first door. The lights were on so he had full view of the woman strapped to the bed. The handcuffs were tight and she was pressed down to the bed by several strong straps. She would not be able to move even if she had the strength of ten men.

Her resemblance to Tina was worrying, though she was clearly younger than her. There was a hint of immaturity to everything about her. Still, there was no denying she was her child. That explained why she had appeared from the city like she had. It raised the question when she had had time to give birth to her and the sibling she had, as well as who she had roped into fathering them.

Seth sipped his drink and leaned against the door frame.

He nearly missed her stirring.

He rushed into the room and set his drink down on the night stand.

Again, the young woman moved.

“Tanya!” His voice was loud enough to carry outside through the cracked open balcony door. He had intended to return quickly, but now it looked like the schedule for the evening was being turned upside down.

She opened her eyes. Seth readied himself and gathered up some electricity. Enough to shock her unconscious if need be.

“What is it?” asked Tanya when she appeared in the doorway. Seth gave a

nod towards their prisoner and she quickly realized she had woken up. They were both under her intensive investigation.

“Who are you?” asked Seth.

She glared at both of them and tried to move.

Seth was not in the mood for playing games. He grabbed her by the thigh and let a small shock of electricity loose. It made the young woman yelp in pain.

“That was a very lenient one. I can shock you hard enough to fry you. So please, answer my questions.” Seth stared right back at her.

“I'm Celia,” the girl finally said, her voice filled with displeasure.

“Is Tina your mother?” asked Seth.

“Yes.” Celia gritted her teeth. She hated being trapped like she was. With the man so close to her there was no time to change into something else and slip away.

“Who's your father?” asked Tanya, eliciting a glance from Seth. It was a question he had hoped to avoid.

“John,” Celia replied. She took a moment to examine her two captors. The last thing she remembered was the shimmering bubble appearing and then a blinding light and pain that seemed to go on for an eternity. The look of shock on the man made her smile. He must have been one of his old friends.

“How..” Seth started but then shook his head. It wasn't important how it had happened. Her being John's daughter did not change what she was.

“Where are we?” asked Celia and looked around the room for the first time. There were things there she had never seen before. The light on the ceiling was strange with no flame fluttering about.

“We're not in Kendle any more,” said Tanya and walked over next to the bed. She looked down at Celia. “We're in another world. It's called Benevez.”

“Another world?” asked Celia. Of course. Her mother had travelled to several of them.

“Do you know how to do that? Travel to another world?” asked Seth. Her knowing was the only reason to keep her alive. If she didn't then killing her would be the best option. Letting her loose in the world would be a disservice to everyone.

“No,” Celia admitted and upon seeing his expression she realized it had been a mistake to confess it. He had already threatened her. There was little keeping him from killing her.

Seth gave Tanya a look than said I told you so. She frowned in return.

“So you're stuck here with us,” said Tanya and turned her attention to Celia.

“Not for long,” muttered Seth.

“If you're going to kill me then do it already,” said Celia. “But you'll be killing your only hope of getting away from here.”

“You just said you can't do it,” said Seth.

“It doesn't mean I can't learn,” said Celia. She didn't like being stuck in a strange world any better than he did. Her worry was of her mother and brother. There was even slight concern for John which she found curious.

“How can we trust you?” asked Seth and glanced over at Tanya. “The moment you're loose you could easily escape, transform and go on a rampage in this world.”

She did nothing to argue the point.

“There's not much I can give you besides my word,” said Celia, knowing fully that it was not much. Seth did not look like he trusted anyone besides the people he'd known for years. Certainly, he would not trust someone who had been an enemy mere days ago.

“That's not much,” muttered Seth and started pacing around the room.

“I could strap a bomb on her,” said Tanya in a conversational voice.

Seth stopped in his tracks. “What?”

Tanya shrugged her shoulders. “It's not hard. A small collar around her neck with a few sensors. If it's tampered with or she transforms it'll explode. It'll rip apart her throat.” It sounded like she had used such a device before.

“Do you actually have one of those?” asked Seth with a combination of curiosity and repulse.

“I might,” said Tanya and turned to leave the room.

“I'll wear it,” said Celia in a quiet voice. She had no intention of escaping. Being at the hands of enemies was better than being in a strange world all alone. Especially when those enemies seemed willing to let her live. There was no

guarantee the world outside would be as kind. She had known nothing but hostility from the outside world in the place she'd lived her entire life.

Seth glared down at her and continued pacing. He seemed to be struggling with the idea.

Tanya returned, carrying what looked like nothing more than a decorative choker. It seemed to be made of black velvet, though upon closer inspection you could tell it wasn't and there was a thickness to it that separated it from any normal piece of wear. A small silver shaped heart hung on it.

"This should do," she said and went to the bed. Without asking for permission she put it around Celia's neck and took a step back to admire it. The small heart hung against her skin, right beside some very visible veins.

The material felt comfortable on Celia's skin, though it was a bit tight and made swallowing somewhat of a struggle. But she could bear it.

"Happy now?" Celia turned to give Seth a look.

"You're sure it works?" asked Seth, ignoring her and instead focusing on Tanya.

"I wouldn't have brought it up if I wasn't," replied the blonde woman and presented to him a small device. "With that you can remotely trigger it."

Seth took the device. It wasn't complex. Just a grey plastic box with two buttons and a light that blinked. He gave Tanya questioning look.

"The light tells you the device is active. The yellow button deactivates it and the brown one makes it go off."

"Wouldn't you usually use red and green for the buttons?" asked Seth.

"You have to work with what you've got," said Tanya, not biting into the humour.

Seth turned the device in his hands a few times before glancing at Celia again. "All right. We'll see how this goes. Any trouble from you and I will make your head explode. Got it?"

Celia nodded.

"All right. Let's cut her loose," said Seth and with help from Tanya they undid the straps holding her down. For a brief moment she was naked before she let her usual dress flow over her body. For a brief moment she was afraid it might

trigger the collar, but when she did nothing to change the area around it she figured it would be safe.

She was right.

Her muscles groaned when she sat up and stretched. It was enough to tell her she had been in bed for a few days. Her two captors gave her room to stand up and stretch her legs. There was much for her to be curious about. The light in the ceiling drew her attention first. No flame, no smoke, what sort of light was it?

“What kind of light is that?” she finally asked after staring at it for a while.

“Electric,” said Seth.

The answer did not make it any more clear, but she didn't ask any more about it.

“You've never been to any other world?” asked Tanya. The way she was staring at every piece of technology with intense curiosity was enough to tell that much.

Celia shook her head. “No. My mother has been to countless ones. She never told us much about them. We didn't have much time together.”

Her regretful tone was enough to melt Seth's heart a little. She couldn't be evil to the core if she felt like that over missing time with her mother. He let out a sigh and started towards the door. “I'm going to finish my drink.”

Tanya followed him out and a moment later Celia followed. She took careful steps, as if any moment the floor might give out underneath her. The living room and its various electronics had her distracted for a long time. Especially after she discovered how to turn on the television. She glanced out to the balcony once in a while to see Tanya and Seth enjoying their drink and talking. Sometimes they were giving glances back at her to ensure she was still there.

She found it odd they had left her alone so easily after displaying so much distrust. They must have had faith in the collar she'd been weighed down with.

The images on the television stole most of her attention, not leaving much room for worrying. The images of explosions and people dying, soldiers rushing from crumbled building to another only to be replaced by an advertisement for some drink that made kids smile. She flipped through channels, exposing herself to the wide variety of content on offer, from nature documentaries to news and

children's cartoons.

It made her realize just how confined her view of the world had been.

It made her think of what John had said to her, that she had missed many lessons in life. She was starting to think he had been right.

A growl escaped her stomach. She looked around. Not seeing any other option, she stood up from the couch and walked to the balcony. She was surprised how easily the glass door slid to the side to let her out. The air had a smell to it she had never experienced before, but it wasn't unpleasant in any way.

Seth and Tanya both turned to regard her.

For the first time in her life Celia found words escaping her. She had intended to ask for food, but the scenery before her made her walk forward and lean against the railing.

So many lights!

It made Siver seem like a small village. In either direction she looked, the lights continued as far as she could see. When she turned to look forward into the distance, she could see the orange flames painting a distant hillside.

"What's that?" she asked.

"War," replied Tanya.

"Against who?"

"Another nation."

"Why?"

"She has a lot of questions for someone who's supposed to help us," said Seth and took a sip from his drink.

Celia frowned at him. "I'm not even one year old. Don't expect me to know everything."

Seth had not even thought of that. If John was her father then she really could not be that old, despite her appearances. She looked old enough to be in her late teens. You wouldn't confuse her for a child no matter how hard you looked at her.

"Even I don't know why," Seth finally admitted and gave Tanya a look. All he knew was the world was torn by war. The reasons for it were something he'd never bothered to find out. His thoughts had been to avoid the place all together.

"It's the usual ones," said Tanya and took a sip from her drink. "Various ethnic groups oppressing each other over old grudges. Swaths of land that are disputed between nations. The fight to control certain resources. Opposing religions. It's a tangled mess that I doubt even the warring parties fully understand. That makes peace a difficult prospect."

Celia thought about it for a moment as she watched the orange flames spread in the distance. Occasional loud bangs still carried over the bay. "They're worse than we were. We just wanted a home. They already have one, but they're not satisfied with it."

Tanya and Seth exchanged looks. Seth especially seemed to have a hard time accepting her point of view. He'd seen the slaughter at Siver. She had not been around to see it. Maybe the intentions had changed over time, but that did not change the fact it had all started with blood instead of talk.

A growl pulled them all out of their thoughts.

"Do you have any food?" asked Celia, not wanting to look at either one of them.

Tanya smiled. "There's plenty of stuff in the kitchen. Come on, I'll show you."

The two women walked out, leaving Seth to look after both of them before turning back to the scenery. There was a lot he needed to process.

"Is he always like that?" asked Celia and followed Tanya into the kitchen. She admired the marble counters and could not resist rummaging through drawers to see what was in them. She even opened up the oven and tried to figure out what its purpose was. There was nowhere to put the wood.

"He's a grumpy sort," admitted Tanya and opened the fridge. Celia was next to her in a flash, looking delighted at the cool air that hit her. She watched Tanya pull out some ready cut meat, butter, lettuce and tomatoes.

Celia looked like she wanted to ask more about the fridge and how it worked, but she remained silent. She climbed onto a stool and took a seat while watching Tanya start building her a sandwich. The way the older woman was acting made her think she had made the right choice. These weren't bad people. If she did as they wanted there would be no trouble.

Had she known Tanya better she might have thought differently.

“How long do you think it will take?” asked Tanya and started slicing a tomato.

“What?”

“You learning how to move to a different world.”

“Oh. I don't know. I have no place to start from,” Celia admitted. She had not given it much thought as of yet. There had been too many new things distracting her.

“Well, I'm not in much of a hurry. I like it here,” said Tanya and turned around to present Celia with a sandwich that had plenty of filling. She took out a plate and put it on one and slid it in front of her. She glanced out into the balcony while the younger woman dug into it. “Don't tell him that, but I'd be content staying here for the rest of our lives.”

Celia gave her a curious look while chewing her food. Was she asking her to fail? Not to hold up her end of the agreement so the man would be forced to stay there with her?

“I have a job to do tomorrow. Maybe you'd be interested in helping?” Tanya leaned against the counter and smiled at her.

Celia gave her a hesitant look. “A job? What do you do?”

Tanya grinned. “I kill people.”

Celia nearly choked on the piece of bread.

Chapter 3

His head throbbed. It was the first thing Rand came to realize. Opening his eyes just made it worse and the bright sunlight momentarily blinded him. He felt the gentle breeze run over him, carrying with it the smells of a meadow in full bloom. He blinked furiously.

As his vision cleared he could start to see tall hay and flowers. A cricket chirped and bees buzzed from one flower to another.

With a groan, Rand sat up. His back complained about it, as did his legs when he pushed himself up. He was glad he'd ended up in a warm place. Waking up naked in the winter would have been unpleasant, if he'd ever even woken up in such a situation.

For a moment he wondered what had happened, but then he remembered. The dragon had crashed into them. What had happened after that was a bit of a mystery.

Jen!

He looked around in a panic. Was she all right? He was atop a small hill that offered a good view all around the meadow. In the distance he could see a forest that surrounded the entire area. He turned around to get a full view of the place. It was then that he spotted it.

In the distance, the dragon stood facing a small figure.

His heart jumped.

His feet started to move before realizing it.

He didn't notice any of the thorny things that pricked his legs. There was no weariness in his steps. All he could see was the small figure dodging the dragons jaws as its head came down and snapped at her.

The distance grew shorter, but there was still so much of it.

It felt like an eternity closing the distance.

"Jen!" He shouted as loud as he could, out of breath.

The figure glanced back, but didn't do so for long. The dragon demanded her full attention. Rand hoped it would give her strength seeing him coming. Together

they'd be able to escape.

He started to feel the thumps when the dragon moved its body. How long had she been dodging and fighting it? Without any weapon she was never going to do anything else.

He ran faster.

In horror he watched the dragon raise a clawed hand and make a sweeping attack with it. It sent Jen flying through the air. Rand winced at the thought of getting hit like that. She wouldn't be able to get up.

The dragon wasted no time. Its head lunged down, jaws open. It pulled up and sent something flying in the air. A clawed hand raked down to the same spot. It let out a thundering roar and spread its wings.

Rand could feel the air pushing against him as the creature rose to the air.

"Jen!" he cried out again and ran as fast as he could.

The dragon looked down, but did not bother with him. It flew away without looking back.

There was so much blood on the ground it had gotten slippery. Rand came to halt at the sight of it. Jen laid in the trampled grass, her body a tortured mess. Her left arm was gone, tossed somewhere by the dragons as it had bitten down, leaving behind a jagged and torn wound that reached to her chest. Claws had cut through her, leaving behind two gaping wounds that ran down her entire body. Blood glistened, innards struggled to free themselves of the constraints of her body.

Dead eyes looked to the side.

"No," Rand fell to his knees. He had to lean forward and support himself with his hands. He gagged. There was nothing to throw up. He'd seen dead bodies by the dozens by now, but seeing someone you loved in such a state was another thing all together. Had his reaction been the same when he'd killed his wife? He couldn't remember.

Sobs escaped him.

"No!" There was fury in his voice. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he looked up into the sky. "Damn you! I'll find you! I'll make you pay!"

He hit the ground with his fist.

He had not realized his power had activated.

The ground gave underneath him. A loud rumble ran through the area. Rand felt himself sink. A crater formed where he had hit. When the ground finally stabilized he looked around with tear filled eyes. It was a shallow slope that had formed, but the diameter was so large he figured it had to have been several hundred feet lower than where it started. The meadow seemed undisturbed otherwise.

He blinked and looked around.

It was the most he had ever done with his power.

It had not been in time to help Jen.

He turned his attention back to her body.

With a sob he crawled over to her and brushed aside some of her hair. He held her in his lap and closed her eyes. A soft kiss to her forehead. He remained so for a long time.

He didn't want to let go of her. Why had she been taken away? Was it revenge for how he'd killed his wife? Was the universe balancing the scales? But none of it was her fault. She had had nothing to do with it. It had been all him. Why?

Rand let out a deep breath.

"Am I not allowed to be happy?" he asked in a quiet voice. "Must I always rob myself of it, or have the world do it for me?"

With some effort he stood up and picked up the limp body of Jen.

"If this is how the world is then it can burn."

The slope, as gentle as it was, still made it hard to climb up. Burying her at the bottom would not do. It would eventually fill up with water, killing everything there and making it impossible for anyone to visit the grave. He wanted to at least have that option.

The slope ended a bit into the surrounding forest. Rand searched for a good place to lay her to rest. He finally found a big oak like tree that had conquered a respectable space for itself. There was plenty of room between it and others of its kind. With his power it was easy enough to dig a deep grave and fill it. He even found a large stone and moulded it into a tombstone to mark the place.

Maybe someone else would find it then, but it didn't matter. She deserved to be marked instead of being forgotten.

Standing over the new grave, he felt the need to say something, but no words came to him. The tears started to roll down his cheeks again. He wiped them away and took a wavering breath before kneeling to give the tombstone a kiss.

It wasn't anything fancy. Just a rock shaped into an arching slate. No engravings in it, but it was enough to help him find it again. The oak would keep it safe from weather under its massive branches.

Rand stood up and returned to the meadow. He looked around, hoping for some sign of civilization, but there was none to be had. He turned to the direction where the dragon had flown. It was as good a place to start as any.

Being naked made his progress slow. When running through the meadow adrenaline had pumped in his veins. He had not felt any of the pointy things on the ground – small branches from trees, sharp rocks. Now, he felt all of them. Having to carefully choose his steps made for slow progress.

He hoped he'd find something before darkness came. Sleeping naked in the forest did not sound like an appealing prospect. Even though it was a warm day the night would be cold for someone without shelter and the insects would not leave him alone.

It seemed luck had abandoned him.

The forest continued on and even though he walked as far as sunlight lasted he found no sign of any habitation. Finally he had to concede and give up and look for shelter. The forest was relatively flat and void of rocks, but there were plenty of large trees, so he made the same kind of shelter he had used with Jen when spying on Vincent's fortress.

He left a few holes in the bark so light could come in when the sun rose. It also let fresh air in.

He shaped a wooden bed for himself. It was a hard surface, but at least it was smooth. The worst part about sleeping on the ground were the lumps and bumps you had to live with.

It wasn't a pleasant night. Despite being tired, Rand laid on his bed for a long time, only his breathing and racing heartbeat to keep him company. It felt

like his heart was about to explode out of his chest. In the end he didn't even notice when sleep finally slipped its blanket over him.

His body ached when the first rays of light woke him up. He had barely had time to sit up when his stomach growled, reminding him he had not eaten in a day. His mouth felt dry and his head throbbed. He needed to get something to drink as well.

He left the shelter, not bothering to close it up. If anyone happened upon it they'd wonder what had made it, but that wouldn't be Rand's problem any more. He wasn't going to return to it.

His water problem was solved by a small creek he happened upon. With his power he fashioned himself a wooden container that could hold a decent amount of water. He thought about making a belt for it, but deemed it not worth it yet. He didn't have anything else to carry. In an emergency he could use the container to hit his enemy. It was better than bare hands and with the water in it it had a nice heft to it.

Food was now his primary concern. The forest was filled with all manner of animal, but he had few ways of catching them. Not to mention any way of cooking the meat. Even with the hunger gnawing inside he wasn't willing to risk getting sick from eating uncooked meat. So instead of stopping to hunt he braved on, hoping the forest would end and lead him to a place with food.

It was getting late in the day when the forest ended and Rand stepped onto a road. It was the sort countless carts and feet passing formed over time. Tightly packed dirt. Looking in both directions he tried to decide which way to go. Neither way gave any hints where it led to. As far as he could see they were identical in every way.

Shrugging, he chose to go left. Following the road at least gave him a chance to meet up with someone else on the road.

After a few hours of walking he could see a wagon heading his way. The forest had given way to open grassland on either side of it. There was no place to hide, but he didn't want to do that anyway.

Whatever came his way would give him some hint as to where he was.

He could hear the wagon coming. The clang of pots and pans sounded loudly

before it along with an assortment of other noises. When it got closer he could see all sorts of things hanging from its sides. A merchant of some sorts?

There were two horses pulling the box shaped wagon. It was made entirely of wood and no doubt offered a relatively comfortable place to spend the nights. It was made for travelling the roads all year round.

A single man sat on the perch. He pulled the reigns, halting the wagon by Rand. The man eyed him suspiciously and pulled the pipe out from the corner of his mouth before spitting on the ground. He had a shaggy grey beard and hair that grew only on the sides of his head, leaving the top bald and shiny.

"You need some help, stranger?" His voice had a rasp to it. A man of the strong drinks.

Rand smiled briefly. "It's hard to deny it with no clothes on."

"I suppose it is," the man admitted and eyed him again. The dried blood that covered many places of Rand's body was not missed. "But still, one has to wonder how a man ends up in the middle of nowhere, naked, and covered in blood?" The man's free hand made a move and grabbed hold of what seemed like the handle of a club.

Rand had to think what to say. Telling the full truth was not an option. "I was travelling with my wife. Looking for a new start. We camped out at a meadow a few days from here. One morning I woke up to her screams. I clambered out of the tent to see what was going on and there it was. A dragon."

"A dragon you say?" asked the man, sounding surprised.

Rand nodded. His expression grew grim. That, he did not need to fake. "It killed her. Burned all our belongings with its breath. I barely escaped with my life."

The wagon driver looked at him with new eyes. The dried blood got a whole new meaning. There was no denying he looked like a man who had lost something dear. He let go of the club handle. "Sounds like you've had it rough, friend."

"Can't say it has been pleasant," Rand admitted and looked around. The road was empty of any others. "What's your name?"

The driver took a puff from his pipe before answering. "They call me Ben. I'm

a travelling merchant, as you can probably tell. If you need something, I've got it."

"I could sure use a set of clothes," said Rand. "Though I'm afraid I don't have much I can pay you with."

"I suppose you don't," said Ben and jumped down from the perch. Even though age had bent his back some, he was as tall as Rand. He must have been tall when younger. "Come on. Can't leave a man in trouble on the road."

Rand followed him to the back of the wagon and watched the old man open up the two doors that made up its rear. Inside was a wide variety of goods, from ropes and farming tools to pots and pans and jars filled with spices. In a small town he must have been a welcome sight.

"I'm sure I have something suitable for you," said Ben and disappeared in the wealth of goods. Rand waited patiently and surveyed the goods. He spotted a black pan that was all bent and twisted. There was even a small hole in it due to rust. He grabbed it from its hanging place and turned it around in his hands.

"Ah, that. Shame, really. Was a good pan. Forgot it in the rain one time too many and then the horses ran over it, bending it into that useless piece of scrap." Ben appeared once more with a neatly folded shirt and trousers in his hands. A pair of boots was placed on top of them.

"I could fix it," Rand offered. He did not feel comfortable simply taking charity from the man. With his power it would be easy enough.

"What? With your bare hands?" asked Ben and eyed him.

Rand didn't wait for further approval. The familiar dots and lines appeared and he started to work. He cut away the rusty parts, mended the bends and bumps, and soon the pan looked as good as new. It might have been slightly thinner than before, but he doubted anyone would notice it since he'd did his best to even it all out.

He offered the pan to Ben.

"Well I'll be," the man said and gave him the clothes while taking the pan. He turned it around, tapped it with his knuckles to ensure it was as solid as before. "How did you do that?"

Rand had pulled on the trouser and taken a seat on the wagon. He was doing his best to clean his feet before putting on the boots. "Everyone has their

skills.”

“I’ll say.” Ben squinted and gave him a look. “A man who can fix is a man who can destroy. You look like a man who’s out for destruction.”

“I won’t deny that,” said Rand and fitted the boots. There was plenty of room left over for his toes, but it felt like they wouldn’t chafe his heels too bad. He could walk in them.

“So what is it you’re going to destroy?” asked Ben. He didn’t sound worried for himself.

“The dragon.”

“Ah..” Ben hung up the pan and jumped down from the wagon. He regarded Rand as he pulled the shirt over his head. It was a bit big for him, but better than nothing. “We saw it a few days ago.”

Rand regarded the man with an intensity that had him take a step back. “Where? When?”

“In the town we came from. It flew over it, circled a few times and then continued west.” Ben licked his lips. Maybe telling him about it had not been the best of ideas.

Rand clenched his hand into a fist. He looked down the road where the wagon had come from. He now had a direction to go in. “Thank you. I now know which way I need to go.”

“It could have been a different dragon,” said Ben. “Though rare, there are several known ones living in the area.”

“What?” Rand couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“They’re not that unheard of in Mideon, friend,” said Ben. He looked at Rand as if he were half witted for not knowing it. “You see them flying in the sky now and then. Rare that they’d attack a human, but it happens.”

Rand let out a frustrated noise. So it was possible the dragon that killed Jen wasn’t the one who crashed into the two. It could have flown off before either of them woke up. It might have attracted another dragon to investigate the area.

Or it was the same one, but now it hid amongst others like it.

No matter.

He’d kill them all if need be.

Then it struck him. Mideon was a place he had never heard of. It certainly was not in Kendle so where was he?

“Where am I?” he muttered to himself, but the keen ears of the old man picked it up.

“Where are you? Son, you're more out of it than I thought. You're in the kingdom of Mideon.”

“What world?” asked Rand.

Ben gave him a blank stare before shaking his head. “Dragon shock. That's what it is. I can understand. Facing a creature like that. It can drive the wits out of the sharpest of men.”

What world? Where was he? He hadn't had time to think about it. The loss of Jen had occupied his mind so completely. Where had they ended up in that bright flash? How was he going to get home?

Too many questions danced into his mind.

Rand shook his head.

Getting home? That would be a problem for when the dragon was dead.

“It seems my journey might become a long one,” said Rand and took a few steps in his new boots to try them out. “If you've got any more items that need fixing, I can do that for you in exchange for a bag and some food.”

Ben rubbed his chin. “I might have a few.”

Rand thanked what ever powers were around that he'd ended up in a world where the language was still the same. “Then we have a deal?”

“I suppose we do,” Ben agreed. He hoisted himself up into the back of the wagon again and rummaged through his collection. He found some dented pots and pans, an axe with a broken handle, and a few other items that needed repair. One by one Rand fixed them all.

“You should be careful,” said Ben as he handed the last item to Rand. It was a pot that had a mismatched lid to it. Making them fit together wasn't a hard job.

“About what?” asked Rand and started working on it.

“The dragons. They're dangerous. And not just them.”

“What do you mean?” Rand looked up from the pot.

“Well, there are people who worship them. They think if they're pious enough

a dragon will descend from the sky to mate with them. Bunch of mad rambles, but they'll try to stop you if you tell them you're out to kill one."

If they took on as attractive human forms as Tina did then Rand couldn't quite blame them, though it did nothing to make it any less mad. "Thanks for the warning."

Rand finished fixing the pot and handed it back to Ben. He examined it for a brief moment before nodding and setting it back where he'd found it from.

"That town up there has decent food in it. If you tell them your story they'll point you in the right direction," said Ben and reached behind a barrel. He pulled out a bag and handed it to Rand.

It was surprisingly heavy and when Rand opened it he found plenty of food there as well as some other items anyone camping out would find useful.

"Thank you." Rand gave the old man an appreciative look. He'd done more for him than anyone in a long time.

Ben waved his hand. "You helped me plenty, friend. These items you fixed will swell my coin pouch well past what I've given you."

Rand watched the old man jump down from the wagon once more and start to close it up. It seemed their business was concluded and it was time to move on. He looked up at the sky and saw the sun was still up. He'd have a few more hours of light before needing to set up camp.

"Remember what I said." Ben gave him one last stern look before heading to the front of the wagon.

"I will," Rand assured the old man and waved a hand before turning his back on him and starting to walk. The bag was flung over his shoulder. Oddly he did not feel the hunger despite not having eaten for such a long time. His body had had other things to think about all the time.

The road remained empty for the rest of the day.

When darkness started to claim the lands, Rand found himself a place to rest a little ways away from the road. There was a small collection of trees there that offered a modest amount of shelter and wood to burn. He dug through the bag Ben had given and found flint with which to start a fire. There was a thick blanket there as well that he spread on the ground to soften the lumps. The food

given was nothing special, some bread, cheese and dried meat, but hunger was the best spice of them all and Rand enjoyed every mouthful. He had plenty left over for the next day to keep going. He hoped he'd reach the town by then and be able to find some more food then.

And a proper weapon.

All he had now was the small knife Ben had included in the bag to cut the bread and cheese. Even with his power that would not be enough against a dragon.

Rand got an early start in the morning. He wanted to reach the town. He kept a good pace and made good time. He'd broken off a branch and stuck the bag at the end of it as it made it easier to move and not having it bounce off his back made for more comfort.

The weather kept warm and dry. While there were some clouds in the sky none of them looked ready to pour down rain. They were the sort of white fluff that kids would look up at and see shapes in.

It was past mid-day when rand arrived at the town. He had expected nothing more than a huddled together collection of buildings, but it was a proper town with clearly defined streets and even a wooden palisade surrounding it offering protection against outside threats. Beyond it, in the distance, he could see the looming shapes of mountains.

He walked over to the wooden gates and looked up. There were guards on the palisade and they'd kept an eye on him the entire time.

A small door in one half of the gates opened up.

"What's your business here, stranger?" the guard wore a helmet and had his hand on his sword when he stepped out. His chain-mail glittered in the sun, as if polished that morning.

"I'm just a traveller looking for some supplies," Rand replied. "I ran into the merchant Ben and he told me good things about your town."

"Ben, eh?" the guard examined him for a moment. His clothes hid most of the dried blood and there was now enough dirt from the road on him to conceal the rest. "If he sent you then you're welcome."

Rand smiled. "Thank you."

The guard gave way and he stepped inside the town.

It wasn't a big place, but not a small one either. There was bound to be a few inns and shops that would need help from someone with his skills. The problem would be finding them.

"I must admit I am in a spot of trouble," said Rand and turned to the guard. He'd removed his helmet, revealing a thick blonde hair and a young face that had not seen any combat.

"Trouble?" his expression grew grimmer. No guard wanted to hear that from someone they had just let into their town.

"I was on the road with my wife. We were attacked. By a dragon. It killed her and burned all of our belongings."

The guard raised an eyebrow. "A dragon you say? We saw one a few days ago. Circled above us for a while, but then flew north towards the mountains."

Rand nodded. He'd keep that information in mind. "I don't have anything on me besides the clothes Ben was kind enough to give me in return for a few fixed items. I'm really good at fixing things. Is there anyone in town who might need such skills? I need some money to pay for a place to sleep and get some supplies."

"The blacksmith is always busy," said the guard. "You could ask him. Just walk up the street. The clanging will guide you to him."

"Thanks," Rand smiled.

"I'm sorry about your wife," said the guard before Rand could turn away. "A rare thing for a dragon to attack."

Rand gave him a nod to acknowledge the thought, but walked away quick none the less.

The less he thought about it the easier it was to move forward.

There weren't that many streets in the town which made finding the smith an easy task. The metal clangs could be heard far away.

Talking the smith into allowing Rand to help was far more difficult.

Chapter 4

John had always hated the graveyards. The towering crypts made of concrete and steel had an air to them that made you want to steer clear of them. It wasn't that they were repulsive – far from it with plenty of plants, benches and other things to bring nature into them. There was just something in the idea that there were thousands of dead piled up in a tower that eclipsed many of the ones living people called home.

The gravel under his feet made its grating noise when he walked. On both sides there were resting places for the dead. Most were urns placed inside a see through case, mounted on a pedestal of some sort or on top an actual tombstone. There were simple plaques on some telling who rested there.

A few feet ahead walked Tina. Her black dress made it look like she was on her way to a loved ones grave. The skirt went all the way down to her ankles and nearly brushed the gravel. The long sleeved top she had on had strings criss crossing along her back, pulling it tight around her chest.

All appearances, but still gave her an air of sadness.

That wasn't fake.

She had lost a lot in the calamity at Siver. All her children were gone.

The expanding sphere had sent her and John to a different world. It had not been a place either of them knew so they had simply returned to where they had left from. All that had remained of the city were patches of land from different worlds.

They'd searched the surroundings, hoping to find someone alive, but they'd had no such luck.

Tina had taken it surprisingly well. There had been no fits of sadness or tears shed for those lost. Even John had been more affected, mostly by Celia's disappearance. He had seen some potential in her to turn out well, but now that potential was lost perhaps forever. If those who had disappeared had been sent to other worlds it would be near impossible to find them. Celia and Felix did not know how to Alternate, but they might discover that ability with time, if they were

still alive.

So there was still some hope.

Still, it weighed on Tina. There was a glumness to her. She had not even spoken about the exchange she had had with her mother over the city. The most she had revealed about it was the other dragon had been her mother. What had they talked about? What ever it was, clearly it had not been to her liking.

“What's this?” asked Tina. She had stopped in front of a larger than usual grave. It featured what looked to be a statue of a soldier. It had a helmet in one hand, a rifle flung over his shoulder. It was looking down on the grave stone with faded markings.

“The grave of the Unknown Soldier,” said John and examined it closer. Which war was it from? There had been so many it was hard to remember them all.

“Why bury someone if you don't know them?” asked Tina.

“It's a symbolic thing to acknowledge the soldiers that died in a war in such a manner you could not identify their bodies. It's about respect for their sacrifice.”

“Ah..” Tina gave the grave another look with a different eye. She then glanced around at the row of other graves. They were only in the middle of the building, eighty floors up from the ground, so there were plenty more graves above them. “Seems to me you're trying very hard to bury them in the midst of everyone else so they would be forgotten.”

A smile passed John's lips. “It used to be that these were big national monuments. But now, there have been too many wars. Land has become valuable. It's why we're burying our dead in buildings like these. They were going to stop doing these tributes all together, but the people would not stand for it. So they do these small ones now. If we go up a floor or two we'll probably see another one, for some war no one remembers any more.”

“What's the point?” asked Tina. “If no one even remembers the war.”

“It mattered when it was put here,” said John. They were in one of the oldest of the high rising graveyards. It had not seen a fresh body in centuries. The city around it had changed considerably, but it was still among the tallest of the

buildings in it and still kept in good shape.

Tina shook her head and continued walking. John followed. His black suit matched well with her attire, making them look like a gloomy couple out for a stroll.

“There will be no grave for my children,” said Tina quietly and examined an urn in its protective casing. You could tell effort had been put into acquiring a nice one. There were even some golden engraving on it. It must have been someone important.

“They're likely alive. Only in different worlds,” said John, trying to keep her from getting too gloomy. There were several things worrying him about the situation. One was the fact the lizard men were now wrecking havoc in who knew how many worlds. The second was Tina was so preoccupied with her worries that she had stopped giving him blood. It had been days since the last serving and he was starting to feel anxious about it. There was a hunger gnawing at him that made him eyes passers by with hungry eyes.

Even though human blood was no match for hers it would quench the hunger for a while. He feared at some point he'd break and kill someone simply for that reason.

“We should search for them,” said Tina.

“We don't know where to even start,” said John. It was complete madness to even try. Even if everyone had ended up in the same world finding that world was unlikely since there were thousands of them, millions, maybe even more.

Tina looked thoughtful and continued on the gravel path. John knew the look. Wheels were turning in her head, forming some plan.

They walked until they arrived back at the lobby. There was an elevator there that carried people to the floor they wanted to get to. A stairway went alongside it in case of emergencies.

“Let's go to Sixten's place,” said Tina.

“What are we going to do there?” asked John. He wasn't all together certain the welcome there would be a pleasant one. They'd trapped the owner in another world and his workers were unlikely to be grateful for that.

“I have an idea,” said Tina, but spoke nothing more because the elevator

came up and a couple of people were inside. They both stepped in and continued down with the people. It took a while for the elevator to make the long trip down, but it finally came to a halt and the doors opened to let them into the main lobby.

“What kind of an idea?” asked John. They didn't need to wait long for a transport to arrive. They climbed into the two seater and Tina told it where to go. It would be a fairly long trip.

“His place has that Oracle thing, doesn't it?” asked Tina.

“Yes.”

“And it can locate people in other worlds?”

“Only if they have a chip,” said John. It wasn't going to be that easy to locate anyone. Even if they had a chip, locating a single person could take days and that was when you knew in what world they were in along with the general area.

Tina fell silent for a moment and watched the buildings go by. People walked by with their shopping bags. It was a commercial area they were going through. “Maybe it can be modified to search using other criteria.”

“What do you mean?”

Tina glanced at him. She did not want to admit it, but had he not been there, she was not certain she wouldn't have done something drastic by now. He had a strangely calming effect on her. Realizing that worried her. He should have been nothing more than a toy. “The chips that you use has a specific signal it put outs. I saw that with Sixten. But I also noticed everyone puts out a signal of some sort, whether they have a chip or not. It's different and weaker, but if the modification can be done, I'm certain we would be able to find anyone we want, where ever they are.”

“But we'd have to know what their signal looks like,” said John. Still, he could not completely dismiss the idea. “Assuming it's unique for everyone.”

“I can remember a few,” said Tina. “That's a good enough start.”

“Let's hope you're right,” said John. “And that Sixten's people aren't going to kill us the moment we step out of this transport.”

“We'll just have to kill them if they try,” said Tina and glanced at him with a sly smile. “You'd enjoy it, wouldn't you? You haven't had much blood in recent days.”

John looked away from her, soliciting a laugh in return.

The transport carried them to their destination and came to a halt in front of the run down building that served as Sixten's base of operation. When Tina got out of the transport her black dress had turned into her usual body hugging attire. John continued to keep his black suit like appearance. It was easy to maintain and offered a decent amount of protection. While it may not have looked like it, the black fabric that made up his suit was as hard as steel and could stop almost anything thrown at it.

John looked around. He didn't spot anything unusual going on. There were the homeless sitting on the side walks, peeking from the alleys. The whores standing around, offering themselves up to any passer by. The drug dealers huddled up in their little groups. No one paid the two any attention.

They walked up the stairs to the door and entered the hotel.

The receptionist sat in the same place as last time, behind the thick glass. John walked up to her and cleared his throat.

She looked up. "What can I do you for?"

"You don't remember us?" asked John. Explaining everything to her once more would take time.

She frowned and took a closer look at him. "You. How did you get back here?" She did not sound pleased. Her hand went for a button under the counter.

"Not something I'd like to explain here. Can we go down?"

She hesitated and glanced towards the back room. Whether something was communicated to her or not, John could not say, but finally she nodded and motioned them towards the elevator.

John nodded as thanks and guided Tina into the elevator. It started downwards as soon as the doors closed. The closed space made John worry there would be a less than welcoming party waiting for them, but there was nothing more they could do about it. If there was then there'd be killing to do. He did go to the effort of standing in front of Tina, shielding her from any potential harm.

It turned out there was no need for it.

A familiar face greeted them when the doors opened.

"Welcome!" said Sixten, arms spread and a wide smile on him. He had a

bottle of whiskey in his other hand, telling the habit of drinking had not been plucked from him yet.

Both Tina and John stared at him with surprise. He was back home, all his metal parts intact. Both of them had expected him to be dead or at least stuck in the world the Lord Saviour ruled.

“What? No words for an old friend?” asked Sixten and took a swig from the bottle. Despite having a relatively clean set of clothes on there was no hiding the stains on them, telling he had not changed in a while. “I suppose not. You must be shocked to find me here. Shocked.”

John frowned at his mocking voice. “You could say that.”

“How did you get back here?” asked Tina. There was no one else in the corridor, which told her he wasn't out to hurt either of them. At least not in any obvious manner.

“The Saviour sent me,” said Sixten and grinned. “He has a job I need to do.”

John noticed the obvious first. The Lord Saviour had the ability to Alternate and he could do it with metal in the process. He glanced at Tina and saw similar worry on her. He feared it might have been her that had showed him how to do it. What sort of damage could he do with that knowledge?

“What sort of a job?” asked Tina. Her eyes narrowed. She had come there to find a way to locate her children, but if the Lord Saviour was advancing in his plans it might be prudent to intervene in some manner. Him roaming the worlds freely was not going to serve her children well.

Sixten took another swig from his bottle and burped. “It's a secret.” The man smiled.

John frowned at him. “We could just kill you.”

Sixten laughed. “You could, couldn't you? But what would that do? You wouldn't get what you came here for.” A drunken frown appeared on him. “Why did you come here?”

“We need your Oracle,” said Tina. There was no reason to hide it. He'd find out eventually and what they wanted to do was not something that needed to be hidden. Still, she didn't go into details just yet.

“That's all?” asked Sixten with a surprised expression. “Well, feel free to do

so.”

“We'll need to talk with someone who can modify it,” said John.

Sixten grumbled and took a gulp. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to get someone who knows the Oracle code well enough?”

“You've got one on your pay roll. Otherwise you wouldn't have an Oracle,” said John. It was true that due to government regulation it was difficult to find people with expertise in the area, but it wasn't impossible. Expensive, but not impossible.

Sixten stood there for a moment, hands spread, looking around. He took another swig from the bottle before smiling. “Fuck. All right. I've got a guy. Come on. I'll call him for you.”

He started walking down the corridor with surprisingly steady steps. It made John wonder how much of his drunkenness was faking. In the end he came to the conclusion very little. The man had just learned to deal with it.

John and Tina followed their guide, both cautious about their surroundings. While Sixten had been friendly enough so far there was no guarantee things would change at a moments notice.

Sixten led them to a door and opened it, motioning for the pair to follow him inside. He had not led them astray as the familiar set-up of chairs and console told them they were indeed in the Oracle's room. The whiteness of the room was somewhat disturbing and struck a stark contrast with John and his black attire.

“Take a seat. I'll just call the man over,” said Sixten and hobbled over to the console. He pressed a button and started barking orders. John listened in with half an ear to ensure he didn't order anything he wasn't supposed to.

Tina found herself a seat and got comfortable. She looked unworried. She waited for Sixten to finish his call before nailing him down with a stare.

“What does the Lord Saviour want you to do?” Her voice had weight to it and the quick swig Sixten took from the bottle told it had the desired effect.

“I can't tell you. He'll kill me,” said Sixten, sounding more miserable than ever before. “It's all your fault anyway. You left me behind in his clutches.”

“If you don't tell me *I* will kill you,” said Tina in a flat voice.

For a moment Sixten froze, then his eyes darted all around, looking for an

imaginary escape from the predicament. He took yet another swig from the bottle that was fast approaching emptiness. "Why me?"

"That's the most useless question," said John. "Just answer her and live a little longer. The Lord Saviour can't kill you as fast as she can."

Sixten raked a hand through his hair. He took a seat in one of the chairs. He sat on the very edge, ready to jump up at a moments notice. "I don't know what he plans to do, but my part is not that big. I just supply him with some chips and let the people he chooses use my facility to move from world to world."

"What are these people doing?" asked Tina.

Sixten shrugged. "I don't know. They come and go. They're probably making connection to the other worlds in anticipation of something."

"Not hard to guess what that is," muttered John.

Tina leaned forward, lips pursed. Her fingers formed a triangle against which she pressed her lips. "He is arranging his pieces. He's placing people where his actions will strike first."

"With his ultimate goal, does it matter where you are? Everyone ends up dead," said John. The collisions or merging of worlds would create a disaster unrivalled in history.

"His hope obviously is that the worlds will remain somewhat intact. There will be places to claim under his rule and that goes a lot smoother if they've heard of you before. Maybe they're even already your supporters." Tina leaned back in her seat. It wasn't a comfortable thought. Something needed to be done about it.

"Let's hope he's right in case no one manages to stop him," said John.

Sixten laughed at that. "There's no stopping him. You don't know the extent of his powers. No one can stop him."

"Maybe not directly, but at least we can throw some tree trunk along his path," said Tina with a grin. "You were hungry, weren't you?" she turned to regard John. "Maybe some of the Lord Saviour associates would like to give you some blood."

"If they don't volunteer, I'll just take it," said John. Secretly he hoped it would be Tina's blood, but he was at a point where human blood held enough appeal to crush any moral objection he might have had over killing.

Sixten stared at both of them like they'd lost their minds. "You're not going to do any killing in my facility! That's going to draw him here. Besides, you've got your own thing you need to do, don't you?"

"It's not going to take both of us," said Tina. "I can handle that while John does a bit of feeding." She did not seem at all concerned with the Lord Saviour possibly appearing.

"But.."

The look Tina gave Sixten was enough to silence him. John knew well enough that arguing with her would not change her mind. She had decided on the course she wanted to take and it would take a bigger storm than what he could muster to change it.

John stretched his hands. "So, any of these agents of the Saviour here now?"

Sixten bit his lip, struggling to decide what to do. He thought about calling security, but he'd seen what Tina and John could do. Finding new guards was never easy, at least if you wanted people who wouldn't run when the first shot was fired. Wasting lives was not the right course.

"No," he finally said and took a gulp from the bottle. "Like I said, they come and go to other worlds. They rarely stick around here for long."

John started to say something, but the door swung open and a man entered. His grey hair was the sort you'd expect a distinguished politician to have, but the lab coat he wore on top of his brown clothes made it clear he was something else.

"Ah, Richter! Good of you to come so quickly." Sixten waved his bottle holding hand at the man.

"Sixten," said Richter with a slight nod and a frown. "How can I be of help?" The way he talked told of sophistication.

"Ask her," said Sixten and pointed the bottle at Tina. "What ever she wants, you do. Or I die."

Richter raised an eyebrow, but turned to Tina. "How may I help you?"

"I will tell you soon," said Tina and examined the man for a moment. She then turned to John and Sixten. "Why don't you two go and hunt down some of those people we talked about?"

Inside, John sighed. He had hoped to be rid of the drunkard, but it seemed

he was stuck with him once more. Arguing with Tina was never worth the time. You always ended up losing.

“Come on,” John turned towards the door, not waiting to see whether Sixten followed. If he had any sense left in him he would, If not then he wouldn't be a problem for much longer.

Upon entering the corridor he was disappointed to see Sixten come out the room only a short while later.

“Where do we start?” asked John.

Sixten took a swig from his bottle. Considering how often he did that it was amazing there was any left or that he was still standing. He looked both ways along the corridor before answering. “This way. We might get lucky and have one of them come back. Usually they do so around this time.”

“So they do have a schedule?” asked John and followed the man. Despite his drunken state, he trusted him to know the way.

“Eh, sort of,” said Sixten and staggered along. He seemed to be playing up his drunkenness. He didn't elaborate on the matter further and John didn't push it. It didn't seem like he'd get anything useful out of the man.

They didn't need to walk long before Sixten came to a halt and entered through one of the doors. John followed to find a familiar looking room with the equipment needed for Alternating there. A line of lockers dominated one of the walls,

There was a man there, mid stride in putting on a pair of trousers.

“Is he one of them?” asked John.

Sixten took yet another gulp from the bottle. “Yeah.”

John grinned and started forward. The man struggled to get his trousers on. He managed to do it, but it was of little use. John's blade shaped hand stuck through his stomach the moment it happened.

The warm blood ran over his hands and started to be soaked in. John closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation. Compared to Tina's blood it was like eating something sweet as opposed to shooting the most wonderful drug into your veins.

But it quenched the worst of his thirst.

The man struggled briefly, but soon went motionless. John kept him upward

for a while to let all of the blood flow into him. He then let the body slide off the blade and slump onto the floor.

Smiling, John turned to Sixten. "Where's the next one?"

Sixten looked at the body and then the bottle in his hand. He then looked at John before lifting the bottle to his lips and emptying it.

Chapter 5

Carl woke to complete darkness. He could tell something was tied around his hands and legs to keep him down on his back. It felt like a stone tablet against his back. He could hear noises from around him. Footsteps circling around him, metal clinging against stone, fire crackling.

It took him a moment to remember what had happened. The jolt of pain from slightly moving his head told of the whack he'd received. The pain made it hard to focus. He doubted he'd be able to do anything with his powers.

"Hello?" he asked tentatively. There was little point in continuing to pretend to be unconscious. What ever his captors had planned they'd do it anyway.

There was some more shuffling and footsteps.

A brief moment later the hood was removed from his head.

The light from several torches made him blink before he could see around him. By the looks of it they were somewhere in the temples cellars. There were no windows in the room and there was the sort of silent weight over your head that told of countless tons of rock above you.

Carl found himself strapped onto a stone slab that looked almost like an altar. A cauldron filled with red glowing coal stood close by and there seemed to be several metal instruments in it, gathering heat.

The sight made him swallow hard.

Several of the grey skinned men stood around him. All wore the robes of priests. None of them looked at him with anything but bold faced hatred.

"What ever you want we can talk about it," said Carl. He was not sure they could understand him, but keeping quiet seemed the worst choice. He licked his lips and glanced at the cauldron. "There's no need for those."

The priests exchanged some hand signals between them. The grins that appeared made Carl struggle. They weren't going to listen to anything he said.

One of them pulled out a metal rod from the hot coals. The flattened tip glowed red hot. Hands grabbed Carl's clothes and ripped them away.

"No. Please, don't," Carl pleaded and watched helplessly as the hot iron got

closer to his chest. It didn't stop. The hot metal sizzled as it hit skin. Carl screamed and thrashed against his restraints.

The pain in his chest did not go away when the metal was lifted and put back in the hot coals.

Carl took in heavy breaths. Sweat ran down his face. "Why are you doing this? Eve would not approve. She has chosen me."

Hand signals were exchanged once more. At least it allowed time for Carl to catch his breath. The throbbing in his chest did not subside any in that time.

Another tool was lifted from the hot coals.

Carl watched with wide eyes as the pinned wheel came to view. The priest holding it grinned at him before rolling the hot metal against his skin. Every time a hot pin pierced his skin a new scream escaped his lips. Down his sides the trail of burnt skin went, across his stomach and onto the other side.

He was starting to feel like there was no more scream left in him.

The priests around him looked pleased with themselves while they waited for the metal to heat again. Signals were exchanged once more while Carl did his best to gather himself up. All he wanted to do was wrap himself into a foetal position and wish the pain away.

It did not look like that would happen.

Death started to seem like the only way out and the priest were intent on ensuring that would take a long time.

A distant rumble made its way down from above, unnoticed by everyone except Carl. He didn't know what it was. His focus was on the priests and yet another glowing piece of metal pulled out from the hot coals.

Flesh was seared once more. Screams echoed in the chamber.

Another rumble came down, this time shaking loose dust from the ceiling.

Everyone noticed it this time.

The priests stopped their torture and huddled together to motion with an intensity Carl had not seen before. They looked frightened and worried. The glimmer of sharpened steel in the light told Carl they had come to a conclusion.

The rumbles were likely Eve realizing what had happened. She would not be happy about it. She'd search for those responsible. The priests must have figured

it would be better she found him dead rather than alive. If they were quick enough maybe they'd get away before she could find the place. Indeed, a few of the priests slipped out of the room in anticipation of that. They had decided there was no reason for all of them to be caught.

Three of them remained, each with a long knife in hand. Each had a curve at the tip of the blade, creating a sharp looking hook that would pull out innards when drawn back out from someone. Nasty things made Carl shiver.

"You don't have to do this," Carl pleaded with them. "Just go and leave me. I won't tell her anything." Lies, but maybe they'd be foolish enough to believe. If he got out he'd make sure every single one of them would be dead.

The priests weren't fools. They arranged themselves around him and raised the blades. The darkness of their eyes made them look even more terrifying.

"Please don't," Carl pleaded.

The first blade came down and sunk into his gut. He screamed.

The door flew inside the room, stopping the two remaining blades mid air as the priests were shocked motionless. The one blade that founds its target was let go of, leaving it inside Carl.

Through the pain he fought to keep his eyes open and see what would happen. Past the priests he could see Eve standing in the doorway. She was in her human form, the narrow passages of the underground obviously not able to fit her dragon form.

The look she gave the three priests made even Carl want to crawl under a rock. He had not seen her angry before and now he hoped there wouldn't be a second time he'd witness it.

The priests sunk to their knees and started grovelling. Carl couldn't see the signals they were making, but he could see they were having very little effect on Eve. She walked forward with the sort of certainty an approaching thunderstorm had and stopped right in front of the kneeling worms. She regarded them for a moment before reaching down and grabbing one of them. She hoisted him up by his robes with ease and stared right into its eyes.

"I told you to leave him be," she said, her voice sharp and cold. "Now I must show you what happens when you disobey me."

There was a bright flash and the only thing left in her hands was the priests robes. The priests knew not what she had done, but Carl did. She had just Alternated the priest somewhere. His only hope was that it was an unpleasant place.

She grabbed the next priest and did the same to him. When she got to the third one, the one who had sunken the blade in Carl's gut, she had on an even deeper frown. "You will not be as lucky as your friends." She reached down and grabbed the still pleading priest. Upon touching him flames erupted and engulfed him, but there was something strange about them. They moved slowly, barely a tenth of the speed with which the torches around them burned.

The priest screamed and stood up. He ran around the room, finally making it out the door and into the underground corridors. The flames illuminated his way.

"He'll burn for days," said Eve and turned her attention to Carl. She saw the burn marks and the knife sticking out his gut. Her expression turned from anger to one of compassion.

"Good," said Carl. He hoped the priest would run out the main doors of the temple for all of his kind to see. They'd know he'd done something to anger their goddess. Word would spread and fewer would dare to object to her words. Maybe it would scare off the remaining priests.

"Want me to pull this out?" asked Eve and pointed at the knife.

"It has a hook on the end. I'm not sure that's a good idea," said Carl. Every word hurt to say.

"I'll just do this then." Eve reached for the knife handle and wrapped a hand around it. A bright flash later the blade was gone, leaving only an open wound with blood flowing out of it. She put a hand over the wound and seemed to focus. Carl could feel a warmth take over the burning sensation of the wound. When she lifted her hand from it all that remained of the wound was an angry red scar.

"How did you do that?"

Eve smiled briefly. "I told you. There is little we can't do with the particles." She undid the restraints holding him down.

Carl pushed himself up to a seated position and winced. The burned skin felt tight and every little move sent jolts of pain across his chest. "Is there

anything you can do about these?"

Eve came and stood in front of him and examined the burn marks. "These are difficult to heal," she said and looked him in the eyes. "But I can ease the pain."

"Anything would help," said Carl and winced again as she ran a finger across a patch of burned skin. The second time she did that the pain was lesser and by the fourth time there was barely a faint pain left. She glanced down after the final patch of burned skin had been treated and smiled.

"We should get you some clothes."

Carl had had more important things on his mind. Being naked had been at the very bottom of the list. Now that it had been brought up he felt uneasy about it. "This stone is getting a bit cold to sit on," he admitted in an effort to make light of the situation.

"Let's go find you something then," said Eve. "There should be plenty available seeing as I just got rid of three of my priests."

Carl tested how well his feet could hold him up. While the wounds had been mostly taken care of, the lost blood had not been replaced. There were still the memories of the pain that lingered in his mind and made his body feel the wounds even after treatment. The stone floor felt cold against his bare feet.

"There were more than three of them," said Carl and followed Eve out the door. The corridor went in three directions. Judging by what he could see in the dim light it was nothing short of a real maze down there.

"I know," said Eve, her voice filled with disappointment. "I should have seen this coming. They were far too insistent I get rid of you."

"You couldn't have known they would disobey your orders," said Carl. He couldn't bring himself to blame her for it. She had been clear to the priests, but they had decided to take matters into their own hands.

"It won't happen again," Eve assured and turned a corner. The torches lit the way far enough to reveal a stairway at the end of the corridor.

"Where did you send those two priests?" Carl was curious to find out. Had they been sent to certain death or somewhere where they would get to live their lives for years to come.

Eve laughed. It wasn't a kind laugh. "I once visited a world that nearly killed me. There was nothing there but rivers of molten rock and volcanoes spewing ash into the sky. They will find it a hard place to live."

"Sounds like they're probably already dead," said Carl. It didn't bother him. Still, he hoped they'd live a little longer and suffer.

"Probably," admitted Eve. She did not sound bothered by it either.

They walked up the stairs in silence. They had to use two more stairways to get to ground level in the temple. They could hear screams coming from the great hall that dominated the centre of the temple. When they arrived there they saw the burning priest running out the door towards the temple entrance.

"Good," Eve muttered and walked on towards the priests quarters.

Carl stopped for a moment to stare after the burning priest. The flames had moved very little and there was still no sign of the grey skin suffering from them. It would be a long time before the flames finally managed to kill him.

He followed Eve to the priests living area and watched her rummage through one of the rooms. She declared it to be one of the dead priests. The noise was enough to gather a few curious acolytes, but they all ran off when Eve gave them a stern look. They knew not to get in her way when she showed certain traits.

"You probably don't want to wear the priests robes," said Eve and gave him a questioning look while holding up one of the multicoloured robes.

"Not exactly my style," said Carl. He'd grabbed a blanket from the priests bed and wrapped himself in it for the time being. The temple wasn't exactly the warmest place even if it was summer outside. The thick stone was a perfect guard against the heat.

Eve tossed the robe aside and dug further down in the small chest at the end of the bed. Carl was surprised to see a few items made of gold fly out and hit the floor. It seemed the priest in question wasn't against personal wealth. Carl had not thought about the teachings of their religion that much. Maybe wealth wasn't something the priests were supposed to frown at. At least their robes were flashy enough.

"How about this?" asked Eve and tossed a simple shirt and trouser on the bed. "Must have used these when he came here. No idea why he'd keep them."

Carl grabbed the shirt and found it would fit him albeit there was tightness in some places. The same went for the trousers. It made him wish he had his equipment with him, but that had vanished when they'd escaped the growing bubble.

"These will do," he said and started putting them on. He felt slightly uncomfortable doing it under Eve's watchful eyes, but asking her to look away would have been a sign of weakness he did not want to show her. It wasn't like he was the first man she'd have seen naked and getting dressed. There must have been others. Tina was proof of that. Though maybe she'd been in her dragon form for that.

Carl shook his head.

It was best not to think about it too much.

"What about that meeting we were supposed to have today?" asked Carl as he finished getting dressed. Bare feet was acceptable. He could find a pair of sandals from somewhere a bit later.

"Do you feel up to it?" asked Eve and gave him a concerned look.

"I think so," said Carl though he still felt like there was a solid piece of metal sticking out of his gut. The wound might have been healed, but his body still remembered it. The trauma of the violation lingered and made him smell the burned flesh all over again. He swallowed hard to combat the feeling of nausea.

Eve's eye narrowed, but she didn't argue. "You should eat something. It's still early in the day and your body needs it."

Carl wasn't going to argue against it. "I'm not sure the priests bothered to make me breakfast this time."

"I'll fix that," said Eve and turned to leave. "Wait in the kitchen. I'll be back shortly."

Carl nodded and did as told. He didn't feel uncomfortable sitting alone in the room. He wasn't worried the priests would try something again. His head was clear now. If anyone tried to do anything they'd find themselves facing a fight they couldn't win.

It was a long wait before Eve returned with a frightened looking acolyte following her. A platter filled with food was placed in front of him before the

acolyte made his quick exit. Eve took a seat next to Carl and grabbed herself a wing from the roasted bird.

“What would your priests say if they saw you sitting in their quarters, eating food like this?” asked Carl as he dug into the food.

“I'm sure it would shake their sense of importance, but what do I care?” Eve bit into the wing and chewed down the white piece of meat.

“What are you going to do about the rest of the priests?” asked Carl. He'd have to stay at the temple for a good while from the looks of things. He'd need to sleep. The priests would have time to make other attempts at his life.

“I'm not sure,” said Eve. She gave Carl a look. “But it's clear you need some protection. So from now on you're sleeping with me.”

Carl nearly choked on his food. “What?”

Eve laughed. “Not like that. Just sleep. You'll have a bed in my chamber. I'll make certain no one can touch you.”

Carl wasn't going to ask how she'd do that. “If you insist.”

“I do,” said Eve. “You're the most fun creature I've ran across in a long time. I'm not going to let these misguided fanatics take that away from me.”

Carl wasn't certain how to feel about being talked about as if he were nothing more than an interesting new pet. Still, he appreciated the sentiment carried by her words. She was concerned for his well being and that was more than many others had shown him in recent times.

“So where are we going for the meeting?” asked Carl.

“You'll see,” replied Eve with a mysterious smile.

“It is another world, I take it?”

Eve nodded and picked the last scraps of meat from the bone.

“How different is it?”

“You'll see,” said Eve. “All I'll say is it is more advanced than this one.”

Carl stuffed more food in his mouth. Clearly Eve wasn't going to tell much. He'd find out soon enough anyway so he didn't feel like pressing the matter. They finished the meal without much further talk. A brief rest later and the two were out on the stone balcony behind the temple. Carl had found himself a pair of sandals that weren't too worn down. He could only hope the place they were going

to wouldn't be cold.

“Are you ready?” asked Eve. The wind rustled her hair, forcing her to push it aside so she could see.

“As long as it's not going to be freezing where we go,” said Carl and smiled. It felt forced after everything that had happened that day. It was hard to believe he was standing there in relatively good shape. Eve had worked a miracle on him. Despite that his mind still lingered on the events. A shadow of the searing pain of the hot iron made him raise a hand to his chest and take a deep breath.

The events would haunt him for a long time to come.

“It shouldn't be,” said Eve and reached out to grab his hand.

“Let's go then,” said Carl and grabbed her hand.

A moment later a bright flash left the stone balcony empty.

As usual it took a moment for Carl's vision to return. His ears needed no such breather so he could hear the wind rustling the leaves in the trees. He could hear the birds chirping and the sound of someone cutting wood in the distance. When his eyes started working again he found himself standing in the middle of a small clearing, surrounded by a lush forest of birches. The leaves were still green, a tell tale sign of the height of summer.

A path led into the forest, towards the sound of the wood cutting.

“Come on,” said Eve after giving him a moment to take in the surroundings.

Carl made no objection and followed her down the path. He looked up at the sky and saw a white streak draw itself into the sky. He squinted to see a small dot preceding it.

An aeroplane.

She had told the truth that the world they had come to was more advanced. Behind his own, but certainly ahead of the sword and arrow worlds they'd been rummaging through as of late.

The path took them through a forest that seemed almost too ideal. Carl had to hold his breath when the forest ended and the path led them to another clearing, this time a considerably larger one. A house stood in the middle of it. It had white walls and a roof that looked to have a gotten a good lathering of tar. Flower boxes hung below the dark framed windows. There was a small patch of

land turned into a field with various crops growing on it.

Eve didn't stop to admire the sheer calmness and soul pampering of the scene, but proceeded to walk around the house to the back of it, towards the sound of an axe hitting wood. Carl took a few running steps to catch up to her.

Behind the house they found a man wielding an axe, slicing through pieces of wood like they were nothing and turning them into the perfect size for a fireplace. He had on what looked to be a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt with red and black squares. You could tell wood chopping was a favourite hobby by his muscular upper body.

"Jonah," Eve greeted the man loud enough to be heard.

The man lowered the axe from above his head and turned to regard her. His eyes made quick note of Carl as well, but disregarded him almost as quickly. He said nothing as he put down the axe to rest against the large piece of wood he'd been using as a work surface.

"Eve," he said and nodded. It was hard to tell whether his voice was gentle or harsh. It lied somewhere in the hard to differentiate middle ground of the two. Either way, he did not sound overly pleased to see her.

"Still chopping wood I see," said Eve and walked over to the pile of wood pieces. She gave them an appraising look.

"Helps to keep the mind clear," said Jonah. He kept his eyes on her. "What do you want?"

"What makes you think I want something?" asked Eve and gave the man an innocent look,

"You always do," said Jonah.

Eve frowned, but then laughed. "True enough."

"So what is it this time?"

"We need your help."

"We?"

Eve nodded towards Carl. "Him and I?"

Jonah turned to regard Carl for the first time. He did not seem impressed. "Your new pet?"

"He's the man that's going to kill the man who killed Howarfench."

The declaration clearly shocked Jonah. "Howarfench is dead?"

Eve nodded. "Killed by a man who calls himself the Lord Saviour. If possible he is even worse. His plans put everyone in danger."

"What plans?" asked Jonah. He was starting to sound interested in what was going on.

"He plans to unite all the worlds into one," said Carl, daring to speak for the first time. He walked to be closer to Eve.

"That's madness," said Jonah and shook his head. "There's no way that can be done without killing almost every living being."

"I doubt he cares," said Carl.

Jonah looked thoughtful for a moment.

"We could really use your help," said Eve.

"Every time I help you I'm worse off," Jonah muttered. "Last time I came back with one horn less. Do you have any idea how long it takes to grow one back?"

"What's a century here or there for us?" asked Eve and smiled innocently.

"That's a century every female of my kind will laugh at me," Jonah muttered.

"You can't blame me for your own mistakes. I did warn you about the danger." Eve looked like she was starting to be annoyed by the man's whining.

"You failed to mention the buggers think the horn of my kind is a great potency drug," Jonah said and stood up to his full height. When he did that, he could look down at both of them from a heads length. "There is nothing more humiliating than being tied down by little creatures and have your horn sawed off."

"Be thankful that's all they had time for," said Eve. "I didn't tell you what they think the heart of one of your kind can do."

Jonah grunted. "Enough of this."

"I agree," said Eve. She did not seem worried that the man they had come for help was starting to look agitated by their very presence. It wasn't a far off thought that there was a reason he was living by himself in the middle of a forest, chopping wood to pass the time.

Jonah glared at both of them. He was struggling to come to a decision. You

could see he was worried about the plan that had been revealed to him. At the same time it was apparent he had bad experiences from going along with anything to do with Eve.

The two stared at each other for a moment.

Jonah sighed. "You always get me eventually."

Eve smiled. "I wouldn't be me if I didn't."

"So what's that pet of yours called?"

"I'm not her pet," said Carl, annoyed that he was being dismissed as one.

"Sure you aren't," said Jonah with a smirk. His attention was solely on Eve, making it clear he did not wish to converse with a pet any further.

"He's Carl," said Eve and gave him a calming look.

Jonah grunted and started towards the house. "Come on. We'll talk more inside."

"Are you sure we need him?" asked Carl.

"He can be a bit hard headed," Eve admitted as the two followed him. "But we absolutely need him."

Carl wanted to argue, but doing so seemed unlikely to bear fruit.

So he stepped inside the house to bring their new found ally up to speed.

Chapter 6

The street lamps cast their yellow light down from above. Tanya slipped from one shadow to the other with seasoned experience. A much less confident figure followed her, though there was no hiding the excitement you would have seen on her face.

Celia grinned as she pressed her back against the wall next to Tanya.

Her usual dress had been turned to mimic what the more experienced woman wore. Black pants that didn't fit too loosely along with a long sleeved black shirt that hugged their figures ensured they blended into the shadows. It was an entirely different experience for Celia. She had grown used to going where she wanted to when she wanted to. Where she went there had been barely any humans. The lizard men had always greeted her with respect.

Sneaking around in the dark, doing your best not to get seen was a new experience.

Still one thing bugged her.

“Why didn't you tell Seth where we were going?” Celia spoke in a soft tone that barely carried far enough to be heard by her companion.

Tanya turned to give her a look. “He wouldn't approve. Better he doesn't know so we don't have to argue about it.”

It had been hard enough for her to convince the man to let her take Celia with her. The detonator to her necklace was with her so if she tried to escape death would be certain. Even with that it had taken a lot of convincing to keep him from tagging along.

“You keep a lot of secrets from him,” Celia noted. It seemed like an odd thing to do considering how close the two were.

“Necessity dictates,” said Tanya and inched to the corner of the wall. She peeked around it to take a quick glance at the street. She then reached into her backpack and pulled out a gun. Celia had seen her screw on the extended barrel. The silencer she had called it. Whether it would work like she advertised Celia had her doubts of. She had heard a gun being fired and muffling the sound

seemed like an impossible task for a metal cylinder.

“Why do you do this?” asked Celia. A change in subject looked to be in order.

“What? Sneak around in dark streets with gun in hand?”

“Kill people for money,” said Celia, focusing her question. It seemed like an odd thing to dedicate your life to. She had killed people herself, of course, but there had always been a reason for it, be it to ensure the survival of her brethren or just to keep them fed. Killing for money somehow seemed wrong to her.

“I like the challenge,” said Tanya and took another glance around the corner. The guards at the gate did not seem overly vigilant. Run across the street and climb over the wall from the side. No one would notice them. “And there are worse ways to make a living. I could be speculating with this years crops on the market and starve millions doing it.”

Much of her explanation made no sense to Celia. There was a lot she did not understand about the world she had landed in. She was learning, slowly, but it would be along time before she would fully understand it all.

“Come on,” said Tanya and rushed across the street. After a moment of hesitation Celia followed her as quickly as she could. She had yet to hear why she was along for the ride. It seemed everything would be done without her help just as well.

They pressed against the wall once more and Tanya took a glance around the corner to ensure the guards at the gate had not seen them.

“Why kill the man we're here for?” asked Celia.

“Because someone is paying us handsomely for it. What more reason do you need?” Tanya looked up the wall. It was too high for her to jump and grab hold of even if she stood on Celia's shoulders. A rope with a grappling hook was out of the question in the street. The barbedwire at the top didn't help either.

That's where Celia came in.

“Can you get me past the wall?”

Celia gave the wall a look. If she could take her dragon form it wouldn't have been nothing more than an annoyance, but as it stood she needed to retain the human form and that forced her to think of something less direct with which to deal with it. She had never really thought about how to use her powers. She had

always simply done it and the dragon form had made it largely irrelevant. She could use the bulk of it to deal with most anything.

“I could manipulate the air to lift you up,” said Celia hesitantly. She had never done it, but it should have been possible. “I’m not sure I can get you out though.”

Tanya smiled, though it was hard to see in the darkness. “Let me worry about the getting out part.”

“Why do you need to do it like this anyway? Couldn’t you just kill him from a distance? I’m sure you have a weapon that can do that.” To Celia it seemed like an incredible risk to take just to kill someone.

“Clients demand,” said Tanya and shrugged. “I need to place something on the body and I can’t very well do that if I kill him half a mile away.”

“I hope you get paid extra for that,” said Celia and started to figure out how to do what she had suggested.

“Oh, I do,” Tanya assured and readied herself. She wasn’t sure what to expect, but when she could feel air rushing below her feet and slowly start lifting her off the ground she understood. She expected it to be hard to maintain balance, but the air gave a solid foothold. It was almost like standing on solid ground. She looked down at Celia with slight admiration.

She could be of great help in her work.

“Just wait there and I’ll be back soon,” said Tanya and got a nod in response.

Celia watched her disappear behind the wall. She let go of the particles to stop the air flow. A surprised yelp and a thud could be heard from the other side of the wall.

“I’m sorry,” Celia whispered and hoped the woman would not be too angry over her lapse in judgement. She should have lowered her down to the ground, but not seeing her made it that much more difficult. There was no reply from beyond the wall. It left Celia feeling uneasy.

She waited patiently in the dark. Time seemed to crawl. A passing car shone its lights on her, but the occupants did not seem to notice her. There weren’t a lot of cars in the city or so Tanya had told her. The constant wars made it difficult to

justify spending the metal and fuel on anything but military equipment. Even though the city they were in was not part of that conflict they felt the demand for the goods just as much as those who were.

Only the rich could afford to have one.

Still, Celia had seen them before. The first one had had her attention for a long time while she tried to figure out what made it move and how it operated. Tanya and Seth had been patient enough to tell her the main parts of it, but even they couldn't give the full details. They didn't know the things well enough and admitted as much to her.

She leaned against the wall and watched the red tail lights of the car disappear around a corner. Celia had to admit to being somewhat overwhelmed by the world she had ended up in. Everything was so different to what she was used to and there was so much to learn that she doubted even a year would be enough time.

The simple stroll she had taken with Seth and Tanya during the day had given her more than enough to think about. Enough that she had forgotten all about the explosive around her neck.

The sudden realization had her glancing up and down the street.

Tanya had the detonator and she was nowhere near her. Slipping away would be easy. She could find someone to disarm the thing and then she'd be completely free to do what she wanted to.

The thought made her neck tingle. Free to explore a world like this? Free to do what she wanted? At the same time she had to admit to being frightened of the idea. There was too much unknown there, things she did not understand and threats that might best her because of that.

No, it wasn't the time to run away.

She needed more time.

Her thoughts returned to the idea a few more times while she waited, but each passing moment made Tanya's return more likely. When she heard a rustle a bit further up the road she knew the time had fully passed. She looked up to see a dark figure hanging down from a tree branch that extended over the wall. It dropped down onto the side walk almost silently and started towards her.

“Did you do it?” asked Celia as soon as the dark figure got close enough.

“He's dead,” Tanya confirmed and rustled her hair. “Come on. We'd better get away from here before they find the bodies.”

“Wasn't there supposed to be just one?” Celia followed the older woman.

“I got disturbed,” said Tanya. She did not sound pleased about it. “Didn't think his lover would be in the bathroom. She walked in just as I put a bullet in his head.”

“So you shot her too?” asked Celia.

“Of course. No witnesses,” said Tanya and hurried around a corner. They walked a few more streets and turned a few more corners before slipping into a small alley. Tanya started taking off her shirt.

“Give me that bag,” she said while stuffing the shirt into a garbage bin. Celia did as told and watched her pull out a shirt she had left the apartment with. Seth would not know anything when they returned. The trousers received the same fate as the shirt and were replaced by a light skirt that reached her ankles.

“You too,” said Tanya and gave her a look.

“Right.” Celia did as told and turned the black attire into a more colourful one that mimicked Tanya's, though her shirt ended up having more cleavage. The hot air was not pleasant and the more skin was exposed to fresh air the better it was.

Tanya raised an eyebrow at her, but said nothing.

“What did you have to do?” asked Celia as they left the alley. She still carried the backpack, but it was flung over her shoulder in a careless manner.

“Hm?”

“That special thing you had to do for the client. What was it?”

“I had to place a sealed envelope on his chest.”

“What was in it?”

Tanya shrugged her shoulders. “I didn't open it. Doesn't matter to me. The job is done and the money will be in my account soon enough. That's all that matters.”

They got off the side streets and into the main streets. A lot more people were around and the music from the bars could be heard all they way outside.

Restaurants taunted their sense of smell and made their mouths water. The city never slept and there was always a place open for you to dance or enjoy a meal. People walked past in groups, laughing, some sporting drinks they shouldn't have taken away from the club they had been in.

Neon signs lit up above them, making the street lamps almost unnecessary. How anyone could sleep in the floors above was unbelievable. Celia eyed everything with the sort of curiosity a child would have. Even the palm trees that grew evenly spaced on the side walk had her looking up at them. Then her attention was drawn to a display window with a scantily dressed woman slowly dancing and doing her best to draw in lonely men who'd be willing to pay for some time between her legs. From there her eyes wandered to a food stall that had been set-up in the middle of the wide walkway. Meat was searing on a flat metal surface and there were a few people seated at the counter, slurping up noodles from their bowls.

“Can we stop and eat there?” asked Celia and tugged Tanya towards the stall.

Tanya eyed the place with slight suspicion. Street food had its dangers in the city. It was an easy business to start and some of the people that ended up doing it had no experience with professional cooking. They'd cut corners and not do things properly which led to customer getting sick. But she recognized the name on the stall. She'd read good reviews of it.

Glancing up into the sky she finally relented. “All right. Seth won't like us being so late, but he'll just have to deal with it.”

Celia rushed forward and took a seat on one of the stools. Tanya joined her a moment later and got the owners attention.

“What will it be for the young ladies?” asked the man. He had a white apron and a white scarf wrapped around his head. He was young, maybe a few years older than Celia looked, and he had a smile that made you want to smile back.

“I want what they're having,” said Celia and pointed towards the two customers that already had their servings.

“All right. And you?” he turned his attention to Tanya.

She wasn't as quick to decide as Celia had been. The menu was displayed

under the counter, through a layer of clear glass and it listed all the main ingredients. It took her a while to read through all of them. All the while the owner waited patiently.

"I'll have the beef noodles," she finally said. Beef was always the safest thing to go with. Even if it turned out undercooked you probably wouldn't suffer too badly for it. Provided actual beef was used.

"Excellent choice," said the man and turned to his cooking utensils to make their order.

Tanya turned to Celia. She was busy looking around and inspecting every thing she could see from her seat. The curiosity about her made her seem younger, though given her actual age it wasn't surprising that her curiosity got the best of her. Tanya leaned against one hand and looked at her for a while.

"What?" Celia asked when she noticed she was being stared at.

A small smile passed Tanya's lips. "There's something captivating about seeing someone so enthusiastic about a place you yourself consider mundane."

For the first time in her life Celia felt herself blushing. "Sorry."

Tanya laughed. "Don't be sorry. There's nothing wrong with being curious. It's a good trait to have."

Celia couldn't think of anything to say in response.

"I'm curious myself," said Tanya to fill the silence. "Since I was young all I've been taught is how to kill people. It has left me curious about a great many things. So I read and do my best to quench that thirst to understand."

"I don't know how my mother does it," said Celia, drawing a curious look from Tanya. "She seems to be able to slip from world to world without issues. She'll blend in anywhere she goes. How she knows the things she does.." She shook her head.

"She has had time," said Tanya. "With enough time you can learn just about anything."

"I wish she had shared more with me," said Celia. "I wouldn't be so lost now."

Tanya felt a tug of sympathy for her. It couldn't have been easy to see so little of her mother. She had some knowledge of what that was like, but it had to

have been worse for someone who came out ready to face the world. Someone like that needed even more guidance than a child who had time to learn on her own.

“Don't be in a hurry and everything will work out,” said Tanya and made room for their servings. They both got a large bowl in front of them with noodles swimming in a broth that smelled too delicious. There were an assortment of toppings in both bowls, ranging from a boiled egg to freshly cut greens.

Tanya tossed the owner a few coins to pay for it all and got herself two chopsticks with which to enjoy the food.

Celia kept a close eye on her to figure out how to use the chopsticks. It didn't take her long to figure it out and be enjoying the noodles. It was far tastier than anything she had had before. It made her appreciate the fact there were people who made their living preparing such things. She had always thought food as a necessity to keep you going, but now she knew there was enjoyment to be had from it, experiences that would stay with you for the rest of your life.

“This is so good,” she said in between a mouthful.

“It is,” admitted Tanya. The pieces of beef in her bowl seemed to be cooked to perfection. There wasn't much room for complaint in the taste or seasoning. It was a place she would come to again.

Maybe bring Seth with her.

They ate in silence, the only sound they made coming from slurping noodles from the broth. People walked past the stall in an ever more drunken state which made them talk louder and stagger more.

Celia lifted her bowl and drank down the last of the broth. She felt more full than ever before. It had been a large serving. She let out a satisfied sigh and set down the bowl. Tanya finished her portion a moment later.

“We should go. Seth's probably worried about us,” said Tanya and stood up. She nodded a thank you to the owner before leaving. Celia followed her after thanking the owner as well.

The walk back to the apartment wasn't long from where they were. It was one of the taller buildings in the city and the fact she had an apartment at the very top of it told Tanya had money to spend. Even more after tonight.

“What should I do?” asked Celia outside the building. She stopped short of

the glass doors that opened automatically.

“What do you mean?” asked Tanya and turned to regard her.

“Seth wants to leave this place, but you do not. I'm not sure what I want. So should I even try to find a way out of here?”

“You should,” said Tanya in no uncertain words. “But when you find the way, should you tell him?”

“He wouldn't be happy if he heard you saying that,” said Celia. As little time as she had spent with the two it wasn't hard to come to that conclusion. Tanya was playing a dangerous game by trying to keep him where he was without telling him.

“Then we'd better make sure he doesn't hear anything, won't we?” The stare she gave Celia was blood stopping. Knowing her profession it was not unclear what the threat was.

Celia averted her eyes. She could not forget the explosive around her neck. A single press of a button would silence her and Seth was not going to shed a tear if that happened. “It's better he doesn't know,” Celia admitted.

Tanya nodded. “I'm glad you understand.”

The exchange had wiped away any good feeling the food had built up inside her. Celia followed her inside the building and into the elevator in silence. It felt like their relationship had taken a giant leap backwards. Tanya did not seem bothered, but it was not her that had taken the leap.

The elevator made the trip up relatively quickly and the two soon entered Tanya's apartment.

“What took you so long?” asked Seth when the two entered the living room. “You were supposed to go for a short walk.” He looked genuinely worried. Whether it was over the possibility of Celia having escaped or the two of them being late was another question entirely.

“It turned into a longer walk,” said Tanya with a reassuring smile. “You know how she is. Everything draws her attention.”

“And we stopped to eat,” Celia added.

“It was a wonderful place. We should go sometime,” Tanya added and gave Seth a coy look.

He gave both of them a suspicious look. "Maybe."

"I told you he'd be worried about us," said Tanya while mixing herself a drink. It was never too late for one.

"Of course I worried," said Seth and threw himself back onto the couch. The television was showing a movie of some sort. There were a lot of gunshots in it. "You out there with her. Who knows what could have happened."

"I had the remote, remember?" Tanya dug the thing out of her pocket and tossed it to him. It made Celia wince. It was like her own heart had been tossed across the room carelessly. A wrong landing could have ended her life and when Seth fumbled to catch it she felt like it would come true. But he caught the thing safely.

"Don't just throw it around," Seth snapped.

"Why not? You seem so willing to kill her," said Tanya and sipped her drink.

"Not by accident!"

"Ah, so you want to plan it ahead. Very considerate of you."

"Where's all this coming from?" asked Seth and stared at Tanya. Why were they fighting over such a thing? At what point had their relationship gotten to the point where fights could happen? They'd both been too careful of such things in the past.

"Nowhere," said Tanya and opened the balcony door. She closed it behind in a manner that told she wanted to be alone.

"What the hell was that?" asked Seth and stared at the balcony door.

"I don't know," said Celia. The whole exchange had seemed odd to her. Had Tanya wanted to defend her? Or had she simply sought something to confuse Seth with? But to what end would she do that?

Seth shook his head and put the detonator on the coffee table in front of him. "So what did you see on your walk?"

"Lots of drunk people."

Seth laughed. "Yeah, there are plenty of those around."

"It's an odd city," said Celia and moved to the couch. She sat on the opposite end of it from Seth. The movie had gone from a shooting scene to one where the main character was making moves on the love of his life.

“How so?” Seth gave her a curious look.

“It's surrounded by war. The television shows reports of it daily, of people dying not a hundred miles away. But here it's like none of that is happening. The people laugh and celebrate like the world was at peace.”

“It's only the surface,” said Seth. “A cover to hide their fears. If you look hard enough you'll see their nervousness. You'll see the worries.”

Celia had to admit that she had given the drunken people only a cursory look. It was probable Seth was right. She was not used to looking and judging people. Most she had seen she had simply killed or watched be eaten. “My father was right.”

“John?”

Celia nodded.

“What did he say?” Seth always seemed to get interested when his friend was mentioned.

“He said I lacked experience. Then I thought he was wrong, but I see now there are too many things I do not know. Too much in the world I do not understand.” Celia curled up against the arm of the sofa. Her bare feet she tugged under herself.

“We're all inexperienced,” said Seth. For a moment they were both silent. The movie drew their attention.

“Have you gotten any closer to figuring out how to get to another world?” asked Seth.

Celia felt like sharing the discovery she had made when helping Tanya, but that would have meant revealing they had been out for more than a walk. “I think I need some place where I can try things,” she said instead. “Somewhere where there is room for mistakes. Failure in the middle of the city could be quite..attention drawing.”

Seth pondered it for a moment. Having seen what her mother could do there was no denying the possibility. “I'll see what we can do.”

Silence took over again as they watched the movie.

Chapter 7

Working for the smith proved to be more taxing than Rand had thought possible, but at the same time the money he was making was not bad at all. The smith himself was a strict man, but once you got on his good side he was a nice enough person. He didn't tolerate any excuses and made Rand work the shop the traditional way for a few days before allowing him to try his skills out on real items. Once he saw what Rand could do he stopped forcing him to do the heavy physical labour and instead left him to handle the various small repairs that came his way.

Rand had shared his story with him and thought it had had an impact on how much money he was getting. The smith seemed supportive of his idea for revenge. As news spread it seemed like the town folk felt the same way. They brought in items for repair and slipped Rand some extra coins here and there and wished him luck.

Of course, there were those who gave him grim looks out of fear that his actions would bring death to their town. But they didn't go farther than that.

He had a small room at the back of the shop. The bed wasn't uncomfortable, but the heat from the furnace made the place feel like an oven. Each night he reminded himself that he had to endure it only for a week. By then he'd have enough coin to buy himself a few sets of spare clothes along with food and other items necessary when travelling.

"So you're really leaving?" asked Don. He put down the heavy smith's hammer and gave Rand a look over. He had a traveller's cloak on and a bag hoisted over his shoulder.

Rand nodded. "I can't stay any longer. I've given the creature enough of a lead already."

Don grunted and turned to the rack behind him. He grabbed something from it and tossed it to Rand. He fumbled with the heaviness of it, but managed to catch it and hold it in his hand. It was a sword with a very basic scabbard.

"Can't kill a dragon with that knife of yours," said Don and lifted up the

hammer once more.

Rand pulled out the blade to inspect it. It wasn't the finest of blades. It wasn't meant to be a decoration. It was made for killing. The hilt was wrapped in leather and a slightly larger orb of metal ensured it would not slip from your grip easily. The guards were simple stretches of metal without any decorations. The blade was sharp and had grooves in it to let the blood flow away.

It was basic, but it had a bite to it. Certainly better than his knife.

"Thank you," said Rand. He set down his bag and fastened the blade around his waist. "I don't know how to repay you for all the kindness you've shown me."

Don shoved a piece of metal into the hot coals. "No need to thank me. Just don't get yourself killed."

Rand felt his determination waver. The people of the town had been good to him. They'd shown what human kindness could be at its best. On Jen's dead body he had sworn he'd burn down the entire world if needed. The people of the town had made him think there were places that did not deserve that fate no matter the reason.

"I won't forget you or the people of this town," said Rand. "I have no ill word to say about this place."

Don grunted. He never spoke much.

"Well, I'll be going then," said Rand and grabbed his bag. He walked out of the smiths shop and onto the street. As he walked towards the northern gate people passed him, some greeting him with nods when they recognized him, some ignoring him completely.

It was a good day to start a journey. The sun shone from a cloudless sky and the temperature looked to remain a pleasant warm instead of the hot grill it had been for a few days.

The guards at the gate gave him no trouble. If someone wanted to leave the town there was no reason to harass them. When they tried to get back in the story may have been different.

After walking for a while Rand turned to give the small town one last look. The palisade hid most of the buildings from view, but he could see the smoke rising from where Don was moulding metal to his desires. He left behind the

temporary home he had found and started down the road, towards the mountains.

Two days ago he had ventured into one of the town's taverns and heard rumours. They'd said the king was in the north, at the foot of the mountains, battling an uprising from the dragon cultists. It was only a rumour, some didn't believe it, but there were those who believed it and worried what would come of it.

From what Rand had gathered the king was well liked in the town. His soldiers kept the roads safe and bandits and other nasties of life were a rare thing. Unlike under the previous king's rule.

It didn't matter to Rand whether the king would be there or not. He'd walk through him just the same if he tried to stop him from tracking down the dragon. If he wanted to help then he'd take that hand and shake it.

It was that single tracked thinking that kept his mind busy as miles passed down the road. He started to wish he'd had enough coins to buy a horse, but they were rare in a small town and expensive if you wanted one. He'd had to have worked several more weeks to cover that cost and that was giving his target too much of a lead. Given that the dragon could fly it would have an advantage just from that.

He took several breaks during the day to rest his legs and to eat something. He figured the rations would last until the mountains, but then he'd need to secure more from somewhere. He had some extra coins, but they wouldn't last for long. Eventually he'd need to stop and work again. The thought of slowing down made him feel despair. Could he track down a dragon like this? Every stop made it harder to find it, gave it an opportunity to slip further away.

He needed to do something big that would secure his finances and allow him to focus on hunting the thing instead of being distracted by money troubles.

Days passed.

The road he walked was mostly empty. An occasional wagon rolled past, the occupants never stopping or even greeting him. It suited Rand fine. He wasn't in the mood to talk with strangers.

The nights were uneventful. The cloak was enough to keep the night cold away so he didn't even bother lighting a fire every night. He hoped the summer

would be enough to finish the task. Walking in the winter snow and camping outside while trees froze solid was not going to be a pleasant experience.

The thought put some more energy in his steps.

It took him a week more to reach the foot of the mountains.

It turned out the rumours had been true. The king was there and the dragon cultists had a stronghold up the mountain where they were holed up in. The king's army remained camped on the flat ground, between a forest and the mountains, not wanting to risk the losses scaling up the mountainside would incur.

Rand observed the army from the safety of the forest, trying to decide what to do. It was unlikely they would simply let him walk through. He could have been a cultist spy, after all. Going around did not seem like a viable option. Examining the mountainside made it clear there was only one way up it and finding another would take more time than he had to spare.

In the midst of the sea of tents there was a small village. Rand counted around twenty buildings, meaning it was nothing more than a place for miners to stop for supplies on their way up to the mountains. No doubt it had an inn and more than likely the king had confiscated it for his personal use.

Rand shook his head. There weren't many options open to him. He hoisted the bag over his shoulder once more and emerged from the forest. He headed straight for the village.

It didn't take long for a group of soldier to spot him and head his way. Rand made the decision to stop and wait for them to come to him. He set down the bag and took as non-threatening a stance as he could. The group of ten soldiers surrounded him, their spears pointing straight at him.

"Who are you and what's your business here?" asked one of the soldiers. Judging by the red mane his helmet had he was an officer of some sort. His metal chest plate had more engravings than those of the men with spears.

"I come here to solve your problems," said Rand in a calm voice.

"And what problems might those be?"

Rand looked up the side of the mountain. He could barely see where the stronghold stood. There were stone bridges connecting it to various high points in

the mountain face, towers with flags fluttering in the constant wind. "I can take down that stronghold for you. If your king lets me."

"He's mad, captain Cadmer," muttered one of the soldiers.

"You're probably right, Shank," said Cadmer. Rand made note of both men and their names. It was always good to remember who you had talked to.

"I can prove my worth if you just let me," said Rand and gave Cadmer an unwavering stare.

The captain seemed unimpressed, but curious. He had nine men with spears pointed at him and an army of thousands standing behind him. What could one man do? "How?"

"Just tell Shank there to lend me his spear," said Rand. "I'm not going to do anything. You have the superior strength."

After a brief consideration the captain nodded. "Give him your spear, Shank."

The soldier hesitated, but eventually took a step forward and handed the spear to Rand. He grabbed it with a nod and inspected it. A solid wooden shaft that ended in a sharp steel point. The men around him took a more cautious stand and held their weapons tighter.

"You might want to give me a bit more room," said Rand and summoned his power. The captain saw the change in his eyes and ordered the men to take a few steps back.

A single glance at the ground gave Rand what he needed. He found the right point and stuck it with the spear. It was only a small portion of a larger web, but it was enough for demonstration purposes. The hole that appeared sunk down quickly, creating a crater with steep walls. The soldiers stumbled to get away from it, leaving Rand to stand in the middle of it.

For a moment Rand looked up at their frightened faces before sticking the spear into the ground again, this time lifting the ground back up to where it had been. The soldiers kept a respectable distance to him now.

"I barely scratched the surface with that," said Rand and leaned casually against the spear. "You get me up to that fortress there and I will flatten it for you."

It took a moment for Cadmer to gather himself. "That is something the king must decide."

"Then we should go talk to him," said Rand.

"Give Shank his spear back," said Cadmer. Rand did as told and handed the weapon back to its owner. He got some nervous glances from the soldier. He looked at his own weapon as if it were a snake. Maybe he feared some of the power still remained in it and he'd do something horrible with it.

"And we'll be taking that sword of yours," the captain added.

Rand sighed and undid the belt. He tossed the blade to the ground. "Do you want to take my clothes as well?"

"No. You can keep them." There was no humour in Cadmer's voice as he motioned for his men to form up around Rand and escort him into the camp. They walked past tents and curious soldiers that tried to get a glance at what was going on. They must have been camping there for a while now. Boredom had started to set in. There were plenty of groups of men lazing around, playing cards and tossing dice. It was the sort of easiness that set in when knowledge of no battle in the future had set in.

"Doesn't look like you're in a hurry to win this," Rand noted as they passed a group of half naked soldier who had found a barrel of wine from somewhere.

"The king feels it is best we confine them and starve them out," said Cadmer.

"Why are you fighting them anyway?" asked Rand. The rumours had been vague about the reasons behind it.

"They believe the throne should be occupied by the dragons. They will not recognize a human as their ruler. So they staged this uprising. They're a fringe group with not many supporters, but that stronghold of theirs is a place of death for anyone trying to take it over." Cadmer glanced up at the mountain side. Rand could tell by his voice he did not look forward to making the climb with arrows raining down on him.

"Have there been any dragons in the sky?" asked Rand. "You'd think they'd have one hovering over them if they're trying to put one on the throne."

Cadmer shook his head. "A few days ago a dragon flew past us from the south. It didn't even stop to look at the fortress."

“Where did it go?” asked Rand. It must have been the one that killed Jen. If nothing else it was the best lead he'd found so far.

“It flew deeper into the mountains,” said Cadmer. “But not before causing quite a panic here.” He turned to give Rand a look. “Why do you care where it went?”

“I'm tracking it,” said Rand.

“Why?”

“I'm going to kill it.”

Cadmer started to laugh, but then grew serious. There weren't many reasons why you would say it. It was likely it had killed someone the man cared for. Laughing at something like that was not right. On the other hand he could have laughed at the ludicrousness of the claim, but he'd seen what the man could do. Killing a dragon might have been possible for someone like him.

He didn't have time to say anything on the matter as they arrived in the town and at the inn the king was staying at. It wasn't much of a building, but better than staying even in the luxurious tent of the king. There was something about having walls around you that the wind couldn't rustle and a roof over your head that didn't leak when it rained.

“Keep an eye on him,” said Cadmer and headed towards the door. The personal guard of the king had the place under close watch and they'd kept an eye on the group ever since first seeing them. They questioned the captain for a bit before allowing him through. The red overcoats they wore hid underneath plate mail that looked to be of high quality.

Rand was slightly disappointed he had been left outside to wait, but it was only a sensible precaution. Even if he was unarmed they knew he had powers. Revealing it had been risky, but it seemed like the best way to go forward. He turned his attention to Shank who carried his sword and bag.

“What's this king like?” It was a valid enough question coming from someone who was about to meet him for the first time. At least Rand hoped he would be meeting him.

Shank gave him a suspicious look. “You're not from around here, are you?”

Rand shrugged. “My home is far away.”

“Figured as much,” said Shank. “Anyone from the kingdom of Vale would know king Gadron to be a honourable man. Ever since slaying the former king he has improved the lives of his subjects considerably and repealed many of the laws that hit the lowest casts hardest.”

“A man of the people then.” It was obvious Shank held him in high regard. When he looked around he could see the other soldiers displaying much the same sort of feeling by their expressions.

“Every man in this camp would lay down their lives for him,” said Shank. “For our king we would do anything.” There was no reason to doubt his words.

“We should get along fine then,” said Rand and smiled.

“Make sure you do or I'll tickle your spine with my spear,” said Shank.

Rand grinned. The man was serious, but he took it as a poor joke. They waited for a few more minutes before the door to the inn swung open and Cadmer walked out, followed by more personal guard from the king as well as some more high ranking looking officers. Finally, the king himself walked out.

The only way to tell him apart from the soldiers around him was the fact there was more decoration on his armour, though that did nothing to diminish the practical look of it. He wore a red cape and a small golden tiara on his head was the only allowance he made for looking more royal.

“This is the man?” he asked and stepped forward to inspect Rand.

“Yes, your majesty,” replied Cadmer.

The king eyed Rand for a moment. He was relatively young to be one. Maybe in his late thirties. There was no sign of grey in his brown hair, no wrinkles on his clean shaven face. “You claim you can solve our little problem?”

“I believe I can, your majesty,” said Rand and looked him straight in the eye. “I'm certain the captain told you what I can do. His men will vouch for the story.”

“I do not doubt his word,” replied Gadron.

“Then you have no reason not to let me try,” said Rand.

“You could be working for the cultists,” said Gadron. “Letting you through could give them information they should not gain.”

“Your majesty, if I worked for the cultists you and your army would be at the bottom of a very steep pit, getting massacred.” There was no bolstering in Rand's

voice. It was a simple statement of fact.

Gadron did not flinch at the claim. Instead he gave Rand another inquisitive look, trying to determine how much there was exaggeration in his words. Seeing none made him give his high ranking advisers a look. A few shook their heads.

“What I find myself wondering is, why would you offer to do this?” the king turned to regard Rand once more.

“I have no love for dragons or anyone who worships them,” Rand replied.

“And why is that?” the king asked. “A man does not hate without reason.”

“A dragon killed my wife,” Rand replied in a quiet voice. “They're no gods. Even if they are, no god I would want to worship. They're all better off dead and anyone who thinks they're gods can go die with them.”

Gadron regarded Rand with a sympathetic look. “I can understand your reasons. I can't deny I might feel the same if I were you.”

“Then let me do this,” Rand pleaded. “You have nothing to lose.”

“What do you need from us?” the king asked.

Rand hadn't really thought the plan through before walking over and surrendering himself, but as they'd walked to the town he had come up with an idea. Even with his powers he wasn't going to walk into the fortress unopposed. There were questions he wanted to ask the cultists before destroying them. For that he needed them to accept him as one of them.

“I need someone who can teach me to act like one of the cultists,” said Rand. “And I need a group of men who will chase me up the mountain in a convincing manner.”

“You plan to play one of them?” asked the king.

Rand nodded. “They will open the gates to me thinking I bring important news from the outside. Your men chasing me will only add to my credibility. Once I'm inside I will be free to do my work.”

“It doesn't sound like a plan that will have you coming out alive,” Gadron noted.

“Have faith, your majesty,” said Rand. “I'm not ready to die just yet.”

The king paced around for a moment. He glanced at his advisers and Rand in turn. “Very well. We will do as you suggest.”

Rand smiled. "Thank you, your majesty."

"Keep his weapons for the time he is in the camp. Keep an eye on him, captain Cadmer. He is your responsibility until we send him off. And find someone who can teach him about the cultist ways."

Cadmer saluted. "As you wish, my king."

With that, Gadron turned and returned inside the inn. His lackeys followed along with the members of the personal guard who had come out with him.

"Shank, you're with me. The rest of you, back to your posts," Cadmer ordered. The soldiers did as told, leaving Rand alone with the two men.

"I trust you will not give us trouble?"

"I have no reason to," Rand replied to the captain. He had what he wanted. There was no reason to do anything to jeopardize it.

"Good," Cadmer grunted and started off towards the edge of the camp closer to the mountains. Shank waited until Rand started after him before following him. They walked past tents. The soldiers at the front seemed to be less casual than the ones at the back. It made Rand think they shipped the soldier on less alert to the back of the camp to give them more time should an enemy come down the mountain. It spoke of confidence that the lands behind them were firmly under control. Given how things had looked on his walk, Rand had no reason to doubt that.

Cadmer led them all the way to the edge of the camp. From there the mountains loomed over the world below like giants. The captain led them to a tent that looked like all the others.

"Nemes!" Cadmer called out.

There was no response.

"Nemes! Get up you lazy drunk!" There was more demand in the captain's voice. After a bit of waiting the flap of the tent parted and a man stepped out with unsteady steps. For a soldier he looked like a poor excuse with his bushy beard and bloodshot eyes.

"I'm awake," the man muttered and squinted in the bright sunlight to see who had disturbed his sleep.

"You should have been awake a long time ago," said Cadmer and inspected

the man from head to toe. His uniform was a mess, no doubt because he had slept in it. His stomach bulged out a bit, but you wouldn't have called him fat. Just a man who enjoyed his beer.

“Captain Cadmer,” Nemes said and made a half hearted attempt at a salute. “My night went long, I will admit that, but only because of the company of the long necked beauty.”

“He's not talking about a woman,” Shank whispered to Rand.

“Well, I've got a job for you none the less. Orders from the king himself.” It was a slight exaggeration, but not far from the truth. The king had ordered Cadmer to find someone who could teach Rand after all.

Nemes did not seem impressed. “What do I have to do?”

Cadmer gave the man a firm look. “You were once a cultist, right?”

“A fact my comrades here will never let me forget,” Nemes muttered and glanced around.

“Well, that's going to come in handy now. You are to teach this man everything you know about them. How they behave, how they talk, everything.” Cadmer motioned towards Rand.

Nemes looked him over and shrugged. “Fine.”

He turned around and reached inside the tent. After feeling around for a bit he pulled out a clay pot and removed the wooden cover from it. He took a large gulp from it before turning to face Rand once more.

“You sure this is the right man for the job?” asked Rand. The way he was acting did not inspire much confidence.

“He's the best we've got,” said Cadmer. He didn't sound too pleased with the fact.

Nemes grinned and toasted with the clay pot before taking another gulp.

Chapter 8

Shivers ran down John's spine. Warm blood dripped down his hand. He grinned and slashed an even greater wound into his victim. More blood sprayed out, more enjoyment ran through his body. He could feel the blood being absorbed into him.

It wasn't as good as Tina's blood, but there had been plenty of it.

A small laugh escaped him.

The body hit the floor with a thud. John stood above it for a moment, enjoying the sensations. It was the tenth one he'd killed since the first one. It was more blood than he'd ever gotten in such a short amount of time and it was starting to feel overwhelming. He started to doubt his ability to stop.

"You're fucked up man," Sixten muttered from next to him. "I've seen some crazy shit done in the underground, but you, you're something else."

John turned to regard him. He had gotten another bottle in his hands and it was getting empty at a frightening pace. He must have had some machine inside him to help burn all that alcohol away. Otherwise he'd have been dead long ago.

"Have you ever tried chrysalis?"

"I'm not into those sort of drugs," Sixten replied. He took a bit of distance to John.

"But have you tried it?" John demanded, lifting up a hand to watch the last remains of blood disappear into the blackness that was his body.

"Yeah, I've tried it."

"Then you know. That sense of euphoria that hits you. You feel almost like you're having a continuous orgasm."

"Fucking hot when a chick gets to that phase," said Sixten and grinned. Despite not doing the drug himself he hung out with plenty of people who did. There were perks to it, like watching a half naked woman writhe and moan on the couch as she tried to deal with the waves of pleasure.

"That's what the blood does to me," said John. He did not mention that with Tina there was some pain involved as well. "But it's not as incapacitating. I can

function and I have my mind that wants for more every moment.”

“Doesn't sound very manageable,” said Sixten and took a gulp of the golden brown liquid in his bottle. He looked up and down the corridor they were in. “Fuck. Got to call someone to clean this up.”

Despite everything his business was still running. There were Alternaters there who had nothing to do with the Lord Saviour. A ripped apart body would make them question their safety and that would be bad for business.

“I'm not running around killing everyone I come across just yet,” said John.

“You're not far fucking off,” said Sixten and walked over to the nearest intercom. They were placed next to almost all the doors. He pushed a button and started ordering people around to clean the mess.

John blinked. The drunkard had a point. He had not hesitated killing anyone they came across. He'd trusted Sixten to point the right people to him. He'd thought about killing some of the people they passed in the corridors. The realization of it hit him only then.

He was losing control.

There had been too much blood.

And all it had taken was the blood of ten people.

“What have I become?” John muttered to himself. He looked at the miserable body at his feet. She had been a pretty woman. Now she looked like a pack of dogs had mauled her and ripped her apart.

“You're fucked up. I told you,” said Sixten and walked back to him. He gave John a pat on the shoulder. “But don't worry about it. Everyone's fucked up one way or another. The reasons vary. Some were sexually abused by their uncle when they were a little kid. Some are just born with wires crossed in their heads. As fucked up as you are, there's always someone out there who's even more screwed up.”

“That's not exactly a bright view of the world,” John noted. The words had done nothing to ease his dismay.

Sixten laughed. “The world is the mother of all us fucked up people. What does it make her?”

It was hard to deny the world wasn't screwed up. John was a prime example

of it. If you looked around you for even a little while you saw things that you knew were wrong. The more you looked, the more you saw them. Few could argue that the world was a sane place. Those that did had likely never looked at it, but instead lived their lives in a tunnel that led them to work and back home, blocking out everything else in the world.

“The world isn't a pleasant place,” said John in a monotone voice.

“No, it isn't,” Sixten agreed and looked up and down the corridor. He could hear footsteps coming their way. The clean-up crew was coming. “Let's go see what Tina is up to. You've killed just about every agent working for the Saviour.”

John ripped himself back to reality. It was no good wallowing in things you could do nothing about. He had been turned into the being he now was and going back was not possible. He needed to make the most of what he had.

“Yeah. Let's do that,” said John and started walking away from the body. He did not look back. The group of people that rushed by to clean it all up went unnoticed by him.

Sixten led the way since he knew the facility and soon they were back in the familiar white room with Tina and Richter working with the Oracle.

“Had fun?” asked Tina and looked at John with a small smile. She knew what the bloodbath must have done to him.

“I think he's suffering from a self awareness crisis,” said Sixten and threw himself into one of the chairs.

“Is that so?” Tina gave John a questioning look.

“He's over thinking things,” John replied and frowned at Sixten. He did not need Tina knowing there were doubts in his mind about how to live his life.

“Have you got the Oracle doing what you want?” Changing the subject seemed like the best way to avoid any further questions about his own mind.

“It is tricky,” said Richter, though he sounded enthusiastic. Tina must have sent him on a path he had not considered himself. It was in the nature of some to get excited about such things. “But we are running a first test. It's taxing on the Oracle so it might take a while to see if we get the results we want.”

“I'm certain we will,” said Tina and turned to Sixten. “You really should pay the man more. He is a genius.”

Sixten snorted. "There are geniuses on every street corner."

"A rather poor attempt not to have to spend more money," said Richter and grinned at Sixten. "But I am happy. I get to play with things I love. The pay is secondary to me."

"See? He's happy. No need to rock the boat." Sixten took a gulp from his bottle.

"You're lucky you found someone like him," said John as Richter and Tina continued to stare at the Oracles command screen. "Guys who know this stuff can be expensive."

Sixten shrugged. "Not really. There were plenty of them working on the project for the government and the legit companies. When the whole thing got shut down they were left with nothing more to work on. Many of them were passionate about it and will work for relatively cheap for the opportunity to do what they love. Fucking idealistic bastards. I'm all to happy to fuck them over in wages."

Sixten had spoken in a soft tone that probably did not carry to the two very focused individuals by the Oracle.

"Fucking politicians. They think if you make a law saying something is illegal that it will suddenly disappear and not be a problem any more. The fuckers don't consider people like me who thank them for every thing they say people shouldn't do because I'll make more money selling it all once the legitimate providers are gone. Goes for drugs, alcohol, sex – every fucking thing."

"They think they're doing good. Protecting people from themselves. They don't realize people make their own decision and should be free to do so as long as they're not harming others." John frowned at Sixten.

"I've got no problem harming others to make money," said Sixten happily.

"You're a fucking bastard," said John. "I'm talking about the average person here."

"The average person isn't going to disobey a law. That's why the fucking politicians can do what they want. And they'll get voted back in by those same average people who don't see they're losing their freedoms bit by bit." Sixten looked like he wanted to spit on the ground, but instead took a swig from his

bottle.

"I should kill a few politicians," said John, half-joking. Even when he'd led a normal life, well before even knowing about Alternating, he'd thought a few politicians would have deserved to die.

"You kill one and three more pop up. It's a wasted effort," said Sixten. "Though I wouldn't mind seeing a few of their brains plastered all over the news."

John grunted and made his way to one of the chairs. He couldn't agree with everything Sixten said, but his views on politicians was spot on in his opinion. It was disturbing to find something you agreed on with him. He was such a seedy figure you'd have thought his views to be completely opposite to someone like John.

That brought him right back to how he had changed. Say what you would about Sixten, but at least he wasn't running around murdering people left and right.

"It works!" Richter slammed his hands together and made a little dance that would have had an entire night club pointing at him, laughing.

"So it seems," said Tina and looked up at John with a smile. "We just found Celia."

"We know where she is?" asked John. He wasn't sure how to feel about it. She had shown some promise of being salvageable, but maybe she would have been better off without Tina in her life?

"Not precisely, no," said Richter. "But we know what world she's in. Narrowing down someone's location even when they have a chip is a time consuming effort. No way the Oracle could do it for someone who we have barely a signature for. I'm not even fully convinced this information is correct."

"It's correct," said Tina in a confident voice. "And we're going to narrow it down further with time."

"How much time?" asked John. "I doubt we have a lot of it. I've killed eleven of the Lord Saviours agents. He's going to figure out something is wrong when he doesn't hear from them. Then he'll come asking questions and I bet we don't want to be here when that happens."

"Eleven?" Tina raised an eyebrow at the number. "You really enjoyed

yourself, didn't you?"

John almost felt himself blushing a bit. "You told me to go kill them."

"I did," Tina admitted. "I didn't tell you to be insatiable about it."

"They just kept appearing," said John defensively. He could tell Tina was teasing him, but he couldn't help the need to make it look like it was her fault and not his own. Admitting his own guilt fully would have taken him to a place he was not ready to open the door to.

"You guys better go and leave me to deal with the fallout," said Sixten. "I can say I haven't seen the agents. Easy enough. But if you're here then it won't be as easy."

"Where would we go?" asked John. They had a hotel room paid for so it wasn't an issue of not having a place to go to. More it was deciding their destination. If they knew the world where Celia was then going there seemed like a good idea. They might not have known the precise location of her, but there was always a place to start looking.

"We go where she is," said Tina with no uncertainty in her voice. "The Oracle can keep working on narrowing down her location. We'll drop by from time to time to see how things have progressed. Unless we happen to get on her scent on our own."

"Sounds like a plan," said Sixten. There was no hiding his eagerness to see both of them leave.

"Where is she then?" asked John. Even if the Oracle had located the world it was possible it had not yet figured out the right planet. It was an often overlooked fact. When people talked about worlds they spoke of certain planets within different universes. It was entirely possible to have multiple worlds that were located in the same universe.

There had been attempts to use the same technique to travel to other worlds within their own universe, but as far as John knew those had met with failure.

"Let's see," said Richter and leaned over the display. He pushed a few buttons before frowning. A moment more passed as the man worked to get the result out. "Benevez."

"Well she's fucked," said Sixten and sipped more from his bottle.

Tina frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Benevez is a world torn by war," said John. He could not help but agree with Sixten. "They use relatively modern weapons. I think they'd be enough to kill Celia if she wasn't careful. It's not a place where you can assume a dragon form and fly through the skies without fear. There are powerful weapons that can take you down."

"She's not helpless," said Tina, though it was clear she was now even more worried about her.

"She's not invincible either," said John. Being realistic about it was the only way to move forward. Tina did not fully understand what sort of a world their daughter was in. The cruelty of the men there was unparalleled. A young woman like Celia would quickly find herself in a situation she was not equipped to handle, even with her powers.

"All the more reason we start searching for her immediately," said Tina.

"What about Felix and the rest?" John asked.

"The Oracle can't work on more than one of these tasks at a time," said Richter. "And even one will take time. There is a lot of noise to be filtered out."

"We'll do what we can," said Tina, though she did not sound pleased. "We find Celia and then we find Felix. No matter how long it takes."

"I'll make sure the Oracle keeps searching," said Richter.

"And I'll make sure the Lord Saviour doesn't come and fuck everything up," said Sixten while waving his bottle around.

John and Tina exchanged looks. It was difficult to trust someone like Sixten to do something unless you were there watching over his shoulder. It was probable he'd drink too much and forget ever making such a promise. He'd drank enough for the day is it stood.

But they had little choice.

"When do we leave?" asked John. He knew the answer would be somewhere between now and immediately.

"Now," said Tina.

Inside, John chuckled. He had started to know her well enough to predict responses to certain things. There was no point arguing about it with her, there

rarely was a chance she'd change her mind.

Tina walked over to John and grabbed him by the arm.

"You better not fuck things up," she gave Sixten a firm stare.

"I won't," the man assured, looking more sober than ever during the day.

"If you do, expect to die," said Tina and then Alternated her and John away.

There was the usual moment of blindness.

Then the sound of distant explosions made it through the initial confusion. John blinked to regain his vision. Now that he thought about it, how had she known how to take them there? Previously she had had to witness the alternating herself before being able to do it. Maybe Richter had shown it to her through the Oracle?

He shook his head. There were better times to think about it.

John found himself looking at a jungle. Tall trees surrounded him and a lush undergrowth covered the ground. Vines hung from the tree branches and he could hear animals moving, safely hidden by the leaves.

"Damn it," John muttered to himself. They couldn't have landed in a much worse place. From what little he knew about the world the jungles were located in the areas with the worst conflicts going on. There were plenty of hiding places and they could be surprised any moment by enemies.

They tended to shoot first and ask questions later.

"Such life," said Tina, startling John. She appeared from behind the thick undergrowth and looked around in wonder. "I've seen forests before, but nothing that would begin to compare to this in sheer volume of life."

"We've got to go," said John and looked around. The distant explosions had him worried. There was a battle raging somewhere and they usually weren't going to be closely contained.

"But which direction?" asked Tina and continued looking around in wonderment.

"Away from the explosions," said John and grabbed her hand and started to pull her along. He flowed into the dark armour outfit and thanked the fact he couldn't feel the heat. The air must have been suffocating.

"What's the hurry?" asked Tina, but did not try to fight against him. She

followed along, only adjusting her usual dress to allow for more movement.

“We don't want to get mixed up in any battle,” said John. He wasn't certain how well his current being would handle bullets. Would they hit him and cause damage or simply bounce off harmlessly?

One thing was certain. He did not want to find out.

“Is it really that bad?” asked Tina.

“Yes.”

John formed a blade with his hand and started cutting through the biggest obstacles. It allowed for slightly faster progress. He hastened the pace when he heard some shouts coming to he left of them.

“Sounds like we could be meeting some people,” said Tina. She was calm and unconcerned about the fact.

“Let's hope not,” said John and cut down a large leafy plant in front of him. He was surprised to find himself staring at a man wearing green clothing. Before John could register anything else the man let out a scream and started firing with his rifle. The bullets hit John, but he felt nothing. The bullets flattened against his hardened shell and dropped to the ground.

Tina appeared from behind him and with a single motion of her hand cut the man down. The hand returned from a huge dragon claw back to her slender arm in the blink of an eye.

“Well, he panicked,” said Tina with a smile. It was no wonder, seeing the hell spawn like black figure of John emerge from the thick undergrowth. It would have scared anyone.

John didn't pay attention to it. He focused on listening. The gunshots had echoed through the jungle and though the thick vegetation would dampen the sounds it would still carry far off. He soon picked up footsteps, running ones. Soon there were shouts from all around them.

“He wasn't alone,” said John and braced himself. Given the way the sounds were coming their way, escape seemed unlikely. They were surrounded. “We're going to have to fight.”

Tina grinned. “It's been a while since I got to do that.”

“Just remember their guns are dangerous and they have more powerful

weaponry at their disposal.”

“Just remember I’m not limited to being a dragon either,” said Tina. She did however change her appearance to match John better. A black armoured engulfed her, though it maintained her feminine figure. The helmet looked like a horned bulls head that had risen from the underworld.

Together they looked like a pair of demons risen from the depths.

The first group of men that got sight of the pair froze in their place. They stared at them wide eyed, not knowing what they were facing. When Tina burst into laughter that was more menacing than anything else, they raised their weapons and started firing.

Bullets riddled both of them, but neither seemed to notice it. John ran forward as quickly as he could and sunk his bladed hand into he gut of one of the men. He knew better than to give them time. He saw the grenades strapped to their vests. He did not want to test how well Tina would be able to survive something like that. He knew it wouldn't be a problem for him as long as there would be iron near by.

With blood spilling everywhere, there would be some.

Tina wasted no time getting into the fight after John's initial attack. She rushed in, her hands turned to blades much like his, and cut into the soldiers. In a panicked mess the soldiers shot indiscriminately, sometimes hitting their own. Tina burst out laughing when her next target fell to the ground, a hole in his head from a friendly bullet.

It was so easy.

She couldn't understand why John had been so worried. Even he was cutting down men like they were nothing. The bullets did nothing to stop either of them. More men rushed in, guns blazing, but they fell just as easily as their comrades.

She cut down one more man, his blood spilling into the still standing undergrowth. The red drop dripped from the green leaves like morning dew. She turned to face another enemy.

“Die, monster,” the man shouted and pulled the trigger. His weapon was different from the others. It had a larger barrel. It shot a larger round. Tina felt

the impact of it. The projectile was heavy. Then the world blew up. She could barely understand that she was flying through the air. She hit a large tree back first. All the air was driven from her lungs. There was pain.

The explosion sent John to the ground, but not before he could see Tina take the direct hit from it. His mind screamed. If she died he'd be stuck in this world. If she died there would no longer be her sweet blood for him to enjoy.

John scrambled to get up. He paid no attention to the soldiers still shooting at him. He ran to where Tina rested against the tree and knelt down beside her, using his own body to cover her from any enemy fire.

She wasn't unconscious, but it was clear she had gotten a good knocking on the head. A trickle of blood seeped from her black armour and trickled down the side of her face.

"Come on, pull yourself together," John commanded. He did his best to ignore the urge to lean in and lick the blood off her face. Now was not the time no matter how enticing the reward. He shook her by the shoulders.

Tina muttered something and tried to focus her eyes.

Bullets kept hitting John's back. He could only hope there would not be another grenade coming their way. He casually stabbed to death a soldier that dared to venture into close range.

Finally Tina managed to get herself together. "What was that?" she asked and tried to push herself up to a standing position.

"A grenade," said John. "They've got even more powerful weapons. I told you this could be dangerous."

Tina leaned against the tree for support. "I can see that now. I need to take things seriously here." She surveyed the situation the best she could while John covered much of her field of vision. She could see ten men shooting at them. Who knew how many more were lurking in the cover the jungle provided. They weren't going to kill their way out of trouble, not the way they were working right now.

"Buy me some time," said Tina. She didn't bother explaining the request any more than that. She didn't need to. John did as told and started drawing fire to himself while doing his best to protect her and still kill a few of the soldiers.

The few bullets that managed to reach her did nothing to distract her. She

had not used her powers much. The simple form of a dragon had been enough to deal with most anything in worlds where the mightiest weapons men carried were arrows and swords. Now, she needed more and the powers at her command were happy to oblige.

She raised her hands towards the sky and then brought them down in a swift motion. Fire rained down from the sky. It was no ordinary fire as it moved with a will of its own and clung to everything like glue. It washed outwards from where she stood, setting everything in its path in flames. Brief cries of pain filled the air as the men burst into flames. Their voices soon silenced when their bodies turned to ash.

Fresh air flowed down from above and pushed the flames further out. Tina took in a deep breath. Even she had had to hold her breath to protect herself from the hot flames. She watched huge trees go up in flames and burn out as quickly as matches.

John stood in the middle of it all, stunned by what he was seeing. He had known her to be powerful, but what she had done was still a frightening display of it. The flames travelled quickly and finally pattered out, leaving behind a circle a mile across.

It had taken mere minutes.

“Come on. We should go. We've wasted enough time here,” said Tina. She did not seem concerned with what she had done. Her concern was finding Celia.

John simply nodded and they started walking through the hot field of ash.

Chapter 9

“Are you certain we can trust him?” Carl gave Eve a concerned look as they left Jonah's house. The talks with him had gone smoothly enough, though he had continued to treat Carl like he was nothing more than a worm that had popped up from under ground after a summer rain.

“How many times are you going to ask me that?” Eve gave him a frown. The sun was starting to set and the forest path they were on was starting to grow dark.

“As many times as it takes,” said Carl. “He wasn't exactly trust inspiring.”

“His kind are like that,” said Eve. “They view anyone not of their race inferior.”

“Doesn't seem to apply to you,” said Carl. He had not missed the looks Jonah had given her. There was longing there despite the quips about past misfortunes she had brought upon him.

Eve smiled briefly. “It took me a hundred years to get him to stop referring to me as a big lizard. He's stubborn, but when he gives his word you can count on it being held. He promised to help us and that's what he will do.”

“I wish I could be as trusting,” said Carl and looked up at the sky peeking in from behind the thick foliage.

“You'll see,” said Eve in a voice that told she was not going to entertain any more questioning along the lines.

For a moment they walked in silence.

“Why didn't we just Alternate away?” asked Carl.

“And miss this lovely walk?” asked Eve and looked around. Despite the growing darkness there was the gentle rustling of leaves. The night animals were starting to come out and you could hear owls and other animals start their hunting.

Carl couldn't help but chuckle. “On our way here you didn't seem that interested.”

“That was then. Now is now,” said Eve and gave Carl a mysterious smile.

“You make it very hard to understand you,” said Carl and shook his head.

“All part of the fun,” said Eve and laughed. It was a happy laugh.

Carl had trouble seeing her for what she was when they talked of nonsensical things. In her human form there was nothing to tip you that she was more than you could see on the outside. At times she seemed like any normal human. Then there were moments when she reminded you that if she wanted to, she could kill you with one word.

They walked the path for a bit more before arriving at the clearing they had arrived at. With no trees to block the view they could start to see the brightest stars come to view.

“Where do we go now?” asked Carl and admired the growing display above.

“Back to the temple?” asked Eve. “Or is there some other place you want to go to?”

Carl considered it. Going back to his real home would have been balm on the various wounds he'd suffered along the way. But how would he explain the long absence? The fact the police were probably still looking for him over the alley shooting? At the same time he felt bad for leaving those close to him without knowledge whether he was dead or alive. They must have been shocked to see him in the news.

“You look worried,” said Eve.

Carl was startled. She had moved silently and was now standing right by him. He could smell her. He couldn't have told you what she smelled like. All he could have told you was it made you want to throw yourself into it and roll around like a cat in catnip. The urge to wrap his arms around her waist and pull her closer came on strong, but Carl managed to fight it.

Doing it might just have ended up with him getting hurt.

“I don't seem to have a place to go to where I wouldn't be in danger of being killed or thrown in prison,” said Carl, his voice reflecting the sadness the thought provoked.

“Does that mean you don't want to go back to the temple?” There was no judgement in her voice, just curiosity. She rarely seemed to take a stance that had her judging other as if she knew better. It made it easy to trust her and be

open.

“Where else would we go?” asked Carl.

Eve smiled. “There are many places I can think of. I did travel quite a bit before settling down where I have. That's how I met Jonah. That's how I met many beings.”

“How exactly did you meet Jonah?” asked Carl. Maybe hearing it would make it easier to trust him to hold to his word.

Eve looked up at the starry sky. “It was when I was young – younger – and still going from world to world. I stumbled upon this world. Jonah and his kind aren't the only ones living here. There are humans and various other races. None of them look too kindly on Jonah and his kind.”

“Why not?” asked Carl. He felt the need to sit down, but there was nothing to use as a chair. So he took a more solid stance.

“They believe they're evil. They tell stories of his kind coming at night to steal babies and slaughter wild stock.”

“And do they?”

“They do,” Eve admitted with a slight smile. “I happened upon a town where Jonah had been caught doing just that. The men of the village had cornered him with a nine month old baby in his arms. It's a small miracle they had not killed him then and there. Instead they had captured him and were planning to make a show of killing him.”

“I assume you helped him get free?” Why she would do that, Carl did not know, but it seemed characteristic of her.

“I couldn't resist it,” said Eve and laughed. “You should have seen him. Chained up between two large wood poles. He still had both his horns then and there wasn't a man in the village who could reach his chest. Still, they had captured him. I took on a human form and went to talk with him. We came to an understanding and he was free a few moments later. You should have seen the villagers run around. They ended up regretting not killing him when they had the chance.”

She'd left out many details, but the story did nothing to make Carl feel better about trusting him. “What do they do with the babies?”

“They worship a god called Nevbenus. It is part of a ritual to place a human baby on the altar and cut it open. They believe it to be the highest offering to him.”

“How nice,” said Carl, his voice failing to hide his disgust. The way Eve spoke made him remember once more she was not human. She talked of it as if the human baby was nothing more than a goat. To her it might have even been true. “Doesn't it bother you you set someone like that free?”

“Why would it bother me?” asked Eve. “I saved a life.”

“But someone like him..”

Eve snickered. “You believe a new born baby has more right to live than him? A life is a life. It doesn't matter how evil or good it is in your view.”

“But he'll kill others,” said Carl, trying to find some justification against her view of the world. Letting loose someone who would kill more put more lives at risk than letting him be killed did.

Eve shrugged. “A wolf is a killer. So is the eagle, the owl that hoots in these woods. Should I kill them as well so the mice and deer can live in peace?”

“But they're just animals,” said Carl.

“A life is a life,” said Eve.

The realization that she really saw no difference between the animals of the woods and more evolved beings – beings that could think and talk – was startling to Carl. He shook his head in defeat. Arguing with her about it did not seem like a good idea. She had had many more years to come to her view of the world than he'd had. While it was hard to admit, the recent weeks and months had convinced him he knew little to nothing of the world. Who was he to judge someone who had travelled the worlds and seen things he could not even imagine?

“So where do you think we should go?” asked Carl, wanting to change the subject. The night was getting chilly and returning to the temple held little appeal. He hoped she had some other place they could go, one without priests that were after his life.

“I think there is a place you should see,” said Eve and reached to grab his hand. She wasted no time Alternating away.

Carl could feel the cool air be replaced by warmth. Even after the blinding flash he could tell they were in a sunny place. He could hear animal noises and smell wild flowers blooming around him. He found himself standing in the middle of a large meadow when his vision returned. Eve stood next to him and looked around.

“Where are we?” asked Carl. It didn't seem like that special a place. He'd seen plenty of meadows like it before. Eve reached out and grabbed his hand once more. He could tell she was preparing to do something with her powers.

“Stay still and do not say a word,” she said and small wrinkles appeared on her forehead. It was then that Carl could feel the distant trembles. They came closer. Something large was walking towards them.

A brief moment later he could see it emerge from behind the trees that surrounded them. It looked like a bull that had been enlarged to the size of a two story building. The horns curved around its head, trees bent and cracked out of its way as it walked. Each hoof left an imprint on the ground that could have passed for a pond in any noble man's garden. It lowered its enormous head and began grazing on the tall grass. It looked like it would easily clean out the entire meadow.

Carl gave Eve a nervous glance. He did not want a beast like that spotting them. She gave him a reassuring smile and a gesture that told him to wait.

He turned his attention back to the animal and waited.

The beast continued grazing until it suddenly lifted its right front foot and let out what seemed like a cry of pain. Gingerly, it tried to put weight back on its foot, but it didn't hold. The huge beast went tumbling to its side, shaking the ground so hard Carl and Eve had trouble staying up.

Carl could see its side rising as it took in breaths. He could hear how laborious it was for the animal. Then with a shudder it drew in its last breath.

What had killed it, Carl could not tell. It must have been something powerful to fell a beast like it in such a short amount of time. Poison, no doubt.

Eve let go of his hands and undid what ever had been hiding them from the large creature. She started walking towards the corpse. Carl followed, certain there was no more danger. She wouldn't have put him in harms way, not after

hiding them both from the beast.

“What killed it?” Carl asked when they got close enough to the ox to touch it.

Eve knelt down and pulled aside a few blades of grass. She pointed at a small plant sitting in the middle of it all. It had a spike like top that protected the delicate blue flowers blooming underneath it.

“That thing?” Carl asked. He wasn't used to seeing plants that could kill so quickly.

Eve nodded. “This world is dominated by huge animals like this one. The plants have slowly adapted to it, not by growing larger, but by arming themselves with weapons to kill.”

Carl glanced at the dead beast and then the flower. The disparity in size had him questioning what he'd witnessed. How could the small spike even nick its leg?

“Why did you want to show me this?” There was a reason behind it and Carl suspected it had more to do with her view of the world than just wanting to show him something unusual.

“Just because you believe yourself to be superior to something does not mean you have the right to decide who lives and dies,” said Eve and let the grass back to sheltering the deadly flower. She stood up and gave Carl a look. “Just because you can talk and reason does not mean you are the one to decide what is good and what is evil. The flower is not evil, it is merely living and surviving. The same can be said of the ox. The same applies to Jonah. Is his belief in a god that does not exist futile? Of course. Are his actions necessarily evil? No. Just like the flower, he is trying to live his life.”

Carl shook his head. It wasn't a belief system he could get behind. Of course, life was precious, but no matter how he tried to twist it, there was no room for understanding someone who sacrificed children in the name of a god. Maybe Eve did not believe in evil or good, but for Carl those were real concepts, built on the morals his parents and the society around him had instilled in him.

They were teachings one could not easily abandon.

“I can't bring myself to agree with you,” said Carl.

Eve smiled. “I don't expect you to. If you want to divide the world into good

and evil, black and white, then you are free to do so. But remember that there is a whole area of grey in the world and in the end it is always life that matters, not the motivation behind the actions.”

“Is that why you want to stop the Saviour?” asked Carl. “Because it might end life as we know it?”

Eve nodded. “He does not care who or what gets hurt in filling his plans. It isn't a matter of being good or evil, it is a matter of preserving life.”

It was a solid enough reason. Though Carl considered the man to be evil to the core what Eve had said made him wonder about the true motivations behind his plans. Were they really evil or simply something he did not fully understand?

“Come. Time for us to get some rest,” said Eve and extended a hand to Carl. After a moment of hesitation he took hold of it and closed his eyes. He didn't bother asking where they were going.

When he regained his vision the scenery took his breath away. All he could see were mountain tops and the white clouds that surrounded them like an ocean. The setting sun was painting the sky red. It took him a moment to realize they were in a see through shell at the top of the highest peak. All around he could see through, but if he looked close enough he could see the crystal like material that stood between him and the bitter cold air outside.

“What is this place?” he asked and walked to the see through wall and placed a hand on it. It felt solid enough to withstand the howling winds.

“It's my hiding place,” said Eve and made her way to the bed that was in the centre of the room. There were soft carpets covering much of the stone floor. There was a fireplace she lit with a single wave of a hand, chairs formed a half circle in front of it.

John noticed small holes right by the barrier the crystal made. Warm air flowed in. Looking around he could not see a place for air to get in from the outside. It made sense, given how thin the air would have been. Just popping in from ground level would have been a shock that could have proved fatal even for someone like Eve.

“I come here to enjoy the silence,” said Eve and sat down on the bed. The dress flowed from around her into a more loose nightgown. “It is my refuge, my

place of contemplation. Somewhere down there is my temple and the priests that run it. Sometimes I come here to get away from them.”

“I can see why this would be a good place for it,” said Carl and turned away from the view. He noticed her changed attire and quickly returned to the view.

“Tomorrow we need to continue your training,” said Eve. “Jonah will need some time to get things together the way we asked. And you need to become better at controlling your powers if we are to succeed.”

Carl nodded. “I know I fall short in that regard. All of this has made me realize just how little I know about the world.”

“Realizing that is a good first step towards a wider view,” said Eve.

Carl stood silent for a while just enjoying the view. He could see why she came there to calm down. He could already feel his heart beating at an easier pace. Some of the distant worries that had been pressing the back of his mind were starting to disappear. His times of alternating had made him appreciate the beauty nature could present to you if you took the time to look. In the man made cities of his home it was easy to forget that.

“Didn't you say you were tired?” asked Eve.

Carl turned to regard her. She was laying on her side, head propped up by one hand and a soft pillow. She patted the empty space in front of her.

She smiled upon seeing his hesitation. “I am sorry, but there is only this single bed. We will have to share. Don't worry, I won't do anything.”

Carl frowned. She could have easily made another bed if she wanted to. He remembered the scent that had lingered around her earlier. Falling asleep to it was too tempting a prospect to ruin. With a bit of hesitation he walked over to the bed. Eve scooted over to give him a bit more room. He felt a bit uncomfortable removing his shirt and laying down on the bed.

She was so close.

The crystal that surrounded them started to grow less see through. The room fell dark.

“Sleep well,” said Eve.

“You too,” said Carl and turned his back towards her. He found a pillow to use and pulled a blanket over himself. The enticing scent from her drifted to his

nose. It made him relax and fall asleep in no time.

Morning came in an instant to him. He had not woken up a single time during the night. The muted hum of the wind had not bothered him at all. When he opened his eyes he saw a slender hand draped across his chest. The same scent that had helped him fall a sleep felt stronger in his nose. He felt Eve's hair rub against his chin.

For a moment he wondered what to do. How would she react waking up as they were, tangled together like two lovers. It could have happened by accident, there was little you could do to control your body when sleeping, or it could well have been her plan all along. She had been the one to invite him to the bed.

Carefully, he lifted her limp arm from his chest and guided her head onto a pillow. Doing his best not to stir the bed too much he slipped out from under the covers and stood up. He grabbed his shirt from the floor and pulled it over his head. He turned to regard her before stepping further away.

The calm expression on her was enough to make him stop for a moment longer. When ever she was awake there was a certain intensity to her. Determination shone through. As she slept all that melted away. What was left behind was a calmness and beauty that was hard to define. He did his best to ignore the smooth thigh that peeked from under the blanket.

He started to regret getting out of bed.

The crystal shell that surrounded them had started to let light in again. He could see the morning sun slowly climb over the mountain tops. It was as beautiful a sight as the sunset had been. Carl walked over to the wall and pressed a hand against it. He then stretched to loosen his muscles.

"This is not a bad sight to wake up to."

Carl stopped mid stretch and turned to see Eve resting her head against one hand and looking at him with a smile. Her hair was a mess, but if anything it made her look more appealing.

"It is a nice view," Carl admitted and turned back to regard the mountain tops. She had probably meant more than that, but he didn't want to acknowledge that. Getting involved with her any deeper seemed like a bad idea. It was entirely possible she saw him as nothing more than a curious toy and she would get

bored with him over time.

“Did you sleep well?” Carl could hear the amusement in her voice. Had she been awake for his morning manoeuvre?

“Like a rock,” said Carl. He felt refreshed. More so than after many other nights. He had to wonder if sharing the bed with someone had an effect on it even if she was not someone you were in love with. Did the closeness of someone else make your worries of vulnerability disappear? Did that lead to better sleep?

“Good. Then you're ready for the day,” said Eve and got up from the bed. She stretched for a long time before finally walking to the fireplace and the small table. A moment later there was food on the table – ranging from bread to fresh fruits.

Carl joined her to fill his stomach.

Neither spoke. They focused on eating and watching the scenery around them change with the rising sun. It was as serene a breakfast as Carl had ever enjoyed. It felt good after all the commotion that had been going on. It made him forget the wounds that had been healed, but still haunted his body.

“What are we going to do today?” asked Carl, finally breaking the silence. Her training could just be sitting in the room or it could be moving to other worlds to try different things. You never knew until she told you.

“You'll see,” said Eve and gave him a mysterious smile. Her nightgown faded away and her usual dress appeared to hug her body. She held out a hand for him and Carl took it.

A bright flash left the room empty.

Chapter 10

The lights flickered on in long lines. Dust floated in the air in what little light came in through the dirty windows. The concrete floor was covered in dirt and garbage that ranged from old chairs and tables to parts of industrial machines.

“Will this do?” asked Seth and tried to see to the end of the over three hundred foot long hall. The width was half that. The roof was high above. It was enough space to have fit several small homes.

“It's a bit old, isn't it?” Tanya noted. She'd taken off her sunglasses to see in the relative darkness. She looked down and frowned at the dust that had already clung to her bare toes. The open sandals had not been the best choice to wear it seemed.

“But there's enough space,” said Celia and looked around the area. The walls of solid concrete combined with the high windows made it a sturdy structure that would be able to withstand some small mistakes she might make. It also gave her privacy and kept curious onlookers away.

“The military used to use the place for testing,” said Seth. “Jet engines and that sort of stuff. So the walls and windows are built to withstand some explosions.” The broker had given him a lengthy history lesson about the place. It had passed the time during the long drive from the city. The place was far away from the tourist beaches. The only downside was it was close to the border that there was some danger of fighting spilling over to it, but that was a small risk.

It rarely happened.

“That sounds perfect,” said Tanya, though she still did not look convinced.

“Don't let the dust and dirt fool you,” said Seth and watched Celia poke around a rusting heap that might have once been an engine of some sort. Amongst all the grime she looked out of place with her white dress and large summer hat. “A bit of cleaning and this place will be perfect for her.”

“It's a bit far from the city,” said Tanya with hesitation. She was aware of the closeness to the border as well. It wasn't a place you wanted to stay at without some protection. Looking around she could not see a sensible place for a bed or

other things needed to spend nights there.

“There's a kitchen at the back,” said Seth and pointed towards a small shack at the back of the large hall. “There's a toilet too.”

“Does any of it work?” The place looked to have been abandoned long enough for the pipes to have rusted in place.

“According to the broker it does,” said Seth. If Celia looked out of place among the grime so did Tanya. The yellow bikini top and shirt wrapped around her waist to hide the bikini bottom were an attire more suitable for the beach than for exploring an old industrial building.

“I don't look forward to living here instead of the apartment,” said Tanya. She wasn't about to let Celia live in the place alone nor allow Seth to live with her alone.

“You don't have to move here,” said Seth. “Celia and I can manage it between the two of us.”

“We're in this together,” said Tanya and turned to regard the large pair of doors at the end of the hall. They had come in through a small side door. The large doors were big enough to fit a house through. “Do those open?”

Seth nodded and went to press a button by the door they had come in. They could hear the creeks as rust broke and the doors started moving apart. They weren't fast, but eventually they opened enough to let in sunlight and fresh air from the outside.

Celia joined the two to stand in the open doorway. The yard outside had concrete slabs with grass growing from between them. Some had even cracked and plants were pushing through them. A worn down chain link fence surrounded the area and beyond it there was nothing but grassland and jungle before the outskirts of the city took over.

“This place is perfect,” said Celia with a smile.

“You think it's big enough?” Tanya looked concerned about the fact.

“I don't think we can find a bigger place,” said Seth. “Not at the price we're willing to pay.”

“It's big enough if I don't make too big a mistake,” said Celia. “I don't think there's a building big enough to contain things if I really mess up.”

“Well that's comforting,” Seth muttered.

Celia gave the man a smile. “Don't worry. I'll be careful.”

“So we're buying this place?” asked Seth.

Celia gave an eager nod. Tanya looked hesitant, but finally gave her nod of approval.

“All right. I'll go tell the broker,” said Seth and started towards the two cars by the open gate. He'd come there before with him to see what the place was like before dragging Tanya and Celia to make the final decision. It was the third place he'd been to see. The two others had been too small and too close to other places. What Celia was going to do would draw attention if anyone was close by.

“It's going to take a lot of time to clean this place up,” said Tanya and turned to look inside the hall once more.

“Leave that to me,” said Celia with a smile. “The dust will go with wind and the other grime will be washed out with water. We can probably get most of the useless junk out that way too.”

“Just don't do anything before the broker leaves,” said Tanya and glanced at the bald headed man. The smile he had on him told Seth had given him the good news. The man must have been relieved to get rid of such a junk property.

“I won't,” said Celia and grabbed hold of her hat as a gust of wind blew past.

They watched Seth return to them. “All right. The deal is done. All that remains is for the payment to be given.” He gave Tanya a look.

“I'll go sort it out with him,” said Tanya in a resigned voice. Neither of the two had any money to their name. It was all her earnings that were being used. Not that it mattered much to her. Once they were done with the place the warehouse might come in handy for her own purposes. It wasn't that big an investment either so it wasn't going to make her go broke.

“You'll need go back to the city for it, won't you?” asked Seth.

Tanya nodded. “We'll visit a bank together.”

“You could get us some supplies on the same trip,” said Seth and looked around. “Some soap and mops and other things like that.”

“Some food might be nice too,” said Celia and gave the inside of the warehouse a look. “This is going to take some time.”

"I'll try to bring a bit of everything," said Tanya. She wasn't too pleased with being made the grocery mule, but she couldn't let Seth or Celia do it. Neither could drive the car since they lacked the local license and the police checkpoints that were strewn all around the main streets meant you got checked often enough not to be worth the risk.

She was also hesitant to leave the two alone in the middle of nowhere. Not because she thought they couldn't protect themselves, but because they might slip something attention raising to someone passing by. The local authorities could be paranoid and she didn't want too much attention on herself. Buying a warehouse like that was already getting close to the border of drawing attention.

"While you're here, try and come up with some legitimate reason for why I bought this place," said Tanya and headed for the cars.

Seth watched her get in the car and drive away after the broker.

"Why do we need a reason?" asked Celia after the cars had disappeared from view.

"To keep nosy people out of our business," said Seth. He had not thought about a cover story, but the more he considered it the more he saw the need for it. He did not want Tanya landing in hot water over something he was responsible for. There were plenty of her own actions that would come up if they drew too much attention.

"But we can't fill the hall with anything," said Celia and frowned. "At least not with anything we don't mind seeing break."

"Do you need all that space?" asked Seth. "We could use the front to store some crates filled with some goods and say we're using it as storage. That way you'd still have the majority of the area to yourself."

Celia frowned and peeked inside the hall to estimate the area. Truth be told she had no idea how much space she'd need. If something truly went wrong she doubted the walls would be able to contain it. At that point did it really matter if there were some goods at the front?

"I think that could work," she said and reached for her neck. She wanted to tug the collar, but then remembered what that could result in. The heat made it sometimes uncomfortable to wear.

Seth nodded. "Then I'll start thinking of some goods we could plausibly store here."

"And I'll get to cleaning," said Celia and stepped inside the warehouse.

Seth nodded and remained outside. He inspected the yard a bit more and the surroundings of the front yard. There were some rotting pallets up against one of the walls and several more were strewn around the yard, some completely covered by grass.

The sudden boom of wind made him jump. The cloud of dust and dirt that blew out from the large doorway made him think of someone opening a bag of flour and blowing on it with all their might. The wind howled for a good while, bending trees as far as beyond the fence. The lush green was covered in a layer of grey and black as the warehouse emptied itself.

The wind died down and after that there was a brief silence.

Then water started pouring out the door. It wasn't slow trickle, but a torrent that washed away even heavy items like the broken down motor that had been sitting inside the hall.

Seth cursed and ran behind a corner to avoid getting himself wet or washed away with the current. He watched the dirty water flow against the fence. For a moment he feared it would get washed away, but it held in place, though part of it bent as debris piled up against it. It took a while for the water to stop flowing and for Seth to dare to move from his safe place to peek inside the hall.

He saw Celia standing in the middle of it all with a wide smile on her. Not a single drop of water had touched her nor did it seem like the wind had touched her, but the room around her looked a lot cleaner. The floor would take some time to dry and Seth could see the water had reached almost as high as the windows. How had she managed to do it without getting herself wet?

She giggled to herself and spun around, the wet floor giving little resistance to her spinning.

Seth couldn't help but think she was still just a kid. It was easy to think of her as one when she acted like one. Yet he was acutely aware she was not one. Her little display of power to clean the warehouse had been a reminder she would eat you alive if you made the mistake of thinking that.

"It's a good start," said Seth and stepped further inside the warehouse. It would take a while for the floors and walls to dry. That would no doubt reveal some grime the water had failed to wash out. You could not get everything away without some scrubbing.

"Ah, I wonder why I haven't used my powers so much before," said Celia, her voice filled with joy. "It's so.. liberating. I feel like I can do anything."

Seth gave her a frown. "That's a dangerous attitude with anything. The moment you start to think nothing you do can go wrong is the moment you lose."

Celia turned more serious. "I'm not saying that. I know there are risks with what I do. I'm just saying there does not seem to be much of a limit to what I can do. I could have pushed a lot more water out that door, but then I might have damaged the building."

Seth grunted. "Have you gotten any clues on how to get me home?"

Celia shook her head. "But give me time. I'm learning so much by doing these simple things."

Both of them fell silent when they heard the metallic sound.

There was no mistaking the sound of a gun loading a bullet into its barrel.

Seth turned to face the large doors. He saw the men dressed in green. The rifles were pointed straight at him. He saw some heavier weaponry as well in the form of grenade launchers and bazookas. Despite that he immediately started gathering his power.

"Can we help you, friends?" Seth asked and gave Celia a look. He hoped she wouldn't do anything hasty and followed his lead.

"This is a nice place you have here," said one of the men and dug out a cigarette from his chest pocket. Seth saw the marking on his jacket. They were part of a faction fighting the war that raged outside the safe zone.

"You do know you are inside the safe zone?" Seth hoped they didn't and had made a simple mistake. Maybe then they would leave without incident.

"We know," said the man after taking the first breath from his cigarette. He blew out a cloud of smoke. "But see, we are deserters. We don't care."

The men around him grinned and chuckled. The way they eyed Celia made it obvious what they thought.

“What do you want?” Maybe they would go away if they got some food and money. The only problem was they had none of either, but he could say Tanya would bring some. Maybe that would be enough to settle the situation. As Seth examined the group closer he counted ten men in total. It was unlikely they had all stepped inside, a few were probably outside standing guard.

For deserters it was a relatively large group.

“What do we want?” asked the man who seemed to be the leader. “What do you think a bunch of men who have been wandering the jungle for a few weeks want?”

“A shower?” It seemed like the most obvious thing. The water was still working at the warehouse, but there was no shower. Best Seth could offer the men was fresh water and a bucket.

The man laughed. “All right. That might be nice, but most of all we want some decent food. Some alcohol would be nice. And a woman.” He licked his lips and gave Celia a dirty look.

“You can't have her,” said Seth. As much as he had reservations about her, there were some things he wouldn't wish on even his worst enemies. What the men had in mind was one such thing.

“Do you think you can stop us?” asked the man and blew out another puff of smoke. He raised his weapon and pointed it towards Seth. It was only a pistol, but the men around him raised some more deadly weapons. They'd be able to spray both of them full of bullets within seconds.

Seth grinned. He felt the power surge through his body, his skin tingle as the electricity built up. He had not tried what he had planned before, but it should have worked given the fact he could propel metal objects away from him. He turned to regard Celia.

“You know how your father looks when he's about to kill someone?”

The girl nodded.

“Can you do that?”

She nodded again.

“Then do it. We can't talk these men out of their desires. We'll just have to kill them all.”

The men burst out laughing.

Seth couldn't blame them. But that laughter would die soon enough.

“Just shoot him, boss,” said one of the men to the one holding the pistol.

“Yeah, we don't need him,” the man agreed and pulled the trigger.

The moment he did that Seth unleashed his power. Blue sparks crackled around him. The bullet that would have hit him stopped mid-air, inches away from his chest. For a moment the man stared at him in disbelief before all of them unleashed a torrent of bullets at him.

Seth hoped stealing the attention would give Celia enough time to change and when he looked to the side he saw her covered in the black armour that John wore. Hers was more feminine, but still a frightening sight, though she had a vulnerable spot where her necklace was. She had not dared transform anything near it. She wasted no time advancing. Her hand turned into a blade and the first man cried in pain when it sunk to his side.

His scream made the rest realize Seth was not the only danger in the room.

Some turned their attention to the new threat while others continued to focus on Seth. The constant barrage of new bullets made it hard for him to do any sort of a counter attack. He wished he could push the bullets back toward their origin, but that would have meant putting down the magnetic field that stopped them in the air.

Doing that would expose him to danger.

But he saw no choice. Celia was doing her best against the men and the black armour seemed to protect her from most of the bullets, but you could tell each hit had an effect on her. Her advance wavered and that gave the men the opportunity to try and wrestle her down.

Seth made the decision and brought up his other hand. Focusing, he changed the way the power worked. The bullets that had hung in the air shot backwards and straight into the men still firing rounds at him. As quickly as he had done that, bullets started to hit the floor next to him and one scraped his shoulder while another drew a red mark on his left thigh. It made him grunt and almost lose focus, but he managed to bring up the protective field again.

The men who got their bullets back were not as lucky.

Three of them were riddled with them and they fell to the ground, not moving again. Blood started to puddle underneath them and slowly slither towards Seth. It seemed the floor had a slight slant to it.

One got hit in the leg and he fell to the ground, cursing and wailing in pain. His weapon slid across the floor a good ways away from him. He was not an immediate threat.

The last one standing escaped unscathed, remarkably. He glanced at his fallen comrades then turned back towards Seth. The grin that appeared on him told Seth enough. Someone had sneaked through the side door and was standing behind him.

“Watch out!” Celia shouted and struck down a man trying to hold her other hand. Two more men laid on the floor, bleeding from where their arms had once been attached to the rest of their body. She seemed to have no hurry killing anyone.

Seth started to turn. The man holding the bazooka came into view. At the same time he could tell the other soldiers were getting away from him.

Then there was a bright flash.

The bazooka fell to the floor on top of the pile of clothes. Seth barely had time to register it before there was another flash. He blinked to regain his vision and the first thing he saw was the pile of flesh that had appeared by the door. It may have once been human – he could barely make out the face of the man that had held the bazooka – but everything else about him was all messed up. A finger protruded from where his forehead was and a leg stuck up into the air with a hand coming off from the ankle. Innards laid out in the open and Seth could see the lungs taking in a moist breath. The mass quivered before coming to a still.

Seth turned to look at Celia. He did not miss the horrified expressions on the men who were still standing. It was hard to tell what she was thinking with the helmet she wore, but the pose she was frozen in told enough. She had done something unexpected, something she had not intended.

Now that the men had ceased firing Seth took the opportunity to reach into his pocket and grab a coin. He flicked it towards the last man standing from his bullet return. The coin hit his head with enough force that it came out the other

side, spilling blood and bits of brain as it released them from the confines of bone.

That made Celia jump back into action and start cutting down the remaining men. Seth saw the situation was under her control so he grabbed another coin from his pocket and went to the side door. He peeked out carefully. A bullet hit the side of the door making him withdraw in an instant. But he'd had time to see where the shot had come from. There was a man hiding behind a rusty barrel, rifle pointed at the door.

Would the coin be enough to pierce the barrel?

Seth weighed it in his hand. It was made of soft metals. It wasn't dense enough. His other coin had been made of better stuff. It had been more valuable. He looked around and started to wish Celia had not cleaned out the place. Still, he spotted a heavy bolt nearby and grabbed. It felt heavy in his hand.

It would do.

He moved to the other side of the doorway to get a better shot at the man. There wouldn't be much time to aim or fire so he took a few moments to ready himself. He placed the bolt on top of his finger and held it in place with his thumb. Like a gun, he pointed it forward and made the slight lean out the door before releasing the deadly projectile. He didn't stop to see whether he hit anything and it proved to be the right choice as a bullet hit the spot where his head had been a second before.

He grinned when the noise of the bolt hitting the barrel reached him. Then came the cry of pain and silence. With that he dared to take another look out the door. The barrel had flown back so far it rested against the tattered fence. The man behind it rested on the ground. He did not move.

Seth pulled himself back in and gave the hall a look. Celia stood in the midst of the corpses and was having her fun poking the only man still alive. Her blade sunk to his shoulder and a cry of pain was followed by curses and promises to kill her, rape her and her mother. It only made her poke the man again and smile. She had removed her helmet so the man got to see her beauty and cruelty melt into one.

"Celia," Seth grunted when he put weight on his leg. He'd thought the scrape

had not been bad, but it seemed adrenaline had played its tricks.

The girl glanced at him, but kept her bladed hand ready. "They all dead?"

"There might still be some on the outside," Seth said. If the men outside had any sense they'd have disappeared into the forest by now.

"I should go check things out," said Celia and the helmet formed around her head before Seth could say anything. Almost casually she slit the throat of the man she had been toying with and started to walk away even before his body hit the floor.

Seth limped after her, but finally decided it was best not to stick his head out the open main doorway. If something hit Celia, she'd be annoyed at best. If something hit him, he'd likely be dead. There was no reason to worry for her safety. Not against so few enemies.

Gunshots rang out from the opposite side of the building.

A blood chilling scream followed soon after.

Seth waited. He wiped some sweat from his brow. It had been a hot day to begin with. The fighting had done nothing to help that. His hands were trembling a bit as the adrenaline started to disappear from his blood.

"Get a grip," he muttered to himself and glanced at the dead bodies not far off from him. He had felt nothing when killing them. In the past that would have bothered him immensely. How much had the events changed him? Had he turned into a cold hearted killer?

The thought continued to gnaw at him.

Celia came around the corner. She had circled the entire building. The helmet melted off from her when she entered the safety of the concrete walls. She smiled at Seth like she'd made a personal record in something she enjoyed doing.

"Seems we're in the clear now," she said and wandered off to the bodies. She kicked a limp leg. "Just when I had the place cleaned up. Sort of."

"There could still be some in the jungle," said Seth and observed the sea of green and brown. With the clothes the men wore they'd blend in too well to be noticed from afar.

Celia continued to prod the bodies with her foot. "We can't search the entire area."

Seth nodded and made his way to the button that closed the big doors. The engine screeched to a start and the doors started to close. "Best we hold up here until Tanya comes back. We'll figure out where to go from there."

"If she comes back," said Celia and gave him a look. "If there are soldiers on the outside they might get her."

Seth chuckled. "More likely she'll get them."

"True," Celia admitted. She remembered well the efficiency with which she had worked that one night. She had watched her enough to know she was a hunter.

The hall grew darker when the doors closed. The dim lights were no rival to sunlight. There was a silence. The two of them waited for something to happen, but all they heard were the distant noises of animals.

"What should we do with the bodies?" asked Celia. She had gone around and kicked every single one of them. It was only then Seth noticed there was a small black spike sticking out from her foot. Blood dripped from it. She had ensured they were all truly dead.

"Ditch them in the jungle I think," said Seth. There was bound to be some beasts there that would eat away the flesh and the bones would disappear into the undergrowth. It was unlikely anyone would find them there. Even if someone did it would be easy enough to explain they had been attacked. No one in the safe-zone had sympathy for deserters. The soldiers that remained with their regular units never gave trouble.

Deserters on the other hand were known to cross the border to loot, rape and kill. The soldiers and police of the safe-zone did their best to ensure it didn't happen, but some inevitable slipped past them. As they had done in this case.

The hard part would be telling how they managed to kill all of them.

"I could turn into a dragon and eat them," said Celia.

Seth shuddered. "You haven't eaten people before, have you?"

"Once," said Celia and gave him a grin.

The chilling reminder of what she was had Seth feeling around for the remote. It was still safely tucked away in his pocket. With that he remembered what had happened.

“What did you do to make that man disappear? You clearly Alternated him away.”

Celia shrugged her shoulders. “I'm not sure. It was such a heat of the moment action.”

“Try,” said Seth. It was the best clue they'd had in figuring out the specifics of the travel.

Celia put her hands on her waist and looked down on the floor, lips pursed. “I remember what I wanted to happen. It didn't exactly go as I wanted it, but maybe I can do it again. The problem is, what do I test it with? The man didn't make it out of it looking too good.” She glanced at the pile of flesh that had once been a human. Seth could tell even she did not go undisturbed by his fate.

Seth followed her gaze and shuddered. That was not something he was willing to volunteer for. They needed something that was alive to test with. “We need to buy some livestock for you then.”

“You mean like chickens and cows?” asked Celia. She looked excited at the idea.

“Yeah. Just remember they're not for you to eat,” said Seth.

Celia gave him a frown for the remark. The last bits of the black armour melted from her and she was back to wearing the head turning summer dress. Even the hat appeared on her again. It was hard to reconcile the image with the killing machine that had been going around moments before.

“How long before Tanya is back?” she finally asked.

“I don't know,” Seth admitted. How long would it take to get to the city was a known factor and even that would have her away for at least an hour more. Add to that the time for getting supplies and she'd be at least twice that. “Not soon.”

Celia nodded.

They settled down to wait for her.

Chapter 11

Rand glared at the drunken man. For three days he had been teaching him about the cult of dragon worshippers and not once had he started the day sober. It was a small miracle he had been standing by the end of the day. His bottle was often empty and it was a mystery where he always managed to find some more.

That wasn't to say his teaching was bad. He knew the cult well and his instructions were firm and logical. He made Rand memorize the often used phrases, greetings and secret gestures that would unlock the fortress gates for him.

Still, Rand had to wonder why his superiors tolerated him. As a soldier he was about as useless as one could get. Maybe he had some redeeming values when he was actually sober.

"Remember, you look down when talking to those superior to you," said Nemes and took a long gulp from his wine skin. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and sought a more comfortable position on the barrel.

As usual, they were sitting by his tent. Other soldiers walked past them, some giving them an envious glare while others completely ignored them.

"I won't be doing much talking once I'm in," said Rand. His plan was simple. Get into the fortress and once there crush the place. Using his powers it shouldn't prove too difficult if he caught the cultists by surprise.

"They're a suspicious bunch," said Nemes. "You won't get far from the gate if you don't act like you're one of them. You don't even need to speak to give yourself away."

Rand wished he was on his way already. Three days meant the dragon he was after could have been hundreds if not thousands of miles away already. At the same time he could not deny the truth in the drunken man's words. He needed to know at least the basic things and present them in a passable manner. If they caught him right at the gate the chance of an arrow finding his heart was much greater.

"Come on. Let's see those hand signs one more time," said Nemes and took a

swig of wine.

Rand had had trouble learning it as his fingers weren't quite so dexterous, but he'd managed to master the secret greeting. He used his thumbs and forefingers to form an O and then the letter N and finally the letter A.

Ona was the name of the first dragon the cultists had worshipped. They used her name as secret greeting to identify any of their members.

"Still a bit clumsy, but it'll pass," said Nemes.

"How's the training going?"

Rand turned to regard the captain that had walked up to them.

"He's learning, Cadmer," said Nemes and raised his wine skin in greeting.

"Captain Cadmer," said the man and gave the drunken soldier a frown. He then turned to Rand. "How long before you're ready to go?"

"The king getting impatient?" asked Rand. He couldn't blame his majesty for it. He felt the same way.

The captain looked around. There were a few soldiers loitering near their tents, but no one at a hearing distance. "He is. He wants you to go in the morning."

"He's not ready," protested Nemes. "They'll make him the moment he steps in the gate."

"The king commands it," Cadmer snapped. He did not look pleased about it, but a soldier followed orders. "I wish there was more time, but there isn't."

"I'm ready," Rand assured the man and gave him a confident look. "As long as I get through the gates I'll be fine."

Cadmer nodded. "Be ready before sunrise."

Rand watched the captain walk away. His armour and overcoat was as immaculate as ever. His back stood straight and there was an aura of confidence around him. He was a man men would follow.

Nemes spat on the ground. "Damn usurper think he knows best."

"The captain?"

Nemes laughed. "The king."

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't heard how the king became king?" asked Nemes, surprised.

"I'm not from around here."

The man eyed him before nodding. "Yeah, you aren't from around here. If you were you'd know how Gadron got his throne."

"I'm assuming it wasn't inheritance by bloodline." That was the way one usually became king. The other way was through killing. It wasn't hard to decide which one was the case here.

"Our old king, Venet Cardiovalar, was a good king. He wasn't a warrior, but a diplomat. That's not a bad thing in a king. He has others to fight the battles for him, but few can replace you in diplomatic talks. So we had peace and prosperity." Nemes took a gulp of wine. His expression had changed from grim to one of remembering better times.

"Gadron was his general. A trusted friend. The peace did not suit him. He's a warrior to the core. He wanted battles and when Venet solved problem after problem through talks it left him with nothing to do. So he killed the king."

Rand had to take a moment to melt the revelation. "And everyone just accepted it? I'd have thought there would be rebelling, protests."

Nemes laughed again. "Gadron had the support of the armies and Venet had no heirs or relatives. What little protests there were were squashed quickly. Besides, he didn't break any law. If you kill the king then you're the new king."

"Why hasn't anyone killed Gadron then?" asked Rand.

"Some have tried. They've all failed. They make the mistake of openly challenging him. What they need to do is sneak into his tent during the night and stick a knife in his back."

Rand shook his head. "Seems like a shoddy way of running a kingdom."

Nemes laughed. "It's how the ancient laws are. No one dares to change them."

"Maybe they should," said Rand.

"Tradition is a strong force. One man is hard pressed to battle it."

Rand considered it. There were traditions in his own culture against which it was hard to act. You had grown into them and challenging something that was a part of you was always a difficult thing to do.

"Let's go through a few more things," said Rand. There was no point

worrying about the cultural problems of his current hosts. He wouldn't be with them for long and getting into the fortress should have been the only thing on his mind.

They went through several more habits of the cultists before taking a break for lunch. The rest of the day Rand spent getting ready for the mission. He got the right clothes and had Nemes help him put them on the right way. He needed to sleep in them to give the image he'd been on the road for a while. They'd throw some additional dirt on them in the morning darkness.

By then it was supper time and after that Rand retired to his tent to get some rest. The red robe he wore was uncomfortable, the fabric rough and itchy which made it hard to sleep. As soon as he drifted to sleep he woke up to Cadmere waking him up.

Still rubbing his eyes he clambered out of the tent and looked around. There was a squad of twenty men standing behind the captain. Shank was there and the soldier gave him an encouraging smile.

"We're going to have you run ahead of us," said Cadmere as they started to walk towards the edge of the camp. It was still dark and the only thing lighting their way were the torches and camp fires. "Do you know the way?"

Nemes had taken him once up the mountain side to see the path. It wasn't hard to follow. You had a drop to one side and a stone wall on the other. He could get up it without any light.

"It shouldn't be a problem," said Rand and glanced up into the darkness. The lights from the far up fortress were nothing but small star like spots.

"We'll give you a little headway. After that we will come after you with dogs and everything we have," said Cadmere. "It needs to look real."

Rand nodded. "I know. I'll try not to be too slow."

The barking of dogs was certain to draw the cultists attention. They would no doubt spot his robes and think him one of them. They might come out and help which would put Cadmere and his men in danger, but that was a role they had been given. They knew the risk. They also knew rand was taking an even greater one.

They arrived at the foot of the path leading up. There were guards there and

a pack of dogs that seemed eager to chase after something. Their already enthusiastic barking and sharp teeth made Rand glance at the captain, worried.

Cadmere grinned. "Don't worry. We won't let them catch you. But you should give the running your all. Just in case."

"Thanks," Rand muttered.

"I'll count to two hundred. Then we start after you."

Three minutes. It wasn't much of a head start when you were going in the dark and your pursuers had torches to light their way. The horizon was starting to lighten up so it wasn't complete darkness, but Rand was hard pressed to see where he was stepping.

Rand nodded to the captain and started up the stone path. The worst part was when he left the circle of light the torches and camp fires had provided. It took him a moment to adjust to the increased darkness, but then he started to see vague shapes and made better time once more.

He heard the shouting and the dog barks. His pursuers had started after him. The noise made him move ahead at a quicker pace. Several times he stumbled on rocks and fell. The noises following him got closer, but so did the looming fortress.

It stood squarely in the middle of the path. There was no going around it. It guarded the way to the mountains as immovably as the mountains themselves. The high wall that faced any attackers was a daunting sight. The closer Rand got the more he could make out of it. He could see torch lights moving on the battlement. The cultists had guards posted. The way the mountain was formed meant neither side could really control the path between them. There were no places to post men to guard.

At least, no place that wouldn't have arrows raining on you.

Rand glanced back and saw the torches getting closer. He hastened his pace, stumbling on loose rocks, scraping his arms and legs to the sharp edges of the mountain face. He kept one hand always on the safe feeling rock on his other side. The path was wide enough for five men to walk side by side in comfort, but in the darkness the feeling of rock was the best guarantee you weren't teetering on the edge of the path.

He felt slight relief when shouts started to echo down from the fortress. He saw torches arch down from it as the guards threw them so they could see what was coming their way. Rand hastened his steps and grabbed the nearest torch. He hoped they'd see the robe he was wearing and held back their arrows. If they didn't it would be a short mission for him.

"Brothers, help!" Rand yelled and ran as fast as he could. He looked back with a frightened expression. "I have news from the outside. Let me in!"

The gates remained closed, but at least no arrows came at him as he made his way onward. The dogs were barking closer. He could hear men shouting after him, cursing when they saw how close he was to the fortress. Rand was startled when a poorly aimed arrow scraped rock by him. It had not come from the fortress.

The captain was playing his part a bit too well.

"Open the gate! They're shooting arrows at me!" Rand rushed on. The gates did not budge and that made his palms sweat. But as he got closer he saw the small door in one of the big gates. It cracked open and a hand waved him to hurry. He put his last bit of strength to the short spurt and jumped through the open door. He heard it slam shut as he fell to the ground, panting and sweating from the run.

The yard was well lit with torches and lamps lining the walls surrounding it in even paces. Rand looked around. There was a well in the middle of the yard, further into the mountain face and away from the path. The main part of the fortress was beyond it. Looking at it all he started to feel silly. Could he crush something like it even with his powers?

"Are you all right, brother?" came a voice from behind him.

Rand gathered himself and stood up. He turned to see three similarly dressed men staring at him. Two held swords in hand while the middle one with his grey hair held a torch. Rand made the greeting Nemes had taught him and that seemed to ease the three men a bit and they responded to the greeting with their own.

"I am fine, brothers, now that I am safely within these walls. I hoped to sneak past the army below, but the guards spotted me. I was lucky the dogs

didn't catch me.”

“That was quite the run up the mountain,” said the grey haired man. “Quite the risk to try to sneak past the army.”

“My message is important enough to warrant them,” said Rand.

“Then you seek to speak with the Claw?”

The Claw was what they called their leader. The cult wasn't one with a lot of imagination – or so Nemes had said – and they named their high ranking positions after parts of a dragon. Why they had chosen the claw as the leaders had been a mystery Nemes had not elaborated on.

“Yes, I must deliver my message directly to him,” said Rand.

The three men eyed him with suspicion. Had he made a mistake? Only a moment before they had looked to accept him as one of their own.

With a hesitant look, the grey haired man spoke. “The Claw is dead.”

For a moment Rand cursed in his own mind before having the wherewithal to feign shock and sadness. “Dead? Can't be. How?”

“He has become one with Ilia. She leads us now, as it should be.”

Ilia? Nemes had made no mention of her to Rand. Who was she? How was he supposed to react to her being in charge? With joy? The three men did not look anything but elated over the fact.

“Brothers, I must ask your forgiveness. I have been away for a long time and without contact to my brethren. I do not know what is going on. I have not heard of Ilia.”

All three of the men frowned. Had it been a mistake to admit ignorance? Rand glanced around. There were more of the cultists appearing to see what was going on. He counted twenty of them in the yard. Who knew how many more were looking on from the windows and the walls surrounding it.

“Then you must rejoice upon hearing the news,” said the grey haired man with a smile. “Ilia is young, barely more than a child, but she is a dragon. We finally have what we have sought for so long. A true one leading us. The army below will be but a nuisance once she is ready.”

A dragon. That was all Rand needed. The plan had been to get to the Claw and then start tearing things down, but he couldn't go up against a dragon while

surrounded by the cultists. He'd need to find the weak spot right now and act on it.

“Brothers, I am left speechless at the news,” said Rand and did his best to look moved. “If she is our leader then I must deliver my message to her. She must hear it.”

The three men exchanged looks.

“Very well, brother. We will guide you to her,” said the grey haired man and started walking towards the well and the fortress behind it. It was clear the side of the mountain was where most of the rooms were. Even if you got an army in through the gates there would still be considerable difficulty taking the place.

Rand started to follow the man and activated his powers. The familiar dots and lines appeared and he tried to find the centre of the pattern that held the place together. He paid no attention to the two men following him, weapons still at the ready.

He was surprised how easy it had become to interpret the patterns. They were starting to make sense to him so much so that he could take a single point and map out in his mind where it would lead to make a sane connection to the rest of the network. That meant he could find the centre of the pattern much easier. He hoped it would not be inside the fortress, somewhere deep in its dungeons. Getting there would be difficult.

As he followed the lines Rand found himself relieved. The patterns did not go deep. The centre of it was right by the well and they were going to walk right past it. He looked around, this time trying to determine where the threats came for his actions. There were plenty of robed figures at the walls and more wandering around the yard. All of them were glancing at him from time to time. Sudden guests were not something people under siege were used to.

The well got closer.

Rand readied himself. Plans changed and sometimes taking action that surprised even yourself meant your opponents had no chance to stop it.

They walked past the well.

Rand mustered his will. Kneeling down, he slammed his fist against the centre of the pattern.

The ground shook and sent robed men falling off the wall and those standing in the yard to their knees. A thunderous crack sounded from above. The stone underneath Rand cracked and the small canyons spread everywhere. The highest towers started to sink down. Loose stones fell from the mountain face as the powers started to push down.

It was a much more destructive process than when he exerted his power on a smaller scale and on a single point. Here, he was using a single point to influence thousands. It wasn't going to be as finely controlled.

With slight worry he watched a single strand snap free from the overall pattern. A crack appeared where the line had been. It spread outwards towards the edge of the mountain. No daring to move Rand watched the cracks widen. He watched the ground behind the cracks tilt and start to slide away. The gate and a large portion of the fortress that made up the outer edge slid and fell, crumbling as it made its way towards the ground below. He could hear men scream as they realized they were falling to their deaths.

Rand could only hope the army below wasn't in the way. There'd be a lot of dead if they were. At the same time he hoped the rest of the fortress wasn't going to follow the same path.

Looking around he could see his power working. The highest towers had sunken to the ground level and the walls had disappeared into nothingness. Even the main portion of the fortress, that had been carved straight into the mountain face, had been brought down though the main doorways still stood.

He'd done enough.

He took his fist off the nexus and stood up. It took a moment for the ground to settle. Half the yard had fallen off the side of the mountain, but that left still many robed figures trying to get up now that the destruction was finished. Rand casually walked over to the grey haired man and kicked him in the chin, putting an stop to his attempts to get up. He grabbed the sword that was tied to the man's waist and pulled it out.

Going down the side of the mountain was not an option. There were too many robed figures between him and the slim path that still remained. Going up, past the fortress posed a similar problem. The only path left for him was to go

inside what remained of the once mighty fortress and hope to find a room in which to barricade himself in.

Rand started towards the doors and cut down anyone who tried to stop him. There were a few who had gotten on their feet and had seen him do the deed. Their swords were cut in half and a moment later the man behind the sword met a similar fate. Thankfully the walls had gone down and along with them the men who held bows so there were no arrows being shot at him. Most of the cultists were dazed and unsure what was going on so it was only a few that tried to stop him. To the others he was just one of them.

The door leading inside the fortress hung loose. Rand could see the arch above the doorway had buckled and sent the door off one of its hinges. Carefully, he stepped inside. Dust floated in the air and he could see small stones scattered across the floor. The stories above must have crumbled down. It was a small miracle the entire thing had not collapsed.

He'd arrived in a large hall. Pillars held up the roof, some showing cracks and strain as a result of the recent rumbling. One had even fallen over. At the very back of the hall there was a stairway leading up to a pedestal. Rand could see a chair toppled over there.

The silence was oppressing as Rand moved away from the door and further into the hall. To the left there was a staircase leading to the upper levels, but it was blocked by a pile of rubble. The collapse above had not gone without causing damage and it looked unlikely anyone would have survived it. The light from the few torches and lamps that still burned was enough to let him see where he was going.

A sob made him stop and listen.

It came again from behind the pedestal.

Sword raised up, Rand made his way there. It wasn't a noise a grown man would make. Shouting started to echo through from the outside which made Rand glance back, worried. He hoped the cultists would be too busy trying to figure out how to defend their compromised position against the army that was no doubt making its way up the mountain. With no walls to protect them the fall would be quick and inevitable.

Assuming the half of the fortress that had fallen had not crushed the army below.

Rand rounded the raised stand and saw a small figure huddled behind what looked like a piece from one of the support pillars.

“Hey.”

His voice made the figure jump up. He could hear chains moving and upon inspecting closer he could see a thick chain go from one leg to a large piece of stone. A frightened looking face looked up at him past copper coloured hair.

It was a young girl.

She couldn't have been more than ten years old. Her robe was dusty, but well made. It was the same colour as the rest of the cultists, but it had stitching to it made in golden tones. She was clearly someone more important than a rank and file member, but why the chain?

“I didn't run away,” said the girl and pointed towards the chain. It went from her leg to a broken piece of a pillar, but at that end it had come loose.

“Who are you?” asked Rand and looked around. There was nothing threatening coming their way so he crouched by her. The pedestal hid both of them from view from anyone at the front of the hall.

“Ilia,” said the young girl with a frown. She inspected Rand with a careful eye. “You're not one of the others.”

The dragon. Rand instinctively grabbed a better hold of his sword. She was young, but no doubt deadly if she so decided. But if she was their leader, why had she been chained up? Why was she in human form?

“And you're not a dragon,” Rand noted, hoping it would prompt her to reveal something.

“Yes I am,” replied Ilia sharply and gave Rand a glare.

“You don't look like one.”

“I'm young,” she replied as if that explained it all.

Outside the sounds of fighting started. Men screamed. Rand felt relieved knowing the army had arrived to mop up what remained of the cultists.

“Why are you chained up?” asked Rand.

Ilia gave the thick metal loops and glare. “So I don't run away. So I'm forced

to remain like this and unable to spread my wings to soar through the sky like a free dragon should. They know I would leave them and laugh at their foolish beliefs from above. So they chain me up and force me to pretend I'm their leader. They killed their old leader for it and fed him to me."

Rand shuddered even though having eaten a human did not seem to bother her much. A thought made its way to his mind. "Can you find your own kind?"

Ilia gave him a suspicious look. "We can sense each other," she admitted. "Especially us young ones. Helps us keep away from the ancient ones who might see us as a snack."

Rand grinned. "You're coming with me then." He reached and grabbed the chain. A solid yank ripped what little still kept the chain attached to the piece of rock and left him with a solid leash with which to keep her with him.

Ilia examined him for a moment. "Why?"

"Because I need you to find me a dragon. All of them if need be."

"Why?"

"So I can kill them."

"Why?"

"Is that all you can ask?"

"It suits the situation."

Rand sighed and stood up. The girl looked up at him with determined eyes. She may have looked like ten, but there was a will behind those eyes and a mind that was far from being that of a child.

"One of them killed someone I loved," said Rand. "I hope to find that one. If I have to kill all of them while I do it then so be it."

Ilia stood up as well. She was taller than Rand had expected. She was skinny, as if poorly fed, but he could tell that with age and proper nutrition she would turn into a beauty.

"You are a fool," she said in a firm voice and stared him down like a queen.

For a moment Rand stared at her. It was a declaration he had not expected to hear from her. Finally, he smiled wistfully. "Maybe I am."

The sounds of fighting started to die down on the outside. There had not been much left of the cultists and no doubt captain Cadmer had brought with

him a chasing party capable of mopping up the untrained rebels.

“Either way, you're coming with me. If you don't, I will kill you.” Saying the words brought no emotion out of him. Had he been thinking clearly it might have startled him. When had he become the sort of person that told a child he'd kill them? Without any remorse? Even if they were a dragon.

Ilia frowned at him, but said nothing in return. When Rand started walking towards the door she followed after a slight tug of the chain.

Cautiously, Rand peeked through the cracked door. The yard was filled with soldier sporting the Vale army symbols and colours. Dead bodies were strewn all around, most sporting the cultists robe. There were some men from the army that had met their ultimate fate as well.

He hoped to see a familiar face. Popping out in his cultist robe would have been a bad idea given the situation. He saw men with bows at the ready. Catching an arrow in his chest was not the way to start the day. The sun had climbed above the horizon and was casting its light on the fallen fortress.

“They're all dead?” asked Ilia from next to him. She had sneaked close enough to get a peek of her own.

“At least the ones in this fortress.”

“Good.”

Rand didn't have time to wonder about her reaction as he spotted the captain near the well. It was the only chance to get out of the situation without getting shot full of arrows. He dropped his sword and stepped out the door with his hands up. Ilia followed, the chain clinging as she walked.

“Captain Cadmer!” Rand yelled loud enough to be heard by everyone. The soldiers nearest turned towards him, bows and arrows were pointed at him and those with swords or spears started to run towards him.

The captain turned toward him and recognized him. “Stand your ground men!” His voice boomed across the yard louder than Rand's voice had. The soldiers did as told and watched the captain make his way to where Rand was.

“You're alive,” said the captain as soon as he got close enough to talk normally. Shank loomed behind him and was giving Ilia curious looks.

“Seems so,” said Rand.

Cadmer looked around. "When you said you would crush the fortress I didn't quite believe you, despite everything. But you certainly did what you promised. Once the wall was down it was easy enough to mop up what remained." He looked past Rand and past the door behind him. "Anyone alive in there?"

"The upper floors seem to have collapsed," said Rand. "The stairs up are blocked so can't say. Nothing alive on this level though."

Cadmere motioned for a few men to go and check it out anyway. "The king is on his way up. He wants to thank you personally."

Rand had hoped to be able to slip onward without such delays, but who was he to say no to a king?

"And who is this?" asked Cadmer, finally noticing Ilia hiding behind Rand. He frowned when he saw the chain going to her leg and that Rand was the one holding it.

"Her name is Ilia," said Rand. "She'll be coming with me."

"She looks important," noted Cadmer and paid close attention to the golden embroideries on her robe.

"She's not," said Rand and presented the chain going to her leg. "They kept her a prisoner. I just found the robe so she'd have something to wear. She's a victim of the cruelty of these men and I'm taking her to a safe place."

"Liar," muttered Ilia, but not loud enough that anyone else but Rand could hear her. It was clear she'd rather go with him than the men of the army. Rand couldn't fault her logic. Easier to escape from one man than an entire army. Her only mistake was not knowing the single man that was looking to keep her.

Cadmer examined the girl for a moment more. She did her best not to look at him and hid behind Rand. "All right. The army is no place for a small girl."

"Then we will be going now," said Rand and started towards the other side of the fortress. The walls had crumbled there as well, but the path up the mountain was still intact.

"I can't let you do that," said Cadmer and the soldiers around them closed in, blocking Rand and Ilia in. "The king is coming and he wants to talk to you in person."

Rand sighed. "Fine," he muttered and sought a seat for himself. Running up

the mountain had taken a toll on his legs and he'd had little time to rest them. He found an intact step on which to sit down and wait for the king. Ilia took a seat next to him while some of Cadmer's men stood guard near by.

"Who is this king?" asked Ilia.

"Some usurper who decided there had been too much peace," said Rand and leaned back on his elbows, the edge of the stair digging into his lower back.

"Why do they follow him?"

Rand shrugged. "Tradition and laws."

"You humans are odd."

"I'm not going to deny that," said Rand and leaned forward. They spoke no more as they waited for the king to arrive. It took some time as Cadmere's soldier secured what remained of the fortress, but finally the banners of his personal guard appeared climbing up to the ruins.

Cadmere walked to meet with the king and give his report. The two stood at the ruined gates for a good time while the king's advisers milled around them. Finally, the king parted from the group, followed by Cadmere, and headed to where Rand sat.

Rand stood up to greet the king.

"I must admit I did not believe you could do this," said Gadron and looked around, still with an expression of slight disbelief on him.

"When I say I will do something then it generally tends to happen," said Rand.

Gadron nodded. "A man to my taste. Tell me, what do you plan to do now?"

"I'm going to take this girl and be on my way," said Rand and glanced at Ilia. The king followed his gaze and dismissed her as some poor girl the cultists had held captive.

"Why not stay?" asked Gadron. "I could use a man like you."

"Thank you for the offer, your majesty, but I have my own affairs to tend to," said Rand.

"You make the mistake of thinking I was asking," said Gadron and gave Rand the sort of look that would have put any of his subjects on his knees and begging for mercy. Rand looked around and saw his personal guard fondling their

weapons.

He glanced down at Ilia and received an expressionless look back.

So that was how it was going to be. Even if he got Gadron to let him go there would be the next one to deal with. A different kingdom, a different king, some self absorbed local lord who'd try to tie him down. Always someone looking to chain up a man with talent.

The solution was simple.

"All right. I will work for you," said Rand and extended a hand. For a moment Gadron simply looked at it, but then extended his gloved hand. Rand grabbed hold of it and smiled.

Gadron's eyes widened as he looked into Rand's.

The golden rings stared back at him.

Rand's other hand rose up and a single finger pressed against the king's chest. He made a flicking motion with it and blood burst out as the king was cut in two from the right shoulder down to the lower part of his left ribs.

While the men around them stood firmly in place, shocked by what had happened, Rand reached out and pulled the king's sword from its scabbard. It was a fancy blade with a large ruby serving as its pommel and other jewels embedded into its hand guard. Even the blade itself had engravings in gold making it one of the most expensive weapons he had ever held.

The body of the king fell to the ground, the two pieces bouncing away from each other while blood flowed out. Rand raised the sword above his head just as the personal guard started to react and get their weapons out and head for him.

"Nobody move!"

His voice had enough strength that everyone around stopped. The men hesitated.

"According to your laws and traditions I am now the king. Raise a hand against me and you will meet the same fate as the former king and this fortress!"

The soldiers looked at each other, confused.

Rand sought out Cadmere in the crowd. He looked shocked, but ready to act if need be.

"Captain, protect your king!"

Cadmere hesitated. Rand knew he'd taken a risk. They might decide it was better not to allow a total stranger to take the throne. If they had any sense that's what they'd do. But traditions and laws had a strength that was hard to fight when you were raised to follow them.

Cadmere could not resist following his upbringing.

“Protect the king!” he ordered in that loud voice that carried across the entire yard and probably a fair way up the mountain. Rand was pleased to see Shank among the first ones to rush to his side, weapon at the ready.

As more of the Cadmere's men gathered around him, the personal guard of the former king started to lose its will to fight. It seemed the situation was under control.

“Long live the new king!” Cadmere shouted and the men around Rand cheered. Even some of the personal guard joined, though some looked like they needed a knife in their back once night came to ensure a smooth transition.

“Most interesting,” said Ilia from next to Rand and kicked the limp hand of the dead king.

“Didn't think it would actually work,” muttered Rand silently enough that only she could hear. Now he needed to decide what to do with a kingdom.

“What will you call yourself?” asked the girl.

“What do you mean?” asked Rand. He already had a name.

“Every king needs a name,” said the girl. “The brave, the just..they use all sorts of thing to make themselves seem better.”

Rand thought about it for a moment as the men continued to cheer for him.

“I will be the Dragon King,” he finally said.

Ilia gave him a look. “Why the Dragon King?”

Rand grinned. “You'll find out. As will all of them.”

Chapter 12

The jungle was alive around them. Not a moment went by without one animal or another making a sound. The air was filled with a cacophony of bird song and primates warning their neighbours to stay away from their tree.

John cursed and cut down another large fern blocking their path. Sometimes he was thankful he couldn't feel much. The heat and moisture must have been suffocating. He could tell Tina was struggling with it. Her hair clung to her face, sweat ran down her forehead and she was much more irritable than usual. Though John suspected some of that might have stemmed from the encounter they had had upon arrival.

They had been wading through the thick jungle for two days. No further soldiers had crossed their path, but a measure of caution slowed them down. The hit from the grenade had made Tina more cautious as well. She had realized there were things in the world that could hurt her, perhaps even enough to kill.

Water condensed on John's black armour and ran down in small streams when a bead got large enough. It seemed he remained the same temperature no matter the environment. It was an interesting observation for John, but he didn't have time to think about it too much.

He worried where they were heading.

They'd picked a random direction from where the battle had occurred. There was no way of knowing if they'd end up deeper in the jungle or in the embrace of civilization.

John cut down another large leaf blocking the way.

"A wretched place this is," muttered Tina from behind him and removed some of the hair from her face. She barely wore anything. Her usual dress had been reduced to a skimpy top to cover her breasts and a pair of shorts that went barely half way down her thighs.

"We just happened to arrive in the hot and moist parts," said John. He'd tried to recall everything he knew about the world they'd arrived in. Most of it was about the wars and how they consumed almost the entire planet. There was one

zone that all parties had agreed to keep neutral because the leaders and their close friends needed a place to party in without having to worry about stepping on a mine or getting their car shot up by masked men. It was an oddity that the agreement had held for as long as it had.

Getting to the safe zone was the best option for getting time to make a proper plan. They wouldn't have to worry about soldiers disturbing them.

The fact they were in a jungle bode well for being close to the place. In the north the forests were pine and birch while further south there was nothing but deserts. The safe zone was located in the jungle belt that ran around the planet.

"We could just fly," said Tina. It wasn't the first time she was making the suggestion.

"We could," John admitted and hacked down some more leaves and made his way onward. "But like I said, they have devices that can spot us from miles away. They have airplanes that can catch up to us and shoot missiles at us. Those would hurt much more than what you were hit with earlier. It's not a risk worth taking."

He didn't even go into what sort of attention a dragon would draw world wide. On the other hand, news like that might be enough to draw Celia to them. In the end he had made the judgement the risk was too great. He could live without Celia. Living without Tina and her blood was not something he was willing to risk.

"Then at least let me make a path for us," said Tina. She was starting to gain an edge to her voice.

John knew how that edge could cut. "It'll draw attention too. We'll be out of the jungle soon enough."

"Soon enough was a day ago," said Tina. She glanced up at the trees at the sound of a fight that had broken out between a couple of primates. The noise was deafening for a moment as the entire tribe started voicing its opinion. All John and Tina could see were green leaves. The noise was just an eerie echo down from above.

The two continued onward.

Tina made no further complaints. John focused on cutting a path for them.

His black armour was the perfect protection from anything looking to sting or bite him. There had been one snake that had made the mistake of testing its teeth on him. It had slithered away humiliated and maybe with a broken fang.

They held a small break during mid-day, even though it was rare to get a glimpse of the sky to tell the time. There wasn't much food for them to eat, though neither of them were the sort to need much. A few fruits from trees high up were enough to keep them going.

It was late in the evening before they stopped for the night. There was no shelter to use so they climbed up a tree and found a large branch that offered a stable platform for them to sleep on. For the night Tina wrapped herself in the black armour. Hugging each other, they fell asleep secure in the knowledge that should anything come by and bother them it was unlikely to cause them harm before both woke up.

The night passed and the two were walking again as soon as they woke up. Neither wanted to spend more time in the jungle than was needed. It was only a few hours later that they came across a road. It wasn't a paved highway. It was packed dirt and sand, but it was well kept and tracks told it was used regularly.

Looking up and down the road it was impossible to tell which way led to civilization.

“Which way do we go now?” asked Tina with a frown.

John shrugged. “Either way works.”

They stood on the side of the road.

“We'd better make ourselves look a bit less threatening.”

“What if we run into soldiers?” asked Tina. It was rare for her to be the cautious one.

John rubbed his chin. “Well, we'll try to look like civilians. If they're the right soldiers they won't do anything to us. Just drive by. If they're the wrong kind, well, we'll just have to kill them before they kill us.”

“Now who's being reckless?”

“Would you like to walk in the jungle some more?”

“No.” The reply came from her with such conviction that John doubted she'd ever enter the place again. He couldn't blame her. It wasn't the most hospitable of

places and the heat was enough to make anyone feel like they were withering away.

“Then we go,” said John and changed his form. The black armour flowed into a set of trousers and shirt that seemed more suitable for the climate. Tina was already wearing something someone wandering in the jungle might have. The problem was they had no bags, nothing saying they were prepared for the hardships of the jungle.

Then again, it would be only seconds before both of them were ready to kill.

“Which way?” asked Tina. There was nothing to indicate which way would lead them to where they wanted to go.

John glanced both ways. “We go this way,” he said and started towards what he believed to be north. Tina followed without complaints. She knew the place even less than John did and in the end it wouldn't matter that much which way they went. It was a road. It was rare to find one so well travelled that didn't lead anywhere.

It was much easier to walk an open road than wade through the thick undergrowth so they made good time compared to their earlier pace. A few hours of walking had them at a crossroad. It was a paved road and they were lucky enough to find a sign that pointed them to the right direction. The safe zone was only fifty miles away and it looked like the good road would take them all the way there.

Still, it was a distance they couldn't cover in the few hours of daylight they had left.

“Maybe someone will drive by and we can get a ride,” said John though in his mind it was more likely someone would drive by and stop to try and rob them. His view of the world did not give the impression that it was particularly safe anywhere.

“You think so?” Tina did not sound convinced.

John glanced back at her. “If you stick your thumb out in that outfit then at least we'll get any man to stop.”

Tina examined herself before giving John a confused look. “Stick my thumb out?”

John chuckled and started to explain the finer points of hitch-hiking to her.

It was starting to get late when they heard a distant engine roar coming from behind them. John looked back and saw an off-road vehicle coming their way. It didn't look like it was military equipment, but one of the lucky civilian ones to still be able to afford to drive around with one.

“Should I try it?” asked Tina.

John nodded. “Doesn't look like it's military so we've got nothing to lose.”

Tina stepped a bit into the lane and stuck her thumb out. If possible, she made her top seem even skimpier. She summoned a smile on herself that would have drawn the attention of anyone.

For a moment it looked like the car wouldn't stop, but it began slowing down a bit before passing Tina and then came to a halt a short ways ahead. The darkened windows made it impossible to see who was inside or how many of them there were.

All four doors opened and five men climbed out.

John cursed. He knew the type well enough. They were gang members of some sort. Criminals. Even during war those types found a way to make a profit and live a life of luxury. The large all road capable vehicle told of that.

At least they weren't soldiers.

“What do we have here?” asked one of the men. He had a blue scarf wrapped around his head and a loose shirt that no doubt hid a gun tucked away in the back of his trousers.

“A hot one,” said another man and walked closer to Tina. It was obvious where he was looking at and what he was thinking.

The three other men said nothing, but instead directed their attention to John. It was clear how they planned everything to go. Three of them would take out John while the two would focus on Tina. They kill him and take her with them, no doubt to sell or use as a sex slave or something worse.

John sighed.

“Tina, let's kill these guys.”

He didn't need to say more. She grinned and the black armour flowed over her. The men looked startled and started getting out their weapons while

shouting at the two monstrosities that had appeared before them. Professional soldiers had not been able to stop the pair. Poorly prepared thugs had no chance. It was a quick and bloody battle, though the blood flowed from only one side.

Feeling warm blood on him felt refreshing to John. There had not been much of it since the scuffle in the jungle and now it brought new energy to him. It ended too soon in his mind. The last man fell to the ground, skewered by John's blade formed hand. Tina had finished her two opponents quicker and was looking over at John with a small smile.

"You really are quite attractive when you're killing," she said and the armour melted off from her. She was back to the tight top and shorts. Not a drop of blood was on her.

John felt a sting of guilt at the remark. One more reminder how much he had changed, how profound an effect the slavery to her blood had had. "You made me this way," he said, not accusingly, but as reminder.

Tina laughed. "No, my dear. You were already on that road when I met you. I just pushed you along a bit."

John wanted to deny it, but couldn't. When she had ripped the flesh away from him he had already found the enticing nature blood had on him. The real culprit was the lizard man that had taken away his hand and the chip that had protected him from going dark.

"Let's take their car," said John and started towards the vehicle while letting his armour melt into the attire he'd had earlier. The different colours and textures came to him naturally now. He had trouble remembering why it had been so difficult before.

"Can you drive the thing?" asked Tina. Neither of them paid much attention to the five corpses they left behind. The jungle still surrounded them on both sides. The bodies would disappear soon enough. Even if someone found them it wouldn't be much of an issue in a world torn by war. Dead bodies were bound to pop-up frequently.

John peeked in through the drivers side door. While he had been brought up in a world where people didn't drive he had visited worlds where that was a common thing. He'd learned the basics. Still, seeing that it was an automatic

made him sigh out of relief. It was simple enough to drive even if it had been years since his last time.

“I think so.” John shut the rear door and took the drivers seat. Tina followed his example on the other side. She took the passenger seat next to John. She looked pleased with the fact there was airconditioning blowing cold air at her and the seat beneath was soft and comfortable.

What caught her attention was the radio.

It was playing the same sort of metal music that had had her drawn in when they'd first entered John's home world. She fiddled with the control to turn the music louder and started bobbing her head with the rhythm.

John cringed at the growls that made it impossible to tell what the lyrics were. He put the car in drive and stepped on the gas pedal. The car shot onward with enough force to push both of them down into their seats. Things settled down once they were at speed.

“This is comfortable,” said Tina and snuggled herself into the seat. She turned the music a bit more louder and watched the scenery go by through the side window.

“Beats walking,” John admitted and did his best to tolerate the music. “Can I ask you something?”

Tina turned to regard him. “Sure.”

“Why do you like this kind of music?”

Tina frowned. “I don't know. It's something I hadn't heard before. The instruments they use, the way they sing, the beat of the drums..I don't know. It just resonates with something in me.”

John smiled. What more did anyone need to say about why they liked a particular sort of music? If it resonated with them then that was all the reason needed. “It is a style few appreciate.”

“It's their loss,” said Tina and smiled as the song changed. It started with a heavy guitar riff that had her feeling tingles run down her spine. Once the singing started you could actually make out the lyrics singing about the universe. It seemed an odd subject for music in such style, but even John found himself liking the part where the vocals got clean.

They drove for a good while in silence, listening to the music. The headlights started to illuminate their way as darkness started to creep over the land. There weren't many vehicles coming from the opposite direction. A few army supply trucks passed them with their escorts, but even those didn't bother them.

John slowed down when they saw a bunch of lights in the distance. It wasn't another vehicle coming their way, but a collection of buildings. It looked like a border checkpoint.

"What's that?" asked Tina and peered into the distance. She could make out dark figures passing by the lights.

"Looks like a checkpoint," said John. They didn't have any papers to present. They didn't even know if it was for the safe zone or some other purpose. Going in carried a risk with it.

"What's it for?" asked Tina.

"They'll want to see some papers from us," said John and kept the car at a crawl. "Something that tells them who we are and what we're going to do once we're past that point."

"We don't have any of that, do we?"

"No."

"What do we do then?" asked Tina. "Kill them all?"

John thought about it. Maybe he could pass things off like they were robbed. It was sort of true. He could say all the luggage had been left behind and they'd barely escaped with their lives. They might believe it or they might not. He couldn't come up with a better plan on the spot.

"Just follow my lead," said John and gently pressed down the gas pedal. It didn't take long for the car to roll to a stop near a pole that blocked the lane. Two soldiers appeared from a glass booth to inspect them.

John rolled down the windows as one of them knocked on it with his gun.

"Papers please," said the soldier and looked inside the car with a bored expression. He noticed Tina and grew a little more interested, but he paid little attention to John. Tina rolled down the window and caught the attention of the second soldier.

"We don't have any," said John and rushed to continue as the soldier

frowned. "We ran into some deserters on our way. They took all our luggage. It's a small miracle we managed to get back in the car and escape. I'm not even sure where this road leads. We were in such a hurry."

"This leads to the safe zone," said the soldier and examined both of them. He shined a flash-light at both of them to get a better view. John did his best to look shaken up, but Tina failed miserably at it. All John could hope for was that her cleavage was enough of a distraction from that fact. "How many others were in your group?"

The assumption that they had survived only because some others had died was a valid one. "We started out with five," said John, playing into the soldiers expectations. "The deserters killed three and took everything we had. I just want to get back to safety with my wife here."

"And you have nothing left? No papers, no drivers licence?" The soldier frowned.

John shrugged. "Nothing."

"Wait here," said the soldier and went to the front of the car. His partner came up and they exchanged words in a heated manner.

"You could run them over now," said Tina in a voice that barely carried over the music.

John looked around. Even though there were only two soldier at the post there were several buildings there. He could see a guard tower a little ways off where the fence ran to create a border. There would be soldiers there. If he ran over the two there'd be a chase and life in the safe zone would suddenly turn into a hiding game.

"Let's see where this goes," said John. Even if the soldiers decided they wouldn't be let through they could still kill them and drive away. "But be ready to act."

Tina nodded.

The soldiers argued for a bit more before returning to John's window. "All right. You can drive through."

John gave the soldier a relieved smile. He didn't have to fake it. "Thank you."

The soldier nodded and motioned with his hand. The pole rose, leaving an

open road for John to drive on. He raised the window back up and gave the soldiers a wave of his hand.

“That worked out well,” he said as the checkpoint was nothing more than a spot of light in the side mirrors.

“Could have been worse,” Tina admitted and kept her eyes on the road. They drove around a bend in the road and got the view of the safe zone city. They were on top of a hill so they got a good view of the lights that spread below them to follow the beach into the distance. Compared to where John lived it was a small town, but there were miles after miles of buildings so it held plenty of places for someone to hide in.

“Do you think she's here?” asked Tina as they drove on and started to see gates that hid behind them some of the bigger mansions that the wealthy had.

“I hope so,” said John. “If she's somewhere else we'll have some serious trouble trying to find her. If she's alive. You've felt what the soldiers here can do. She has much less experience dealing with situation like this.”

“She's not helpless,” said Tina and looked out the side window. All she could see was darkness illuminated by occasional lights from gardens behind walls. The road had turned into a slithering snake that slowly led them down towards the city. “If she's here I'll find her.”

“We'll need some place to rest,” said John. “We've been going through a lot.”

“I wouldn't mind a soft bed,” Tina admitted.

With no money they'd need to get some from somewhere. There weren't any passers by where they were now, but there was bound to be some in the city itself. They drove on and soon they started seeing some passers by, mostly in cars, but then followed by people walking. John pulled to a stop near one such couple.

“I'm going to get us some money,” said John and flowed into the dark armour as he got out.

Tina looked out the window. John walked up to the couple and surprised them. They had been too busy with each other to notice the threatening figure come closer. The street lights under which they stopped gave Tina a perfect view of what took place.

It looked like he didn't even bother to talk to them. He rammed the bladed hand through the woman first. He didn't even stop before pulling out the hand and striking the man down as he tried to defend her. For a moment he stood above the two dead bodies before leaning down to search their pockets for money.

Tina smiled.

He had turned out well. Whether he realized it or not, there was no going back for him. The blood called him with such force he'd never be able to say no to it. He was a killer and he liked it.

"That was quick," said Tina when John sat back in the drivers seat and closed the door.

He tossed two wallets to her. "Toss the cards. Get the cash. Hopefully no one saw me," said John and sped away towards the centre of the city. They'd find a hotel there.

Tina went through the wallets. She tossed the plastic cards as John had instructed. The paper bills she kept along with the metal coins. She had no idea how much money it was, but the amount of bills in her hand felt like a thick bunch.

They disappeared into the city, leaving behind the two dead bodies under the street light.

Chapter 13

Sixten shivered. It wasn't because of the airconditioning nor the hangover he was struggling with, but the expectation of having to face the Lord Saviour. He'd received notification of his arrival the previous day and he'd spent the rest of that day looking up into a whiskey bottle.

It had helped momentarily, but now the hangover was making him think it had not been such a good idea. He had started to swear he'd never drink again, but stopped half way with the thought. He knew it wouldn't hold. He'd grab a bottle as soon as possible.

The thought made him glance at the small table in the corner and the tempting ember brown bottle of whiskey that stood on it.

"Fuck," he muttered and raked a hand through his hair.

Meeting the Saviour wouldn't have been so bad, but John and Tina had fucked him over good. The missing agents had the man furious, of that he had no doubt. If he discovered Sixten had helped John and Tina then it would be the end of him.

Sixten stood up from the bed and grabbed a fresh set of clothes from his closet. A shower would have done him good, but who had time for such a thing in the morning? He'd go in the evening. If he wasn't too drunk to remember.

If he was alive.

He fought the nausea and the sway the world seemed to have gained during the night. He looked in the mirror. He'd buttoned up the shirt the wrong way, but he didn't care. It was as usual. People expected him to be unable to properly button a shirt. Best they kept thinking that. They'd underestimate him when hungover and that was the best of times for someone to give some leniency.

He grabbed a jacket that had seen its best days and pulled it on. He looked a lot cleaner than before, not wearing his usual attire. Someone might have mistaken him for a reputable man.

"Fucking shitty clothes," Sixten muttered to himself after pulling on a pair of pants. Satisfied that he wasn't naked, he grabbed some small items into his

pockets and left the room. The white corridor hurt his eyes.

“Should have murdered that fucking designer,” he muttered to himself and shaded his eyes. At least the room set aside for him had some more sensible colours – dark tones and toned down lights. It made waking up a more enjoyable experience.

He headed for the Oracle's room. He needed to talk to Richter one more time before facing the Saviour.

He found the scientist there, busily working on the console. He had continue the work Tina had put him on, but so far the results had not been promising.

“Richter,” Sixten headed for the pitcher of water set on the table as he talked. “The Lord Saviour is coming today.”

The man looked up from his work. “I know. You told me yesterday.”

Sixten frowned. “I did?”

“You had two empty whiskey bottles in hand so you probably don't remember,” said Richter, his voice betraying the contempt he had for him.

“Ah, that explains it,” said Sixten and grabbed the pitcher of water. He didn't bother with a glass, but gulped down liquid straight from the pitcher. He knew Richter didn't think much of him. But as long as the money landed in his account on time and he got to do what he loved there was no problem.

“Fuck that tasted good,” said Sixten and wiped some of the water off from his face. He'd drank the entire thing in one go, but still felt like he'd spent a day in the desert without water. He turned his attention to Richter.

“The Saviour will probably not talk to you, but if he does, you say nothing about Tina and John, understand? If you do, we're both fucking corpses.”

“I know,” said Richter and continued to work. “I won't say anything. She put me to such an interesting task that I don't want to give up on it.”

“You found anything since yesterday?” Sixten wasn't sure what he'd been told yesterday. It was all a bit of a blur, but he was fairly certain there had been no change.

Richter looked up from the monitor to glare at him. He then sighed. “I suppose you wouldn't remember it either. Fine. I've made some progress. I've narrowed down the search area and her location thanks to having John and

Tina's signatures to work with. They're in the same area. I've narrowed it down to a fifty square mile area.”

“That's a lot of fucking ground to cover still,” said Sixten.

“Less than a planet,” said Richter defensively. He was certain his drunkard of a boss couldn't understand the significance of it all so it was best not to tell him too much.

“So where are they?” asked Sixten. He hoped they were far away from the worst areas of conflict. Though upon thinking about it, it wasn't the two of them that would be in danger. It was everyone else that crossed their path.

“In the safe zone, or close by,” said Richter. The Oracle had a decent map of the entire planet, but the borders tended to change and it had been a long time since anyone had updated the map. Not since travel had been suspended there by most places.

“Well, best of luck to them,” Sixten muttered. They could die there for all he cared. If the Lord Saviour joined them even better. His life had been put on hold thanks to all the figures that had appeared to make all sorts of demands of him. It was enough to make him want to get out of the business and disappear somewhere.

His thoughts were interrupted by an announcement echoing through the speakers.

“Fuck. He's here.” Sixten hurried out the room without saying anything more to Richter. He'd given the warning he'd intended. Only thing left was to hope the scientist managed to keep to it if the Lord Saviour started talking to him. Though the chance for that was remote if he remained in the Oracle room. There was no reason the Saviour would want to go there.

He hurried through the corridors to the room where the Saviour had arrived. The door slid open and there he was, as imposing as ever.

“Lord Saviour,” said Sixten with a slight bow. Sweat ran down his forehead. The three guards flanking the man did nothing to make him sweat any less.

“Sixten,” said the Saviour and smiled. It wasn't a warm smile. He looked around, visibly impressed. “You didn't tell me you ran such a high quality operation.”

"It didn't seem important," said Sixten. It had been better when the man had not known. Less temptation to visit. Now he might come back more often, making life difficult for everyone.

"You're right," said the Saviour. "It isn't important. Is there a place we can talk?"

"This way," said Sixten and showed the man to the corridor and then to a conference room. Alternaters used them to sometimes plan their trips. The guards followed them inside. Sixten had anticipated the need and arranged for beverages and some light snacks. They were laid out on the table.

The Saviour grabbed himself a chocolate chip cookie and bit down on it. He let out a sigh. "You have no idea how much I have missed these. I tried to get something similar together back in Nemedan, but never got close. There's no chocolate there, at least not that I've managed to find."

"Home is always home," said Sixten and found himself a seat as far away from his guest as possible. He still remembered what he'd done to Vincent. There was nothing guaranteeing he wouldn't be next to turn to dust.

The Saviour nodded. "So true." He grabbed a bottle of cold beer and popped it open and took a gulp. He took off the cape he wore and draped it over the back of a chair before taking a seat. He gave Sixten a stern look. "So what happened to my agents?"

Sixten shifted in his chair. "I don't know. They went to fill their assignments and never came back. Maybe their missions failed."

The Saviour stared at him intently. "It's possible. Some of the assignments were dangerous."

Sixten relaxed a bit. "If I knew what had happened to them I would tell you. I swore to serve you and I keep my oaths."

The Saviour nodded. "I know. I trust you."

The fuck you do, Sixten thought to himself. He wouldn't have trusted himself and a man like the Saviour was far more careful than he ever was.

"Well, no matter. The agents are gone. All we can do is make sure new ones take their place. My plan has been delayed long enough as it is."

"I will ensure they have free use of the facility," Sixten assured.

The Saviour nodded. "Then we can start putting my plan into motion."

There was a moment of silence between the two. Sixten had to gather the courage to ask. "What exactly is the plan?"

The Saviour grinned. "You know the ultimate goal I have. Unite the world into one like they are supposed to be. I can't do it to all the worlds at once, there are far too many to do that, but we will start with a few. My agents have been preparing the worlds I've chosen for it. They've placed devices there, gathered support from among the locals. All I need are the final pieces in place and then I can begin my part. Pulling the worlds into each other."

A chill ran down Sixten's spine. It wasn't the hangover this time. "Are you certain that is safe?"

The Saviour laughed. "Safe? Of course not. There will be death and destruction. But the world will be on its way to being whole again."

Sixten licked his lips. "How long before you begin?"

The Saviour shrugged. "Depends on the agents. Not long. Weeks?"

It wasn't a lot of time. Sixten pondered what to do. Staying meant being caught in the destruction that was to come. Maybe he'd die in it. That would be a blessing at this point. But what else would be destroyed in it all?

"But enough about that. I came here to visit the world, see it one more time before I remould it," said the Saviour and stood up.

"You're going outside?" Sixten asked, surprised.

"Any reason I shouldn't?"

"You went Dark," said Sixten. The Saviour probably didn't understand what that meant these days. "Your face is in every database you can imagine. Every camera you walk past will record you and alert the police. You will be hunted down before you can take more than ten fucking steps out the door."

"Really?" The Saviour raised an eyebrow.

"You were the first one to go Dark so you don't know how seriously they take that shit these days. Fuck, even the army might get involved and that's some nasty shit that would be coming your way." He slipped into cursing without noticing it. Somehow he'd managed to contain it for the rest of the conversation, but he was getting worked up and that played his brain.

“Tangoing with the army wouldn't fit into my plans,” the Saviour admitted, though he didn't sound too worried about it. Sixten stared at him, having a hard time believing the confidence he had. “But I've made up my mind. I'm going outside.”

“But if they catch wind of this place I won't be able to offer the agents anything.” It was dangerous. Too dangerous. It put Sixten in danger and he couldn't accept that. Not without trying to talk him out of it. Fuck his plans. He didn't want the police coming and fucking up everything he'd so far built.

The Saviour waved his hand. “It is but an inconvenience. If need be I can Alternate them myself. It'll be a lot more work for me, but at least I'll be seeing to it personally. No more disappointments.”

Sixten felt despair wash over him. If the Saviour walked out the door as he was it would literally be minutes and law-enforcement would be swarming over him. At the very least he needed to alter his original appearance so the facial recognition systems wouldn't pick up on him. Though looking at him he was a lot older than the most recent picture they'd have of him in the database. Though there was software to compensate for ageing, it was possible he'd be able to slip through.

It was too slim a possibility for Sixten to accept outright.

“You need to disguise yourself somehow,” he pleaded with the man. “Wear a fucking mask or something. You don't want the cops coming for you so take some fucking responsibility for it and act.”

The Saviour raised an eyebrow at his words. Such harsh criticism had not been levied against him in a long time and he had not expected Sixten to be capable of it. Still, he could not deny the wisdom in his words. It was better to disguise yourself than to have to deal with being chased by everyone in the city.

“All right. I'll wear a mask.” There was nothing he was going to do that would be hampered by it.

The visible relief on Sixten didn't go unnoticed. “There are some masks in the supply lockers near the elevator. Some of the Alternaters don't want others seeing their faces so we hold a few in reserve in case they forget their or something.”

The Saviour grinned. "Do you want to come with me?"

Sixten stared at him with dull eyes. "Fuck no. If they catch you I'll be dragged into it and this place would be toast."

The Saviour chuckled. "Figured as much. All right. You stay here and get drunk like you usually do. I'll be back in the evening."

Sixten watched the man leave the room. He'd find the elevator on his own and the masks too. They weren't hard to find. He sighed and leaned back in his chair. At least he'd deflected the issue of the lost agents. That had been the most dangerous part of the conversation and it had gone surprisingly smoothly. A part of him thought too smoothly.

"At least he gave one good fucking advice," he muttered to himself and left the room. The walk to his own room wasn't long and the first thing he grabbed when entering was the bottle of whiskey from the small table. He pulled off the cork and took a long gulp. The taste of smoke overpowered almost everything about the drink. It wasn't very good quality. But it got you drunk.

"Fuck these clothes," Sixten ripped off the shirt and put down the bottle. He threw his trousers away and went to the closet to get a more usual attire for him. What had been the point? The Saviour wasn't one to judge based on clothes.

Brilliant hangover idea, that's what it fucking was, Sixten thought and pulled on a shirt that looked like it had soaked up more than one instance of vomit. A black leather jacket and black jeans completed the attire.

"Fuck the Saviour," Sixten muttered to himself and grabbed the bottle, enjoying another long gulp from it. He was starting to feel better with the alcohol warming his insides.

With bottle in hand he left the room to roam the facility he owned. Despite everything going on, there were still the normal customers coming by and using it. There was staff going about their duties. Few knew what was actually going on and that was best for everyone. Of course, there were whispers of something big happening. Of mysterious men Alternating to places where few went.

He stopped by in the control room. It had the security cameras that recorded everything going on. It had been a tedious task to wipe every killing John had done. But it seemed the Saviour was not that interested in getting to the bottom

of it.

“Everything all right?” Sixten asked and walked among the workstations. There were five people keeping an eye on things, three on the security cameras, the other two focusing on keeping an eye on the machines that made the Alternating possible.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” reported the woman in charge of the five people currently on shift.

Sixten took a swig from the bottle and eyed the monitors. The corridors were calm with only a few employees going about their business. The image swapped into an Alternating chamber.

“Zoom in on that,” said Sixten. The image soon did as asked. He took a swig from the bottle and grinned. The woman on the monitor pulled off her shirt, revealing well shaped breasts.

“Fuck I've missed this,” said Sixten and watched the woman get ready to go where ever she planned to. The employees said nothing. They were used to their boss coming around and enjoying the views offered by the cameras.

The show didn't last long. The woman closed and locked her locker and stepped into the circle that would whisk her away to another world. Sixten waved his hand and the monitor started rotating through cameras once more. He didn't stay long after that.

Another swig of whiskey when he entered the corridor.

Sixten looked around trying to figure out what to do next. Since being away a lot of his other business endeavours had dried up. He hadn't had time to work them up again. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

With the Saviours plans, was there any point?

The world he lived in would not remain the same for long.

“Best to get fucking wasted,” Sixten muttered and took another gulp. He started to wander the corridors. Somehow, he ended up finding himself in front of the Oracle room. The door opened and he staggered in.

“Still here?” he asked and gave Richter a look. He was hunched over the console, still working just as he had earlier in the day.

“I see you survived the Saviour,” said Richter without looking up.

Sixten grunted. "Can you believe the fucker went outside? He wanted to go outside without any fucking disguise. Can you imagine the heat that would have attracted?"

That made Richter look up, concerned. "You didn't let him, did you?" Heat would mean the place would get shut down. No more working on something he loved. Worst, he'd end up in jail.

"I got him to wear a mask," said Sixten and threw himself into one of the chairs. Another gulp of whiskey burned his throat.

Richter relaxed a bit. "That's good."

"He's still out there doing who knows what," Sixten reminded. "He could be going to blow up a building for all the fuck I know. Heat could still be coming."

"Let's hope not," said Richter and focused back on his work. It was best not to think about things you had no say in.

"Can you imagine the reaction?" asked Sixten. "The first fucking person to go Dark, miraculously comes back. The media would be all over that. Fuck, the government would be pissing their pants. They'd send in the military with every fucking killing machine they had to get rid of him. He's a mistake they should never have allowed to happen and they want to erase him from existence."

"Not to mention all of us who are fans of Alternating," said Richter without looking up. "He ruined the business we love."

Sixten snorted. "The hurt of fucking hobbyist is small compared to the ego of the government."

"True enough," said Richter and tapped the console screen. He let out a sigh. Another attempt that had yielded no appreciable results.

"You should take a break Get drunk. Fuck around," said Sixten and raised his bottle of whiskey in salute. "Would do you good. Go to the command room Maybe you can catch some woman getting ready. I saw a nice one earlier today."

Richter gave him a frown.

"Suit yourself," said Sixten and laughed.

He focused on emptying the whiskey bottle and hoping the Lord Saviour wouldn't get himself into trouble.

Chapter 14

Sweat ran down Carl's forehead. His breathing was heavy. He made a quick wipe to stop the salty beads from dripping into his eyes.

"Do you need a break?" asked Eve. She was standing a little ways off from him. There was a shimmer around her and a ring of scorched grass that still had small flames going here and there.

"I'm fine," Carl replied and gathered his strength. The particles around him gathered to unleash another attack against her. A jet of flame shot out from Carl's extended hand to hit the shimmering shield around her. More grass caught on fire, but as the attack subsided she stood there unharmed.

"That was good," she said and nodded. The shimmering shield disappeared and she stepped out of the ring of scorched ground. "Good enough that we can take a small rest."

Carl didn't want to show it, but the training had taken a toll on him. He staggered under a near by tree and sat down. He felt like he'd ran a marathon. The strain coming from using his power seemed to be related to how accustomed he was to the particular feat. The more training he had the easier it became, but the hard things – like creating something new – never got easy.

At least according to Eve.

They had arrived in a world Carl had never been in. All he could see around them was untouched wilderness. There were no signs of life other than the animals of the forests and meadows. The air felt fresh and the smells that lingered from blooming flower and other plants was as pure as anything he had ever smelled.

"Is this world like this everywhere?" Carl asked, his curiosity finally getting the better of him.

Eve stood up. She had been picking flowers and now had a bunch of them in her hand. The colours went from bright red and yellow to darker ones like violet and blue. She took a deep breath from them before responding. "There was once life here. Life like us. It died out."

“How?” Carl leaned back against the tree and looked up into the foliage. He saw something resembling a squirrel run on a branch before jumping into the air and landing on the branch of another tree.

“They killed each other,” said Eve and hunched down to pick out a flower she didn't yet have in her collection. It was a bit of a miracle so much still remained after they had been training all afternoon. There were plenty of now barren spots as well.

“Something like that.. it should leave scars behind. Something to prove they were here,” said Carl. War always left behind scars. There should have been ruins left, depending on how recent the event was and how advanced the civilization had been.

“There are ruins buried under all the plants, hidden by forests. It's best not to go digging around in them. You might find a pocket of the disease that killed them all.” Eve turned to look at Carl. “It was their own creation. Meant to end a war that had raged between two nations. Instead, it ended them all.”

Carl felt his throat dry. “And you brought me here? That disease could still be around and kill me!”

Eve smiled. “Out in the open sunlight? I don't think so. Deep underground, in the confines of ruins? Perhaps.”

Her reassurance didn't make him feel any more comfortable. “I don't like it. Diseases can be hard to predict. They can mutate. It might have evolved to survive this long.”

“You would already have symptoms if there was any of it around,” said Eve. “While the symptoms came within hours of infection, they were subtle and many though it a common flu. It took days to progress to a point where you were bed ridden and even more until you died. But it was lethal for everyone who got it. Without a host to live in it has died out.”

Carl still didn't feel quite comfortable with it. “How do you know so much about it?”

Eve gave him a sad smile. “I was here when it happened.”

“The disease didn't get you?”

Eve shook his head. “I'm not human. I walked down streets laden with the

dead, looking for anyone that might have survived, but there were none. All that there was were the rotting corpses and the smell of death.”

“But why bring me here?” asked Carl. No matter how long ago it had been there was still the risk of him getting the disease. For that matter, why was she dragging him to places that all seemed to have a story or lesson of some sort to tell.

Eve pulled out a piece of hay from the ground and used it to tie together the bunch of flowers she had gathered. “You need the lessons.”

“What exactly are you trying to teach me?” asked Carl. His breathing was starting to settle down.

“What matters and what doesn't.”

“That's not much of an answer.”

Eve smiled as she examined her bouquet. “You are still stuck trying to define what you see as good or evil. I'm trying to tell you those definitions rarely matter in the grand scheme of things. What matters is life.”

“Doesn't that mean you should never end a life?” It wasn't logical to dismiss evil in Carl's mind. Evil tended to lead to loss of life.

“You still insist on clinging to a view point close to you,” said Eve. “When you start to think on the scale of the entirety of what there is, losing a few million lives in war is not a significant thing as long as it means life is allowed to prosper after that. Sometimes the war is won by what you consider evil, but for life in general that does not matter. Life goes on. It is rare to run into an evil that wants to end all life. That would be the same as committing suicide. Few living things want that.”

Carl shook his head. “I can't agree with that. There are real evil things out there that do not deserve to live because they treat life with contempt.”

“Evil life is still life,” said Eve and walked over to him and presented the flowers to him. With slight confusion, Carl grabbed them. The smell slithered to his nose, making him smile. “There's no point debating this further,” said Carl. “Neither of us is likely to change our point of view. I've lived my entire life seeing what is in front of me. That is a perspective I can't shake.”

“Just give up on him.”

Carl jumped up at the sudden new voice. It had come from behind the tree. He didn't relax much as a familiar figure emerged to view. It was Jonah.

"He can Alternate?" Carl asked, surprised.

Jonah laughed. "Something to that effect."

Eve shook her head. "He can't Alternate, but he can project himself to another world and find people. He can sense people he knows and find them more easily."

Jonah leaned against the tree. "You can't imagine how hard it is to find you even with that advantage."

"Being hard to find is second nature," said Eve with a smile.

It was the first time Carl had seen him in his original form. He was missing a horn, but other than that he looked like something straight out of hell with his sharp angled face, the sharp teeth and the red skin with brown patches of fur. Give him a trident and you'd find something very similar in the illustrations of various religions.

"You might want to be easier to find when you ask someone a favour," said Jonah.

"Have you done what we asked?"

Jonah nodded. "As far as I've been able to, so far. You've got yourself the support of my kind. If there's some army that needs fighting, we'll do it, even if we don't usually do such things. We prefer more indirect methods."

Eve laughed. "The last time your kind put together an army you nearly wiped out humanity."

Jonah shrugged. "Then we realized we needed them. Better to take a beating and a humiliating loss than to have your own kind die out. We're not as numerous as we once were, but we can put together something of worth."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," said Eve.

Carl agreed. If things escalated into an all out war between the worlds the damage would be huge no matter what happened. Maybe things would be even worse than if the Lord Saviour succeeded.

No.

Nothing would be worse than him succeeding.

“Got any spies after the Lord Saviour?” asked Carl. It had been part of their proposal. At the time he had not understood how they'd accomplish it. Now he knew.

“We've got him,” said Jonah. “Doesn't seem like he's doing much. I think the last report had him back in your home world.” His yellow eyes focused on Carl.

A shiver ran down his spine. What was the Lord Saviour doing back home? “Any idea what he was doing there?”

Jonah shrugged. “Him Alternating away played hell on tracking him. Took us a while to find him again. Not sure what he's up to. The report I saw didn't say.”

“If he's leaving his home base then his plans are moving forward,” said Eve. “He has been moving pieces in the background for a long time and now he's getting involved himself. That means what ever he's building up to is nearly ready.”

“And we're running out of time,” said Carl. He felt like they had very little in place to counter what ever was coming their way. They were unprepared.

“It would seem likely,” Eve admitted. She looked as displeased about it as Carl did.

“It's not all bad,” said Jonah. “Someone apparently killed a bunch of his agents. Slowed things down somewhat.”

“Who?” asked Carl. If someone else was sabotaging the Lord Saviours efforts then they might have an ally they didn't know about. If they could work together the probability of success would go up.

Jonah shrugged. “Someone called John. We overheard the guy called Sixten talking about it.”

If Tanya and John were working against the Lord Saviour then.. no, more important that, they were alive! Someone besides him had survived the calamity that had befallen them. While John was a special case, as was his master, that gave hope that others might have made it out as well. Maybe Seth and Rand would be all right as well.

“I know John,” said Carl. “He's a friend, but I didn't think he wanted to get involved in this. At least the person he's travelling with did not want to.”

“Well, it sounds like he did the killing more for fun than anything else,” said

Jonah.

Carl felt his good mood sink back down. So that was what John had become. Someone who killed because he enjoyed it.

“Is he still there?” asked Carl.

Jonah shook his head. “He's gone. Chasing someone in another world.”

“I realize it's not part of the deal, but can you have someone find him and keep an eye on him?”

Jonah glanced at Eve who nodded. “Sure. We'll keep an eye on him.”

“Thanks.”

“Is that all?” asked Eve.

“That's about what we got so far. Figured you should know.” Jonah did not seem like he cared about it one way or the other. Then again, it was hard to interpret the emotions running across his odd face.

“Keep us updated,” said Eve. “Things are going to start moving quicker now that his plans are coming together.”

Jonah nodded. “Just don't make it too hard to find you.”

With that the man – if you could call him that – shimmered into nothingness. Carl stared at the spot he had been in for a moment before letting out a sigh.

“What's the matter?” asked Eve. She put down the bunch of flowers and walked over to him.

“You heard what he said about John. I think he might be completely lost now.”

“No one is completely lost,” said Eve.

“When you go around killing people because it brings you pleasure then I'd say you're pretty much lost.”

“People can change. John has done it once, he can do it again,” said Eve.

A bitter grin passed Carl's lips. “He didn't change. He was changed. That's a big difference. Your daughter made him what he is now much more than anything else.”

“I'm sorry.” The regret in Eve's voice made Carl glance at her. He could tell it was paining her that her daughter had done something like that. She probably

wouldn't have cared had it not been for Carl being so close to her. It bared the ugly truth to her.

"It's not your fault," said Carl. He was slightly surprised to find himself really meaning it. Eve had brought up her daughter so her sense of right and wrong came from her, but there was only so much a parent could do. The outside world influenced everyone and sometimes your beloved child was simply born wrong in the head. Tina was a good candidate for one of those.

"I should have done better with her," said Eve. She sighed and sat down. Carl followed her lead. "I should have taught her more before letting her go explore the world."

"I'm sure that's what every parent thinks when they let go of their children," said Carl. He remembered well how his own parents had looked when he'd moved out on his own. He could tell they were feeling a loss of something important, but at the same he could tell they were proud. Of course, he had only moved within the same city so if his parents had any business with him they could have just called or popped by for a visit. Things were a bit more complicated with Eve and Tina.

"My kind does not have the luxury of feeling that," said Eve. "You have seen what my daughter has done."

It was the first time Carl was hearing her sound truly regretful about her. A part of him wanted to lay the blame at her feet, but that would have been the same as blaming the parents of a murderer. Had Rand's parents failed in bringing him up because he'd killed his wife? No. What Carl knew of the man he had been a pleasant guy and never sought to hurt anyone on purpose. What had happened with his wife had been a temporary lapse in judgement brought out by stress and years of being subjected to the same lectures. Everyone had their breaking point, no matter their upbringing.

Didn't make him any less of a killer though.

"What happens, happens. You can't control the lives of others or the decisions they make. The only thing you can do is be there to support them when they fall down. Few are truly born so evil that they're beyond redeeming. I don't think Tina fits that. She was subjected to something horrible in the hands of

Vincent and his men and that has left her with scars.”

Eve tilted her head. “Sometimes you have too much understanding and forgiveness, sometimes you're just blind to the obvious. You're a mystery.”

Carl laughed. “I'm human. We're not logical beings all the time.”

They spent a moment in silence, enjoying the sounds the gentle breeze roused up from the forest around them and the meadow.

“Your friends could be alive,” said Eve. “Just like Tina and John.”

Carl nodded. “They might. I hope John will lead us to a few of them.”

“Would you like to go look for them?”

For a moment Carl wanted to say yes, but he realized the situation was beyond that. They didn't know where to start looking. “I think we're past that. Let's focus on thwarting the Lord Saviour and then we can search for them. If there is a world left.”

“We'll make sure there is,” said Eve. Hearing the strength in her voice made Carl feel a bit more confident in it being true.

“So what do we do now?” asked Carl. He had no clue how to proceed. If the Lord Saviours plans were nearing completion then they had to as well, but most of that was still a mystery to him. Eve held the strings firmly in her hands.

“Why don't we go visit this Sixten and see what he knows?” asked Eve.

“Are you sure that's wise? Jonah said the Lord Saviour himself is there.”

Eve shrugged. “If we run across him we can always escape.”

“You sure?”

There was a moment of silence. “Fairly sure.”

“That's not very convincing.”

“What else would we do?” asked Eve. “The other bits of our plan are moving on their own.”

“We could train some more.”

“You need a break.”

“Can't deny that.”

“Why so reluctant to go?”

“I guess I'm afraid.” Saying it out loud made Carl realize it was true. He'd pushed it to the back of his mind and distracted himself with other things to do,

but the feat had been there all the time. How was he supposed to solve the situation without the world ending? He was just one man who had been living a normal life until a few months ago. He wasn't some superhero. Just an average guy off the street. What he was facing was something far greater than him, even greater than Eve.

It was a small wonder he could go about without shitting himself with every step.

He was startled when Eve put a hand on his shoulder. She gave it a gentle squeeze. "Fear is a strength. I'd worry if you didn't feel any of it. I'm scared too. It's how we deal with it that will define our success."

Carl nodded. "Let's go see Sixten then, shall we?"

Eve smiled briefly and stood up. "You know the place?"

"I can get us close I think. Jonah didn't tell us where they were precisely, but I know Sixten runs an operation in a certain place. That's probably where they are."

"Is it hard to get into?"

Carl shrugged. "They'll probably let us in if they see me. If Sixten sees me. He knows me." He thought about where to go, then he realizes the clothes he was wearing were likely to attract quite a bit of attention. When you were already wanted by police that was not something you wanted to do. He'd need clothes. Eve would need something that would fit in better as well.

He could think of only one safe place to go to.

"Change of plans. I'll take us to my home. I need some clothes that will better fit in as will you."

Eve nodded.

Carl could only hope his family wouldn't be there or there'd be a lot of explaining to do. He stood up and started to prepare himself for the Alternating. Even after the intensive training he still felt uneasy doing it. It had been easy before knowing what the risks were. Now, he was acutely aware that one mistake could lead to catastrophe for the world he was in. It made him shudder just thinking of all the Alternaters operating in his own world. They were doing things with dumb luck and not ending up dead just by dodging the bullet by accident.

He pushed those thoughts out of his mind and focused on the process. He didn't want to make a mistake. He reached out and grabbed Eve's hand and released his powers. The bright flash left him blinded once more, but when he regained his vision he was happy to see the familiar apartment.

At first it looked like everything was it was supposed to, but then he noticed the thick layer of dust on the living room table. The once green plants were dead, the leaves mostly fallen to the floor.

"Dusty," said Eve from next to him.

Carl nodded. There was barely any light coming in through the shades. He walked over to the kitchen counter. If he'd been left any sort of message it would be there. He found a brown envelope with his name written on it. He opened it up and found the letter.

Dear Carl,

We can't take it any more. Your face is all over the news, the police are looking for you. What have you gotten yourself into? The neighbours are whispering. One of them threatened Sam! We can't deal with this. We're moving out. If you ever come back, the divorce papers are in the envelope. Sign them and file them. I'm taking the kids.

Goodbye,

Naomi

Carl put the letter down and sighed. He couldn't bring himself to blame Naomi. She had to do what was best for the children and being associated with a criminal was never going to be good for them. She'd probably taken them to her parents, leaving the apartment empty for fear of further trouble from the neighbours.

At least she had not sold it yet.

"Everything all right?" Eve had walked behind him. She stood only an arms length away.

Carl reached into the envelope and pulled out the legal documents. They were already signed by her. "Yeah..just..family issues."

Eve peered over his shoulder at the documents. She frowned, but said nothing before wandering away to explore the apartment.

Carl looked at the documents for a moment before reaching out for a pen and signing them. He knew it to be the right thing to do. Even if everything worked out with preventing the Lord Saviours plans, he had changed. He was not the same man as when he'd married her. He couldn't live the same kind of life any more.

He left the signed papers on the counter where they'd be found.

He walked to the bedroom and found his clothes still hanging in their closets. At least Naomi had not thrown everything away. He picked out a normal set of clothes and dressed himself. It didn't take long and soon he was back in the living room.

Eve had found the television and was surfing through channels with a curious expression on her. She'd apparently come across some clothing commercials since she had on an attire that could have been gotten from any local shop. She'd fit right in.

"Come on. Let's go," said Carl, not wanting to spend any more time in the apartment. The longer they stayed the more likely it was he'd end up breaking down for having had to say farewell to his old life.

Eve said nothing, but closed the television on followed him out the door.

Chapter 15

The bodies were gone and no one had come asking after them. Seth was starting to feel like it was all right not to worry about it. When Tanya had returned from her supply run and seen the dead men she had looked like an angry mother who had caught her son doing something he shouldn't have. She had had her hands on her hips and given both Seth and Celia the sort of look that seemed to ask whether either of them could be left alone.

After hearing what had happened she went into professional mode and helped dispose of the bodies with the years of experience she had. In the end Seth found himself wondering if anyone would ever find so much as a bone from all the dead men.

Having cleaned up the bloody mess they'd gone to work on the industrial hall. They'd cleared out the pieces of old machinery and gotten rid of most of the dust and grime. Seth had spent time fixing up the kitchen and built some rooms next to it so Celia had a place to sleep along with himself and Tanya even though she insisted on driving back to town every night.

It wasn't a long drive so Seth couldn't really blame her. His little rooms were far from the comforts of her apartment. In the end he and Celia joined him many times.

"There's something we need," said Seth on one of the drives back home after a day of working to clean the warehouse. Celia was in the back seat, looking out the window at the now familiar scenery, though in the darkness which only the lights of the car pierced there was not much to see.

"What's that?" asked Tanya. She drove and kept her eyes on the road.

"Livestock."

"Excuse me?"

"Livestock," said Seth. "We need animals so Celia can practice her abilities. You remember we told you she Alternated one of the soldiers and he came back as a lump of flesh?"

"Yeah, I remember that."

“Well, she needs animals so she can figure out how to do it without mangling up who ever she's transporting.”

“You wouldn't like it if I mangled Seth, would you?” asked Celia from the back seat.

“No, no I wouldn't,” Tanya admitted and glanced at the girl from the rear-view mirror.

“So we need livestock,” said Celia and smiled at her.

Tanya sighed. “First buy a warehouse and then a bunch of animals. That's going to attract the attention of someone. This isn't exactly the place where you start a farm. The land's far too valuable for that.”

“We're not doing anything illegal,” Seth pointed out as the car turned from a side road onto the main one. A few minutes and they'd be driving through some of the better parts of the city.

“But it will draw attention and I'm not keen on that,” said Tanya. After a bit of hesitation, she finally nodded. “But I don't see us having a choice.”

There were street lights now.

“Is that a body?” asked Celia from the back seat.

Seth turned to look and saw the slumped figure under one of the lights. Tanya slowed down and he saw there was a second one next to the first one.

“No. That's two dead bodies,” said Seth.

“Unlucky couple returning from a night out. Ran into a mugger and resisted,” said Tanya and pressed the gas pedal. “Best not to linger about.”

Seth and Celia both looked at the bodies as long as they could. The city was generally a safe place, but robberies and murders were not unheard of. They never were when you had enough people gathered in an area. But for a region surrounded by a constant war it was a surprisingly safe place to be.

As they drove a police car rushed past them, sirens blaring and lights flashing. They were too late for the couple, but they'd do their best to catch the culprit.

There wasn't much discussion after that. They arrived at Tanya's apartment and did their evening chores, everyone too tired to do much more than clean themselves up, enjoy some sandwiches for the last meal of the day before

plopping down on the sofa and watching television.

In the morning it was decided Seth would take a taxi to the warehouse to continue making it a better place to be at and Tanya and Celia would go out and find some livestock.

It turned out to be a harder task than they had thought.

Most of the meat sold on the market was already dead. Everything from chickens to beef came ready cut and butchered. Asking around some of the shopkeepers they finally got some leads where to go for live animals, but it was already mid-day at that point.

“Is this it?” asked Celia and pointed to a stairway that led to the second story of the brick building.

Tanya shaded her eyes to see the sign above the metal door. “I think so.”

It was a hot day. Had either of them had a choice they'd have been inside, sitting under an air-conditioner, instead of walking the streets, sweating so much that it felt like someone had dumped a bucket of it over them. The leads had taken them to the industrial harbour. Large freighters sat still at the pier while cranes loaded off crates upon crates of goods. The air was filled with the smell of the salty sea and petrol mixed in with fresh fish and a number of other smells.

Tanya felt the need to take a bath just by being there.

“Let's go,” she said and started up the stairs. She caught a whiff of the smells coming from the big doors that made up the front of the building. It was the smell of animals packed in tight quarters.

Celia followed her up the stairs. Both of them let out a sigh of relief when they entered the office. They had air-conditioning so the air that hit them felt like a gust from a glacier compared to the air outside. It was a small room with a single desk. Behind it sat a man, his legs resting on the table and the rest of him covered behind an open newspaper. He lowered the paper when the door slammed shut. He frowned at the two women.

“If you want meat you'd better go to the market.” He went back to reading the newspaper. His gruff voice and black moustache along with his bald head made him seem intimidating. Had it been anyone else but Tanya they might well have done as he suggested.

“We're looking to buy some livestock. Three dozen or so to start with.” Tanya glanced at Celia. They had not talked about how many they needed, but three dozen seemed like a reasonable amount to start with.

The man lowered the newspaper and gave them another look over. He grinned, revealing teeth that were more yellow than white. “Well, why didn't you say so? Please, come on in.”

“I did say so,” Tanya pointed out and walked up to the desk. There were no chairs available. It wasn't the sort of place where deals were discussed for hours on end. Most that came that way had already arranged deals and simply needed to deliver the paperwork and money.

“So you did, so you did,” the man agreed. He eyed Tanya for a moment before moving to Celia. He licked his lips.

Tanya decided he did not like the man. “How much for the cows with delivery?”

The negotiation was short. Tanya paid the man with a check. She had come prepared with some cash, but the price had been too high. By the time they were walking down the stairs and out of the office, the order had been delivered to the warehouse and some worker was no doubt wrangling their new bovine friends into a truck to be delivered to the hideout.

“That man was creepy,” said Celia. They were walking back towards the apartment. They'd left the car there. Getting around the city by walking was often faster during the day, especially at the crowded centre.

“There are men like him in the world,” said Tanya and gave Celia a look. “All they see is your breasts and ass and pretty face. That's all they want. So they stare and drool, wanting you, knowing they can't. Sometimes they forget that and try. That's when you kick them in the balls.”

“I'd just rip out his throat,” said Celia.

“That works too,” said Tanya with an approving nod.

The day had not gotten any cooler and leaving behind the air-conditioned office made the air feel even hotter. Even their light summer dresses felt too much and made Tanya want to go to the beach, strip naked and enjoy the cool sea water. But there was not time for that. She needed to get Celia back to the

warehouse so she could start testing on the animals they had just purchased. The delivery had been promised within a few hours and even though Seth was there, he'd need help herding all the animals inside.

"How long do you think it will take you to master it?" asked Tanya as they walked the street. They weren't far off from the apartment by then. Silence had taken up most of the journey and Celia had still been too curious about the surroundings not to talk much for fear of missing something.

"I don't know," said Celia. They stopped at a crossing and waited for the lights to turn red. "I don't have much of an idea what I did and why it kills anything living."

Tanya nodded. "Let's hope you don't need to go through an entire herd of cows. They're not cheap."

"We could still sell the meat," said Celia.

Tanya shuddered. "After what you described happen to the man I doubt anyone would want to eat meat like that. I certainly wouldn't feel comfortable selling it."

Celia shrugged. "Meat is meat."

From there they walked the rest of the way to Tanya's apartment. They got into her car and drove to the warehouse. They arrived in time to see a large truck drive away and Seth standing in the yard, scratching his head as the cows roamed around him. The chain link fence kept them on the property, though the broken gate offered an avenue of escape. So far none of them had noticed it. They seemed more interested in enjoying the freedom after being stuck in a cramped truck and eating some fresh grass.

"Why haven't you gotten them inside yet?" asked Tanya as soon as she got out of the car. Their arrival had sent a few of the cows running to avoid getting hit.

"They just arrived and I'm no damn cowboy," said Seth. His voice was filled with frustration.

"Let me do it," said Celia and grabbed hold of the nearest animal. Her hand morphed into a dragons claw and wrapped around the creatures neck. The grip was tight and she dragged the animal behind her despite its resistance. How she

did it with her tiny body was something neither Tanya nor Seth wanted to think on further.

“Well, she seems to have things in hand,” said Seth and looked around. “I guess I’ll go fix the gate. I found some wood that can be used to make something that’ll keep animals from getting in or out.”

“And I’ll make sure she doesn’t do anything we don’t want her to,” said Tanya and walked after Celia to the relative cool the warehouse offered. Even after the small amount of time they’d devoted to making the place more presentable it was far better than the state they had found it in. Gone was the dust and grime and some of the surfaces had already received a fresh coat of paint or other little fixes.

Celia had dragged the cow to a support pillar and tied a rope around its neck and fastened it to the pillar. It had no place to run to and its otherwise sedate eyes were telling it did not like the situation.

“What are you going to do with it?” asked Tanya and leaned against a pile of crates that was near the cow.

“It’s probably going to turn into a mass of flesh and blood,” said Celia and stroked the animal’s snout. It did nothing to calm it down. It was a small wonder it wasn’t trying to rip its way to freedom or worse yet, try to trample the woman in front of it.

“Not wasting any time starting to practice, are you?”

“Why? Should I be doing something else?” Celia gave the older woman a stern look. She knew she had the remote and could end her life with a push of a button, but she didn’t come off as someone who minded a snide response here and there.

“No.” Tanya looked the other way and saw Seth walk past the huge open doorway, herding a bunch of cows in front of him while waving what looked like a small tree branch. He swatted one of the animals on the behind when it stopped. It made her smile.

A bright flash brought her attention back to Celia.

The cow that had been tied down was gone and she was grinning with satisfaction.

“At least I know this much already,” she said.

Another bright flash.

Tanya blinked furiously to regain her vision. When she did, she wished her vision had been gone. She wasn't the squeamish type, but even she felt sorry for the poor cow and what it had turned into. It was hard to recognize any part of it, but she could swear there was still a heart beating in plain view. The mass of flesh, guts and blood was a few feet away from where the animal had originally been.

“Doesn't look very promising,” said Tanya. She hoped she wasn't going to be the one who'd have to clean up the mess. There was a moist gurgling sound from the mass before a shudder ran through what pieces of it still retained some muscle movement. It went silent and motionless after that.

The grin on Celia did not melt away. “I know how to Alternate things from one place in this world to another, but I can't yet move things to another world.”

“Maybe you should first work on getting the things through alive before thinking of other worlds,” said Tanya. The mere thought of it happening to a human was enough to make her feel uneasy. No way she was going to let her test anything on Seth.

“I know,” said Celia and gave the sad looking mass of flesh a look. “I think there's some usable meat in there.”

“If you want to poke through then go ahead, but don't expect me to help you or eat anything you pull out. There's no telling what has merged with what in there.”

Celia shrugged. “I'm not a picky eater and you have no idea how my appetite can get. This form changing doesn't change what I am at the core.” She walked over to the mess of flesh and started to dig through it. She managed to pull out some chunks of meat that looked like they might be edible. “Could you bring me a dish from the kitchen where I can put these?”

“Sure,” said Tanya and gladly walked away from the scene. The kitchen was small, but there was a gas stove there and some cabinetry for dishes. A table for three was propped against one of the walls. Plenty of room for what they were going to use it for. She found a plastic bowl from a cabinet next to the fridge and

deemed it clean enough. When she returned to the warehouse side Celia had dug through the mess and found a few more pieces. She dumped the meat in the bowl and stood up.

“You should clean your hands before you stain that dress,” said Tanya.

Celia looked at her hands. They were covered in blood and grime. “I guess you're right,” she said and grabbed the plastic bowl. “I'll put this in the fridge in the same go. Can you tell Seth to bring in the next cow?”

Tanya nodded.

It took them a while to separate one animal from the herd and goad it to the pillar to be tied down, but they managed it in the end. It was turned into a mass of meat as quickly as its equally unlucky predecessor. Several more followed, but there was little progress in how they returned.

Celia cursed loudly as her latests failure appeared. “This will never work!”

Tanya had been leaning against the wall by the large doors. She pushed herself off from it and kicked a rock. “You've been at it for a day. Don't expect it will all come to you after just a few tries. It took me a long time to learn how to use a sniper rifle properly and to get the needed accuracy. You just need to practice.”

Celia said nothing while glaring at the poor animal that had not co-operated with her.

The sound of a car coming drew Tanya's attention and she walked out the large door to see. Seth was already standing at the front, not far from the gate he had constructed. They both watched a car appear. The road led only to their warehouse so it wasn't going anywhere else.

“Maybe they're just lost,” said Seth as Tanya appeared next to him. Looking back she could see Celia standing at the warehouse door, watching just as they were.

“Could be,” said Seth and frowned. It was hard to see the driver and passenger. All he could say was that there were at least two people in the car.

It came to a stop by the gate. The front doors opened and two people stepped out.

“Well, fuck,” said Seth and prepared himself. Tanya reached for her hidden

gun though she suspected it would not do much good.

“Mother! Father!” The squeal of joy that Celia let out when she started to run towards the pair reflected from the fear her two captors felt seeing the two monsters arrive.

Chapter 16

The view offered by the hotel room window was a soothing one. A few less tall buildings stood in front and beyond them was the white sand beach and the blue waters of the ocean. Tina rested her head against the window and let out a sigh. She ran her hand through John's hair.

He was kneeling in front of her, hugging her naked thigh, licking off a smear of her blood she had drawn there for him. She could feel his body shiver with pleasure.

She leaned back against the wall and enjoyed the view with a small smile. Her eyes wandered to the buildings in front and the balconies of the unfortunate people that had not gotten a room in the direction of the sea. There was a man sitting in a lounge chair with binoculars. His shirt and shorts told plainly enough he was there for a vacation. As she watched, the man spotted her in the window. He took the binoculars off for a moment before returning for the view. Tina smiled and ran a hand over her naked body.

"Someone is watching us," she whispered to John.

The man mumbled something in return, but didn't seem bothered by it.

Tina shrugged and glanced out the window again. They were still being watched by the man. Tina smiled a bit and brought a finger to her mouth. She bit down hard enough to break the skin. She smeared a bit of the blood on the window to ensure their watcher saw it. She then pulled back John's head and squeezed a few drops of blood into his open mouth.

The shivers of pleasure turned into what could have been mistaken for convulsions.

Tina grinned when she saw the horrified expression on the voyeurs face. She gave the man a smile and a wave before parting from the wall and pulling shut the curtains. John's hands reluctantly let go of her when she walked to the bed and laid down.

They had settled in the hotel after going through several others and finding them fully booked. She had to admit the room was comfortable and the view

breathhtaking. Contrasting it against the fighting in the jungle it felt almost surreal.

Still, she couldn't shake the true purpose for being there. While enjoying a bit of rest was important it paled in comparison to the task of finding her son and daughter. She had kept her tentacles out, ready to spot any sign of particles being used for anything, but so far there had been nothing of note.

“Should we go out today?” she asked.

It took a while before John could get his bearings and answer. “I don't see why not.” He climbed to his feet and tried to shrug off the after effects of her blood. He did away with a blotch of black that had seeped on his skin when his concentration had been broken. It was easy now, even under the influence of her blood.

“We're not going to find them by walking the streets,” said Tina.

“We can ask around,” said John and sat on the edge of the bed. “Though I suppose not much will come of that either. You haven't sensed anything to give us a hint?”

Tina shook her head. “The particles here are so stale that they barely move. It's like no one here does anything, ever. Even back in Kendle there was more movement even though the people there had no clue about them.”

“Well, this is a more advanced world,” said John. “The more advanced technology gets the less people believe there's magic in the world. The less they need it when a device bought from the store can do it with a flip of a switch.”

“I suppose they're too busy killing each other,” said Tina, remembering the incident in the jungle. The memory of being blown back by the explosion sent a shiver down her spine. It was one of the few times anything had come close to harming her. It was a new feeling to come to terms with.

John laid back on the bed. “We could just take it easy for the day. Go to the beach, walk around town to get to know it. Maybe we'll run into something that might help us.”

It was a big bed. Tina had to scoot down a bit in order to poke John on the cheek with her big toe. He turned around and started to suck on it. Tina smiled. “You're right. Let's get to know this place a bit more before we start ruffling any

feathers.” She paused for a moment to ponder whether the jungle incident had made her more cautious or was it simply fear that kept her from being her usual, reckless self. No matter what it was it didn't seem like an all together bad thing. She wasn't conceited enough to think there was nothing to improve in herself.

She let out a sigh and pulled her foot away from John. “Let's get going then.”

John let out a groan, but did as told. They didn't need long since both could just will their clothing into being. A few minutes and they were out the door, Tina in a light summer dress that danced around her when she moved or a breeze caught her, John in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. Looking at them no one would have suspected they'd killed two people last night and were more than a couple out on vacation.

A warm breeze greeted them as they exited the hotel.

“Should we take the car?” asked John and shaded his eyes from the bright sunlight. He imagined the day was hot, uncomfortably so. Sometimes the benefits of his body over the old one were pleasant.

“Let's just walk around,” said Tina. “We'll see more.” watching things go by the car window didn't allow you to stop and admire them nor did it make it easy to stop and go examine something more closely. Walking offered much more freedom in that regard.

So they walked around town. They first visited the beach and walked close enough to the sea for the waves to wash over their feet when they hit the shore. The moist sand felt more comfortable to walk on than the hot, sunburned one where most people had laid out their blankets and sunshades.

The stop at the ice-cream stand lasted a while as Tina fell in love with the cold treat. The young woman selling them looked baffled when she ordered one of most everything she had to sell.

“I have a headache,” Tina complained when they finally walked away from the stand and the benches it had for the customers.

“That's what eating too much ice-cream does to you,” said John with a faint smile. She had been like a small child tasting it for the first time. There was no denying she had been charming to look at with the smiles and surprised expressions.

"You should have warned me," said Tina and frowned.

"What would have been the fun in that?" asked John and grinned.

Her eyes narrowed. "I won't forget this."

John realized he might have gone too far. She wasn't the sort of woman to forget things and when she wanted payback she got it. She was in a position to make life very difficult for him.

"I'm sor.." John started, but Tina raised a hand to shut him up. She looked around with a concentrated expression.

"What is it?" John asked.

"The particles are moving," she said. They were in the middle of a busy stretch of board walk. "Someone is using a lot of power for something."

"Can you follow them?" asked John.

She nodded. "We need to get the car. It's not close by. We need to hurry before they stop, though the particles will be flowing for a while yet to equalize."

They rushed back to the hotel parking lot and jumped into their car. Tina gave instruction in which direction to go and John drove the best the roads could follow. Soon they were out of the city and driving on country roads. It started to look like they were headed straight out of the safe zone, but then the warehouse came to view.

"That's it," said Tina in an intense voice. "That's where it's happening."

They drove closer and saw two figures standing near the gate that separated the warehouse from the outside. John had no trouble recognizing one of them.

"Seth is there," he said and kept driving.

"Curious," said Tina and kept an eye on the two figures. John brought the car to a halt a bit before the gate. They stepped out.

John could tell Seth was prepared for a fight. He prepared himself for it as well.

"Mother! Father!" the cry of the familiar voice had John smiling. They had found what they were looking for. He saw the familiar looking young woman run from the warehouse towards them. Tina was already walking towards her, but stopped in her track when Seth grabbed Celia as she was passing them. She saw the woman pointing the gun at her. It wasn't a danger, but made the situation

that much more clear.

“Don't come any closer,” yelled the woman and showed some sort of device in her other hand. “There's an explosive around her neck that will rip her throat like a hungry wolf. One press of a button and she's dead.”

Tina glanced at John. He nodded. So it wasn't impossible. It complicated things.

“What do you want, Seth?” asked John in calm voice. He watched him glance at the woman with him. Who was she?

“First off I want you to promise you're not going to kill either me or Tanya here,” said Seth. John grinned. He wasn't even talking about fighting back or killing *them*. The big man knew what was up, he knew Tina would kill both of them without trouble.

“That depends on what else you want,” said Tina. “All I really want is my daughter. You're of little interest.”

Seth and Tanya exchanged a few hushed words. Tina did her best to try and hear them, but it wasn't to be. She did notice the particles around Seth acting in a strange way. He had a power, but what it was remained a mystery until he'd use it. That made her rethink the situation. It was entirely possible he'd be dangerous.

“I'm stuck here,” said Seth finally. “Tanya has her chip so she can go home any time, but I don't. Celia has been trying to find a way to get me home, but so far not with much success. You could probably help with that, couldn't you?”

Tina grinned. So that was why there were cows milling about all around. That's what had caused the disturbances with the particles. “I could have you home in a minute if you wanted to.”

“How do we know we can trust you?” asked Seth.

Tina laughed. “You don't. You'll just have to work with it. But like I said, I just want my daughter. You're of little interest to me unless you start causing me trouble, which you are getting dangerously close to right now.”

Celia said something she couldn't hear, but it seemed to ease Seth a bit and he let go of her.

“All right. You get us home and we let her go. No one gets hurt.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Tina and smiled as Celia rushed over and hugged her. Seth and Tanya stood at the ready, looking apprehensive about the deal they had just made.

“How are you my darling?” asked Tina as she and Celia parted. She looked unharmed.

“I'm fine. They've been taking care of me and teaching me things,” said Celia with a smile. She sundered over to John and hugged him as well. He looked uncomfortable at that, but didn't push her away at least.

“You must tell me all about it,” said Tina and turned her attention back to the two that had been holding her hostage mere moments ago. The urge to kill them just for that was hard to fight, but she had given her word. Not that she was against breaking it, but the former friends of John had proven to be a delightful unknown in everything that had played out. It would be a shame to lose them.

“You can put your guns away. I'm not going to hurt you. I promised, after all,” said Tina and started towards the pair. Reluctantly, they put away their guns. She examined the woman Seth had found himself with. Not part of the original group of friends. She stopped in front of the pair. “So, where do you want to go?”

“Home,” said Seth. His expression grew darker. “I've had enough of this all. I'm no hero. Let the Lord Saviour destroy it all if that's what's going to happen. I'm done.”

Tina cocked her head.

“Are you sure?” asked Tanya and gave the man a look. It was a look of surprise.

“What difference can I make in it? None. I'm not sure what kind of a life I have left behind at home given that the cops are looking for me, but at least I'd be alive,” said Seth and looked on as John listened to Celia telling what had happened to her. He did not look conflicted about being there. He looked almost happy. Tina glanced back and saw the same thing. Somehow Celia had crept into his heart.

“I'm still going to kill you some day,” said Seth and stared at Tina. “John

may be alive, but what you did to him I'll never forgive."

Tina grinned. "He seems happy enough with it."

"So does a drug addict when he gets his dose," said Seth. "Doesn't mean shit."

"Seth, maybe now is not the time," said Tanya and gave Tina an uncertain smile. "She did promise to see you home. See *us* home." The quick addition of the last sentence and the weight given to the word *us* had the corner of Tina's mouth twitching. Poor Seth looked clueless to the whole situation.

"You come kill me when you're ready for it," said Tina with a smile. "I'll make time for you, I promise. But now, where would you like to go? There aren't that many places I'm familiar with in your world and given that the police is looking for you, maybe Sixten's facility would be the best place?"

"That sounds fine," said Seth. He glanced at Tanya. "You coming with or returning on your own?"

"I'll come with you to see she keeps her word," said Tanya.

"Just let me talk with John and Celia and then we'll go," said Tina and turned to walk over to the two.

"..and she climbed over the wall to kill him," said Celia just as Tina came within hearing distance. She made note to ask her what she had been talking about.

"They want to go home right now," said Tina as Celia fell silent having seen her come along.

"Can't blame them," said Celia. "Poor Seth has been pushing me hard to find a way to get him home."

"We found what we came for," said John. "Nothing keeping us here."

Tina nodded. "We need to find her brother next. I'll take us to Sixten's facility and we can start the search." She examined Celia and her eyes narrowed when they hit the choker around her neck. "And we need them to take that thing off your neck."

"I don't mind it," said Celia. "I quite like it, actually."

"Then you can make your own," said Tina with a frown. She then turned to Seth and Tanya. "Would you mind taking that explosive off from my daughter?"

It was the woman that stepped forward to tinker with it. It didn't take long before she lifted the thing off her neck. A moment later Celia had made a similar one to replace it.

“Well then, shall we go?” asked Tina and gave everyone a look. There were no protests. “Then gather around and take my hand.”

With hesitation, Seth reached out with a hand and grabbed hers. Tanya was holding his hand. John took hold of her other hand and Celia hung on to him. “Pay attention and you'll learn,” said Tina and gave Celia a look. She nodded.

The bright flash that followed was something she was getting used to now. A few blink later and they were all staring at the walls of Sixten's facility.

Chapter 17

It was the largest dragon Rand had seen. It towered over Ilia as she stood in the rocky clearing. The years had seen her grow into a young woman who turned the heads of men when she walked by. Long red hair, pale skin, eyes of deepest green and a slender figure that had nothing extra to it.

“What do you want, young one?” the dragon rumbled. Its scales had streaks of grey running through the gold. Rand couldn't see all of its body, but he knew from the size of its head, horns and neck that there was a body the size of a farm somewhere behind it, hidden in the massive cave from which the visible part came to view.

For eight years he had been hunting dragons, but never had he seen one so old. How it had eluded him so long was a testament to its cunning mind. But now he'd found it – to be exact, Ilia had found it – and the dangerous part was to begin. He gave his bearded chin a rub and waited for Ilia to do her thing.

“I am here on behalf of the Dragon King,” said Ilia, her voice clear and strong.

The dragon let out a grumble that vibrated through the ground. “There are two great fools in this world and you have joined one of them. It is not too late to leave him, young one, and be your own master.”

“A fool, am I?” Rand muttered under his breath.

“Mighty Dranull, I would not serve a fool,” said Ilia. “That he has sent me to talk to you is proof enough of his sharp mind.”

The corner of Rand's mouth twitched. She was lying, of course. She herself had declared him a fool many times, she had argued against meeting this dragon and she never let an opportunity pass to remind him of the mistakes he had made in the past.

“What do you seek from me?” asked Dranull and lowered his head to rest against the ground. He still had to look down at her. She was barely as tall as the teeth on his lower jaw.

“The world is divided,” started Ilia. It was a speech she had given to many a

dragon before. "There is Felix the Red who has taken control of kingdom after kingdom while gathering our brothers and sisters around him. The people under his rule are no better than slaves or cattle. Then there is the Dragon King, who has taken kingdom after kingdom. The people under his rule are well looked after and free to pursue their dreams and desires."

"And he spent a few years killing our kind where ever he found us," said Dranull, his eyes narrowing. "If you are trying to make a case for him, you are doing a poor job of it."

"Felix the Red is not one of our kind," said Ilia. "He is an impersonator. He can become what he wants and he is using the dragon form to deceive our kind and drag us to a war we are not a part of, a war that will surely make the humans hate us even more."

"All the more reason for me to stay where I am," the dragon rumbled. "I am old. Fighting is for the young."

"Would you not agree to meet with the Dragon King?" asked Ilia. "He only wishes to speak with you."

Dranull snorted. "If he wishes to speak with me then why did he send you beforehand?"

"He felt one of your own kind would make it easier for you to hear him out," said Ilia.

Rand winced. She had told him to go first, on his own, that Dranull would not hurt him. Another jab she could pull out at any time to remind him he wasn't infallible and made mistakes just like anyone else. Not that it was something he needed reminding of. He was all too aware of the mistakes he'd made in the past. Some kept him awake at night.

"So he sent me a young female to entice me?" Dranull lifted his head off the ground and glared down at Ilia. It was a sight that would have made many run away, but the young woman stood her ground. Rand knew she was well aware that even if she took her own dragon form, she wouldn't be even half his size and would not be able to put up much of a fight. Even with Rand there it was questionable whether they would be able to beat the ancient creature if things went sour.

“It is not his intention to deceive you, ancient one. He respects you enough not to bother you if you do not wish to be. If you want me to leave, I will. If you want to meet with him I will let him know.” Ilia sounded confident and did not give an inch to the monstrosity in front of her. Rand could not help but feel proud of her even though her strength was something she had always had. It was not something he had helped her create.

Dranull let out a rumble that sounded like half the mountain was sliding down on them. “Very well. I will speak with the Dragon King. Send him to me.”

Ilia made a slight bow and turned around. She walked straight to where Rand was hiding. It wasn't much of a hideout. Just a large rock behind which he could stand and be out of sight. He didn't hold any illusions about Dranull knowing he was there. He only hoped the men that were hidden further away went unnoticed.

“He's ready for you,” said Ilia when she reached behind the rock and came face to face with Rand.

“I heard,” Rand replied and made an adjustment to a shoulder pad. The armour he wore was made a dragon scales. It was light and offered protection comparable to the best of plate mail, but it also itched even through the under-shirt he had. The green scales looked impressive, but Rand had to admit wearing a full plate mail would have been more comfortable despite the weight.

“Just be yourself,” said Ilia and rose to her toes to give a small kiss on his cheek.

“Ain't my first time,” said Rand and ensured his sword was safely fastened around his waist before stepping into view from behind the rock. The moment his eyes met Dranull's he felt the fear creeping inside him. It was something he'd fought many times, but when ever he faced a dragon it was there in the background. Some men could never over come it and simply ran away.

“So you're the Dragon King,” Dranull rumbled.

Rand fought hard not to take a step back when the eyes focused on him. He felt small. Vulnerable. Every cell in his body told him to run away. “I am, ancient one.” In his mind Rand thanked every deity he knew by name for the fact his voice sounded strong and unwavering.

“Bold to dress yourself in the hide of my own kind,” said Dranull. Then he snorted. “Then I’ve never been a fan of the green ones. They think they are clever, but more often they end up the fools.”

“I’ve always found anyone who uses poison to be distasteful,” said Rand. The poison spit of the green dragons was horrific in the pain it caused before death came and ended the misery. He’d seen more than a few men succumb to the fate. Even being burned alive was preferable to that.

“Never eat something a green one offers you. Might just kill you,” said Dranull. He seemed to relax. Rand took it as a good sign.

“I take it that you know why I am here based on what Ilia told you?” Rand asked and kept his eye on the beast. Most of its body was in the cave so he wouldn’t be making any quick attacks. A breath would be impossible to miss, but then there weren’t many places where to hide from it. Death was the most likely outcome if the ancient being decided he didn’t like Rand.

“I know of you. I may spend much of my time sleeping in my cave, but I hear things. I know you have convinced many of my kind to join you. I know Felix the Red has done the same. I know you two are only searching for a place where you will meet and finally end this silly war.” A forked tongue slipped past Dranull’s teeth and licked the air. Even his tongue was big enough that it could have covered Rand in saliva in one lick.

Rand’s hand formed a fist. On one hand he had to admit the war was silly. On the other he couldn’t put aside Jen and what had happened to her. If the matter could have been resolved in a one on one fight he would have taken the opportunity in a heart beat. Felix was the one that had escalated things to the point where the world was divided in two.

“It is a war with many reasons to it,” said Rand and unclenched his fist. “To some on the outside a part of it can look silly, but to those involved it is a serious matter. That is how wars tend to be. They are in a way personal.”

“None of the reasons are of my concern,” said Dranull and lowered his head. Rand tilted his head to look into the eyes of the lizard. “What reason do I have in angering either one of you by taking a side?”

“This is not a fight that someone like you has the luxury of staying out of,”

said Rand and quickly realized his words could be interpreted as a threat. "Something will eventually drag you into this. I know it and Felix knows it. I would prefer you take a side openly so everyone knows where you stand. I'm certain Felix would want that as well. Neither of us wants a surprise at a crucial moment. I know Felix has taken action before to prevent such things from happening."

"Has he now?" asked Dranull. His curiosity sounded genuine. Perhaps not all news had reached his ears.

"I know Felix went to see Draxell. He asked of her what I ask of you now. She turned him down."

"A wise choice," added Dranull before hearing out the rest.

"She was dead a week later," said Rand.

"Draxell is dead?" The disbelief with which the words came out had Rand feeling more secure with his position. He had hoped two ancient ones would know each other or at the very least of each other.

"It is hard to mistake a dragon dead," said Rand. "Your kind isn't the sort to stoop to something like that. Who or what killed her we don't know exactly, but we know enough that Felix was behind it. There aren't that many creatures around that could kill someone like her."

Dranull nodded his head. "It is not easy to kill someone as ancient as me and her." He seemed to stare into the distance. "More than one egg of hers was seeded by me. Long time ago when we were much younger. We dragons are not ones to attach to a mate for a life time. We choose who ever pleases us at the right time. Still, hearing of her death is maddening. Knowing it was not age that took her."

"I know what you must have heard of me. That I hunt and kill dragons. It is true that I have done that when my rage and anger were still fresh." Rand remembered well the early days as king. He'd march armies at the mere hint of a dragon and spend hundreds of lives killing it. "I was a fool blinded by what had happened to me. I never considered my actions were spreading the same suffering to countless others. It was Ilia that finally made me rethink my approach. All I want is Felix dead. He's the one who has caused me pain. The other dragons have

done nothing wrong. It is in that spirit that I am here to meet with you. I want you to lend me your strength so this conflict can be brought to an end. If you do not join me then I will leave and hope Felix does the same. I fear that if he comes the same fate will meet you as Draxell saw.”

Dranull gave Rand a long stare. It took all his willpower not to turn away.

“The young one. Where did you find her?”

The question caught Rand by surprise. The answer was simple enough. No reason to lie. “A certain faction of dragon worshipping cultists had her chained up in their temple. She was nothing but a child then. I happened to destroy the temple and in the process rescued her. She has been with me since then.”

“I noticed the chain around her leg. Is she a prisoner?” There was no anger in the lizards voice, but Rand could feel the answer could be the difference between death and gaining an ally.

Rand had a small smile pass his lips. “I’ve told her she could take it off any time, but she refuses to do so. She thinks it’s a reminder. Like a child would hold on to a locket their mother left them she feels the same way about the chain.” Rand looked up at Dranull. “If she wanted to leave she could have done so any time. I have never kept her as a prisoner.”

“Yet she chooses to stay with you,” said Dranull. “It is most curious.”

Rand said nothing. He could have talked about how they occasionally shared the bed. How she had obvious feelings for him and how he could not deny that there were some from him as well. None of that would have made the ancient dragon view the situation any more favourably.

Dranull shook his mighty head. “I will not join you, Dragon King. I will not join Felix. I have no stake in this conflict.”

“But what about Draxell?” asked Rand in a last ditch effort to turn the ancient ones mind.

A low rumble escaped the dragon. “Death comes to us all at some point. Now begone.” The fire in his eyes made Rand turn around and head to where Ilia was hiding. He glanced back and saw Dranull pull deeper into the cave before resting his head on the ground and closing his eyes.

“He didn’t join?” Ilia gave Rand a curious look when he arrived in the hiding

place.

“No. No he didn't.” Rand couldn't hide the frustration in his voice. There were plenty of dragons that had joined him since he'd stopped killing them on sight, but losing an ancient one was never a good thing. “He promised to stay neutral. That's the best we can get out of him.”

“I told you he would be a stubborn one.”

“We had to try,” said Rand and looked around. The soldiers had kept their positions. If he wanted to he could order an attack and kill the ancient dragon. That would mean many dead men. It wasn't worth it. “Come on. We'll trust him to do as he says. Leave him in peace.”

Rand started walking into the woods. Dragons tended to like their lairs in high places so it had been a bit of surprise to find Dranull's on the low side of a mountain, still well within the forest limit. The unconventional place likely played a role in why he had not been found in so many years. It also helped the nearest town was days away.

Ilia's chain let out a metal sound as it dragged the ground while she followed him. It wasn't long before they ran into men dressed in similar sort of armour Rand had. He had killed a lot of dragons and even one made for quite a few armours. They were light and durable, but valuable so they were reserved for his personal guard. Still, there were a thousand of them in the woods who now started to form up behind him so they could return to the main camp.

It was a short trek through a sloping mountain side. It wasn't steep and the terrain was easy enough to find footing in so it didn't take long for the camp to come to view. Rand wasted no time ordering everyone to ready for moving out before disappearing into his tent. Ilia was not far behind him.

The first thing he reached for was a cup of water. Rand gulped the cool liquid down with a thirst that seemed to have gone on for days. He undid the belt around his waist and tossed the sword onto a chair. It was a big tent with a large field bed that was comfortable, but could be packed into a space that didn't take up an entire wagon.

Ilia sat down on a bench at the foot of the bed. She reached down to scratch her ankle. The iron chain around it was not the most comfortable thing.

“You should get rid of that thing,” said Rand and put the empty cup down. “There's no reason to keep it.”

“It's a reminder,” said Ilia and gave him a look. “A reminder where I come from. What I owe you. I might forget otherwise. It is a significant matter yet also insignificant.”

“You're contradicting yourself,” said Rand and threw himself at a chair. His armour gave enough mobility to allow him to get comfortable.

“I'm a dragon. I'm allowed to do that to confuse lowly beings like yourself,” said Ilia. She managed to say it with enough contempt and hubris to sound believable. Rand knew her better than anyone else and saw right through it, but an outsider might have fallen for it and gotten angry. As much as anyone could get angry at a dragon. Most would have called doing that committing suicide.

“The years have been long,” said Rand and stared at the floor. Carpets covered the bare ground and gave the tent some much needed softness and luxury.

“They could have been shorter,” Ilia admitted and stretched herself. The chain reminded of its existence with a clink.

“Twice I have come face to face with Felix. Twice events have unfolded and prevented either one from delivering the fatal blow.” Rand often found himself wondering what could have been if those distractions had not come to be. If he had not cared for those following to such an extent the war could have been over. His revenge could have been complete. In the early years he might have ignored thousands dying, but as the years passed and he grew more accustomed to being king, things changed. He began to care. Felix had seen that and made use of it numerous times.

In turn that had bred more hatred inside Rand. But it had not been strong enough to ignore those suffering.

“I keep telling you. You care too much. You need to let the anger come to the surface, feel the thirst for revenge.” Ilia stood up and walked over to Rand. She sat down in his lap and wrapped her hands around his neck. She looked him straight in the eyes. “You need to be a king, not a friend.”

“And I keep telling you that I need to care more. I need to be more careful.

Not caring, not taking notice, is what has led to all the trouble in my life.” Rand tried to shift in his seat. It was still uncomfortable having her so close. It was hard to let go of that little girl he had rescued. She had grown into a woman. He had slept with her. Still his mind could not let go of that image of her. Not all the time.

Ilia snorted. “There you go again with your moral high horse.”

“It’s a comfortable horse to ride,” said Rand and leaned forward to plant a kiss on her neck. She had a smoky taste to her, almost like a whiskey. Rand knew if he kissed her enough that taste of smoke would linger in his mouth even when he woke up in the morning.

“Your highness!”

Rand leaned back again and sighed. “Yes, what is it?”

Ilia slipped off from him and made her way back to where she had been sitting. She watched the guard peek in through the tent flap.

“A messenger, your highness. Should I let him in?”

“Yes.” Rand scratched his chin and gave the man a glare that made it clear something important had been interrupted. The guard had a grim expression when he turned around to let the messenger in.

The messenger looked like he’d just jumped off his horse and rushed straight in. His clothes were covered in dust and the mud on his boots told the horse had not been able to carry him all the way through his journey. By the urgency with which he knelt and made the customary salutes Rand deemed the message he was carrying to be important.

“What news do you bring?” asked Rand after hearing the greetings.

The messenger remained on one knee and looked up when he started to speak. “Your highness, our enemies have struck in the east. They’re attacking the city of Renden with a force that is too much for the local defenders to fend off. The local commander is requesting re-enforcements to be sent immediately. He also noted that Felix the Red has been spotted on the battlefield.”

Rand tapped the arm of his chair and thought for a moment. He knew the defences of Renden well. The city was heavily fortified and there was a squad of dragons there to bolster the already impressive amount of men on the ground. It

should have been hard to break. If it was being pushed to the point of breaking that meant the attack was serious and deserved an equally serious response.

“Relay the message to my generals,” said Rand. “Instruct them to gather an appropriate response and hurry to the aid. I will be moving there with my personal troops. If they do not catch up to me before I reach Renden then they can consider themselves dead.”

“Yes, your majesty,” said the messenger and stood up. He made a final salute before turning around and leaving the tent. Rand didn't need to tell him where the generals were. The messenger likely knew it better than he did. The generals didn't move that much from their positions after all. The larger mobile forces moved slow enough that it was easy to keep track of them. If the messenger didn't know where some army had previously been it was simple enough to ask from someone who wasn't the king.

“We'd better let the troops know of our new destination,” said Rand, but made no move to stand up. Facing off with the ancient dragon had been exhausting even though all he'd done was stand there and utter a few words. The trek up the mountainside couldn't be described as anything but a brisk walk so it wasn't physical exhaustion that was holding him in its grip.

“Will this be the battle that finally ends it all?” asked Ilia. She was making no effort to get up and get ready either.

“With Felix, I doubt it,” said Rand and stood up. “I fear we are destined to fight until one of us dies of old age. Knowing what he is that will likely be me.”

“If he is anything like a dragon then he will certainly outlive you,” said Ilia and stood up. She walked over to Rand and grabbed his hand. “That is if no one kills him. But you will. All you have to do is be as ruthless as you were in the beginning.”

“I doubt even that is enough,” said Rand.

“If it is not, then I will see this to the end,” said Ilia. “As long as I am alive Felix will not rule these lands.”

Rand examined the young woman. She had had her own run-ins with Felix. Once Rand had been riding on her back during a battle and Felix had attacked them. She had been much smaller then, but that had translated to greater speed

and agility. It was the only thing that had saved them, but she still carried a nasty looking scar on her side as a result of it. There was enough reason for her to hate him just as much as Rand did.

“You shouldn't let yourself get wrapped in this hate that surrounds me,” said Rand. “You could have a happy life.”

“Not with Felix around,” said Ilia. “He will not stop until he rules everything. Happiness under his reign seems unlikely for me. He knows me.”

Rand shook his head. “I guess it's best for me to kill him then.”

“You should.” Ilia gave him a kiss on the cheek and left the tent. Rand followed her out and started doing something about moving out.

Chapter 18

Carl glanced at Eve. She was looking out the window. Buildings whisked past them, people on the side walk blurred into a sea of different colours as the transport pod sped through the streets. Most of the time she was composed, but now even she couldn't hide the excitement of seeing a brand new world. It reminded Carl of how he'd felt the first time he'd Alternated to Kendle.

The shock of being in an old, untouched forest for the first time. Knowing that behind any tree a monster could be lurking and the only thing protecting him was the axe at his hip and the strength in his arms. The noises and smells of stepping into a tavern that had supper cooking and spilt ale on the hay floor. Not all the experiences had been pleasant, but every one of them had made him richer. He had to wonder how rich she was with such experiences.

"You do not get tired of it?" Carl asked.

"Tired of what?" Eve didn't turn from the scenery outside the window. She had the sort of absent mindedness to her voice that came with being occupied by something more interesting than what was being talked about.

"Of seeing new worlds," said Carl. "You seem to have been enjoying yourself more than usual since arriving here. You almost seem to radiate happiness."

Eve turned from the window and gave Carl a sly smile. "I feel sorry for the person who can't enjoy seeing and learning new things. If you lose that ability then life becomes dull and grey. I've seen hundreds of worlds, all different from one another, but every time I go to a new one there's something new waiting to be discovered. It fills me with immense joy knowing that there's always something new to see and learn."

"I know people who are perfectly happy not learning anything new," said Carl. "Several of them I worked with."

"And do they seem happy?"

Carl shrugged. "I never noticed them being unhappy."

Eve tilted her head slightly and gave Carl a puzzled look. "How curious."

"What? You've never ran into a person who was content being where they

were?"

"Content, certainly," said Eve and turned to look at a particularly appealing billboard. It showed a woman and how she was applying some new lipstick. "But unable to draw joy from learning? I've never ran into anyone like that."

"Then you haven't ran into many humans," said Carl. He remember how one of his co-workers had protested every time he'd been sent to a course or there had been training for some new software. He had never been happy if something new and unexpected hit his desk. He seemed the sort who'd happily stamp the same reports over and over again for decades with no change.

"Your kind has been a minority," Eve admitted. "But there have been races similar to your in many ways. Maybe I've only been lucky enough to run into those more adventurous ones."

Carl glanced out the window. The transport was making its way down a ramp. The buildings going by were familiar. They were getting close to their destination. "It's hard to judge people simply by looking at them or even spending half an hour talking with them. It's all theatrics. There's a façade that everyone keeps up. Seeing through that isn't easy."

"You don't need to know all the inner secrets to judge someone," said Eve. "I've spent days, weeks with you. Yet every day I learn something new. I don't know what horrible and wonderful things you still have yet to reveal to me. Yet I know you. I know how you act, what you think about certain things and through that I can draw expectations on what you think about matters we have not yet touched on. I know enough that I can trust you."

"Trust is easy to earn," said Carl. "Even easier to betray."

Eve turned from the passing by scenery and examined the man next to her. It was easy to forget how little time they had spent together, but at the same time it was hard to ignore the experiences and conversations they'd had. She knew the man just as well as she had told him. "Tell me, do you regret it? Starting to travel to other worlds?"

Carl chuckled. "I've lost a friend because of it. I've lost my family. My life in this world is gone. Of course I have regrets. I wouldn't be human if I didn't."

"If given the choice, would you do things differently?"

“Of course I would. I'd make sure Rand never killed his wife. That would stop all this from happening.”

“Would it?” asked Eve. “Vincent would still have my daughter. His plans would still move forward.”

“But I wouldn't know about them,” said Carl. “I wouldn't be in the middle of it all.”

“Ignorance may be bliss, but wouldn't you rather know what was coming your way so you could do something about? To change things?” Eve kept a close eye on the man. “Your family may have left you, but they are still alive. They won't be alive if we do not stop what is going on behind the scenes.”

Carl rested his arm against the window frame and rubbed his chin with the palm of his hand. “I don't know. I honestly don't.”

Eve was about to say something, but a bright flash caught her attention. The tall buildings and the speed of the transport meant she could only catch a glimpse through the side window, but the ball of flames was unmistakable. The black column of smoke that soon rose above the tallest of buildings was clearly visible.

“What was that?”

“I don't know,” said Carl and reached to turn on the monitor that was placed on the dashboard. When the vehicle drove itself it wasn't that unusual to watch some news to pass the time.

The screen came to life and Carl changed the channel until he found a local news station. It wasn't long before they had a talking head describing the situation along with footage from the air.

“This massive explosion took place in the Behmar Bank main office. The police are urging everyone to stay away from the scene.”

The footage from the air took over the screen. There was smoke and debris everywhere. The main office of the bank looked to have taken a severe hit. The entire front of it had been blasted open. There were police and emergency vehicles arriving on the scene to find out what was going on.

“Amazing. They get on the scene so fast.” The amazement in Eve's voice was endearing.

“The news station has drones flying all around the city. There's always one close by if something happens,” said Carl.

They watched the smoke whirl around. There were some people staggering away from the destruction. It was hard to tell what was going on. The drone doing the filming seemed unable to get wider shots that would have given a better over view.

“Is that a person?” asked Eve and pointed at a figure emerging from amidst the dust and smoke.

Carl squinted and waited for the shape to emerge. “It is,” he agreed. The drone zoomed in on it and the reporters talking in the background noted their amazement that someone was walking out of the rubble alive. A few more figures emerged and walked out in the open. The drone kept zoomed in on them and Carl let out a curse.

“What?” Eve stared at the four figures that took up most of the screen now. The reporters were wondering who the people were.

“That's the Saviour!” Carl glared at the screen. Questions raced through his mind. The man's face was completely visible. It wouldn't take long before the cops knew who he was. The most wanted man in the world. In secret, anyway. They'd send in what ever forces were deemed necessary to kill him.

“Are you sure?” asked Eve.

“Yes! I sat across from him at a table. I know what he looks like. But what the hell is he doing here? And in public, blowing up places? He'll have the entire planet after him in no time.”

“He has a plan,” said Eve. It was her first time seeing the man who they were after and she seemed to take in every bit of him as she stared at the screen. “He wouldn't show himself if he didn't. He's not the sort to do that.”

“But what could his plan be? Now that he is exposed he has a lot less freedom to move around. His face will be plastered on every billboard. He can't mingle in.” Carl shook his head. “I can't see any possible gain for him.”

“If he wants certain people to come after him then what he's doing makes sense,” said Eve. As she watched the drone zoomed out from the group that was now leaving the scene. It instead focused on the police vehicles arriving on scene

and some of the uniformed people that were pointing at the group.

“Well, the cops are after him already,” said Carl and pointed to the screen. Officers had confronted the group. Guns were drawn, from what he could tell from the image being broadcast. Commands were being given. It didn't look like the Saviour was listening. He kept walking, as did his companions.

When the commands went unheeded by the group, the police started shooting. The bolts of energy were clearly visible as they hurled through the air, towards the group. They struck an invisible shield and dispersed without doing any harm.

“Well, they're dead now,” said Carl. Just as the words left his lips the Saviour disappeared from view. The drone was giving a wide enough view that he could be seen reappearing among the officers shooting. He grabbed one of them by the arm and a moment later a cloud of dust was blow out and the officers clothes and equipment fell to the ground. There was no body to be seen. It took the Saviour only moments to dismiss the officers shooting at his little group.

“He is dangerous,” said Eve.

They'd know that all along, but this was the first time Carl could detect a hint of fear in her voice. It terrified him. “Nothing we can do about it right now. The cops are dead and if there are any left they should be running away. If they've got any sense in them.”

The live feed of the scene was cut off. The broadcast went back to the studio where the news anchors tried their best to hide the shock the events unfolding had caused. They were professionals, but there was no hiding the unease with which they tried to explain the situation.

“Does this change our plans?” asked Eve.

Carl had to think about it for a bit. It was likely the Saviour had come through Sixten's facility. If he returned there it would pose a problem. A deadly problem. On the other hand the whole city along with the government would be on his heels. That didn't seem like the sort of situation where he'd risk exposing that connection. He needed Sixten and his facility for what ever he had planned.

“Let's go ahead as planned,” said Carl. “I doubt the Saviour will come to the facility. He's going to be hunted by so many people he won't be able to risk

exposing Sixten.”

“Unless he doesn't need him any more,” said Eve.

Carl shrugged. “Not going doesn't leave us much else to do.”

“All right. I trust your judgement.”

A brief grimace went past Carl's face. “Let's hope I'm worth it.”

The transport finally made it to the neighbourhood where Carl had told it to go. The change in appearance was noticeable. The buildings were more run down, the streets had litter on them and the homeless people in their ragged clothes only added to the image.

When the transport came to a halt Carl had to take a look around just to ensure it was safe to get out. Normally he'd have steered well clear of the part of town. But when you wanted to do something illegal it often led to unsavoury places.

“So there are places like this in your world.” Eve looked around as the transport went on its way to collect its next passengers. She stood on the side walk and looked out of place with her clean clothing.

“I envy the world that doesn't have its share of fuckups and people who have run into hardship.” Carl turned his gaze at the hotel that bore the building number he had remembered.

“It is in the particles that make us all up. The potential for failure is built into all of us because the world was broken.”

“You mean people won't fail any more if the world is fixed?” Carl gave Eve a curious look.

She chuckled. “Of course not. No one can succeed at everything no matter the situation. What a boring world that would be if no one failed.”

“At least it would drive some people out of business,” said Carl and started heading towards the hotel. The staircase leading up was a short one and Eve followed close behind him.

The lobby was as he remembered it being. The elevator and the staircase was at the same place as was the reception desk protected by the thick glass. The same surly looking woman sat behind it and gave the two a dull look before letting out a sigh. Carl walked up to her and she gave him a more thorough look.

She did not seem to recognize him.

“The rates are hourly. How long do you want the room for?” If her expression was bored then her voice was flatlining. It sounded like the mere effort of uttering the words was draining the last bit of life out of her.

“We're not here for that this time either,” said Carl in a genuinely annoyed voice. “Sixten knows us. We need to get down there.”

The woman gave him another look and glanced at Eve who was standing a bit further behind, examining the room like she'd never seen one like it before.

“Wait a moment,” said the woman and stood up and disappeared through the door behind her.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Carl at the empty cubicle and turned to Eve. “You'd think they'd remember me from last time. Their boss left all sorts of instructions.”

“We remember the important things,” said Eve. “Do you remember the hundredth person you guided to do the same thing as the hundred before them?”

“No, but we didn't exactly match the usual customer the last time. Pretty sure we were the most exciting thing to happen to this place in years. You'd think something like that would stick with her.”

“Or you think too much of yourself,” said Eve with a small smile.

“Entirely possible,” Carl conceded.

They waited for the woman to return. Eve got to pass her time examining some of the clients that came down the stairs or with the elevator. Mostly it was drunk men who had their paid whores still clinging to them. Many of them gave Eve more than a long look, the whores measuring her if she was competition, the men wondering if they could afford her. Carl knew Eve could have dismissed them all with a single look, but instead she chose to play indifferent which only seemed to egg them on. Still, no one had the courage to approach her. They all staggered out the door in a hurry.

The door to the back room opened and the woman walked out again. “Go to the elevator,” she said as she took her seat.

Carl nodded. He knew the procedure. Eve followed him into the small box. There was no need to push any buttons. The doors closed automatically and a moment later the elevator started its way down.

"It'll take a while," said Carl and glanced at Eve. She looked uninterested in the time it would take. She was more interested in examining the small space they were in. Carl doubted she'd have noticed even if the way down took an hour. Luckily for him it didn't take that long.

The elevator came to a halt and the doors opened. The first thing Carl saw was Sixten standing in the corridor, giving him a cold stare.

"Fuck you," said Sixten.

"Um.."

"No. Shut up and fuck you." Sixten glared at Carl completely ignoring Eve standing next to him. "You fuckers left me behind. I know, I know, I was there with Tina and John, but fuck you anyway. You fucking left me with the Saviour. Do you have any fucking idea how close to death I came?"

"Well, I'm sorry," said Carl though he didn't quite understand why the man had expected to be saved by him. "It was a quick situation. I didn't have time to think much if I wanted to follow Tina."

"Fuck your sorry," Sixten muttered. "I should have you killed on the spot."

"You're welcome to try," said Eve, finally drawing the man's attention to her. The way she looked at him made him take a step back. To the sides there were thugs looking on and normally they likely would have taken a step towards their master, but now they remained in place.

"And who the fuck are you?" Sixten demanded.

"I'm Eve. Tina's mother."

Sixten took another step back and the expression on him went from annoyed to pure terror.

"Don't worry. I won't do anything. Unless you give me reason to." Eve gave the man a warm smile.

"What do you want from me?" Sixten managed to ask as he gathered himself. He gave his guard some desperate glances, but they seemed content to keeping their distance. They seemed to sense the people in front of them were more dangerous than them.

"There's lots going on we're interested in," said Carl. "John and Tina used your facility once so we figured they might have come back. We've lost Seth to

some unknown world. Maybe you can help us with that. Then there's the Saviour that's going out in public, robbing places and killing cops. Maybe you know something about that too, seeing as you managed to make it out alive despite being stranded with him.”

“That is a lot,” Sixten agreed.

“We would appreciate any help you can give us,” said Eve and finally stepped out of the elevator. She gave the corridors heading in three directions a look. She measured the guards from head to toe and made them visibly uncomfortable. Carl followed her out of the metal box and stood next to her. He was prepared to act if need be. Sixten clearly wasn't in a good mood.

The man rubbed his forehead with his artificial arm and sighed. “Fuck it. I owe you fuck all, but the world is going to end so why the fuck not? Why not help the people that stranded me with that lunatic? Ain't going to make things any worse. Fuck.” He managed to put such intensity into the word that it reflected all his frustrations and fears in a surprisingly accurate manner. Without looking to see if the two followed him he started down one of the corridors.

Carl gave Eve a quick glance and followed Sixten. Eve matched his steps and the guards followed them, but kept a respectable distance, though not too far as to prevent them from doing their jobs.

Save for the group the corridors were empty. Carl found it suspicious. It was the best time of the day for Alternating. People were just getting off from work and were looking to get their fix of relaxation. With the Saviour rummaging about he'd expected there to be staff running around doing his bidding to ensure his plan worked without a hitch. When he led them to the same conference room his help had done on the first visit Carl started to relax a bit. It was a familiar room with its long table and plentiful chairs. There was even a pitcher of ice water on the table along with enough glasses for all of them.

“So what exactly do you want from me?” asked Sixten and threw himself onto one of the chairs. He hoisted his legs up on the table and leaned back to the point where it looked like the chair might tilt over.

“Help finding Seth, for a start,” said Carl as he took a seat which left a couple of empty chairs between him and Sixten. Eve took a seat right next to him

and reached for the pitcher of water and a glass.

“Hasn't he gone dark? Not much I can do to help in that regard,” said Sixten. “If he still had his chip then things would be different.”

“Isn't there some way?” Carl did not want to give up on his friend so easily.

Sixten rocked his chair back and forth for a bit before replying. “There might be. Tina has much the same problem with her children. Richter is working on a way of locating them and they don't have chips. He figured a way to locate one of the missing brats. Convincing enough that Tina and John went after the lead.”

“They were here? John and Tina?” Carl couldn't hide the emotions those two brought to surface.

“Sure. Funny thing, now that I think about it, I wasn't mad at them for leaving me behind. Maybe I expected Tina not to give a fuck. Then again, I didn't know any of you so why would I expect you to take me with you? Fuck. The mind can be an irrational thing. Maybe I thought you were better people.”

“Better is such a relative term,” said Carl. He couldn't bring himself to consider that he still stood on the side of good. The line had been blurred too much to make that judgement. Too many people had lost their lives.

“Anyway. They were here. Now they're not. But what they wanted seems to be what you want so good for you.” Sixten kept rocking the chair dangerously close to its tilting point.

“We appreciate your help,” said Carl. He glanced at Eve who was silently sipping her water while keeping an ear on the conversation. He was about to say more, but the door opened and someone who looked like they worked at the facility poked their head in.

“What is it? I'm in the middle of a fucking meeting.” Sixten growled at the man and the colour of his artificial eye turned into a crimson red.

“I'm sorry, but there are people here who wish to speak with you. It's them.” The way he put weight to the word them made all the difference.

It was clear from Sixten's reaction he knew exactly who the man meant. “Well, that's perfect. Send them in.” He stopped rocking his chair and pulled his legs off the table as the man disappeared, but left the door ajar.

“Who was he talking about?” Carl didn't like the idea of unknown people

joining them. There were things being discussed most people did not need to hear.

“You'll see,” said Sixten with an infuriating smile. The conversation died there with Carl giving Eve apprehensive looks while they waited for the mystery guests to arrive.

“Well, this is a surprise.”

The familiar voice sent chills down Carl's spine. He turned to the door and nearly jumped out of his seat when he saw Tina walk in with the widest grin on her. John followed soon after. The fact he looked like himself instead of the armour clad death machine was a relief and put Carl slightly at ease. The teenage girl that followed them in was unfamiliar to Carl, but judging by her features she was the daughter of Tina.

“Carl!”

Hearing Seth's voice felt unreal. He should have been lost somewhere, but instead he walked in with a surprised smile only to be followed by Tanya walking in after him. Seeing both of them safe was enough to make Carl forget about Tina and rush over to his friend to embrace him in a monstrous hug.

“How did you get here?” Carl asked as the two broke their embrace.

“We got a ride from them,” said Seth and nodded towards Tina, John and the teenager.

Carl turned to the group and realized his reunion with Seth was not the only one happening. Eve had stood up and was examining her daughter as well as the teenager. It wasn't hard to see she came to the same conclusion Carl had about who she was.

“Mother. This is unexpected indeed.” Tina gave Eve a pleasant enough smile, though it was easy to tell it was made with reservations. For a brief moment her dress rippled as if she wanted to change into a more secure form, but it calmed down before most could even notice it.

“Tina.” Eve gave her a warm enough smile to melt the icy air between them. She turned her attention to the young woman standing next to her. “And is this your daughter?”

“My name is Celia,” said the young woman and gave Eve an assessing look.

It looked like she wanted to dismiss her and look down on her, but she couldn't find the reasons to do so.

"A fitting name," said Eve. She had stood up when the group had entered. The water glass was on the table, half empty. "I hope I can have the chance to get to know you."

"What are you doing here, mother? Last we met it wasn't good for anyone." Tina gave her a cold stare that she somehow managed to muster up.

"Now, now. There's time for family feuds later," said Sixten and took his seat in the casual, legs on the table manner once more. "Why don't you all have a fucking seat and we can talk. We've got some common things to talk about."

There were some uneasy looks exchanged between both groups, but they did as Sixten suggested. Carl and Seth joined Eve on one side of the table while Tina, John and Celia sought seats on the opposite side. Carl found himself sitting straight across from John and looking straight at him made him feel uncomfortable. It was obviously the same for John who did his best not to meet his eyes.

Sixten let the uneasy silence run for a moment before lifting his feet off the table, standing up and pacing around a couple of times. "Seems to me we have a common problem on our hands. The Saviour is here, in this world, causing trouble and ready to enact his plan. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm pretty fucking happy with the world the way it is. It don't need fixing."

"He's here?" Tina couldn't hide how uncomfortable that knowledge made her. The tone of her voice was enough to make Celia give her a distressed look. The same fear seemed to transfer from mother to daughter with just the tone of her voice.

"He was on the news killing cops," said Carl.

"And he got away?" asked John.

"Seems that way," Carl replied.

"He has to have the entire planet after him by now," said Seth.

"Even if he does, that won't matter," said Sixten. "He'll fucking kill anyone getting even close to him and he has that fucking plan of his. It's ready. All he has to do is give it a final touch himself."

“And you want us to stop it?” asked Tina with a surprising amount of amusement in her voice.

“Yes, I'd very much fucking like that,” said Sixten and threw himself back in his chair.

“This isn't exactly a group that gets along,” Tina pointed out. “Aside from my mother, everyone on that side of the table wants to kill me, and truth be told, I'm not even sure my own mother doesn't want me dead.”

“I don't, dear,” said Eve and gave her a smile. “We simply have certain disagreements.”

“We were going to try and stop him anyway,” said Carl. “Once we found Seth and now he's with us. We can turn our attention to the big problem, though I'm not sure what we can do about it.”

“I don't see what this has to do with us,” said John.

“You live in this world, don't you?” asked Sixten.

John nodded.

“Then it's your fucking problem.” Sixten gave the man a stern look before extending it to everyone around the table. “It's our problem despite our differences because what he's doing will affect us all.”

“What is he doing?” asked Celia. “And who is he?”

“The Saviour is trying to fix the world,” said Carl.

“And that's a bad thing?” Celia asked looking confused.

“It is when fixing it involves smashing all the worlds together. Billions would die in the chaos. Entire planets would disappear.” Carl gave everyone around the table a look. Tina didn't seem impressed. John, it was hard to read him, but it looked like the idea bothered him. Celia still looked mostly curious. Whether she was capable of feeling fear Carl didn't know.

“So what's his plan then? And how do we stop it?” Seth gave Sixten a look expecting the man to lay things out since he was pushing for a solution so hard.

“Thanks to certain people trapping me with him,” Sixten gave everyone around the table a glare, “I know most of his plan. He saw the use of me and this facility and given that I had little choice if I wanted to live, I helped him. He has constructed a device that will allow him to channel his power to another world.

He can do this to dozens of worlds at the same time. With his power he can break the fabric of the universe and pull the worlds he's connected to together. That is the fix he has in mind. It won't be everything at once, but can you imagine the destruction of even two worlds merging together?"

"Yes. It happened on a very small scale when Carl used his powers." Tina gave the man a smile. "He sent all of us to different worlds with pieces of land with us."

Carl nodded. "Where Siver had been there was a large crater and patches of land from jungles to the beach. If that's what happens when worlds merge then it's going to be deadly. Can you imagine a piece of a sun merging with a planet?"

The room fell silent as everyone considered the implications. It was Sixten that finally broke it. "Now you understand the situation. Thanks to Tina there Alternating away and showing the Saviour how to do it without merging metal and organic into a mess, he has now been able to place his devices in the worlds he had in mind. His plan is ready to go ahead."

"When will he do it?" asked Eve.

"Tomorrow, if no one stops him before then." The tight time frame Sixten gave was enough to make them all turn sour looking.

"What's your plan then?" asked Tina to the surprise of everyone. She had not looked the most enthusiastic about the entire affair.

"Plan? I don't have a fucking plan." Sixten chuckled and put his feet on the table again. "I'll leave that up to you."

"How many of these devices are there? Maybe we can find them all and destroy them?" It was the best idea Carl could come up with that didn't involve taking on the Saviour himself.

Sixten shook his head. "Too many and I don't know where they are. You're not going to search through dozens of fucking planets to find something the size of a book in one day."

"So the only option is to kill the Saviour." Eve said it with such gravity that no one argued against it. As Carl looked around the table it was obvious Tina was the only one who thought the plan crazy.

"How are we supposed to kill him? You know what he is," said Tina. "It's

suicide and you know it, mother.”

The two women stared at each other for a moment in an uncomfortable silence. Finally, Eve let out a sigh. “I know how terrible he can be. I know his power. But we are powerful as well. You, Carl, me, we three combined might be enough.”

Tina snorted. “Carl can barely travel to another world. What can he do?”

“I’ve been teaching him,” Eve replied.

The revelation was enough to make Tina raise an eyebrow and give him a sly smile. “I bet you have.”

Eve ignored her remark completely though it made Carl feel a bit flushed. “I know others around this table have powers as well. Together I believe we can do it. Everything in this world has a centre to it. Every tree, every living being, every rock has that tiny spot inside them that if touched will break the entire thing. We must find that in the Saviour and put an end to him.”

“Sounds like we need Rand then,” said John.

“What do you mean?” asked Carl. He had mixed feeling about talking to him even on a general level. It felt wrong. The man sitting opposite to him wasn't the same man he had been friends with. He may have looked like it, but the blood covering him, although not visible, was not easily ignored.

“You remember. He has the ability to see those little lines that keep everything together and cut through them. I bet he can see that centre of things. Getting him close to the Saviour and having him stick his finger to the centre would solve everything.”

“Except we have no idea where he is or if he's even alive,” said Carl. “He was caught up in that same mess we all were. It's a miracle we're all sitting around this table.”

“Were we not all swept away in pairs?” Tina gave everyone in the room a look and received nods of various degree of confusion in return. “It might be that Felix and Rand were swept away together to the same place. We already found Celia. Maybe we can use the same method to find Felix. And Rand. I'm sure Richter has honed his methods by now.”

The way she added Rand at the end as an afterthought had Carl on his toes.

She could easily have been pretending to care about stopping the Saviour only as a means to get her son back.

“That's a pretty long shot,” said Seth. “And do we have the time?”

“We can do more than one thing at a time,” said Tina. “Me and John could go look for Felix and Rand while the rest of you stall the Saviour.”

“Conveniently setting the two of you in the perfect place to simply disappear and never come back.” Carl couldn't resist pointing out the obvious intent behind the plan.

“Your lack of faith in me is shocking.” Tina gave him a sly smile.

“How about Celia stays right here with her grandmother while you two go about finding Rand and Felix?” The suggestion from Eve took everyone by surprise, but after brief consideration Carl knew it was the best they could hope to get from the pair. He didn't know much about what had happened to John, what he had become, but the way he kept glancing at Tina with a mix of rage and longing told how tied to her he was. There was no way he'd part with her for a long period of time. Celia on the other hand was free to do as she wanted and Tina would certainly return for her.

“So I am to be a hostage once more,” said Celia in a flat voice and sighed.

“Not a hostage, but an integral part of what we're going to do,” said Eve and gave the young woman a warm smile. “I think I have a way for us to stall the Saviour and his plan, though it's not going to be easy.”

“So do we have any fucking clue where Rand might be?” Sixten asked and started tilting his chair again.

“Let's ask Richter,” said Tina. “If he has then me and John will follow that lead. The rest of you do whatever it is you're going to do.” She turned to Celia and whispered something to her, to which she nodded and looked slightly more at ease with her role. Try as he did Carl couldn't hear a thing they had said.

“Sounds like we have some sort of a plan and agreement,” Sixten said and gave everyone around the table a look. There were no objections, but then there weren't any nods of agreement either. “What is this, fucking sixth grade and I'm the fucking teacher asking whether you did your home work? Come on people. Yes or no. You're in or you're out. There's no in-between and no room for grey.”

“We're in,” said Carl with nods from Seth and Tanya.

“Us as well,” said Tina with a grunt from John and a somewhat less enthusiastic nod from Celia.

Sixten gave them all a stern look. “Good. Now let's get this fucking mess sorted.”

Tina stood up and motioned John to follow her. “Let's go see what Richter has come up with.” Celia looked like she wanted to join them, but a stern look from her had her remain in her seat. She watched her parents walk out of the room with a resigned look.

“So, how the fuck are we going to slow down the Lord Saviour?” Seth looked around the table at all those remaining, but mostly he focused on Eve. It had been her idea so it was up to her to explain it.

“Well, here's the plan..”

Everyone, even Celia and Sixten, leaned in and listened to what Eve had to say.

Chapter 19

“I have made some improvements to the search algorithm,” said Richter with a hint of pride in his voice. He sat at the Oracle's console and typed in something as fast as his fingers could manage. He looked up from the screen at Tina and John. “It has allowed me to greatly expand the range and speed with which the search goes. I think I've located several of your offspring.”

“Any way to tell who is who? We need to find Felix.” Tina sounded irritated. She had not expected such a meeting to take place. Her mother being there had thrown her off. Having had to leave Celia in their hands was not something that sat well with her either, but she had given her instructions that might turn it into something beneficial in the long term.

“Ah, yes, that's the trouble I'm having. I can't tell who is who. I'd need some previous information of the person, like the profile they'd have on the Oracle if they'd used this facility.” Richter continued typing while he talked. He didn't seem to have any trouble doing more than one thing at a time.

“You have her information,” John pointed out and nodded towards Tina. “Couldn't you use that to try and find a close match?”

“Hmm, yes, yes, that might work,” Richter said and started typing on the console with increased vigour. “I must say, my scans have discovered dozens of new worlds. Places we had no idea existed. Sixten is quite excited about the possibility of expanding his offering. Some of the worlds are so far away they could be totally different from anything we've seen so far. Exciting to say the least.”

“I'm sure it's very exciting,” said Tina and landed herself in one of the comfortable chairs that took up the centre of the room. “But it's of no interest to me. All I want is to know where Felix is.”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Richter admitted and kept typing away. “It'll only be a moment.”

John took a seat next to Tina. He knew her well enough to see she was not in a good mood. He suspected he knew the reason for it. “So, that was your

mother.”

Tina nodded.

“You don't seem to get along too well.”

Tina frowned at him, but after a moment of silence she opened up. “I don't really know her. She was never much of a mother. Too busy tending to her loyal worshippers to give me much attention. Of course, as you know, my kind grows up fast. So I was on my own before my first year ended. She showed me how to travel the worlds and after that we rarely saw each other. She retired to that temple of hers and I went to explore the worlds. Then I was caught by Vincent.”

John digested the story for a moment. The way she told it made it seem like her life had not been that long. He had to know. “How old are you, exactly?”

A small smile passed her lips. “Wouldn't you like to know.”

“I really would,” John agreed.

Tina reached out and gave his cheek a gentle pat. “Maybe some day.”

“Still, she's your mother. You seem to hate her.”

“I don't hate her,” Tina said with slight anger. “I just wish she wasn't involved in this. She's on the opposing side. She's competition. I'd rather she stayed in that temple of hers and let the world run by.”

“But she's helping us now,” John pointed out. He glanced at Richter who was still typing away at the console. He didn't seem to be paying any attention to their low voiced conversation.

“My mother always has more than one reason for doing something,” Tina replied and sighed. “I fear your friend Carl might be a lost cause.”

“What do you mean?”

“My mother clearly has her eyes on him. She will get what she wants from him. What happens after that is harder to say. She might kill him or she might decide to keep him, but either way, your friend is headed for much the same existence as you.” Tina measured John from head to toe. “Though you do have some special gifts in your favour.” She reached out and caressed his cheek and ran a hand down his neck before pulling away.

The first instinct for John was to warn his friend. Then upon reflecting on it for a bit he came to the conclusion it wasn't his problem. For all he knew Carl

would want to kill him. The brief encounter with Seth had left him with the feeling that was where his friends had settled on. They saw him as the blood consuming monster he'd been turned into. To them it was a perversion of what their old friend had been. Something to fix, something to be gotten rid of.

His friends were no longer his friend.

He was saved from any further conversation by the delighted giggle Richter let out. "I've found it. I've found it! So far away!"

"Are you certain?" Tina asked and stood up. She went over to the scientist and looked at the console from over his shoulder.

"Yes!" Richter couldn't hide his excitement. "There were several hits with your profile, but they were far too radically different. Then the search found this. It's as close to you as anything to be found."

"The rest must be the lizard men," said John as he stood up and walked over. He could see a map on the console. Each world was represented by a dot and there were lines running between each point, creating a map with routes. One such dot was marked red and Richter was zooming in on it quickly. From what John could see it was far away from the usual cluster of worlds the Alternaters ventured into.

"We can worry about them later," said Tina. "We must get Felix first."

"The world is far away. Who knows what's it like, how time moves there relative to here." Richter had finished zooming in on it the best the equipment could handle. The red dot had moved from marking a world to marking a general location on the spherical mesh that denoted a planet. Of course, there was no information whether the dot was in an ocean or a land mass.

"Is it habitable?" asked Tina.

Richter punched in a few commands and information started to flow on the screen. "Seems so. That's the best we can do from here. Someone will just have to go and take a look."

"I bet I know who that is," John muttered.

Tina turned around and gave him a pat on the shoulder and a smile. "Thank you for volunteering. Though I'm going with you so you're not alone."

John sighed. "When do we go?"

“The calculations are ready and in the system. Let me just calibrate one of the testing departure rooms for it. It's room six. Just go through the normal procedure and you'll be there.”

“Let's go then,” said Tina and started walking towards the door.

“Thanks,” John said to the scientist before following her out to the corridor.

The test rooms were left of the elevator that served as the entrance to the underground facility. The way led them past the conference room they had all been stuffed in before. It was now empty. John figured the group had gone off to execute whatever plan Eve had convinced them of.

The test room was much like all the other departure rooms. The claw like metal structure on the ceiling was ready to send people off to worlds unknown. The only difference was the lack of lockers where people could stuff their belongings to.

John didn't waste time and strolled right under the metal claw. Tina was right there next to him.

“Ready to go?”

Tina nodded.

John reached for the console and selected their destination. It was a short list with only one choice. The metal claw lowered from the ceiling and started its low hum. The bright flash soon followed.

In his mind John cursed. He had appeared as nothing more than a black ball of metal and now had to re-arrange himself back into a human form. Travelling with Tina had spoiled him. He'd grown to expect a smooth transfer.

Lacking all his senses he had no idea where they had landed. So he made his eyes and ears a priority before moulding the rest of his body. He could hear distant roars. What he saw was nothing more than a typical forest of pine trees and the near barren ground beneath them.

“Curious,” said Tina.

John formed his mouth. “What is?” He started work on becoming a human shape.

“It sounds like there's a battle happening. The roars. They remind me of myself in the dragon form.”

“Maybe it's Felix?” John stood up and watched the sphere shape collapse into his stomach and his hands spring out from it. He stretched and moved them around and counted the fingers to ensure everything was as it should have been. Finally, he made the black armour appear over everything.

“There's more than one. Dozens.” Tina kept her eye to the slices of sky the trees above didn't obstruct. “We need to get out of this forest and closer to the action.”

John took a few steps to ensure he had formed his feet the right way. “Let's go then.” He noted Tina had her own armour on. Given that there were sounds of battle reaching them it seemed a prudent choice. If there were dragons involved it would become even more important.

As they walked through the forest the ground began to slope upwards. The animals that usually made noises grew silent. The sounds of fighting grew more audible. The roars were mixed in with the screams of men and metal hitting metal. Try as they did they still couldn't see anything in the sky. The forest was too thick.

Then suddenly the trees stopped. They had arrived at a sheer ledge. It offered a breath taking view over a lush green valley. A river cut through it like a silver line. Looking down John could see the figures flying in the air. Brief bursts of fire occasionally lit up the sky. The thunderous roar of lightning hit from time to time as another kind of dragon made its attack. There were figures that clashed in the air and tangled with each other. The pair made a deadly drop towards the ground before untangling at the last minute to save themselves from being crushed on impact.

Beneath all that there were the armies of men fighting. Occasionally a dragon would swoop down and decimate a portion of an army before another dragon could come in and distract it. In the middle of all that destruction sat a walled city that was quickly burning to the ground.

“One hell of a battle,” John managed to say. He had thought the fight for Siver had been bad. It paled in comparison to what was happening below him.

Tina looked at the entire thing with a frown. “Those are not the same as me. Those are real dragons.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Just curious,” Tina replied. She seemed to scan the entire field of battle. “But I don't see Felix anywhere. Still, I can feel he's close.”

“Look. There.” John pointed to the sky above. A formation of dragons was flying in from down river. There were six of them. Leading them was a smaller one, but as it got closer the reason for it became apparent. The lead dragon had a rider.

“That's not Felix,” Tina noted and squinted to see better.

“Must be someone important none the less,” John pointed out. “None of the other dragons have riders.”

They watched for a moment in silence. They could see there was an army following the new formation on the ground. With them joining the battle it looked like the tide would turn in favour of that side. Having no concept of what was behind the battle and its sides it was hard to tell what that meant.

A single dragon parted from the battle and soared up into the sky to meet the new formation. It looked like the bigger dragons in the formation wanted to move against it, but the rider raised a hand and headed out on the back of the small dragon. It seemed like an impossible match. The attacker was much larger and likely far more powerful. Still, the young dragon dove down to meet it head on.

“He's going to die,” said John moments before the two met in the sky. Even if it was coming down from above it wouldn't be enough of an advantage.

“No,” said Tina in a confident voice.

She turned out to be right. The smaller dragon struck its older sibling. Its claws dug into the scaly body. John could see blood and blue scales fall down onto the battlefield below. He was amazed the rider was still hanging on and had even managed to take out a sword. As he watched, the blade struck the larger dragon. Against the scales it seemed like it would be useless.

The big dragon burst into a cloud of blood and chunks of flesh that rained down on the field below like a gruesome hailstorm. The smaller dragon quickly righted itself and hovered with lazy flaps of its leathery wings. There was a roar from the entourage above to properly announce their arrival.

“That's Rand,” said Tina.

“What?” John tried to see the figure properly, but it was too far away. All he could make out was the colour of his armour.

“That power. He struck the dragon to the very core of its being and shattered it like a porcelain cup. Unlikely anyone else has that power.” Tina sounded both impressed and worried.

“So he has mastered his power,” said John. It had been impressive to begin with. Now, who knew what his limits were. If he could take down a dragon with a single strike like that, what else could he do? Was he capable of doing the same to anything? If so, he just might have wielded the power to destroy entire worlds.

Another roar came from across the valley.

“Felix,” Tina breathed out, her eyes already wandering the horizon to locate her son. It wasn't hard to spot the formation flying towards the battle. It was even easier for her to recognize her son leading it.

“We might want to intervene,” said John and pointed towards Rand. His dragon was climbing quickly to meet the new enemies. Even from afar he could tell his intent. The desire to kill radiated from him with every little move he made.

Tina examined the situation for herself before nodding. “Hop on.”

She started changing into her dragon form as soon as the words left her lips and John scrambled to climb on her back. She barely had functioning wings before she plunged off the cliff. The wind rushed past John as they approached the ground below with worrying speed, but then she spread her wings and levelled their flight and then started to climb up to meet her son.

She let out a loud roar the moment her transition to dragon form was complete.

John clung to her neck the best he could. The wind beat against him and tried to throw him off. It wasn't his first time riding her so he was used to it and knew how to remain on.

Looking around he could see the effect her appearance had had. Rand had stopped climbing and was looking their way. From the distance it was impossible to say what he was thinking. All John could make out was that he seemed to be arguing with the dragon he was riding.

In the other direction he could see Felix. He'd changed course and was heading straight for his mother. He let out a welcoming roar.

Still, Rand was closer to him than they were. John turned his attention to him once more and saw that he was headed for Felix with new found determination.

"You better hurry," he shouted to Tina over the rushing air. She heard him and put some extra effort to her flying. The huge wings went up and down at a slightly faster pace. The distance between her and Felix closed.

It wasn't enough and John knew it. Rand would meet their son before they could reach him.

He watched with a sense of helplessness as Rand closed the distance into attacking range. He had gotten above Felix and now swooped down with his dragon. John was close enough he could see the sword in his hand. His red armour made him an easy target to keep track of.

He didn't catch Felix by surprise, though. He rolled out of the way just in time and Rand sunk below him along with his dragon. He had not managed to land a hit.

And then Tina was there. She got between Rand and her son and let out a deafening roar. It was enough to make Rand get some distance between them, yet he turned around, his dragon hovering in the air while he looked at them with a grim expression. He was not wearing a helmet which surprised John a bit. Maybe he'd lost it in the tumble with Felix or the earlier dragon.

"Get out of my way, John!" Rand's voice barely carried to him despite the force in it.

"I can't let you do anything to her son!" John replied. He shouted as loud as he could and hoped it was enough to cover the distance.

"He killed Jen!"

That was enough to make John glance back at Felix. It was impossible to tell in his dragon form what he was thinking or what his reaction was. Jen had been a nice enough person. John could understand her getting killed upsetting Rand. He had to agree that before the change he would have been right there with him. Now, he had to stand against him.

Felix was his son, after all.

"You're not killing him," said Tina. She didn't need to shout. The sheer bulk of her being was enough to carry her voice far enough.

"You think we've both conquered half the world just so you can show up and stop it?" Rand demanded. He looked past Tina and John. "Come on Felix! You know how this has to end!"

"He's right, mother. We have to settle this." Felix hovered closer to Tina as he spoke. "Too much blood has been spilled."

"No!" Tina roared. "There are bigger things at play now than your little feud. We need both of you. Alive."

John was surprised to hear her say that. He had expected her to be willing to kill Rand despite him playing an important part in their plan to stop the Lord Saviour. It seemed the threat he posed had convinced her of what needed to be done.

"I don't care what you need!" Rand declared. He didn't seem to do anything, but his dragon quickly rose above Tina and the rest and sought a good angle of attack. Felix responded in kind. The two circled each other completely ignoring Tina and John who still tried to talk some sense into them.

"We need to do something quick," John shouted to Tina who was trying to put himself between the two fighters. They both knew the danger of such a move. Rand could just as easily cut down them as he had the earlier dragon.

"I know. I'm going to do something drastic now." Tina stopped trying to catch the two and instead stopped to hover in the air. John could tell she was manipulating particles. He couldn't see them, but he could sense the concentration coming from her. He tightened his grip on her.

The he felt heavy.

It was like someone had put an anvil on his shoulders. It pushed him down and as he looked around it seemed to be the same for everyone around them. The dragons were struggling to keep up, but try as they did even their powerful wings weren't enough to counter what Tina was doing. Slowly but surely they all started to sink towards the ground.

John could see Rand and Felix still struggle towards each other, but their

progress was non-existent. Both sunk towards the ground along with everyone else in the sky.

Tina went down with everyone else. As they got closer to the ground John could see the effect was the same for the people on the ground. The fighting had stopped as men struggled just to stay on their feet. Lifting up their weapons to strike at the enemy seemed an impossible task. Just taking a single step was an obvious struggle.

Closer to the ground she changed some of the effects her powers were having. She pulled Rand, his dragon and Felix closer to where she landed. They all ended up within talking distance of each other. Tina eyed them all with the sort of superiority her powers warranted. "If I ease on the power, will you behave?"

Her words were directed at Rand. He struggled as did the dragon under him to get at Felix, but it was to no avail. "He killed Jen."

Tina shook herself. It made John fall to the ground. In the time it took for him to struggle to his feet she had gotten rid of her dragon form. In place stood her human form with its matching black armour.

"Everyone, why don't we get comfortable. This seems like it will take some time." Tina gave everyone around her a look. She had not put on a helmet so her face was clearly visible with all the irritation and frustration weighing in on her.

Felix was the first to heed her request. He changed into a human form that was far removed from the boy in his late teens John had last seen him as. This was a grown man in his thirties. He had a beard covering his chin and upper lip. From his face shone life experience that had been less than pleasant. His clothes seemed to be made of fine silk and came in a blood red colour along with golden accents. He looked like a king.

"How long have you been here?" asked Tina as she examined him.

Felix shrugged. Even that seemed to take a lot of effort under her powers. "How long has it been, Rand? How long have you chased after me? How long have we been fighting to settle this matter?"

"Years," came a grunt from Rand. He'd slid off his dragon. "Decades? Does it matter? Blood and tears have covered this world on either side for far too long. It

needs to end.”

To John's surprise the dragon next to Rand flowed into the form of a young woman with a chain around her ankle. She had an exotic beauty about her, but most of all he had expected her to just be a dragon incapable of taking another form. He glanced at Tina to see if she was surprised, but she seemed to have barely registered the change.

“I honestly do not give a damn how long you two have been using this world as your playground,” said Tina, glancing at both of the men. “There won't be a world to fight over unless you come with us.”

“What do you mean?” It was the girl that had been Rand's dragon that asked the question.

Tina turned to regard her. “And who are you?”

“Ilia,” she replied and gave a defiant look in return.

“And what's your part in all this?” Tina glanced at Rand.

“I saved her,” Rand replied to her look. “In return she has been helping me with various matters.”

“I'm sure she has,” said Tina with a wry smile. “But to your question. There is a man called the Lord Saviour. He has a plan that will see all the worlds merged into one. That will bring about so much death and destruction that few will survive. We're going to stop him. Carl and Seth are in on this plan. They sent us to get you.”

“I find that hard to believe,” said Rand. “They went after you to kill you, after all. For what you did to John.” He gave his old friend a look. It was obvious he felt pain just looking at him. John doubted he even saw him as a friend any more, but more an abomination of something that had once been important to him.

“It's true,” said John. His voice carried with it the sadness he felt for the situation and the way his old friend was looking at him. “They're not happy about it, but it is what it is. Sometimes your enemy becomes your ally, even if only temporarily. The threat is real. Please don't discount it simply because it's us delivering the message.”

Ilia turned to Rand. She whispered silently enough that no one else heard the words. Rand's expression told all. His jaw tightened. His brows furrowed.

Everything about him told the words were not the kind he wanted to hear. He argued back to her. John could pick up a few words since he talked louder, but not enough to fully comprehend what was being said. The woman argued back and it looked like they were headed for a fight.

"I'll go with you," said Felix.

It was enough to bring a warm smile out of Tina. "Thank you."

"But only if we can come to an agreement over this conflict."

The warm smile died away as soon as the additional condition was uttered. "We don't have time for that."

Felix chuckled. "We've got all the time we need in this world. How many days has it been since the battle at Siver? It has been years for us. I can tell that's not the case for you. We've been at this for *years*. We can't just drop it because you come in and say so. Not without some resolution."

"For once we agree on something," said Rand. Ilia stood next to him looking sour.

Tina sighed and gave both men a disappointed look. For Felix it was a more hefty one. He was her flesh and blood after all and being disappointed in your own family was far worse than being disappointed by a stranger.

"How about a temporary truce?" John suggested. "Just work together on this and then once we're done you can go back to fighting."

"I just said no to that," said Felix in an annoyed tone.

"Enough!" The anger in Tina's voice was amplified by her increasing the force that was pinning everyone down. It made everyone struggle to stay upright. She glared at all of them with eyes that promised more to come if things didn't go her way. She turned to regard Felix. "So you killed Jen?"

"Yes," Felix admitted.

"Why?"

"She was there when I came to after the incident at Siver. I didn't know where I was, but I knew she was an enemy. She was vulnerable so I killed her." There did not seem to be any regret in his voice.

Tina turned to Rand. "And this is why you've been trying to kill him?"

"Yes." The reply came with such determination and hatred in it that any

consolation between the two seemed to be impossible.

“And in pursuing your revenge the two of you have split this world between yourselves, brought about a war like no other the people here have seen, pitted armies against each others sending thousands upon thousands to their deaths, and for what? For the death of a single woman. You've killed thousands. And you think I'm a monster?” Tina gave Rand a cold stare.

For a brief moment he could meet her stare before having to turn away. Her words cut like sharp knives. He knew her points were valid. In his pursuit he had permanently altered the world he'd arrived in. He'd caused the deaths of thousands. Created thousands more like him who had lost someone they loved and now sought revenge for them. He'd bred more hatred in the world than Tina ever did with her actions in Siver.

“I know I've made this world a mess,” Rand admitted. “But I can't forgive what Felix has done. Never.”

“But you can put this on hold to try and save more worlds than this,” said Tina. “It won't undo what has happened here, but it will save countless lives. It will stop an untold amount of suffering and loss. If there is a cosmic scale that measures these things then maybe it will even out the weights you've put on one side of the scale.”

Rand hesitated. Until now he had been too consumed by his quest for revenge to even consider what his actions had done to the world around him. When he'd toppled kingdoms and taken them under his own rule he had justified it by thinking he'd make things better for the people living there. In many ways he had done so, but he had also brought war to kingdoms that had been at peace. And it wasn't the sort of brief war they had tended to fight, but a decades long slugfest that claimed lives in multiple generations.

“Listen to her,” Ilia whispered in his ear. “If what she says is true your revenge would be meaningless. There would be no world left for you to rule.”

Rand struggled with himself and the desire to see justice for Jen. A sigh and a small smile passed his lips. “Fine. I'll help you for now. I can settle things with Felix once it's done.”

“Good,” said Tina. She took in a sharp breath when she saw the golden

circles around Rand's eyes. He had his arm lifted and with a single finger he poked at a point in the air. To anyone else watching it would have looked like he was poking air, but it was a very specific point amongst the particles that were doing her bidding. It all came unravelled the moment he touched it. The oppressing gravity that had been holding everyone down was gone. Her eyes widened with shock and surprise.

Rand gave her a wry smile. "I was curious to hear what you wanted. So I listened and played along. A part of me is glad I did. Seems you've really got some bad shit to deal with. But do not for a moment think you have the edge here."

"Congratulations, mother," said Felix as he walked up next to her. "You've secured a monster to fight a monster."

Chapter 20

The street was empty for the time of day. A few transport pods whisked by, but the pedestrians seemed to have completely disappeared along with the drunks and whores that made use of the area. It was, of course, all part of the plan.

Such as it was.

“This is a shit plan,” said Seth.

“It's all we've got,” Carl replied. He looked around the corner from a small alley. He had a perfect view of the hotel that served as a front for Sixten's Alternating facility. Eve was sitting on the stairs leading in. She was the bait. That part of the plan did not sit well with him.

“Doesn't make it any less shitty,” Seth grumbled from next to him.

Carl grunted. Celia was sitting right next to Eve. Together they looked like a mother and daughter that had simply stopped to rest, though why they would do so in such a part of the city was questionable.

“He might not even show up,” Seth pointed out. He looked around the corner down the other direction.

“If he wants off this world, he will. Sixten seemed confident he'd come back.”

“If he does he'll have all the cops in the city on his trail,” said Seth. “The cameras will pick him up. They'll come swarming after him like a nest of angry hornets.”

“I doubt a few cameras will be enough to catch him,” said Carl. “The cops here are not equipped to handle someone like him.”

“And we are?” asked Seth and reached into his pocket. The feel of the smooth metal balls gave him some comfort. They'd be deadly even against someone like the Lord Saviour. At least that was his hope.

“Better than the cops,” said Carl. “You saw what happened to those poor bastard on TV. They were dust before they could even realize what happened.” They had studied the footage in hopes of finding something to use against him. It had not been a fruitful endeavour.

“We might be too,” Seth pointed out. “Our powers aren't going to do us much good if we're dead before we even realize we need them.”

“Then stop talking and keep an eye out,” said Carl. The tension in his voice would have been enough to shoot an arrow with.

Seth grunted and did as told. They'd been waiting there for an hour already. No one knew when or even if the Lord Saviour would be coming. His appearance was still on the news and the cops were swarming the city like ants whose nest had been disturbed. For all they knew it would be hours more before he turned up.

In the distance the sound of sirens grew louder. Seth tensed up, but as the sound moved further away he relaxed again. A deep sigh escaped him. He gave the street a look over before turning back to Carl. “This isn't going to work.”

“Sure it will,” said Carl and glanced back at him before turning back to the street.

“Are you really comfortable with the risk Eve is taking?”

“I worry, of course,” said Carl. He knew well that a single mistake could cost her her life. The same went for all of them. He'd been with Eve long enough to grow attached to her. Celia she had only just met and it was hard to express the knot of feeling she brought about. The daughter of John and Tina. Seth had told him she was harmless, but it didn't take away the fact she was likely just as powerful as her mother which made her a threat to just about everything.

“Then why go through with this?” asked Seth. “There has to be a better way.”

“If there is I'd sure like to hear it,” said Carl and turned to Seth. “We already mulled over this in the conference room. There weren't any better ideas presented. So if you now suddenly have one, please, share it with the rest of us.”

Seth glared at him before turning back to look at the street. “I don't have a better idea.”

“Then stop complaining and keep an eye out.”

Silence fell between the two. Every time a transport turned to the street they tensed up and prepared to act and every time the pods continued on without stopping they let out a breath of relief and relaxed. Time passed slowly and the constant vigilance required of them took its toll. Seth hid his yawns behind a

hand and reached for the steel thermos Sixten had given them. A sip of coffee drove away the worst of his sleepiness.

He was forced to cut his drinking short when a transport turned to the street and slowed down right in front of the hotel.

“This might be it,” said Carl with a whisper.

“Maybe,” Seth agreed. They both watched the transport as its doors opened. Three men came out. From the distance it was hard to tell who they were, but after a bit of trying they were both confident one of the men was the Lord Saviour.

“Shit, it's really him,” Seth muttered.

Carl nodded next to him. “Let's hope Eve pulls it off.”

His hope was crushed when the sound of sirens grew closer. From both ends of the streets the police vehicles came speeding in before coming to a halt. Doors opened and fully geared up officers flooded the street. In less than half a minute both ends of the street were blocked off with vehicles with flashing lights and armed men huddled behind them, shouting at the three men who were looking at it all with slight amusement.

Eve and Celia were still sitting at the hotel stairs. No one was paying much attention to them and they seemed to be doing their best not to get noticed.

“Well this is fucked,” said Seth.

“Not according to plan at all,” Carl agreed. They had expected the Lord Saviour to have lost anyone trailing him.

“One thing's for sure. Sixten must be cursing his tongue out.”

“His continued business is the least of our worries,” said Carl. He felt the breeze come down from above. He looked up to see a craft hovering in the air above the street. He saw figures jump off it. They landed on the street with heavy thuds.

“The fucking military?” Seth asked in disbelief.

“Seems so,” said Carl and watched the mechanized troops straighten up. Robots controller from afar by people. No risk of death, but plenty of potential to kill. Three meters tall they were more like tanks of old than any infantry. Certainly they had the fire power and toughness to match, but with the mobility of a regular human. They were built human like with two legs and arms, but with

much more strength and durability. From the documentary Carl had seen of them he knew they could run as fast as a regular transport pod and lift several of them if need be. They needed that strength to wield the large rifles they carried. Right now those deadly weapons were squarely aimed at the Lord Saviour and his two men.

They did not seem concerned and that concerned Carl more than anything.

“This is going to get nasty,” said Seth from next to him.

“Eve needs to get out of there before they start going at it,” said Carl. He tried to get her attention without getting that of the police or army, but she seemed unconcerned. She and Celia were still sitting on the stairs. She had an arm wrapped around the younger woman and looked confident enough that whatever happened she'd be safe. Celia looked more concerned though even she was looking on at things with more curiosity than fear. Especially the mechanical army units seemed to get her interest.

“Too late,” said Seth. Just as the words left his mouth the army units pointed their guns at the Lord Saviour and started shooting. Whatever he had done to get there had been enough to make the army lose any pretence of negotiation. The sound of the large guns firing was like a cannon had fired right next to them. It made their ears ring. It shattered windows above them and sent down a rain of sparkly bits and pieces that made small cuts if they hit you the right way.

The bolts of energy from the large weapons sped towards the Lord Saviour and his two henchmen, but right before they hit they simply melted away. The soldiers kept firing and the cops joined in, but the result was the same. The Lord Saviour looked at them with a mild grin and shook his head in disappointment.

“They're not doing anything to him,” Seth shouted over the gunfire.

Carl nodded.

As they watched the Lord Saviour started to push back. His powers swept over the first military robot. It disintegrated into rust coloured particles and fell to the ground in a fine dust. His two henchmen leapt forward and headed down either direction of the street. They smashed into the cops firing at them and started killing them like they were nothing more than ants.

“Seth, you might want to try and take a shot at him,” Carl turned to his friend with a concerned look. “This is going to go bad real quick otherwise.”

“What about Eve and Celia?” Seth asked and watched another robot turn to a cloud of rust. He glanced towards the stairs. The two ladies were still sitting there, watching, unconcerned over the carnage around them.

A worried expression passed Carl's face. His lips tightened. “They'll be fine.”

“You're the boss,” said Seth and reached into his pocket to pull out a metal ball. He rolled it in his hands a couple of times before starting to build up electricity. He had his doubts whether it would work. He had the element of surprise on his side as well as speed. Compared to the bolts of energy the army weapons shot the ball would be travelling several times faster. He felt the electricity in the air around him intensify. He took aim and pointed the ball straight at the Lord Saviour. His attention was elsewhere. He shouldn't have been able to react to the shot.

Seth gave the ball the push it needed.

The loud bang put to shame the military weapons that had been used before. The ball travelled too fast for anyone to see. It hit the Lord Saviour in the shoulder and sent him spinning in the air before his body landed on the street. For a brief moment Seth felt elated. He'd taken down the man. All it had taken was a single shot from him.

The Lord Saviour started to move. He climbed to his feet and his eyes fixed on where Carl and Seth were hiding.

“Fuck,” Seth muttered. The metal ball should have hit him hard enough to tear off his arm, but instead it seemed like there had been barely any damage done.

“Get behind me!” Carl stepped forward and gathered the particles around himself. The protection he put up kicked in just in time to stop what ever attack the Lord Saviour had sent their way. The air in front of Carl shimmered blue as the invisible force struck against it. Carl hoped he'd be strong enough to weather the full attack. The buildings on either side of them took the brunt of the attack as it slipped around the shield Carl had conjured up. Glass crumbled, the brick sidings turned to dust and the support beams holding the entire structure up

started to break as they got weaker.

“We've got to move or that building's coming down on us,” Seth said and prepared another metal ball to shoot. He took aim and launched it over Carl's shoulder. It never made it to the Lord Saviour. He was hit by a cloud of metal dust and that did nothing but make him grin.

“It'll be tricky, but let's do it. Go to the left,” said Carl and started to slowly move in that direction. The cops had stopped firing. As he looked around he noted they were all dead. The army mechs were piles of dust. The only ones still standing were the two of them and Eve and Celia. It also meant the two men with the Lord Saviour were free to focus their attention on them. “Ignore the Lord Saviour! Do something about his henchmen!”

“Right!” Seth turned around and readied a metal ball. He took aim at the man standing by the corpses of dead cops. He grabbed his attention and the man started towards them. What powers he had, Seth didn't know. He had not paid much attention to how he was killing the officers.

He let loose the metal ball.

It hit the man in the chest.

It was like an explosive had gone off inside him. One moment he was there, intact, the next his body was in shreds, painting the street with red blood and lumps of flesh. It was more effective than Seth had expected. So far he'd only shot at solid walls and while the damage had been impressive then he had not expected the damage to the human body to be so catastrophic. For a moment he just stared at what remained of the man. The white bones sticking out of the bloody mess made him shiver.

“Keep moving!” Carl shouted. The building to the right of them let out a loud creak in protest of its support beams being weakened. Debris rained down to the street and looking up Carl could see the entire building had tilted a bit. It didn't look like it would come down on them, but instead crash into the building next to it. He was surprised no one had come out running from the building, but then he realized they may well have. The attack from the Lord Saviour had simply turned them into dust.

Carl saw the particles moving. He glanced at Eve. She had stood up with

Celia next to her. She looked prepared to launch an attack. The attack from the Lord Saviour stopped. He'd noticed him looking at the two women.

“Well, it seems there has been some change in faces in your group,” said the Lord Saviour loud enough for them to hear. He seemed to ease up which was enough to make Seth stop taking aim at his remaining henchman.

“We won't let you do what you have planned. We're here to stop you,” said Carl in return. He didn't let his guard drop and continued moving towards Eve and Celia.

The Lord Saviour laughed. “Obviously. Not that you'll succeed, but I must say you have put up more of a fight than anyone else has in years. It's oddly refreshing.” he turned to examine Eve and Celia. “You two look familiar.”

“I'm Tina's mother,” said Eve. She had a hand on Celia's shoulder and she slowly pushed the two of them towards Carl. They'd moved from the stairs and were now on the side walk.

Around them the street was eerily silent. The cops were all dead. The army robots were nothing but dust in the wind. The slowly tilting building was the biggest noise maker as debris fell down from it.

“Ah. Still, I must say I have a feeling I've seen you before. In person. Even fought you.” The Lord Saviour looked thoughtful.

“You have not fought me. I've fought *him*.” The weight Eve put on the word *him* carried with it hidden meanings only she seemed to know.

A smile appeared on the Lord Saviour. “Of course. Now I remember. Quite a fight it was. *He* had not been pushed so far in centuries. No one since then managed it either. Until I came along, of course.”

“I would very much like to find out how you defeated *him*.” Eve continued to inch towards Carl and Seth. Celia looked oddly indifferent to the whole exchange. It was as if she had for the first time seen a clash of real powers and was still trying to process what she had witnessed.

“I'm sure you would. But it's too late for that now. Your little stunt here has forced my hand. I wanted to spend a little more time preparing, but now I must go ahead with the plan. It's time to fix these worlds.”

Carl did not see any particles behaving strangely around the Lord Saviour,

but he could feel power. That was the only way he could describe it to himself. His words had been enough to warn them all and everyone jumped into action. The plan was ditched. The Lord Saviour was not supposed to be ready with his plans. Stopping him had completely failed.

None of them were in time.

A deep rumble erupted from beneath the ground. The shaking was bad enough that it sent everyone to their knees. The building that had been on the verge of collapsing finally took the last hit. It fell against the building next to it and slowly crumbled down in a cloud of dust and debris.

Carl looked up. Down the street, beyond the Lord Saviour, the buildings had disappeared. In their place was a desert. Glancing back, behind himself, buildings had similarly disappeared and been replaced with a forest. He could see strange birds flying up into the sky.

Looking up beyond the haze created by the atmosphere and the dust in the air he could see an entire planet. It was disturbingly close and took up a large portion of the sky. He could see the blue oceans and the green landmasses. He could only ponder the long term effects such a thing could have on both planets. What would gravity do? Tear both rocks to pieces? Make them collide?

Carl shook his head and looked down at the safety of the pavement. It was too much. His mind could not comprehend the magnitude of what was happening.

“Carl, snap out of it!”

Carl looked up and saw Eve crouching next to him. She shoved Celia to him in a rough motion and gave him a look. “Take care of her.”

Before he could say anything in return she had gotten up and started towards the Lord Saviour. First she walked to get accustomed to the ground still shaking under her feet. She picked up speed and soon she was running towards the maniacal man. She was noticed and her defences quickly encountered an attack, but it wasn't enough to stop her.

Carl could see the particles around her. It was obvious what she was going to do.

“No!” Shouting was all he could do about the situation. Without noticing it

he'd wrapped an arm around Celia to hold her in place so she didn't run after her grandmother. She joined in on his shout, no doubt for seeing the same as he did. They both watched helplessly as Eve closed the distance to the Lord Saviour and then disappeared in a bright flash of light.

The rumbling of the ground did not stop, but it slowly started to quiet down. Carl and Celia looked at the spot Eve had been, feeling numb. A hand grabbed his shoulder. He looked back and saw Seth looking at him.

"Well, we going after her?" Seth asked.

"I don't know," said Carl. "I don't think she wants us to."

"Of course we're going after her!" Celia ripped away from his grip and stood up. She looked down at him with defiance. "She's buying time for this world and every other one. Where ever she took him won't solve this. They'll fight and she'll die. Then that monster will be right back here or some other world do continue this disaster." She looked up at the new planet that had appeared in the sky. It was obvious she was shocked at everything that had happened.

The expression on Carl softened. She seemed the sort who was used to being the powerful one. Now she had witnessed something that had put her own powers to shame. Even her grandmother had looked weak compared to the Lord Saviour. It was something that would shock anyone to their core.

"But the Lord Saviour can't Alternate on his own. Can he?" asked Seth.

Carl shook his head as he stood up. "Best assume he can do what ever he wants. At least then we won't get fucked by not expecting something."

"We need to go help her," Celia pleaded with them. "She can't hold against him for long on her own."

"I'm not sure there's much us being there will help," said Carl. He knew his own limits and compared to Eve he was still an ant. Celia might have been of more help along with Seth, but even those two wouldn't be enough.

"I'd say we go. No point leaving her to die on her own and wait for the Lord Saviour to finish what he started here. We'll be dead either way." Seth sounded determined. He'd accepted where things were headed.

"What about Tina and Rand? They'll be coming here. If no one's here to greet them they won't know where to go. He's our trump card in this, hopefully.

Someone needs to be here to tell them where to go. Someone who can Alternate.” Carl gave the two a look. Of the two Celia was the one who might have been able to do it. Carl didn't know for certain how powerful she was.

She seemed to realize the implied question in his look. “I saw where they were going. I can do it, but I would really rather go help Eve.”

Carl nodded. “All right then. You and Seth go after them. I'll stay here and wait for your mother and Rand to arrive.” He realized he'd said nothing about John. Acting like his old friend wasn't a part of any of the things going on seemed to come unconsciously to him. Perhaps it was his mind preparing for how things would be in the future. If there was such a thing as a future for any of them.

“You sure?” Seth gave him an apprehensive look while he glanced at Celia.

“Yeah. I'll meet up with Tanya down in Sixten's facility. She's probably needing a bit of calming for missing all the action.” A part of Carl dreaded the talk that was waiting for him with her. She had not been happy about being shoved down underground where it was relatively safe while the rest had been above ground, but when it had become clear she was the last obstacle should the rest of them fail she had gone along with it. The guns Sixten had presented her with had helped her enthusiasm along with the fact she had been free to booby trap the entire place.

“Right. Off we go then,” said Seth and walked over next to Celia. She nodded and after a brief moment of concentration the two of them disappeared in a bright flash.

The street felt empty as Carl looked around. There should have been people running around screaming in panic. Carl figured the earlier fighting had them all huddled in a closet hoping they wouldn't get hit. He glanced at the crumbled down building and felt a momentary sting of guilt. The people that might have tried to run away from the impending doom had only run into a quicker death at the Lord Saviours assault.

Carl sighed and headed for the hotel. He hoped Tanya would not be too upset over what had happened.

Chapter 21

“Holy shit.” John stared down the end of the street. Where there had been buildings before there was now sand dunes. There were dead cops laying on the ground, a crumbled down building to one side and what looked like the remains of army robots.

What ever the case, there had been a fight and it had been deadly.

“The place sure has changed,” Rand noted from next to him. He looked over the entire scene with the sort of indifference only a man who had witnessed hundreds of battles could. The dead bodies were glanced over and even the sudden appearance of desert and forest on either end of the street barely raised an eyebrow.

Next to him stood Ilya. She was much more impressed with everything she saw. Especially the tall buildings surrounding her had her head tilted up towards the sky with wide eyes. She quickly realized how bewildered she was looking and brought her gaze down. She glanced at Rand and then the others. During those few seconds she gathered herself back to a calm and reserved state.

“This isn't good,” said Tina with a deep frown. “I can still see the disturbances. My mother fought here. Carl fought here. *He* fought here.”

“None of the bodies are theirs,” said John as he looked around. “Though I suppose there might not be any bodies left.”

Felix stood up from next to one of the dead police officers. He'd looked around much like Ilya, though he had not tried to hide his amazement. He still looked around with the sort of eyes that had seen something they liked and now wanted more. “Who exactly is *he*?”

“That's a long story,” said Tina and took in a deep breath. “No time for it now. Come on. Let's get underground. See if Sixten is still breathing.”

She led the way for the group. Up the stairs into the hotel and down the elevator into the underground facility. There was no receptionist there, but the elevator nudged downward as soon as the group was in. Someone was still watching and deciding if people could be let in or not. With Rand's armour and

the sheer number of people stuffed into the small space it got hot and stuffy quickly. Thankfully the ride wasn't too long and when the doors opened the group spilled into the corridor to be greeted by a grumpy looking Sixten.

"It's all fucked," he said.

"What happened?" John asked.

"The Lord Saviour, that's what fucking happened. The fucker came here and brought the cops and even the military with him. Won't be long before the ones he killed get replaced by their still alive buddies that want to know what the fuck happened. And they'll come here and fuck my shit up. Fuck."

"What happened to *him*? What happened to my mother?" Tina wasted no time getting in the upset man's face. She stepped closer and almost looked like she grew in size just to intimidate the man into talking.

"This wasn't the fucking plan," Sixten continued, but when Tina put a hand on his shoulder he shut up.

"Where's Eve and that monster?" Tina demanded once more.

Sixten swallowed hard. "Carl knows. He's here waiting for you."

"Well then, let's go talk to him," said Tina and let go of the man.

Sixten rubbed his shoulder. "Fine." He'd become a lot more subdued and led the way in silence. They didn't enter one of the many negotiation or departure rooms, but instead went straight for the command centre where cameras and personnel kept an eye on everything going on in the facility. They found Carl there along with Tanya who was armed to the teeth and arguing with Carl.

"I should have been there!" she was yelling while waving a gun in her hand. Another one was strapped over her shoulder to her back and several more were hanging from a belt around her waist. She had a vest on that seemed to hold explosives of various sorts on it.

"You agreed to the plan," said Carl, not looking very happy about the argument. "You were the last line if everything went wrong."

"Well, everything did go wrong and I was of no use. If I'd been there then maybe things wouldn't have gone so badly." Tanya glared at the man in front of her.

Carl shook his head. "Doesn't matter who would have been there. We

wouldn't have been able to stop him.”

“That's not the sort of attitude that will get us out of this situation,” said Tanya in a stern voice. She sighed. She then noticed the group that had entered the room. Looking past the computer screens and the people monitoring everything she examined the new ones in the group. The man in red armour must have been Rand. He looked older than she had expected. The young woman next to him looked to cling to him like glue. His armour was intriguing and looked to be made of scales. It looked expensive and effective at the same time.

Her attention turned to the man next to Tina. She figured it to be her son. There was a resemblance, but he looked far too old. He should have been the same age as Celia. She decided holding onto the gun was the prudent way of moving forward.

“Rand!” Carl had noticed the group as well and walked over to greet his friend. He had a hand extended and Rand grabbed it without hesitation. Both men had genuine smiles on them.

“You've gotten old,” Carl noted as they let go of each others hands.

Rand shrugged. “Where I ended up time worked a bit faster. I heard you had some trouble so I figured I'd come help.”

“Took some convincing,” Tina muttered close by, loud enough for Carl to hear.

He ignored her. “Yeah, we're in some end of the world territory right now. Hopefully you can help.”

“What exactly happened?” Tina demanded impatiently.

“The Lord Saviour came here and everything went wrong,” said Carl and turned to her. He told the entire story. How it all had gone wrong, how the police and military had been wiped out and how Eve took the step to save them all and how Seth and Celia had gone after them. The moment he told about Celia he could tell it made Tina angry and worried.

“How could you let them go after him?” Tina demanded. Her tone was enough to make Sixten take a few steps away from her.

“You think I could stop your mother?” asked Carl and shook his head. “If she wants to do something she does it and there are very few who could stop her.

Celia and Seth went to help her. They know the risks. They know it could be their death. We all knew that when hatching up this plan.”

“We should go after them,” said Tina while glaring at Carl. She clearly still blamed him, but couldn't bring herself to argue about the matter any further.

“Now that Rand is here, I agree,” said Carl. “I'm just as worried about them as you are.”

“Doubtful,” said Tina with contempt.

Carl let the quip go without notice. “I can show you where to go. Just follow me and bring the rest with you. With their equipment.” He gave Tanya a quick glance to ensure she was on-board and received a slight nod to confirm it.

“Fine.” Tina got closer with John, Rand and the woman that was with him. She kept her eyes on Carl as he huddled in closer to Tanya.

“Go kill that fucking bastard,” said Sixten to all of them. He had pulled away from all of them and gotten a desk between him and everyone else. He had no intention of going along with them.

Everyone ignored him.

Carl grabbed hold of Tanya's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. He didn't know where they would be going as he started to gather the particles. They might find their friends already dead and the Lord Saviour ready to kill them. Who knew what sort of destruction Eve clashing with him could cause. It might be a destroyed world.

The bright flash blinded him. To his relief he found the air breathable. The ground shook and sent him to his knees. A loud explosion made his ears ring. Carl blinked furiously to regain his vision.

“Watch out!”

Carl felt something hit him and shove him away. A moment later the sound of rock grinding against rock made a shiver run down his spine.

“Get yourself up and running. All hell's loose here.”

It was Seth. Carl blinked some more and started to regain his vision. His friend was pulling him to his feet and rushing him to run. He could hear gunfire. Tanya was already in action.

“Where are we?” Carl asked as Seth dragged him behind a large chunk of

rock that looked like it had been torn away from a mountain and thrown there.

“Beats me,” replied Seth and pulled out a metal sphere from his pocket. There was dirt all over him and a small cut near his hairline was trickling blood down his face. Dust lingered in the air and Seth shot his metal bearing into it. Carl tried to peer into the floating grey, but couldn't see anything. Whether Seth had hid something or not remained a mystery, just as much as to what he had been aiming at.

A rumbling headed their way.

“Shit! Get down!” Seth ducked behind the rock. Carl did the same. As the two huddled there Tanya emerged from the cloud of dust and jumped in next to them. Rand and the mystery woman he had been with soon followed. They jumped to safety just in time to avoid the invisible force that ploughed through the ground. Dirt and rocks were thrown on them. After the force had passed there was nothing but a deep ditch where it had struck.

“How the hell am I supposed to get close to someone like that?” Rand demanded. “He's tearing this whole planet apart just fighting with that woman.”

“Just wait for your opportunity,” said Tanya and pulled up her rifle. She looked around before darting towards another boulder that offered cover. Seth went after her.

“She's right,” Carl pointed out. “We're the distraction. Lay low, observe, and strike when appropriate.”

Rand cursed. “Fine. Ilya. We're going up.”

The woman nodded and took a step away from the two men. She started to change. Her skin turned into scales. Her hands morphed into claws that could rip away a man's face. Wings sprung out from her back. She turned around and started to run. Rand was right behind her and jumped on her back just as her wings took their first flap and sent her into the sky not as a woman, but as a dragon. The two disappeared above the dust and out of view.

Carl blinked and took a deep breath before closing his eyes and opening them again. “Right. Got to go and help.”

He stood up and looked around carefully. It wasn't hard to tell where the fighting was going on. The sounds of the ground itself breaking was enough to

lead the way. He swallowed hard and ventured into the dust cloud that covered everything. He could see barely twenty feet in front of him. From one obstacle to another he hopped between hiding places as quickly as he could.

Sparks of light started to appear through the floating dust. Carl inched closer and readied his defences. He darted forward when the preparations were done. To his surprise he emerged from the dust into clear daylight. Looking around he could now tell the dust was swirling around an epicentre. Like the eye of a storm, but there was no calm. The Lord Saviour stood in the middle, surrounded by what looked to be a protective shell. It was thwarting attack after attack. Eve stood opposite to him, near the edge of the dust cloud, and was hurling what ever powers she could muster to break his protections. Off to her left was Tina doing the very same. That they were not having much success was a testament to the fearsomeness of their foe.

Ragged rays of blue light shot out from the Lord Saviour bubble and lashed out at everyone attacking him. Some had their own defensive bubbles that stopped the attack while others simply ducked behind rocks and hoped it would hold.

Carl hoped Tanya was all right. He'd seen her duck behind a large boulder, but the light had spewed enough loose rock around that it might not have been enough to save her. It might have cut straight through her shelter. He peeked from his hiding place to see if there was an opportunity to strike. He was just in time to see a black ball roll over to the Lord Saviour and strike at him with a thin spike that looked sharp and sturdy enough to pierce anything. It simply vanished as it hit his protective sphere. The black sphere rolled away quickly, but not fast enough to avoid getting hit by the blue light. The hit didn't seem to do much as the ball rolled away.

Carl retreated back behind the rock. He assumed the black ball had been John. Whether he was hurt was impossible to say. Not that he was that worried. As long as there was iron he'd be all right. He shook the worry out of his mind and started to focus on gathering particles for himself. He found it took time. There were too many others using them. He soon realized he'd need to build a reserve before acting. There was no immediate power boost to be had if things

went wrong. Carl thanked Eve in his mind for her teachings.

Otherwise he might have rushed in without preparing.

Carl peeked from behind his shelter at the Lord Saviour. His protections were intricate. A metal ball shot by Seth disintegrated before impact. Bolts of energy from Tanya's weapons smashed into an invisible wall, never reaching their target. Attacks of all sorts from Eve, Tina and Celia were equally ineffective and every time their attack changed the defensive orb around the Lord Saviour adjusted to thwart them.

As Carl watched attack after attack fail he started to see a pattern to how the shielding worked. He began to see a possibility for taking it down. A well timed attack of no real destructive power. A precision strike made with a needle. He started preparing for it. It needed to be timed with another attack. He hoped it would go unnoticed then. He hoped Rand would see the opportunity where ever he was. It would be a brief window.

The opportunity presented itself when Eve and Tina launched an attack at the same time. From opposite directions came attacks that sent dirt flying and shook the ground enough to force Carl to seek support from the rock behind which he was hiding. It almost made him miss the timing for his own attack. He gathered the particles and sent the needle like attack forward. Like a virus his little cone of particles slithered towards the shield and prodded it. The crack was found and it wedged itself in and started to spread. The structure of the shield quickly weakened. It was too fast for the Lord Saviour to notice.

The shielding crumbled.

The brief moment of confusion on the Lord Saviour face made Carl grin. He hoped Rand would be able to make use of the brief moment he had created. To his surprise it wasn't Rand that connected with an attack. It was the combined assault by Tanya, Seth and Tina that hit the man. A bolt of energy struck him in the back from Tanya's rifle. He lurched forward only to be pushed back by a ray of light from Tina's attack. It set his clothes on fire and scorched his skin. Finally came Seth's metal ball from the side that sent him flying to the side. He slumped to the ground and didn't move.

Carl had seen the impact. He'd seen the man's side burst open. The small

metal ball had pierced through him with such force there was no way he'd be living through it. His protections had not been ready for it. This time the hit was lethal. Carl was sure of it.

The sudden silence felt uneasy. Everyone was shocked the attacks had landed. Carl glanced around to see the confused expressions on everyone. They were slowly making their way towards the fallen enemy. They were being careful, ready to defend themselves at a moments notice.

"What happened?" asked Eve as she emerged from the cloud of dust not far off from Carl. Her hair was a mess. A trickle of blood ran down the side of her dirt covered face. There was a slight limp to her left foot and her right arm looked like someone had tried to barbecue it. Carl had not realized the fight had taken such a toll on her. The brief moment he'd seen her she had been doing well.

"I broke his shielding," said Carl and turned his attention back to the lifeless body. "You think that was enough to kill him?"

"Maybe," said Eve and continued to inch closer.

Something stirred by the body. Everyone stopped and hunched down for the worst. It wasn't the body itself that was moving. Something was rising out of it. It was like black smoke slithering out of every pore on the body. It swirled into a formless blob before starting to take form. It started to become more solid. Two feet touched down on the ground, twice the height of Carl. A torso formed on them, two arms came into being that ended in deadly looking claws. The head formed, two horns reached out in a spiral that ended in sharp tips.

It wasn't a human face. It had a snout with sharp teeth. A forked tongue slipped out between the sharp rows to taste the air. Eyes of red glared down at them. Thick fur covered its upper torso and arms. It let out a growl that made everyone take a step back.

"What the hell is that?" Carl asked and glanced at Eve. He saw how pale she was even underneath all the dirt. To his surprise she turned around and started to run.

"Run!" was all she said.

Carl looked after her for a brief moment, dumbfounded by her reaction. He glanced back at the monstrosity that had solidified itself in front of him. Black

mist started to spread from it and mix in with the lingering dust. He had no idea what it was, but the feeling he got from watching it was to do what Eve had done. Just as he started to turn to run he saw a glimpse of red falling from the sky.

Rand landed right on the monster's neck. His legs buckled under the impact, but his sword did not. It sunk hilt deep into the monster's neck. The golden circles on Rand's eyes were glowing more than usual. The monstrosity let out a blood curdling roar and its hands tried to grab at Rand. He clung to the sword for his life and tried to sink it deeper, but it wouldn't go any further. He changed his grip and sliced down to the side with it. He fell to the ground along with the creature's left arm.

Carl rushed over to him. Rand was getting back on his feet when he reached him.

"Fuck. It was too deep after all," Rand muttered and spat out some dust from his mouth and coughed. He wiped his forehead with his armoured hand.

"You all right?" asked Carl. The monster behind them was still roaring and clinging to its severed hand. Black mist escaped from the wound instead of blood.

"I'm fine," said Rand and stood upright. He gripped his sword with a grim expression. "I missed his centre. Just barely couldn't reach it. But I can now if I hit him from the side. I can kill him."

The monster turned around and set its eyes on Rand.

"That might be hard to accomplish," said Carl. "No surprising him now."

Rand chuckled. "I don't need to surprise it."

The black mist gathered around the creature suddenly launched towards the two men. Carl had his protections up in the blink of an eye, wide enough to cover Rand as well, but his friend stepped forward to meet the oncoming attack. With one swing of his sword he cut the black mist and dispersed it.

He glanced back at Carl and smiled. "I've had years to learn my powers. I'm not the weak man that you last saw. I am a king."

Carl couldn't come up with a reply. He watched his friend walk towards the monster. He stood in front of it, seemingly unworried, staring right back at its red eyes. He didn't wait for it to attack. Rand was the one to attack. He went for one of its legs and sliced it clean off right below the knee. The monster stumbled and

roared in pain and more black mist escaped from it. Another swing of Rand's sword and the mist disappeared.

Carl couldn't help but watch in awe. His friend was single handedly manhandling something that had given the combined forces of Eve, Tina, Celia, Felix and Tanya a run for their money.

The creature made a sudden swing at Rand. He was too late to block it and the force of the hit sent him flying through the air. Carl felt the tiny glimmer of hope die inside him. It would have been too easy for Rand to simply cut down the creature while the rest watched. Before the creature could make another swing it was hit by a ray of light from one side and a ball of flames from another. It wobbled under the attacks and struggled to stay standing.

It gave enough time for Rand to roll away and stand back up. He wiped some blood from his lips and grinned.

Carl joined in on the attack to give his friend the opportunity to strike. His cone of invisible force struck the monster on the side and knocked it over. Rand wasted no time on seizing the opportunity. He rushed to the fallen creature and sunk his blade to the side with the missing arm. The creature roared in pain. Rand pushed his sword in deeper and tilted it around, seeking the right spot to hit.

The creature let out a scream that was more of a whimper. There was fear in it. It seemed to know what was coming. Rand twisted his sword one final time and grimaced.

The horned creature broke like a porcelain cup falling to the ground. Cracks appeared on it and the final scream that escaped it froze the blood of anyone hearing it. Then it fell apart into ever smaller pieces until there was nothing left.

Rand took in a deep breath and stood upright. His hand went to his side. The hit he'd received had done some damage despite the protection offered by his armour. A dragon swooped down from the sky and as it landed next to him it took the shape of Ilya.

"You're hurt," she said as soon as she saw him holding his side.

"Yeah," Rand admitted.

"I told you it was risky," she said as she moved his hand away and started to

inspect the damage. Her prodding made Rand wince and groan more than once.

"He's dead?" asked Carl as he walked up to the pair. Looking around there was no sign of black mist gathering to form another creature. The dead body of the Lord Saviour rested where it had fallen, unmoving.

"Dead as anyone can get," Rand assured him. "I tore him apart from the very centre of his being. If there's such a thing as a soul then that was torn apart as well. There is nothing left of him."

"Good." Carl looked around. Everyone else was starting to come out of hiding. Eve was walking back, still looking weary. Tanya emerged from behind a large boulder along with Seth. Both looked surprised with the situation. Carl had to admit it was hard to believe it had ended the way it had. There had been so much fear for the man. He had seemed impossible to stop.

He saw Tina, Celia and John crouched together not far off. The sight made him turn away quickly. John was licking blood off from Tina's arm like a dog getting a treat. He knew it was to help him heal, but he couldn't get past what it all meant for his friend. What he had lost for it. The fact Celia was looking on with great interest made it all the worse.

"You all right?" Carl asked as Eve got closer. It was hard to tell from underneath all the dirt how injured she was. He could swear he saw some red in some places.

"Few scrapes and bruises," said Eve and focused on the dead body of their enemy. She did her best to hide the burned arm. "He really dead?"

"He's dead," Rand assured her and tried to shoo Ilya from his wounds, but she was persistent. "Nothing left of him. Not even a shred of his soul if there's such a thing."

"Good," said Eve and let out a sigh of relief. She looked ready to collapse so Rand grabbed her good arm and helped her to a near by rock that made for a perfect seat. She gave him a grateful smile. "That thing that came out. It was an old enemy. One I've seen many lose to. One I've feared encountering. Maybe the myth of it had built it to be worse than it was."

"Fear does that," said Rand and sat down next to her. "It grows and makes what ever you're fearing that much worse. When you finally come face to face

with it and overcome it you realize it wasn't so bad after all.”

“People still got hurt. People still died,” Eve noted. “There are countless worlds that are now truly broken and I doubt there's anything we can do to fix them.”

“But we stopped the worst from happening,” said Carl and gave her a look. “We did what we could.”

Their talk was interrupted by Felix limping towards them. Much like everyone else he was covered in dirt and seemed to have multiple minor injuries, but nothing life threatening. He walked over to Rand with a defiant look. Rand tensed up and took a more stable stance as soon as he saw him.

Felix stopped in front of him with a heaving breath. He measured him from head to toe before speaking. “It's done. The truce is over. Let's finish this when we're both feeling better.”

With a flash of light he was gone.

Rand cursed. “We need to get home, Ilya. Quick. Before he can do too much damage. Before those I left in charge get the idea I'm dead.”

“I've seen it done enough times now. I can do it,” Ilya assured him and grabbed him by the arm. A bright flash and the two were gone.

Carl shook his head. He had hoped Rand would have stayed, but it seemed he had unfinished business. “Do you think their world will be intact?”

Eve shrugged. “Who knows. It wasn't one of the known worlds as I understand it. Should be safe. But who knows what sort of damage has been done.”

Carl realized his own world was probably worst off. Whether it was still there was questionable. The new planet had appeared so close that it was going to change the world just by being there. “He may be dead, but the destruction remains.”

Eve nodded. “Not exactly the fulfilling victory, is it?”

“Feels more like we lost,” Carl admitted.

“It's over?” Seth had walked up to them along with Tanya. Neither one seemed to be too badly injured. Few minor bruises and scrapes were to be expected from ducking for cover for your life.

"Yeah," Carl said with a feint smile. He examined the two with a concerned look. "You guys all right?"

"Nothing we won't live through," Tanya assured him and put down the rifle she had been holding. "I know we won, but why do I feel hollow inside?"

Eve gave her a sympathetic smile. "I know that feeling. So many horrible things have happened that even though it's over it doesn't feel like we achieved much good."

"Too many worlds have been destroyed for things to feel good," Tanya agreed. "I wonder what happened to Benevez?"

"We can go take a look," Seth told her. "Not like we have much waiting for us back home."

His offer seemed to make her happy as she gave him a warm smile. "That is if one of our friends is willing to give us a ride." She turned her smile towards Carl and Eve.

"I'd be happy to," Carl assured her. "I'll have to go take a look back home anyway. See how Sixten is doing. How bad is the world looking over there." He wanted to say something about checking on people he knew, but decided not to. If there had been wide spread mixing of worlds then it was unlikely he'd find them back home. They'd be off on some different world. Maybe alive, maybe dead.

"I have some things to take care of as well," said Eve and stood up. "I would very much like to meet you again. Maybe at Sixten's in a few days?" she gave Carl a questioning look.

"Sure," Carl agreed and watched her walk over to where her daughter was feeding her pet. Just seeing the two made him feel sad so he turned away.

"You still think we should kill her?" asked Seth as he noticed how his friend reacted to the sight of the two.

Carl shook his head. "There has been enough killing. We might not like what he has become, but John can take care of himself." He looked on as Eve exchanged words with her daughter. It looked like the conversation was going better than the previous ones.

"You're probably right," Seth agreed with a sigh. He stretched himself and winced as a pain shot from his shoulder down his hand. He stopped to rub his

shoulder. "If I never have to do anything remotely like this then I can die happy."

"No dying for you any time soon," said Tanya and grabbed his arm. She pushed herself against it in a manner that made it obvious how she felt about the man.

Seth looked a bit surprised and uncomfortable at the same time. His look made Carl burst out in laughter. That made Tanya give him an angry look and tighten her grip on the man who seemed to have no idea what her intentions for him were.

"We should probably go," said Carl and glanced quickly at the group not far off. It seemed Eve had finished talking and they were readying to travel. "Nothing left to do here."

Seth nodded.

"I'll take you to where you want to go," said Carl and started to gather the needed particles. He hoped their destination would not be too badly affected.

Epilogue

Carl watched over the city. He felt a bit uneasy being on top of such a tall building when the ground was still shaking from time to time. Up in the sky the hazy image of another planet took up much of the view. Below the city that had once been a jungle of tall buildings was, at some parts, now literally a jungle with lush green trees. There were spots of desert here and there along with every other sort of terrain conceivable.

To his dismay his old home had been replaced with a meadow. Gone were the apartment buildings and in their place was a carpet of green spotted with flowers of all colours. Where the original buildings had gone was impossible to know. Whether the people still lived after being ripped into another world was questionable.

How many millions had died?

Carl shook his head. It was too much to think about.

The news were going crazy with the apocalypse. That's what they called it and it wasn't that far off. The scientists had no explanation and the government was having trouble keeping up law and order. There were reports of men on horses attacking a neighbourhood. Their swords, bows and plate mail had proved of little use against even the local police, but the fact such an absurd things had taken place was creating a nervous atmosphere.

The fact they'd made it through to another world with metal gear and still as functional humans gave Carl some hope that others might have been as lucky as them.

For a brief moment he'd considered coming forward and telling the world what had happened. That had not lasted long as he realized the cost of doing so for himself. He'd be arrested, questioned and likely never seen again. Especially since he'd gone Dark.

Dropping in to check on Sixten had been interesting. The man had been a nervous wreck. The empty whiskey bottles in his office had told how much he'd been drinking. There had been several crates full of bottles waiting to be

consumed. It seemed his solution was to escape into a drunken state so he didn't have to deal with what had become reality. Carl couldn't really blame him. The world was unravelling and there was still doubt in the air whether the planet would survive its new orbital friend. Crime was up, a lot of places were shut down because people were too afraid to leave their homes, there was looting and society seemed to be on its way out and the age of gangs ruling seemed to be dawning.

Carl felt a hand on his shoulder and jumped a bit. Turning around he came face to face with Eve. "Jeez, you scared the shit out of me."

Eve grinned. "Sixten told me you'd be up here on the roof."

"Yeah, needed some fresh air." Carl turned to look on at the city once more. "How's Sixten doing? Still on his first bottle?"

"I'd say he's moved on to his second one," said Eve and walked up next to him and gave the view a look. "This place seems to be the worst hit by it all."

"Your home?"

"Fine," said Eve with a small amount of relief in her voice. "It seems his powers did not reach that far."

"Good," said Carl with a nod. "How's Tina and Celia?"

"Busy. Tina's trying to find her children and bring them together again. Celia's helping her as is John."

"I hope she's not planning to start another war where ever she takes them." The thought of the lizard men attacking another human world did not sit well with Carl. He'd seen it first hand and it wasn't a pretty sight. Then again, with the upheaval in the worlds, it was possible she'd find a place for them where they'd be able to live in peace.

"Jonah sends his regard," said Eve. "I told him what happened so he could call off everything we set up. Didn't really end up needing him. I still feel like there should have been more to this."

"Life isn't a movie or a book," Carl replied. "Things that seem too large for anyone to handle can be taken down by the smallest of things. A big pay off with everyone happy at the end is the stuff of stories. Fiction."

"Aren't you happy?" asked Eve and gave him a curious look.

"I'm happy I'm alive and that we stopped the Lord Saviour, but how can I be

happy? Most people I know are missing, likely dead in some other world. Millions have died. This place could still crumble. No one knows what that new planet is going to do. It might rip this one apart and kill everyone. How could anyone be really happy with that?"

"It's not our responsibility," said Eve. "We did the best we could."

Carl snorted. "That is reality for you. Bitter-sweet."

"So, what are your plans now?" Eve asked in hopes of taking the man's mind off to something else.

"Can't stay here," Carl admitted. "If they find out I've gone Dark they'll blame this all on me. I could go searching for people I know in the other worlds, but that seems like a lost cause from the get go. So, I don't really know."

"I'll probably head back to my own world," said Eve. "It has been nice going out to the other worlds once more, but I think I've had enough of it for a while."

"I can understand that," said Carl and gave her a small smile.

Eve tilted her head and examined him. "Would you like to become a god?"

The implication in her question were clear enough.

"Sure. Why not?" Carl replied.