

The Legends of Mondus

The Dagger of Shadows

Kristoffer Pauly

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About the Author

Kristoffer Pauly was born in Denmark in a small village called Karlstrup. Ever since his childhood he has always had a keen imagination, but it was not until the age of 17 that he began writing on what would later become *The Dagger of Shadoms*. Instead of writing the story in his native language he chose to write it in English, because this was the language his favourite authors wrote in.

After finishing high school he spent two years working part-time while writing. When his first book was finished in 2016 he began studying Medialogy at Aalborg University to further develop his skills in 3D modelling and animation.

Besides his interests in animation and 3D modelling, Kristoffer spends his pastime immersed in games and anime. He enjoys finding different ways to tell stories and uses it as inspiration for his writing, as well as his university studies.

Preface

The initial idea for *The Dagger of Shadows* as well as the overall series, *The Legends of Mondus*, came about as a result of reading the works of some of my favourite fantasy authors. I was inspired to create a unique world of my own and wanted to give my perspective on what a fantasy novel should be.

In the beginning an overwhelming urge made me start inventing the universe, where I wanted my stories to live in, and after I had mapped out various stories in my head I began writing on *The Dagger of Shadows*. It took several years before I finished, though this was mostly due to the fact that I wrote the majority of the story during my busy high school years.

The Dagger of Shadows is the first story in what will hopefully be a vast collection of stories all tied together by the name *The Legends of Mondus*. Most of the stories in this series will be unconnected, though they all serve as individual puzzle pieces that will eventually form a clear image of Mondus and its amazing legends.

Kristoffer Pauly

October 2016

To my mother, for being patient and believing in me.

To Kimiko, for being a great help and a good friend.

Chapter One

A man with a beard sang of a distant battle while a woman played softly on a three-string. Tess sat quietly on a stool near the bar and drank her mead, listening to the tale. Her short silver-grey hair lay flat on her head, and from behind anyone could easily mistake her for a young man. Her pale skin did not resemble that of the locals of Heimyal, but rather that of the Easterners from the Marshlands. She wore a reasonably clean, white, hooded tunic and dark linen trousers that had been cut short at the ankles.

Tess sat by the bar for a while, waiting. The red-faced man she was watching was seated deeper within the tavern. For a while he just sat there, staring at his mug, perhaps entranced in the tale or maybe dreading going back to his master. After he had emptied his mug he rose from his chair. The singer in the background ended his story and was being cheered on by the crowd gathered in the barely-lit tavern. Tess swallowed the remainder of her mead and as the man left, she followed him out into the streets of the Commons.

Outside, the wooden sign, which read 'The Meadery', dangled in the wind. The red-faced man walked in the direction of the Grey Market. With the ease that comes from repetition he passed through the scattered crowd of commoners coming back from the market after working since sunup.

Tess pulled the hood over her head to avoid standing out from the crowd, and to shield her face from the cold evening winds that blew across the city.

As the man entered the Grey Market district, the number of people coming back and forth increased significantly. Tess doubled her pace to catch up with the unsuspecting victim, skilfully dodging people coming towards her. She was as a fish in water, flowing gracefully to and fro, avoiding impatient individuals hurrying home. Her eyes remained fixed on her target.

She bumped into the man and apologised, 'It was my fault.'

Her beautiful face and deep russet-brown eyes made the man's already ruddy face light up like a torch. 'It is all right, I should watch my step.'

As she disappeared back into the crowd she held a little key firmly in her palm. The man might check his pockets to see whether his key was still in it, and if he did he would find the fake one Tess had placed in its stead.

Tess sat in her little house studying the old key, waiting for the darkness to settle on the city. It

was, she had been told, at least two-hundred years old. The metal was muddy green and had black marks of wear on it. Besides the obvious signs of age, it was very plain, having one end in the form of a circle, but the remarkable thing about it was that instead of the one head that normal keys had, this one had three. The three heads meant two things, first that the key belonged to an old house in the rich part of the city, and second that no thief Tess knew of could pick the lock, to which this key belonged, not even Jack.

She held the dagger in her hand, wondering if she should bring it along. Usually she did not need weapons when she broke into a place, but this was different. It was not just any house she was robbing. There had been a reason why she had to think everything through, rather than just pick the lock of the house, walk in and steal the specific item, and then leave again without a trace.

The difference was that this time she was hired to rob one of the King's Men. If she was caught, she risked severe punishment, and most likely, death. Tess had heard stories about the brutality of the King's Men from other thieves and once when she was younger she had witnessed a public punishment of a captured thief. The man had been branded and they had broken every bone in his hands.

She left the stinking Beggar's Corner, later that same day, wearing the black hooded jacket and trousers that Jack had given her. They were tailored for another thief who had been taller than her, but she had remedied the fact that the outfit was too big by rolling up the sleeves and the legs.

Without a sound she crept through the city, through the smog-ridden district of Anvils and past the glowing Great Forge, where skilled smiths would hammer all manner of weapons into shape. She passed through the streets of Hangman's Square that during the day was a sprawling centre of people from all over the land of Heimyal, but at night was so deserted it seemed impossible that people actually lived here.

She came to the gate of Old Town. Behind it lived all the rich, important and powerful.

Stationed on this side of the gate were two guards. One was asleep in a standing position, while the other polished his short sword with an absent look in his eyes. These guards were the usual lazy, half-poor and abusive types, who took care of all the districts except Beggar's Corner and Old Town. Beggar's Corner had no law, and the guards generally avoided it. Old Town was a different story though, the gate might have been guarded by the regular guards, but inside Old Town, the King's Men were the law. Throughout history the Kings demanded a special guard to keep the rich safe. These guards went through ten years of training, and less than half the trainees ended up qualifying. Many tried to become a King's Man, because being a one meant

power and wealth, two very appealing aspects to common folk, but most of them had no grasp of how hard the training would be.

After observing the gate for a bit, Tess decided exactly how she would get past the guards. Jack had taught her to approach every situation with an open mind, and take all options into consideration.

After her mother died, Jack had taken care of Tess. He taught her everything he knew about being a thief, as well as installing some manner of decency into her.

Tess picked up a small rock, one of the many that lay scattered throughout Hangman's Square. She held it firmly in her palm, and threw it in an arc above the guards. It hit a wall some distance away from them, far enough for them not to see where it landed, yet close enough for them to hear the sound it made.

The guard polishing his sword put the cloth in a side pocket of his leather vest, and tapped the sleeping guard with the flat side of his blade. The man awoke and grumbled something unintelligible, to which the first guard responded with a sigh and walked off in the general direction of the sound.

Tess smiled to herself. She came out from her cover and sprinted towards the wall on the right side of the gate. In one leap she hit the side, planting a foot on a brick that stuck out from it. In the second leap she secured a tight grip on the top of the wall. With ease she hauled herself up onto the wall and dropped down to the cobbles on the other side. Her worn leather boots creaked as she landed firmly on her feet. The remaining guard at the gate noticed nothing, though this might have been because he was fast asleep again.

Tess stood a short distance from the wall that separated Old Town from the rest of Modai, and pulled out the map Jack had given her earlier that day.

'*You will need this for later,*' he had said, explaining that Old Town was such a mess of streets and back alleys that without a map an outsider would never be able to find one specific house.

She peered at the creased paper map, frowning and trying to find 'Septimer Street', the main road that went through Old Town. She put her finger on her location on the map and traced it along the main street until it came to a crossing, her finger then followed the west-going road that went past *The Winery* and ended in *Parcel Street*.

It was a long way to Parcel Street, and to avoid detection by the patrolling King's Men she would have to stick to the smaller streets and alleyways, which meant it would take a while to get there.

After skulking through the unknown district for a long time, she reached Parcel Street. Thankfully, it was still dark.

The house, when she found it, was at the end of the street. From the second floor candlelight shone out through the windows. Since the nights in Modai were as dark as soot, candles were generally used to find one's way around inside. Of course there were lanterns and torch-bearers scattered throughout most of the city, but their light was never sufficient for moving about in a house at night. The candlelight indicated that the resident inside was not asleep. Tess knew that only one man would be in the house, as Jack had promised to take care of the servant from whom she had stolen the key, but she had not expected the resident to be awake at this time.

With silent steps she crept to the big door. It looked similar to the key, muddy green with spots of black. The grey brick walls of the house were cracked and moss-covered. The roof was tilted so that rain would pour off, and this was very important for any house in Heimyal, since it rained incessantly during Fall. The small houses in Beggar's Corner were cheaply made and usually had flat roofs, which often cracked under the weight of heavy rain. Fortunately Tess' own house, one of the older houses in Beggar's Corner, had been built with a slanted roof.

She pulled out the key and inserted it into the old door, turning it slowly until three hollow thumps were emitted from the lock. She took her hand off the key and held on to the handle of the door. Her heartbeat doubled as she pushed it. To her relief the door made not a sound and swept open, revealing a room darker than the night outside.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her, waiting for her eyes to adjust, but alas they did not.

With a sigh she put her palm on the hilt of the dagger, closed her eyes and focused. When she opened them again, the room was a dark grey, and she could see the outlines of all her surroundings. She almost fell backwards in surprise when she found herself face to face with the open-mouthed head of a bear, hanging proudly from the wall in front of her.

She looked around. The room was big and looked as though it was used for guests. The walls and shelves bore numerous trophies collected by the resident, and at one end some comfortable chairs circled a small table. A display case with a glass window stood against the far wall and she crossed the room to look closer. A sword with a leather-covered handle and a curved spike on the hilt lay inside. Its blade was the length of an arm and was decorated down its spine with a repeating symbol etched into the metal. The etchings were black and seemed to be glowing without giving off any light. She thought back to an earlier conversation with Jack.

'An enchanted sword?'

'Keep it down, there are other people here,' Jack said.

'I've never seen an enchanted sword before,' Tess said eagerly.

'That is because they are rare and illegal. It makes sense that he is willing to pay three gold

crowns for us to retrieve it.'

'But Jack, what does he need such a sword for?'

'That is none of our matter, but I am sure it is for nothing good,' he looked her in the eyes.

'So?'

'Yes. I'll do it.'

'Good. Here's what you do first...'

The pulsating beat of the glowing symbols matched the rhythm of Tess' heart.

She leant forwards to open the case, but it was locked. She cursed silently for having forgotten to bring her lock-picking tools. She would have to find the key, which would most likely be in the upstairs bedroom, along with the man she was robbing.

Stalking in the shadows she passed through the house, passing the kitchen and climbing the staircase as silently as a wolf tracking its prey. Candlelight flickered from what she guessed was a bathing room, and a crack under the door cast a sliver of light onto the landing. As Tess reached the top step of the staircase, the light seemed to disappear before it hit her skin, as if it was being absorbed by the air around her. With her palm still resting on the dagger's hilt she crept across the wooden floor, which, to her surprise, gave off no sound.

There were three rooms upstairs, the bathing room that was currently occupied, what she guessed was the servant's quarters and the master's room. Upon entering the master's room Tess was overwhelmed by the awful smell of rosewater, a scent that was, and had been for many years, the favourite of the rich. When the liquid was cast into the air or rubbed on skin it produced a scent so sweet that even bees despised it.

The carpet was made from a Sand Wolf, a beast twice the size of a bear. She had not known how big that was until she saw the pelt strewn across the floor. The mouth and eyes were, similar to the mounted head downstairs, wide open.

She searched around the room for the key. There was a cabinet, presumably for the resident's clothes, a wooden desk with a chair under it, the large pelt on the floor and of course an enormous bed, which every rich person in Modai seemed to have. Tess was one of the few 'lucky' people in Beggar's Corner to actually own a bed, something that had caused some minor fights with her peers, however her bed was not even half the size of this one and still took up most of the space in her little house.

Tess walked over to the desk and pulled the chair back so that she could open the drawer underneath it. In the background she could hear someone humming a jolly tune and splashing about in what she imagined was a tub. It amused her that the dreadful and horrific King's Men could be so peaceful when left to themselves. She had pictured them all as brutes, who drank

wine from the skulls of their enemies.

The drawer slid back gracefully on its oiled mechanism to reveal a mess of letters or at least it was a mess after Tess had gone through it searching for the key. She found it though. It lay under some personal letters smelling pleasantly of lily-of-the-valley and quite clearly the resident had not done his best to hide it.

With the key in her hand she descended the staircase silently, and in the receiving room, fitted the key into the small lock. It opened with a low *click*.

'**Careful,**' a voice said.

'Be quiet,' Tess whispered back.

She pushed open the display case and grabbed the handle of the sword, grazing her thumb across the metal as she did. With a cry of pain she threw the sword away. The touch of the blade had sent a searing pain through her hand as if she had burnt it on an open flame. The weapon fell to the ground with a clatter.

Muffled footsteps crossed the floor upstairs and began creaking down the staircase. She froze, her heart pounding, and in the silence, heard a blade being unsheathed. She was still in shock from the pain in her hand, and by the time she came to the man had reached the bottom of the staircase. His figure loomed in the doorway, lit by a flickering candle in his hand, its wax dripping unnoticed onto his skin. He was naked except for a piece of cloth wrapped around his waist. In his left hand was a slender knife, the kind used for stabbing. Water fell from his short golden hair as he positioned himself awaiting Tess' first strike.

He had not noticed the sword lying between the two of them, until Tess darted across the floor with the dagger in one hand and her free arm outstretched, reaching for it. As she got a firm grip on the handle she shouted, 'Now Mhran!'

'**As you wish,**' echoed the voice and just as Tess was about to be run through with the King's Man's knife, she turned black as the night outside, and disappeared into the shadows.

Chapter Two

Two years earlier

One, two, three... Tess counted at least seven heavy coin bags hanging loosely from the belts of busy townspeople. It was early morning still, with the sun low enough for none of its light to pass over the walls, yet the Grey Market was crowded with all the likes of the city. There were shouting traders, commoners, rich, foreigners and more. The gathering was great indeed, and for a thief this was a fruit-bearing tree, ripe for the picking.

Market days such as these only happened once or twice a year, during Harvest, so everyone with their wits in order was here, well, except for the Nobles, they sent servants in their stead. These servants were Tess' usual choice of target, however passing up an opportunity was never her way.

Gracefully she swept in and out of the crowds standing around each market stall. With a little sharp knife concealed within her long sleeve, she sliced coin bags from the belts of preoccupied people with one hand, catching them with the other and stuffing them inside her coat. Like a dancer she moved around, in and out of the crowds, until her pockets were full and her coat heavy.

The sun's golden light bathed the Grey Market as Tess emptied the coins from her coat in a damp side alley. The haul so far, amounted to twenty-seven silver and fifty-one copper crowns. This was not all hers to keep. Jack was expecting fifty silver coins by the end of the day, but anything beyond that was hers, so she went back into the market.

Like a silver dove, she swooped in and out and around each stall. The smells of raw fish, honey mead and spices hung in the air. Every stall offered a new kind of temptation, but Tess was here for a different reason than the commoners who pushed and jostled each other for space. She stuffed her coat with stolen coins until it was heavy once more.

She returned to the same alley, took off the coat and sat down on the cold and damp cobblestones. Reaching into all the pockets and hidden compartments, she pulled out many small bags that chinked as she dropped them in a heap. Carefully she emptied the contents of the bags onto the ground, making sure that not a coin was missed.

'Pick us up.'

The voice startled her and she scattered the contents of the bag she was holding as she leapt to her feet.

'Who said that?' she demanded, looking around the alleyway.

'We did.'

Tess looked around. She could not place the voice. It sounded like it came from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

The voice spoke again, **'Look down. You are stepping on us.'**

Tess looked down. The blade of a dagger protruded from beneath the sole of her right boot.

She knelt down to pick it up and brushed the dust from it. There were cobwebs on the handle and it looked like it had lain in this alley for many years, except, it had not. When she was in the alley earlier, there had been nothing on the ground at all.

'Where did you—?'

'Are you Tessana Grey, daughter of Sarin and Samuel Grey?' the voice interrupted.

Tess held the dagger in her hand. It seemed to hum whenever the voice sounded.

'I am. How do you know this?'

'We are the bringer of sad news. Your uncle has passed away.'

'How much?'

'It's very... unique...!' he said and considered the dagger for a while. 'Thirty silver crowns.'

Tess nodded in agreement.

The merchant handed her a small, heavy bag, which Tess deposited inside her coat.

The merchant observed her carefully as she left his stall and disappeared into the crowd, he then considered the dagger again. Its handle was shaped in a manner that was most common in the lands of Hjo, and the horn that it was made of was twisted in a way that gave a steady and comfortable grip. The pommel had three little claws holding a small perfectly round glass orb that contained some kind of black smoke. As he observed the orb, the curious substance inside shifted around. There was a small cross-guard as well, in the form of two slender spikes that curved away from the wielder's fingers. The blade was the same faded dark-golden colour as the rest of the dagger's metal and the middle of it was twisted and warped, as though the blade had been bent out of shape on purpose.

The merchant placed the dagger at the very front of his stall for all to see. He knew there was a market for unique collectibles in Modai, but as soon as he turned away the dagger disappeared.

'I have what you wanted.'

'Yes I can see that.' Jack looked at the coins on the table. 'I am curious though, why do you smile so merry-like? Did you rob a rich man blind or something?'

'I'm not telling,' Tess said playfully, thinking about the many coins she had received in exchange for the strange dagger.

He collected the coins on the table and placed them inside a dark wooden chest.

As Tess rose from her seat, he said, 'Before you leave I have a serious question for you.'

As Tess walked back home from the Sparrow, she could not help but think about what the strange voice had said. That her uncle had died. She had not seen the man since the death of her mother. At the time, he had wanted to adopt her, to keep her safe from the terrors of the big city, but Tess had not gone with him. If her mother had managed all those years, she could as well.

She thought about Jack's suggestion. He wanted her to advance from the usual pickpocketing to lockpicking. Tess knew how to pick a lock, but it was more than just that. She had to enter a house and grab an item, all the while the residents could be in there as well. She doubted it was something she could handle on her own.

Ridding her mind of any concerns, Tess opened the door to her house, took two steps and fell face first on the floor.

'You are making a habit out of this, always stepping on us,' a familiar voice said.

Tess got back on her feet and located the item she had fallen over. Her eyes widened as she saw it was the dagger.

'I sold you,' she said, rubbing her forehead.

'You could sail out on the sea and throw us in the water and we would be waiting for you on the shore,' replied the omnipresent voice.

'How did you get here?' Tess asked, not questioning the idea that inanimate objects could talk.

'It is simple. We are bound to you, as the pelt is bound to the wolf.'

'Bound to me? Who are you?'

'We are Mhran. We are bound to you now as we have been bound to your family's blood, ever since your great-grandfather, Martin Grey, first held this dagger.'

'Mhran?' She considered the name. 'How do you know my uncle is dead?'

'We have been in his possession ever since your father died. Your uncle commanded us to stay in his attic and we were there for many years gathering dust, until we found ourselves in an alley where you were sitting.'

'I don't understand. How do you know he is dead, then?' She stared at the little orb on the hilt of the dagger.

The black smoke inside it shifted and the voice said, **'We only change wielder if the previous one dies.'**

'You said that you have been in my father's possession. When was this?' Tess had never met her father and her mother had rarely mentioned him.

'Samuel, the bandit,' the voice considered. **'He was very stubborn and never listened to us.'**

'What do you mean?'

'We are old and know many things your kin does not. We tell your kin many things, but few listen.'

'I don't understand.'

'You will, some day.'

Tess did not ask anything else, but just sat and stared at the dull dagger in her hands for a while.

What seemed like a brief conversation had lasted half the day, which meant the sun's light had left the city. Jack had told her to steal a bronze pendant from the house of Pete, a smith living in the Commons. Tess picked up the odd dagger, fastened it in her belt and left the house heading towards the Commons. She made her way through Beggar's Corner and the smoggy Anvils.

The only sources of light in the streets were from the sparse street lanterns and the moon. As Tess traversed Hangman's Square, she noticed some men watching from afar. They were torch-bearers, guards who patrolled at night.

'Beware, you are being watched.'

'You're not helping by talking that loudly,' Tess whispered.

'You are mistaken little girl. Only you can hear us,' Mhran hummed in her head.

Tess made her way through cold, dingy alleyways. There were fewer street lanterns here, and the blurry outlines of her surroundings twisted into terrifying figures.

'Lay your hand on us,' the voice advised.

Tess carefully laid her palm on the hilt of the dagger. Everything before her eyes went black as soot, but a moment later everything turned from black to dark grey. The outlines that were blurry a moment before were now clear as day. She could see everything around her, but there was also a low humming, which seemed to be coming from the orb. It was like the soft tune of a mother guiding her daughter to the realm of dreams.

'Now you see as we see,' the voice said, before Tess even got the chance to ask.

Before her was the house of Pete, its outlines perfect and its whole façade grey. With her palm on the dagger she walked up to the door and pulled out her lock-picking tools.

Chapter Three

Tess could not see the trees that surrounded her. The horizon was faded and the forest was dark. There was the beating rhythm of her heart and the humming by her right hip where the dagger was attached to her belt.

Her feet hammered down upon the soft ground, and she heard it again. The dreadful howl. It was not from a wolf and not from a bear. It was from something bigger.

The sound caught her off guard and she looked back, just as her toe hooked under a branch lying on the ground. She landed on her knees, struggling to get up. Her heartbeat became more intense, more rapid. Her body was shaking in terror. The humming by her side grew louder.

She had little time to react as she heard it coming towards her. She was on her feet and looking back once again, but before she could react, the massive creature had passed her. She thought it would stop, but it kept running. Then came its tail. It grabbed her by the waist and swept her away.

She tried desperately to scream.

Tess screamed so loudly that she woke herself. She was covered in her own sweat and the bed she was laying in had become damp and clammy.

She sat upright. The dagger was within her reach, humming the familiar tune. Everything was peaceful.

Tess hated that dream. It had come to her many times before, always the same, always running from something unknown, but never getting away.

The superstitious folk of Heimyal said that a dream could sometimes be a foresight into the future. She hoped this was untrue. Whatever she was running from, she certainly did not want to meet.

Tess removed the blinds from the single window in her little home. The waking sun had yet to pass its light over the walls of the city.

The house was small and could barely accommodate one person, but she felt at home here. The lack of space had always been there. The bed took up most of the room, but she was used to it being like that. Tess had lived in this home ever since she was little. She and her mother had both slept in this bed. They had lived here in the worn-down Beggar's Corner all of her life. Tess had been here watching her mother leave in the morning and return home later the same day. She had been here as the sickness took hold of her mother and she had lain in the big bed grieving after she had passed away.

She would have starved to death, hidden away in this house, if Jack had not found her. He had wanted to send her to live with her uncle, but she had not wanted to go. Jack had understood and soon afterwards began training her to become like her mother. It had been the only thing worth living for at first, but gradually Jack had become important to her. Having never met her own father, Jack became the man she relied on and trusted with her life. Tess had been a dedicated student. She wanted to impress Jack and honour her mother's memory.

Tess put on the same white and wrinkled tunic she had worn the day before, and a pair of light-brown linen trousers. She fastened them around her waist with a dark leather belt she had once stolen from a merchant's shop.

On a table, crammed into the corner next to her bed, lay the dagger. It would stay there if she asked it to, however after the incident yesterday it would be best to take it with her. She reached out for it with her left hand, but when she took hold of the handle a searing pain in her thumb forced her to let go of it.

'You are hurt,' hummed the dagger.

Tess looked at her hand. The thumb was swollen and dark red. She found an old moth-eaten shirt on the floor and ripped a piece out of it, which she then bound around her finger. She remembered why it was hurt and started looking around the room. The sword she had stolen was not here.

Panicking, she scoured her belongings until the voice from the dagger spoke in her head.

'The sword has found its way to the man expecting it.'

Tess stared at the dagger. 'How?'

'We brought it there.'

'Did he notice you?'

'We are shadow. We are only seen if we will for it to be so.'

She squeezed her feet into her black knee-high boots, making sure not to use her injured thumb.

When she finished she fastened the dagger to her belt, and headed towards the Sparrow to collect her pay. She closed the door behind her, but left it unlocked, she had lost the key running from the guards two seasons earlier and had yet to get a replacement. Though nobody in Beggar's Corner worried about security. The general idea being that because everybody was poor, nobody had anything worth stealing. It also helped that no one dared to cross blades with Jack, so anyone who worked for him was safe from harm, at least in this district.

Tess trudged through the muddy streets passing tiny little houses, spaced as though it had been at random. Some of them looked like buckets, as the weak roofs had collapsed and formed

bowls that filled with rainwater.

There were no street sweepers or anything fancy in Beggar's Corner so most of the district looked like a field that had just been ploughed and then soaked in rain. Even though Fall was more than half a season away, rain still poured down from above once in a while.

On her way to the tavern Tess passed the broken and abandoned Light's Chapel, built by missionaries from the faraway lands of Hjo many centuries ago. It was a petty little building that had been caked in dirt and washed by rain many times. The true colour of the chapel's masonry was a mystery. The rain over Modai tended to wear down any untreated buildings and leave them grey and dull.

Tess arrived at the Sparrow just as the light of the sun rose over the walls. The little tavern was crowded as always. There was coin to be won at the small three-legged tables where all manner of bets were made. Almost every person held a mug of mead and the usual mood of drunken happiness was present.

Tess walked to the back of the tavern, nodding at the barkeep as she passed. The sound of the dagger hitting her side produced a small *clunk* every time she took a step. The wooden floor creaked as she entered the back room. It was poorly lit by a small lantern hanging from the ceiling. When she closed the door behind her, she was completely alone.

Tess approached the bookcase that stood up against the wall. It was filled with all manner of books, but she only needed to find two specific ones. She had done this many times before, so she knew where the two books were placed.

Without much consideration she placed her left hand on 'The Book of Dread' and the other on 'The Blakemore Mystery' and pulled. The books leant forward, but did not fall out. Instead a *click* sounded to the left of the bookcase and the wall opened like a door. Tess pushed it aside and walked through. She closed the wall behind her, which produced another *click*. With careful steps she descended the steep staircase and found Jack sitting at a darkwood table in the middle of the room, writing in a journal.

Jack put away his journal and looked Tess in the eyes, but then directed his gaze towards the object, which produced a low *clunk* as she walked towards him.

'Expecting trouble, are you?' he said, nodding towards the dagger.

'About that—'

'What happened?' Jack interrupted her. He had noticed that her left hand had a piece of cloth bound around the thumb.

'The man saw me. I touched the blade by accident and, well...'
Tess said looking down at her feet in embarrassment.

'He spotted you?' He sent her a look of concern. 'Are you sure he saw your face?'

'I don't know. It was dark.'

Jack scratched the stubble on his chin, 'You have a very unique appearance, so if he did see you it is likely the guards have been told to look out for you.'

'Maybe he didn't see me,' Tess said. 'Does it really matter? I have been spotted before.'

'You have,' Jack stated dully, 'but this is different. These King's Men are relentless and it is likely that the owner of the sword is very eager to retrieve his property.'

'Will the King's Men be looking for me?'

'Perhaps. I do not think the owner will have told them about the theft. Even King's Men can end up in the Red Castle if they possess unpermitted magic.'

'So I'm safe?'

'Only time will tell. For now I have another job for you, in the Commons.'

'Oh, already?'

'A letter was waiting for me when I entered to the Sparrow this morning. It was paid in advance and seemed to be a time sensitive matter.'

'What do I have to do?'

'It is your specialty, house robbery. It is the large building just before the gate to the Grey Market.'

'I know the place. It belongs to one of the master smiths.'

'Not just any of the smithies either. Black John, the man who forges all the weapons for the King's Men.'

'What am I stealing?'

'The letter said a jewelled bracelet.'

'I'll be back with it soon.' Tess started heading for the stairs before Jack stopped her.

'You might want to hide that dagger. You do not want that kind of attention right now, and try to cover your hair.'

Tess had put on one of Jack's old leather jackets and had its hood over her head.

She was standing under the arch that merged the Market with the Commons. It was a decent vantage point for her to survey the surroundings. Black John's house had only one door and it was in plain view of the most crowded part of this district.

Pushing through the stream of people she made her way around the building. The tall wall that separated the two districts cast a shadow over this side of the house. It took only a few moments for her to find a window, although it was on the second floor. Black John was one of the more successful residents of the Commons, which was obvious from the size of his home and from the fact that it was constructed using stone and wood, similar to the houses of Old

Town.

Tess put a foot on one of the stones in the wall and lifted herself up. Slowly, but surely she managed to scale the side of the building until she could see through the window on the second floor. She grabbed the window frame with one hand and with the other she pulled out the dagger from inside the jacket.

'Is anyone inside?'

'The house is empty,' answered the voice.

She turned the dagger in her hand and slammed the hilt into the bottom of the window as hard as she could. The glass shattered and she dropped the dagger inside, so she could use her free hand to open the window latch.

After she had opened the window completely she crawled inside the house. The room she entered was dark, but after a moment her eyes had adjusted. She picked up the dagger and fastened it in her belt, and then started looking through the rooms.

Her heart was pounding in her chest even though the dagger had told her no one was here. Ever since her first house robbery she had gotten addicted to the suspense. The feeling that anyone could catch her in the act was exhilarating.

She did not find the bracelet in any of the rooms on the second floor and so she went downstairs. The staircase creaked with every step that she took, and she almost tripped as one of the steps nearly came off.

The main room she entered looked more like a workshop than a home. An anvil sat in the corner next to an assortment of tools. Light shone in through a window in the far end of the room and on a table just beneath the window laid the jewelled bracelet.

Tess made sure that no one could see her from the outside as she grabbed the bracelet. She put it inside a hidden pocket in the old leather jacket.

As she ascended the staircase she made sure to avoid the broken step and she exited the house through the same way she had entered.

Confidently she walked back into the mass of people and headed back towards Beggar's Corner.

After a while the voice spoke to her.

'You are being followed.'

'How many?' whispered Tess.

'Two.'

'Do you recognise them?'

'Yes. One of them followed you from the tavern.'

'Why didn't you warn me earlier?'

'We did not realise that he was following you until now. He hides his presence well.'

Tess bit her lip and took a turn that led further into the Commons, instead of going out into the open Hangman's Square.

'What about the other one?'

'He is likely looking for what we took.'

She started running. If a King's Man was following her she had to get away. Even with the dagger, she doubted that she could best him.

It was a long time since she had last been in the Commons and while she was sure that she could outrun her pursuers, she was afraid of getting lost in the twisted streets and alleyways.

As she ran and constantly changed direction, she started to wonder who the other pursuer was. It made sense that the King's Man would find her on his own as he could not ask others for help when it regarded a prohibited enchanted weapon.

Tess had stopped in a dead end to catch her breath. The buildings here were not very tall and if necessary she could climb onto the rooftops to escape.

'Do you think the King's Man set up this job to track me down?'

'It would be a clever strategy,' said the dagger.

'Are they still following me?'

'We do not sense their presence at the moment.'

She sighed in relief.

'Which way do I go from here to get back to Hangman's Square?'

A few moments later Tess had made her way back to the gate that led from the Commons into the large square. She did her best to hide in masses of people and as soon as she got into Hangman's Square she ducked into an alleyway.

'Wait here.'

'Why?'

'Someone is approaching.'

She dashed into the cover of a building and listened as footsteps echoed through the alley.

'Tess, are you here?'

She poked her head out from her cover. 'Jack?'

'I have been looking for you. We have to get back to the Sparrow.'

'I know. The job was a trap.'

'Indeed. I thought it was quite strange that we got a job paid in advance, usually our clients want to see the item before they pay.'

'Wait. Were you the one who followed me from the tavern?'

'You saw me?'

'Well I—'

'He is here,' the voice interrupted her.

Sound of rustling armour filled up the air around them, and footsteps from behind became louder and louder.

'You are surrounded,' said a raspy voice. His familiar golden hair and hard blue-green eyes sent a shock through Tess' body.

'It's him,' she whispered.

Tess looked behind them trying to spot an escape route, but three scruffy-looking guards with swords drawn were staring back at her.

'What do you want?' Jack said. His voice was surprisingly calm, but she was sure he already had a plan.

The King's Man started walking towards them, his silver cuirass gleaming in the sun. 'You know what I want, thief.'

'We do not have it anymore,' Jack replied.

'Who has it then?'

The King's Man was almost within an arm's reach and the guards behind them had also started advancing.

'Our clients value our discretion, I am afraid I cannot tell you.'

Jack smiled mockingly at the man before him, and then lifted his arm in the air with his palm open.

'Close your eyes,' he whispered.

She closed her eyes and through her eyelids sensed a piercing light. The men around her screamed and she felt a great heat beside her. She opened her eyes to see Jack punching the King's Man in the face with a burning hand.

'Come on!' he yelled at Tess, and the two of them ran out of the alleyway back into the open square.

Other guards that had been alerted by the commotion started chasing them as the pair crossed through the busy city centre. They hurried into the cover of the alleyways and hidden streets at the opposite end of the Hangman's Square, near the Anvil district gate. Several guards followed them into the narrow pathways that many denizens of Modai called home.

Tess and Jack ran as fast as they could. Tess' small and slender frame was the exact opposite of Jack's sturdy and muscular one. His appearance had always puzzled Tess. When she had one day asked about it, he had told her that it was a ruse, *'No one will think I am a thief if I do not look the*

part.' He was right. His muscular body and dark-brown leather attire were more akin to an enforcer or a mercenary, but when it came down to it Jack was the best thief Tess knew of.

They dodged in and out of the familiar alleyways of Hangman's Square. The common guards were not known for their ability to chase down thieves in the complex maze of the city, so it was not long before the sound of heavy footsteps faded.

They kept on running, as the guards would most likely alert others, stationed near the city gate.

Most of the small alleyways in Hangman's Square were abandoned except for the rats and small birds. The buildings here were home to those rich enough to escape Beggar's Corner, but too poor to live in the Commons. Amongst the stacked, uniform stone houses a few shops were nestled into tight spaces.

They ran through the labyrinth of alleyways and small streets alongside the city wall. Beyond the tall stone structure lay green hills and farmland. The plains that surrounded the capital of Modai were vast and stretched from the Dead Sea east of the city to the Elder's Forest in the west.

They stopped at last, breathing quickly. Tess sat down on the hard cobblestone ground and rested her back against the great wall, while Jack stood on the opposite side of the alleyway.

'What did you do to them?' Tess asked.

'I will explain once we get out of this city,' Jack replied, in a tone that bartered no argument.

'For now we need to think about how to leave the city.'

'Where do we go? I don't know any cities out there.'

'I think it would be wisest travelling to Simer.'

'Simer?'

'It is a small village not too far from here.'

He paced back and forth in thought. 'Yes, Simer is our best option. I know someone there, who might be willing to give us food and shelter, at least for a while.'

The sun was right above their heads now, the dry heat of Seed bearing down on them.

'We won't get to Simer,' Tess said. 'If the guards who followed us have any idea what they're doing, they'll have warned the whole garrison by the city gate.'

She leant her head back against the wall and looked up at the sky. For a time she sat staring blankly at the cloudless blue, until Jack broke the silence. 'We make them move away from the city gate then.'

They stood at the mouth of the alley. In front of them people were going about their lives as usual. The alley that they had followed opened into the street where the city gate was. It was busy at this time of the day, with horse-drawn wagons coming into the city carrying vegetables, grain,

metal and other items, and empty ones leaving. Many people were following the main street in Hangman's Square to get to Sober Man's Retreat. Here they would spend the next half day drinking away the earnings of the morrow's work. Across the street from the tavern lay the garrison. It was not a very fortified building, but it did not need to be as Modai had not been attacked from the outside for many centuries. The building's exterior was a blend of common leafwood and grey stones.

Jack pointed to the garrison. 'This will draw their attention.'

He took up a stance of a fighter and clenched his right hand into a fist. His hand started glowing and red flames licked across his skin. He then punched the air and sent a fireball roaring across the street. It avoided all of the pedestrians and collided with the garrison's wall, immediately covering it in fire.

People nearby screamed, and the guards at the gate ran to defeat the flames.

'Now is our chance!' Jack said, and grabbed Tess by the wrist. She had no choice but to follow him.

One of the older guardsmen had not gone to the garrison, no, he had stayed atop the wall next to the gate instead. He was smart enough to know that buildings did not catch fire by themselves.

Amongst the disorder he watched two people running through the gate below him. He took the bow that hung from his right shoulder and from the quiver on his back, removed a long thin wooden arrow. He placed the arrow on the string of the bow, breathed in and then out, pulled the string back and took aim. Then he let it loose.

Tess and Jack pelted down the gravel road that led away from Modai. Fear of being caught kept them going, even as every muscle objected.

Tess turned her head and grinned at him. Jack had not seen that wicked look for many years. In that same moment a look of horror paled Tess' face. She opened her mouth, but no sound came.

Her legs collapsed under her body and because of her speed she landed hard on the ground. From her lower back, protruded a thin arrow. Blood was already colouring her white tunic and the dagger that was usually in her belt, now lay in front of her. Jack skidded to a stop and rushed to her side.

Time had been very slow as the guard watched his arrow soar through the air and hit the target a long way down the road. He stood still for a moment watching the consequences of his actions.

It would have been an amazing shot, if it had not been for the fact that he had aimed for the burly looking man.

He turned to shout at the guards behind him. Had he not been a captain and a figure of authority, the guards would not have left the burning garrison to respond to his call.

Jack bent over Tess, who lay on the ground. She was still alive, as her chest expanded and retracted in short, ragged breaths.

On the horizon guards were running towards them. Jack stood up. He was done running. He extended his right arm with the palm facing him. The palm turned dark red as a small flame lit from its centre. The little flame danced and started to grow.

Jack felt a cold hand on his left shoulder. He turned his head and saw Tess, only it was not the Tess he knew. Her body was coated in darkness so black that nights would have envied it. The shade had no visible features. Only the outlines indicated that a person was within. He knew it was Tess though, he knew it was her even though it did not look like her. The shade turned its head away and looked at the approaching guards.

In its right hand Jack beheld the dagger, but it was not enveloped in the strange darkness. The only noticeable change in the weapon was that there was no longer dark smoke inside the orb attached to the pommel.

In the time it takes to blink, the cold on Jack's shoulder had vanished, and the shade had covered the distance between him and the guards.

The shade moved too fast for Jack to follow it with his eyes. In one moment it sliced the stomach of a guard and then burrowed its dagger in another. It moved from guard to guard, cutting and stabbing them with the dark-golden dagger until there was but one left: the old captain with the bow.

The shade stopped and gazed at him. He did not run. He just stood still, trembling as he faced the walking nightmare.

The featureless shade approached the old guard slowly. The captain took up his bow once more. Carefully he placed another arrow on the string. The shade came closer. The man's trembling hands made him drop the arrow and he frantically knelt to pick it up, but it was too late. The shade stood over him. From his kneeling position he looked up into the dark nothingness, his eyes were fixed on the monster before him.

The old guard struggled upright and looked straight at the shade. His hands did not tremble as he let go of the bow, nor as the shade pierced his flesh with its spiked arm. No word or sound was uttered from his lips, when the arm broke through his ribcage and impaled him. He was already dead as the shade lifted him up into the air. It tossed his limp body to lie with his fellow

guardsmen, with their stares and frozen expressions.

The shade returned to Jack and stood before him. Gradually the darkness receded into the shade's right hand, where it seeped back into the orb on the pommel of the dagger, and Tess was visible once more.

She looked blankly at Jack for a moment and then fell to the ground. Soon the road was covered in the blood from her wound.

Chapter Four

He signalled for Martin to follow and with careful steps he trailed the man.

The stones that made up these walls looked delicate, yet the place had stood, steadfast against wind and weather, for more than two-thousand years. It was a legend that was well known in the land of Heimyal. The legend told of a great King who had once walked these halls, built according to his own design. He had united the lands of Heim and Yal together under one monarchy, but his success had been short-lived as his sons had rebelled against him. The King had died defending his great castle and the two sons had once more split Heim and Yal.

Martin was led through rooms neatly decorated with lavish silks and intricate patterns on every stone and wood surface. The castle almost felt like it was suspended in time as every little detail of it had been preserved perfectly for thousands of years. The air itself felt exquisite and was something only found in places of greatness.

The pair entered the throne room. Martin thought it was strange that the primary room of the castle was so deep inside. In the eastern lands where he was from, Kings had their throne rooms at the front of their castles to make it easier to host travellers, Nobles, commoners or whoever might visit.

The throne in the middle of the room looked strange. It was wrapped in dark leather and seemed very out of place. This was surely a change implemented by the castle's new residents, who had a liking for the darkness, a liking that was reflected in their garments and in their cold eyes.

The grand hall was not empty Martin noted, in fact it could not have been more crowded. There were by Martin's count at least thirty black clad men and women here, and all of them were staring at him.

On the throne sat a pale man with long dark hair. He had an aura of understanding, yet at the same time of Pride, and Pride it must be, Martin reflected, that would lead a man to take a King's throne with no title to give him the right.

The man on the throne spoke with a powerful voice. 'Welcome to our family, Martin Grey.'

Tess opened her eyes. A fierce pain came from her wound and sweat dripped from her forehead. She looked around the unfamiliar room. It was not her home, nor was it Jack's and from the silence outside, neither was it anywhere in Modai.

She tried to rise to a sitting position, but the pain made her lie down again.

'You need to allow your wound to heal before you start walking about,' Jack's voice said.

She turned her head. He was sitting in a corner, reading a book.

'Where are we, Jack?' she asked in a broken voice.

'Simer,' he responded.

She gritted her teeth and tears streamed down her cheek.

'The pain will be gone soon,' Jack promised.

Tess lay staring at a crack in the ceiling, when Jack returned with a wooden bowl in his hands and a spoon sticking out of his side pocket.

She took hold of the damp bowl, noting that its contents were lukewarm.

'What's this?' She eyed the curious substance inside, and moved the bowl around, analysing the way the substance flowed. It stank like something that had been left out in the sun for too long. It was neither thick and chunky like porridge, nor thin and watery as a soup might be.

Tess wrinkled her nose. 'Do I have to eat it?'

'You had better,' Jack said in an offended tone.

Tess dipped the spoon into the sludge and scooped up a dollop. She stared at it in disgust as it dripped back into the bowl.

Jack snatched the spoon, scooped up another portion and stuck it into 'Tess' mouth. She grimaced as Jack pulled away the spoon and then swallowed.

'Ugh! Awful.'

'You know, I spent a long time making that for you.'

'I'm sorry, but you're a terrible cook,' Tess said and laughed a little, but stopped when Jack scowled at her.

'Just eat your food, you child.'

'I'm not a child!' She pointed her tongue at him in defiance.

For days Tess lay motionless in the bed, waiting for her wound to mend.

Jack was by her side most of time, but every now and again he would leave, and an elderly woman named Lydia would bring her food instead. Thankfully her cooking was much better than his. She never spoke to the old woman, but she assumed that she was the friend Jack had mentioned back in Modai.

The last time she had been in a bed this long was after her mother had passed away.

After some days Tess started having vivid flashbacks to a time when her mother was still alive.

'So,' Sarin started and hugged the little girl at her side. 'What story do you want to hear?'

'Valeria Thorn and the Blue Knight!' the silver-haired girl said.

'Again?' She wrinkled her nose and ran a hand through her red hair.

'Please, Mother,' begged the child.

'All right, then. As you wish.'

The little girl cheered.

The mother pulled the sheet up over them and got the Big Book of Tales from its hiding place underneath the bed. She opened it and traced her fingers deftly across the uneven pages until she found the right story, and cleared her throat as she always did before putting on a narrator's voice.

The child snuggled up close so that she could see the colourful pictures.

The first page had the title in elaborate letters at the top with a picture beneath showing a brown-haired woman wielding two swords. Next to the woman was the Blue Knight, kneeling at her feet.

'That is Valeria.' The mother pointed at the woman. Valeria wore a dark jacket that ended at her lower back and had white trousers that were a bit too big for her slender figure.

'I know that,' the little girl said. She was well-versed in this story's pictures.

'It was after the last rain of Fall,' the mother began.

The little girl fidgeted slightly in the big bed and when she had found the best position she relaxed.

The day her mother had started showing signs of an illness had been a cold, rainy day in the end of Fall.

'Tessa, can you bring me some water?' asked the red-haired mother from the bed. Her eyes were dark and sweat dripped down her face.

The little girl grabbed a cup and went outside to fill it with water from the rain collector.

The mother smiled at her daughter after emptying the cup.

'Mother?'

'Yes, dear?'

'Shall I read you a story?'

'That would be nice.'

The little girl jumped off the bed with excitement and found the great book under the bed. With all her strength she lifted it onto the bed and then sat down next to her mother so they both could see the pictures.

'It was after the last rain of Fall, the young... erhm.'

'Duellist,' the mother helped.

'The young duellist was staring at the city before her. Rivendale,' she said to herself.'

'That's right.'

'Carts and wagons passed her as she stood there admiring the gate.'

The girl looked at her mother. 'Are you sleeping?'

'No, go ahead. I'm just resting my eyes.'

'Are you going to get better soon?'

'Yes, very soon,' said the mother. 'Just before the end of Fall.'

The girl smiled. 'Can we see the Harvest festival again this year?'
'Of course,' Sarin replied. She sat up and started coughing into her hands.
'I'll get you some more water,' said the daughter.

Memories of her mother had helped Tess survive horrible nights in Modai. Even when she had gotten really sick their time together had still been precious.

Some years after her mother's death, she had convinced Jack to read her a story from the Big Book of Tales, but it had not been same. Still, she was upset that she had not brought the book with her, regardless of the fact that she knew every single story from start to finish.

Tess examined her wound many times as she lay in the bed. She was no expert, but she knew that the arrow that had torn through her body should have killed her.

In the first days, the pain made her go limp when she tried to move, but as time progressed she was able to sit up for longer and could move her legs without collapsing.

When Jack sat in the chair watching over her, he usually read in a book, but when Tess started showing signs of a recovery, he began carving a walking stick for her. He bought a long piece of rosewood from a salesman in a town nearby and worked on it to make it suitable for Tess' height. The grip of the staff was made to match her hand perfectly. When he had finished it, Tess was still not fully able to stand, but she lay with the staff at her side and occasionally studied the strange symbols Jack had carved into it.

When she asked him about the symbols, he told her they meant 'good luck', but Tess recognised what he was. She remembered how Jack had beaten the King's Man with his bare hands and set the Modai garrison on fire.

She had heard stories about magicians, mainly from the Big Book of Tales, but also from drunkards in the taverns of Modai.

Many of them were grim and often revolved around the macabre rituals magicians undertook to achieve their powers. The most common rumour was that magicians gorged on the raw flesh of beasts and drank the pure blood of the white stags that inhabit the southern part of Heimyal.

Tess realised that she had never met a magician before Jack, and he hardly fit the common conception. He did not wear a silken robe that flowed in the wind, or a pointed hat that almost toppled on its side because of its weight and he certainly did not have a long grey beard.

She laughed quietly to herself imagining Jack with such an outfit.

A couple of days after the staff was finished Jack came to her bedside with a curious glass flask.

"This new medicine should ease your pain," he said and handed it to Tess. She held up the flask

and looked doubtfully at the red liquid inside, then, in one fluid motion, emptied the contents down her throat. She made a guttural sound of disapproval. 'It tastes like stale mead.'

Jack picked up the dark-red staff and handed it to Tess. 'Give it a try.'

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and with the staff in hand, stood up for the first time in twenty-three days.

The staff was light, yet sturdy enough to support her weight.

'Where did you get this?' She looked at Jack, who stood on the other side of the bed.

'I bought it. It is a special sort of wood from the Summer Isles.'

'Oh.' Tess sat back down on the bed again. 'That's where my mother was from.'

'Come. Let us go outside,' Jack encouraged.

She limped behind Jack whose uncombed hair made him look as if he had just woken up. The hallway outside of the bedroom was small and the ceiling was so low that even Tess had to stoop slightly. There was more space just in front of the door and she realised that it was here the food was made. Just to the left of the door was a cooking-fire with an iron pot hanging over it and next to it lay an old bedroll. Since Jack seemed to sleep in the chair and Tess had the only bed, it was likely that Lydia had to sleep here. To the right was a closed door, and as they passed it Tess could clearly smell herbs and strange aromas. Curious she walked up to it wanting to find out what was inside, but Jack grabbed her arm and led her outside into the fresh air.

Simer was a lot smaller than Tess had guessed. It had only four other houses, all of which looked like they were owned by farmers. These farmers likely worked tirelessly to provide a scanty amount of corn for the big city of Modai, where the rich would fill their bellies and never even once consider how much work went into bringing them the food they ate so heartily.

'It is a poor-looking place,' Jack said as though he read her mind. 'The houses were built long ago and all look as though they will fall apart if the wind from the South blows hard enough.'

'Why don't they just build new ones then?' Tess asked. She was leaning on her staff for support.

Jack looked out over the houses, 'They have not got the coin to pay for the timber and stone needed to build a new house. Even if they went out into the forest and chopped down the trees themselves, I promise you that one of the cruel King's fine men would come around and demand a toll.'

'That's awful.'

'It is how things are, unfortunately, but enough of that, let me see you use those legs of yours.'

'How's the wound, child?' A frail voice asked.

Tess was sitting on the grass outside the house, and looked up at the woman who had treated

her.

'It's fine,' she said and thought for a bit. 'Are you really Jack's friend? I don't see you talk much to each other.'

Lydia smiled and turned her gaze to Jack, who was leaning up against a tree a short distance away. 'Friend? No. I'm his mother.'

'His mother?' Tess looked at Jack as well.

'Well, I suppose that since he calls himself 'Jack', it's no surprise he didn't tell you about me either.'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't think it's in my right to tell you. In time maybe he will tell you himself.'

The old woman stared at Jack for a bit then sighed in a way only mothers do.

'Are you hungry, child?'

Tess nodded and they went back inside the house.

Chapter Five

The sweat dripped from his face. His dagger was poised in the air, awaiting his opponent's attack. It came then, their sharp blades meeting in a loud clang.

'You have a strong arm and a skill for daggers, Martin,' the man with the long hair said. His long thin sword hung by his right side and trembled from the last blow.

'How about we make this more interesting?'

'What do I get when I win?' Martin smiled shyly.

'I will give you another book to study. One of the special ones,' Lucien said, and laughed, 'but only if you win.'

They looked at each other, both determined to win, though Martin had more to gain. He had waited for a chance to learn more about this strange magic, and after a year of undoubted loyalty to the cause, it was time for him to advance in rank.

They walked some distance away from one another and took up their fighting stances.

From the palm of Lucien's right hand, darkness spread. It coated his hand first and then continued along his sword. It was hard to tell, from where Martin stood, but the sword appeared to be longer now. Martin considered his own weapon, the dagger. Up close it had the advantage, but his opponent's sword had the reach that might not allow him to get near. Martin concentrated and allowed dark things to enter his mind. The darkness travelled along his veins and spread out through both his hands.

The long-haired man charged him, his sword pulled back, ready for a deadly stab. Martin stood still. Lucien jabbed his black sword at him so swiftly that it would have hit Martin in the shoulder if he had not been faster. To Lucien's surprise the tip of the sword lunged past Martin, and he caught the shadowy blade with his left hand and with his right hand thrust the dagger directly at the throat of his opponent. The pointed end of Martin's dagger stopped and only pricked the skin on Lucien's neck.

'You are getting slow, Lucien. Maybe you should consider eating less,' he said, grinning.

Lucien stared at the blade. 'You are too fast for me, I must admit.'

The darkness faded from them both and Martin let him go.

Lucien sighed and muttered something. From within his tunic he withdrew a neat black book. It had no title and the pages were as white as bone.

'Here, take it.'

Martin grabbed his prize and bowed to his master.

'Do not read through the night. Remember that you have a task tomorrow!' Lucien shouted after him as he

headed for his quarters.

Tess awoke to the sound of an argument. With the door to the bedroom closed, the noise coming from the outside was muffled and barely audible, yet loud enough to wake her from sleep.

She got out of the bed and opened the door silently.

'I told you it is too dangerous!' Jack said in a raised voice.

'Well nobody is doing anything about it!' Lydia retorted.

'I will go and look for them, do not worry.' Jack was about to say something more, but noticed the open door, 'Tess. Come on out.'

Tess rubbed her eyes. 'What are you arguing about?'

'It is nothing,' Jack said, but she could tell he was lying. 'Eat some food. I will be back later.'

Dawn turned to morning and morning to day, and finally, day turned to afternoon.

'When's Jack supposed to come back?' Tess asked the old woman, as they sat outside on the grass. A flock of black ravens flew over their heads and settled on an open field of grass some distance away.

'I don't know,' Lydia said, keeping her gaze on the forest entrance nearby.

Tess followed her eyes. The trees were black-barked oak and in this gloomy afternoon light they reminded Tess of her recurring dream.

'Is Jack in there?'

'Yes.'

Tess' eyes widened, 'But that's the Elder's Forest!'

The woman smiled at her.

'He should not be in there! People go missing after entering the forest!'

'You should not believe in everything you are told, little child,' she said in an indifferent tone, but Tess could tell from her face that she too dreaded the forest.

At dusk, the pair decided to go inside. There was nothing they could do for Jack, except prepare a meal for when he returned.

The shadows grew long and turned to darkness. The little white moon came to life and its dull light was the only thing illuminating the night.

Tess awoke in the middle of the night after having a bad dream and crawled to the edge of the bed, where her trusty staff leant. She lifted it onto her lap to study the carvings below the round handle. There were only two kinds of engravings, but they repeated all the way around in a tight

pattern. The first type was a skilfully carved equilateral triangle. The second was a tilted half-circle with a small triangle within. The etchings were coal black, as if burnt into the red wood.

A line ran from the engravings at the top, to the flat end. Tess traced the line with her finger, feeling the smooth edge of the groove. As her fingertip reached the end of the staff, she turned it on end, and noticed something on the bottom, a circle, or more precisely, an engraving in the form of a circle, coal black like the rest of the engravings.

As she studied the engravings, contemplating their meaning, a terrified shout from Lydia interrupted her thoughts.

"Tess? Tess! Come here fast!"

Tess ran, or rather she tried to run and instead ended up face down on the floor. She got to her feet again, took hold of the staff with her right hand and clumsily went out into the main room.

The old woman was pulling something heavy. When Tess got closer, she realised with horror that it was the limp body of Jack, and much to her fright blood poured from an almost perfect hole in his left shoulder.

'Help me get him inside,' commanded the old woman.

With some difficulty the two of them dragged into the centre of the main room. He seemed unconscious, but he would grimace if they knocked his injured shoulder. They kicked the bedroll and cooking pot off to the side to clear some space and lay Jack down, then the old woman ran into the room with the closed door, and she heard the sound of drawers opening and closing.

Tess sat beside Jack, and tried to be patient.

There was a humming amidst the commotion, slowly it got louder and louder in her mind.

The dagger was calling for her. It would usually hum when she was not close to it, but this was different. Its melody was urgent, and rapid.

Lydia was still messing around behind the closed door as Tess hurried into the bedroom, where the dagger was now making a sound so terrible that she felt the danger it sensed.

As she ran to the dagger her right foot slipped and the staff fell from her grip. She reached out and grabbed the dagger just as something burst through the front door of the little house.

Instead of landing flat on the floor, Tess spun her body, with the dagger in her hand, and landed with both feet solidly on the ground. She dashed into the main room, where a black featureless creature was hunched over Jack. Its right arm was raised in the air and where its hand should have been, was a long spike. It seemed similar to a man, but the horns protruding from its head told her it was anything but. Before the dark shadowy being could strike Jack, Tess jumped at it, pushing it through the doorway. They both landed on the ground outside, and but Tess quickly summersaulted backwards onto her feet. As she turned the creature also rose from

the ground, ready for her next move.

Tess charged with her dagger extended. The creature held its arms back preparing to strike, then, as she got closer, it swung its arm at her and she plunged the dagger into it cutting it along its length.

The creature gave an eerie shriek, not a scream, not a sound, but a thought that made her head cringe.

As she spun around to face it again, Tess noticed something strange. She seemed separated from her own being, as if she was controlling her body, but without the pain from her wound and without any emotion.

The shadowy creature was looking at her. Along its right arm was a wound similar to a tear in cloth. No blood and no bone. Tess felt nothing but an overpowering will to live.

She lunged at the creature again and with every attack and every strike, the darkness from the dagger spread over her skin, bit by bit, until she was her enemy's equal in appearance.

Every pass and every strike with the dagger landed true on her enemy, shredding it until it became frail.

Every attack from the creature seemed weak and easy to deflect, in fact not once had it cut her with its lethal-looking spikes.

A voice entered Tess' mind. *'Many more will follow. I am but a scout.'*

'Kill,' Mhran commanded.

Tess pulled the dagger back and rushed her shadowy opponent.

Tess regained consciousness a few moments later. She was lying on the ground and her thin white tunic was smeared with dirt.

She rose to a sitting position, turned her head, and almost screamed with dread at the sight of a strange creature lying beside her. It was dead or at least she hoped it was, because it had been shredded in ways that would have killed a man twice.

As she stared at the creature, it evaporated into the air.

It was not until Tess stood up that she noticed she was still holding the dagger tightly in her right hand. The dark smoke inside the orb was shifting randomly.

'What was that thing?'

'A shadow spirit,' the voice said. **'A thing similar to us, yet very different.'**

Tess looked at the orb, 'How do you mean different?'

'It is difficult to explain, but all you need to know is that, where it will kill you, we will not.' There was a momentary silence. **'The man is hurt, go see to him. He may not have much time left.'**

Tess staggered back to the little house. The fight with the shadow creature had taken her a long way away from where it had begun.

'Demons! Why won't this work!' a voice cursed inside. The old woman was sitting to the left of Jack's body, surrounded by a plethora of flasks and vials containing liquids of the most horrible colours. She was mixing their contents and pouring some on Jack's wounded shoulder, while mumbling wordless spells. After her final word, the liquid smeared around Jack's wound glowed red for a moment, but as nothing happened, she cursed and began mixing anew.

'You cannot mend the wound,' Tess said in a dry and exhausted voice. There was nothing they could do for Jack.

'What do you know about alchemy?' Lydia said bitterly.

Tess sat down on a chair next to Jack. 'Nothing,' she admitted. She wanted to cry in despair, but her body would not let her.

For a moment the woman was silent then she bit her lower lip and said in low voice, mostly directed towards herself, 'I'd hate to have to resort to this.' She sighed, 'Child, could you help me hold down his chest?'

Tess got up and knelt down on the right side of Jack, placing both her hands on his chest. He was breathing heavily and occasionally he coughed as only a sick man would.

Lydia laid both her hands on Jack's wound and Tess watched his face contort. Her lips moved, however no sound came from her mouth.

The dagger at Tess' side began to alter its usual melody. It now sounded distorted and twisted, as though it was under pressure. Tess' eyes widened in amazement, as clear white light shone from the palms of the old woman's hands. The light was brief and when it disappeared, it was as though the room was left darker than before. Afterwards the dagger returned to its normal low humming.

It was a new day and Jack lay peacefully on the bedroll. He had not moved once, but he was still breathing.

Tess sat beside him wondering what he was dreaming about. The old woman appeared at the door and looked at her.

'He'll be fine.'

Tess turned to look at the woman. 'What did you do to him?' She was not sure what she had witnessed. 'Did you do that to me as well?'

Lydia looked surprised for a moment, then smiled, 'Yes, child, I did.' She looked at Jack and then back at Tess again, 'If I hadn't, you would both be dead.' The reply sent a shiver down Tess' spine. She went silent and turned back to Jack.

No trace remained of his wound, not even a scar. It bothered her that he was left without any wound at all, when she still carried hers. Was the magic Jack's mother had used more potent on him because he was her child or simply because she had wanted it to be? Tess hoped it was the former.

Chapter Six

Martin studied the artefact carefully. If the story was true it would be more than fifty-thousand years old. It was of course impossible for this to be true. Still, the book had been right about the ruins of a castle that had been marked by shadows unknown, but no books or scrolls dated back more than five-thousand years, and even those were never in as good a condition as the black book that Lucien had given to him.

As Martin sat and studied the dark-golden dagger, his little finger touched the glass orb attached to its hilt. A quake rushed over the little room and it grew blacker than sod. For a moment Martin thought he had lost his sight, but then the room was there again, although it was now blanketed in a dark-grey shadow, as though lit by some strange lantern.

'Who beckons?' asked a strange voice.

Martin looked at the dagger in amusement.

'Interesting,' he said to himself.

'Who asks?'

*Like a warm breeze, the voice flowed across the room, **'Mhran, prisoner of this orb. What do you ask of us, Martin Grey, assassin of the East?'***

Martin looked at the dagger, now less amused. 'How do you know my name, spirit?'

'Your name, your history, your dreams, all of this is in your thoughts. We hear those thoughts and are enlightened by them.'

'What did you mean when you said, 'What do I ask of you?''

'You wield the dagger. The spell that binds us to this orb, bids us to obey the wielder.'

Martin considered this for a moment, 'Well then, I bid you to appear before me.'

There was a flicker in the dark-grey colour that covered the room.

'We cannot. The spell does not allow us to leave this prison.'

'I see,' Martin said. 'If I wanted, could I release you?'

'As our wielder your wish to free us along with breaking the orb would suffice.'

Martin was about to continue his questioning, when two knocks on the door interrupted him.

'Hide yourself,' he commanded.

The dark-grey shadows that had painted the room disappeared. The dagger, which rested in Martin's palm dissolved in the exact moment that Lucien entered the room.

Tess awoke, sitting in the chair next to Jack. His bedroll in front of her was unoccupied. She got

to her feet, rubbing her sore neck, which had been bent at a horrible angle as she slept.

With a firm grip she took hold of the rosewood staff, which leant against the chair. She used it pull herself up to a standing position, then she leant on it as she walked out of the little room.

Outside the room, Jack was putting his leather jacket on in front of a worn mirror.

The old woman stood silent, observing him from the side room.

'Where are you going?' Tess demanded.

'Out.' Jack kept his eyes fixed on the mirror.

'What? But you—'

'You are coming with me.'

'I am?' Tess was excited, yet puzzled by the speed of Jack's recovery.

'You are,' Jack confirmed.

'But—'

'No excuses.' He turned to look at her, 'I could use the help. I really could.'

'When are we leaving?'

'Get your jacket and we can go now. Leave the staff here, you do not need it.'

Tess shrugged on her jacket and crossed the room to Lydia.

She forced a smile. 'Thank you.'

'What for?' Lydia asked.

'Everything. Jack's too stubborn to say it, but without you we wouldn't have made it.'

'I hope you don't get yourselves in trouble again,' she said, with a tired look on her face, while clutching her left shoulder.

'We'll try not to.'

Jack headed out of the door, 'Let us go, Tess.'

'Coming,' she answered.

As Tess turned, Lydia grabbed her arm. 'Your dagger, it's not from this world. The darkness within it is evil, corrupt. Do not let it control you.'

'I—'

'Tess! Hurry up,' Jack called from outside.

The old woman gave her a small push. 'Go.'

Tess stopped in the door and looked back at the mother one last time. The old woman smiled awkwardly in return.

'What's the hurry?' she asked when she got outside.

'The sooner we get going the better,' Jack replied, and they set off into the forest.

The forest was covered in a shroud of darkness, something which the sunlight lacked the power

to pierce.

Jack had been leading the way for some time. They had not spoken a word to each other since they entered the forest. It was as though a single word between them would alert all the horrors of this place.

Jack was confidently tracking a path unknown to Tess, and she considered that he had to have a flawless memory, since he had not stopped once to look around. Though looking around would provide no clue of their position, at least not for Tess.

She had been reluctant to leave the staff behind, but she was slowly becoming more comfortable walking without it, although her stomach still ached a bit whenever she strained herself too hard to keep up with Jack. Tess wondered if the dagger had somehow mended her wound or whether it was the old mother's magic that had started to take effect.

After some time, Jack broke the silence.

'Over there.' He pointed to a figure, seated next to two trees.

As Tess got closer she retched at the sight. It was the corpse of a hunter, whose skin had turned blue-green and whose body was bloated to twice its size. Although she only looked briefly before she turned away to throw up, she recognised the importance of this man. For what had been his fatal wound was a perfect circle-shaped hole going all the way through his skull.

Jack approached as Tess leant against a tree wiping vomit off her boots.

'Are you alright? I should have warned you.'

'Is that how you found him?'

'Yes. Though not as—'

'Bloated?' she interrupted wryly.

'Indeed.' Jack laughed a little.

'What did you do after you found him?'

'After I found him, I went deeper into the forest.'

'And that's when the creature attacked you?'

'I think so, though I do not remember anything.'

Tess wondered how he had made it out of the forest, but then again he had not been struck a fatal blow like the hunter behind them.

'Why were you even out here to begin with?' Tess asked, dreading the answer.

'Do you remember the argument, which you so sneakily observed from the shadows?'

'I do.'

'Well, apparently three children have gone missing from nearby villages.'

'And you thought they'd be in the forest? Why?'

'You probably have not heard about this, but in the region outside of Modai 'The Descendants of Vorkan' are behind most abductions.'

'They live in here?' Tess looked around her, imagining monsters hiding in the darkness, and shuddered.

'They do,' Jack said. 'But that hunter was not killed by the Descendants. They usually string the bodies of their victims up in the trees at the edge of the forest.'

'Do they also murder children and string them up in trees afterwards?' Tess asked, trying not to picture it.

Jack looked away from Tess and into the heart of the forest. 'No, and I have actually never heard about them abducting children before. I think something else entirely is happening. Three missing children and the attacks on the hunter and me, there is definitely something off about this whole situation.'

'So why are we in this forest?'

'It is possible that the Descendants simply changed their ways, so I would like to find their camp and ask them about it.'

'What if it isn't them?'

'I am not sure. I promised Lydia that I would look into it, but if we find nothing at the Descendant camp, then I have done what I could.'

'You aren't going to keep looking for the children if we find nothing?'

Jack looked at her seriously. 'Tess, people go missing every day outside of Modai, they even go missing inside the city walls. It is not my job to find them. This is just me trying to repay my debt.'

Tess looked at her dagger as though it held all the answer to this riddle, but she dared not ask it.

Jack was building a little fire out of dry wood he had found in the forest bed.

He took a few steps back and then with a hand motion summoned a flame that quickly took hold of the wood.

'I can't believe you kept this secret from me for so long,' Tess said annoyed.

'I was planning on telling you.'

'When?'

He scratched his beard, 'After you moved out of Beggar's Corner.'

'Somehow I don't believe you.'

'Yeah, yeah, I get it,' he said dismissively. 'Speaking of secrets, do you mind telling me about that dagger? How long have you kept that hidden from me?'

'About two years.'

'I must have taught you well to keep such secrets even from me.'

'Well I didn't think you'd believe me, and it's enchanted. You would have made a big deal out of it.'

'It is unlike any enchantment I have ever seen, and it is a big deal. I mean you killed seven guards with it.'

'What?' she asked in disbelief.

'You do not remember? You were hit by that arrow and then you killed them all with the dagger.'

Her hands started trembling. She had killed without knowing, or was it the dagger that had taken control. Perhaps Lydia's words were true.

'Are you alright?'

'I'm alright,' she lied. 'I think I'll get some sleep.'

'Dream well,' Jack said.

Tess curled up with her face towards the little fire and closed her eyes. Thoughts raced around her head and the moon travelled far across the night sky before sleep came to her.

Jack sat with his back against a tree, looking at the fire and at Tess who lay quietly opposite him.

He found it strangely familiar that he could not recall his activities from the day before. It was as though whatever had happened simply did not exist in his memory. When he was a boy, he had fallen from a tree and the same thing had happened. He had awoken two days later with no memory of the event other than his foot slipping on a branch.

He knew he would have trouble sleeping. As always, his thoughts would keep the land of dreams at bay. He sighed and let his head fall back against the bark of the tree.

Jack awoke and yawned scratching at the stubble on his chin. Tess was still lying in the exact same position as the night before. It was, to Jack's eyes, as though nothing had changed and that it was in fact still night, except it was not, it was a new day, the slight breeze on his face told him as much. It was neither the warm wind of the midday nor the cold wind of the night, but rather the mild wind that in Heimyal told of the rise of the sun.

He sat still, feeling the forest around him, sensing its heart, the ever-roaming beasts and the alarming absence of birds. Something was upsetting the balance of these lands, but he could not sense what.

When Tess woke and sat up, Jack was fiddling with a bone.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

Jack did not stop, but kept mumbling inaudibly and carving into the bone.

She repeated herself, a bit louder this time, 'Jack, what are you doing?'

He stopped mumbling. 'Protection,' he said.

Tess wondered what they needed protection against, but did not ask.

For a moment both of them just looked at each other without saying anything.

'Well then,' Jack said and continued with his carving and mumbling.

Tess could not see the symbols carved into the bone, but doubted that it would make sense to her even if she could. Though that did not stop her from being curious.

She pulled out a piece of hard rye bread from the bag Jack had brought with him from Simer, and started chewing, while examining the forest. It was still impossible to tell which way they had come from or which way they were going. The dark trees looked the same whichever way she looked, and the soft leaf-covered ground did not provide any clues either.

The ominous darkness that lay across the forest made it impossible to see which way one might go to leave this forsaken place. Tess just hoped that Jack knew where they were going, as the prospect of being lost in this gloomy forest was not appealing.

Chapter Seven

'Mbran.'

'What asks the wielder?'

'Stop calling me that...' Martin replied, slightly annoyed.

'As you wish.'

'Do you have knowledge of magic?'

'We do. We are also aware of the reason for your question.'

'I never doubted that,' Martin said. *'Then you know of the creature Lucien has brought here, to this realm?'*

'We can sense it. It is a creature known to us, similar to us, yet different.'

'How do you mean different? Inferior?'

'It is inferior, yes. One might say that where we would be the wolf, it would be the cub. However, it is also different to us as man is different to demon kin,' the voice swept back and forth across the room.

'It is not like you then?'

'No, it is not.'

Tess awoke to the smell of burning meat. Jack was roasting what appeared to be a rabbit over their little campfire.

'Is it dawn?' She asked, rubbing her eyes.

'Dawn?' Jack said looking around him, 'it is just past noon.'

'Noon?' She did not know how Jack could tell.

Tess ate a piece of the rabbit meat she had pulled from the remains still hanging above the warm embers. On the other side of the campfire Jack nibbled at his piece, and stared at her with his eyes half-opened.

'What?' she mumbled with her mouth full of food.

'Nothing,' he said. 'I was just thinking how much you look like your mother.'

'My mother?' she said, mouth still full.

'Aye,' Jack replied thoughtfully, still looking at her.

Tess looked away into the forest.

'My mother had red hair, so how can I look like her?'

Jack shook his head. 'Not your hair, obviously. It is your face. You have her eyes, her features.'

'Oh. I still wonder why my hair is like this,' she said, running a hand through her silver-grey hair.

'Who knows? Could be some ancestor of yours was from a land where such hair is common.'

'You think so?'

'Honestly? I do not know, but there is much of Mondus I have yet to see.'

'I'd like to see the Summer Isles sometime.'

'Take me with when you go, yeah?' Jack said, smiling.

'I will,' she promised.

They set out into the forest again, leaving their burnt out campfire behind. Tess doubted they would come back to it. A few more steps into the darkness of the woods and it would be completely out of sight.

Jack was leading the way in silence, his steps in the soft earth barely audible to her. Sound was a strange thing in the forest, there were no birds chirping and singing, and the wind did not howl as it passed through the dense treeline. The only thing she could hear was the ominous creaking of the dark trees and a slight ruffle of leaves, she felt as if they were in a dark box cut off from the rest of the world.

'Jack?' Tess called.

He did not stop, but kept walking.

'What is it?'

'You seem very familiar with this place.'

He slowed down so she could walk next to him.

'I lived next to this forest my entire childhood and I have been here a few times since.'

'Is that why you know about the, erhm...'

'Descendants?'

'Yes.'

'When I studied magic my master brought me here once, to trade with those who dwell in the depths of these woods.'

'Trade?'

'Indeed, they have things not found anywhere else in Heimyal.'

'And you think they'll welcome us with open arms if we just find their camp?'

'That is what I am hoping. I want to ask them about the hunter and the missing children. They have to know about what happens in their woods.'

'You seem very sure that they aren't the ones who killed the hunter and took the children.'

'Well as I said yesterday, they tend to have a set way of dealing with outsiders. Their few murders are always the same, as if they are following ritualistic guidelines.'

'They don't sound like they would be friendly to us if we just showed up at their home.'

'It is hard to tell, really. The Descendants are very solitary and wary of outsiders, but I think they fear the wrath of the King, so they limit themselves.'

'They fear the King?'

'Yes, hundreds of years ago, a princess was kidnapped by the Descendants and the King's Men were brought into the forest, where they wiped out most of the clan. After that they stopped leaving the forest and became less hostile.'

'I hope you are right.'

They continued on their way for a while longer, trudging through the soft earth and leaves that covered it. When Tess started getting tired they stopped and set up camp.

She chewed on some bread, while staring into the flames of the fire Jack had made for them. She was not sure why he had brought her along, perhaps he had wanted to keep an eye on her or maybe he did truly need her help. While his words about the Descendants had been fairly positive, she suspected that he felt uneasy about this journey. He had after all been carving bones for their protection, whatever that meant. There was something he was not telling her, but she was afraid to ask.

After she had finished eating she laid down next to the fire, enjoying the heat in this cold and clammy place.

Jack had his back against the trunk of a tree while Tess slept, her body curled around their little campfire.

He was writing in his journal, something he did whenever he had trouble sleeping or when many thoughts crammed his head. The decorated bronze quill in his hand scribbled away, while he hummed a melody he had heard long ago. The quill was old and had been in his possession ever since he had studied to become a magician many years ago. He still remembered the day his mentor had handed it to him. '*One day you may pass this on as my father did to me and I have to you,*' he had told him.

Jack had often thought about sending Tess to live with her uncle, but since his death two years ago, he had come to realise that he was the only one Tess had left. Before she was born, her father had been murdered and no more than eight years later, her mother had died from a local pandemic. It seemed to him that the Grey family were cursed and he could not help but think that the dagger was somehow involved.

Tess awoke gasping as though she had been running. She rubbed her eyes and sat up.

'Can't sleep?' she asked, clearly tired enough to have no such problem herself.

Jack looked up from his journal, 'I have not been able to sleep much for the last couple of days.'

'Really?'

'It is not something that usually happens to me, but I think it is just the after-effects of the attack.'

Tess pictured Jack's body in the little house. The floor had been wet with blood from the circular wound going through his shoulder. She looked at him and he returned her gaze.

'What happened to the thing that attacked me?' Jack broke his stare and looked down at the journal in his lap. He had drawn a sketch of how he remembered the creature.

'I killed it,' Tess replied. She felt as though she had told a lie, since it had not really been her who had killed it. The dagger had taken control of her body and forced her to kill it. Or maybe that was just a lie she told herself.

'Hmm, how did you manage that?' Jack asked, but answered his own question before Tess had the chance. 'It was the dagger, was it not?'

Tess nodded.

'You know, I did not go down without a fight, I hit that thing with my flame, but nothing happened,' Jack said. 'It reacted as though I had just pricked it and I have seen what my flame can do to men, but this thing, it was unlike anything I have ever seen before.'

'The dagger says that it's a creature similar to it.'

'You think that they are from the same place?'

'I don't know,' Tess said.

Before either of them had a chance to say anything a distant noise made them both jump to their feet.

'What was that?' Jack asked.

Tess did not reply, but she had a bad feeling in her gut.

A few moments later a strange gust of wind blew at them from the heart of the forest, shaking the leaves on the trees.

Tess attached the dagger to her belt, her eyes scanning the forest.

She heard the roar before Jack did, and by the time Jack realised what it was, Tess had already started running in the opposite direction. She knew that roar. It was the thing that had haunted her for almost two years. In her dreams, a beast borne of dread and evil would always follow after the roar. It was a cruel hunter, as it intentionally let its victims know that it was coming for

them.

She heard Jack's voice call for her in the distance.

Tess could not see the trees that surrounded her. The horizon was faded and the forest was dark. There was the beating rhythm of her heart and the humming by her right hip where the dagger was attached to her belt.

Her feet hammered down upon the soft ground, and she heard it again. The dreadful howl. It was not from a wolf and not from a bear. It was from something bigger.

The sound caught her off guard and she looked back, just as her toe hooked under a branch lying on the ground. She landed on her knees, struggling to get up. Her heartbeat became more intense, more rapid. Her body was shaking in terror. The humming by her side grew louder.

She had little time to react as she heard it coming towards her. She was on her feet and looking back once again, but before she could react, the massive creature had passed her. She thought it would stop, but it kept running. Then came its tail. It grabbed her by the waist and swept her away.

She tried desperately to scream.

Chapter Eight

Martin looked at his chainmail in the bottom of the open chest. He sighed and began to pick it up, but stopped as the dagger started humming.

'What?'

'You do not need to wear this. It will do nothing more than slow you down.'

'Old habits die hard,' Martin said and put the chainmail back.

'Amusing,' the voice said.

'What is?'

'You actually believe that.'

Martin did not respond to the comment, but picked up the dagger.

'Will you lend me your strength for this very last task?'

'As you wish,' the voice said and disappeared.

The darkness started engulfing Martin's body as he opened the door and left his room.

'Wake up,' Jack whispered, poking Tess' shoulder.

She opened her eyes, but quickly closed them again to shield them from the sunlight above.

'What happened?' She asked, squinting at her surroundings.

They were in a poorly constructed wooden cage, but it was not the cage that kept them from escaping, but rather the giant beast outside of it. Veins were visible on its sickly-white skin, and six dark spikes protruded from its back, down its spine. It was lying down, but she could see the long, thin, white hair that covered its face. Only one of its paws was visible, but it was a massive thing with thick curved claws.

Tess cowered into the corner of the cage and whimpered.

'What's that!'

'Calm down,' Jack said. 'It is harmless for now, but I would not alert it.'

'How can you be so calm?' Tess exclaimed.

'Trust me, we are currently being treated nicely, that will most likely change soon, but I have a plan. Alerting the creature is the last thing we want to do right now, so steel yourself and listen.'

'I don't understand though,' Tess said still looking at the huge, ghastly-white, spike-covered creature. 'Where are we?'

'We are still in the forest. This clearing is the heart of it. This is the home of the Descendants

of Vorkan.'

Tess looked around. They were near the very middle of a large circular camp of primitive tents of all sizes. The land was flat apart from its centre, which was raised where a large tree stood. The tree looked old, its bark dry as desiccated fruit, but on its branches sprung beautiful, bright, red leaves. Under the tree was lush grass and among its blades, thorny red roses reached for the light above. In front of the tree was a stone altar, which reminded Tess of the altar she had once seen inside the old, run-down chapel in Beggar's Corner, except this one was visibly stained with blood.

'Jack? What's that altar for?' Tess asked, although she already had a pretty good idea.

'It is a sacrificial altar, a place where offerings are made,' Jack replied.

'Offerings to what?'

'Not to what, to whom. The Descendants believe that they are offering to Vorkan, the father of the forest,' Jack answered, looking back at Tess. 'When I studied magic, I was taught many things about the Descendants. They practice conjuration of hybrid animals, blood spells and most importantly, soul preservation.' Jack paused to lick his dry lips. 'The Descendants believe that they have preserved the soul of Vorkan within the tree they call Siimkan, the father tree. Their ritualistic offerings are meant to feed the soul of Vorkan so that he one day may be borne anew. This has never been proven to actually work, but they believe it will.'

'So offering animals to a tree will bring him back to life?' Tess was sceptical.

'Not animals, Tess, men and women, young and old, though never children, never before anyway.'

'Did the Descendants create that... thing?' Tess asked and pointed a careful finger at the beast as though it might notice her gesture.

'They did. It is an abomination in every sense of the word,' Jack whispered. 'The Descendants call it Kaeor, it means Spikeback. They created it by combining a red-tailed snake, a black wolf, a man and a demonic creature known as a lurker. Its creators intended for it to live forever, but the souls of the various creatures it is made of, colliding within it, will eventually cause the body to decay.'

'How are we supposed to get past it?'

'I have something that might make the souls inside it collided more rapidly,' Jack said.

'Might?'

'If it does not work, I want you to run away as fast as you can.'

Tess was reluctant to do anything with the beast near, but she had to trust that Jack knew what he was doing.

'I thought you said these Descendants would be friendly.'

'I think the words I used were 'less hostile', but yes, it seems I was wrong. A lot must have changed since I was last here.'

Before either of them could say more there was movement outside and one of the Descendants came to their cage. He did not speak to them or even acknowledged them. Instead he focused on the beast.

'*Ka hii, lo vorko. Ka cone yasbe,*' the man said to the Kaeor. It replied with a growl as though it understood what had been said to it.

The man looked at them, scowled and spat at ground, then left.

'What did he say to it?' Tess asked.

'My Celvic is a bit rusty, but I think it was something about being sorry and that he understands its pain.'

'It's in pain?' She was having trouble feeling sorry for the massive white hulk.

'I suppose it makes sense if its body is deteriorating.'

'I guess,' Tess said, not even sure that she understood what that meant.

The two of them sat in the cage as the sun journeyed across the sky and the shadows grew longer. Eventually the sun disappeared behind the cover of the black trees and they were left in the dark. The sky was still auburn from the light of the sun, but soon that faded too and a chill crept across the clearing. Not long after the rest of the camp's inhabitants went into their tents.

Tess could not sleep.

'I'm hungry,' she complained.

'I know,' Jack replied.

'They're not very good captors,' she said, trying to lighten the mood.

'I do not think their goal is to keep us alive.'

Tess frowned. She wanted to cry, but she knew it would not achieve anything.

The ground shook a little, and she looked up at the beast, staring at her through the bars with its reflective eyes. She froze and sweat ran down her back, but then it turned around and trampled away from the cage.

'What is it doing?'

'Interesting,' Jack said.

A moment later the beast was back and in its mouth it held the bone of a piece of meat that had hung on one of the fires near the tents. To her amazement it thrust the bone between the bars of the cage.

'Accept the food,' he said, nudging Tess in the back.

She took hold of the bone and the beast let go, then she pulled it into the cage.

'Thank you,' she stuttered.

'*Balku lai*,' Jack translated.

The beast growled in response and lay down in front of the cage, its long muscular tail coiling around it.

During the night Tess quickly realised that the clearing was much colder than the forest as the many trees provided shelter from the harsh winds.

Earlier Jack had taken off his jacket and wrapped it around her, but the thin leather provided little protection against the wind, although she would never admit this to him.

As morning dawned on the forest, the light and warmth that replaced the cold and dark was all too welcome.

Tess had kept her eyes closed pretending to sleep the entire night.

Jack nudged her in the side and she opened her eyes. She turned to look at him and ask something, but before she got the chance the big creature in front of the cage moved aside and a young man, with a painted face and long dark-brown hair, approached the cage. Behind him were two older, unpainted men.

'*Lai orik!*' the painted man shouted at them.

'He is telling us to stand,' Jack translated.

They obeyed, and the man came to the door of the cage and opened the primitive lock, which was nothing more than a rope used to fasten the door to the cage, but with a beast such as the Kaeor guarding it, no locks were truly needed and she doubted that anyone ever considered fleeing.

The painted man pointed at Jack and said in perfectly fluent Common, 'You are first.'

Jack made to leave the cage, but Tess pulled at his arm.

'Where are they taking you? Please don't go!'

'Do not worry. I will not leave you,' Jack said, and she released him.

The painted man had understood what Jack said and pulled out a knife, which had been holstered in the side of his pants. He pointed it at Jack and opened his mouth to say something, but before he got the chance, Jack pushed the knife out of his way with his left hand and with his right grabbed the man's face. Smoke flowed from within his hand and the man started screaming.

He fell to his knees, clutching his face and whimpering.

Jack dropped down and pulled something from his boot as one of the other men charged

towards him. The man made to slice him with a blade, but Jack got up quickly and deflected the weapon. Then he jabbed the item from his boot into the man's jugular. Blood sprayed like a fountain and the man fell to the earth. The last man commanded the Kaeor and then ran to his brethren further in the camp.

Jack's eyes fixed on the beast. He held the item in his hand and Tess recognised it as one of the bones he had been carving into the day before.

'Find your dagger!' Jack yelled to Tess, who had not even noticed that her dagger was missing. She looked around and saw Jack's bag, discarded against a nearby tent, for some unknown reason she knew it would be in there.

Jack ran towards the beast with the spike-like bone in his right hand, and the beast opened its massive mouth, exposing rows of razor-sharp teeth. As Jack charged towards it, it snapped its jaws at him, but he sidestepped. The menacing beast started to turn, its long white hair waving about as it did, but it was too late. He had already stabbed the bone into its side. It growled in pain and Jack just managed to dodge, as its muscular tail whipped towards him in retaliation.

The blackened symbols on the bone started to glow red.

Jack ran to Tess, who was waiting for him with the bag in her hands.

Without questioning she sped after him and away from the camp. Behind them they could hear the shouts of the Descendants in pursuit.

As they hurtled back into the dense forest they could hear the monster roar. The air shook with the reverberations of its powerful voice, but this was not the roar they had heard the day before, it was the kind of roar a man would make as he charged towards the enemy, knowing death was certain for him.

Even injured the beast was faster than its masters and so it ran far ahead of the Descendants. The huge lumbering creature barged into the trees around it as the control it had over its own body faltered.

Tess ran next to Jack, her eyes fixed on the route ahead.

'Did it work?' she yelled.

'I hope so!'

The ground trembled as the beast closed in on them. Suddenly they felt the heat of its breath, and Jack grabbed Tess, and pulled her to the side in a frantic dodge. The raging hulk overshot them and tried to turn, but because of its speed tripped over its own legs, spun around once and collapsed into a thick tree in its path.

They looked at each other as they got up and dusted the dirt off their clothes.

'That was close,' Tess said.

Jack walked over to the massive creature. It was breathing heavily and looking at him, its eyes covered by the white hair that fell from its head.

'Shouldn't we get out of here?' she asked.

He pulled the bone spike out of the white, veiny skin, without replying. With its blood he painted a perfect circle on the creature's side, then added different shapes and intricate symbols, and mumbled a few inaudible words. The air shook for a moment and Jack watched the creature begin breathing more easily. The symbols started glowing red and then the air shook again, more violently. Jack looked up as though he was watching something happen, but Tess saw nothing. The dagger in Tess' belt hummed strangely, and then as the red light from the symbols faded and the humming disappeared, the fallen beast breathed no longer.

Tess did not say anything. She was not sure what had happened, but knew the monster was dead.

'Come. The Descendants will follow our trail shortly,' Jack said, looking back at the path of broken trees left in the wake of the Kaeor. She followed him as they ran further into the darkness of the forest.

'I'm tired,' Tess muttered after they had made their way towards what she expected to be the edge of the forest. The forest was still dark and she still could not tell if it was day or night.

'Let us rest here then,' Jack said. 'I doubt they will be able to track us this far.'

'What makes you say that?'

'The beast we killed, the Kaeor, it is a hunter and a tracker. Without it the Descendants will have difficulty picking up our trail.'

'Will we be out of this forest soon?'

'Yes, it should not be much further.'

'What'll we do then? Go back to Simer and then to Modai?'

'I think it would be best to wait a while longer before we return to Modai.'

'What about Simer? Won't your mother be worried?'

'She told you about that, eh?' Jack asked. 'I am sure she has forgotten about us already, her fickle mind forgets much.'

'That's a cruel way to treat your family,' Tess said.

'We were never really a family.'

'What about the children then? Wouldn't she want to know what we found?'

'What did we find though? A murdered hunter and some crazed fanatics, who worship a tree.'

'Isn't there a possibility that the Descendants... you know.'

'What? Killed the children? I doubt it.'

'It didn't seem like they had second thoughts about killing us,' Tess said, raising her voice.

'Children are different, Tess. They believe that children are pure beings, it goes against their beliefs to kill pure beings.'

'Where did they go then? It is not as though the children just disappeared into the air without a trace.'

Jack seemed distant for a moment.

'I do not know,' he confessed. 'But it will be impossible to find them, the Descendants could have been the ones to abduct them, but the blood on that altar was dry and they were not in the camp. Maybe the children simply left home, we do not know what lives they had, perhaps they were not abducted at all.'

'Your mother seemed pretty convinced.'

'Tess, I am not interested in talking about this any further. I told you already that it is not our job to find missing people. I upheld my promise to Lydia. They were not with the Descendants so there are no other trails to follow.'

'But—'

'I know, it sucks giving up, but we have no other leads to follow.'

Tess sighed. She hated just leaving it like this. Even though she did not know the missing children, she felt as if they were abandoning them.

'Fine,' she just said.

With his flame, Jack lit them a warming campfire, and then sat and scribbled in his journal, while Tess watched.

She did not like the forest, it was always dark and wherever she looked thick black-barked trees stood, spanning so far into the horizon that any landscape beyond was impossible to see.

'Jack,' she said.

'Yes?' he responded, without lifting his pen or changing the pace of his scribbling.

'Why did you never tell me you were a magician? Don't lie to me this time.'

Jack stopped his pen and looked at her. 'It just never seemed fitting. I mean, how would you have suggested I had done it? Just say 'Hey Tess, I am a wizard?'' Jack smiled. 'And I was worried you would be scared of me.'

'I'd never fear you.'

'Clearly magic does not frighten you, but I do not regret keeping it from you for all these years. Besides an expelled magician is not a real magician.' He looked back down into his journal, though without writing anything.

'Expelled? From where?'

'There is a school for magicians in Heimyal. They call it the Court of Elements. I studied there when I was young.'

'How did you get expelled?'

Jack looked up from his journal again. 'I broke a rule,' he said seriously.

'What rule?'

'No duels.'

'Duels?'

'Magical duels, the kind that only end one way.'

'And which way is that?'

'By one of the duellists dying, of course,' Jack said coldly.

'Really?'

'Yes, that is not what happened though, but that is what I told them.'

'What happened then?'

'I killed a man who tried to kill me.'

'Then why not just tell them the truth?'

'The man, or rather, the boy, I killed was of a wealthy family. Telling the truth would have meant disgracing his family and in return they would have killed me as well.'

'I don't understand, though. Why did he try to kill you in the first place?'

Jack laughed as though Tess had said something funny. 'Most magicians are petty folk, they always have to be the best at every cursed thing and when someone is better than them, they seek to overthrow them, in my case through murder.'

'Oh,' Tess said and went silent.

There was a pause and he started scribbling again.

While Tess slept Jack wrote in his journal. He added a sketch of the Kaeor he had slain, along with the sketch he also added the spell he had used to free the souls from the host body, just in case he needed it for future reference.

As he wrote and sketched, the campfire's flames dissipated until there were nothing but embers, and just enough light to see what he was doing. In their little pocket of the dark forest all that could be heard, were the scribbling of a pen, the turning of rough paper and the low crackling sound of burning embers.

To Jack, the forest was a paradise within a nightmare. It held many terrors and yet the cool breeze of the night that rustled the leaves was so peaceful.

A sound made him freeze. He looked up, for in his little pocket of the dark forest, there was

now a sound unknown to him. It was a sad melody a mother would hum to her child as she laid it to bed, it was a melody which was unheard by anyone or anything else than him and it did not come from anywhere and yet it could be heard from everywhere.

'Danger lies ahead,' a voice said and to Jack it felt like the winds of Harvest climbing over the green hills of Muor.

'Danger lies behind,' continued the voice.

'Why are you speaking to me?' Jack asked in a low voice so as not to disturb Tess' sleep.

'You must head to the castle, the one scorned by magic and blood, and now covered in death.'

'What castle?'

'The ever-standing castle of King Severoux Drake.'

Jack's heart beat fast. He knew the castle. Being very interested in history he had read all about Drake's ascension to Kingship of Heimyal. He had also read about the fall of Drake. His two disowned sons had each brought an army to bring down the King, and it is said that so many died in the battle that the blood flowed all the way from the castle down into the streets of the city known as Drake's Town.

'I know its location, but why should I go there?'

'You are not of importance, but the girl must fulfil the destiny of her family and bring down the cult of shadows.'

The voice disappeared back into the nothingness and Jack sat for a while just listening to the crackling embers.

Chapter Nine

Martin sat on a wooden chair looking about him at the death and destruction he had caused. He tried to comfort himself by thinking that it was for the better, that all these lives would mean nothing if they had caused the fall of Mondus. Still, he felt burdened by this responsibility. That he had to do the right thing, even if that right thing was slaughtering his adopted family, because their leader, drunk with power, had chosen a fate for them. A fate, which would bring about the ruin of everything, of many more lives, was it ever fulfilled.

Martin held the dagger firmly in his hand. 'I should free you as a reward for your service,' he said, his face bare of expression.

The voice gave no response.

He turned the dagger so that the orb pointed down, then he hammered it into the table in front of him.

The impact left a crack in the surface, but neither orb nor dagger sustained any visible damage.

*He lifted his hand to try again, but was stopped by the voice, **'You do not have the will to free us.'***

'I am sorry, but we still have not rid Mondus of that monster Lucien,' he said, looking at the nearest body. It had a clean circular hole going through the heart, and its eyes were locked in a blank stare. He had killed all the cult members as mercifully as he could and in doing so had discovered how powerful Mbran truly was. He had witnessed it through him slay the powerful sorcerers and fighters, who had been loyal subjects to Lucien and devoted fanatics to the cause of clouding the realm of Mondus in never-ending shadows.

It was early dawn, Tess slept and Jack rested against the trunk of a tree with his eyes closed.

The absence of birds was very evident in the forest, as every dawn in Modai was always led on by an orchestra of whistling and singing.

The rustling of leaves as wind flowed through the forest was the only sound around their little campfire after Jack had put his journal away. However, to someone with a keen ear, distant footsteps had now become another sound in the dark forest. Jack snapped back to reality as he heard the barking of a wolf in the distance. He got up quickly and with his bag over his shoulder he went over to Tess and shook her gently. 'Wake up, we have to go.'

Tess sat up and rubbed her eyes. 'What's going on?'

'It is the Descendants, they have found us. Hurry up.' His voice was calm even though he knew the danger that closed in on them fast.

Tess quickly got to her feet, fastened the dagger in her belt and nodded to Jack to indicate that she was ready.

As they fled from their makeshift camp Tess yelled at Jack.

'I thought you said they wouldn't be able to track us.'

'I was wrong. I did not realise they had tracker wolves.'

'Tracker wolves?'

Jack did not get to reply as a bark in the distance made them realise their pursuers were right behind them.

A few moments later an arrow whistled through the air and hammered into a tree next to his head.

'Run Tess. Run!'

Tess ran straight ahead and Jack followed behind her, blindly casting fire from his hands back at their pursuers. Most of his flames hit trees and went out, but one hit a pursuer in the chest stopping him mid-sprint and sending him sprawling backwards. Jack smiled triumphantly at the sight, but many more Descendants followed behind their fallen brother, and three tracker wolves now led the hunting party.

'Keep running!' Jack yelled to Tess.

He skidded to a halt and turned around to face the wolves coming towards him. The lead wolf leapt at his throat, but he dodged its open mouth with a neat sidestep and kicked it away. The palm of his right hand glowed with bright red flames and as one would toss a stone he flung a ball of fire at the two other wolves, which on impact exploded in a shower of flames that set the nearby trees ablaze.

Jack put his right hand on the trunk of a nearby tree and mumbled a few words, and then ran after Tess.

Behind them he could see the advancing Descendants come near the tree with his mark on it. At first he thought the spell had failed, as nothing happened, but then the pursuers were thrown off their feet as the tree exploded and the ground was covered in tall, menacing flames. The dark woods had become a little brighter and the crackling of burning trees was still audible as they ran out of the forest.

Beyond the tree line was grass so tall that it almost covered them entirely. With some difficulty they managed to traverse the grass, after which they ran down a small hill and across an open field.

As they reached a distance far enough away from the trees. Jack stopped Tess. 'We are safe now. They will not leave their precious forest to catch us, not this far away from it.'

Tess looked around them. 'Where are we?'

'I am honestly not sure what it is called,' Jack said, also looking at the green fields around him.

'However, I do know a tavern nearby.'

'Somehow that's not surprising.' Tess grinned and set off after him.

From time to time she looked back at the growing plume of smoke that steadily climbed out of the forest and floated away with the wind.

After some time they reached a wide gravel road. Tess assumed that this road would lead straight back to Modai.

'Is it much further?' she asked.

Jack looked around him. 'It should not be too far now,' he said and started down the road.

Tess wondered where in Heimyal they were. As far as she could see there were nothing but green fields, the wide gravel road and the massive forest.

The sun was above them as Jack stopped and signalled to Tess, who had fallen a bit behind.

She ran to him and as she came close he pointed at the roadside.

'We are here.'

She looked around and almost missed the dark-brown front of a tavern that was well-hidden amongst some trees a bit off from the big road.

As they approached the tavern Tess saw a sign that was planted firmly in the ground before the building, it read in thick dark-green letters 'The Green Barrel'.

Jack walked up three small steps that led to a heavy wooden door, and pushed it open. Tess followed him inside.

They were greeted by the stench of pipe smoke as they entered the damp tavern. Tess looked around the dark room and she saw a few isolated men sitting at their own separate tables and embracing wooden mugs, which seemed to take up all of their attention. Not one of the tavern visitors looked up as the two travellers approached the bar.

'Jack!' said a deep and hearty voice. 'Blessed Light, I haven't seen you in years!'

'Dal, what are you still doing here, old man,' Jack said and embraced his friend, who surprisingly enough was even bigger than him in both height and width. They both laughed and talked for a little bit and then the man named Dal looked at Tess.

'She's your daughter?'

'No, she is Samuel's kid,' he responded.

Dal looked at Jack then. 'Ah, I'm sorry, I didn't know.'

'Do not worry about it, my friend.'

'Sarin's daughter, eh? A damned thing that was,' he said, shaking his head. 'So, she's working for you then, I s'pose?'

'She is,' Jack confirmed.

'Good, good. Better than joining those forest crazies like the orphans round 'ere.'

The hulk of a man looked at Tess again, 'You want something to drink? I've got mead, both sweet and strong.'

'Sweet would be fine,' Tess replied.

'You got it,' Dal said. He went around behind the bar and filled a mug with a brownish liquid from one of the green barrels that were stacked against the wall.

After being handed the mug, Tess trailed behind Dal and Jack as they went into the backroom.

It had a big bed and a round table with three chairs around it, there was also a closet for clothes and a small desk with knives and other tools for preparing meals. Behind Dal an enormous sword leant against the wall.

'When all the drunkards are gone, this is where my wife and I live,' Dal said, after they had each sat down on a chair. Tess' chair was the only one to have four legs.

'Where is your son, do you know?' Jack asked.

'Last I heard from him, he was working for some smithy in Modai.' Dal looked at the big sword behind him and said proudly, 'He made me that, he did.'

Jack walked over to the big sword, studying the blade and handle. 'He is your son alright,' he said, and Dal laughed. His booming voice made the room shake.

Dal took the candle from the centre of the table and held it up in the air.

'Let me see how good your magic is. Last I saw you, you almost fainted trying to light a fire.'

'I had forgotten how funny you were,' Jack said and snapped his fingers. The candle lit up gently and Dal placed it back down on the table, then he clapped his big hands together and laughed. 'Very good.'

Jack sat back down, and Dal looked at them with a serious expression.

'So why are you here?'

'We need to go to Drake's Town. Do you have a horse we can borrow?'

'Drake's Town?' Dal asked. Tess looked at Jack in surprise as well.

'It is just something we have to do.'

Dal pointed at Jack. 'You be careful. I haven't heard from that place in a long time, for all I know they might all be dead up there!' He laughed again.

Jack did not laugh.

'By the way, have you heard anything about the war down south recently? It has been a while since I heard anything about it.'

Dal rubbed his hairless chin. 'Hmm, yes, there was something about the giants.'

He stopped for a moment to think.

'Ah, right, apparently the Khatour went missing after one of the skirmishes.'

'Missing?'

'Aye, I think the giants are even blaming the King.'

'Well it would not be surprising if that old madman did something like that,' Jack said seriously.

'If the fightin' gets worse, they'll send in the King's Men for sure.'

'What is a Khatour?' Tess interrupted.

Both Dal and Jack looked at her, and she became a little bit embarrassed by the attention.

'He's the King of the giants,' Dal explained.

'So the giants think that our King killed their King?' Tess asked.

'No, no. The Khatour is still alive.'

'How do you know that?'

'It is a bit complicated, I will explain it later,' Jack said, and then turned to Dal. 'I also have something I want you to take a look at.'

He glanced at Tess quickly, his hand outstretched. 'Hand me the dagger.'

'Why?'

'Tess...' he said impatiently.

Unwillingly she gave him the dagger.

Jack turned to Dal again and laid the dagger before him. After a few moments of looking at the thing and turning it over in his hands, Dal eyed Tess curiously. 'Where did you get this from?'

Tess was about to say something, but Dal interrupted her by saying to Jack, 'I've never seen anything like it before. The metal, the orb, the handle even. It looks costly too.'

'So you have never seen this type of metal before?'

Dal shook his big head and Jack frowned a little.

'What do you mean 'costly'?'

The big man smiled briefly. 'See this grip 'ere? It's made out of horn for sure, not one I recognise either and it's been spun in a way that takes a lot of time and effort.' He paused for a moment, turning the dagger over in his hands a few times. 'The claws on the pommel are very precise too, which is a bother to make, especially considering how small they are. Someone spent a lot of time on this piece. Though the owner must have done something to it, since the blade is twisted so strange like, which definitely happened after it had been forged. Not sure how it'd be done though. More often than not, a blade will break before it'll bend that violently. Oh, and even I can tell that it's magic. Bad for business, that.'

Jack cursed silently, he had never seen one before, but he was certain that something like this was an artefact. Something crafted long ago and for no small purpose.

Dal was about to hand the dagger to Jack, but then stopped.

'By the Light. I've never seen this before.'

'What?'

The big man grabbed the candle and held it in a way that the dagger cast a shadow onto the small table. Except the shadow was not right, only the handle and orb on the pommel were visible in the shadow, but the rest of the dagger was not.

'It has no shadow,' Jack said. He could not believe his eyes.

'I noticed it long ago,' Tess said, to the surprise of the two men. 'The dagger told me it's a special kind of steel. The lack of shadow means he can't break free from it.'

Dal's eyes widened. 'Just like in that story—'

'The Beggar's Crown. Yes, that's what I thought as well.'

'I have not heard about that story before,' Jack said.

'It was in the Big Book of Tales,' Tess explained.

Dal nodded. 'Sarin would read from it every now and then, when we visited.'

'I do not remember that.'

'You're just getting old, Jack.'

'You are not too young yourself.'

'Never said I was.'

'Do you know where my mother got it from? The book I mean,' Tess asked.

'I think she said it was a family heirloom.'

'Why do I not remember that?' Jack said. Usually his memory was not that spotty.

Dal grinned. 'They say when you get old: your looks go first and then your memory. You never were a looker, guess it was only a matter of time before—'

Jack covered Dal's mouth with his hand and gave the dagger back to Tess.

The big man continued mumbling into his hand and Tess started laughing. Jack laughed a bit as well.

After Dal had stopped trying to talk he removed his hand.

'You just can't handle the truth, Jack.' Dal chuckled.

'Yeah, well, the truth hurts.'

Everyone went quiet for a moment, and Jack took the opportunity to look over his old friend. Except for a few wrinkles in his face he had not changed much, even though they had not spoken to each other in over ten years. The people they were now were very different from back then.

Dal's deep voice broke the silence.

'So, about that horse.'

Chapter Ten

'Are you still willing to do this, even knowing the damage it will cause you?'

'I am,' Martin said, looking at the items that lay before him. He ran a hand through his greying hair and sighed. 'I cannot complete this task any longer. It is time to pass it on to my son.'

'We fear they know where you are.'

'I am certain they do,' Martin said, with a sad tone in his voice. 'Will you be with me until the end?'

'We will.'

'I am glad. Now explain to me how this ritual works.'

'Are you awake?' Jack asked in a low voice.

The horse they rode was going at a pace a little bit faster than walking, and they were jolted every time it moved its legs.

Tess groaned as she awoke, rubbing her sore neck. It had been a poor idea to lean against Jack while she was sleeping, but she was not sure how else to sleep when on horseback.

'I am awake,' she answered. 'Will you now tell me why we're going to Jake's Town?'

'Drake's Town,' Jack corrected.

'Yes... Drake's Town,' Tess said, slightly irritated. She did not like riding.

'I doubt you would believe me.'

'It has something to do with the dagger, doesn't it?'

'It does,' Jack confirmed. 'It spoke to me, when we were in the forest.'

'It did? What did it say?'

'It said I should take you to the Castle of—'

'The castle... ' Tess interrupted, considering the word.

'It is near Drake's Town.'

'I think I know the place.'

Jack screwed his neck round to look at Tess. 'From where? Have you read any of my books?'

'Your books? No, I've dreamt about it.'

Jack stopped the horse so harshly that Tess fell forward into him.

'We will rest here,' he commanded. 'And you will tell about these dreams.'

The horse cropped grass next to the tree it was tethered to, meanwhile Tess stared tiredly into

the fire Jack had made.

He sat down in front of her, which made her break her stare.

'What are these dreams about?'

Her mouth twitched briefly.

'Tess...' Jack said impatiently.

'You won't believe me.'

'Are you sure about that?'

'Fine,' she sighed. 'In my dreams I see through the eyes of Martin Grey and he for some reason came to the castle.'

'Martin Grey?' Jack considered. 'Is he an ancestor of yours?'

'I don't know, the dagger told me he was, but I've never heard of him.'

'So what happens in your dreams?'

'In them Martin is able to use strange magic. Dark magic.'

'The same kind that the dagger can summon forth?'

'Yes, but in most of my dreams he doesn't have the dagger with him.'

'Truly? So how is it that he can summon magic then?'

'A man named Lucien gives him these strange black books. In my dreams, I never see what the books have on their pages, but I'm certain that this is how he's able to shape shadows.'

'Books?'

'The Books of Nightshadow provide much knowledge of our kin,' announced the voice unexpectedly.

'Did you hear that?' Jack wondered.

'Yes,' Tess replied.

'We speak to enlighten the girl and the man, for they stumble in darkness deeper than they assume.'

'Speak plainly, spirit!' Jack ordered.

'The animals in these lands have fled, why is this so?'

'Magic?'

'Yes, magic. It shapes and destroys and rebuilds. The animals feel this, and the magic present in these lands frightens them.'

'Is this why you want us to travel to the Castle of Drake?'

'Yes. Even in our prison we feel the distortion emanating from that place. You must find Lucien there and kill him.'

Tess barely slept that night. She sensed that the dagger was right, and something evil lived in

these lands. The thought kept her mind from entering the realm of dreams. Throughout the night she lay with her eyes open and stared at the endless bright dots in the dark sky.

The next day they packed their things and continued down the gravel road to Drake's Town.

During their journey, Jack thought about the absence of people on the main road. He knew from experience that many of the nearby villages would not be able to sustain themselves without the coin they earned from trading with Modai, and yet they had only passed one carriage since they set off from the Green Barrel four days earlier.

He had not been in this region for many years, but it still troubled him that the main road had become so abandoned. In the past Jack had travelled across Heimyal following this road, and he would never go a day without encountering carriages heading to Modai or riders on horseback.

Perhaps the dagger was right.

'You see that ruined tower up there?' Jack pointed excitedly to some spot in the distance, where plants had settled on the ruined foundations of a long abandoned tower.

'What about it?' Tess said and yawned, Jack's sudden voice had woken her.

'That,' he said and lowered his hand, 'used to be one of Drake's Town's outposts, in fact it stood here long before this road was anything more than a dirt path for horse-drawn wagons carrying supplies from Modai. Back when Modai was nothing more than a merchant's town.'

Tess nodded lazily and although Jack was unable to see it, he continued, 'After the Fall of Drake, his two sons divided the whole of Heimyal and tried to destroy everything their father had built.'

'Tried?'

'Indeed,' he answered and halted the horse next to the broken watchtower. Tess followed Jack's example and dismounted.

Lush grass and plants covered most of the road in this area, and the watchtower was barely visible since most of its stones were covered in thick moss. If Jack had not pointed out the tower, she would never have noticed it was there.

Jack lifted up one of the grimy stones that had once been a part of the broken tower. He placed it on the ground before Tess. Behind her, the horse was chewing on some grass, obviously not impressed by moss-covered rocks.

'That's a stone,' Tess confirmed, unsure of how else to respond.

'Exactly,' Jack said. 'It is a stone.'

'What?'

'It is nothing but a stone!' Jack said, waving his arms around as to point out some obvious fact,

of which she clearly had no knowledge.

He sighed. 'You really do not know? Alright, let me put it like this: this here is a stone, nothing special about it, yes?'

Tess nodded.

'When you see the Castle of Drake, you will find that the stones there are no different from this, except, and this is where it gets interesting: the stones that the castle is built of are not overgrown with plants or tender from rain and wind. They are in the exact same healthy condition as they were thousands of years ago when the castle was built.'

'Are you sure?' Tess asked in disbelief.

Jack's face turned a little red from embarrassment. 'Well... I have read that they should be.' He scratched his head and smiled. 'I have never actually seen the castle myself.'

'How are you sure we aren't heading to Hjo then?' she said playfully.

'Quite the jester you are,' Jack said, not even allowing Tess the satisfaction of a smile. 'I know how to read a map you know...'

'Well, did you bring a map then?'

'No,' Jack answered, making Tess grin triumphantly.

'Did you see that?' Jack said, as they sat around their little fire past dusk.

Tess laid her book down and looked at Jack. 'See what?'

'The shadows are moving about in a strange manner...!' he said, looking about him.

'Maybe you should try sleeping if you are starting to see things,' Tess said, as though she was talking to a child.

Jack said nothing, but from time to time he would turn his head quickly as though he was trying to catch a glimpse of something.

Tess wondered if he was hallucinating, because he had not slept for days. She smiled and then picked the book back up again. It was one that Jack had brought with him from Simer. The cover bore an elaborate insignia and the title read 'The Blue Knight's Folly, A Tale of Valeria Thorn'. It was a story Tess' mother had read to her when she was little, and after her mother's death she had continued reading through the exploits of Valeria. Whether the tales were true or fiction did not matter to Tess, but she wanted to believe in them, she wanted Mondus to have a place for heroes, for the knights who rescued princesses, and for the hunters who felled mighty beasts.

It was later that same night, when the naked white moon shone brightest and Tess had yet to fall into the abyss of dreams that Jack, still disturbed by tricks of the night, stood up.

The fire, now reduced to embers, let off a thin continuous stream of smoke which trailed off

into the night sky.

Jack extended his arm and opened his palm, revealing a small, bright flame, and the shadows created by the flame, bent and twisted, creating many figures even the wildest imagination could hardly compete with.

Jack let the fire spread from his palm to his entire hand and took up the stance of a warrior.

'What are you doing?' Tess' voice came from behind him.

'Do you not see the shadows? How they twist endlessly.'

Tess bent her head sideways looking at the many shadows, unsure of how they were supposed to be different.

The dagger started humming in a multitude of patterns, as it had never done before, and Jack looked at it, lying next to the campfire. 'Spirit, are you the one doing this?'

'We are,' the familiar voice announced.

He let his guard down and extinguished the flame in his hand.

'How are you able to do this?' he inquired.

'Do you not feel it, O magician of these lands? The air is thick with untamed power. Magic flows across this landscape as if the sky above spilled it down with the rain.'

'Yes, I can sense it.'

'It is a marvellous thing. The raw essence of it allows us to stretch beyond this mortal prison and bend the shadows with our will. We have not been able to do this for a very long time.'

'Where is it all coming from?'

'Strange. You already know the answer, yet you ask.'

'The castle.'

'Yes, the castle of death and magical arts forbidden.'

'What do you mean?'

The voice did not respond and the shadows that had danced merrily around before, returned to normal.

'Did he mean the castle we are heading towards?' Tess asked.

'Yes, I am afraid so.'

Chapter Eleven

'I don't understand.'

'You must kill him and avenge your father.'

'How? I'm not a fighter like he was.'

'We will teach you and you will use us as a weapon, like your father did.'

'What about mother?'

'She will understand. Tell me again, who is your enemy?'

'Lucien.'

Tess awoke, aware that Mhran was trying to show her something, that she had to kill this Lucien, but she was still not sure why. Lying on the ground, she turned her head, and much to her amazement saw that Jack was sleeping with his back leant against a thick tree. He rarely slept she had realised. It seemed a foreign thing to her, but she guessed it had to do with his magical powers.

Usually people talked very highly of Magicians, even unskilled ones. This was mainly caused by fear as the power that these Summoners and Sorcerers were capable of possessing, would be enough to obliterate a house in less time than it takes to blink your eyes. However, when these same people were out of the crowds of the city or drunk, in places like 'The Sparrow' or 'The Meadery', they would talk about how Magicians were unlike everyone else. Having worked for Jack most of her life, Tess had been to all the taverns in Modai, but mainly the Sparrow. She had heard many stories about Magicians from the loud-mouthed drunkards of the tavern. Some said that, especially Sorcerers would delve into mystic arts, often involving the blood of men and beasts, and some had claimed that such practices caused a disturbance in their souls and made them unable to rest for long periods of time.

While Tess pondered this, now sitting up, Jack rubbed his eyes tiredly and looked around, narrow-eyed and confused.

'I have not slept properly for what feels like half this season,' he said jokingly, but then his expression became graver. 'We need to talk about the dagger, this spirit of shadow.'

'It orders us around for reasons unknown to us, why should we even listen to it?' he argued.

'I'm not sure, but look how far we have gone already,' Tess said dismissively.

'We should go no further, not if trouble awaits us at the end of this journey.'

'You can handle yourself in a fight and I, well, I have the dagger.'

'My magic does not hurt the shadow creatures, and the dagger is not something you should rely on!'

'Mhran is powerful, you know this and so do I.'

'If this spirit is so powerful, why does it need us?'

'In our current state we do not function without a wielder, this you must have discovered already,' the voice said, as it unfurled itself across their little campsite.

'I saw you bend the shadows just this night, why should I believe your words?'

'Bending and twisting of shadows is of little use against the creatures Lucien will send after you, and it is most taxing on us when we are confined within this prison of the strangest metal.'

'So you cannot fight by yourself, but that does not explain why we should take on your quest for vengeance.'

'You do not know it yet, but straying from our quest will cause much suffering later. It is true that we seek revenge on the being known as Lucien, he murdered Martin the wielder, dearest to us of all your kin.'

'You spoke to me before and said that 'Tess' family was destined to destroy the cult of shadows, let it be my destiny instead, let me be the one to kill Lucien.'

'No. The girl must fulfil the oath sworn by Martin Grey, whose blood still flows in her.'

'I'll do it,' Tess said.

'I will not allow it.'

'I'm old enough to rule my own life.'

'You have always been a stubborn girl.' Jack sighed. 'I will be by your side then. Let us find this Lucien, so that we can put this mess behind us and move on with our lives.'

Tess was glad, but at the same time also worried. Could she actually best this person who had already defeated her great-grandfather, a man both wiser and more powerful than her?

Jack started packing up his things and she followed suit. It was all she could do to numb the fear and anxiety inside of her.

They put their few belongings on the back of the horse and set off along the road again.

'The castle is close. Brave yourselves for the fight that you will soon encounter.'

Tess poked him in the back. 'Jack?'

'What?'

'How do you know Dal? You've never talked about him before.'

'He is a former associate of mine.'

'Doing what exactly?'

'Well, we called ourselves 'Knights of the Road' once.'

'Knights?' Tess said sceptically.

'Indeed. We would unburden rich people of their most heavy of possessions such as coin bags, jewellery and sometimes rarities.'

Tess laughed. 'You were robbers.'

'That is such a degrading word, but that we were. And damn good at it too, well, until the King's Men were sent after us that is.'

'Truly?'

'Aye, Kings tend to disfavour anyone who causes an outrage amongst the Noble men and women. Very much so, in fact.'

'So, did they catch you?'

'Do I not live and breathe before your very eyes? I assure you that this would not be the case had we been caught. Robbers outside Modai tend to get it worse than the city-dwelling ones. Sure, if you are caught inside a Nobleman's house you will get publically beaten and marked, but outside Modai they just kill you outright and leave your body for the animals.'

Tess shuddered. 'That's horrible.'

'That is how life outside of the city is, unfortunately. Away from the public eye the Men of the King will do terrible things and claim them to be in His name. You can only hope that they will eventually get the same treatment.'

Jack tugged at the horse's reins and it slowed down. 'We can rest here for a while and get something to eat and drink,' he said.

'Have we got much bread left?' Tess asked.

'No, we have not.'

After eating the remaining scraps of food, they continued on the horse again.

Jack in the front, Tess in the back, rocking back and forth with every step of the horse. A trail of thin dust followed them as the animal plodded along the road.

The view of the trees, and fields of green around them, faded as the light of the sun began to recede. With the passing sun the cold and sharp evening winds crawled across the lands, descending on the pair like a pack of hungry wolves.

Tess hugged Jack's back tightly to shield herself from the wind.

The horse slowed its tempo and she looked up from behind Jack's shoulders.

'We are here,' he announced.

'Drake's Town' announced big letters carved into the stone sign fastened at the top of the big gate that led into the town.

'You were right about the stones,' Tess said. She looked along the straight road that led through Drake's Town to a long series of steps leading up and around the hill behind the town to a large castle surrounded by tall stone walls.

'It seems so,' Jack said. 'Had I been wrong, there would be nothing but ruins before us.'

As the sun set behind the horizon and the moon started making its trek across the night-sky, Jack and Tess walked into the town that lay before the Castle of Drake, leaving the horse tethered near the gate.

All the houses here were made of the same type of wood. They were brown and small, and reminded Tess of the houses in Beggar's Corner, though their placements were not as random.

'Can you feel it?' Jack said floating his fingers out in the air as though he was running them through the smoothest silk. 'The air is full of magic here.'

'So is that why the stones here are different?' Tess asked, remembering their previous conversation.

'Not only the stones, the wood as well, the steel too, everything here.' He stretched his arms out as far as he could. 'The air is thick with enchantments and spells, so much that you could practically feed on it.'

'I don't feel it,' Tess said.

Jack lowered his arms and looked at her, with narrow eyes. 'That is a shame, it feels invigorating!'

Tess laughed. She had never seen Jack act like this before.

They continued along the road that went through the town. A sign indicated this was 'King's Avenue'. Soon they arrived at a big statue. The road split around the statue and continued towards the castle steps. Houses lined either side of the road and it seemed as if this was the heart of the town. Jack stopped to look at the plaque attached to the bottom of the stone figure. He read the inscription aloud, 'Severoux Drake, first true King of Heim and Yal.' Jack's face was now as expressionless as that of the statue before them.

'It is tragic when sons become so obsessed with power that they would murder their own father just for a little more.'

Tess looked at the statue. It depicted a sturdy man, who held a helmet in his left arm and rested his right hand on the hilt of a sword that was planted in the ground. He had a handsome face which displayed great detail, yet expressed no emotion. She thought to herself that a man who fought a war with his own sons would neither be a happy nor a sad man, but a man so distraught that all feelings would escape him.

'Had his sons been content with their place, a great King would have lived a little longer and perhaps many wars could have been avoided,' observed Jack.

'They stood there for a bit admiring the statue.

'When did the town become abandoned?' Tess asked, her voice the only sound in the night.

'Abandoned?'

Jack looked around and noticed what she had noticed.

'I do not understand,' he said. 'This is supposed to be the fourth most populated town in Heimyal.'

'If so, where did all the people go?'

Jack looked towards the castle. 'Maybe they all went up there?'

Tess followed his gaze. 'Why would they be in the castle?'

'I am not sure, but I feel like something awful may have happened here.'

'Do you think this is the work of Lucien?'

'Perhaps,' Jack replied.

Her heart started beating faster. 'Should we go and check it out?'

'Do we have a choice?' Jack wondered, and started trotting towards the steps that lay at the end of King's Avenue.

She followed behind him, intentionally letting him stay in front as a guard against evil.

He stopped when he reached the foot of the many steps and Tess caught up with him. The pair started their trek up the stairs that led to the castle on the hill.

As they walked up the many steps Tess noticed the dagger's melody change.

'Mhran, is something wrong?' she enquired.

Its voice roared in their heads as thunder on a bleak day. **'The air is filled with magic. It is not of the purer kind. No, it is foul with the scent of bloody death.'**

Jack had stopped also. 'Bloody death?' he questioned. 'I have heard of magical energies being left behind after wars where many people died. Could it be that the essence of war still lingers on this very ground?'

'No. The magic here is fresh, as though the souls that fuel it were released only moments before we set foot in these lands.'

'The villagers,' Tess said grimly.

'Yes, I fear they must all be dead for the air to be this potent with magic.'

'Lucien will pay for this,' Tess said decisively and unsheathed the twisted dagger.

Jack followed her as she ran up the stairs.

The stone steps snaked around the hill and when they reached the top they could no longer see the town on the other side.

In front of them, on the landing, was a massive wooden door to the castle courtyard. The door had a long handle on each side. Tess grabbed the handle on the left and Jack grabbed the one on the right, then they both pulled in opposite directions, but the door barely opened and even Tess would not be able to slip through the gap.

Tess walked over to Jack and they both pulled at the same handle. This time the gate opened a bit wider, but it still took all of their combined effort to pull the right part open enough so that a person could walk through.

They both gasped for air afterwards. 'I wonder how Lucien manages to open this gate by himself,' Jack said between quick breaths.

'He probably has followers to do it for him,' Tess guessed.

'Are you ready?'

Tess nodded.

They squeezed through the gate and found themselves in a grand courtyard. It resembled an arena, being almost completely round, with one end being the gate for entry and the other end being the castle entrance.

The ground in the courtyard was completely flat and consisted only of dry, grey-brown dirt, which seemed unable to sprout a single blade of grass.

'Is that a statue?' Tess asked as she pointed to a massive figure in the other end of the courtyard, next to the castle entrance.

Jack looked at kneeling figure as well, but said nothing.

'It is living. Though we had no idea your kin could become this big.'

'What are you talking about?' she asked the dagger.

'A giant?' Jack muttered.

Before Tess could ask what he meant the castle gate opened and a crooked man came out into the weak light of the moon. He wore a dark-purple robe and spoke with a voice shrill, but strong.

'Who treads on this ground?'

Jack considered his reply for a moment. 'Travellers,' he shouted.

'Why do you travel to this place?' the robed man called out.

'We seek Lucien, for unfinished personal matters.'

'There is no man with such a name here.'

'You lie!' Tess shouted.

'If there was a Lucien here, he would be dead like the rest of the villagers.'

Tess' eyes widened. 'Did you kill them?'

'Some I killed, the others I had my pet kill. I think I will let it kill you too.' The robed man

made a gesture with his hand.

The kneeling figure arose and picked something up off of the ground. It was a sword Tess realised.

With the weapon in hand the giant strode towards them, his hard eyes fixed on Jack. A long dark braid flowed behind him in the air as his feet met the ground one after the other.

As the giant got closer, she noticed how strange his sword was. It had a blade similar to a rough crystal, unlike anything she had ever seen. The blade was transparent like a gem and seemed to shift between glowing red and green.

Tess stood her ground, though not due to bravery, but because her legs were frozen rigid in terror.

Jack did not falter and quickly tossed a fiery ball at the massive being. The ball impacted on the side of his chest, leaving a scorch mark and halting his charge for a moment.

He quickly turned to Tess. 'That is no ordinary giant, he is the Khatour! Listen, you have to get your dagger into action. I will not be able to hold him off for long.'

She nodded, yet terror still hung on her face like a mask.

'Embrace our darkness and we will guide you,' said the voice only to her.

Tess squeezed the dagger tightly in her hand, and let the foreign voice flow into her mind. The humming inside her head ushered away her thoughts. It was a soothing melody and as it played its tune within her mind it dispelled her indecision and fear.

Darkness flowed from the dagger and onto her skin, covering her entire body slowly.

Jack charged towards the approaching giant. He cast forth another ball of fire that thundered over the ground and made the air around it roar furiously.

The fireball was sliced in half and absorbed by the crystal sword as it came within the giant's reach.

Jack stopped for a moment considering this and then tossed two smaller bolts towards the incoming giant. They curved through the air in two separate arcs, though as they came near the Khatour held out his sword and the bolts were absorbed by it.

The giant closed in on Jack and before he had a chance to summon more fire, he had swung his crystalline sword and hammered it into the ground releasing a powerful flame that surged across the dry dirt towards Jack.

Jack threw himself to the side, but before he could get back onto his feet, he had come within reach of the Khatour's sword. With both hands on the handle the Khatour swung it towards Jack, who leapt out of its path as its blade razed the ground, sending a cloud of dust up around it.

Jack's hand was covered in a bright flame and he punched the side of the giant, inducing a loud groan and felling him to his knees. In his moment of triumph, he did not see the massive hand swing at him in retribution.

The impact sent him sprawling across the hard ground and when his body stopped awkwardly some distance away he did not stand back up.

The giant walked towards the unconscious man and reached out as to pick him up, but before a single one of his big fingers could touch Jack's limp body, the dagger's blade had cut the giant across the back of his legs, once more felling the massive being to his knees with a furious bellow.

Tess stood behind the giant and as the massive being spun around to hit her, his hand was cut in half casting a spatter of blood onto the dirt.

The Khatour tried to stand up, but could not. She walked towards the giant and with a swing of the dagger cut his stomach open. Blood spewed out of the wound and Tess leapt back as the Khatour fell flat on the ground, producing a cloud of dust.

She crawled onto the back of the giant and grabbed his hair, the giant muttered curses in a strange language, but was silenced when she slit his throat.

As Tess climbed down from the giant's back her shadowy skin started receding into the dagger.

For a moment she breathed rapidly as though she had held her breath while Mhran had controlled her body.

She walked up to Jack, who had become conscious again and helped him to his feet.

'Are you alright?'

Jack dusted off his jacket, though it did little to remove the dirt stains on it.

'I am fine,' he said and coughed.

'Was that really the Khatour?' Tess asked as she looked at the fallen giant.

'Yes, the Sword of Blood and Life it wielded was a clear sign of its stature.'

'I don't see it anymore,' Tess said, confused, looking around the massive corpse.

'When the Khatour dies the sword returns to its people, where a new King will be named,' Jack said, looking at the dead King before him. The blood that spilled out had created a very large pool around the giant body, making it seem like it was floating in a red pond.

'I don't understand, why did the Khatour attack us?'

'I am not sure, but I believe a powerful spell was compelling him to do so,' Jack said.

She was about to say something, but then a piercing pain made her knees give out from under her.

Jack spat out blood and Tess screamed in agony as the robed man came nearer. His hands were pointed at them with every finger moving in careful patterns through the air.

Help me, she begged.

The shrill voice spoke to them, 'It is called a Soul Anchor and it took me a very, very long time to make. Now you spoiled my fun and for that I will punish you severely.'

Jack shouted something, but the pain twisted his words into nothing more than groans and painful exclamations.

Tess' body on the other hand had started rising slowly from the spell, which the robed man had cast on them. **'We will be the one to punish,'** the voice said through her lips and the robed man stopped still in his tracks as though every muscle in his body had frozen. Then he started running back towards the castle.

Darker than the night around them were the horns that had sprouted from Tess' head. Spikes of shadow grew out of her skin and soon the spell that had bound her to agony was gone.

She glanced at Jack, who lay on the ground barely breathing and still had blood trickling out of his mouth. Then looked to the castle entrance, where the robed man had closed the gate behind himself.

Tess ran to the gate and with a single cut of her blade tore it in half.

She walked through the large door and into the hall of the castle, stopping for a moment to get her bearings. The sound of quick footsteps coming from a floor above sent her running up one of the side staircases.

Tess ran through a series of small rooms, before entering the throne room. Her quick steps barely made a sound as they hit the floor.

There, in the throne, sat the corpse of a man. He had been perked up in a curious manner as if he was playing the role of a King.

A shrill voice came from the side of the big room, 'Begone demon!'

The robed man was curled up in a corner as though he was a child seeking shelter from the evils of the world. In his hands was a strange skull that he hugged tightly.

As she came closer, the man stood up and pointed his hand at her as he had done in the courtyard. This time the spell he was channelling had an effect, though it only made the surface of her shadowy skin flicker slightly and did not halt her approach.

'I am Baradur, Scourge of the Marsh!' the man shouted desperately at the shade, trying to make her stop.

'Fear me!' he begged.

Tess ignored his plea and walked right up to him.

The robed man cried out loud as she plunged a lance-shaped arm through him, piercing his

heart. As she pulled out her arm the man fell to the ground, dropping the skull as he hit the wooden floor.

The shadow retreated from Tess' body and the dagger fell from her grip. Then she passed out.

Chapter Twelve

Tess put a hand to her head and opened her eyes slowly. The room was very dark, since all the windows had been covered. She got up immediately when she saw the body that lay in front of her.

As she got to her feet she looked around for the dagger. She found it lying right next to the body of Baradur. His blood had coloured the blade.

Picking it up she noticed that the humming it usually emitted was gone, then she saw the orb on the hilt. It was broken. With the realisation of what that entailed her heart stopped and for a moment she stood completely still.

'Mhran?' she called out.

Like a long sigh the voice spoke, **'We are at your command.'**

'Reveal yourself,' she commanded awkwardly.

Before her eyes the darkness in the room grew darker and she saw the outline of the shade. He had two arms and legs, a torso and looked very much like a man except for the nightmarish darkness he possessed and the two horns that grew out of his head.

'We appear before you as the shadow of Martin Grey,' the shade announced.

'Can you help me see?'

'As you wish,' the voice obeyed and her eyes became adjusted to the darkness in the throne room.

Tess looked around. In the centre of the round room was the throne upon which the corpse of a man had been placed, a crown of dead brambles had been put on his head.

'Curious magician,' Mhran said, also looking around the room.

'I don't understand what could make someone do this,' Tess said terrified, as she noticed all the various corpses throughout the big room. They were all placed in strange positions and at a quick glance one might have mistaken them for being alive, but they were clearly dead as the discolouration of their skin and the putrid smell indicated.

The shade picked up something that lay next to the body of Baradur. It was the skull he had held on to as he died. It was not a normal skull Tess realised. It had horns, sharp teeth and was longer than the head of a man.

'This skull is very interesting,' Mhran said.

'How so?'

'The magic of this region is spilling from it.'

'We should show it to Jack,' she decided. Then she remembered what Baradur had done to him. She let go of the dagger and ran through the castle.

The shade did not pick up the dagger, but just followed closely behind her.

The room just outside the throne room was occupied by even more corpses that were splayed in lifelike positions. Tess tried not to look at them as she stormed through.

With the night-eyes that Mhran had granted her, she saw more horrible things running through that castle than she had ever wanted to. Baradur, the wicked magician, had seemingly taken every single man, woman and child from the town, and had placed them around the castle after murdering them. Some of them were laid in beds, with their eyes closed as though they were sleeping, others were placed around tables with food, cups or glasses in their hands, making it appear as though time had simply frozen and that all the people were stuck in a moment which would last forever.

As she exited the castle she stopped for a moment heaving for fresh air. If she had eaten anything recently she would surely have vomited it out onto the dry dirt of the courtyard, but she had not, though a growling stomach was not something that bothered her at this moment.

Tess ran to where Jack lay. For a moment she thought he was dead, but noticed his chest raised and lowered itself ever so slightly.

Carefully she nudged his shoulder, but he did not wake, instead he merely groaned in pain.

The shade stood behind Tess, in its hand was the strange skull.

'The man is very weak now,' Mhran said.

Tess shook Jack's body. 'Wake up,' she begged him.

'He will recover from this wound that eyes cannot see, but it will take time.'

'I need him.'

'He cannot help you in this state.'

'Can you carry him?'

'As you wish,' Mhran obeyed. The shade knelt down next to Jack's still body and then picked him up as though he weighed nothing.

'We'll go back to the horse and then we can figure out what to do next.'

As they walked back towards the gate of the town Tess could not help but wonder about the strange creature that walked in front of her. How could she know its true intentions now that it was no longer bound to the dagger.

'You are mistaken,' Mhran said, as if he had heard her thoughts. **'We are still bound to you until the deed is done. The dagger only limited our capabilities and in a time long ago it**

was the only way to control us.'

'I don't understand though, how did the orb break?'

'The orb could only break if the wielder intended it to be so.'

'It broke when that magician cast his spell on us,' Tess realised.

'Yes. You asked us to lend you all of our strength.'

'And in order to do so, the orb had to break and let you free.'

'It is as you say.'

They walked through the town, where the desolation now became very clear. The small houses stood untouched all around them, but in the weak daylight Tess noticed scattered items on the ground, smashed windows and boarded up doors. The wicked magician had truly murdered every single soul in this town and even if by some miracle one or two people had survived, the horrors they had witnessed would surely be enough to drive them insane.

Tess wondered whether or not this place would ever be repopulated. She for one would never come back here, knowing what she knew.

They passed the statue of Severoux Drake and stopped to admire it for one last time, its featureless face resonated with how Tess now felt. To her it seemed as though this place was cursed, having had a bloody war, a murderous cult and a wicked magician occupying it.

'What of Lucien? He's not here, how do we find him?'

The shade stopped for a moment and looked to the sky as though it held the answer. **'We can sense him now. He is not far from us, but we should be quick to bring about his end, for it would seem he is delving into shadows ever deeper.'**

'I thought you said he would be here.'

'We acted according to what memories we had, but outside of our prison we can finally feel the draw of his magic. Like a wolf is lured by the scent of blood, it would seem we are lured by the scent of magic. He is awaiting our arrival.'

Tess did not question the shade any further, she figured that it would do her little good, instead she just nodded and they continue along King's Avenue until they reached the town gate.

The horse was staring idly into the air, completely oblivious to them and to the events that had transpired.

'What should we do with Jack?'

'We cannot take him with us. He is not strong enough to endure further strife.'

'Let's go back to Dal's tavern and then we can chase after Lucien,' Tess decided.

'No. Lucien is very close and we sense that he is summoning something.'

'Summoning?'

'It is as we said,' answered Mhran. **'Fret not, child. Jack will arrive at the tavern of which**

you speak, but it will be without us.'

The shade hauled the body of Jack onto the back of the horse with ease and afterwards he deposited the horned skull in one of the bags that was slung over the horse's back. Mhran walked in front of the horse to look it in the eyes. The horse barely seemed to notice his presence. The shade laid a hand on the head of the animal and as he lifted his hand away, the horse started galloping along the wide gravel road, heading back towards the Green Barrel tavern.

'What did you just do?'

'We spoke to it and it listened.'

They both watched as the galloping horse carrying Jack on its back disappeared into the horizon.

'I hope he doesn't fall off,' Tess then said.

'We had not thought of this,' Mhran admitted.

Tess laughed. 'If he does, I'll be the one who's blamed.'

For a while both of them said nothing, girl and shade stood side by side staring at the bleak landscape with its dark trees, dirty road and ominous clouds.

'It'll start raining soon.'

'It is as you say.'

'Then we had better start making our way to Lucien if we're to settle this matter once and for all.'

'He is to the north, through the forest behind the town.'

Tess sighed. 'It would have been nice to have that horse still.'

'As you wish,' Mhran obeyed and before her eyes his form changed from that of a horned man to that of a horned steed. His appearance still shrouded in darkness unending.

Tess looked at the shade in his new form and frowned slightly. 'I get the feeling you hardly tell me anything of your powers.'

'Listing them all would take a long time.'

She climbed onto the dark steed and set him into motion by tapping his side with the heel of her boot.

He was fast, so much so that to avoid falling off Tess had to wrap her arms around his neck.

As the shadow horse sped through the forest with tall slender trees Tess yelled to Mhran, 'Do you really think we can defeat Lucien?' Her voice was drowned out by the roaring wind that blew against them.

'Our last encounter with Lucien led to the death of Martin.'

'But you were inside the dagger then, now that you are free of it shouldn't you be able to?'

'We cannot say yet, but we are to face a foe that will not fight on its own, and we are alone.'

'You have me, so you're not alone,' she said encouragingly.

'Together we are alone,' Mhran's voice said inside her head, yet so clear that she thought the whole forest had heard.

The forest was larger than she had expected, but the shadowy steed rode towards their final goal relentlessly. The dark mane flowed in the wind as they traversed the hilly landscape. Tess no longer held on to his neck for her dear life, but had instead found a more respectable posture similar to that of a knight who was riding to battle. What battle she was riding towards she did not know, but for once in this long and perilous journey of hers she managed to maintain a shred of hope. She knew what Mhran was capable of and she almost yearned for another moment where his spirit and hers were one. When they had defeated the vile Baradur she had felt as though they could fight an entire army and emerge victorious. Deep down a part of her hoped that they would do battle with this Lucien that Mhran wanted to kill.

The terrain began to go downhill and the trees grew wider apart as the steed rode onwards. Tess now felt the chilling touch of the night since the trees no longer provided cover. The winds became brisker as a large clearing in the forest opened up before them. It was grand indeed, stretching more than half the length of Modai. At the edge of the clearing farthest away from them was the very end of the land, beyond which was nothing but the open seas.

The tall grass around them waved back and forth as the steed made its way to the middle of the clearing, where five tall stones stood, planted firmly in a circle. A lone figure stood before the standing stones, patiently waiting for them to come closer. She knew it was Lucien.

The shade came to a stop and Tess jumped off. As her feet hit the ground the steed transformed back into the shadow of Martin.

With every muscle in her body rigid and a fire in her stomach Tess walked towards Lucien. The wind made her silvery hair flow like the waves of the sea and she looked like the heroines in the tales she had heard as a child. Lucien stood before her, his eyes emitting pale light that was almost too bright to look at.

'We have been awaiting you First Prince of Shadows, for a long time, indeed we have. As soon as we felt your power rekindled we prepared this ritual for you,' a voice said through Lucien's lips, and his arm pointed to the centre of the five standing stones behind him, where a very large sigil had been drawn in dark-red blood across the exposed dirt.

'We recognise you and we question why you are here without your true kin,' Mhran responded to the being that inhabited Lucien's body.

A truth then dawned on Tess. 'You're the thing that was summoned inside the Castle of Drake, when Martin was still alive.'

The pale eyes fixed on Tess and the head of Lucien tilted slightly. *'You are young. It amuses me that you know this. But your words are true. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Vigil as the master first named me. Once a harmless spirit, but now a harbinger of the Void.'*

'Why do you represent the Void? Why have you forsaken your Queen?' Mhran asked.

'You would not understand the peace that the Void has envisioned.'

'To rob every living thing of will is an empty form of peace.'

'Let Senju guide you to the truth. Help me release Him.'

'Senju would shroud the world in darkness, and when all life here belongs to Him, He would find another world. He would never stop. Only misguided children would dream of such an existence.'

'You are like specks of dust before Him. He shall devour the world and then you will understand his peace.'

Tess tightened her hands into fists, but felt Mhran's cold touch on her shoulder.

'Not yet,' the voice said, only to her.

She relaxed her hands and looked at Lucien again. He was exactly like the man Tess remembered from her dreams. It seemed like he had not aged a day, as if being possessed by Vigil had warded him against the mean spell of time, which would eventually fell any man or woman to their knees.

The strange voice of Vigil then spoke again, *'Forfeit now, First Prince. We will give the child a swift death if you give yourself to free Senju, who awaits in the Void you so tightly sealed.'*

'I'm not a child!' Tess yelled.

Vigil looked at her menacingly, but she did not falter. *'You are insignificant in this matter.'*

Mhran looked at Tess for a moment and then at Vigil. **'We refuse your offer, merciful as it may be.'**

'A *pity*,' Vigil said, and then waved Lucien's hand in the air. From inside the blood sigil iwithin the five standing stones a pool of darkness spawned. It grew and grew until it touched the edges of the painted symbols.

A colossal black hand slowly crawled out from within the pool and raised high into the air, the arm that connected it to the sigil seemingly endless.

Over the course of their journey Tess had seen things she would never have believed, but compared to those moments this seemed the most unreal.

'A hand of a Senju, God of the Void,' Mhran explained.

'The Void?'

'A world in-between worlds. We have fought Him before, and we suggest you do not interfere. It is us that He wants. We are His jailor and His warden, only we have the key to His cell.'

The enormous hand slammed into the ground before them without warning, and the impact blew a gust of wind across the clearing that sent them flying backwards. Tess tumbled across the ground until she slid to a stop.

Mhran offered her his hand.

'I'm alright.'

The shade of Martin Grey looked towards the standing stones and the hand that lay before it.

'Don't die.'

'Death is not a mercy the Void allows.'

Mhran charged towards the standing stones. With a powerful kick he leapt into the air and landed on the shadowy arm of Senju. Mhran was cutting and stabbing with his arms that were rapidly shaping themselves into many different weapons.

Senju swung its giant hand and sent the shade flying.

Mhran crashed into the ground and dust filled the air.

Tess was anxiously watching as the cloud of dust settled, looking for any sign of her shadowy companion. She then noticed that Vigil was no longer anywhere to be seen, though she was sure that he was watching the fight like her.

Before the dust dissipated Mhran shot out of the cloud with tremendous speed and severed one of the fingers from Senju's hand as he flew past.

The massive finger collided with the ground as if it was a drop of black water, and left behind a great puddle of shadow that after a few moments came to life. From the remnants of the finger, creatures, like the one they had killed in Simer, came forth, human in appearance except for the horns, but movements like that of an animal. Tess tried to count them, but they kept coming, all of them were running towards Mhran.

He jumped into the mass of shadowy creatures and was lost like water cast into the sea, but stood out purely from the fact that all the other black beings were focusing on him.

Even more creatures joined the mass, obscuring Tess' view of Mhran, but she knew the fight was not lost as it had yet ended. Somehow the lone shade was holding his own against the servants of Senju.

'It would seem the First Prince has not forgotten how to fight.'

Tess spun around and saw Vigil standing next to her. Her body froze. She did not know how to react. Should she run? Should she try to fight?

'You seem so helpless without your friend by your side.'

The face of Lucien was staring at her, though clearly it was no longer him. She instinctively grabbed for the dagger at her waist, but it was not there.

'Go on. Beg for your life. If it amuses me I may be merciful.'

Tess punched him in the face with all of her strength. She was pretty sure she had broken Lucien's nose as blood was streaming down his face.

'That was very stupid of you.'

Lucien's hand grabbed Tess by the throat and lifted her off her feet. She was desperately trying to breathe.

'Specks of dust should know they are nothing before the Void.'

The grip on her throat tightened and the colour started fading from her vision. It felt as though her lungs were about to burst.

'When your world belongs to Senju, you will understand true peace.'

Vigil tossed her backwards and she landed on the ground with force. Pain shot through her body. She lay flat on the dirt gasping helplessly for air. Tess looked up into the bright white eyes of Vigil, who was looking down at her.

Lucien's foot landed on her chest and pushed the air out of her again. The pressure on her chest increased, and something cracked. She tried to cry out in pain, but no sound ever left her lips. Her hand reached out to stop him, but Lucien's hand grabbed hers and broke it.

The pressure vanished from her chest, but she could not move. Pain was all that she felt as she lay motionless on the hard ground.

'I will make you a vessel for the Void to enter, even if I have to break every bone in your body, one at a time.'

Tess' eyes lost focus and she was just about to pass out from the pain, but then Lucien picked her up by the neck again.

'I want you to be awake for this.'

The grip on her neck vanished and she fell, but someone caught her.

Mhran had sent Vigil flying across the ground with a kick and was now holding Tess in his arms.

She looked up into the featureless face of darkness.

'Close your eyes.'

Coldness rolled through her body, soothing her pain and when she opened her eyes again she was laying on the ground. Tess got to her feet and looked at her body. It was covered in Mhran's shadow. She lifted her hand in the air and flexed the fingers, it was no longer broken.

'We are now one. With our essence your body has become whole again.'

'I thought I was going to die.'

'We should have expected this of Vigil.'

'I want to kill him.'

'We should interrupt the summoning first.'

'What happened to those things you were fighting?'

'The voidborn. We killed all of them.'

Tess looked towards the standing stones. There were now two arms coming out from the black pool in the midst of them.

'How do we stop it?'

'The stones, breaking them will work.'

She dashed across the clearing to the summoning circle. With full control over the power of Mhran she felt invincible.

A black hand descended upon her while she was running towards the stones, but with a leap she avoided it, only to be caught by the second hand mid-air. She grabbed on to one of the giant fingers, and held on tight while it snaked around trying to throw her off. Tess let go as it flung her far towards the sky above.

'How do I shape your shadow?' she yelled at Mhran, as she was falling back towards the earth, where the two great hands waited like hungry serpents.

'Bend our essence with your will, command it to take shape.'

Tess focused on her right arm, imagining a mighty sword.

The dark shadow flickered across her skin, and her arm grew into the shape of a great sword, wider than her body, but still flexible.

One of the hands shot up towards her, but with a twist of her body she got out of its way and hooked into the side of the endless arm with her shadowy sword.

The hand continued upwards while she was cutting it along its length descending rapidly towards the ground. Tess kicked off from the long arm just before she hit the ground and spun around with the sword, slicing a deep groove into one of the standing stones.

'The stones are too dense!'

'We must find another way to break them.'

Tess landed on the grass next to one of the stones, hoping to have a moment to think, but one of the hands was already flying through the air towards her.

Without enough time to react she caught the full brunt of the impact and was slammed into the enormous stone beside her. She did not feel any pain, but without Mhran's shadow skin all of her bones would surely have been crushed.

A loud crack emitted from the stone and it split along the middle, the upper half falling into the black pool that had spawned the giant hands.

The second hand was heading towards her just as the first moved, but this time she got out of the way.

'Four stones remain.'

A third hand was now making its way out of the darkness that had spawned the other two.

'I thought Senju needed you to escape.'

Tess jumped into the air and hooked her sword around one of the great fingers of a black hand that passed above her.

'Senju is still locked away deep within the Void. These are but a few of His hands reaching for the light.'

With a twist of the long flexible sword arm she cut off half of the giant hand, before jumping to the arm of another that flew past in the air. Tess ran down the side of the arm, which coiled around in an attempt to shake her. The shadowy veil that covered her body made it possible for her to stick to the massive arm even as it lifted into the air.

The severed hand had already landed on the grass and was spewing forth voidborn that were watching her from below.

Tess let herself fall from the arm and landed expertly on top of a standing stone.

The servants of Senju started crawling up the side of the rock and the three black hands in the air focused in on her, when the first one came close she leapt to another stone, the hand did not stop and crashed straight through the solid rock, which shattered and sent the voidborn flying.

The two remaining hands collided with each other in the air, like starving wolves closing in on their prey. Tess jumped over the first one, which tore off the side of the standing stone, and she grabbed onto the last hand with her sword arm and steered it into another. The entire rock shifted and was pulled out of the earth.

Her feet hit the ground first after she jumped from the defeated hand. It was amazing that Mhran's shadow could endure a fall from such heights.

'Senju has been crippled, these hands no longer move.'

"There is still one stone standing.'

Although the arms were not moving any longer, the black pool remained. The gateway to the Void was still open.

'Breaking the last one will seal His defeat.'

Tess started making her way towards the last stone, considering how she was going to break it, when a figure stepped in front of her.

It was Vigil. The body of Lucien was clearly broken from Mhran's kick, but a white shadow covered his chest holding the shattered body in place.

'I will not hold back this time,' Vigil said. The white skin on Lucien's right arm shaped itself

into a rapier.

'**This fight is mine,**' Mhran's voice said in her mind, and suddenly she felt like an observer in her own body.

Vigil thrust his rapier towards Mhran, who dodged and caught it, pulling the white shade off his feet.

Tess' arm transformed from a sword into a lance, but she could only watch as Mhran controlled her body, as if she was a puppet attached to strings.

The shadowy lance jabbed towards Vigil who was on the ground. Instead of avoiding the hit, Vigil sacrificed Lucien's left arm, which the black lance pierced through without resistance. The move had greatly injured Lucien's body, but it was seemingly no hindrance to Vigil, who used the opportunity to retort by slicing the dark shade across the stomach.

A cold piercing pain quickly flowed through Tess' body, but vanished almost as suddenly as it had come. The rapier's cut had penetrated the shadow skin, which otherwise kept her from harm.

Mhran pulled his lance from the remains of Lucien's arm and jumped backwards, preparing for the next attack.

Vigil's brilliant shadow started covering the face of Lucien and sprouted two horns from his forehead. The rapier arm grew longer, and the body of Lucien slowly disappeared behind the whiteness.

The arm that had been destroyed by the dark lance started assembling itself as Vigil's white skin crawled across it. When it finished, the arm was whole again and the being leapt at them.

Mhran deflected the rapier blade and jabbed the lance towards Vigil, who dodged it with a spin and sliced across the shadowy skin that covered Tess' calves. The cut did not pierce and the white shadow was immediately met with a kick to his face, which sent him sprawling.

The dark shade lunged after him, the dark lance transforming into a sword halfway through another jab, which caught Vigil by surprise and slashed him across the shoulder while trying to avoid it.

The white shade somersaulted backwards and shaped another blade with his free arm, and started thrusting, slicing and swinging the two sword arms in a flurry before him.

Mhran had no choice but to fall back to get out of his reach. The more the dark shade backed away, the closer he got to the edge of the clearing, where the side of a cliff led straight down to the sea.

'He's going to push us off the edge!' Tess' voice yelled inside her own mind.

Mhran did not reply, and all she could do was watch as her body was slowly being forced towards the cliff. As her foot was placed on the very edge, she felt a rush through her body and

Mhran leapt into the air and landed on the other side of Vigil. The white shade looked at them as the shadowy sword cut a deep line across his body. Another cut followed, and another, and another, until Vigil's essence was tattered and flawed. Beneath the white shade's skin Tess could see Lucien's blood.

'Be warned First Prince, the day will come where—'

Mhran stabbed the white shade through the middle of his body with the dark lance, tearing a hole through Lucien's chest.

The white of Vigil's essence flowed away from the body of his host, trailing off into the air like smoke, until it disappeared and only Lucien was left behind.

For a moment Tess just stood there, staring at the man she had been hunting since Mhran had first sent her on the path of her ancestor. The wind made Lucien's long black hair flow.

Then he opened his eyes and when he saw and when he felt, his eyes widened, the pupils turning very small. Then he screamed. A scream that must have lain dormant in his lungs for hundreds of years.

The dark shade pulled the lance from his chest, releasing a tide of dark-red blood.

Lucien opened his mouth again, but Mhran had already spun around and just before he spoke the shade parted his head from his body, sending the scattered Lucien backwards off of the cliff and into the sea below. It was such a long drop, that she did not hear the sound of the separate parts of his body hitting the water.

Lucien and Vigil were no more.

All of a sudden Tess was in control of her body again, but the shadow still covered her body.

'The last stone remains.'

She walked across the clearing to where the stone stood planted firmly in the ground and shaped her right arm into a long sword. It took many swings against the solid rock before it was cut apart and then she kicked it into the middle where the pool of darkness remained.

The large stone started sinking into the darkness that had summoned the black hands, but as the magic of the summoning circle disappeared so did the darkness, and the rock became fused with the ground as though it had been partly swallowed by the earth.

'Our task is complete.'

Mhran lifted his shadow from Tess and she dropped to the ground. The shade caught her as she went limp, laying her carefully on her back in the soft green grass.

Blood from her wound trailed down her exposed stomach. Before Tess passed out from the pain she saw a blackbird fly overhead, followed by a whole flock.

When Tess opened her eyes she stared straight into face of the dark shade. Mhran stood above

her, its featureless head blankly staring back at her. No longer bound by oath and old promises, it seemed uncertain to Tess what Mhran would do next.

He simply spoke.

'Yours is a frail kin,' Mhran concluded. 'When you fall, you break, and when you are cut, you bleed.'

The dark shade knelt down next to her and put a hand on her head. Tess barely felt the touch as her body was already afire with agony unending. After a moment Mhran's essence flickered and she felt a coolness flowing through her body, seizing the pain that had occupied it before.

She looked at Mhran with a quizzical look.

'What did you do to me?' she asked the shade.

'We healed you.'

'I didn't know you had the power to do that.'

'Do not worry it is far less of a risk for us to use this magic than for your kin to do so.'

Tess did not respond, but just got to her feet. She stretched her weary body and then noticed something that had been discarded a bit away from the broken standing stones.

'I see the children Lydia wanted Jack to find,' she said hollowly.

'They are dead,' Mhran confirmed.

'I don't understand why they'd do that,' she said, trying not to look, but finding herself unable to divert her gaze.

'Their blood was used to paint the summoning portal.'

'Why would they use children's blood?'

'The souls of your kind flow through the blood and the young of your kin have pure, untainted souls. Pure souls are easier to manipulate for spells,' Mhran said. 'When we were first bound to the dagger, a young boy's blood was used for the spell. They called the boy Lajame, meaning 'Saviour'.'

Tess looked around at the destruction. The black hands were gone and everything seemed peaceful.

'I feel like I have been dreaming ever since I found the dagger. None of this seems real.'

'Your understanding of reality is quite limited.'

'That almost sounded like an insult.'

'It is simply the truth. Do you really wish everything was as uneventful as your life before we met?'

'I don't know, but this is like some of the stories that are made up and put into books.'

'Every story is based on truth, some more than others.'

Tess did not reply.

'You have a last request,' Mhran noted.

'Could you take me to Jack?'

'As you wish.'

The air around the shade shook and Mhran formed himself into the shape of a steed once more.

Tess climbed up without much trouble and instantly the dark horse set off in a gallop, carrying her fast across the grass-covered clearing.

Even with the wind rushing past them, she found it easy enough to lay her head down against the back of the steed and fall asleep. She knew that Mhran would never let her fall.

Chapter Thirteen

'They are here.'

'I will kill as many as I can.'

'We shall be your weapon.'

The door to the little house fell into pieces as a black shadowy sword sliced it apart. The arm of the first man to enter was covered in darkness.

Using the dagger, Martin speared right through the attacking man's shoulder, breaking his shadowy skin and settling the blade deep into his flesh. Blood gushed outwards as Martin pulled out the slick dagger.

Two other men entered and Martin sliced through them like a knight would cut through untrained soldiers.

He fought with all his might, slaying the oncoming attackers until only one man was left, the eyes of whom were shining brightly. He knew it was Lucien.

Martin leapt towards him, his grey hair flowing, but the dagger did not settle itself in Lucien's body, instead a white shadowy spike tore through the dark skin that covered Martin's body and pierced his heart. Before he felt the pain from the wound, he was dead.

The shadowy skin dissolved into the air and the dagger fell from his grip. Before it landed on the floor of the little house, the dagger vanished into the shadows.

Tess opened her eyes. She knew that Mhran had saved this last memory of Martin. She was not sure why she had to see it, but she guessed that it was a way for him to finally let go.

The steed was still travelling, but no longer was he galloping through the forest with the tall trees, instead he was going down the road that led to the Green Barrel and to Modai.

Tess looked at the back of the steed's head. 'Why did Vigil call you 'First Prince?'

'Our kin knows us by the title of First Prince. Vigil's kin knows her as the Queen's Advisor,' stated Mhran.

'Vigil was a woman?'

'We do not have genders like your kin, but if you perceive us as a man, you should perceive Vigil as a woman.'

'How would Vigil know you as a Prince if you are not the same kin?'

'It is a story for another time,' Mhran's voice said in her mind. The steed continued down the road without pause.

Tess wrinkled her nose, annoyed, and as if beckon by this expression a drop of water fell from

the sky and hit her exposed neck.

The impact was slight, but startled her nonetheless. It had been a while since it had rained last.

'Hmm,' she grunted. 'Fall already.'

'Even in this realm time is swift to change, and seasons with it.'

Fall, Tess considered, was her least favourite of the three seasons in Heimyal. It brought nothing but rain and dark clouds to these lands. Farmers would rejoice for not having to work as much, but for the rest of the populous of Heimyal, it was naught but trouble as mud and slippery stones became a daily nuisance, and with the constant downpour there was also the threat of floods. Floods were luckily not a thing in Modai as it lay higher in the landscape than its neighbouring villages and cities, however in the coastal city of Septim, which lay to the east of Modai, floods were notorious for breaking houses and shattering boats with unimagined strength.

More drops fell over the land as the steed galloped with tremendous haste along the wide road.

'Should we stop?' wondered Mhran.

'No. The sooner we can get into the cover of Dal's tavern, the better.'

'As you wish.'

The shadowy hooves kicked up mud as it traversed the slippery road. Tess' wet hair stuck to the sides of her head and her temper was anything but cheerful.

The trees to either side of them hung as though the leaves had gotten too heavy for the branches and the wet bark seemed almost black.

The visibility of the land had reduced so immensely that Tess' could barely see the end of the nearest field, it looked like a wheat field, but she could not tell.

When Fall was over, the fields of green, yellow and light-brown crops would be harvested. Harvest season was something Tess looked forward to, for after Fall and the rain it brought with it, there would be a big feast in the streets of Modai to celebrate the start of Harvest and the new influx of wheat, and all the other produce that came with this season. Even Beggar's Corner would be a joyous place for a time. For now, however, there was only rain and lots of it.

Tess sulked for a while, but then thought better of it. She had won had she not? Had she not fulfilled her destiny and completed what her ancestor Martin, could not?

She forced a smile. She would be reunited with Jack soon, her mentor and surrogate father.

'How far yet?' she half-yelled through the rain.

'We have half a day's journey ahead of us still,' the voice of Mhran announced clearly in her mind.

Tess frowned.

For the longest time she just slouched on the back of the horse, while the rain fell endlessly.

Then she thought about the fight with Vigil.

'Why did you not want me to fight Vigil?'

'We have not experienced it before, but we felt it would be best that we were the one to end her existence. We wanted to be the killer.'

'You mean you wanted revenge?'

'Yes. We have been in your world for too long. Such an idea does not exist amongst our kin. We believe revenge to be a practice uniquely performed by Mondanes.'

'Mondanes?'

'That is what you are to other beings not from here.'

'I have never heard it before.'

'The demon kin were the ones to attribute it to your kind. It means to be normal, born without magic. A strange notion, since most demons seem to share the same fate.'

'I'm confused.'

'We know.'

'So I'm a Mondane?'

'In the sense that you are from the world of Mondus, yes, but your life is far from normal, even though you were born without magic.'

'All the abnormal should be over now, I'll be a true Mondane again.'

'It is not a bad thing. Many beings strive for normality, the fate of living and dying without enduring much strife. A peaceful existence. It should not be taken for granted.'

'We are here,' Tess said, staring at the sombre little tavern. It looked dry compared to everything else around them and she realised that one of the reasons it had been hidden amongst the trees was for the purpose of shelter.

The steed halted and Tess dismounted.

'Farewell,' she said unceremoniously and nodded once to the shadowy horse.

Mhran did not move, but instead just watched as Tess walked up the three wooden steps that led to the tavern door.

She turned to look at him for the last time and then carefully pushed the heavy door open.

Damp and smoky air greeted her as she entered the Green Barrel tavern. It was dark inside, even now, at midday with the sun's light occasionally being let through the clouds. No candles had been lit and yet the patrons seemed content enough with simply staring at their mugs and sulking, except one.

Tess felt his gaze almost bore its way into her skin. He did not look hostile, though, and once he knew Tess had noticed him he gestured for her to come over.

She looked around, but nobody else seemed to show any interest in her, and so gave in and walked over to the old man's table.

'What?' she said, a little harsher than intended.

The old man looked at her for a while, clasping a strange ball in his hands. The slack skin on his face moved more than his mouth, when he finally spoke. 'Don't do It!' he said with a frail voice.

'Do what?' she asked, confusion riddling her face.

'It!' the old man said as loudly as he could, flailing his arms above his head for emphasis. None of the other patrons reacted, occupied with their mugs as they were.

'Alright, that's enough, you ol' bastard. Can't you see you're frightening the girl?' said the booming voice of Dal.

A heavy hand landed on Tess' shoulder, the impact almost knocking her to her knees.

'Come along.'

Tess nodded and followed the innkeeper, aware that the old man still stared at her intently.

Dal walked behind the bar. 'Pick your poison,' he said automatically.

'Sweet mead,' she responded.

He pulled out a mug from beneath the counter, filled it without looking and hammered it down on the wooden counter before her, then sat down on a three-legged chair that creaked in protest.

'Alright,' said Dal. 'What are you doing 'ere?'

'I'm looking for Jack,' she said, smiling.

'Oh, right,' he said, nudging his forehead. 'He said you'd show.'

She sipped the mead once and then emptied half the mug in one go. 'So?'

'Not 'ere,' he explained. 'This lot may be more distracted by their thoughts than a wolf with a fresh chop of bloody meat, but let's keep this private, ye?'

Dal stood up, his body towering over Tess' slender frame. He went through the door next to the bar and she followed him.

Light came from a lone candle on a table in the familiar little room. The big sword that Dal's son had forged for him still leant against the back wall.

They both sat down at the rickety little table on even sketchier chairs. There was a small, round window in the back wall that she had not noticed the first time she had been here with Jack. Through the warped glass she could see a plump little woman working in what appeared to be a garden.

'My wife,' Dal said, having followed her gaze.

'So where's Jack?'

'Well, he came 'ere some days ago, arrived laying across the back of a horse he did. Looked like shit too.'

'But he's not here now?'

The heavy man shook his heavy head, making the floor and table tremble. 'One of his boys was 'ere, chubby little dark-haired thing—'

'Karl,' Tess interrupted.

'That's it,' Dal agreed. 'Anyway, he had something he needed to tell Jack, had waited two nights 'ere for him.'

'What was it he needed to tell him?' Tess knew Karl well enough, he was too clumsy to be a thief, but had a knack for making friends and hearing things usually only whispered. Jack used the boy to pick up rumours as well as spreading them.

'Now, I'm not one to stick my ears where they don't belong...'

'But?'

'Said something 'bout an enchanted sword, not the kind of thing I want to lose my ears for, mind. Magic is bad for business, I've always said, but Jack never listened.'

'An enchanted sword,' Tess repeated in a low voice, remembering something that had already settled in the back of her mind.

'Jack said I should make you stay here if you showed.'

'I'm leaving,' she said, already standing.

'Figured as much. Your mother was the same way too, stubborn and feisty,' he said and laughed.

'You're not going to stop me?' She considered the big man. If he wanted to he could easily restrain her.

Dal smiled as if reading her thoughts.

'Nah,' he said. 'I figure you know what you are doing.'

'One last thing—'

'There's a horse out back. When you are done with it, just send it this way and it'll head back home.'

'Thanks, Dal,' she said and nodded. Then she left the small room.

'Mention me to your friends, you hear?' he shouted as she walked across the wooden floor towards the door.

Tess looked around the tavern one last time before she opened the heavy door. The old man no longer sat in a corner eyeing her, but further in the back sat a man Tess recognised as a

guardsman of Modai. He was staring at the mug in his hands. She shook her head and exited.

She walked down the wooden steps that were slippery from the rain.

'You could have told me he wasn't here,' she said and frowned slightly.

'You never asked,' the voice of Mhran said.

'I'm glad you didn't leave, then.'

'We know.'

She climbed onto the back of the shadowy steed.

'Take me to Modai.'

'As you wish.'

The black shadowy hooves hit the road, each in perfect succession to the previous one, while water cascaded down from the sky. Seen from afar the steed would only appear as a blurred image, travelling across the landscape at a speed faster than any feathered arrow.

Tess held on to Mhran tightly as they sped down the road.

She wondered if they would be able to arrive at the city immediately after Jack did or whether he had too big of a lead on them. The shadowy steed galloped more than three times faster than the speed of any messenger's horse, bringing Tess from the Green Barrel to the walls of Modai in a little less than four days.

They never rested and never stopped to eat, but somehow she did not feel the need to, as if the mere presence of Mhran gave her the sustenance she needed. She never tired and she never ached, her body seemingly as enduring as Mhran's shadowy essence.

Blankly had Tess stared from the back of the steed during the ride, locked in thought, barely noticing the passing of day and night. She had thought about many things. She had wondered what possible message about the enchanted sword could have compelled Jack to ride to Modai, in the state he was in, with such urgency. She had also considered how she would go about finding him. It had been an easy consideration though, as Jack rarely left the secret backroom of the Sparrow in Beggar's Corner.

The dark steed arrived outside the city of Modai, where the rain of the season was hammering away.

Tess jumped off the back of the steed with such vigour that it seemed as if she had just awoken from sleep, even though sleep had not come to her since they had left the tavern.

A gust of wind played with Tess' hair and she stood beside Mhran, in his shadowy impersonation of Martin.

They observed the city from afar. The tall stone walls with patrolling guards on top, as well as

the partially closed gate to the city with guards outside. Two sconces on either side of the gate were lit and the fire within illuminated most of the road that broke off towards Modai.

Tess scratched her neck, considering how she would approach this. She looked at Mhran and he looked at her. Then the shade grabbed her arm. She blinked in reaction to the sudden movement and when she opened her eyes again they were inside an alley of Hangman's Square.

Mhran let go of her arm and Tess looked at him seriously.

'What'd you do that for?' she questioned sternly.

'You wanted to get inside the city. We got you inside the city,' Mhran's usual monotone voice announced.

Tess shook her head and smiled, then she started walking to the end of the alleyway they were in.

Mhran did not follow.

She turned around, this time realising that he was leaving her for good. 'I—'

'We know,' Mhran said.

Tess grinned and nodded. 'Farewell Mhran.'

'Farewell Tessana Grey.'

Tess walked away, leaving the shade behind. For a while he stood and observed her, but when she turned a corner the shadows engulfed the shade of the once-alive Martin. For a moment Tess thought she heard a familiar melody being hummed, but it quickly faded into the chorus of the wind that blew across the city.

With surprising ease Tess slipped through the alleyways of Hangman's Square, never once being noticed by the guards. Not that it would matter if they had seen her, as citizens were allowed to move about in the night as they pleased, except Old Town of course. She was, however, not completely sure there would not be a bounty on a certain silver-haired thief.

Once she got past the guards in Hangman's Square and entered Anvils, she eased up. Anvils was generally a deserted district at night and deservedly so, as the place was plagued with heavy smog coming from the many furnaces that during the day were stressed to their limits to smelt enough metal. Tess covered her mouth with a piece of cloth she had stolen from a clothesline a few alleyways back, and hurried on through.

It was intentional that Beggar's Corner was cut off from the rest of Modai by the Anvils district. Even though Beggar's Corner had been put up some four-hundred years ago to house the sick, poor, homeless and disgraced, without charging them tax, it was no secret that it had also been to rid the Commons and the Grey Market of people begging or sleeping in the streets. It made sense that the King as well as the general populace had done their best to deter the poor

from going back into the rest of the city during the day. This had worked since the only people from Beggar's Corner who left the district during the day, worked in either Anvils or Hangman's Square for petty coins. Of course the thieves were the exception. They went everywhere in the city, day or night, knowing the unfrequented streets and alleyways, doing whichever work they fancied, by hire or in their own interest.

Tess stepped through the broken stone gate into Beggar's Corner. It was not really a gate anymore nor had it been for as long as she could remember. Disrepair was an eventuality with most things in the district as the poor had a habit of breaking things when they became restless. This was good in a way. It meant that abandoned houses did not crowd the already overpopulated district as they were quickly torn down by idle hands.

As she got further into the muddied district the familiar yet vicious stench of decay and waste greeted her. She had not been here for a while she could tell, as it made her stomach roll.

Tess strolled across the muddy ground that had once been a courtyard for training guardsmen, she moved around the many shacks and houses that lay scattered all throughout the district. Beggar's Corner was a living place, where such things as place-names, alleyways and streets were never truly defined, and changed according to the mood of the season.

It was Fall now, meaning that the downpour was almost without pause. This made the constantly crowded district change a lot, as most people either stayed inside their houses or the local tavern for the majority of the season. She did see a brave few souls, who stayed outside under slanted shelters huddled around a fire, though they might also have been some of the unfortunates whose homes collapsed under the heavy rain.

Tess heard the Sparrow long before she saw it, the merry voices carried far in the wind. The crowded tavern shone brightly out across the district as a beacon of joy in an otherwise sad place. The Sparrow towered above the shacks and tiny houses of Beggar's Corner and it was, to Tess' knowledge, one of the few houses in this district to have been built out of stone and wood in a proper way, rather than being hastily put together with the nearest available materials as was the trend with most other buildings here.

It was here Jack's band of thieves would occasionally gather. He did little to oversee the operations of his thieves, but whenever something big happened, they would always gather here. Tess was of course different, Jack had let her stay as often as she wished and she would always come here when she needed advice.

Stepping through the doorway, Tess remembered that she had not changed her clothes for a long time, then laughed to herself as she realised that her smell would hardly combat that of the regular drunkards in this tavern. Her torn and bloody rags were not an unfamiliar sight in this place either, in fact it was almost like a trend here.

She passed through the tumultuous crowd, and even the drunk made sure not to bump into her. The people here knew that she was not one to mess with. Tess was always impressed with how big of an influence Jack had over this part of the city.

Luke, the tavernkeep, stood half-awake watching the patrons sing, shout and shamelessly behave like children every single night. He was clever Tess knew and strong as well, his muscles made Jack's look small and a few times she had seen him demonstrate his strength, when a patron became too violent. She admired his calm approach to everything and for a forty year old man he still looked quite young. His brown backswept hair had yet to become grey and only few wrinkles marked his face.

'Seen Jack?'

Luke looked at her, suddenly becoming more awake. 'Evening, Tessa. Saw him this morning, he left midday and hasn't returned yet.'

She frowned a bit. 'Where'd he go?'

'Didn't say.' Luke smiled apologetically.

'How about Karl? Seen him around?'

He scratched his stubble. 'That the tall slender one?'

'Nah, the chubby one.'

'Ah, then no.'

'Thanks anyway.'

She nodded. 'See you around.'

'I'll be here,' Luke said and Tess passed into the back of the tavern.

She looked at the old bookcase, which was the only thing inside the small backroom. It was old, but had been made of sturdy darkwood. It had been a concern of Jack's that one of the inhabitants might try to sneak it out of the tavern to use it for building a shack. Tess guessed that the only reason it had not happened was Jack's reputation and Luke's 'kind' approach to looters.

Without any consideration she put her left hand on 'The Book of Dread' and her right on 'The Blakemore Mystery', and pulled.

A *click* came from the fake wall. Tess let go of the books and they tipped back into their usual positions on the shelf.

She pushed the wall aside and closed it behind her, making sure the wall emitted another *click* before she walked down the staircase.

The hideout was lit by a candle inside a glass cage, the candlewax indicated that the flame had burnt for a long while, but there was nobody here.

Books lay scattered on the only table in the room, some of them Tess recognised as

notebooks Jack had kept on dealings with customers. Some of the other books had weird symbols and signs in them. She realised that Jack had been studying the strange skull with horns, since it lay in front of the books and because he had made a detailed drawing of it. She had no idea what the books had told him though, as they had been written in a language that used strange curled letters she did not know. His notes looked unfinished as though he had been in the process of studying and had to leave it to do more important things.

She was unsure why the skull was so special, apart from its strange appearance of course. Mhran had said that magic flowed from it, but what that actually meant was something only Jack would be able to figure out. She still wondered why Mhran had taken the skull with them in the first place. Perhaps he knew something more than he had cared to tell.

Tess shook her head, whether or not the skull was important did not matter right now. She was looking for a particular notebook, in which Jack had written about his clients, his opinions of them and what their assignments for the thieving band had been.

The one she was looking for was buried beneath two other books and as Tess pulled the brown leather notebook out of the pile, she saw that it was already open on the page of Jack's last deal.

The 14th of Seed, a day with sun and no clouds in the sky.

The client is a man with greying short hair and Noble clothes. We met at the Winery in Old Town (how the guards would let me into this part of Modai willingly is unknown, perhaps this client has more influence than I first realised). He wears a crescent moon necklace around his neck and over his clothes. The necklace makes the air thick with magic (it might be a warding charm against the influence of the enchanted sword). The sword is folded in a piece of tattered cloth I found lying around. It might have been too filthy for him, but he took it nonetheless and paid what he had promised, three gold crowns. The coins are smaller than I remember. Oddly enough he does not wear the scent of rosewater as many other Nobles I have met. He is very peculiar. Noam, he calls himself, he is very proud of his name it seems, claims a good King was called this once. He bears no last name and appears to be without wife. The Man by his side has me a bit uneasy and I think he followed me after I left the tavern.

I should give one of the gold crowns to Tess so she can buy that house in the Commons she has been looking at.

Tess looked up from the notebook, *Noam*, she thought to herself. She did not know the man described in the book, but then again she knew almost none of the Noblemen of Modai by name.

After Jack had gotten back from Dal's tavern, Tess was sure he had wanted to investigate the skull as his curiosity knew no bounds, but why he would be interested in the enchanted sword

again, she did not know, however Luke might.

She made sure to blow out the candle in the glass cage before she left. Even in Fall buildings could burn to the ground, this was especially the case in this district as the wood was the cheapest and since it was never coated in flame retardant alchemical water, as it was too costly.

Jack had once told her the story of the Fire Clan, a band of terrorising bandits that, as their name suggested, had the habit of setting things on fire, especially rich people's houses. After their attacks had led to half of Old Town burning down, all the court alchemists had been tasked with finding a way to make buildings impervious to fire. They had ended up crafting a special kind of water that made fire unable to spread across anything coated with it. The Fire Clan had afterwards been hunted down by the King's Men and that had been the end of them. Tess knew that if the Fire Clan decided to burn down Beggar's Corner it would be a task completed in less than a day.

She got to the fake wall and pulled it open from the inside by tugging a rope off to the side. She pushed her way through and closed it behind her, and then walked back into the tavern again.

'Luke.' She stared at the man behind bar.

'What is it?' He asked, looking at Tess and rubbing at his eyes tiredly.

'Do you know something about a certain sword?'

'What sword are we talking about?'

Tess looked around to ensure no one would be able to hear her. 'You know. The one I stole for Jack's client in Old Town.'

'Oh, that one. 'Chubby', erhm, Karl, told me that one of the King's Men was sent to the Red Castle after he murdered the Royal Advisor. He used an enchanted sword to kill him. You think it's the same?'

'That's the only recent news from Old Town?'

'Pretty much, unless you want to hear gossip about some Nobles getting married, it's supposedly quite scandalous.'

'No thanks. Did Karl tell Jack about this?'

'Probably. He said it was quite a big deal.'

'Do you think it would become a problem for us if that's the very same sword I stole last season?'

'I'm sure the King's Men would already have raided this place if that was the case.'

'I hope you're right.' Tess bit her lip. This had to be the reason why Jack had hurried back to Modai. Perhaps he had already sorted everything out, but she still felt as though something was off about this whole situation. They had stolen the sword for a Nobleman only to have it end up

in the hands of another King's Man and being used to murder the King's advisor. It just did not make sense to her.

She looked at Luke. 'Do you still have contact with that tavernkeep in Old Town?'

'Mikael?'

'Possibly, is he the one who tends the Winery?'

'Ah no, you mean Jasper the Snitch?' Luke said and smirked. Jasper had once worked for Jack at the same time as Luke and the two of them had been fierce rivals, or so she had heard.

'Is he working today?'

'He's a tavern keeper, which means work every day and night.' He sighed, surely contemplating his own occupation.

'Can you pour me a drink?'

'Sweet mead as usual?' Luke asked with a mug already in his hand.

'I'll have dark mead today.'

'You'll regret it later,' he said, to which Tess responded by pointing her tongue at him.

Tess was leaving Beggar's Corner, her stomach growling at her, she had perhaps been a bit overconfident when she had chosen dark mead.

She decided to go into Old Town to find Jack. Jasper would hopefully know where he was. Even though Jasper no longer worked for Jack, he would sometimes still help them with jobs that took place in Old Town, and it was likely that Jack had gone to visit him and ask about Noam's whereabouts.

If the advisor had been killed with the enchanted sword she had stolen, it would likely mean that the King's Man, whom Tess had stolen it from, would be the first one blamed. Was he the King's Man that had been sent to the Red Castle? Perhaps it was the plan of the real killer to blame it on the original owner of the sword, but why? Revenge, maybe? Why would Jack interfere in this matter, if it did not concern them? Although it was possible that they could be seen as co-conspirators to the murder, which meant the King's Men would start hunting them. The punishment for murder was far worse than the one for thievery. This had to be the reason why Jack would get involved, even the slightest chance of it being traced back to them meant trouble. She wondered how he was planning on fixing this problem.

Tess shook the thoughts from her mind and walked through the broken gate that led into the Anvils district.

It was still dark so no one was present yet, but come dawn, Anvils would be busier than the Grey Market during Harvest. Practiced artisans and their apprentices would be endlessly making weapons, such as spears, halberds, swords, axes, spike-hammers, daggers and knives for the royal

army. In a lesser corner of Anvils, practiced fletchers and wood-shapers would be crafting shields and both short and longbows for the patrols outside the gates and atop the tall walls that surrounded the city. Occasionally Grand Smiths would be crafting special weapons for Nobles or decorated King's Men, all by themselves using the Great Forge.

When she had been younger Tess had seen one of the Grand Smiths test his newly made sword against an apprentice, she still remembered the odd sound his blade had made as it cut through the air and impacted with the apprentice's sword, cutting it in two.

Tess put a piece of cloth over her mouth and nose again to stem the smog and smell. It was a scent that she could not get accustomed to even if she was to spend the whole day here.

She passed the many different anvils, forges and other tools as she made her way through the expansive district. Jack had told her once that many of the anvils here were more than four times the age of the men who worked on them.

As she turned a corner, the gate leading to Hangman's Square came into view.

Tess knew it would be harder to find her way through Old Town this time as she did not have a map. She would have to get into the district first though, which meant getting through the gate or, rather, over it.

She ducked down and kept to the shadows until she reached an alley she knew was unpatrolled and then ran through Hangman's Square until the Old Town gate was visible.

There were four guards standing around the gate. The men talked together with voices that carried far in the otherwise silent and cold evening air. Tess would have no way to distract four men at once, so her plan of crawling over the short part of the wall near the gate would have to be abandoned.

Before the gate there was quite a lot of open space and no cover of buildings, so it would be impossible to sneak over to the gate without being spotted.

Tess snuck around the fringes of the guardsmen's view, trying to spot a way to get into the district. She had heard talk about secret tunnel routes that connected all the districts of Modai, but even if such rumours were true, she had no idea where to find these tunnels.

As she stood within the shadows, surveying the wall for any possible entrance, her hands started turning black. She looked down at her hands and from the middle of the palms a seemingly impenetrable darkness spread across her body, rapidly covering her in shadow. She stared frightened as she was becoming one with the darkness. She blinked once, moved backwards and then her back touched something. *Strange*, there had been nothing around her. She turned and looked behind her seeing a tall wall. When she looked up in front of her, she did not see the gate to Old Town any longer, in its stead was a dark alley that extended a long way before her and then split into two. Again she looked at her hands. The darkness that had covered

her body was quickly retreating back into the palms again.

'Mhran?' Tess whispered.

No answer came and after watching the shadows for some time, she decided that she should focus on finding Jack.

Tess shook her head, trying to rid her thoughts of all the puzzles she sought answers to. Her feet carried her forwards, even though her mind was elsewhere. She passed along the alleyway, following smaller streets and after a while she reached one of the bigger streets of Old Town.

She recognised the name 'Septimer Street' on a sign. Last she was here this was the street she had followed. She also remembered passing the Winery on her way to Parcel Street.

Just as Tess poked her head out of the alleyway, footsteps and the sound of rustling metal could be heard not far from her. She went back into the shadows of the buildings and waited for the people to pass her.

The sound of footsteps filled up the entire alleyway, echoing off the stone walls, as the guards walked by.

They were King's Men, even in the dark of night their silvery cuirasses and white linen tabards were easy to spot, then again these guards were not trying to hide from trouble, they were known to face twice their number head on and come out unscathed. There were three King's Men in the group, as was the standard. Each of the guards had a different weapon and she was sure that as deadly as one of them would be, the force of three at once amounted to that of a small army.

After a few moments, she no longer heard the guards and decided to move out into the big street. She went over to the other side and ducked into one of the smaller alleyways that went the same direction as Septimer Street. From her previous encounter with the district, Tess had discovered that the King's Men in Old Town only kept to the big streets and the places where important Nobles lived. This meant that during the night nobody would be present in the smaller streets and therefore Tess could move faster without having to worry about guard patrols.

Tess' feet hit the ground one after the other. The impact with the stones produced very little sound, despite the fact that she was running as fast as she could. The stones that made up the streets in all of Modai, were in Old Town more delicate and deliberately placed than in the rest of city, where most of the stones had just been tossed into the dirt without much consideration.

The houses Tess passed, on her way to the Winery, were home to the lesser residents of Old Town, who were too rich for the Commons, yet not rich nor important enough to have a two-storey house in the Noble part of Old Town and so had to settle for modest one-storey houses.

After running for some time, Tess was beginning to tire and slowed her pace. A moment later she heard loud voices in the distance. They had to be coming from the Winery.

Determined she walked through the maze of streets, alleyways and houses, relying on nothing but her ears. She reached the end of an alley that led out into an open area, where Septimer Street curved around a corner, and on that corner was the tavern.

Tess was surprised that the inhabitants of Old Town were actually able to enjoy themselves and behave like fools.

She was just about to walk out of the alley when she saw a group of three King's Men standing by the building, overlooking the drunkards who were coming and going. The Winery might be a fancy name for a tavern, but it was still a tavern and it had the same purpose as all other taverns.

Tess observed the entrance for a while and to her dismay the King's Men had not abandoned their post even once, though from their disapproving looks it seemed they were not too happy about it either. She guessed that guard duty at the tavern was one of the simpler assignments that the King's Men dealt with. Most of them were probably more interested in serving the King directly.

She decided to try to find another entrance on the other side of the tavern, all the while keeping herself within the boundaries of the shadows to avoid the eyes of the menacing guards.

The tavern was big, at least twice the size of the Sparrow and made with red-brown wood and dark-grey stone. The building was tall as well and its roof stood slightly above that of the one-storey houses in this part of Old Town.

As Tess shimmied around the tavern she realised that it only had the one entrance and that one was guarded by the three King's Men, none of whom she had any desire to meet.

The side of the tavern that Tess was facing was opposite the entrance, so she could safely walk up to the building as this part was covered in shadows dark enough to shield her from vigilant eyes.

As she stood against the wall of the building, she could feel the reverberations of cheerful voices inside. She wanted desperately to get in, so that she would be able to ask Jasper about Jack's whereabouts.

Tess leant against the wall as she considered her next move, then suddenly her right hand slipped through the wood as though it was made out of air. She looked at her arm, and then darkness spread from it and onto her body. When she was covered entirely in the bottomless darkness she pushed the rest of her body through the wall as well.

Inside a backroom in the tavern a dark hand came through the wall, followed by the body of Tess. She fell to her knees after pushing herself through. The darkness that had covered her slowly retreated to the centre of her palms and left her breathing heavily with her knees pressed against the wooden floor.

She looked about the room and as her eyes adjusted to the darkness she began to rise, however the weight of her body slowed her down as though she was not used to it.

As her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she started seeing the objects around her. There were a few kegs in the back that filled the room with the scent of sweet wine. A dusty chandelier hung from the ceiling and a few chairs had been carelessly thrown into the middle. To her right was a door, its keyhole cast a single beam of light across the dark room.

She limped over to the door, slowly regaining control of her body the further she went. When she reached it she put her eye against the keyhole and peered through. What she saw was nothing like what she had expected, nobody was drunkenly brawling and no bets or idiotic knife games were conducted. In fact, everyone she could see was standing and talking, most people were clearly drunk, yet they retained the same dignity as when they fared during the day. Tess doubted that she would even make it to the bar before anyone saw her for what she was and threw her out, but she was not about to let Jack handle this affair on his own and so she opened the door quietly and snuck out into the drunken crowd of the Winery.

She pushed her way through to where she believed the bar was, it worked well enough to begin with, but then people started to notice her clothing and her untidy hair, and saw that she was not one of them. Though Tess was not instantly called out to leave the tavern, but instead those who noticed her as something beneath them, handed her their empty glasses as though she was an assistant to the barkeep. Tess took the thick glasses and the closer she moved to the bar, the more she carried in her arms.

As she reached the bar, her arms were wrapped about a wobbly tower of glasses, all of which smelled strongly of wine. Jasper stood at the bar in the process of refilling for one of the patrons, when Tess set down the glass tower on the counter in front of him.

'I hadn't heard I was getting a new assistant,' the raspy voice of Jasper observed.

Tess poked her head out from behind the pile of dirty glasses, her face was as serious as she could manage, her eyes narrowed as she looked at Jasper.

The slender man frowned. 'Oh, it's You,' he said.

'Where's Jack?'

'I want nothing more to do with your gang. It's bad for my reputation.'

'Where's Jack?' Tess repeated, but harsher this time.

'Please leave, I'll call the guards.'

'No, you won't,' Tess said menacingly and reached over the counter to grab the scrawny man by the neck of his dark-red shirt. She did not care if anyone saw.

'Alright, alright,' he said and Tess let go of his collar. 'He came to me asking about some guy, one of the rich ones from around here. I told him that I knew nothing about this person and

that he should definitely not look at the end of 'Septimer Street' for the third to last house on the right.'

'Thank you.' Tess smiled and walked away.

Before she had taken two steps Jasper spoke. 'Beware girl. The man Jack is looking for is every bit as cruel as he is smart.'

Tess made a hand gesture without turning around to indicate that such did not bother her, but she knew that something was amiss.

As she left, she could almost feel the eyes of the surrounding people bore into her back as they stared her down.

Tess had almost forgotten about the three King's Men outside of the tavern, but managed to put her hood on before they had a chance to look at her.

She walked past them, but just as she did one of them grabbed her shoulder.

'Halt,' a stern female voice ordered.

Tess froze, she was sure that they would know about the robbery and about the particular colour of the robber's hair, her hair. She had to act or she would never find Jack, and so she wrestled her shoulder from the guard's grip and ran towards the other end of the street.

'Stop her!' the woman yelled and in her mind she could almost see how the two other guards would be right behind her, weapons drawn and ready to strike her down. Fortunately for Tess, their footsteps sounded heavy as though the armour they wore was slowing them down. She ran into the nearest alleyway.

Grey stonework surrounded her as she sped through alley after alley, changing direction whenever a new one presented itself. After running for some time, exhausted and cold, she was sure that her pursuers had given up. She now had no idea where she was or how to get back to Septimer Street. The alleyways of Old Town were so poorly placed and structured that without a map or intimate knowledge, one could get lost very easily.

The houses that surrounded her were still the lesser one-storey ones. Tess was frustrated, but she was not about to give up. She grabbed hold of the stones in the wall of a house and started scaling the side of the building. With uneasy legs she reached the top and crawled onto the roof. From her vantage point she could see the roofs of the many homes around her. In the distance, looking towards the massive castle to the north, were the differently built houses of the richer part of Old Town. Although she had no idea what Noam's house would look like, she knew it would not be too far from the castle gate that lay at the end of Septimer Street.

Tess crawled down from the roof of the house and headed towards the castle.

It was early morning, and although the rain had let up the winds were cold and the sky still dark.

From here she could see the castle gate and the two groups of King's Men who stood guard. They wore armour darker than the patrolling King's Men and she remembered Jack had told her that the ranking order of the guards was determined by the colour they had. Whether these guards were above or below the rank of those who patrolled the streets of Old Town, she did not know.

Tess walked along the line of buildings that were to her left. Following this, she figured, would lead her to the end of Septimer Street, where she would find the house belonging to Noam. To her right was nothing but open space in front of the gate of Castle Modai. The open space would give the archers on the walls enough time to kill unwanted visitors before they had any chance of merely touching the gate. At the moment she could only spot a few archers along the wall, but each of them were likely as deadly with a bow as the King's Men were with their weapons.

The stonework here was older than the rest of Old Town's, it had cracks and was riddled with moss, yet still stood even though it was possibly more than five-hundred years old.

Nobody was about at this time, except the King's Men and perhaps the tavern patrons. *Good*, Tess thought. If things got bad, she did not want an audience.

As she walked along the outside of Old Town, she noticed that the buildings opened up further ahead, most likely where Septimer Street ended. Determined, she approached the opening.

She stood for a bit, at the end of the street, counting the buildings until she found the third to last house that Jasper had informed her was Noam's home.

There was no light coming from any of the thick warped glass windows. If this was where Jack had gone then she needed to get inside.

There were no guards around here so Tess just walked straight up the street to the house. The door was the kind that required a three-headed key and would be impossible to force open. She almost gave up, but then remembered how she had entered the Winery.

Tess put both hands on the wall of the house, but nothing happened. She looked down at her hands, trying to summon the darkness that had come before. Nothing came at first, but after concentrating, the darkness flowed from the centre of her palms and covered her arms. She put her hands against the wall again, but as soon as her skin touched the cold mossy stone, the darkness evaporated from her body.

'It's called a charm,' a voice behind her said. 'Numbs all magic, supposedly.'

Tess turned around and looked straight at the man who had snuck up on her. She had not even heard the scrape of a boot when he had approached. He had light-brown hair and a short well-trimmed beard as well as deep-blue and calm eyes, his cuirass was a matte burgundy, but

most importantly he wore the tabard of a King's Man. Her eyes lit up as she saw the sword that hung from his belt, it was the same sword she had stolen from the house in Parcel Street almost a season before. Blackened symbols on the spine of a dark blade.

'Noam?' she asked, unsure yet with a stern look on her face.

The man laughed. 'You are mistaken. The old man would not come out of his bed for someone like You.'

Then Tess remembered what Jack had written in his journal '*The man by his side has me a bit uneasy.*' This man was Noam's personal guard she realised and such guards were not given to just any Noble from what she had heard. Who was this Noam exactly?

'Where's Jack?' Tess asked the man as menacingly as she could.

The man laughed again. 'Who are you to ask questions?'

'Please. I need to find him!' she begged, letting her emotions get the better of her.

'You won't find him alive.'

'What did you do?'

'What do you think?'

Her body froze. 'No,' Tess whispered. Jack could not be dead. Had he survived a fight with a giant only to be killed by a King's Man over a job gone wrong? It was not right. It had to be wrong.

'You're lying!'

'He's dead. I made sure.'

'Why would you kill him?!' she screamed at him.

'I was ordered to,' the man said. 'I'm supposed to silence you as well.'

Tess could not control herself. Tears rolled down her cheeks and her body started shaking.

The man scratched his beard and looked down at her with pity.

'I'm sorry. You don't even deserve this. You're just a lowly thief.'

He sighed and unsheathed the enchanted sword from his belt, though with some difficulty as though his arm was injured. The blade had blood on it. She knew it was Jack's blood.

'Bryant was a fool for having this *Thing* lying around,' he said hatefully.

Tears pattered the cobbles in front of Tess, her eyes were red and her teeth gritted. Anger, sadness, regret and many other feelings took up the space in her head.

The man got closer. 'I'll make it quick and painless,' he promised.

Tess looked up into his eyes and grabbed his tabard, the man stopped.

His eyes widened, 'I—'

She let out a mournful roar and ran her arm through his chest, piercing his heart.

The man's eyes still blinked as Tess stared into them, her own red eyes burning with hatred.

When she pulled the shadowy lance from his chest he fell slack on his knees, back slumped against the wall of Noam's house, smearing blood along the side of it. A heavy sigh left his lips and the blood from the hole in his chest coloured the white tabard so that it matched his burgundy cuirass.

Tess felt an overwhelming urge to throw up, but she held it in. She had to find Jack.

She started running down the way the King's Man had come and as she ran the tears continued streaming down her face. Jack could not be dead. She did not believe it. He was a magician, she was certain that he had some trick up his sleeve. She just had to find him first.

The shadow on her arm had not disappeared. It was as if her anger and sorrow had manifested itself on her body. The darkness was slowly crawling across her skin, spreading further up her arm.

She stopped after having retraced the King's Man's steps as a dark alleyway opened up in-between two houses. Something unexplainable told her she would find Jack in there and she entered the darkness, allowing her eyes to adjust before going any further.

Every step echoed through the tight corridor. Further in was more room to move around and as she got closer she could hear a dripping sound alongside the echo of her boots.

When she reached the small room she stopped.

'Jack?'

A body lay collapsed against the stone wall, blood trailing from its stomach and dripping down into a small red puddle.

Tess moved closer and laid a hand on the lifeless body. She shook it gently.

'Wake up.'

She shook him again.

'Please...'

The tears started rolling down her face again. An indescribable pain in her heart made her cry out. It hurt so much.

She hugged Jack's warm body, and clutched it tightly as if it would wake him from this slumber. His blood soaked through her clothes. It was warm and the smell of iron filled her nose.

Tess cried loudly. The pain she felt was so immense that she wanted to end it all. She wanted to die if it meant they could be together again.

Jack lay still in her arms as her tears dripped down on his face.

'**Tessana,**' said a familiar voice. The darkness in front of her shifted, letting through the simulacrum of Martin Grey.

'You're a figment of my imagination,' she said to the darkness.

'Your sorrow will control you. It will be your end. We have seen it before.'

'Please... Just go.'

'Is that what you truly wish?'

'I want Jack to come back.'

'He is right here. Do you not feel it?'

'I don't feel anything.'

'Come with us,' Mhran urged.

'I want to stay with Jack.'

'You can take him with you.'

Tess looked up at the darkness. 'Where will you go?'

'Our home.'

'Is it far away?'

'Yes. You will feel safe there. We promise.'

Mhran extended a hand towards her and she grabbed it.

'Take us there.'

'As you wish.'

Chapter Fourteen

'Open your eyes. What do you see?'

'Darkness.'

'Look closer, Martin.'

'I see tall structures. I see an edge in the horizon. I see other spirits like you.'

'This is Nightshadow, our home. We have not been here for a long time.'

'Am I really here with you?'

'Not yet. This is only a dream.'

'It is beautiful.'

'When we are free, we will take you here.'

Tess opened her eyes. At first she thought she had gone blind, but then her eyes pierced the darkness of this new world.

The ground around her was dark-grey and completely flat. Surrounding her were four pillars that held up a tower, which she was lying underneath. The entire structure was as dark-grey as the ground around it and the building glowed slightly as though it was covered in a thin white mist.

As she sat up she noticed the other buildings around her. All of them were tower-like structures and each one was more than five times taller than Tess. Not one of the buildings looked even remotely similar. Some had decorative spherical figures at the top and others had curved spikes protruding from their sides. There were also a few structures that she had no idea of how to describe and for which, standing upright without falling seemed like a violation of reality.

Mhran, where are you? She thought to herself.

Tess continued to look around and noticed different looking shades walking about the landscape, she knew they were the kin of Mhran, but beyond the infinite darkness they possessed none of them looked alike. They were as unique as the buildings that surrounded them. Some had horns, some had four arms instead of two, some had tails and some were more akin with animals, walking on four, six or eight legs and with the contour of what could be fur. Mhran had obviously copied the shape of Martin, but she knew that he could shape himself as he wished and so it was possible that this was common amongst his kin. She wondered if their

buildings possessed the same ability as well. Tess was slightly unnerved by the idea that Mhran's kin all wore the guise of others like clothing, swapping according to the task at hand or according to the mood of the day. And if so, what was their natural appearance or had they none?

Tess stood up, her body felt lighter than it ever had before, all her motions flowing gracefully, without the sluggishness that was a constant amongst her kind. Now standing she could see a lot more of her surroundings, and looking in one direction she could see what appeared to be floating islands in the distance, separated from this part of the land by a strange white, grey and black mist.

She turned and looked across the land in a different direction, in the far reaches of it she could see a strange structure standing alone. It looked like a castle as it had a tall spire at each of its four corners and an even bigger one in its middle, the castle also had the same white glow as the buildings around her.

Tess suddenly realised that there was no noise. There was no wind howling as it collided with the strange towers scattered across the land, there was no audible talking from the shades around her and there was not even any sound from her feet as she started walking towards the edge of the land. The only sound she could hear came from the mist that separated the different islands of this curious realm she was in. *Nightshadow* was the name her dream had told her. The sound from the mist was similar to the humming the dagger made when Mhran had been within it, but she noticed quickly that the sound was a mesh of many different melodies. Perhaps each shade had its own melody. Somehow it seemed logical to her, even though this entire place went against all reason.

She was unsure of the distance she had to walk to reach the edge of the land. It lay in the horizon, but the dark-grey ground provided no insight into how many steps she had taken or how many more she had to take.

For a long while Tess walked mindlessly in a straight line towards the horizon that was characterised by the dark-grey land giving way to a vast open sea of mist-like shadows that flowed about in no particular patterns. The sea lured her closer with its mystique and although it contained only white, grey and black, the infinity that it seemed to stretch beyond was something that caught the eye in a most curious way.

Her gaze was bound to the sea and so she hardly realised that she had reached the edge of the dark-grey land, she did not realise that she sat down on the edge either and she did not realise that she was not alone in this strange attraction towards this foreign sea that flowed randomly and stretched far beyond where the eyes could see.

'We see you are drawn to this like our kin. Some still observe the sea without noticing

anything else.'

Tess did not turn to look at Mhran who sat beside her on the edge. 'I don't understand it,' she said, almost in a whisper.

'Sorrow is within you. Our kin bears sorrow within it as well.'

'I'm all alone now and nobody will ever know what we did.'

'A hero does his duty, knowing that he will not be praised or thanked, but if he can save those in need he will do it with a grin on his face,' Mhran said. **'Martin told us this once when we asked why he wanted to stop Lucien.'**

'I wish I had never found that dagger.'

'It was already decided that you were going to find it, if not that day, then the next. This path was inevitable.'

'I've lost everyone because of it. Without the dagger I would never have started robbing houses. If I had never started robbing houses I would never have stolen that enchanted sword. If I hadn't stolen the sword Jack wouldn't have been—' Tess bore her nails into her arm.

'You feel that you are at fault for what happened to him. If you had never found the dagger and never stolen the sword, then another would have in your stead and fate would have repeated itself without your involvement. Another person would have killed the King's Man in revenge.'

'It may be that you're right, but what am I to do now? I'm no longer important to you. I have played my part in this twisted war.'

'You are as important to us as Martin was. We would never have brought you here otherwise. This is our gift to you. If we had left you in the world of Mondanes you would have met a grim fate.'

'So I should just live here with you until I die of old age?'

'Do you want to stay here forever?'

'I would rather go back to my own world.'

'We can take you there if you wish.'

'But I can't go back. They'll hunt me down. Maybe I'll stay here until they have forgotten me.'

'Given enough time, they will.'

'It doesn't seem like there is much to do here while I wait.'

'We could tell you the story of our world and kin.'

'Very well, tell me your story.'

'As you wish.'

The Story of Mhran

In the beginning two creators shaped the realm of shadows. They were the King and the Queen of this world, the dark and light.

The King created shadow beings in his image and the Queen in hers. Life was breathed into the beings and they were sorted into a hierarchy in order of creation. The first of the dark shadows was the First Prince, and of the light shadows was the First Princess. Three more Princes and Princesses were created, each were paired up with their counterpart with an unbreakable bond.

After the royalty came the advisors, then the guard and then the common beings who held only a fraction of the power that the Princes and Princesses had. Each being had its counterpart, and each pair was inseparable as was the design of the creators.

When the denizens of the shadow realm had been born the King and Queen began shaping homes for them. The royalty were given a castle to share. The dark princes lived with the King and the light princesses with the Queen. Those of later birth were given different homes, the commoners receiving the most modest ones.

Upon completing this task the creators decided to shape a sea around the land and its distant islands. They poured their essence out over the edge of the land and created a sea with such unparalleled brilliance that all the beings of the world came to observe it.

When the creators had finished their realm they sat on the edge together and watched the world before them. The royalty were the first to approach them, after them followed the advisors, the guard and the common beings.

The First Prince was the one to ask the question all the beings in the world pondered over.

'What is the meaning of our existence?'

The creators did not answer, but instead gifted the shadow beings with the power of magic. It was the same magic that they had used to shape the land and create the world. With it the dark and light shadows learnt how to shape themselves and spent a long time testing the limits of these powers. When the shadow kin realised that this magic did not hold the answer to their question they returned to their creators.

'Why are we here?'

Again the King and Queen did not answer, but instead gifted the shadow beings with the power to move between realms. In their predetermined pairs the dark and light shadows travelled

across many worlds, in every realm the shadow kin visited the beings were unaware of them and fought amongst themselves over the same questions they had asked their creators. A long time passed while the dark and light beings searched these many worlds for answers, they learnt a lot about these foreign beings, but they never found what they sought and thus returned to their homeworld.

Upon their return the shadow kin were greeted by a horned silver serpent with wings. Its eyes gleamed with a feeling they had never experienced before.

'The answer to your question is Desire!'

The dark and light beings did not understand this feeling as they had been born without it.

The creature then spoke to the beings and their creators.

'Feast!' it said, and without hesitation the shadow kin were at war.

The dark and light turned on each other in an attempt to satisfy the craving desire the serpent had cursed them with. A few fell into the sea in their struggle, but most fought long and hard, eventually succumbing to either their dark or light counterpart. The First Prince devoured the First Princess and in the process lost his mind to the craving sensation. With ravenous strength the Prince lunged at other light shadows that had conquered their counterpart, he tore apart their essence and gorged on it.

The King and Queen had also been fighting, but neither of them had won, and in a moment of clarity they sent a burst of energy out across the realm and seized the fighting for a moment. They knew the curse the silver serpent had put on them would never be healed and therefore decided to separate the two kin. A quake shot across the realm and split it in half, all the light shadows gathered around their Queen and their part of the world fell through the sea and onto the other side.

In desperation some of the dark kin jumped into the sea to follow the light shadows, but they did not make it, for the sea itself had become hostile to the beings of the world.

After the separation the dark King shut himself away in his castle. The dark beings roamed their part of the shattered realm until one of them, the First Prince, took the mantle of leadership upon himself. The curse of the serpent still corrupted their cores, and so they sought out a way to sate the craving. When they had explored several worlds for a reliable way to feast, the dark shadow kin discovered that light sources provided them the sustenance that they desired. The light shadows had not found a harmless way to satisfy their hunger and instead gorged on the souls of beings in other worlds. Whenever dark and light shades encountered each other in other realms, they would fight. The dark kin would fight to preserve life, and the light would fight for the right to feast, an act they revelled in compared to the dark shadows, who saw feasting as nothing more than a necessity.

Either as a result of the serpent's curse or the war between dark and light the sea of shadows had become filled with aberrations. These twisted shadow beings crawled through the sea and up to the land of the dark kin. They, like the light kin, desired souls to satisfy an endless craving. The dark kin were able to fight off the savage aberrations at first, but their number was endless and it was not long before the first casualty, a common being. When he died a great black hand rose from out of the sea and pulled him down with it.

The war with the aberrations was long and many shadow kin succumbed to their vast number. Those that survived had learnt to master their magic and could fight many opponents at once with ease. The fighting soon reached a point where no more dark kin were killed by the aberrations, as a result of this something crawled out of the sea. It was the monster that the black hands belonged to. A God with a thousand arms and hands. It wrought havoc on the land that the dark kin inhabited and killed many of the shadow beings who had survived the onslaught of the aberrations. The First Prince alone fought this enormous deity in order to protect his people.

With its thousand hands the twisted God fought the lone Prince on the edge of their realm. The Prince severed many of the black arms, but just like the aberrations their number seemed endless. Just when the First Prince thought defeat was imminent he recalled a spell he had learnt in the world of Angels during the travels with his counterpart. He leapt towards the deity and pushed it back into the shadowy sea. When they had fallen far enough away from his home the Prince cut off a piece of his essence and used it to imprison the God within the sea, restraining its thousand arms.

The sea of shadows fought him with all its might when he tried to return to his kin, but he eventually found the edge and clawed his way onto the land.

A long time passed while the dark kin rebuilt their world and mended their wounds from the war.

For what in other worlds would be a lifetime, the First Prince sat on the edge of the land and stared off into the sea below him. He had fought the aberrations for such a long time that he now felt lost, without purpose. The questions his kind had once asked their creators no longer filled his mind. The purpose for his existence had been set. His lot in life was to fight. It was what his whole essence yearned for.

After a long time, an opportunity presented itself. A strange voice beckoned him. '*Appear before me, First Prince,*' it said. It was a voice he could reject with ease, but he obeyed it and was summoned to the realm of Mondus. There were many surprised beings standing before the First

Prince in the small chamber he appeared in. These Mondanes had not expected their magic to work.

'What do you desire?' the Prince asked them.

'We wish to borrow your power, to make a weapon of you.'

It was what he had sought for a long time, it was his purpose to fight and so he accepted the request of the horned kin that had summoned him. With their magic they bound his essence within an orb attached to a dagger made from metal that did not cast a shadow. The blade bent and twisted at the strain of his presence, but did not crack or splinter.

After the ritual was finished, the horned Mondanes began the search for a suitable wielder. They had named the weapon Maharan, meaning the Dagger of Shadows, and the First Prince adopted this name. His kin were unaccustomed to names, but these were not his kin and thus a name was appropriate.

The first man who held the dagger collapsed under the weight of Maharan's power. The second, third, fourth and fifth all followed suit. It was not until the sixth person, a young hornless man with ashen skin, grasped the handle that the might of Maharan was tamed. Like a thin veil the shadowy essence of the Prince flowed from the orb of the dagger and covered the ashen man. With Maharan's power the wielder was able to use the magic of the dark kin to shape the Prince's essence with his will, but after only having wielded the dagger for a short while the ashen man passed out. Nevertheless the horned Mondanes were pleased with the results and started making preparations.

The First Prince realised that he was the first of his kin to be summoned, but not the last. The Mondanes sought power for something and summoned many of his dark brethren. The majority of the shadow beings that were brought to Mondus were the common spirits that the Prince far surpassed in strength, but they had been hardened by the war with the aberrations and could therefore serve the purpose of the horned summoners.

Many hornless men and women joined the horned beings in their castle fortress. They were assigned as wielders for the lesser dark spirits. The First Prince realised that it was war that these Mondanes were preparing for. While it had been left unsaid, he knew that they were fighting the light kin. It was the only reason why the horned magicians would go to such lengths as to ally with the dark shadow spirits. They were to be the Darkness to engulf the Light.

For ten days the Mondanes prepared and finalised their summons. A total of twenty-seven dark kin, including the First Prince, had been brought to Mondus.

Among the wielders, the ashen man who carried Maharan was the leader. Although he possessed no strategic skill or combat experience, the sheer power of the dagger he wielded was enough to set him apart from his peers.

On the eleventh day, the wielders and some of the horned magicians left the castle fortress. Twenty-three dark spirits accompanied them within their enchanted prisons, only the Prince's prison was an exquisite weapon, the rest of his kin were locked within jewellery and gemstones.

The First Prince later discovered that the four dark spirits that stayed behind at the fortress were experimented on, and turned into living books to gather knowledge. These Black Books of Knowledge were later the reason why a clan of assassins brought shadow spirits back to Mondus again.

After leaving their base a scout caught up to the wielders and their horned masters. The scout informed them of the enemy's location, an ancient summoning site in the eastern part of the Dead Marsh. An enchanted stone there called the Heavenly Mirror was said to allow passage to other realms when fed with a great amount of pure blood, although it had remained unused for thousands of years.

When they arrived at the ancient site they encountered a group of light shadow spirits that far outnumbered them. These spirits were accompanied by a few horned magicians and were trying to activate the summoning stone by feeding it the blood of virgins.

'We have to stop them,' the ashen man said, and the wielders engaged the light kin, while their horned masters provided support with ranged shadow magic.

The dark kin were better fighters than the light spirits, but they were confined within prisons and limited to the use of Mundane bodies, which made the battle uneven against the light kin, who had no wielders. Maharan alone was the only reason why the dark shadows were not immediately defeated, but even the Prince could not fight with all his might from within the dagger.

During the fight the Mirror stone activated and sent a shockwave across the ground, which halted the battle. Like a tear in cloth the air itself split apart and a single being stepped through. She wore a familiar guise, and all the shadow kin recognised her as their Queen. The aura that surrounded her was terrible like the scent of death around a vicious monster, and a monster she had become, living only to feast.

With tremendous speed she leapt across the battlefield and devoured many of the dark kin and their wielders. The ashen man challenged her, but was immediately killed.

The Queen grasped the dagger holding the First Prince within and stared at it with an insatiable gaze, even his mighty essence would never stop the hunger.

Something else stepped through the rift spawned by the summoning stone. His presence was as mighty as the Queen's, but his aura was nowhere near as terrifying, instead it was soothing, like a soft lullaby.

The Queen dropped the dagger and stared at the King. The two of them communed with

each other silently.

When their unheard conversation had ended the light shadows and their Matriarch travelled back to their world through the tear in the air.

The King stayed behind for a moment, taking in the light of Mondus, sating his hunger and leaving the world in darkness. Afterwards he too left through the rift.

The fighting ended then, and the horned magicians and few remaining wielders returned to their castle fortress without a word, they did not seem confused by the events that had transpired, but rather seemed content.

After they had returned to the fortress they began freeing the dark kin from their service, leaving Maharan for last. The Mondanes had erroneously assumed that the only thing keeping the dark spirits from revolting against the wielders was the presence of the First Prince, although all shadow kin had the same loyalty to each other, regardless of their hierarchy. The Mondanes could have summoned a common spirit and all of Nightshadow's denizens would have followed to accompany their brother.

When there was only one dark spirit left to free, the First Prince inside the dagger, a quake rushed through the fortress. The ground opened up and swallowed the entire castle. Most of the corridors collapsed and not a single Mondane survived.

Maharan knew that the earthquake was the result of a summoning inside the fortress, but he knew not what had been summoned or why. For a while he felt a great presence nearby, but it slowly dissipated as more of the base collapsed in on itself.

For fifty-thousand years Maharan lay motionless in the broken castle, unable to move his prison that cast no shadows, until one day a hornless man found him.

The man picked up the dagger and dusted it off. As he touched the handle all of the First Prince's remaining power shot through his body. The hornless man strained to endure it, but the might of Maharan made his knees collapse under him.

'So this is Mhran, the lost Prince?'

The First Prince tried to speak, but all his power had been spent. The many years of inaction had caused his strength to fade.

Maharan was attached to the belt of the hornless man and carried through the ruins of the castle fortress. They never encountered the being that had caused the earthquake, and the Prince was unsure if it still dwelled within. After many days they arrived at a castle in a different part of Mondus. There were many hornless men just like the one who carried Maharan and they all seemed adept at shaping shadows.

Later when the Prince had regained his strength he spoke to the one who had found him. His

name was Martin Grey, an assassin of the Shadowblade Cult.

After Mhran had finished his story Tess sat in silence. She knew what happened after Martin found the dagger and the tragedy of it had not helped her mood. Not that she had expected it to, but the more she thought about Martin's life and her own, she saw no uplifting moments, just tragedy.

'Maybe we should not have told you this story.'

'No, it was good. Just like a fairy tale. Perhaps a bit more violent than normal, but I liked it.'

'It is all true.'

'I just can't believe that. It sounds made up.'

'Is your presence here not evidence enough?'

'I suppose.'

She let out a mournful sigh. 'I wonder what Jack would say to that story.'

'What story? What did I miss?'

Tess turned around and got to her feet. 'Jack?'

'Yes?' He looked at her confused.

She ran to him and hugged him tightly. 'I thought you were dead!' she said, her head pressed against his chest.

'Argh. Easy now, you will open the wound if you press too hard.'

She loosened her hold on him, but did not let go. 'Sorry, but you were dead. How are you here now?'

'For a moment my flame became an ember, but an ember can still burn.'

Tess looked at Mhran, 'You should have told me he was alive.'

'You never asked.'

'I mourned for you, Jack.'

'I am sorry I could not wake up and tell you I was not dead. That King's Man got me pretty good, but I also left him a burnt shoulder. Considering the state I was in, it should be a feat in itself that I was even able to use any magic at all.'

'I killed him, you know.'

'The King's Man? How?'

'With our shadow.'

'I killed Lucien too.'

'I knew you would be able to.'

Tess smiled.

Jack turned towards Mhran. 'How long have we been here compared to Mondus?'

'Time here is faster than in your world, were you to return now all who once knew you would be long dead.'

'As I thought.' Jack frowned.

'That wouldn't be so bad, though. We could start a new life, without having to pay for our past mistakes.'

'We can take you to any part of Mondus you wish.'

Tess looked at Mhran. 'Take us to the Summer Isles then.'

'As you wish, but first you will stay with our kin until your wounds have mended. It would be unwise to return to an unfamiliar world in such a fragile state.'

'I had hoped you would suggest something like that,' Jack said relieved.

'We would like to show you around our world, as your host we are expected to fulfil such duties.'

'Very well, you lead we follow.'

'As you wish.'

Tess supported Jack while they followed behind Mhran.

'You know, I wish I had that rosewood staff right about now.'

'It's okay, you can always lean on me,' Tess said.

The First Prince toured his two guests around the realm and introduced them to any dark kin they encountered.

Although the Prince no longer had a war to fight he found pleasure in caring for the two Mondanes whose fates had crossed with his. When they left him for their own world he felt a longing that he had last felt when the First Princess had been alive, but nevertheless he was content.

The First Prince found his place at the edge of the world and sat there in silent vigil until the end of time.