

Chapter 1: Holy Fire

As the last rays of sunlight disappeared into the horizon where the Tundras appeared to be, the Spirean Sciomancers began their patrol around their city, bound by oath to keep any possible intruders at bay. Even as hours passed after dusk, the night was still unbearably hot as the Sciomancers flicked off perspiration that was clinging on to their long black robes. They were complaining to each other about how the weather was so sweltering hot even though it was already night time. As the full moon slowly rose to signal the middle of the night, a bloodcurdling scream resonated through the city of Spinesreach.

Clutching on to their shadowy black voidstaff, the Sciomancers quickly made their way to the Spirean pylon where the scream originated from, ready to defend their city from any intruders. What they found however, was not what they expected. A dancing ball of flame greeted them as the Sciomancers blinked their eyes in disbelief. On closer examination, one of their fellow guards was flailing his arms in agony as his body was wreathed in flames before them. A burning smell wafted through the air as the screams of the guard filled the air. Before the Sciomancers could go to his aid, what was left was a pile of humanoid ash and bits and pieces of the bright pants the guard used to wear. Everything was over within moments. The Sciomancers looked at each other at a loss of what to do. After realising that there was indeed nothing they could do, the Sciomancers quickly dispersed the crowd that had slowly gathered and prepared to report the matter to the Chair of the Secretariat at the break of dawn.

It was soon evident that this was no isolated case of sentient arson. Similar cases were soon reported throughout the continent in all the cities with guards bursting into flames for no reason at all and leaving no clues for investigations to be conducted. At about the same time, there were rumours of headless ghosts wandering around the Valley of Kalebb with loud creaking sounds resonating through the Valley. The entire continent was thrown into a state of panic and disarray.

Talk of this 'Divine Fire' spread throughout the lands and coincidentally, Lady Auresae was nowhere to be found. Even as Her Order representatives publicly denounced the accusations of their Lady being responsible for the deaths, citing Enorian and Duiran guards being victims as evidence, the Divine's disappearance only proved to make these rumours more believable.

A few renegades enraged at the deaths began to take down Auresae shrines, while others who were fearful of the Lady's wrath made prayers and offerings at her shrines. The land was burning with all sorts of rumours and no place seemed to be a safe abode for refuge.

Chapter 2: Divine Audience

The leaders of various cities were worried. It was not only the cases of mysterious fiery deaths that were cause of their concern. Each city leader had received an unsigned letter demanding their presence in the Northern Tarean Ice Caverns in four days to discuss the fiery matter that was troubling the land. With each leader deciding that things could not get any worse, they began to make their way to the frigid caverns in the north.

The Keeper of Bloodloch and Vanguard of Enorian arrived first and though the two cities never saw eye to eye, the leaders agreed to put aside their differences momentarily in preparation for what was to come. Soon after, the Chair of the Secretariat of Spinesreach and Feral Will of Duiran arrived and before they could scout the grounds of the Cavern for clues of who summoned them, the ground and walls of the Cavern began to rumble. A strong gale of wind blew through the Caverns from an unknown source and unable to keep hold of their balance, the city leaders began to fall to the ground one by one. A loud laughter resonated through the Caverns as the rumbling slowly

subsided. The four city leaders looked at each other each with the same question in mind of what had just happened.

'Sit! While you still can', a booming voice bellowed.

Strangely the four city leaders could not make out where the sound was coming from. It was as if the voice was appearing in their heads. Understanding that it was futile to resist, the Feral Will of Duiran and the Keeper of Bloodloch crossed their legs and prepared to listen to what was to come. Just as the Vanguard of Enorian and the Chair of the Secretariat of Spinesreach looked around trying to find where the voice was coming from another bout of strong wind blasted at their feet and they tumbled to the ground.

'I said SIT!', the same booming voice once again said.

This time, the other two leaders quietly sat down and crossed their legs without further objections and perked their ears to listen for what was to come.

'The land is rife with rumours and the people of the continent quiver in fear. As leaders of your cities, you have all done nothing to address the matter. You are a disgrace. All of you', the voice continued.

Face red with rage, the Feral Will of Duiran attempted to open his mouth to protest the accusation but he found that his throat could not produce a single sound. It was as if his voice had been robbed from him.

'Save your fancy words for your citizens, you pathetic mortal. I will hear nothing from you! Fifteen days, that is all I give you to solve this matter. If you are unable to solve the matter within fifteen days, ask your cities to be prepared to find a successor, for your piked heads will adorn each of your respective city gates. Do not disappoint me mortals or you will face my wrath!', the voice boomed as the poor leaders' ears twitched in pain.

As the last resonance of the voice died out in the walls of the cavern, the four leaders finally managed to muster the strength to return to their feet. The city leaders looked at each other, unsure what had just happened. If it was just one of them, they could have been imagining things but given that all four of them had underwent the same rebuke, it was definitely not a figment of their imagination. Fearful of the wrath of the unknown Divine Being, the four city leaders began discussing what they could do as they stood within the Tarean Ice Caverns.

'I think He is just scaring us, we have nothing to worry at all' said the Feral Will of Duiran, unwilling to concede the fact that the four most powerful leaders on the continent had just been threatened.

'And you were so scared you tumbled to the ground' replied the Chair of the Secretariat of Spinesreach in his usual sarcastic tone.

'Stop it both of you. Are we going to spend the fifteen days coming up with a solution or waste it on squabbling amongst ourselves. I would love to see how your piked heads can continue arguing across the lands' barked the Vanguard of Enorian, sick of seeing the two city leaders argue like little kids.

'I agree. What is important now is that we come together to investigate the cases happening across the land. Only with the combined efforts of the four cities will we have a chance at solving this

mystery' said the Keeper of Bloodloch giving his two cents worth.

The two quabbling leaders realised the severity of the matter at hand and quickly shut their mouth. As the four city leaders were deep in thought, the Cavern suddenly became a deathly silent. The Vanguard of Enorian was the first to break this silence.

'I have a skilled warriors within my city that have undergone the toughest of training and boast of the sharpest of minds. Ascendrils, luminaries and templars, I believe they are the best hope my city can offer towards the solving of this mystery' suggested the Vanguard of Enorian

'I also have some skilled Sentinels and Shamans within my city!' said the Feral Will of Duiran.

The four city leaders then began discussing about the details of how they were going to solve this mystery together. Jointly, they made a fifteen day inter-city alliance to tackle the issue together. Any alliance that lasted any longer would be something they would not be able to concern themselves with given that their heads would be piked in front of their cities.

They had a deadline to meet and the odds did not seem to be in their favour.

Chapter 3: The Fifteen Day Alliance

The city leaders were back in their respective cities and they were anything but upbeat. It was agreed upon that each city would send five of their most elite representatives to form a special task force to investigate the matter. The guards were instructed to put aside any differences they had and work together to solve the mystery as soon as possible. Any piece of information gleaned, regardless of how negligible it could be, would be disseminated to all the cities by any means they could find. The four cities needed all the help and information they could get.

A state of emergency was declared in each city and in the villages serving the cities by their respective leaders and their citizens were warned against spreading rumours or risk persecution. All candles and torches were to be kept away and any information regarding the arson cases that the citizens reported would be rewarded by a large bounty.

The special task force was quickly assembled and assigned sleeping quarters, not that they were expected to be sleeping there most of the time. Surprisingly, the guards had lesser instances of quarelling unlike their city leaders for they clearly understood the severity of the matter at hand and knew that the case at hand had to take priority over any differences they had. There were no longer any differences between the undead or living, Necromancyor Devotion user. If they could not co-operate and work together, they would have to be prepared to be killed sooner or later.

The special task force quickly jumped into action. All the witnesses involved in the previous arson cases were questioned again to ensure that no clues were left out and every detail, big or small, was recorded into scrolls that were guarded day and night by these elite guards. Since they had no idea where to begin, they decided that the best way was to re-examine what they had on hand.

Of these elite guards, the most notable of them all was Misuri, a Sentinel from Duiran. His fine eye for detail and clear headed mind was what guaranteed him a spot in the special task force. In fact, the Feral Will of Duiran had boasted of how with Misuri's help, there were almost no crimes being committed in Duiran. However, in this group of twenty guards, his opinion was often drowned amongst the consensus.

Misuri had mentioned that the sightings at the Valley of Kalebb, though seemingly unrelated to the

arson cases, were worthy of investigation given their bizarre nature. However, with such a tight deadline in sight, the others shot down his suggestion and refused to waste time on anything beyond the current case at hand. Understanding that his single protest was futile, he kept his silence and busied himself with the investigations at hand.

It was soon evident that the initial investigations conducted were anything but thorough. There were many observations unearthed that had not been reported earlier. More than half of the victims had a drinking habit and all the incidents seem to only happen at night. However, the consumption of alcohol was a habit that pervaded across the lands for centuries and such cases of people combusting due to alcohol consumption was unheard of. As such, alcohol being the cause of these arson cases was quickly ruled out

Suspicious were cast that the misdeeds could be done by an agile assassin who always managed to escape before any guards arrived. Of course, this relative agility only applied to the mediocre guards before and not them. The guards were confident that under their watch, no assassin would be able to escape. With this assumption in mind, a trap to capture this nimble culprit was set and the elite guards could only wait and hope that the plan succeeded.

Chapter 4: One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward and Half a Step Forward

The streets of Enorian were unusually quiet as the stars shone their miniscule light upon the roads. The occasional cooing of pigeons could be heard in the distance as the streets seemed almost empty. A old man was fumbling through the streets drunk with his half consumed glass of wine still clutched in his hands. The smell of alcohol wafted through the night air as no other person was in sight.

However, a weird sense of danger pervaded through the streets. It wasn't something that could be seen or heard. It was just a feeling. A feeling that made the hairs on the hands of the old man stand for no reason. Shivering a little and convincing himself that he was thinking too much, the old man quickened his steps as he fumbled towards his house at the end of the street.

Then, it happened.

Without any warning, the old man began to scream in agony as flames that appeared from nowhere wreathed his body. He flailed his arms as he tried to put out the flames but the fire only seemed to burn even more. Within the blink of an eye, the elite guards who were in ambush appeared and Malivan the Ascendril quickly wrapped the old man in an Aquasphere and froze the entire blob of water and human into solid ice. The flames were extinguished instantly as a translucent block of ice stood in its place with a humanoid figure locked within, his face contorted with fear and agony.

The elite guards had lay in ambush all the time along the entire street and not even the presence of a stray cat in any alley could have escaped their watchful eyes. However, the combustion of the old man still happened right before their very eyes and none of them saw the culprit and how he did it. Their plan had failed miserably.

Just as the guards were both puzzled and disappointed at what had happened, bright light and thick plumes of smoke appeared at the adjacent street. Being all highly trained in their own ways, there was no need for any discussion on what to do. The guards quickly made their way to the source of the disturbance to find the makeshift office where they had stored the scrolls detailing their investigations up in flames. The Templar guard who was left behind to guard the scrolls was slumped in the corner, throat slit and eyes wide open. The elite guards could not believe that they were the ones who ended up being ambushed and the only thing they could do was curse and swear

under their breath. Dismayed at how they were tricked when they were the ones setting the trap, the elite guards could only return to their quarters to rest for there was nothing to be done.

Moments later back at the guard quarters, Rikza the Shaman had woken up to take a leak. As he walked towards the latrine, he noticed that one of the rooms was still brightly lit. Through the translucent painted windows, he could see the shadow of a dagger being held in midair and swiftly being brought down before blood splattered on the glass. Charging into the room ready to take on the murderer, he was greeted by the presence of Ivana the Indorani guard and a corpse on a table.

Wiping the blood stains off his face, Ivana gave Rikza a glance before returning to his deed. As Ivana pulled his bone dagger down the sternum of the corpse with a steady hand, everything became clear to Rikza. Ivana was dissecting the corpse of the old man from the street.

When all the guards had rushed to the burning office, Malivan had stayed behind to guard the frozen corpse. He knew that if eighteen guards could not capture the culprit, nineteen would make no difference. To Malivan, he was more hopeful that the corpse would shed some light on the cause of the combustion. Without consulting the other elite guards, he brought the corpse back to the guard quarters and passed it to Ivana the Indorani who was extremely skilled at dissecting corpses. The ice had melted by the time Ivana began his work and as such, blood had splattered across the glass when he plunged his dagger into the chest of the corpse.

'Get out. I have work to do' said Ivana in his cold, ruthless voice without even turning to face Rikza.

Understanding the gravity of the situation, Rikza quickly retreated out of the room and closed the door after him. He had not known the Indorani for long but he knew that Ivana was known for being cold and ruthless and would not say a second word if he could make do with one. He knew that the best thing and only thing he could do now was to wait outside quietly and let Ivana do his job. After all, he had no idea about dissecting corpses and Ivana was the expert.

An hour later, Ivana came out of the room wiping his blood stained hands on a white cloth. With his cold face devoid of emotions, he walked past Rikza without a word and back to the barracks where he went to sleep.

Rikza was at a loss for words at Ivana ignoring him after he had waited a whole hour outside the room but he was unwilling to risk having a taste of Ivana's skill with his bone dagger. Curbing his anger, Rikza could only return to the barracks to rest.

Chapter Five: Animals and Bugs

Misuri stood in the backyard of the guard quarters, silent in contemplation. Eyes looking into the sky as the first rays of sunlight shone onto his face, worry was written all over his face. For once, he was worried that his suspicions were right. For once, he hoped that he was wrong.

Putting his fingers to his mouth, he gave out a shrill whistle and moments later, a grumpy badger appeared from nowhere. Bending down to his little companion, he began to communicate with it in a tongue no one could make sense of. As they continued with their animalistic conversation, Misuri nodded his head from time to time and heaved a heavy sigh. He was right, as always.

Eighteen of the elite guards were gathered in the meeting hall, with only Misuri and the now deceased Templar guard notably missing. As they took their seats, Ivana quietened the crowd and rose to share the results of his late night dissection.

It appeared that there was nothing significantly special about the corpse except that there seemed to be little black dots on the liver of the deceased. Given that the liver was the organ that helped in the detoxification of alcohol and the old man was having wine just before his death, the guards wondered if the dots were probably just a normal occurrence. However, Ivana who had spend his entire life in the company of corpses and organs refuted this claim for he knew that these black dots had never been seen on the liver of normal individuals or even animals. Even Ivana, the Indorani could not decipher what these black dots were. It almost seemed as if they were back to square one again.

As the guards were deep in thought trying to decipher what these black dots could actually be and how they were linked to the case at hand, Misuri slowly strode into the hall, late. Ignoring the glances of his partners, he walked to the front of the hall and clutched his dhuriv in his hand before stomping it on the ground.

Clearing his throat, Misuri began to speak in his crisp voice 'I believe I have an idea of what these black dots may be but I sincerely hope I am wrong. For if this is really what I think it is, we might be going against an enemy so small we might not even be able to fight.'

Being the impatient one, Rikza quickly shouted 'Just hurry up and speak your mind already. We don't have all day! What little dwarf are you talking about?'

Taking a deep breath, Misuri's firm voice continued 'I believe all of you will remember that there were reports of strange sightings within the Valley of Kalebb. Being unable to visit the Valley myself, I recruited the aid of my badger to burrow into the Valley to see if any clues could be found. My badger noticed that there were bugs in the Valley that he had never come across before, tiny insects one would not notice unless you focused on looking at them. Believe me, being the glutton my badger is, if he has never seen them before, there would be no chance you would ever have seen them.'

Understanding what the Sentinel was implying, Ivana closed his eyes to recollect the scene of dissection he had seen in the night. When he re-opened his eyes, he stood up and spoke in his classic cold voice 'Bugs indeed'.

The meeting hall immediately burst into chatter as the guards expressed their shock and disbelief at what they had just heard to each other. What they had just heard was unbelievable but they understood that Misuri and Ivana would not spin false tales to lie to them and having two guards who were experts in this area say the same thing, there was a very high chance that those black dots were indeed bugs. These trained elite had no problems laying waste hordes of enemies or charging into battle alone while grossly outnumbered but now that they were up against tiny bugs that they could not lay their weapons on. None of them had any idea on how to fight these little critters and none of them had any idea what they could do next.

Chapter Six: A Worthy Sacrifice

The streets of Salma were brightly lit with torches, something unusual given the widespread paranoia regarding anything related to flames. The villagers were all gathered on the sides of the streets watching the ongoing procession as a weird cacophony of garbled music resonated through the air. Murmurs and chatter filled the streets as the villagers pointed at the procession while discussing it amongst themselves.

Carried by four of the strongest villagers, a wooden platform made it's way slowly and steadily down the pathway. On the platform was a veiled lady, slowly moving and dancing to the music,

drawing all attention on the street to herself. Although her face was covered, it was evident that her poise had a strange attraction in itself and the possibility that she might actually look horrid seemed unthinkable. The veiled lady was clad in flowing white robes as her sleeve floated in the air with every flick of her wrist. Her waist long hair was a glistening black as they seemed to float in the air with every turn of her head. Her long slender fingers captured the attention of everyone as they danced to the weird cacophony of music.

Chatter was loud among the onlookers as the wooden platform slowly made its way to a house in the north of the settlement. The sides of the street were filled with onlookers but amongst the crowd, a particular pair of deep sharp eyes periodically swept its gaze across the crowd, sensing something out of the ordinary. Grabbing his dhuriv, the owner of these eyes slowly retreated from the crowd.

As the procession ended and the crowd slowly dispersed, Misuri slowly melded his way into the shadows, taking in what he had just observed. The poise and elegance of that lady had captivated him and the image of her dance refused to leave his mind. Despite this enormous distraction, his sharp reflexes had noticed that there was something suspicious within the crowd. Misuri had noticed that there was a group of shifty men hidden within the crowd, busy in conversation while periodically pointing at the veiled lady in the procession.

Through years of training, Misuri had acquired the ability to lipread and coupled with his unparalleled eyesight, this was a skill not to be overlooked. Focusing on the group of shifty men, nothing they said could escape his eyes.

'The ritual will take another half a day and the security here is lax. This is definitely the best time for us to strike. None of these weak villagers will be able to stand in our way', read Misuri off the lips of one of the men.

'What about that guy standing in the crowd looking at us? Should we get rid of him?' asked another observant one who had noticed Misuri looking at them.

'This isn't the time to get into unnecessary trouble. Just complete what we were tasked to and don't bother yourself with other matters', admonished the first man before the group melded into the shadows.

It was not Misuri's style to poke his nose into the business of others, especially in a time like this where the deadline for solving the case was looming. However, he knew that the only thing worthy of the interest of this group of unknown men would be the veiled lady. The image of the dancing lady, veil flowing in the air, crossed his mind once again and he gritted his teeth, knowing that he had to intervene.

The warm rays of sunlight bathed the house in the north as the priest dabbed a dot of red dye on the forehead of the young veiled lady. Accompanied by two chambermaids, the composed lady slowly returned to her seat awaiting instructions after the anointing on her head. It seemed as though she was completely unfazed by all that was happening. However, just before she could take her seat, white smoke began to waft into the room.

The face of the alarmed guards at the entrance quickly contorted as they fell to the ground. The chambermaids and priest also began coughing and desperately trying to take in air but as they gasped forcefully they quickly collapsed to the ground one by one. The young veiled lady supported her head with her hand as her head seemed to get heavier by the moment. The inhalation of the white smoke was making her dizzy and her vision soon blurred before everything became black and

she too, collapsed to the ground.

Within moments, a group of masked men barged into the room and skillfully slit the throats of the guards, clearly not intending to leave any survivors. Crimson blood splattered across the ground as the lives of these innocent guards were taken. Turning their attention to the people within the house, the masked men proceeded to walk towards the young veiled lady. However, just before they could reach the lady a few steps away, another masked man broke through the window and sliced off the leg of the nearest intruder with a dhuriv.

It wouldn't be difficult to guess that the latecomer was Misuri and with his characteristic dhuriv, the masked men immediately recognised him as the one who had been observing them from within the crowd. Signalling for one of his underlings to grab the lady, the leader of the masked men led his team to face off Misuri in battle.

Misuri was not inexperienced in combat but neither were this group of men. As he fended off the attacks of the masked men, he realised that the only reason he was able to take first blood was because he had the element of surprise. Now that he was outnumbered and overpowered, it was clear that Misuri was on the losing end in this battle. Misuri could only defend and not attack as the blows from the masked men seemed to be raining in from all directions. Seeing that their opponent was unable to fend off the fury of their attacks and not wanting to drag the battle on unnecessarily, the leader side-stepped behind Misuri and struck at the back of his neck with his palm.

Everything turned black as Misuri collapsed to the ground, knocked unconscious from the impact of the blow. The men quickly grabbed the lady and were prepared to mount her on their shoulders. They were ready to make a hasty retreat for they had exceeded the time they had expected to spend for this mission, even ready to leave Misuri, the priest and the chambermaids behind for they did not even want to waste their time killing the unconscious few remaining. Yet they were not the only ones there.

Chapter Seven: Lizard

As the hands of the underling wrapped around the waist of the young lady, ready to hoist her onto his shoulders for an escape, a green blur flashed past him at an unbelievable speed and he collapsed to the ground, his throat torn from his body and his blood splattered all over the ground.

No one had seen anything this quick before but what they saw when the group of men when they finally regained their grip on the situation was even more harrowing. A green scaly lizard-like creature, slightly taller than them was standing beside the lady, slowly laying her down on the floor. The creature's entire body was covered in that green scale and his limbs were bulked with power and strength. His blood-stained mouth was evidence of what killed the underling before everyone could react. With beady blue eyes and thick green hide that encompassed his entire body, the creature had large hands and feet if you could even consider those appendages to be them. It was as if a monitor lizard and grown to thrice or four times its usual size and stood on two legs. None of them had ever seen such a creature in their entire life.

As though caring for his baby, the creature gently caressed the hair of the young lady with his oversized hands, totally ignoring the presence of the shocked men. Gurgling in a weird low undertone, he seemed to be entirely in his own world, oblivious to everything especially the weapon-wielding masked men in front of him.

The men knew that the only outcome that awaited them if they failed the mission was death. The only choice they had now was either to die at the hands of their master or at the jaws of the creature.

Deciding to take the gamble, they quickly fanned out across the room, surrounding the green abomination with weapons in hand in preparation to strike.

It appeared that the creature was not entirely oblivious to his surroundings. Sensing the movement of the masked men, he quickly bounced to his large feet and began to observe the formation the men had formed. Seemingly almost able to sense the weakest link, he pounced at lightning speed at one of the men on the right, his huge hands raised and ready to batter his prey.

Taken by surprise no longer, the other men almost simultaneously leapt towards the creature, swinging their weapons at him in battle. Sensing that he would have to pay a bloody price if he insisted on his offense, the creature changed his direction midway in a manner that almost seemed physically impossible for a human. Of course, he didn't seem one bit human at all.

The battle raged on but the earlier violent altercation with Misuri seemed to have taken a toll on the strength of the men. As fatigue slowly crept in, the lizard-like creature began to gain the upper hand and the masked men soon found that they were defending themselves more than they were attacking even though they had the advantage in terms of numbers. The green scaly creature was not about to let this upper hand go to waste. Side-stepping behind one of the men, he grabbed the man by the waist and lifted him to block the blows that were about to be rained onto him. If it were earlier, by the time the creature could grab hold of the man, the blows would have landed on his body. However, the other men were now tired and these blows came just a moment slower than they should have, giving the creature the opportunity he so needed.

Blood splattered across the room floor as the man's lifeless corpse laid in the hands of the creature, slain by the weapons of his counterparts. Almost sporting a smirk, the creature threw the corpse down and leapt towards his next target. With one man down and shock of what had just happened plaguing their minds, the men began to lose the battle even more quickly. It was a matter of time before they all lay dead on the floor, a price they paid for this mission they could not complete.

Misuri regained consciousness just in time to witness the last of the men being mercilessly slaughtered. Before he could do anything, the creature had returned to the side of the lady and hoisted her onto his shoulders. Just as the creature was about to make his escape, numerous people appeared and fanned across the room, blocking his way. The elite guards had arrived.

Misuri was fearless but he wasn't foolhardy. Seeing that he was easily outnumbered by the group of men, he had quickly launched a signal for reinforcements before entering the fray. By the time the two long battles were over, the elite guards had had sufficient time to appear.

Just as a third battle was about to ensue, the creature tossed the lady towards the guards and broke through a window to escape. Surprised by the sudden turn of events, by the time the guards could react, the creature was already no where to be seen.

The creature knew that the guards would not hurt the lady and after that long battle and with the guards fresh and energised, he was now the one on the losing side of the battle if it began. Deciding to keep his life to return another day, he used the lady he so dearly fought for as a distraction before escaping.

As Misuri slowly got to his feet, the guards carried the lady and quickly made their retreat. Time was not on their side.

Chapter Eight: Rumours Kill

All that could be seen was a blur of white. A speck of green in the far end slowly became larger till it melded with the white. Unexplainable panic and despair seeped in as she jumped up, hands laced with perspiration, only to find that it was all a dream.

Everything around her seemed foreign from the bed she was laying on to the walls in front of her, nothing made sense. It seemed as if she had been forcefully removed from where she previously was and put into a different place. She almost snickered at how ridiculous that thought was but, she was right.

The young veiled lady who was the subject of vying for by so many groups of people had regained consciousness, bewildered at what she saw. Her veil, surprisingly, was still on her face. Perhaps the guards did not want to risk outraging any bit of her modesty. Comforting moonlight shone through the windows and into the room, bathing the cold floors around her.

The last thing she could remember was a blur of white smoke before everything became dark and now she even had difficulty mustering the strength to walk towards the door. Coughing softly, as if in a reflex to expel whatever non-existent leftover smoke there was in her throat, she slowly grabbed the sides of the bed to sit up.

A short rap on the door soon followed before the door opened and two of the guards entered and stood in front of her. They had questions and they wanted answers. Explaining who they were, the guards inquired who the lady was and why there were so many highly skilled people vying to abduct her. The story they got was to change everything that was to follow.

Even as strict laws had been passed down by the leaders of the four major cities not to engage in rumour-mongering, these laws could not extend themselves to every village across the land. In the Salm Settlement, it was rumoured that the cases of sentient arson were a result of Lady Auresae's wrath at something the mortals had did. It was a form of punishment for their misdeeds and the punishment would not stop until she was appeased. The village elder decided that a sacrifice was necessary to appease the outraged goddess and the village had to burn someone, ironically, of their own accord in a ritual dedicated to the Lady.

Yania, as the young lady introduced herself as, was the most beautiful lady within the village and her beauty was no secret. Smitten by her, numerous men had attempted to ask for her hand in marriage in the past years but none were worthy enough in her eyes. Amongst the failed suitors, the most notable was the son of the village elder. He had believed that his status was far above the other mediocre suitors for he was in line to lead the entire village in time to come. However, even this status was worthless in the eyes of Yania and she firmly rejected all of his advances. Enraged at the rejection, the village elder's son took this chance to volunteer Yania as the human sacrifice for the ritual.

Yania was to be cleaned and paraded in a procession across the village, as if in an introduction to the Goddess herself on who the sacrifice would be. It would, as the village elder had said, be for the good of the entire village. After the procession, she would be brought to a house in the northern part of the village where she would undergo a ritual with a priest to cleanse her before the burning would take place that night. Fortunately for her, things took a little twist before they could reach that stage.

As she was unconscious throughout the battles that ensued, she had no idea who the group of men or subsequent monster were. She could only vaguely remember a sense of warmth but nothing more than that. Sensing her fatigue, the two guards left to allow the lady to recuperate as they went to report their findings to their counterparts. Two other guards took their place to guard the lady

outside the room.

As Yania lay wide-eyed on the bed, a mixed blend of relief and fear swept past her. On one hand, the twist of events had indeed saved her from the outcome of a fiery death but on the other hand, the thought of so many highly skilled people or creatures going after her did indeed frighten her. Now the only thing she could do was wait, for her fate had long been beyond her control.

Chapter Nine: Familiarity

The silence of the night was swiftly broken as one of the guards at the discussion fell to the ground, a large dart embedded deeply into his head. Wasting no time to react to this ambush, the other guards quickly grabbed the furniture around them and used it to block the incoming onslaught of darts. As they flailed the chairs and tables so quickly that nothing could pass, one of them gave out a whistle to request for reinforcements.

The other leftover guards within the compound quickly arrived and a fierce battle ensued between the elite guards and the intruders, skilled with their art of blowdarts. As losses began to stack on both sides, Ivana gave Misuri a nod and both of them acted together. Flinging their dagger and dhuriv in an aimed throw of immense precision and strength, their weapons throtled through the air and swiftly impaled their target through the chest and nailed the corpse on the wall behind them. In a swift motion, they rolled over and retrieved their weapons, ready to fight off their next enemy.

As the battle raged on, the entrance to Yania's room which was previously guarded by two of the guards who had joined in the defense had a visitor. Before the door opened, Yania could already sense that there was someone there and with whatever remaining strength she could muster, she got up and walked behind the pillar to hide.

The door opened gently to her surprise but what came in surprised her even more. A large green lizard-like creature trudged in and began to scan the room with his beady eyes. Seeing the edge of her dress peeping out from behind the pillar, the creature quickly jumped behind the pillar to face Yania.

Letting out a scream, Yania collapsed to the ground crippled with fear at the abomination that greeted her. She was sure that this was what the guards had described to her for how many of such creatures actually existed in the lands and what were the chances of her encountering two. Quaking with fear, she raised her arm as if to protect herself as she constantly pleaded for the creature not to kill her.

However, the creature did not continue in his advances and just looked at Yania in a gaze that spooked of love and longing. Moving his large arm towards Yania and gently taking her quaking hand in his, he repeatedly pointed at his own chest with his other arm.

'Me...' said the creature in a low guttural undertone as if squeezing out that single word from him was an arduous task in itself.

Bewildered by what she saw, Yania slowly composed herself and began to look closely at the creature in front of her. Apart from the oversized green scaly body, the creature was wearing what seemed to be human clothing even though they were splintered at the ends, bursting from his size and movement. As her glance reached the pants he was wearing, she shook a little as she saw what seemed to be a familiar pendant hanging at the side.

'No. No. What did you do to him? Where is he?', Yania screamed with rage. The pendant was all too

familiar to her and meant the world to her.

Noticing where her glance had focused on, the creature grabbed the pendant in his hands and pointed at his chest again before repeating 'Me...'

Yania soon began to understand what the creature meant and hug him as she sobbed uncontrollably.

'What happened to you? What happened to you?' was the only thing that Yania could say now.

As the creature looked at her with the same look of love and longing, he carried Yania to the table and with the claws on his hand, he began to scratch something on the table top. It seemed so difficult for such a large creature to perform such a delicate task and it was apparent that he was tempted to just smash the table in frustration many times.

As he continued with the weird image that made no sense at all to Yania, footsteps could be heard in the distance. Leaping to his feet and growling with anger, the creature turned to face the door, ready to rip the intruder into shreds.

Misuri soon arrived at the entrance, having realised that Yania could be in danger since the guards at her door had left to help out in the battle. Grabbing his dhuriv tight, he crouched slightly as if in preparation for battle with the same abomination he had seen earlier that day.

Before the creature could leap at Misuri, Yania quickly pulled out her hairpin and pointed it at her throat.

'No! They are good people. Don't hurt them. Leave, quick!' said Yania as her hands shivered from holding the hairpin too tightly.

Growling at Misuri, the creature turned to look at Yania and stretched out his arm as if wanting to take the hairpin away from her.

'No! Leave. Or I'll kill myself in front of you. Go now!', she continued with her voice shaking in fear.

Not wishing to see his beloved lady perish in front of her, the creature could only break through the window and escape into the night.

Collapsing once more to the ground with the hairpin shaking in her hands, Yania pleaded with Misuri 'Let him go, please'.

Heaving a sigh, Misuri could only put his dhuriv away and walk up to Yania to help her back to the bed. He could never have expected that Yania would help the very creature that tried to abduct her escape. Things were getting stranger by the moment.

Chapter Ten: Master

Four masked men kneeled before what appeared to be the back of an old man with a long staff. With only the tapping of his staff audible in the quiet night, the old man slowly turned around to face the four men.

As he turned around, the four men shivered a little as the old man, his cold face laden with wrinkles, stared at them with a penetrating gaze. Closing his eyes but not stopping with the tapping, the old

man stood there quiet in contemplation.

'Why?', the old man said in a cold sharp voice as if words were as precious as gold.

Shivering even harder with fear, one of the masked men broke the silence and began 'There were a lot of them and all of them were highly skilled. The few of us were lucky to have even managed to have escaped Master. It isn't our fault, really.'

Opening his eyes to face the one who spoke, the old man slowly drew his staff up and tapped the floor again with such force that a piece of it broke and flew towards the man at unbelievable speed. As the piece of the ground embedded itself into the forehead of the first masked man, blood slowly trickled down his face and he collapsed to the ground lifeless.

'Excuses', the same cold voice penetrated through the night and into the ears of the remaining three men.

The three remaining masked men seemed to have composed themselves and stopped shivering. Having served their Master for a long period of time, they knew his temperament well. If he had wanted to kill all of them, he would have done so in that one strike. To Him, words and actions were a waste of His time and He would not waste them unnecessarily. The men seemed to be almost elated that their now dead counterpart had spoke first and bore the brunt of most of Master's wrath. It was through his death that they were now reborn, re-gifted with life to continue in service of their Master.

'Go', the one whom they called Master once again instructed in a voice that spoke of power and authority.

Picking up the corpse of the first masked man, the three heaved a sigh of relief as if they had just received amnesty. For to them, it was indeed one. Quickly leaving before their Master changed his mind, the men melded into the shadows once more, leaving the Master alone on the street.

Tapping his wooden gnarled staff rhythmically on the ground once more, the old man closed his eyes to think once more. Moments later, as he opened his eyes, the old man nodded slightly as he began to walk slowly down the street, slowly but surely vanishing into the shadows once more.

Chapter Eleven: Lost Love

Yania sat on the bed leaning against the bed frame, drained. Yet this time she was tired from the emotional turmoil she had just been subjected to rather than the physical fatigue earlier. Nothing at all made sense to her and the constant change of events happening for the past day had far exceeded what she could withstand.

Misuri sat on a chair next to her bedside, having hidden news about the green creature from his counterparts at the request of Yania. The guards had just done a review of their losses and now they were down to just fourteen after that gruesome ambush they had to deal with. As the other guards busied themselves with getting rid of the corpses, Misuri just sat there staring at Yania in uneasiness.

He did not feel one bit at ease hiding information from his fellow guards, especially one that was so important. However, the pleas of Yania tugged at his heartstrings and he really couldn't bear to go against her wishes. He knew that she needed time to calm herself and she knew that he had questions for her that she had to answer. It was now only a matter of time and so they waited.

Waiting for one of them to break the silence.

As her bosom heaved up and she took a deep breath, Yania decided to begin.

'Do you like to listen to stories?' said Yania.

Listening intently with his eyes fixated on Yania, Misuri gently nodded in head in acknowledgement of Yania's question and anticipation.

'Of course you do, that has been what you have been waiting for' Yania said as she nodded her head to herself. Gently continuing, 'In a certain village, a certain lady grew up to be the centre of attention, her beauty both a boon and a curse to her. Countless suitors asked for her hand in marriage but none of them could offer something that caught her attention. Fame, fortune, none of these interest her for they were only masks for an incompetent or devious soul.'

'Yet there was one, just one special guy who did catch her attention. The lady first noticed his writings before even knowing how the person looked. His writings were vivid, emotional and captivated her. They were her source of spiritual fodder and regardless of how he looked, the lady was already charmed by what she read. It turned out that the author of these writings was not ugly at all. In fact, he was handsome and suave in his own way. With short neat hair and sharp facial features, his slender arms almost seemed to be doing a dance as he wrote on his parchments with a quill. To the lady, it was love before first sight', Yania slowly recited in a voice that hinted signs of fatigue. Her eyes seemed to glisten as she appeared to be thinking of something that happened a long time ago.

'He was the heir to a winery and loved to write to pass time. The pair soon became a couple and spend days at end in each other's company, talking about his writings, the world and everything else. They swore that they would only love each other and no one else even till the day they die for so strong was their love that they could not be separated. The man got a twin pair of pendants crafted and they each carried one with them as an item signifying their union. Yet eternal union was but a dream to them and the man eventually did say that he had to return home at the request of his ailing father. He promised to return after six months when everything back home was resolved and ask for her hand in marriage and begin their new life together. Six months, a year and two years passed but there was no longer any news of him. The lady, though worried, never once doubted his promise and could do nothing but wait', Yania continued, tears rolling down her cheek as he recounted what clearly was her own life story.

Knowing that what had happened was indeed too much for Yania to bear, Misuri gently coaxed 'And we all know the rest. What is important now is for you to rest. It is only with rest can you walk ahead and let the story continue.'

Tucking her into bed, Misuri slowly closed the door behind him and left the room. Even as time was not on their side, Yania did need a little to recover and he was determined to let her have some.

Chapter Twelve: Puzzles and Dreams

The green creature was before her once again but this time he was not chasing Yania but rather, seemed to be running away from her.

'It's me, Yania! Where are you going? Come back!' screamed Yania as she used all of her strength to pursue her lover.

As the creature turned around to face her, he opened his mouth and seemed to be trying to say something but no sound escaped his throat. Seemingly distressed, his scaly face contorted with helplessness and anger.

'What do you want to tell me Vanira, say it to me, I am your Yania' pleaded Yania. Yes, the creature's name was Vanira, or at least before we became that creature that he was.

Roaring with rage, Vanira knelt on the ground and began to scratch something out with his sharp claws. However, nothing he carved out on the ground made any sense to Yania. They were neither words nor resembled the image of anything. They seemed like doodles from a young toddler.

Sensing that Yania could not understand anything he was doing, Vanira got to his feet and wiped out what he scratched with his large feet. Letting loose an earth-shaking growl, he turned and vanished into the distance even as Yania screamed and pleaded for him to stay.

Just as Yania screamed her loudest, she jolted up and found herself drenched in perspiration on bed. It was just a dream yet to her it felt so real. It seemed as though Vanira had something he desperately wanted to tell her. He wanted to tell her what happened but everything was to no avail. He was helpless and so was she.

Flicking off the perspiration on her forehead, she took a quick glance about her surroundings and instantly noticed that the table that was present earlier was missing. Almost jumping to her feet, Yania quickly adjusted her clothing and left the room in search for Misuri. It could have only been him who would have taken the table and she needed it back.

As she approached Misuri's room, she quickly noticed that the lights were still on. Rapping on the door before pushing it open, she saw Misuri looking intently at the table with his dhuriv attached at his weaponbelt. As Misuri lifted his head to face her, she slowly made her way toward the table, curious as to what Misuri had deciphered.

Misuri knew that the carvings on the table was probably some sort of clue the creature left behind and the only reason Yania would be in his room so late at night was her worry about the whole matter. Pulling aside a chair for the lady, he beckoned for her to sit, worried that her tired body was still lacking the rest it desperately needed.

'Have you managed to decipher anything?' asked Yania in her soft, gentle voice as she took a seat.

Shaking his head, Misuri took out pieces of paper and presented them to the lady. On the pieces of paper were tracings of the carvings on the table. Misuri wanted to analyse the carvings in all ways possible but was hesitant on possibly damaging the table. As such, he traced the carvings on pieces of paper so he could do whatever he wanted with them. However, the lines on the table made absolutely no sense to him regardless of how he looked at them.

Taking a moment for quiet contemplation, Yania gently picked up a blank piece of paper and a quill. Carefully drawing a few lines on it before stopping to think intently again, she repeated this process for a few minutes before slowly putting down the quill.

Passing the drawing to Misuri, Yania softly said in her tired voice, 'He drew this, in my dream. I know this sounds absurd but I know he is trying to tell me something. I just know it.'

Taking over the drawing hesitantly, Misuri stared at it intently for a few minutes before rotating it and staring at it again. As if afraid to interrupt his concentration, Yania kept her silence throughout

even as she was anxious as to what Misuri would say.

'I will need time. Sleep. We will talk at day break.' Misuri gently coaxed as he broke his silence, the gentleness highly uncharacteristic of him.

Knowing that there was nothing much she could do now, Yania slowly rose to her feet and returned to her room, hoping that there would be good news soon. She knew she had to recover her strength quickly for there were many things awaiting her attention.

Chapter Thirteen: Fate decrees

As the sounds of the crickets resonated through the room in comparison to the deafening silence within, Misuri seemed to be entirely devoid of movement. He was staring at the pieces of paper laid all over the table top as if they were some puzzle he needed to decipher.

The lines that were drawn out did not resemble anything he had seen in his travels across the lands, not words in any language nor the image of anything. He had absolute trust, strangely, in Yania that the drawing she presented to him must have some importance with regard to solving the puzzle even if she claimed she saw it in her dream.

After ensuring that he had replicated many copies of the images, he began to pick up the pieces of paper and cut them into pieces of different sizes and tried to tile them, hoping that they would somehow all fall in place. However, despite Misuri rotating the pieces of paper and trying to fit them together, the puzzle still didn't make any sense. All that he got was helplessness and frustration.

Deciding that he needed a breath of fresh air to clear his thoughts, Misuri got up to open the door to his room. As the door creaked open, a breeze of cold air entered the room and blew the carefully tiled pieces of paper into disarray. Alarmed by the disturbance, Misuri quickly returned to the table side to pick up the pieces.

As he collected the pieces one by one, deciding to rearrange them later, they seemed to be creating some sort of image when viewed overlapping and in the light of the candle. Almost squealing with elation, he swiftly grabbed the remaining pieces and began to squat there looking at them in the light.

This could have been a streak of luck or fate deciding that they needed some help, with this new perspective on the puzzle, Misuri could slowly make sense of what the pieces meant. After another few hours, Misuri finally finished what he sought to do. Satisfied, he returned to his bed for some rest before the break of dawn arrived. After all, he was but mortal and even if he was well trained, he needed rest.

As the warm rays of sunlight shone through the windows and onto the bed of Yania, the subtle change in temperature and light was all it took to awaken the sleeping lady. Rubbing her eyes and standing to stretch herself, she began to walk towards Misuri's room, fully recharged from her well-needed sleep.

As she carefully pushed open his door, she saw the hardy Sentinel laying on the bed, deep in slumber. It then dawned on her that Misuri was but mortal too. Up till now, regardless of whether Yania was awake or asleep, Misuri had been either by her side or busy attending to other matters. His constant accompaniment and strength in both body and character almost made her forget that he also had his own needs even when he did not say so.

Curbing her curiosity about the matter, she walked over and adjusted the blanket for the sleeping Sentinel, appreciating his efforts in helping her all this while. As her dainty fingers pulled the covers and laid it over him, Misuri seemed to have been disturbed by the movement and opened his eyes. Giving his surroundings a quick glance, he was surprised that he actually slept for so long, by his measure. The fatigue that had accumulated did take its toll on him and unknown to even him, it was but his strong willpower that was pushing him along all this while. What was even more surprising to him was that Yania was at his bed side.

As he slowly sat up, Yania turned away with a blush and walked over to the nearby chair to take a seat. As Misuri remembered what he had promised Yania, he quickly got up and took out a piece of paper he had hidden in his shirt and walked over to the table.

'With luck's help, I think I have managed to decipher what those lines mean. I have redrawn what I saw on this piece of paper. Have a look', said Misuri.

Turning her attention to the piece of paper presented to her, Yania saw the drawing of a large valley with a single glass at the centre. Knowing the background of Vanira best, she instantly understood what this meant.

'The Valley of Kalebb!' both Misuri and Yania exclaimed in unison.

Chuckling at their sense of telepathy, the two of them nodded at each other in acknowledgement. The puzzle was solved and they knew what they had to do next.

Chapter Fourteen: Stumped at the Entrance

Time was running out. From the time that the ultimatum was given by the unknown Divine till now, nine of the fifteen days had passed. The elite guards, though having found some clues, had been caught up with battles that seemingly had nothing to do with them. The four city leaders, afraid for their lives, had promised a place on a pike for the guards' heads alongside theirs if they failed what they were tasked to accomplish. If they were going down, they were not going to go down alone.

Ivana and Misuri had earlier, from the investigation of the corpse, found traces of bugs within the body of those who perished in the unknown fire. With news from his badger that these unknown bugs originated from the Valley of Kalebb and along with the newfound information that Vanira, as Misuri had learned to call him, had given, their next destination was hardly any mystery.

Gathering enough supplies, the entire group, Yania included, began to make their way to the Valley of Kalebb. The wind blew in their faces as they slowly ascended the Tarea Mountains and the morale of the guards were at an all time high despite the earlier deaths. After all, it had not been easy for them to find such a lead and they were confident, despite their fewer numbers, that they could solve the mystery as long as they had something to put their hands on to investigate. This was really not difficult to understand. It was akin to a marksman who could hit his target every time he drew his bow. As long as he had a target, he was sufficiently confident in his abilities to hit the target. The problem they had all the while was the absence of the target.

As the grey mountain snakes and snow leopards seemed to be avoiding sharing their path, probably due to their large numbers, the guards and Yania quickly made it to the entrance of the Valley of Kalebb within half a day. Despite the presence of Yania slowing down the progress of the group, the collective effort of the guards was still something not to be underestimated.

As the Pass of Eurik before an iron portcullis slowly entered their line of sight, Rikza the impatient Shaman left the group behind and charged east towards the Valley, eager to finally be of any use and excited at the opportunity to prove his worth. Just as he approached the granite monument in front of him, a freezing blast of cold air surged forth from the valley, knocking him back to the west.

Prone on the ground and slightly disoriented, Rikza quickly picked himself up, surprised that just a simple breeze had managed to knock him down. Embarrassed at his fall, he dusted his robes before charging in again, confident that his earlier fall was just him being taken by surprise.

As if history repeated himself, the moment Rikza stepped onto the same patch of ground he had tried to put his footing on earlier, he was once again flung westwards by a blast of cold air surging forth from the valley. As the goats around let out a sound, almost seemingly mocking him, Rikza picked himself up once more with his face flushed with both embarrassment and anger.

'Stupid', muttered Ivana the Indorani as he witnessed both falls of Rikza. He had often wondered how Rikza even managed to get a place within the twenty elite guards chosen given him being so foolhardy. Rikza's impatience was no news to him given that he had barged into Ivana's room when he was dissecting the corpse but what happened today only made Ivana think Rikza was more stupid than just brash.

Having heard what his Indorani counterpart muttered, Rikza turned to Ivana with a glare but still kept quiet, not wanting to embarrass himself further. As Yania and the other guards made their way over, Misuri turned towards the duo in front of him before nodding his head slowly.

'I should have remembered and I think we all should have if not for our haste in racing here. The Valley of Kalebb have long been a place blessed by the power of the Divines to only allow the young and inexperienced to step foot within it. The blast of air that unsettled Rikza just now is a clear indication that we will not be able to enter.'

As if suddenly recalling this matter, Ivana and Rikza both nodded their heads in unison before giving a small shrug of their shoulders. They had come all the way here but now the only thing that was stopping them from continuing with their investigations was a bout of air. A wave of frustration and helplessness quickly swept through the group but seeing that there was nothing they could do, they decided to sit by the entrance to think of a solution and they needed to think fast.

Chapter Fifteen: What did the Fox say

As the entire entourage of guards and Yania sat by the entrance pondering their options, Misuri, just like the others was thinking of all the possibilities that could be explored. He had never expected that things would go all that smoothly but in times like these, they could only think of solutions when the problems arise.

As Yania slowly walked over to his side before sitting down, Misuri gave it no second thought and just assumed that she felt more at ease around him as compared to the rest of the guards. Stretching out her dainty fingers, Yania softly tapped Misuri's shoulder before gesturing for him to lean over. Sensing that Yania had something to say, Misuri leaned over and listened intently for what she had to say.

'I remember that you are a Sentinel? Perhaps it is time for you to use your bonds with your, pets to see if we can get any information', said Yania softly in Misuri's ear before retreating back to a more comfortable distance.

Despite his disagreement at her use of the term 'pets', Misuri decided not to hold it against the fair lady and nodded his head in acknowledgement of her suggestion. Standing up, Misuri put his fingers to his lips and gave out a shrill whistle, almost startling Yania who was sitting just next to him. After a few moments, a small lithe fox peeped out from behind a boulder before carefully making its way before Misuri's feet, wary of Yania's presence.

Misuri bent down and began to speak in a foreign tongue no one could understand. Coupled with animated gestures, the lithe fox seemed to be nodding its little head as it took in the instructions of Misuri. As Misuri pointed to the entrance of the Valley, the lithe fox circled around Misuri before prancing off into the Valley.

As the other guards crowded over, noticing the small commotion that had happened, Misuri waved his hand seemingly dismissing the crowd given his innate dislike for crowds.

'We shall wait and we can only hope for the best', Misuri said in an almost instructional tone.

Knowing that they were not going to get any information from Misuri if he decided not to say anything, the other guards returned to their original positions and sat down. They continued to think of other possible solutions given that even Misuri was not confident of his solution. This was definitely not the time to put all their eggs in the same basket.

As the sun glared brightly down at them and the wind seemed to almost die down, the guards grew increasingly restless from the heat. Rikza was almost tempted to charge into the Valley again just to get that blast of freezing air to cool him down. However, his sore rear probably gave him a reason to rethink his decision and he just continued waiting, something that was never his forte.

Despite all the anticipation and observing of the entrance of the Valley to await the return of Misuri's fox, the lithe fox still managed to return in a manner that few even noticed. Almost appearing from nowhere, the lithe fox circled around Misuri's feet and let out a small squeal to get the attention of Misuri.

Misuri bent down once more and strained his ears towards his little companion. As they engaged in their, less than sentient conversation, the other guards seemed to have noticed the return of the fox and began to murmur amongst themselves. They did not close in, knowing that it would incur the ire of Misuri and that it might scare away the timid animal and dash their chances. Even Rikza seemed to be more patient now for they had waited for so long and what was a few more moments to them.

As Misuri continuously nodded his head acknowledging what his foxy companion was saying, Yania looked on with newfound respect for the person who saved her life time and time again. After a while, Misuri gave the lithe fox a small pat on the back as though acknowledging its effort and waved his hand at the fox, dismissing it. As the fox disappeared mysteriously into the shadows just as quietly as it appeared, the other guards quickly crowded over to hear what Misuri had to say. None of them had the ability to converse with a fox and what they were anticipating now was Misuri's translation.

Being the impatient one as always, Rikza said in a loud restless tone, 'So, what did the fox say?'

Chapter Sixteen: The Journey through Kalebb

It almost seemed as though Misuri did not hear what Rikza had said and walked past him towards Sinza the Monk. Under the stares of his counterpart, he whispered quickly into Sinza's ears and as

he finished what he had to say, both of them nodded at each other in acknowledgement.

Returning to his original position, Misuri turned to the other guards and said, 'Sit. You will get the answers you want.'

Having only the option to trust him, the other guards sat in a circle beside the Sentinel. The attention shifted towards Sinza who sat there cross-legged with his head lowered in contemplation. The air seemed to quieten down as all the guards and Yania sat there in anticipation of what was to come. All these mystery was killing them, especially Rikza.

Suddenly, the air almost seemed to hum slightly before the voice of Sinza softly resonated through their minds.

'Do not resist. It is me, Sinza. I will be acting as a medium of transfer to channel the thoughts of Misuri into your minds. Relax and be quiet', Sinza telepathically told the rest.

As the other guards closed their eyes, ready to accept what Sinza was about to present to them, Sinza's eyes seemed to almost fire up from the intense concentration. It was not his first time he had used his telepathic abilities but mindlocking so many people at the same time was something he had never attempted before. Misuri had asked for his assistance, understanding that the other guards might not understand the situation fully if Misuri just said it out. As the saying goes, a picture speaks a thousand words and given Misuri's quieter nature, it was perhaps easier for them to 'see' what he had to say.

Their minds slowly became a blur of white as the guards sat there relaxed. Soon, they seemed to be 'blinking' their eyes in the mind as the vision of the entrance of the Valley of Kalebb greeted them once more. It was almost impossible for them to see this given that their eyes were really closed but they soon understood that it was an image projected to them by Sinza.

Seemingly turning their heads around, they could see that a long bushy tail was behind them. They were not just being handed an image to them by Sinza, they were looking at everything from the eyes of the fox!

As they entered the Valley without the obstruction of that freezing blast of air, the sight of the interior of the Valley greeted them. As they descended into the Valley, villagers were seen running around attending to their own matters. A small child was hopping around as he stomped his feet repeatedly on the ground.

'So many bugs! Where in the world are they coming from!' screamed the little one as he tried to crush the bugs with his feet.

Turning their heads, the group then continued their way through the Valley bypassing the native villagers that were there. Soon, they appeared in front of what clearly looked like a winery. The Valley of Kalebb was renowned for its winery but it was the first time these guards ever saw it themselves. Sniffing the air with their animalistic instinct, the group quickly made their way into the winery, squeezing through a small crevice in the walls.

As they squeezed through barrels and barrels of wine, they saw an old man barking instructions to what seemed to be his workers in a tongue none of them could understand. Some of the men seemed to be strangely familiar as the group took cover behind a barrel of wine.

The old man then walked over to a barrel of wine and removed the cover. Putting his hand into his

pocket and taking it out in a clenched fist, he plunged his fist into the wine and gave it a small stir. The group sneaking a peek were put off by his lack of hygiene but what interested them more was what the man mixed into the wine.

Ivana almost seemed to let out a gasp as it dawned on him that the men that they found so familiar were the survivors from the battle at their quarters that night. They were dressed differently to blend in with the villagers but the sharp eyes of the guards could still tell that they were the same people.

As the group's tail knocked into the side of the barrel of wine they were taking cover behind, the old man quickly turned his head towards their direction and shouted something loudly. His workers quickly froze in their tracks and all turned towards their direction. Even though they had no idea what the old man shouted, it was clear that their cover was blown.

Turning around, they quickly squeezed through the crevice once more and began their desperate attempt at an escape. Shouts from the workers could be heard as they chased out from the winery in pursuit. The group almost seemed to perspire from all the heart-pumping excitement. As they ran with all the energy they could muster, they eventually got the workers off their tail and raced out of the Valley to the entrance once more.

Suddenly, the image went black and they heard a loud thud. Opening their eyes for real this time, they saw a pale Sinza collapsed in a heap on the ground with beads of perspiration along the side of his forehead. The intense mental concentration required for the whole thing had drained Sinza badly and that was only as long as he could continue. Although Sinza was not physically wounded, his depleted mental reserves was essentially still a big blow to his health that would return to haunt him later.

Jumping to his side, Ivana quickly helped Sinza up to rest as the other guards murmured amongst themselves regarding what they had just 'saw'. The whole experience, weird as it might have been, actually give them more questions than answers.

Who was the old man? Why were the attackers working in the winery? What did the old man put into the wine? What were those strange bugs they saw?

Everything seemed to become exponentially more complicated suddenly.

Chapter Seventeen: The Scribe Who Remembers Everything

As Misuri, Yania and a few other guards stayed behind at the Tarea Mountains to investigate the matter further, Ivana decided that there was no advantage over having all the guards at the entrance when there was no enemy in sight for them to fight. As such, Ivana decided to return to their quarters to see if any other discovery that would be useful to them could be made. Rikza, sick and tired of waiting, volunteered to tag along and return to their quarters too.

Bidding their counterparts a temporary farewell, Ivana, Rikza and two other guards began their descend of the Tarea Mountains and their journey back to the quarters. Upon their arrival back at their quarters, they were greeted by the sight of a young boy who appeared to be waiting for their return.

'I received word that all of you went to the Tarea Mountains towards the Valley of Kalebb. I've been waiting here for your return but I must say that I am pleasantly surprised at how fast the return was', said the young boy.

'Who are you', Ivana said curtly in response to what the young boy said.

'Oh yes, it is so silly of me to forget to introduce myself. My name is Brania, a scribe tasked by your four city leaders to assist all of you. You see, I have been spending my entire life in the company of books and scrolls. I have also helped out with the sorting of the investigation details before it was razed to the ground by arson. I...' blabbered Brania as his mouths seem to move so fast it almost seemed hypnotic looking at them.

'Stop', Ivana curtly cut him off. Noisy people always got on the nerves of the Indorani. Such people almost seemed to be inviting him to slit their throats with his bone dagger.

Sensing Ivana's displeasure, Brania stopped speaking and followed the guards in while muttering something to himself. Rikza, on the other hand, was glad to see the young scribe. Being around people like Ivana and Misuri almost drove him crazy. The talkative, jovial manner in which Brania conducted himself did appeal to Rikza's slightly more amiable nature.

As soon as the four guards got settled down, they began their discussion of what had happened hoping that such a recollection might help in their mystery solving. Totally ignoring the presence of Brania, the guards continued in their conversation not noticing that Brania was listening intently to every word they said.

Suddenly, Brania's hand shot up into the air in an attempt to capture everyone's attention. When all four guards were looking at him due to his abrupt gesture, Brania smile sheepishly before standing up and walking to the front, preparing to address his audience.

'There have been a total of thirty two cases of people bursting into flames for no reason and of these thirty two, eighteen were reported to have been sighted drinking alcohol prior to the burning. Ten of these people come from Spinesreach, eight from Enorian, eight from Bloodloch and six were from Duiran', said Brania in a one breath.

'How did you know all that?' Rikza exclaimed, marvelling at Brania's bountiful amount of knowledge.

'I helped out with the sorting of the investigation details before they were burnt down. I read every one of them and most of the time, I tend to remember things I read', said Brania as he turned his head towards Rikza.

Realising that they not only had a bank of knowledge in front of them but also a copy of the investigation details that they had lost, the four guards seemed slightly agitated in a happy way of which the glee from Rikza was most obvious. Finally acknowledging that Brania's presence could perhaps help in the solving of the case, the guards began to include him in their discussion.

As they were discussing about the little bugs present in the body of the deceased, Brania seemed to suddenly quieten down, something extremely unusual given his talkative nature. Noticing his silence, Rikza turned to the young scribe and asked if he had anything to say.

'When I was a young boy, I once read a very old scroll in a library and there was mention of insects that seem to resemble that which you all have mentioned. However, I did not manage to read the entire scroll and do not have a complete idea of what these bugs are. I could, however, make a trip back to that library and check if they still have that scroll, if you all so wish so', said Brania.

Surprised and thrilled that this young man they had just got to know today could possibly be the key

in deciphering the clues they had before them, the four guards looked at each other, bewildered. However, they quickly decided that this was probably the best course of action they could undertake at this point of time. After all, the young scribe had volunteered his service and it was really much better than all of them just sitting there and doing nothing.

At this point of time, Rikza suddenly spoke, 'I am sure all of you remembered what happened to our Templar partner who he was guarding the investigation details that day. If Brania can remember every single detail on those investigation reports and is going out to find out what these bugs really are, I am afraid there will be those who will be going after him to silence him. Since there is nothing much we can do now and Brania's trip to that library might well be the key to solving the mystery, I suggest we all follow him to ensure that he safely makes the trip there and back.'

Rikza seemed to have taken a liking to the young scribe, especially after he demonstrated his impeccable memory and bountiful knowledge. A part of him did want to ensure this mission did not go wrong but perhaps one part of him just wanted to be around the young scribe. Rikza was probably not going to let go of someone who would finally talk to him.

After a moment of contemplation, the other three guards nodded their heads in agreement. Just like this, all five of them began to pack their supplies to begin yet another mission.

Chapter Eighteen: To Knowledge We Charge

The scorching sun lashed out at the five people trekking through the Mhojave desert. Hot, thirsty and drenched with perspiration these five people would be crazy to be in the Mhojave desert with the sun at its hottest if they didn't have a compelling reason. However, they did have one and this reason would see them do this even if they collapsed.

The entourage of five people were Brania and the four guards who were protecting him along the way. From Brania's account, the ancient library where he had read about the mysterious insects was hidden somewhere in the Mhojave Desert. The four guards were well travelled but none had heard of the existence of a library right in the middle of the scorching desert. However, on Brania's insistence and Rikza's assurance that Brania was right, they began this journey.

As they trekked towards the centre of the Mhojave desert and beads of perspiration trickled down their body, Brania's eyes suddenly fire up with energy once again. Closing his eyes to recall the exact coordinates of the library, he pointed towards the west and signalled for his 'bodyguards' to press on for they were near. There was pretty much no obstruction in vision in the Mhojave Desert and looking into the distance, there was nothing but flatland covered with sand. Doubts began to arise in the guards' mind on whether Brania really remembered the exact location of the library but since they had already travelled so far, they decided to just continue and trust him.

As they reached an ordinary rock just steps ahead, Brania reached over and dusted off the sand covering the rock. Squinting at the rock through his glasses, he turned around and motioned for the guards to crowd over.

'And we have arrived!' exclaimed Brania in excitement.

Taking a quick glance at their surroundings, the four guards clearly appeared to be befuddled. There was absolutely nothing around them and with their sharp vision, nothing within a hundred feet radius around them. For a moment, even Rikza who was the most supportive of Brania so far thought that he was insane.

Noticing the look of bewilderment on their faces, Brania gave out a hearty chuckle and continued to dust off the sand surrounding the bottom of the rock. Using all the strength he could muster, he began to push the rock clockwise. Though Rikza still could not understand what the crazy young scribe was doing, he was sure that the young man wouldn't have enough strength to complete the endeavour. Stepping forward, he gave the scribe a hand and with the combined effort of the both of them, the rock began to slowly turn.

Strange as it seems, as the rock began to turn, they could hear the sound of chains and what followed was a loud rumble from the ground. Right before their eyes, the ground in front of the rock sank into the ground and in its place was the entrance of a passageway.

A secret entrance in the middle of the Mhojave Desert? Who in the right mind would have constructed such a mechanism there? The entire episode seemed surely insane but it did happen right before their eyes. As the guards' mouth lay open with disbelief, Brania brushed off the sand on his palms and motioned for the guards to follow him into the passageway.

The guards desperately wanted to know how Brania even got to know of the existence of such a place and the mechanism but they knew that this was no time for storytelling, they had more important things to attend to. As they slowly trudged down into the musky passageway, vision soon became more difficult as the amount of light present diminished.

'Even if this does lead to the library, how are you going to find what we came for without any light?' asked Rikza.

Acknowledging his question with nothing more than a smile, Brania continued walking forward at a speed that would make you think this place was his home. Strangely, as they continued down the passageway, the amount of light actually increased and vision became clearer. Soon, what seemed to be an old library was before them.

The source of light came from the large transparent ceiling in the library and what seemed to be a large lake was right above their heads. Sharp as he was, Ivana understood that the library was constructed under a lake and the architect had cleverly used a transparent ceiling to allow light to shine through. Now he finally understood why Brania had insisted on coming here in the day time even when the weather was so unbearable. If they had come in the night, even if they had managed to locate the library, there would not be enough light shining through the lake and into the library for them to find what they sought. He could not help but have a newfound respect for the person who built this library and the foresight Brania had.

As the four guards looked around the library observing the intricate architecture, Brania wasted no time and began searching for the scroll he was looking for. It had been a long time since he was here and it was no easy task searching for one scroll amongst the thousands here. Luckily for Brania and the guards, Brania could still remember vaguely what the scroll looked like and this sped up the process a lot. After about an hour, Brania finally found an old scroll that was already yellow on the sides. Unrolling it delicately and giving it a glance, his face turned into a smile. Just as he brought it down from the shelf and was prepared to fully unroll the scroll on a table to examine the scroll in greater detail, Ivana suddenly grabbed Brania's hand and shook his head. Quickly rolling up the scroll, he pulled Brania behind a shelf and motioned for him to keep quiet.

The other guards were also now hidden behind other shelves with their weapons firmly grasped in their hands. They had company.

Chapter Nineteen: We All Want to Read

Though Brania wasn't trained to have a sense of hearing as sharp as the guards around him, the deathly silence of the library helped to magnify any sound present. As he focused on trying to listen for any sound around, he heard a soft tapping sound that was barely audible even in the deafening silence of the library. Brania could not help but wonder how the guards could have heard these faint sounds so much earlier than him and even while he was blabbering without stopping. However, the only thing he could do now was keep absolutely silent and leave matters to the highly trained guards.

Straining their eyes to ensure that no movement escaped their line of sight, the guards clutched firmly onto their weapons and prepared themselves for battle. They had predicted that their enemy, whoever it may be, would definitely try their best to stop them from being able to find the scroll they desperately needed. What they did not expect was that the enemy would wait so long. They had been extremely vigilant from the moment they began their trek but the joy and amazement at uncovering the library had temporarily let them lay down their sense of vigilance. Luckily for them, it was never Ivana's style to be happy before everything was finalised, or even to be happy at all. Sensing that the flow of air was slightly obstructed and hearing a faint tapping sound in the distance, he quickly pulled Brania behind a shelf and stashed him there for safety. The other guards, though less vigilant, were not amateur warriors. Ivana's movement was warning enough for them and they quickly understood that they had company.

The air almost froze as no one dared to move an inch. After what seemed eternity, the guards spotted a dark shadow near the passageway. Shaking at his slightly at the other guards to signal for them not to be so anxious, Ivana took his bone dagger firmly in his hand, ready to fight for his life and the lives of his counterparts around him.

Moments later, a few more black shadows entered the library and they began to search the premises of the library. From the speed at which they moved and the way they nimbly walked around making almost no sound, it was clear to the guards that these people were highly trained individuals. Tensing up their muscles and ready for battle, the guards looked towards Ivana as if waiting for his permission to attack.

Ivana nodded his head and that was a signal that couldn't be clearer. With a flick of his wrist, the bone dagger in Ivana's hand flew at an incredible speed towards one of the shadows reaching towards one of the higher shelves and the shadow tumbled to the ground as blood splattered into the air. The other guards also quickly engaged their enemies and the two groups of people began to engage in combat in that ancient library.

The guards had taken their enemies by surprise and quickly fell five of them before their enemies could hold their footing. The remaining ones were outnumbered and though they could not be slain immediately, were clearly on the losing end. The usually brash and impatient Rikza was almost like a different person in combat. Every strike he made was well calculated and he proved to everyone why he truly deserved a place amongst the legion of elite guards. Just as he fell yet another enemy and turned to engage the next one, eight more people cloaked in the same outfit entered the library and came to the aid of their compatriots.

The tables were immediately turned on the guards. They were now outnumbered and within moments they were on the losing end, barely able to prevent themselves from getting killed. One of the cloaked men saw a loophole in Ivana's stance as he was caught up in combat with two others and pounced at him with a dagger in his hand. Just as his gleaming dagger was about to slice through Ivana's shoulder, he suddenly slumped and collapsed to the ground.

Brania had charged out from his hiding place and hit the man on the neck with a large book. None of the men knew that there was a fifth person they were going after and this element of surprise worked to Brania's advantage and saved Ivana's shoulder. This save however, did not come without a price. The attention of the cloaked men immediately turned towards Brania and they quickly noticed that he was holding an old scroll in his hands.

The men's eyes almost seemed to gleam from behind their masks and they quickly began to move towards Brania, determined to get what they had come here for. Despite being grateful to Brania for saving him, Ivana was still frustrated that Brania had left his hiding place and exposed his presence. Brania was not trained in combat and with the attention of their enemy now on him, it would be even harder to have to defend Brania from their attacks.

Turning to Rikza and giving him a look of worry, Ivana quickly disengaged from combat with the two men in front of him and leapt towards Brania. Rikza made a bold move and fell the enemy before him. Swiftly he jumped over to take over the enemies Ivana was fighting with as the other cloaked men began to close in.

Ivana quickly took out a tarot card from his pocket and began to mutter an incantation as he rubbed the card between his fingers. Just as the tarot card glowed with energy, he flung it towards the wall and a large map of the land unfolded before their eyes.

'Go! Quickly!', Ivana said to Brania in his usual cold voice. The scroll was all that mattered now and if there was someone who had to return safely, it would have to be Brania.

Unwilling to abandon his newfound friends who were defending his life, Brania hesitated for a moment and looked at Ivana with a plead in his eyes. Just at this moment, one of the cloaked men side-stepped Rikza and plunged his dagger deep into the right leg of Ivana. As Ivana tumbled to the ground with blood trickling from his wound, Ivana turned around and snapped his assailant's neck with his bare hands.

'I said GO!', screamed Ivana. No one had ever heard Ivana raise his voice and everyone could hear how desperate he was now.

Reaching out to touch a point on the map, Brania was sucked into the map and disappeared within moments. The map on the wall vanished thereafter and it was as though the wall was just like before. With a smile on his face, Ivana pulled out the dagger embedded in his leg and charged back to join his brethren in battle. Their mission was to protect Brania and the scroll and now, they had did it. All else, including their lives, were secondary.

Chapter Twenty: You want Food, I want Wine.

As Yania sat by the path on the Tarea Mountain, her legs swayed from side to side in an almost hypnotic manner. Eight of the guards were sitting along the path thinking for more ideas while two of them had went off to gather some water. Misuri sat in one corner and tried hard to piece together all the clues they had so far. He was very sure that the key to solving the mystery was inside the Valley but for now, there was no way they could get in. As the hours passed, frustration and desperation slowly crept in and the morale of the entire legion slowly sank.

As Misuri sat there staring at the entrance, he saw a trail of insects crawling past from within the Valley. These bugs were no longer any news to them but Misuri still seemed to stare at them intently as if they seemed to possess some inspiration within them. As the bugs slowly made their way past his legs, Misuri's face broke into a smile as an idea suddenly struck him. Standing up, Misuri

motioned for the others to gather over to listen to the idea he just had.

'We are all stuck here because we can't go in. However, that doesn't mean that the people inside cannot come out', said Misuri.

'We all know that but the Valley of Kalebb is known for being self-sufficient and being able to farm for sustenance. The people within grow and have everything that they need to survive and rarely come out of the Valley', interrupted Sinza who spotted the loophole in Misuri's argument.

Nodding his head at Sinza, Misuri continued, 'I know that the people in the Valley of Kalebb are known for being self-sufficient and rarely leave the Valley but what if they are no longer self-sufficient? What if they now no longer have enough food to support their people? Would they then not have to come out to get food?'

Misuri's reply created a murmur amongst the crowd as they considered what Misuri had just said. If they could manage to find a way to make the people inside the Valley come out, it would definitely make things much easier for their investigations. Yet the question was how exactly were they going to make these people no longer self-sufficient?

Flicking off a strand of hair from her forehead with her dainty fingers, Yania turned to Misuri and smiled before speaking, 'I'm sure you already have an idea on how to do that so just save us that anxiousness and let us know what you want to do.'

Putting his fingers to his mouth, Misuri gave out a shrill whistle and within moments a grumpy badger emerged from beneath the soil. Misuri bent down and began his animalistic conversation once again, muttering in a tongue none could understand. After a few moments, the badger disappeared below the ground once more and Misuri turned his head back to face the crowd.

'I have instructed my badger to burrow into the Valley and destroy the crops that lay within. It is just about the time that the villagers are going to harvest their crops and with their crops destroyed, they will then have no choice but to come out and gather food for the upcoming winter', Misuri said.

With a roar of laughter, the other guards began discussing how brilliant Misuri's idea was. Within moments, they had arranged for six of them to go gather food while the remaining of them would stay behind to see how matters turned out. This time, they were confident that something would come out of their plan.

As expected, a large furore broke up within the Valley the next day. The villagers were both outraged and at a loss as to what to do now that their crops were destroyed. Their reserves were not enough to support them through the winter and they were putting their hopes in this current batch of crops to be harvested. After a lengthy discussion, one of the shrewder villagers was sent to go out of the Valley and buy food.

As the villager walked out of the Valley, he was surprised to see a group of people pushing carts of wheat right at the entrance. It almost seemed as if this was a godsent for him and the solution was literally at his doorstep. Quickly walking over, he approached one of the men and asked if they could sell him some of their wheat.

This group of people were the ten remaining guards. They had gathered carts of wheat from all the nearby villages and disguised themselves as travelling merchants. When the villager approached them asking to buy their wheat, they looked at each other and laughed loudly, waving their hand in dismissal.

'We have no need for your money for we are rich ourselves. We only want things we can't find elsewhere and gold is definitely more common than our wheat', said Sinza who was disguised as a merchant.

Disappointed at their rejection, the villager slumped slightly and continued with his pleas. He explained that the Valley desperately needed the food for the upcoming winter and they would give anything they could afford in exchange for it.

'That is indeed a very sad plight. Perhaps, if you can get use some wine, we can consider exchanging our wheat for them. We hear that the wine from the Valley of Kalebb is something known far and wide', said Misuri as he looked at the other guards.

It was as if hope was suddenly rekindled. The Valley had no lack of wine and if all the merchants wanted was wine, they were more than happy to exchange it for food. Nodding his head in agreement, he quickly told the guards that he would return to the Valley and get people to cart the the barrels of wine out for exchange.

Just as the villager was about to turn around and return to the Valley, Misuri put his arm in front of him and blocked his way. With a soft gentle tone, Misuri spoke, 'We will need to check the winery itself to ensure that what we are receiving is the genuine wine from the Valley of Kalebb that everyone talks about. We are not going to take the risk of exchanging our prized wheat for some fake goods.'

Clearly put in a spot, the villager slowly shook his head. 'You do know that the Divines do not allow for outsiders to enter the Valley. You are clearly giving me an impossible task', exclaimed the villager.

'Fine then, brothers, let's go. The trade is over' shouted Misuri as he motioned for the other guards to leave. Having known how this plan would go from the start, the other guards began to move the cart of wheats away from the Valley and down the Mountain, appearing to be enraged at the villager's refusal of their demand.

As the guards began to leave with the food, the villager was clearly exasperated and desperate. Misuri, on the other hand, stood there composed with a smirk on his face. The villager paused for a moment to think before he looked up and waved at the leaving guards and shouted 'Fine, fine. I will find a way to bring you all in but I want more food in exchange for it.'

Agreeing to the villager's request, the guards slowly moved the carts of food back. Just as the villager was happy at himself for having managed to use this condition to get more food, little did he know that everything was part of the guards' plans all the while.

Chapter Twenty One: Spying Gone Wrong

Even as the frosty night air licked at the skins of the villagers, none of them felt the slightest bit cold. The representative they had sent out to buy food for winter had returned with news that he had managed to secure an extremely favourable deal of exchanging their wine for food. All their fears of having to starve through the winter had been quashed and all they were awaiting now was the trade to be completed.

The rolling of wheels could be heard resonating through the Valley, magnified by the shape of the Valley and the quiet night time. Within moments, a group of men were seen pushing carts and carts

of wheat down into the Valley and the villagers burst out with cheers. Even as there were murmurs about how these foreigners managed to enter the Valley, what was more important to them now was the food they were bringing in.

The shrewd villager representative was grinning from ear to ear as he walked in front of the carts, shouting off a direction or two from time to time, afraid that the foreigners would lose their way. Of course, he had no clue that though these foreigners had never been in the Valley in body, they had been in there in mind. Misuri, disguised as one of the foreign merchants, could not help but let out a smile at how foolish that villager representative was.

One might wonder how these foreign merchants managed to enter the Valley if it had been blessed by the Divines to only admit the young and inexperienced. It turned out that deep within the village, there was a small well that was the source of water for the villagers in the Valley. Drinking water from this well would grant the drinker temporary immunity from the wrath of the Divines for entering the Valley. The villagers who drank it on a daily basis were thus, almost immune from any rejection from their home. Misuri had expressed his doubts to the villager representative on whether a small amount of that water was sufficient to grant them temporary stay in the Valley. At his insistence, the villager representative had gave them slightly more of this water than was required just to put their hearts at ease.

Yania had decided to stay behind as a beautiful and dainty lady like herself didn't fit into the entire merchant disguise ploy. As the guards slowly wheeled the wheat towards the direction of the winery, Misuri couldn't help but smile to himself at the thought of how Rikza would react if he knew they managed to enter the Valley without having to be blasted repeatedly by that bout of cold air. Soon, the image of the winery greeted them and knowing that they were near the source of the entire mystery, the guards couldn't help but smile to themselves.

As they placed the carts of wheat by the side, the villager representative slowly led the disguised guards into the winery to meet the owner. Just as they expected, that same old man they saw in Sinza's mental projection came out to greet them. Extending his warmest greetings, the old man appeared to be extremely happy to have them as visitors. The workers in the winery seemed to be busy with their own work and most barely even bothered to cast an extra glance at the visitors. The guards were brought around the winery to look at the goods they were going to get in exchange for the food.

'Try it, it is the finest wine you can only find from the Valley of Kaleb', said the old man as he opened a barrel and scooped up some wine with a wooden ladle and offered it to the guards.

Looking at each other, the guards were hesitant to be the first one to try the wine offered given that they knew something unusual had been put into it, even if they didn't know what it was exactly. Misuri quickly took the chance to look into the barrel and focused his unparalleled eyesight at the wine in front of him. As the old man offered again, the guards knew that rejecting his offer when they had claimed to want to check the wine would be highly suspicious. As one of the guards walked up to the old man and took the ladle from him, one could almost see a wry smile given out from the face of the old man. Just as the guard was about to put the ladle to his mouth, Misuri fell forward and knocked the guard to the ground. The guard, ladle and the wine in it all tumbled to the ground as the other guards quickly moved to help their friend to his feet.

'I am very sorry, it must be all the moving of the food that made me so tired. I will be more careful around your precious wine', explained Misuri as he slowly got to his feet.

The old man seemed to frown for a moment but the sign of displeasure quickly dispersed as he

laughed off the stumble and expressed his concern over how tired the guards were. Just as all the awkwardness seemed to disperse into the air, Misuri began to notice something very unusual about the winery. The large group of workers that were busy attending to their own matters and ignoring them all the while seemed to be largely missing. Other than the few who were beside the old man, the only people in sight were the guards themselves. The old man had been exceptionally warm and that had temporarily masked the sudden absence of the other workers but Misuri's observance still picked it up eventually.

As he winked at the other guards, giving out their own unique signal to retreat, Misuri gave out a laugh and walked over to the old man. Picking up the wooden ladle, he scooped up a large spoonful of the wine and pretended to send it into his mouth as he apologised for his misdemeanour earlier. Just as the wine was about to touch his lips, Misuri swiftly flicked his wrist and splashed the wine onto the face of the old man and quickly began to run towards the door. The other guards had been waiting for Misuri's signal and at the moment when the wine was splashed at the old man's face, they had already grabbed in their hands the weapons they had hidden under their clothes and ran towards the door.

As the old man wiped off the wine from his face with outrage and disbelief, his booming voice resonated through the winery, 'It is too late, you are all going to die in this Valley!'

As the guards kicked open the door of the winery, they finally understood where the workers went. All the workers, if they were even workers, were congregated outside the winery as if waiting to ambush the guards. The moment the doors of the winery were opened, the workers, with different weapons in their hands, charged forward to engage the guards in battle.

Though there were ten of the guards, the workers easily outnumbered them and they were not any less skilled than the elite legion of guards. From the way they fought, it was evident that they were the same group of people that had ambushed them from time to time. As Misuri drove his dhuriv deep into the body of one of the workers who fell, he motioned for his counterparts to escape before he dug out the entrails of his enemy.

The escape was easier said than done, each guard seemed to have to deal with at least two to three enemies on average. All of them knew that they had to retreat but none could do so. After a few more rounds of battle, though some of the workers were slain by the skillful guards, some of the guards were also injured by the workers. Their injuries only contributed to slowing down their actions and their situation became increasingly precarious.

Seeing that an escape seemed almost impossible, Misuri flailed his dhuriv to ward off his three attackers and quickly jumped over to the carts of wheat they had brought in. Taking out a flint, he began to light the wheat on fire and began to push the cart of blazing fireball towards the crowd of attackers. As some of the workers' clothes caught fire and they screamed in agony as they rolled on the ground attempting to put it out, Misuri continued pushing that huge fireball towards the winery. He knew that with the amount of alcohol in the winery, all he had to do was push the fireball to the winery and they could escape in the confusion.

Just as the fireball cart was about to collide into the winery, the old man appeared. With a gnarled staff in his hands, he swiftly struck one of his workers from behind and the worker flew towards Misuri as if he was being thrown around like a piece of cotton. The flying worker collided with the cart and the impact of the collision broke the cart into pieces. The worker laid on the floor, dead with his face contorted from the agony of collision with the cart. Misuri could not help but admire the old man for his quick thinking but the cruelty he displayed towards his own subordinates also sent chills down Misuri's back.

During this time, two guards had finally collapsed from their injuries and had been torn apart by their enemies. However, the huge fireball and flying worker did prove to distract the workers for a moment and seizing this opportunity, Misuri leapt towards the exit and motioned for the remaining guards to retreat. Helping the injured along, the guards quickly made their retreat with the workers hot in pursuit.

The noisy battle had attracted the attention of the villagers but there was nothing they could do but hide and hope that the battle would not implicate them. As the guards reached the entrance of the Valley, they heard the old man boom out what seemed to be an instruction in a foreign tongue and the workers stopped in their tracks of pursuit. Not complaining at all, the guards quickly left the Valley and returned to their obscure campsite they had built outside the Valley.

Two of their counterparts had perish in battle and one more later died from his injuries after escaping from the Valley. They were now down to seven and had gained nothing at all from this trip in. Or so they thought.

Chapter Twenty Two: Back to Bugsic

There were blood stains everywhere. Yania and the guards were frantically trying their best to tend to the injured. They had already lost three of their counterparts and everyone left was of paramount importance. Sinza sighed as he bandaged one of the injured guards. This mission had seen them lose three of their compatriots without successfully getting any information they were looking for. In his own terms, it was a complete failure.

As the moonlight shone down on the guards scrambling around to heal the injured, a small shadow was seen closing in on them from the distance. Startled at this discovery, Yania screamed and pointed at the shadow while gathering the attention of these guards whom she had developed a strong bond with. Misuri patted the guard he was attending to in assurance that he would be able to handle the situation before standing up and walking over to Yania with dhuriv in hand. Focusing his eyesight into the distance, he could slowly make out that there was only one person running towards them. Confident that they could handle one intruder even with the injuries, Misuri was more curious as to the identity of this person and sat down to wait patiently for the person to reach them.

'Oh I've finally found all of you. I have been walking for eternity and my legs are tired and my hands are tired and my whole body is aching. I am so happy to have found all of you, it has been such a long walk', shouted the intruder as he slowly closed in.

Misuri couldn't make sense of what the intruder had blabbered. He had said a lot but what he had said was mostly repetitive or not worthy of any attention. Misuri wondered how the intruder could have talked so much and still not have said anything important. To someone as direct and to the point as Misuri, this was a mystery itself.

As the intruder slowly closed in, even Yania began to giggle at the sight before her. It was a young man in tattered clothes who was clearly drained with fatigue. However, despite the young man's evident weariness, his mouth was not the least any tired and continued to talk non-stop. One would have wondered if his mouth should be more tired than his body from all this talking.

This young man was Brania. After touching the map Ivana had created for him in the midst of that bloody battle, he was magically transported back to the guards' quarters. Although he knew the most important thing at hand was the scroll he had managed to snatch, he could not bear to let Ivana, Rikza and the two other guards die and have him do nothing. Even if there was the slightest of

chance, he decided that he had to help them look for reinforcements.

Brania knew that the other group of guards had went to the Valley of Kalebb and this time, despite the lack of bodyguards, he gritted his teeth and began his journey towards the Tarea Mountains. Given that he was not as fit as the guards, his journey there logically took longer than what the guards took to go there. During the long journey, he had read through the scroll over and over again and later burnt the scroll to ensure that it did not land in the wrong hands. With his impeccable memory, the contents of the scroll had been imprinted in his mind probably till his death. Throughout the journey, he had no one to talk to and it was no surprise that his mouth couldn't control his excitement the moment he saw the guards he was looking for.

'Oh you might not know who I am, silly me. Greetings, my name is Brania and I am a scribe who have been helping with all the sorting of investigation reports thus far. Along with the guards who returned from the Valley to the quarters, I went out with them in search for a scroll that contained information about the bugs Ivana had seen from the corpses he dissected. We were attacked and there were so many of them. There was blood everywhere and Ivana helped me escape. You must go and save them! Quickly!' rambled Brania as he appeared to be clearly impatient this time.

Calming the excited scribe down, the calm and collected Misuri sat him down and listened to what he had to say. As the scribe slowly explained who he was and recounted what had happened. Misuri bowed his head for a moment of contemplation before turning to Brania once more.

'From what you said, it has been at least a day since all of you were attacked. If Ivana and the rest managed to survive the attack, they would have escaped and find some way to look for us. If they unfortunately did not, then there is no point for us to charge over to the Mhojave Desert. From the moment we were assembled, we have already swore that we would not make any unnecessary sacrifices for useless things like our corpses. Moreover, we have some injured amongst us too. All we can do now is leave things to fate', said Misuri slowly.

Despite being disappointed at Misuri's response, Brania nodded his head as he understood where Misuri was coming from. He was impatient but he was not stupid and he knew well that leading the whole group to charge back to the Mhojave Desert was definitely not a clever move. A single tear rolled down the cheek of this young scribe as he thought of how Ivana, Rikza and the other two guards had fiercely defended him even though they barely knew each other but now he could not do anything but hope everything turned out well for them. It almost felt as if he was extremely callous.

As Misuri slowly pondered over the news Brania had brought, the part about the scroll caught his attention. He took Brania's hand and brought him over to the other resting guards. Introducing him to them, he asked him to sit by their side and he put down his dhuriv, preparing to speak.

'We have not failed entirely my brothers. Three of us may have died but they did not die in vain. I know what that old man put into the wine', said Misuri towards the crowd.

A small murmur broke out amongst the guards, excited that they did get something as a reward for the blood and lives they had lost. As the murmur died down and all the attention was refocused on Misuri, Misuri cleared his throat before continuing once more.

'When I peeped into the barrel, I did not notice anything peculiar at first but when I strained my eyes and focused my eyesight, I saw the same tiny bugs that we know of crawling by the side of the barrel near the wine. There were also extremely tiny dots on the surface of the wine which I am guessing are the same bugs too. As such, I can confirm that what the old man put into the wine were these black bugs.'

Sinza quickly raised his hand as an even louder murmur broke out amongst the guards. Turning to Misuri, he said, 'That is absurd, why would the old man want to put those bugs in the wine. What could a few insects do other than perhaps dirtying the wine.'

'I agree with what Sinza said, putting bugs into the wine makes no sense at all', said Malivan the Ascendril.

To everyone's surprise, it was not Misuri that addressed this concern but Brania who began talking.

'I think I have the answer to your questions', said Brania as the crowd burst into laughter. What did a little boy like him know about the entire mystery that had the whole land wrecking their brains over it.

'Listen to me! I travelled with your fellow guards to the ancient library hidden under the Mhojave Desert and found an old scroll that wrote about these bugs you all talk about. They are an extremely rare species of insects that come from a distant island unknown to many. These bugs are more than mere insects. They are a medium. A medium containing a spell within them', said Brania, ignoring the laughter from the crowd.

Seeing that Brania did indeed know something they did not, the crowd quickly quietened down and listened intently to what he had to say. For once, even the drop of a pin could be heard in the deathly silence of the night.

'It is said that a skilled witch doctor is able to cast a spell and seal it within the bugs. These spells then become dormant and only await a signal from the witch doctor in order for the spell to be activated. No one knows what the exact signal to be given is for only the person who cast the spell will know that. What I am guessing, is that these bugs containing spells are put into the wine in order for them to be consumed by people thus leaving these dormant spells in the bodies of people, awaiting the signal from the witch doctor for them to be activated. If I am not wrong, the burning of people from the inside is the activation of some sort of spell that has been cast by the witch doctor', continued Brania.

Though what Brania said was harrowing, everything finally made sense to the guards. They had once suspected that it was the alcohol half of the people who had died in such combustion cases consumed just before the incidents that had some sort of poison but this way they could not explain why the other half who did not drink alcohol just before the incidents burst into the flames. If what Brania said was correct, the spell had already laid dormant within their bodies for some time and all they needed was the signal for them to be ignited!

'These bugs may die in the body but the spell within them is not removed. The only way for the spell within the bugs to be removed is either for the signal to be given and the spell works its magic or the witch doctor removes the spell himself', said Brania.

Everything was so shocking. Even though they now knew the cause of the entire mystery, the thought that there was no solution still frightened the guards. If the witch doctor had laid the spell down, there would be no reason why he would help them remove the spell. The most important piece to the puzzle, the bugs, had been solved but now, they still had no idea as to how to go on. To top things off, time was running out and they only had four days before the deadline.

Their end seemed to be looming near.

Chapter Twenty Three: I am Back!

The group of guards along with Brania and Yania decided to leave the vicinity of the Valley of Kalebb. If the workers from the winery decided to leave the Valley to attack them, they were easily outnumbered and coupled with some of them being injured, it would be a battle extremely unfavourable to them. As Misuri tended to his injured brethren while the other guards who were not injured began packing their supplies, Brania was busy chattering away to Yania who was kind enough to lend him her listening ear. An entire day of not speaking to anyone was too much for Brania to bear and everything that made sense or otherwise began to flow from his mouth. Among all the things they talked about, what intrigued Brania most was Yania's story with the green creature Vanira.

'He used to be very handsome and talented. I have no idea what he went through to become like who he is now. I can see that he is in so much pain but there is nothing I can do. I really hope that he is alright', said Yania with a sigh and a drop of tear rolling in her eye.

'You mentioned that you are absolutely sure that creature is him. The only thing is that his appearance has changed a lot and he seems to have difficulties in communicating while having beastly urges from time to time. I suspect the beastly urges are what hampers the communication', said Brania in a cautious manner having felt that this was an extremely sensitive issue to Yania.

Instantly, Yania's eyes almost seemed to sparkle as she looked Brania in the eye. Clutching Brania's hand she continued in a plea, 'You mean you know what happened to him? Do you? Please tell me how I can help him, please!'

Blushing at the beautiful lady holding on to his hand, Brania was stumped for words for once. As he looked at Yania, her pale skin seemed to almost reflect the moonlight shining down on them. Her shiny jet-black long hair looked as if they were a torrent of stars in the night sky. His heart began to pump faster as the light scent of the lady wafted past. Brania slowly tried to wrestle his hand out of Yania's grasp, knowing full well that he would not be able to speak properly with her grabbing on to his hand. Yania seemed to finally sense Brania's uneasiness and let go of his hand with a blush but she did not turn away for to her, what Brania had to say was of paramount importance.

'I cannot say I know exactly what happened to him since I have never seen him. However, there have been records of such, transmogrifications as the healers put it. This is but my guess and please do not pay too much attention to it. Maybe if I can examine him in person I might be able to give you a more conclusive statement', said Brania as he moved away slightly from Yania so that her scent would not distract him too much.

'Let us hope that you will be able to do so one day, even I do not know where he is now', replied Yania with a sigh. The thought of Vanira once again had hit a sore spot within her that she had managed to put under control so far. The series of events that had transpired recently, though tiring and unfortunate, did prove to be an effective distraction for her longing for Vanira. Now, the mention of her loved one made her think about the times they once had and every thought of it only made her heart ache.

Brania began to regret mentioning the issue having seen how it was clearly affecting the lady before him. However, what was done could not be undone and he could only try his best to console or distract her.

'We better get ready, I think the guards are ready to leave. Though we aren't as strong and fit as them, we wouldn't want to be their burden would we?' said Brania to Yania with a smile.

Nodding her head emphatically as if Brania said something she really agreed with, Yania picked herself up and walked towards the guards who were ready to leave, alongside Brania.

Under normal circumstances, Misuri would have let everyone rest till dawn before leaving but the risk of them coming under another round of attack was too high for him to undertake and he had to get them to evacuate as soon as possible. As the healthy helped the injured along, the nine of them slowly made their way down Tarea Mountains. They had yet to decide where to go exactly but they knew they first had to descend the mountains.

As they made their way down, Misuri suddenly stopped in his tracks as if thinking of something. The others turned to look at him yet refrained from disturbing his train of thoughts for they knew that when this careful Sentinel was thinking about something, it would definitely be something important. After a moment, Misuri looked up once more at his peers and nodded his head.

'I know where we should go. Follow me', said Misuri gently. All the time spent with Yania had made him gentler with his words and slightly more talkative, something everyone noticed as time went by.

Since no one had any idea where they should go next, they had no objections following Misuri even if he did not reveal where they were going to. After all, he had proven that his thinking was sharp and decisions calculated so far. What they did notice however, was that they seemed to be walking in a south-western direction.

Following Misuri's lead, they abandoned the comfort of the highways and walked through the thick foliage of the forests. Everyone was complimenting Misuri on how clever he was to choose the less-walked path in order to minimise the chances of their whereabouts being discovered by their enemies. Throughout the entire journey, Misuri did not say another word and just continued walking as if he was constantly deep in thought.

As they walked deeper and deeper into the forest, the first rays of sunlight slowly shone upon them, filtered through the thick canopy of trees. The animals in the forest seemed to slowly awaken as the chirping of birds and the calls of the monkeys could be heard in the distance. The air began to warm slightly due to the bathing from the sunlight and the journey began to become slightly more comfortable and lively even though fatigue was slowly creeping on them.

Strangely, Misuri seemed to have slowed down his pace and with every few steps he took or every turn he made, he would stop and think for a few moments. At first, no one suspected anything but the guards were after all the elite chosen from across the lands and they soon noticed that they had been making more turns for the past hour as compared to the entire night combined. Everyone began to have their own suspicions but none of them raised it, deciding to place their trust in Misuri. Misuri seemed to have noticed the suspicions raised and turned to the rest of them.

'We are indeed walking through a maze and will be reaching where we are going to any moment now. Just bear with me for a moment more', said Misuri.

Misuri had indeed confirmed their suspicions but the guards, Brania and Yania all trusted that Misuri knew his way around. After a few more turns, they saw a little cottage placed between two strange looking trees. For a moment they wondered why they didn't see the cottage from so far away but they then realised that was the exact purpose of the maze! To ensure that the cottage was not easily seen and found.

Misuri quickened his pace and broke away from the crowd. He walked over to the door of the cottage and softly rapped on the door thrice. After a moment, a frail old man answered the door and looked at Misuri with a look of irritation. Glancing past Misuri's shoulders, he saw the entire entourage behind him and heaved a sigh before returning into his cottage with the door open.

Misuri motioned for the guards, Brania and Yania to enter the cottage and as they entered what was clearly the old man's house, they noticed that the cottage was bigger on the inside than it looked from the outside. A cosy fireplace warmed the room and a heavy scent of herbs lingered within the house, even staying on the furniture. Misuri slowly helped the injured guards find a place to sit down and walked over to the table to pour them some water as if it were his own home. The frail old man was sitting on a rocking chair as he puffed away on a pipe that gave out a herbal smell. As he rocked himself on the chair, his glance never left Misuri and after Misuri was finally done tending to his injured brethren, the frail old man began to speak.

'You never return and when you do, you always bring others along', complained the old man as he looked intently at Misuri.

The others did not know how to react to what the old man had said. They were embarrassed if they were indeed unwelcome but Misuri had led them all the way there and they really had no more energy to walk without taking a good rest.

'I am sorry Father. You know I have, important things to attend to and I really wouldn't have wanted to trouble you if the situation was not so dire', said Misuri in response to the old man.

The frail old man was Misuri's father? The others in the room could barely believe what they heard. Misuri had never spoke about his family and some of the other guards even wondered if he was an orphan. They would never have expected that Misuri would bring them back to his own home to escape from their enemies. It seemed like a risk they would never expect Misuri to take on behalf of his family. Misuri's hesitant navigation through the maze suggested that he did not return home often as he had to try his best to recollect what was the correct way in.

Shaking his head, the frail old man slowly tried to get to his feet. Misuri quickly rushed over and helped his father up. His father suddenly grabbed hold of him and hugged Misuri in a deep embrace. With his hands shaking, the old man patted Misuri's back as he repeatedly muttered, 'I am just glad that you are back.'

This scene before them brought tears to their eyes. Many of the guards had their own families they missed dearly but in exchange for their career and training, they had no choice but to leave their families and fight. None of them knew if they had the chance to return to their families alive. None of them knew if their families could one day hug them just like how Misuri's father was doing now. Misuri's normally reclusive nature made this scene even more memorable and touching for deep in his heart, he still had a lot of love for his father even if he did not say it.

As Misuri also patted his father's back, a single drop of tear fell onto his father's head. None of them had ever seen Misuri cry but this difficult reunion had brought tears to even strangers like them, what more Misuri himself. All of a sudden, Misuri's tears were every bit justifiable. After a moment of embrace, Misuri slowly helped his father back into the rocking chair. As he sat by his father's side like a little kid, he slowly pointed at the people he had brought home and began to introduce them to his father and also his father to them.

It turned out that Misuri had grown up in the forests with his father. His mother had passed away shortly after his birth due to complications during the labour and his father was the one who single-

handedly raised him. His father was an extremely learned person who seemed to know a bit of everything. The trees that constituted the maze they walked through were planted one by one by Misuri's father himself and the cottage too was built by him. Misuri's father was also very knowledgeable about plants and herbs, knowing their healing or poisonous characteristics very well. Misuri had been more interested in the art of combat from young unlike his father and never really inherited these knowledge from his father.

'Father, some of my friends here are injured. Do you think you could help in their recovery please?' said Misuri.

It was evident from the wounds of the injured guards that their injuries were physical ones inflicted by weapons during battle. Misuri's father pointed at the large shelf next to the fireplace and instructed Misuri to take the white bottle on the second row. Misuri got to his feet and did just as his father had instructed and walked over to the injured guards. He gently opened the bottle and tilted it slightly. A fragrant white powder toppled out and he carefully spread it over the wounds of the injured guards, careful not spill any.

The wounds of the guards immediately had a cooling feeling and the pain they were feeling was immediately reduced. The other guards helped to bandage the wounds once more and Misuri returned the bottle to the shelf before returning to the side of his father. Throughout the whole process, Misuri's father never let his glance leave his son having waited so long for his return. In his heart, he was so worried that his son would have to leave again and he had to grab every moment to look at his precious son. Even if he didn't usually said it to Misuri, he did love his son a lot and no matter what his son asked of him now, he had no reason to say no.

Just as this heartwarming scene of family reunion was set out in the cottage, a shrill sound followed by a pop could be heard in the distance. Misuri's father clearly looked worried for there was no one else who knew he stayed here. Yet now, they seemed to have company.

Chapter Twenty Four: Safe and Sound

It wasn't only Misuri's father who was clearly alarmed, the other guards who were injured and tired all attempted to get to their feet. Misuri quickly asked that they remain resting and quickly instructed Yania and Brania to look after them. After reassuring his father that everything would be alright, Misuri walked over and picked up his dhuriv before leaving the cottage to investigate the source of the sound.

Despite Misuri's reassurances that he would be able to settle the matter, the other guards were clearly nervous about the matter. A few had already reached out to their weapons despite Yania and Brania attempts to calm them down. If it was truly their enemies hot on their heels, they would definitely not let Misuri face battle alone.

After a while, they began to hear footsteps nearing the cottage. This sudden sound startled the guards even more given they did not expect the enemies to reach the cottage so quickly. Sinza had got to his feet and was prepared to fight while Misuri's father, weak as he was, looked clearly worried. The door slowly opened and what popped in was not somebody but something. The tip of a dhuriv peeked in and the guards' hearts were put at ease knowing that it was Misuri who had returned. Misuri knew that if he had just opened the door and walked in, the nervous guards would probably have attacked given their suspicions. He was not worried about the guards injuring him but rather that they would aggravate their wounds from the outburst. As such, he cleverly first showed the tip of his dhuriv to let the guards know that it was him outside the cottage.

As the guards heaved a sigh of relief, the door opened wider and Misuri walked in with a huge smile on his face. What they did not expect was that two people followed him into the cottage. As the guards strained their eyes to make out who the two people were, Brania let out a gasp and began rushing towards the door.

'My goodness, you are safe, you are alive!' shouted Brania hysterically as he grabbed hold of the hands of the two people.

Ruffling Brania's hair, one of the two people turned to face the guards and gave them a smile. He was Ivana. The other person alongside him was that brash impatient Rikza and they had somehow managed to survive that onslaught in the Mhojave Desert and even find out where the guards were.

Ivana and Rikza closed the door behind them and slowly made their way into the room as Misuri introduced them to his father and his father to them. The most excited among all of them was Brania for he had been feeling guilty all this while having not been able to do anything to help save them. He could not stop chattering beside Ivana and Rikza, asking about what happened that day after he was teleported out. Ivana and Rikza looked at each other and gave out a laugh seeing how Brania's habit of not being able to keep his mouth shut was still something he couldn't kick.

'I am sure everyone has the same questions as you Brania so hold your horses and we'll explain what happened to everyone here', said Ivana to the jumpy Brania.

As Rikza poured himself a glass of water to wet his lips, Ivana gave Rikza a nod and Rikza returned to his place, facing everyone. It was not Ivana's style to speak a lot and this task of recounting what they went through was definitely something better left to someone like Rikza.

'After we ensured that Brania was teleported to safety that day, we turned to face our enemies once more in battle. Ivana was already injured and his movement was slightly impaired by his wounds. Given that the enemies also outnumbered us, we were clearly on the losing end. However, we had been in the library longer than them and did have a better idea of the layout of the library. We decided to take the battle behind the shelves and used the shelves to block the attacks of the enemies. With the shelves blocking their line of sight, we were able to bring down a few more of them to even up the numbers. Unfortunately, we were already tired and wounded and the enemies slowly seemed to understand our battle tactics. The battle got even harder and bloodier but in the end, we did manage to kill all of them though we did sacrifice two of our brothers too', recounted Rikza as he took another sip of water from the glass in his hand.

'Thank goodness at least you two managed to escape but how did you manage to find us given that we were no longer on the Tarea Mountains?' asked Brania, excited as usual.

'We did make our way back to the Tarea Mountains after our escape for we guessed that Brania would look for the rest of you there upon his escape. However by the time we got there, all of you had left and we had to descend the Mountain again in search of you. Luckily for us, when Brania teleported out of the library via the map created by Ivana's tarot card, a little bit of the tarot card's energy that Ivana had created fell onto the clothes of Brania. It was something very faint and very miniscule that only the tarot user who created that energy could detect. Using these traces of energy, we managed to track all of you into the forest. However, the trail stopped outside the maze and guessing that all of you were probably hidden within the maze, we let out a signal to get your attention and here we are now, in the cottage with all of you', explained Rikza in detail.

Though Misuri had said that he had to leave it to fate on whether the other four guards survived, he was still visibly relieved that at least two of them did manage the feat. Given their scramble all over

the land after their escape, he knew that Ivana and Rikza were no less tired than the others. He quickly arranged for the two of them to get some rest and got Brania and Yania to follow him out of the cottage to prepare some food. Being skilled with the art of the hunt, Misuri quickly fell some wild pigeons and rabbits while Brania and Yania skinned the animals and roasted them on a fire. They were glad to finally be able to help with something and not just constantly stay within the protection of the guards.

As Brania and Yania delivered the food to the resting guards and Misuri's father, they could not help but compliment how good the food was. The tired guards quickly fell asleep after the meal and as Brania and Yania were cleaning up after the meal, Misuri motioned for them to come out of the cottage for a talk. Putting down the things they had on hand, Brania and Yania made their way out of the cottage and sat beside Misuri on a log, ready to listen to what he had to say.

'Yania, do you remember how the clues Vanira left behind were what led us to the Valley of Kalebb?' asked Misuri.

Yania nodded her head at Misuri, unsure why he chose to raise this again at this point of time.

'Well, I believe that he might know more about the whole issue and also that we could give him some help to ease him from his suffering', continued Misuri.

'I have no objections to that but even I do not know where he is now. How are we going to ask him about the entire issue if we don't even know where he is?' asked Yania in response to what Misuri had said.

'I have received news that a weird creature of sorts was spotted somewhere north from this forest, biting animals to death and eating their carcasses. From the descriptions, I suspect that the creature is Vanira. If both of you are agreeable, we could make our way there to try and find him. Of course, that would be without disturbing the rest of the sleeping guards. Afterall, we wouldn't want to scare Vanira off with a crowd', replied Misuri.

Given how Misuri had dealt with issues pertaining to Vanira in the past, Yania had implicit trust that Misuri wouldn't harm her loved one. She also really wanted to locate Vanira and find out what happened. This news was probably something not easy to come by and she knew she had to make the most out of it. Nodding her head in agreement, she looked at Brania and Misuri.

The inquisitive Brania definitely did not have any objections and it was decided that the three of them would go north from the forest in search of the whereabouts of Vanira. For Vanira seemed to be the next key in this huge intricate puzzle.

Chapter Twenty Five: How Could You?

With the decision to go forth north to search for Vanira made, the trio quickly tidied up the place at the cottage and made their preparations. Brania and Yania prepared some water and food while Misuri ensured that his dhuriv was in the best condition just in case a battle was necessary. As soon as all these details were attended to, Brania, Yania and Misuri went on their way.

Misuri navigated the trio through the maze and out of the forest before heading straight into the Mamashi Grasslands. Upon their arrival, Misuri wasted no time in finding the exact place where the sightings of Vanira were rumoured to be and they settled down to plan how they were going to lure Vanira out of hiding place.

The only logical bait they had was of course Yania and for the sake of the bigger picture, Yania agreed to play this role. It was agreed that Yania would call out for Vanira with Misuri and Brania hiding in a corner just in case any assistance was required. She would then try to persuade Vanira if he turned up, to follow them to someplace quieter and unless absolutely necessary, they would try their best to avoid having to use violence.

Yania decided to take a moment to go to the nearby river and clean herself up. If Vanira were to turn up, she wanted to be in her best condition when meeting him. The river was crystal clear as the warm sunlight made the surface of the water glimmer and sparkle. Small fishes could be seen swimming gleefully through the water and Yania slowly removed her white robes and waded into the river to clean herself. Being the gentlemen they were, Misuri and Brania were waiting a distance away where they could not see Yania but could hear her and rush over if she shouted for help.

Misuri was deep in thought. He knew very well that all this plan was a lie to Yania. If Vanira did appear, his beastly instincts made him such a danger around Yania and there was almost no way he would agree to follow them without force. Deep down in Misuri's heart, he knew that all the talk about not using violence unless necessary was empty talk in itself.

Brania on the other hand, though extremely knowledgeable book-wise, was clueless when it came to such plans. His heart was racing as the thought of Yania bathing in the river constantly raced through his mind. His young handsome face blushed under the sunlight as he repeatedly shook his head as if attempting to shake that thought out of his mind. He knew that the person Yania loved was Vanira and he admired and even respected her undying love for Vanira despite his change in looks and character. He was here to help her reclaim her love one and now was definitely not the time to be thinking of anything else.

After Yania ensured that she was properly cleaned, she made her way out of the river and donned her white robes once more. Adjusting her long hair, she slowly walked towards Brania and Misuri with her hair glistening from the reflection of the water in it. Taking dainty small steps, she walked up to the two guys and nodded at them, acknowledging that it was time for their plan to be executed. Brania's jaw nearly dropped as the goddess-like Yania walked up to him. Her faint fragrance wafted through the air and her every action from the steps she took to the adjusting of her hair captivated him. Waking up from his trance by a soft nudge from Misuri, Brania quickly picked up their belongings and tagged along.

The bright sun warmed the ground as a young beautiful lady in white was seen in a farm in the Mamashi Grasslands. There was no one else in sight and the very presence of such a beautiful lady in such a dirty place was a stark contrast. In the shadows nearby, Brania and Misuri stood there without making a sound and ensuring that they could not be seen by anyone. They had asked that the villagers at the farm evacuate the place to give Yania the space she needed and now was the time to see if Vanira took that bait.

'Vanira, my loved one. Come out! I know you are here, I just know it. Come out please!' screamed Yania at the top of her voice in what almost seemed like a plea.

Even her shouting sounded so melodious to Brania and from the shadows, a part of him wished that she was calling out to him instead. How could Vanira not come out if he heard such a voice? If Yania had been calling out to him, Brania would have rushed out and hugged her in his embrace. Misuri had his eyes strained for any signs of movement and from what he heard, the creature was rumoured to come to his farm at this time of the day to kill animals and get food. Yania continued her shouting and her pleas became increasingly heart wrenching as she attempted to lure Vanira out.

Then, it worked. A low guttural growl could be heard in the distance and within moments, a green blur flashed past Yania and just as they wanted, Vanira it was that was standing right in front of them. Brania appeared evidently startled given that he had only hear Yania describe Vanira's current state but never seen him or it in person. Misuri held Brania down firmly to ensure he did not make a sound and the both of them continued to observe the situation from the shadows.

With a squeal of delight, Yania rushed over to Vanira wanting to hug her loved one in an embrace. She had dreamt day and night for this scene and now all of this was real. The green creature retreated slightly as his scales glimmered under the sunlight. He let out a soft growl as his beady eyes looked at Yania from head to toe.

'What is the matter Vanira. I am Yania, your lady, your Yania. Do you not remember me?' pleaded Yania, surprised that Vanira took a step back.

It was as if her words were magic and the green scaly creature walked forward and put his large arms around Yania in an embrace. Beads of tears trickled down Yania's cheek and onto the creatures green scaly shoulders as Yania repeatedly muttered how much she missed him. This scene of a beauty and a beast in embrace was both startling and touching.

'Tell me what happened to you Vanira. I want to help you. Why did you not return as you promised?', asked Yania as she faced the creature with tears trickling down her face.

The green creature seemed to have a lot he wanted to say to Yania but the only thing that escaped him were growls. His inability to communicate seemed to frustrate him and he got visibly agitated waving his large arms up and down trying to sign something.

Misuri, hidden in the shadows, began to get worried that the beastly instincts within Vanira might cloud his judgement and he would harm Yania. He had seen that creature in battle and he knew that all it took was one swipe from those huge claws of his and Yania would be dead. Misuri whispered for Brania to stay where he was and he slowly and quietly made his way nearer to the duo while using other things around them as coverage so as to not expose his presence.

'Calm down and take it slowly Vanira, let me know what happened', continued Yania as she attempted to calm the agitated creature down. His contorted face was clear evidence he was trying very hard to say something but nothing was coming out. His growls got louder and they startled Yania who took a step back, slightly afraid. This step back seemed to have agitated Vanira even further and his gestures became increasingly animated and his growls increasingly louder.

Brania who was hidden in the shadows was startled by a loud growl the large green creature gave out and uncontrollably let out a gasp. This gasp, though not loud, caught the attention of Vanira and his head immediately turned towards Brania's location. Emitting an aggressive growl, his muscles seemed to flex as he prepared to pounce towards where Brania was hiding to take out whoever was there.

Yania was at a loss of what to do now and she could only repeatedly ask that Vanira calm down. Her effort seemed to be futile as that gasp Brania let out had betrayed the existence of another person. With a heavy push from his large hands, Vanira pushed Yania aside and pounced towards Brania's location. Brania stood there frozen with fear as he did not expect the speed of the creature to be so quick. It was a matter of moments before his blood would be splattered across the ground of the farm floor.

Just at this moment, a loud sound pierced through the air and a small brown blur catapulted through

the air and struck the green creature in mid-air. A loud thud could be heard on impact and Vanira collapsed to the ground as the thing struck him at the neck. It was the blunt end of Misuri's dhuriv that had saved Brania's life and Misuri was not far behind as he leapt forward to pick up his thrown weapon.

Yania let out a gasp as she saw Vanira slump to the ground, visibly afraid that her loved one was injured. Misuri quickly took out a small bottle from his clothes and poured out a yellow powder before blowing it into Vanira's nose. Vanira seemed to calm down slightly from the effects of the powder and began to drift into a semi-conscious state. He turned his head slowly towards Yania with a look of sadness and anger. It was as though he was trying to tell her, 'How Could You?'

Chapter Twenty Six: The Ultimate Healing

'You said you wouldn't hurt him! You promised me he would be fine! What did you do to him, you monster!' screamed Yania towards Misuri hysterically. She crawled over to Vanira and hugged his body tight. Her love for Vanira had superceded any sense of rationality she had and she totally forgot that if Misuri had not did something, Brania would be the only laying on the ground with his entrails spilt everywhere.

'I didn't mean to hurt you Vanira, I really didn't. We just want to help you. Forgive me loved one', continued Yania as she rocked Vanira in her hands as tears continued to flow down her face. Brania who had by this time recovered from the shock, walked out of the shadows and put his hand on Yania's shoulder as a form of support for the screaming lady.

'He is not dead. He is just unconscious', explained Misuri as he slowly put his dhuriv behind himself. He knew that he had to do something to save Brania and at the most critical moment, he had flung his dhuriv at Vanira. To prevent Vanira from suffering any long lasting injuries, he used the blunt end of his dhuriv which knocked Vanira out as it collided with his neck. He was confident that Vanira would not suffer any injuries given the protection his thick scales afforded him and what he was more worried was that Vanira would regain consciousness quicker than he expected.

The yellow powder he poured from the bottle was a special concoction Misuri's father had created. The slightest bit could knock out a cow for hours and knowing that Vanira was probably stronger than a cow, Misuri used a bit more just to ensure Vanira stayed unconscious before they implemented the next step of the plan.

Yania seemed to slowly calm down as rationality slowly crept back in on her while Misuri's words slowly seeped in. She slowly patted Vanira's unconscious body and wiped off the tears on her face as she knew that they had to continue with their plan or all would come to naught. Brania helped her to her feet and as her petite figure leaned on Brania for support, a tinge of guiltiness swept past Brania knowing that everything escalated to this because of him.

'We need to get out of here. I am afraid that the villagers will return. If they see all this, word will spread and we will all be in danger. We will bring Vanira back to the cottage and hopefully my father can help him', continued Misuri as he slowly went over and picked up the huge creature.

The mention of Misuri's father seemed to calm Yania down further for she knew that Misuri's father was a skillful healer and perhaps he might be able to cure Vanira of whatever he was afflicted with. Nodding her head at Misuri, she adjusted her clothes and tagged along behind Misuri as he walked back towards the forest with Vanira's unconscious body on his shoulders. The first part of their plan had worked and now hopefully everything else would go as planned.

As Misuri slowly trudged back into the forest with the weight of Vanira weighing on his shoulders, Brania supported Yania as they followed behind, Yania drained from all the emotional upheaval. They soon made their way to the maze and this time, with Misuri more familiar with the directions, they managed to return to the cottage quickly. Misuri stashed Vanira in the shed behind the cottage and quickly went to ask for the assistance of his father. All their hopes now were pinned on Misuri's father and his skills in healing.

Yania and Brania returned to check on the sleeping guards to ensure that no one had found out about their quick escapade. The guards were drained from days of battle and their injuries and were mostly all fast asleep in recuperation. Misuri's father slowly made his way to the shed with Misuri's support as his aged body quivered with every step he took. Misuri really didn't want his father to over exert himself unnecessarily but this was a time of emergency.

As Misuri's father cast a glance at the green creature in the shed, he asked that Misuri go get a large cauldron and fill it with water. After filling the cauldron with water, Misuri moved Vanira into the cauldron of water and lit a small fire below the cauldron as instructed by his father. Misuri's father slowly took out a few bottles from his robes with his quaking fingers and uncapped them before pouring their contents into the cauldron. The water bubbled and frothed each time the powder within the bottles touched the water and Brania, Yania and Misuri watched on in silent trepidation.

'I heard that you know about transmogrifications', said Misuri's father to Brania. Brania was slightly surprised that Misuri's father's attention was now on him but he nodded his head in acknowledgement of the elder's question.

'You stay. The rest of you, go out and do not disturb me', said Misuri's father as he pointed at Brania.

Misuri exchanged a glance with Yania and they nodded their heads in agreement. There was nothing much they could do but distract Misuri's father with their presence and they were better off outside the shed than inside. As Misuri led Yania out, murmurs could be heard from within the shed as Misuri's father began a conversation with Brania. The Sentinel and the lady slowly adjourned to the front of the cottage and sat down side by side. The surrounds suddenly became very quiet.

'Don't worry. I am sure my father will be able to come up with something', said Misuri as he broke the silence.

Yania did not reply but simply nodded her head. There was really nothing she could do now and she sort of hated this sense of helplessness.

'Do you hate me for bringing him here?' asked Misuri as he spoke once again, looking intently at the beautiful young lady clad in white in front of him.

'I know you had no other choice and I know this is for the best of him and us. Thank you Misuri and I apologise for my lack of decorum earlier', replied Yania with a soft sigh.

The two of them exchanged a smile as the awkwardness from earlier dissolved into nothing. Misuri got up to get the lady some water and food while Yania sat there staring into the sky, hoping that things would turn out just as they hoped. As Misuri returned and passed Yania the food and water, he draped his coat over her shoulders to keep her warm and sat beside her in accompaniment. The only thing they could do now was wait.

After a few hours, the excited chatter of Brania could be heard and soon his footsteps followed.

Brania soon hopped quickly in front of Misuri and Yania before bouncing up and down in excitement.

'You have no idea what just happened. That was the most insane thing I have ever saw and I am sure you would have thought the same if you were there. My goodness, your father's skills are indeed unparalleled!', blabbered Brania in his usual manner, never hitting the crux of the matter.

'The main point!' replied Misuri as Yania let out a chuckle having known well how Brania's talkative nature always clouded the issue at hand.

'Oh yes, silly me. He is awake and he can now talk!' exclaimed Brania in excitement.

Misuri and Yania almost jumped to their feet. Did they hear wrongly? They were not surprised that Vanira was now conscious given that the powder that Misuri had used to knock him unconscious was concocted by Misuri's father. What startled them was that Vanira was now able to talk and not just let out unintelligible growls. This was a huge leap forward to all of them. As the two of them got to their feet, they quickly made their way to the shed following Brania. They had to see this with their own eyes.

Chapter Twenty Seven: Back to Once Upon a Time

As Yania barged through the door of the shed, the sight before her shocked her. Misuri's father was sitting on a chair by the side while pieces of green scale littered the floor. A weird scent of blood and herbs wafted through the air and Yania quickly turned her glance to the cauldron in the middle. In the cauldron laid the same green creature they had brought back but there were patches of his skin that looked like that of a normal person now. His face was no longer covered with green scales and the water he was soaked in was an eerie green in colour.

Misuri followed through the door and walked over to his father whom was visibly tired from the hours of work. He gave his father a hug and they exchanged some whispers that the others could not hear. Yania, on the other hand, was more caught up with Vanira and rushed over to the side of the cauldron.

'Vanira, can you hear me? I am Yania. I am your Yania', screamed Yania.

Misuri's father slowly got to his feet and moved over to the side of the cauldron. Taking out a bottle, he uncapped it and poured some red powder into the cauldron causing the water within to froth and bubble. As his fingers quivered from his old age, he stretched out his other arm and placed it on Yania's shoulder as a form of reassurance.

'He has been poisoned by a spell or sorts. He has underwent some sort of unknown transmogrification that has caused his appearance to change and his character to mutate as well. He has had to constantly battle the beast within him with his human self and it is quite a miracle itself that he is still able to recognise you. I have temporarily put the spell cast upon him under control and cut away some of his scales. The scales on him do play a part towards his beastly instincts and the removal of some of them, along with my medicine, will allow him to talk to you as before. He has not recovered unfortunately so speak quickly with him while he is conscious', said Misuri's father to a clearly worried and agitated Yania.

As Misuri's father's words resonated through Yania's mind, Vanira's eyes opened and he looked lovingly at Yania. Though scales still covered parts of his face, it was evident that Vanira was indeed a handsome young man and it was no wonder why Yania fell in love with him. As his eyes

rolled without his glance ever leaving Yania, Yania hugged his neck in an embrace having finally seen any resemblance to the Vanira she once knew.

'I knew it was you all along. You are back Vanira. Thank the Gods!' exclaimed Yania.

'Everything feels like a dream Yania. I never imagined that I would be able to talk to you again having been trapped in that beastly body of mine. I tried to talk to you each time I saw you but nothing came out. Every moment was a fight for me to curb the beastly instincts that threatened to take over my body and mind', said Vanira as a single drop of tear rolled down his cheek. Misuri slowly walked over to the side of the cauldron and as Vanira's glance met his, Vanira nodded at the man who had saved him.

'I am sure you want to know my story and while I still have some lucidity in mind, I will share what I went through. My name is Vanira. I come from a family of merchants who live in the Valley of Kalebb. Through the work of generations, we have managed to come up with a recipe for a type of wine that was mellow and tasty. This wine soon gained popularity across the land and thus the winery in the Valley of Kalebb became something we were known for', Vanira continued.

'You mean the winery in the Valley of Kalebb belongs to your family?' interrupted the excited Brania who had been till now, quietly looking by the side.

'Yes. The winery in the Valley of Kalebb belongs to my family or at least it used to be. After my encounter with Yania, I fell in love with this beautiful lady who was kind at heart. I knew that she was the only person I could spend the rest of my life with and nothing was going to tear us apart. However, I soon received news that my father had taken ill and I had to return to the Valley of Kalebb to attend to the matters of the winery. I made a promise to Yania that I would return within six months to ask for her hand in marriage formally. Unfortunately it was a promise I failed to keep' replied Vanira as he looked at Yania lovingly.

'When I returned to the Valley of Kalebb, my father passed away not long after and I inherited the winery. Everything went on as usual until one day I was approached by some visitors. They came to me with a deal of wanting to buy our winery's recipe for our wine. They offered a large amount of gold but the recipe was what had kept the winery going all these years and there was no way I could sell it away regardless of the price they offered. I politely rejected their offer and they left after understanding my stand. I thought the matter was over', said Vanira as he coughed slightly, the strong scent of herbs in the shed choking him a little.

'A few days later, I received a letter that I had been poisoned and if I did not turn over the recipe for the wine, they would not only kill me but also all the villagers within the Valley. My skin had begun to itch since the first meeting and small scales had begun to grow all over. I knew that they were not giving empty threats and not wanting to implicate the rest of the villagers in the Valley, I left behind the recipe for the wine and escaped out of the Valley. As the days passed, the scales began to spread across my body and this almost animalistic instinct within me began to get stronger with each passing day. At times I would lose all control over my body and when I regained a modicum of control, I had already did things I would never have done' continued Vanira as he heaved a heavy sigh of regret.

'You were not poisoned. You had a spell cast on you. I have heard from Brania and he has told me of a bug that acts as a medium for containing such a spell. The people must have put the bug into your drink while you were not looking and subsequently activated the spell to force you to hand over the recipe' said Misuri's father as he rocked himself in his chair, satisfied with the work he had done.

All else was clear to Misuri now. The group of people had taken over the winery and used the renowned wine from the Valley to transmit these bugs containing spells out to the lands. Given its fame, no one would suspect anything and given that outsiders could not enter the Valley, no one would be able to investigate the matter even if news got out.

'That day when you were about to be abducted by that group of people, they were not going after you but going after me actually. They had gotten wind of our relationship and wanted to use you to force me to surrender to them. Even though I had been warped beyond comprehension, I was after all still a threat to them and they could not allow me to roam the lands like that' said Vanira as he turned his glance to Yania.

They had gotten the crux of the whole matter wrong this whole time. Misuri had thought that Yania was the key to the whole matter since the enemies were putting in so much effort just to abduct her. Little did he know that she was but a pawn they were vying for in order to take down Vanira. If Vanira had not revealed all these today, he would never have been able to fit the pieces of the puzzle together.

'Well, you might have been put under a spell but at least the transmogrification helped by giving you strength and agility you would normally not have. Do you have any idea who these people are and why do they want to send out these bugs to the land? Have you any idea about the rumours of headless ghosts in the Valley of Kalebb?' asked Misuri as he probed further.

'I do not know who these people are and why they are doing what they are doing. However, I did return to the Valley once and do know how the rumours for the headless ghosts arose. Making wine is not as simple as just following the recipe. It also requires people who are skilled in the various steps of wine production. In order for these people to continue producing the wine the Valley of Kalebb was renowned for, they had to find skilled wine makers who could help in the production process. They did find some of these people and led them back into the Valley. However, in order to not reveal the location of the where these people were brought to, a black bag was put over the heads of these people as they were led into the Valley and subsequently the winery. This way, the wine makers would not be able to know the way they took and where they were. In the night however, the black bag on their heads camouflaged into the darkness and all that one could see was a person, seemingly without a head, walking into the Valley of Kalebb' replied Vanira.

Misuri almost wanted to slap himself for having not thought of such a simple rationale for the rumours. Another piece of the puzzle was now revealed but the question of who these people were and what they were after still remained unanswered. In fact, these two questions were now the crux of the matter.

'He needs rest. Leave, all of you. I will try my best to help to make him better but I cannot guarantee anything' said Misuri's father as he waved his hand in an attempt to dismiss the crowd.

Misuri walked over and helped Yania to her feet. They knew that what Misuri's father said was right and the most appropriate thing they could do now was to leave matters to Misuri's father. After all, it was Misuri's father who had helped with this breakthrough so far. As Brania, Yania and Misuri left the shed, each of them carried with them mixed feelings as they walked back to the cottage. None of them however, knew what was to come.

Chapter Twenty Eight: What is that Monk-ey Business

As the trio returned to the cottage, sounds could be heard from the cottage and it was evident that

the guards had awakened. As the trio entered the cottage to check on the guards' wounds, they were pleasantly surprised that the wounds had almost magically healed overnight. None of them had ever seen a medicine that worked that fast and if they had not seen the wounds for themselves, they would have thought that the guards were never injured at all. There wasn't even a scar left on where the wounds used to be and the entire cottage burst into conversation on how it was as if magic had been performed. All of them, Misuri included, had a newfound respect for Misuri's father and his unparalleled healing skills.

As they helped the guards up and some of them went out of the cottage to exercise their limbs a little, Misuri looked visibly worried. Even though many of the pieces of the entire mystery had fallen into place and the injured guards were now fully restored to health, they had only three days left before the deadline. They had still no idea who their enemies were and what they were going after. It was a race against time that they had to go through and the odds were not in their favour.

Misuri left the cottage to get a breath of fresh air for he needed some time alone for him to contemplate what their next step should be. It was already mid-day and the forest was bustling with life along with sounds from every animal you could possibly imagine. The squirrels were jumping from tree to tree and little yellow sparrows lined the trees chirping their joyous songs. For a moment, Misuri regretted leaving his father behind in the forest and going out to go for his career of bloodshed. It would have been great if he could enjoy such a scene every day but as usual, Misuri knew that there was no point moping over decisions he made in the past. Afterall, if he did not choose this path, he wouldn't be here today helping to solve the greatest mystery of the entire land.

Just as Misuri was staring into the sky, a white pigeon flew across his line of sight into the distance and Misuri rubbed his eyes a little, focusing his view on the bird. One might think that there was nothing unusual with having pigeons in a forest but to Misuri, this scene before him raised a lot of questions within him. The forest they were in did have wild pigeons and they did roast some for food earlier. However, all the wild pigeons in the forest were brown in colour and a white one like this was not one he had seen in the forest in his entire life.

As the pigeon slowly flapped its wings further and further away, Misuri put his fingers to his lips and let out a shrill whistle. Within moments, a black raven appeared perched itself on a nearby branch and at Misuri's signal, it sped towards the pigeon in the distance. The black raven soon caught up with its target and ferociously swiped at the pigeon with its sharp beak. A few feathers and a small spurt of blood decorated the air as the pigeon fell to the ground, unable to withstand the blow from its fierce predator.

Misuri quickly ran over to the carcass and signalled for the raven to leave. As the black raven flapped its wings and flew into the distance, Misuri picked up the carcass of the white pigeon and examined it in greater detail. Apart from the missing feathers and slit throat, Misuri found a small roll of paper attached to the leg of the dead pigeon. The findings confirmed his suspicion that the white pigeon was no wild pigeon but rather a courier pigeon. As Misuri removed the piece of paper from the dead pigeon's leg and unrolled it, a chill went down the back of the Sentinel.

'Western Ithmia' was all that was scribbled on the small piece of paper and there was no initials signed on the message. It was clear that someone was trying to send out this message and it was a message that would betray their location. They had a traitor amongst them.

Walking to the nearby fire, Misuri threw the dead pigeon and the message into the fire before returning to the cottage. He had to find out who the traitor was but before he could do so, he did not want to alarm the person. This revelation was too shocking to Misuri and for once he felt that he could not trust anyone. For once, there was no one he could now talk to for everyone was eligible

for suspicion. If they indeed had a traitor amongst them, the entire group was now in danger for their every move would be known by their enemies. He had to find out who the traitor was and he had to do it quickly.

Misuri spent the next hour touring the cottage and peeping in on what the others were doing. The guards were exercising their limbs and practising their skills while Yania was preparing food for the next meal. Brania was scurrying alongside Yania helping out while stealing a glance from time to time at the beautiful lady. None of them looked the last bit suspicious but Misuri knew well that no traitor would write the word 'Traitor' on their forehead. He needed a plan.

As Yania and Brania put the food on the table and called for the guards to come eat, Misuri was nowhere to be seen. Just as Brania was about to leave in search of Misuri, the latecomer appeared by himself with a small black bag in his hand. Everyone was curious as to what was in the black bag and Misuri slowly walked over to the table and placed the bag on the table. From the way the bag rested on the table, it seemed relatively empty.

'We have a traitor amongst us', said Misuri curtly as he took a glance at everyone's face.

The entire room burst into murmur as the harrowing news hit them. Many had looks of disbelief on their face but they knew that Misuri never had the habit of saying something that he did not fully confirm. However, the news of one of them betraying the group of still something they really did not want to believe.

'You know we all trust you Misuri and if you say there is a traitor amongst us, there is a traitor amongst us. How do you suggest that we find out who this traitor is then?' asked Sinza as his voice drowned out the murmurs.

Signalling for the guards to quieten down, Misuri picked up the black bag and walked to the centre.

'I do not wish to suspect anyone but it is important that we find out who this traitor is. In the deep recesses of this forest there is an ancient treasure, this black bag. This black bag was crafted a few hundred years ago from the hide of a magical elk and imbued with magical power by a powerful wizard. It has been passed through generations in my family and has the ability to give us the answer that we need' said Misuri to the excited crowd.

'All we need to do is take turns to put our hands into the bag and touch the bottom of the bag. We will then open our hands all at once and the one who has a black mark on his hand is the traitor', continued Misuri as he waved the black bag in front of everyone.

The crowd broke into another round of murmurs as they discussed the possibility of this mysterious powerful black bag revealing who the traitor was. However, they soon decided that there was no harm in giving it a try and they soon passed the bag around with everyone taking turns to touch the bottom of the inside of the bag. As Brania and Yania also finished putting their hands into the bag, Misuri gathered everyone in a circle and counted down for them to open their hands.

'Three, Two, One. Open!' chanted Misuri and everyone opened their clenched fists at the same time.

The strangest thing happened. All but one of the hands had a black mark on them and the crowd looked at each other not knowing what this meant. They took it that Misuri meant there was only one traitor amongst them but given that almost all of them had the black mark on their hand, how could it be possible that all of them were traitors?

'And we have our answer, the traitor, is Sinza!' exclaimed Misuri as he pointed at Sinza the Monk, the only one with a clean hand.

'What are you saying. My hand is the only one that is clean without a mark. If there is anyone who would not be the traitor it has to be me!' protested Sinza with an uneasy look from the accusation made.

'It is precisely because your hand does not have the black mark that you are the traitor. This is no ancient powerful magical black bag and all that talk about a powerful wizard imbuing it with magic was also something I came up with. This is just a simple black bag I found. I put smeared some ink inside the bag and so everyone who touched the bottom of the bag would have gotten their hands stained by the ink. Of course, the traitor would not have dared to really touch the bottom of the bag and his hand would be clean from any marks itself', explained Misuri to the confused crowd.

As all the attention now turned to Sinza the Monk, Sinza was unusually calm and collected. He gave the room a glance and let out a wry smile. Sinza's face twitched for a moment and giving out a laugh, he turned towards Misuri and looked intently at him.

'I must say that you are very clever Misuri. It is no wonder why we have been listening to you all this while. How did you know that there was traitor amongst our midst? I must say I have hidden my tracks very well thus far', asked Sinza.

'When I was walking around outside the cottage, I noticed a white pigeon flying around. To all of you, a pigeon in the forest might mean nothing but having grown up in this forest, I know the wildlife here at the tip of my fingers. A white pigeon would not even survive a day in this forest given how it would stand out against the canopy of the trees. Only the brown wild pigeons here would have a chance at escaping predators by hiding themselves among the trees. As soon as I realised this, I suspected that the pigeon was a courier used to send out a message of sorts. I got my raven to take down the pigeon and just as I suspected, the leg of the pigeon carried a message meant to disclose our whereabouts' said Misuri to the crowd.

'I thought through our entire journey through this mission and I had my suspicions cast on you. Remember when we were at the Valley of Kalebb and you used your telepathic abilities to help transfer the image of what my fox saw to the minds of everyone else?' asked Misuri as he turned to Sinza.

'Yes I do. I expended so much of my mental reserves doing that so much so that I had to rest after that to recover. How was that any suspicious?', replied Sinza with that unusually calm face for someone who had just been exposed as a traitor.

'There was nothing suspicious about that but when you were doing the telepathic channeling, the air hummed slightly from the disturbance your mental waves were creating. When we were disguised as merchants and touring the winery, I felt that same humming only that this time, it was so soft that it was barely audible. The entire chain of events later that involved us fighting and escaping did not give me the luxury of time to think about that soft hum but upon finding out that there was traitor amongst our midst, this small occurrence came back to me and made me suspect that you were the traitor. If I am not wrong, you had used your powerful telepathic abilities to let the enemies know our real identity and that was what gave us away. You were responsible for the deaths of our brethren who fought hard to ensure that we could leave that Valley alive' said Misuri as he got increasingly agitated talking about the deaths of his counterparts.

Just as the last words escaped Misuri's mouth, Sinza's right palm sliced over towards the direction

of Yania as he attempted to do a palmstrike and capture Yania. His best bet at making an escape while among all the highly trained guards was to take Yania hostage and force them to let him go. However, just as his palm was about to reach Yania, Misuri pulled Yania backwards and in her place was the tip of Misuri's dhuriv. Sinza could not stop his move in time and his right palm was impaled on the tip of Misuri's dhuriv. Misuri had expected Sinza's move before he had even raised the issue and his eyes were focused on Sinza's every move even as he answered Sinza's question.

As Sinza howled in pain and crimson blood trickled down his palm, the other guards understood what had happened. Ivana quickly took out a tarot card with a hangedman inscription and flung it at Sinza. A huge mass of ropes erupted from the charged card and bound Sinza tightly. As Rikza swept Sinza to the ground, Sinza's impaled palm got pulled out from the dhuriv and blood splattered into the air and onto the ground. The other guards quickly put their foot on Sinza's body, using their weight to prevent that dastardly traitor from moving another inch.

'Why did you do this? Who are those people?' barked Misuri as he let go of the startled Yania.

'Ha Ha Ha. I had no choice. My family was in their hands and they had consumed the wine with the spell-laden bugs in it. I had no choice at all but to do their bidding if I ever wanted my family to stay alive. I know that I have let all of you down but I cannot tell you who they are or my family would be burnt from inside out just as the other cases. Ha Ha Ha' laughed Sinza with a tear in his eye as he laid bound on the floor.

His face seemed to contort and just as the guards were thinking that it was either due to the pain or his agitation, Misuri quickly stepped forward, stuck his fingers into Sinza's mouth and pried it open.

'It is too late Misuri, it is too late. I am sorry my brothers but it is farewell for now', said Sinza as blood trickled the side of his mouth and his head drooped lifelessly to the side.

Sinza had hidden a small sac of poison within his mouth and seeing that he had no chance of escaping, he had bit that sac of poison open and let its content flow into his mouth. So venomous was the poison that before Misuri could even pry open Sinza's mouth, the poison had taken Sinza's life.

Misuri let out a sigh and closed the eyes of Sinza's corpse. It was not an outcome he had desired but it was definitely one that he had expected. Sinza had been a good brother, a good fighter and their good friend. If not for the fact that his family was held hostage, he was sure that Sinza would never have betrayed them. He was a monk they would definitely remember despite the monk-ey business he tried to attempt. He was, still their brother.

Chapter Twenty Nine: It is Time to Say Their Goodbyes

A large piece of wood was embedded on the ground and in front of it, the ground was some dirt that had clearly been dug up. Brania, Yania and the other guards were all gathered in front and were observing a moment of silence. In front of them was the buried corpse of Sinza, their companion in this journey thus far. On the piece of wood were the words 'Here lies the warrior monk, Sinza' carved into it. Though Sinza had betrayed their trust and inadvertently resulted in the death of the other guards, all of them agreed that Sinza had paid the ultimate price with his death and all animosity had to end there and then. They did not want to leave behind a bad name for someone who had once fought by their side and thus they decided to only write nice things to commemorate him.

As everyone took a moment of silence, as if by a ironic streak of fate two wild pigeons flew down

and perched themselves on the makeshift tombstone for Sinza. The guards slowly returned to the cottage as the pigeons cooed away to the sky. No one could decipher if it was in memory of Sinza or a mockery in itself.

Upon their return to the cottage, the guards decided that it was time for them to leave the forest. Though Misuri had intercepted the courier pigeon Sinza had attempted to use to disclose their whereabouts, they were not sure if Sinza had managed to send out any other messages prior to this intercepted message. If he had did so, staying in the cottage within the forest would be extremely dangerous especially for Misuri's father who was so aged and frail. They were not going to pin their hopes on the maze of trees to protect them and for the safety of Misuri's father, it was best that they take the battle elsewhere.

'Yania, you will stay here with my father and take care of THEM', said Misuri not wanting to reveal that they had another guest boiling in the cauldron in the shed behind the cottage. Yania was not trained in the art of combat and if they brought her along, it would be dangerous for both Yania and the guards. On top of that, with Vanira in the shed, Yania's thoughts would still be on Vanira's safety even if she followed them. Yania knew that her presence along with the group would be a burden to them and she nodded at Misuri as she acknowledged his decision.

'Brania, it is probably best if you stay too', continued Misuri as this time he turned his attention to the young scribe.

'No way I am going to leave you all again!' exclaimed Brania as he jumped to his feet. 'I know I am not good at fighting but I know a lot about the world and my knowledge will be of use to the mission. I promise that I will do everything I can to help all of you and not be a burden to your mission' continued Brania, reluctant to be left behind.

The sense of camaraderie he had developed with the guards was not going to allow him to let the guards fight while he enjoyed the comfort of the cottage. On top of that, seeing how Yania and Vanira were so deeply in love and inseparable made him realise that Yania did belong to Vanira after all. There was really no point for him to stay behind and look at the two love birds in each others' company every day. A life following his newfound brothers was one more worthy.

Misuri sighed briefly below nodding at Brania, accepting his plea to follow them. He had sensed Brania's enamoration for Yania and understood fully how painful it would be for Brania to stay behind. As he asked that Brania and the other guards pack their belongings, Misuri quietly left the cottage and walked towards the shed behind.

As Misuri pushed open the door of the shed, he saw Vanira resting in the cauldron while Misuri's father was fast asleep on the chair. Misuri gently closed the door behind him and covered his father with a cloak. His father was probably drained from having to work on healing Vanira and given his old age, the fatigue was probably not something that could be recuperated from in a short period of time. Misuri's fingers quivered as he gently placed the cloak on his father's body, afraid that the slightest movement would arouse his father from sleep.

Misuri's father was aged and frail and wrinkles were all over his face as he let out a peaceful smile while deep in slumber. For a moment, Misuri did not know how he was going to tell his father that he had to leave again. His father had yearned day and night for his return and he had to leave so quickly upon his return. He knew that he had to leave in consideration of the safety of his father but he knew that breaking this news to his father would break his heart again.

As Misuri gave out a soft sigh, he walked back to the door and left the shed, closing the door behind

him. Misuri returned to the cottage with a tear in his eye and began to help out in the preparations to leave. Time was running short for them.

As Brania and the guards finished packing and were about to leave, Misuri's father hurriedly made his way over to the front of the cottage. Yania had already explained to him the rationale behind the guards imminent departure and though he could not bear for his son to leave, he knew that letting him go was the right thing to do. Misuri's father walked up to his son and hugged him in that same embrace they had when Misuri returned to the cottage. Everyone watched on as this touching scene was played out before them.

'You didn't say Goodbye Son. You didn't say Goodbye' murmured Misuri's father as his wrinkled old hands quivered slightly from trying to hug his son harder.

Tears trickled down Misuri's cheek as they fell onto the shoulders of his father's ragged old clothes. He knew how hard it was for his father to see him off, given that Misuri himself had no idea if he would be able to make it home alive. It was never easy for a father to send his child off on a trip that could not guarantee his safety.

'Promise me that you will come back safely my son. I will wait for you here till you return', continued Misuri's father as he reached out to hold Misuri's hand.

Misuri nodded in acknowledgement of his father's request even though he knew that it was a promise he could not make. However, all his father needed now was that bit of reassurance and he knew that the least he could do now was to give him that bit of reassurance.

'Take this along with you. It is what I have found out since you returned. Hopefully it will be of use to your mission' said Misuri's father as he handed Misuri a small scroll hidden in his clothes. Despite his fatigue and old age, Misuri's father had used every bit of energy he had to write down everything he found out in hope that he could contribute towards helping his son to stay alive. To him, it was the only thing he could do and his son was his everything.

As Misuri pulled away from the embrace, he nodded his head at his father and stashed the scroll into his robes. He gently wiped away the tears on his father's cheek and gave his father a kiss on the forehead. This display of affection was not something Misuri was used to but at that moment, it just came so naturally to this cold, calculated Sentinel.

Misuri turned around and motioned for Brania and the other guards to leave. He knew that any moment longer that he stayed would strain his resolve to leave his father. The Goodbye was painful but it was something he had to say. As they left the cottage, Misuri turned around and closed the door behind him. As the last sight of his father vanished with the closing of the door, Misuri muttered under his breath with a tear, 'Goodbye.'

Chapter Thirty: The Most Dangerous Place is the Safest Place

As Misuri wiped off that last tear in his eye, he turned to his companions and began to lead them through that winding maze of trees once more. Taking a step to the left and a turn to a right every few steps, navigating through the maze now seemed as though it were a walk in the park. Misuri had learned to appreciate the very maze his father had constructed to protect the cottage. It was something he had now implanted deeply into his heart.

'Where should we go?' asked Brania, excited that they were once again on the mission.

This was indeed something the guards had yet to consider. They had been too preoccupied dealing with Sinza's burial and the packing of their belongings that they had forgotten to think where they were to go after leaving the forest. Though the injured guards had now fully recovered, the few days that they were in bandages had impaired their movement slightly and it was probably unwise to charge head on into battle now.

'The most dangerous place is the safest place. I suggest that we return to our quarters. If the enemies do not know that we are there, we can take a moment longer to rest and plan our next step. If they end up finding out we are there, then it is a battle we have to face sooner or later' said Rikza after a moment of contemplation.

This was a viable suggestion but everyone had expected that this suggestion would probably be made by either Misuri or Ivana and not the normally brash and impatient Rikza who only knew how to charge head on into battle. What they did not know was that Rikza had grown as the days passed. The many battles he survived and well planned decisions he had witnessed his companions make had helped to mature him and make him think hard before saying anything. He had already thought of this problem before they left the forest and given that the guards did not know where to go, he decided to voice his thoughts.

The guards decided to heed Rikza's suggestion and Brania had no objections too. Hastening their pace, they began to take to the highway and back towards the quarters they used to live in. Ironically they had not used their quarters for some time having taken refuge elsewhere most of the time. The group of nine chatted amongst themselves as they made their way back to the quarters, enjoying every moment of each others' company. Sinza's recent death had bonded the group closer together and made them cherish the time they had together. None of them knew if they would still be alive after the next battle.

As they neared the quarters, they noticed that everything seemed to be exactly just as they had left. Rikza and Ivana quickly leapt into the quarters and did a quicky check of the grounds before motioning to the other guards and Brania that the place was safe for them to enter. The constant ambushes they had to face had make the guards extra cautious with every step they took. As the guards put down their belongings, they stretched their limbs languidly as a feeling of comfort swept past them. The walk back to the quarters had given the once injured guards a chance to exercise their limbs and help in the blood flow to where they were previously injured. They did not feel tired after the long walk but contrary to that, felt reinvigorated.

The guards could not be bothered to clean up the place for none of them knew how long they were going to stay around in the quarters. They only had three days before the deadline and even if the enemies did not look for them, they would be looking for the enemies soon. As they sat in the meeting hall, a wave of sadness swept across the guards. The last time they were discussing matters in the meeting hall, all the chairs were filled with people and the room was bustling with noise. Now, even with the addition of Brania, not even half the chairs were filled. Twenty elite guards they had started out with and now they were down to eight guards and a scribe. All of them knew that this mission they had was not a walk in the park but when it dawned on them how many of their fellow guards had perished, they could not help but heave a sigh.

As the guards exchanged a glance, they almost seemed to be saying to each other that they would fight on, for the sake of their perished brothers, their cities and the land. From now on, every one of them was precious and they would do whatever it took to ensure that the mission was a success and that everyone in the meeting hall was alive to see its success. They were not going to let any more chairs become empty.

As Misuri walked to the table in the centre of the meeting hall, he took out a scroll from his robes. It was the same scroll that his father had given to him prior to their departure and he had not had the opportunity to read it. Brania and the other guards crowded over as Misuri unrolled the scroll. Lines of words were scribbled all over in bright black ink, evidence that the words were penned not long ago.

As they read the contents of the scroll, the guards let out small gasps and looked at each other at disbelief. What Misuri's father had written down was a detailed analysis of the bugs that acted as a medium for carrying the spells cast. It wrote how the insects could not enter the body through the skin but had to be consumed for the spells to be able to take its effect. The period of dormancy for the bugs could be shortened if they were consumed with alcohol which explained why half of those who began to burst into flames had just consumed alcohol prior to their deaths. The other half had probably consumed the bugs in another manner and it was a long time later that the bugs became active and the spells could work its magic.

What was more important about the scroll was not just the detailed analysis of how the bugs worked. Misuri's father even penned down a way in which he thought the illness, if it could be called an illness, could be cured.

Chapter Thirty One: Same Way In, Same Way Out

Misuri's hands quivered as he held on to the scroll on the table. He could not believe that in it laid the possible solution to the bugs that had been plaguing the entire land. Brania and the other guards could not believe what they saw too. In the scroll, Misuri's father had written that the only way for the bugs to be removed from the body was through the same way they entered the body, through the gut. It was penned down that the person would have to drink large amounts of water and had to jump up and down continuously till the body purged the water out by retching. The large amount of water and forceful vomiting would help to purge the bugs out of their bodies.

The method seemed almost too simplistic and even though they respected Misuri's father as a skilled healer, they found it difficult to believe the remedy entirely. However, time was not on their side and if this method worked, they had to spread it to the people quickly before more people were harmed.

'We need to let the people try this and we have no time to waste' said Misuri as he slowly rolled up the scroll on the table.

'We have no idea if this method really works and I think we should test it out first before letting the people use it' replied Brania as for once, he was cautious about the remedy.

'We do not have the time to do that. We only have three days left and we need to bring the culprits to justice. By the time we find someone suitable and tried out the remedy, we would have no time left to track down our enemies' replied Rikza as he took a different stand as compared to Brania.

This time, the usually quiet Malivan spoke up.

'I can report back to the city leaders and try out this method in the cities. While I am at it, the rest of you can hunt down the enemies and do what you all need to do. This way we will be able to achieve both aims at the same time' said Malivan the Ascendril.

The other guards nodded their head in agreement as what Malivan said had made sense. Given his training, he would be able to make his way back to the city leaders quickly and experiment with the

remedy while they faced the enemy in battle. It was thus decided that Malivan would do just as he suggested while the rest planned on how to take down the enemies.

After packing some food and supplies, Malivan quickly began his journey back to the city leaders with his staff firmly clutched in his hand. The city leaders were currently all at Enorian and if with Malivan's quick pace, he would be able to reach Enorian within a few hours. As Malivan began running towards the city of Enorian with all the strength he could muster, the last rays of sunlight slowly vanished beyond the horizon. It was yet another day that had passed and he desperately needed to quicken the pace of things.

Malivan soon arrived at Enorian, half an hour earlier than he had expected. Without grabbing a sip of water, he quickly rushed to where the four city leaders were housed to seek an audience. The city leaders were relieved that there was finally news from the guards and quickly summoned Malivan to explain the progress of how things were going. Ignoring their orders to explain the entire process, Malivan quickly said that he needed someone who had drunk wine from the Valley of Kalebb and he needed that person now. The four city leaders were slightly startled by Malivan's defiance but they knew that this was a time of emergency and they had to trust the guards they had entrusted with the mission.

The wine of Kalebb was renowned throughout the land and within moments, they managed to find someone who admitted that he had drunk the wine recently. Malivan quickly brought the man to the side and made him gulp down glass after glass of water. Despite the man's protest, Malivan continued pouring glasses of water down his throat till his stomach was visibly bloated. The man was then instructed to jump. The man was too bloated from all the water he had consumed and it was almost impossible for the man to jump. Impatient and not wanting to wait, Malivan grabbed the man by the waist and began throwing him into the air repeatedly. As soon as the man fell back into Malivan's arms, he wasted no time in propelling him into the air again and the protests from the man was audible throughout the room.

The man's face contorted with discomfort as he yelled that he was going to puke. Malivan quickly stopped the throwing and just as the man stood on his feet, he began to retch uncontrollably. Weird as it seemed, one would expect that the man would just be vomiting water given the large amounts of water he had just drunk. However, what the man retched was a pungent brownish nearly black liquid and he could not stop once he began. When the man finally stopped, Malivan used the tip of his staff to prod what was vomitted and he saw small bugs crawling out. They had succeeded!

Malivan quickly put the man aside to rest and reported back to the city leaders. He briefly explained about how the bugs were a medium containing a dormant spell that was waiting to be activated by the people who had cast them. Though they had yet to track down the enemies, they had now found a way to purge the bugs from the bodies of the people who had consumed wine from the Valley of Kalebb.

Having witnessed the entire experiment before them, the four city leaders had no choice but to believe what Malivan had just said. Orders were quickly drafted and passed down for all those who had consume wine from the Valley of Kalebb to stop doing so and for those who had did so to follow the instructions Malivan brought. Even if they had yet to solve the mystery and bring justice to the culprits, they had at least managed to find a solution to the problem.

The four city leaders were visibly relieved but before they could inquire further about the progress of the investigation, Malivan quickly picked up his items and left the city of Enorian. He had accomplished what he had volunteered himself for and it was now time for him to return to the side of his companions to fight to the very end. There was no way he was going to let his fellow guards

fight in battle while he hid in the safety of the Enorian. Malivan knew that by the time he returned to the quarters, the guards would probably have left but they had devised and agreed upon a way of communication and the guards had agreed to leave behind clues as to where they had gone to so that Malivan could follow the clues and catch up with the group. The guards knew that Malivan would never abandon them to survive alone and at this important period of time, every person they had was important in the battles ahead.

As Malivan ran out of the city in the night, he spotted a smile across his face. He was the one that had contributed to the identification of the problem by freezing the half burning man to allow Ivana to dissect it. Now, it was him again who delivered the solution to the problem back to the masses.

Chapter Thirty Two: Who is in the Light and Who is in the Darkness

Surprisingly the other guards did not leave the quarters after Malivan left. They had, however, decided on their next course of action and were frantically acting on it. They had no time to waste and the moment they decided on their next course of action, they had to act immediately. Brania had suggested that this time instead of allowing their enemies to ambush them, they should turn the tables on their enemies. Since the enemies would probably have been trying their best to track them down, they would let out news that they were at the quarters. This way, the guards could at least choose to fight in a place that was more familiar to them and let things work to their advantage. On top of this, they could then hide and await the enemies' arrival. Instead of them being in the light and the enemies in the dark, this time the roles were going to be reversed and it would be their turn to ambush their enemies.

The other guards had no objections to this suggestion and began their preparations for it. Rikza quickly let out news that the guards had returned to their quarters and were heavily wounded. They were resting within the quarters with a few of them incapacitated by their injuries. Rikza had exaggerated matters on purpose to make the enemy think that they were an easy target in hopes that the enemies would lower their guard down. Misuri began to set up traps in the shadows that could be activated at his call when the enemies arrived. These traps however, would not be activated without Misuri's call so as not to injure anyone they did not intend to injure. Ivana had began inscribing more tarot cards just in case he needed to use them during battle. They now had to be extra careful for they could not afford to lose the next battle. As the other guards sharpened their weapons and made their individual preparations, they suddenly heard footsteps in the distance.

Rikza had only just let out news of their return and it was impossible for the enemies to arrive so quickly. Misuri quickly went out to find out what the source of the sound was and after a few moments, he returned with a smile on his face as he led Malivan in. Malivan had returned much faster than they had expected and he had brought good news with him. The guards rejoiced as Malivan recounted how the method Misuri's father had written down was a success. They had now saved the lives of hundreds and thousands of people across the land!

The guards quickly told Malivan of their plan and he also proceeded to make his own preparations for battle. Brania hopped from guard to guard giving his suggestion as to how they could set up traps to wait for the enemies. Though Brania was not a skillful combatant, his astute sense of observation and bountiful knowledge helped the guards set up traps that were both vicious and obscure. He was not the burden that he had worried that he would become. Instead, he was now an asset to the entire team.

As the moon slowly rose to the middle of the sky, the guards were finally done with their preparations. As they waited in the shadows, the guards were both nervous and excited. They knew that given the efficiency of their enemies, it was about time that the enemies would arrive. And

then, it happened.

A masked head peeped into the quarters from the shadows as he quickly analysed his surroundings. Taking an agile step him, he took a more careful look before motioning for the others inside to enter. Right before the very eyes of the guards, almost ten masked men entered the quarters and began to search the quarters for the whereabouts of the guards. They seemed clearly befuddled that the guards were nowhere to be found and just at this moment, the guards struck!

Misuri gave out the call and two sharp darts shot out from the dark corners from the ceiling. They whizzed through the air with such velocity that when they finally embedded themselves into the neck of two of the masked men, the blood of the masked men splattered so high it stained the ceiling. Almost simultaneously, Ivana leapt from his hiding place and flung two tarot cards glowing with energy at two other masked men and upon contact, large masses of ropes erupted from the cards that magically vanished and bound the men, toppling them to the ground. As the two masked men frantically tried to writhe out of their entanglement, Ivana quickly leapt over and slit their throats so quickly with his bone dagger that they could barely react before their heads drooped to the side lifeless.

Two bright beams of light sped out from the corners of the room and slammed into the chest of the two intruders nearby. Rikza had unleashed a large concentrated blast of sunlight from his quarterstaff, a weapon he rarely carried around with him due to its bulky nature. Malivan had similarly brought forth a blast of scintilla to roast the intruder standing in his way. As the two intruders slumped to the ground, a burning smell wafted through the air as the attacks from the two guards roasted their enemies from within.

The remaining four masked men were clearly shocked and quickly drew their weapons to defend themselves from the onslaught of the guards. However, this time they had neither the element of surprise nor the advantage in numbers. The quick killing of the six masked men earlier had given the guards an enormous advantage and they quickly encircled the remaining four with their weapons in hand.

As Misuri impaled another guard with his dhuriv and tore out his entrails, another guard quickly fell another of the masked men. The remaining two masked men were in a total mess. Just as Rikza was about to lay waste to yet another intruder, Ivana suddenly threw a glowing tarot card that disappeared just as it touched the two masked men. Ivana then toppled in front of Rikza, blocking his way as the two remaining intruders quickly took the chance to escape out of the quarters. Rikza helped Ivana to his feet and was just about to give chase when Ivana blocked his way with his hand.

'What in the world are you doing Ivana? You don't even know how to fight properly without tripping over your own feet now?' shouted Rikza, clearly angered at Ivana's mistake.

Ivana let out a smile and said curtly to Rikza, 'Let them go, their leader is not here and if we kill all of them, how are we going to find their leader?'

'Now that they are gone how are we going to find their leader?' quizzed Rikza, clearly not satisfied with Ivana's response.

'Remember how we managed to track down Brania after he was teleported out of the library?' replied Ivana as he nodded at Rikza with a smile.

It suddenly dawned on Rikza what Ivana was doing all this while. Ivana had let the last two intruders leave on purpose and the last two tarot cards Ivana had threw at the intruders, though

seemingly having done nothing, had in fact left traces of energy on their bodies. Using this energy, Ivana would then be able to track down where they were going and the two intruders would then lead them back to their leader.

'You could have at least let me kill one more before you let the last one go', muttered Rikza under his breath as he did not want to admit that he was brash once again.

Patting Rikza's shoulder before letting out a chuckle, Misuri said, 'If only one of them returned, their leader would probably think that he was a traitor and killed him. We need two of them to return so that they can corroborate each other's statements.'

Ivana nodded at Misuri, surprised that Misuri knew his intentions even though he had not explained them. It was no wonder that they were regarded as the most clever and calculated of the entire legion.

'Next time, just let me know first alright' protested Rikza as he put down his quarterstaff with a pout.

The entire room burst into laughter at Rikza's childish tantrum but their success that night was indeed something worth laughing about. Not a single guard had suffered a cut and they had swiftly taken down eight intruders while making the last two play into their plan. For once, they could taste the sweet fruits of success.

Chapter Thirty Three: Icy Home

As the guards laughed off what had just happened, they quickly went to pick up the supplies they had prepared and left the quarters in pursuit. This time, Ivana was the one leading the pursuit for he was the only one who could sense the whereabouts of the two intruders. With every few steps taken, Ivana would stop to sense the traces of energy from the tarot card he had flung and alter the direction in which they were walking towards. If Ivana did not have this special ability to track down the two intruders by means of energy traces, they would have had no way to find out where the intruders went. The two masked men seemed to be extremely skilled in covering their tracks and the paths in which they escaped through had no traces of them having gone through the paths. Following Ivana's lead, the guards continued their journey northwards and soon they reached the edge of the tundra.

The freezing arctic winds blasted at them repeatedly as they trudged through the ice. The guards had not expected that the pursuit would end up in the freezing north and thus did not prepare thick clothing. Shivering as they continued their pursuit, they could only grit their teeth and persevere now. Ivana had sensed that the traces of tarot energy was getting increasingly larger. This meant that the two masked men had stopped moving and that they were nearing in on them. As they followed Ivana's lead, they soon found themselves in front of a large cavern. It was at the entrance of the cavern that the guards stopped in their tracks.

There was only one way in and that was through the entrance of the cavern. However, if they just walked in like this it was akin to walking into a trap and was probably just foolishly embracing death unnecessarily. As they hid outside the entrance of the cavern, they could hear murmurs within the caverns along with weird sounds from time to time. The shape of the cavern acted like a sound magnifier and just by listening from the entrance, the guards could hear what was going on within. Although the strong winds outside proved to be a large distraction, the guards remaining had all been trained and their five senses were all stronger than an average person. As they perked their ears to listen carefully, they were soon able to make out some of the things being said.

'We are sorry Master, the news that the guards were heavily wounded and resting in the quarters was false. The moment we got there we were ambushed and attacked. It is a miracle that we managed to escape' said someone. From what he said, he was clearly one of the two masked men that had walked into their ambush.

The entire cavern suddenly became quiet and only the sound of a repetitive tapping could be heard. Suddenly, a sharp scream resonated through the cavern that was enough to send chills down the backs of all who heard it if the freezing whether didn't already freeze them.

'Excuses. The only outcome for those who fail is death' said an older voice as the tapping did not stop.

'Throw the body out of the cavern. I don't wish for my eyes to be tainted having to look at him any longer' continued the same voice.

The guards took extra care to conceal themselves and soon two men dragged a corpse out and threw it callously in the freezing tundra. The corpse was no longer masked and a small stone was embedded in the forehead of the corpse having caused the skull to cave in. A look of horror was splashed all over the face of the dead and the guards could not help but wonder how the one they called Master managed to pull off this feat in one move.

'Are the preparations ready? Can we use the creature already?' boomed the voice of the one they called Master.

'Yes Master, everything is ready and awaiting your instructions' replied another voice.

The guards were puzzled over what they had heard. What preparations were they talking about and what creature were they referring to? As they exchanged confused looks, Misuri motioned for them to gather over for a discussion.

'We cannot just keep staying outside the cavern to eavesdrop. The enemies are enjoying the warmth and comfort of the cavern while we are freezing our heads off in the cold wind. If we continue waiting like this, we will all freeze to our deaths here. We need to think of a plan' whispered Misuri to the rest, careful not to let the people in the caverns overhear them. It was probably worrying too much on Misuri's part for the howling arctic winds made it difficult even for the guards around him to hear what he said.

As the guards murmured amongst themselves discussing their next course of action, Brania was unusually quiet. The guards were wondering if he was thinking about something or had the cold weather freeze his brains and mouth. After a while, Brania finally spoke.

'I have a plan. What do we have the most around us now?' asked Brania.

'Wind?' replied Rikza as he was unsure what Brania was driving at.

'Ice! We have a lot of ice around us. What we shall do is pile all the ice and snow around us in front of the cavern, as much as we can possibly can' continued Brania.

'So now we are afraid that they are going to catch a cold and are going to help them block off some arctic winds too?' said Rikza with a tinge of sarcasm in his tone.

'Of course I wouldn't suggest something that silly! Once we have piled the ice and snow at the entrance of the cavern, Malivan will use his elemental magic to melt the huge mass of ice. If we pile the ice correctly, the melted water should then flow into the cavern. Since there is only one entrance and exit to the cavern and the cavern is on slightly lower ground, all the water would rush into the cavern and flood it. We can then set up our traps outside the cavern and the people within would be forced to come out. In their haste, they would easily walk into our traps!' said Brania to a crowd of guards staring in disbelief at what they just heard.

All of the guards knew that Brania was an intelligent scribe with a vast amount of knowledge but none of them had expected him to come up with such an amazing plan. There was almost no loopholes in the plan and did play effectively on their strengths in this situation. The guards quickly agreed on Brania's plan and began to make the preparations.

Misuri, Ivana, Rikza and Malivan began laying down their traps, using the ice to conceal the traps for maximum obscurity. This time, Misuri decided to use his most lethal trap that could shoot out up to twenty five darts at once. They could not be sure how many enemies were hidden within the cavern and they decided to err on the side of caution. The other guards busied themselves with the collation of ice and snow. With their combined efforts, they managed to pile up an enormous stack of ice at the entrance of the cavern, ready for Malivan to work his magic.

Malivan whipped out his staff and pointed it at the huge mass of ice while muttering an incantation under his breath. A bright flash of scintillating light burst forth from the tip of his staff and enveloped the mass of ice. Malivan was clearly using all the power he had for beads of perspiration were forming at the side of his head. The mass of ice quickly melted from the heat of Malivan's elemental magic and the water formed began to flow into the cavern. Malivan set out a growl and focused all his energy on the staff. The light of scintilla became even brighter and the mass of ice began to disappear at an unbelievable rate. The water was no longer trickling into the cavern but rushing in like a dam that was broken.

Shouts and curses could be heard from within the cavern and within moments, hurried footsteps could be heard. Malivan quickly hid himself and the other guards prepared themselves for battle. It was time for their showdown.

As the first wave of enemies made their escape from the cavern, they triggered the dart trap Misuri had laid in place. Before they even knew what happened, twenty five darts sped through the air and pierced through the bodies of these people. It happened so fast that it almost seemed as though the enemies walked right into the way of the darts. Not one of them were able to escape the wrath of the darts and blood was splattered all across the white tundra floor. When the second wave of enemies began making their way out of the cavern, it was Ivana, Rikza and Malivan's turn to work their magic.

Ivana had crafted ten bone daggers and hidden them in the snow with sturdy strings attached to them. Ivana could then manipulate all ten daggers at once. As the enemies pointed at the corpses strewn in front of them, Ivana tugged at the strings and immediately, ten bone daggers were soaring through the air as though they were controlled by an invisible hand. With the flick of his wrist, Ivana was able to change the way the daggers were moving and could use them slice the throats, arms and legs of the enemies in front of him. Blood splattered everywhere as screams of agony resonated through the tundra from the slow painful death some of them were going through.

Rikza was also not to be left behind. At his signal, numerous spiritual familiars soared through the sky and began their barrage of attack on the escaping men. The spiritual familiars rended the eyes and limbs of the men as they screamed in agony. While the men were bogged down by the familiars

and unable to see after having their eyes rended by the familiars, Rikza discharged bolt after bolt of concentrated sunlight from his quarterstaff and they blasted into the chests of the flailing enemies. The enemies slumped to the ground as the power bouts of sunlight discharges slammed into them and breaking their ribs into pieces.

The remaining men noticed that their companions who had escaped to the front and right had been ambushed. Noticing a loophole on the left, they quickly began to ran towards that direction. It was now each man for his own and they had no time to bother about their ambushed companions. What they thought was a clever decision was probably the worst and last one they made in their life. As they ran towards the left, a huge inferno of fire suddenly erupted from below their feet and enveloped them. The huge blast even propelled some of them into the skies as their charred bodies dropped back to the ground with a thud. Malivan had cleverly timed and planted holocaust bombs covered by the snow along the path that the men would escape. As the ran past the holocaust bombs, they exploded and ironically delivered the men a fiery death in this freezing tundra.

All the men who had attempted to escape the cavern first lay dead at their feet. There must have been at least thirty of them and the guards didn't even have to jump into close quarter combat yet. However, the one the men called Master soon made his way out of the cavern along with ten other men. As he saw the corpses of his men strewn all over the white tundra ground, he let loose a loud growl of anger and charged towards the guards. It was time for the guards to pay for the lives they had taken!

Chapter Thirty Four: Icewyrms to Turn the Tables

As the Master charged into the fray with a large gnarled staff as his weapon, the other guards also charged forward to engage in battle. The other men surrounding the Master were slightly weaker but the Master packed quite a punch and the enemies still had the advantage in terms of numbers. Misuri, Ivana and Rikza charged forward to take on the Master while Malivan and the other guards began to fight off the remaining men.

This battle was much harder than any of the ones they had ever been in. The guards no longer had the element of surprise and the Master seemed to be a very strong opponent. Despite taking on three of the strongest guards alone, he did not seem any bit on the losing end. In fact, Misuri, Ivana and Rikza were defending more than they could attack even though they had the advantage in terms of numbers. The situation for Malivan and the other guards were strangely the opposite. Though they were fewer in numbers, the remaining men had low morale seeing the corpses of their companions strewn over. With fear in their hearts, even though they managed to hold their footing against the guards with their larger numbers, they were clearly on the losing end.

As the battle raged on in the freezing arctic winds, it became increasingly unclear which side was going to win. Suddenly, Ivana took a step back and flung a glowing tarot card at one of the men fighting against Malivan. As the tarot card vanished upon contact, a large mass of ropes erupted from the card and bound the man tightly. Malivan took the opportunity to fire a blast of dissolution into the man's face and his eyeballs and skull melted under the power of the acidic blast. This sudden change only served to break the already brittle morale the men had. Another of the men was soon slain by one of the guards and the guards got fiercer with every strike.

The one called Master had noticed that his men were quickly losing the battle and he smashed his gnarled staff into the ground. The impact of the force was so great that small pieces of the ground were dislodged and flew into the air. He then hit the pieces of dislodged ground and they ricochet at an unbelievable speed towards Ivana. Having thrown the tarot card to help the other side, Ivana's movement was slightly slowed and though he managed to divert the incoming blow, the pieces of

dislodged ground still grazed his leg and blood began to trickle down.

Malivan knew that the other guards could easily take care of the remaining men and quickly leapt over to fire a blast of stormhammer at the stronger opponent. The one called Master quickly flailed his staff to block off Malivan's powerful magical attack but the impact of the deflection did force him to retreat a few steps. This was enough time to give Ivana a breather and save his life. The battle ground now changed to four of the strongest guards fighting against the one called Master while the other four guards were battling it out with the remaining men. The battle with the one called Master became evenly matched with the addition of Malivan to the fray and the other battle with the remaining men saw the guards slowly laying waste to their enemies one by one. It seemed to be a matter of moments before the other four guards would kill all the remaining men and come over to help out in the fiercer battle.

The one called Master knew that if the other four guards joined forces with Misuri, Ivana, Rikza and Malivan, it would be a matter of time before he lost. Deciding to take a gamble, he flailed his staff to deflect the blows from his four opponents and took a large step backwards. Putting his fingers to his lips, he let out a shrill whistle and the ground soon began to rumble. Within moments, a large stomping could be heard in the distance and the guards turned to see a huge shadow lumbering in towards them from the distance.

'What in the world is that!' shouted Rikza as the harsh arctic winds blasted against his face.

The other guards gave a shrug of their shoulders but as the shadow came increasingly closer, it materialised into what would be their greatest nightmare. An enormous icewyrm was coming at them!

The other four guards quickly took care of the few remaining men and joined their brethren to face off with the monstrosity that was coming towards them. None of them knew how they were going to go against something of this size but being around each other made them feel braver in numbers.

'Ha Ha Ha. You think you can win against me just because you managed to take down my weak men. This is my ultimate weapon, this is your ultimate nightmare!' laughed the one called Master as the huge icewyrm stopped by his side.

'Why are you doing all these? What do you gain from spreading destruction across the land?' asked Misuri as he shouted the question towards the one called Master in the howling arctic winds.

'I'll let you all die knowing what killed you. I come from a distant land called Miraan, far away from the main continent. My people have lived there for generations, devoid of communication with the rest of the world yet happy we were. However, five years ago, while we were out fishing in the seas, a group of wretched pirates from the mainland boarded our island and killed the women and children there. They looted everything we had and set fire to burn off all the crops we had grown. When we returned from our fishing trip, we were greeted by the corpses of our wives and our children. We swore that we would take revenge. The lives of our wives and children would not be lost in vain!' shouted the one called Master as he appeared clearly agitated at the mention of the lives lost.

'We left our island for the mainland and brought along the bugs we cultivated on the island with us. These bugs could contain spells only known to our islanders and could be activated once the bugs found their way into the bodies of the host. We found out that the winery from the Valley of Kalebb was renowned for his good taste and it was the best medium for us to send out our bugs to the rest of the land. We approached the owner of the winery and offered to buy the recipe of the wine but

we were met with rejection. We were not going to let anyone say no to our great plans. We put some bugs into the wine of the owner while he was distracted and after he drank the wine along with the bugs, we activated the spell within the bug to transmogrify him. We took over the winery eventually and within months, numerous people across the land had already consumed the bugs we put into the wine. Our plan was a success! Ha Ha Ha' laughed the one called Master as the memory of what they had did came back to him.

'Then, it was time to test our little bugs. We began to activate the spells contained within the bugs on people across the land and they began to burn from inside out. A simple trick from us sent the world scurrying into a frenzy. It even enraged the Divines who put a fifteen day ultimatum on the city leaders. The people from mainland had to pay for the crimes they committed, they were going to grovel at our feet and beg for mercy as they saw their husbands, wives and children burn into ashes right before their eyes. They would have to go through ten times and a hundred times the pain we had to go through!' screamed the one called Master as he could not contain the anger within him.

The guards exchanged glances as they listened in disbelief. They could not believe what they were hearing from this old man in front of them. His acts were vicious, his plans calculated yet he almost seemed to be a mad man. Misuri slowly stepped forward and looked intently at the old man with rage in his eyes.

'Your plan was perfect and your bugs a lethal weapon. However, we have managed to find a way to counteract your little tricks and the method of purging those bugs have been spread across the land by now. You might not have heard the news while you are hiding in your pitiful cavern here but your ploy has been foiled and your little bugs are now no longer any threat to the people of this land' shouted Misuri as he was determined to shatter that little dream this deranged old man was living in.

'What! That cannot be true! There is no way the bugs can be purged from the body once consumed!' screamed the old man called Master in disbelief.

'You can continue to wallow in that pathetic dream of yours all you want but it is a fact that your ploy has been foiled and the method of purging those bugs discovered. It is all over now!' replied Misuri as he laughed at the enraged face of the old man before him.

'You will all pay for this. None of you are going to leave this tundra alive. I will feed you to my icewyrm and let your blood wash away my pain and agony!' screamed the old man as he waved his hand and pointed at the guards.

The gigantic icewyrm began to charge towards the guards at a breathtaking speed and let loose a freezing blast of air at them. Malivan shouted for the guards to get out of the way as he let loose a blast of magical energy at the corpse of one of the men in front of him. The corpse flew into the sky and into the path of that freezing blast of air and within moments the entire corpse was encased in ice and shattered into pieces as it fell to the ground.

Rikza frantically blasted bout after bout of concentrated sunlight at the icewyrm but they seemed to only irritate the giant creature as the attacks were deflected off its thick hide. Ivana flung a glowing tarot card at the huge creature and upon contact, a huge mass of ropes erupted to bind the creature. The icewyrm merely let out a growl and with a shake, its bindings broke and dropped to the ground.

'It is too strong, we cannot fight it! Retreat!' shouted Misuri as he dodged an incoming sweep from the tail of the huge creature.

Ivana quickly took out another tarot card and this time, he threw the glowing tarot card towards the ground behind them and a huge map unfurled before them. Turning to face the creature, he shouted towards his companions, 'Go! Quickly!'

As Brania and the guards raced towards the huge mystical map, the old man charged ahead with his gnarled staff in hand. 'None of you are going to go anywhere!' screamed the old man as he hit small pieces of stone towards the retreating guards. Malivan swiftly blasted down the flying rocks with dissolution blasts from his staff and fired a large stormhammer attack at the lumbering icewyrm.

'Go now! I will hold him up!' screamed Malivan as he fired blast after blast of magical energy at the old man and the icewyrm.

As Brania and the guards slowly disappeared into the map one by one, the enormous icewyrm swept his tail over towards Malivan and Rikza, the only two guards left on the battlefield. At that moment, Malivan had only enough time to cast a reflection at Rikza before the impact of the huge sweeping tail shattered the reflection he had cast on Rikza and smashed into Malivan's chest. Malivan could hear the clear sound of his ribs breaking but he mustered the last of his energy and fired a blast of magical energy at Rikza, pushing him right into the large map that was about to close.

'No! Malivan!' screamed Rikza as he flew into the mystical map and the map closed before his eyes.

Malivan spotted a smile as his body slowly dropped to the ground. He had made the ultimate sacrifice but to him, it was all worth it. There had been no way they could have escaped the wrath of the fearsome beast before them but with this price he paid, he had saved the lives of his brothers.

Goodbye my brothers and fight well!

Chapter Thirty Five: A Taste of Your Own Medicine

As Rikza tumbled through the map screaming out Malivan's name, he found himself laying on the frozen tundra ground. Brania and the other guards quickly helped him to his feet. Every one of their lives were precious to them but Malivan had sacrificed himself to save the rest of them. They knew that there was no way Malivan could still be alive and since the sacrifice was already made, they could not let it go to waste. The guards picked themselves up and quickly made their way to a nearby cavern to discuss how they were going to face off against such an enormous creature of such ferocity.

As the guards settled down within the cavern, the atmosphere was much heavier than normal. All of them were still reeling from the shock of Malivan's sacrifice and no one knew what to say. Seeing the deathly silence before him, Misuri decided to break the silence and speak first.

'We need to find a way to take down that creature and our normal attacks will not work at all' said Misuri to the quiet audience.

'Indeed. His hide is too thick and deflects most of our attacks while his movement is unbelievably quick for a creature of that size' said Ivana as he joined in the discussion.

The cavern returned to silence as the guards now pondered over what they could do. The lightning speed, thick hide and unbelievable strength of the icewyrm was indeed something they did not know how to handle. It was at this time that Rikza spoke.

'That mad man and abomination must pay for what they did. I say they get a taste of their own medicine' said Rikza.

The other guards crowded in to listen to what Rikza meant by giving them a taste of their own medicine and Rikza continued with rage evident all over his face.

'Remember how that mad man made people consume bugs and then use the bugs to activate spells within the hosts? I say we feed that huge icewyrm some special food we prepare too. We could hunt down some arctic wolves and coat the corpses with some venoms. I don't believe that icewyrm's innards are as tough as its hide', continued Rikza.

The other guards nodded their heads in agreement as they could foresee how Rikza's plan would turn out. After a bit more discussion on how to split the work, the guards began to execute their plan.

Rikza and Ivana soon returned to the cavern dragging with them corpses of arctic wolves they had hunted. A few arctic wolves were easy to skilled guards like them. Misuri had began concocting the venoms they were going to coat the corpses with and the other guards were helping him out with the process. As soon as the venom concocting was complete, they proceeded to coat the corpses of the arctic wolves with them before dragging the corpses in the direction of the battle they had engaged in.

They were not expecting the old man and the icewyrm to be waiting for their return and true enough the duo were nowhere to be seen. However, it wasn't very difficult to see which direction they had went. The old man might be able to cover his tracks but the trail left behind by the enormous icewyrm was easily visible from a distance. The guards easily followed the trail and soon found the icewyrm resting some distance ahead with the old man no where to be seen.

The guards stealthily laid the corpses of the arctic wolves some distance away from the resting creature and hid behind a icy boulder nearby. They had ensured that the scent of the blood of the wolves wafted through the air and to ensure that the icewyrm saw the wolves, Rikza let loose a tiny bout of concentrated sunlight to bounce off the icewyrm's nose.

As the icewyrm woke up from the disturbance, he looked around before noticing the corpses in front of him. Lumbering over, he swiftly took the corpses into his huge jaws and munched on the arctic wolves before swallowing them into his stomach. After he finished with the wolves, he slowly went back to sleep and the guards quickly retreated away, satisfied that their mission was a success.

It was not long before the old man returned to the icewyrm. He noticed some blood stains on the white tundra floor but thought that it was just the icewyrm having eaten up some passing animal for a snack. He laid his staff down as he took out some food and consumed it. He was very satisfied with how that battle had turned out. It had not been easy for him to find this fearsome icewyrm and then tame or manipulate it. The bugs he had been using on the people of the mainland had never been used on animals and especially on one so large. Nonetheless, after months and months of feeding the massive icewyrm with the spell-laden bugs, he was finally able to put the icewyrm under his control and use it at the most important moment to deal that death blow to the guards. The only pity was that those guards got away but that wouldn't be an issue for he could easily track them down and finish that unfinished job.

Just as the old man called Master was enjoying the thought of slaying the guards one by one, a loud shrieking sound cut through the air and with despite his old age, he swiftly picked up his gnarled staff and deflected the incoming object away. A small dart dropped to the floor, a victim of the old

man's lightning quick reflexes. The old man immediately jumped to his feet and turned around to see the group of guards behind him. A smirk extended across his face as he laughed at how silly the guards were to return. Now he did not even have to go track them down and it saved him a lot of trouble. The old man put his fingers to his lips and gave out a shrill whistle. Upon hearing the whistle, the icewyrm quickly awakened and got to his feet growling loudly with freezing air coming out of its mouth. At the old man's signal, he swept his enormous tail towards the guards in a quick blow.

The guards quickly jumped aside and spread out, ready to fight off the monster. They were all surprised that the icewyrm could still fight with such ferocity after consuming the poison-laden arctic wolves. However, they did not have a chance to change their plans now and the only thing they could do now was fight.

Rikza quickly summoned a large group of spiritual familiars to distract the icewyrm and as the massive icewyrm was swiping at the little creatures, Misuri rolled over to his feet and thrust his dhuriv into the toe of the creature. If Misuri had just jabbed the creature with his dhuriv, the creature's thick hide and skin would have easily protected it from harm. However, Misuri had thrust his sharp dhuriv in the crevice in between the icewyrm's toe and nail. Blood spurted out onto the ground and the massive icewyrm bellowed in pain. Misuri quickly pulled out his dhuriv and rolled aside before the icewyrm's large foot stomped down on him. Ivana and the other four guards were also busy engaging the old man in combat. The two groups were equally matched and for a moment they were locked in a stalemate.

As the icewyrm swiped the spiritual familiars to the ground, Misuri and Rikza were leaping around on their nimble feet escaping the blows of the icewyrm. It was as though they were playing hide and seek with the massive creature but they knew that any wrong move would mean the end of them. This new battle tactic the guards came up with was very effective. They knew that though the icewyrm was more powerful as compared to the old man, directing more people to fight off the creature was pointless. As long as they crowded together, it was more difficult for them to escape from the icewyrm's attacks and the manpower was better directed towards locking down the old man in combat. Of course, the two chosen to face off the icewyrm had to be the most nimble and brave and Misuri and Rikza volunteered to bait this enormous creature.

'Are you sure you put the venoms in or did you just add salt and pepper to the wolves!' shouted Rikza as he narrowly escaped the sweep of the massive icewyrm's tail.

The venoms were supposed to have taken effect but perhaps the icewyrm was stronger than they had expected and was managing to stave off the effects of the poisons.

Ivana knew that being locked down in such a stalemate was going to be to their disadvantage as time passed. He decided that he had to take a risk. Seeing a loophole in the old man's stance, Ivana leapt towards that loophole with his bone dagger firmly clutched in his right hand. The old man, noticing Ivana's attack, brought his gnarled staff towards Ivana knowing well that Ivana would then be forced to halt his attack and defend himself from the blow. The best defence at times was offence.

However, to everyone's surprise, Ivana ignored the incoming blow from the gnarled staff that was about to rain onto him. He threw his bone dagger with all the strength he could muster and the dagger cut through the air and sliced through the tendon of the old man's left leg. At the same time, the gnarled staff landed on Ivana's chest and broke one of his ribs. The old man had not expected that Ivana would fight in such a manner, totally ignoring his own safety. As blood trickled down the old man's left and he stumbled a little, another guard took the opportunity and smashed his mace

into the old man's leg, mangling it even more.

As the painful cry of the old man resonated through the freezing air of the tundra, the situation for Misuri and Rikza had taken a turn for the worse. The freezing air had made their movements increasingly more difficult and their leaps began to become less agile than before. Many a time the swipe of the icewyrm's claw or the sweep of its tail was merely inches away from the guards.

'If your venoms don't work we are all going to die here!' screamed Rikza as he attempted to escape from yet another blow from the creature's massive tail. This time, however, his movement was too slow and the tail swept right into him. Realising that he would not be able to escape in time, Rikza brought his quarterstaff to his chest in an attempt to block the attack. A loud snap was audible as Rikza was thrown a few feet away from the impact with his quarterstaff on the ground, broken in two. Both Rikza and Ivana had blood flowing down the side of their mouth, clear evidence they had suffered severe internal injuries.

Using his gnarled staff as support, the old man made his way beside the icewyrm and shouted as he pointed at the guards, 'Yes! Kill them all, stomp out their miserable lives and exact revenge for me!'

However, just as the old man was about to motion for the icewyrm to continue the next barrage of attack, the massive creature turned towards the old man with a burning rage in its eyes. Just when the old man was excitedly pointing at the guards, the enormous icewyrm picked up the old man with its massive jaws and its razor sharp teeth sliced into the body of the old man. A bloodcurdling scream resonated through the air as the creature chewed on the body of its master.

Rikza looked on in disbelief and shock as blood splattered all over the frozen ground where the old man was just standing. Misuri quickly helped Rikza to his feet and motioned for the other guards to retreat. Ivana used the last of his strength to fling out a Universe tarot card and the guards used the time that the creature had its mouth full to quickly teleport themselves to safety. It was, the most harrowing battle and most narrow escape they have had so far.

Chapter Thirty Six: Motherly Instinct

'What in the world did you do Misuri! Why did that creature suddenly turn on its Master and eat him up. My goodness, that was one crazy wyrm' asked Rikza as he coughed in between breaths.

'Nothing much. I just put in some venoms that would cause confusion in the icewyrm but it seems that the venom took longer than I expected to take effect. Next time I'll do better' replied Misuri as he laughed.

'Next time! Next time I'll be dead! Why didn't you put more venom in and ... and... CONFUSION? Who needs the icewyrm to be confused! Couldn't you try something like voyria and make him bleed from the nose and die!' screamed Rikza as he was clearly agitated from the battle.

'If I put too much venom into the wolves, the blood of the wolves would not be able to mask the smell of the venom and the icewyrm would not have taken the bait. Venoms for such massive creatures are not that easy to concoct. Their bodies are very hardy and venoms like voyria would require too large a volume of venom before it could take its effect' explained Misuri to the agitated Shaman.

The other guards nodded their heads at Misuri's explanation and rumbled with laughter as the thought of the icewyrm chomping on its Master returned to them. Brania was busy getting Rikza to calm down and drink some water, afraid that the impatient Shaman would worsen his injuries from

all the agitation.

'What I am surprised though is that the icewyrm ate its Master' continued Misuri as he paused for a moment of contemplation.

'You mean that eating part was not part of your plan?' asked Brania as he helped Rikza gulp down another mouth of water.

'My intention was for the icewyrm to become confused and disoriented so that we could manage to find a loophole to take it down. Unless...' explained Misuri as he slowly turned his glance to Ivana.

Ivana let out a wry smile as Misuri slowly walked over and picked up one of his bone daggers. Taking a sniff, Misuri slowly nodded his head as if the final piece of the puzzle had clicked into place.

'Now I know why the massive creature turned on its Master. Ivana coated his daggers with the blood of baby icewyrms and when he took the gamble to slice the old man's leg with his dagger, traces of the baby icewyrms' blood was left on the old man. My guess is that the massive icewyrm was a mother and given its strong maternal instinct, when the old man neared her the smell of her baby's blood made her think that her Master had killed her children. Coupled with the effects of the venom, she probably couldn't make out who was her Master in that confused state of mind. You, Ivana, are the most clever Indorani I have ever met' said Misuri as he flashed the Indorani a thumbs up.

'I am probably the only Indorani you met' replied Ivana as he tried his best not to move and aggravate his wound.

The entire group burst into laughter at Ivana's jibe given how rare it was for Ivana to say anything light hearted. For a moment, the guards had forgotten about the injuries they had and enjoyed their moment of success.

Suddenly, Brania jumped to his feet and shouted 'Oh No!'

The other guards turned their attention to the young scribe, wondering what caused the sudden outburst.

'We only have half a day left before the deadline and we will not be able to make it back in time to the city leaders to report this success' said Brania anxiously as he paced up and down.

'That you do not have to worry. The four city leaders have to report to the Tarean Ice Caverns at the deadline and the Caverns aren't that far away. I'll make that trip. You guys rest here' said Misuri in response to the worried scribe.

Misuri's response finally put the worried scribe's heart at ease and he returned to Rikza's side to attend to his injuries. The other guards also took the moment to rest their tired limbs and Ivana sat by the side resting his broken rib. Misuri smiled and picked up his dhuriv before saying his goodbye to the guards. Adjusting his clothes, he slowly made his way towards the Tarean Ice Caverns.

Even if Brania was the one walking, it would probably not take more than four hours to reach the Tarean Ice Caverns. With Misuri's quick feet, it was not long before the Sentinel arrived at the Caverns, well ahead of the deadline. In the distance, he could see the four city leaders worriedly gathered in a corner discussing matters. Misuri began to walk over and as soon as the city leaders

saw his arrival, they looked visibly relieved and rushed over to ask Misuri about the progress of the mission.

The four city leaders told Misuri that they had spread word of the manner in which the people could purge the bugs from their bodies and the method was indeed extremely useful. Many across the lands had been cured and with this news, the hearts of the land were put at ease and the rumours that used to plague the cities and villages began to disappear.

Misuri explained the entire matter from the beginning to the end and told the four city leaders how they had finally brought the culprits to justice. The city leaders cursed and swore at the mention of the devious plans of the old man but were relieved that the matter was finally resolved. There was still a few hours before the deadline and for once, they could rest in a corner ready to report the progress.

Misuri walked off to a corner for some quiet time to himself. The fierce battle before this and journey to the Tarean Ice Cavern had taken a toll on him and he needed some time and space to recover from the fatigue. As the Sentinel built a small campfire and the fatigue and worries of his drained away, Misuri thought he saw someone familiar in the distance. As he focused his sight on the image, he nearly jumped up from his seat. He could not believe his eyes, there in front of him were Yania and Vanira!

At the same time, Yania and Vanira had spotted Misuri and quickly made their way over to the campfire. As they exchanged greetings, Misuri noticed that Vanira was now a handsome young man even though there were still small patches of green scales on some parts of his body. He was able to speak fluently and converse like a normal person. From the loving way in which Yania looked at Vanira, Misuri was sure that she did not mind the slightest bit that Vanira had patches of green scale on him.

'Vanira got better and we were confident that you all would succeed. We decided to come here to wait for all of you and just as we hoped, you came!' said Yania excitedly to her Sentinel friend.

'I cannot thank you enough for all that you have done. These small patches of green scales might not be removable but other than that I am basically all cured. If it weren't for your help, I would still be a crazy green lizard running around wrecking destruction and Yania would be worrying about me day and night' said Vanira with gratitude as he held Misuri's hand.

'I am glad to see you two finally together and you have the well wishes of me and all the other guards. Remember to cherish each other for your reunion was not something that came by easily' replied Misuri.

Pausing for a moment, the Sentinel seemed to be deep in thought. After which, he turned to Yania once again and spoke.

'How is my father? Is he well?' asked Misuri as he finally managed to get his question out of him.

'Don't worry Misuri, your father is all healthy and well. The enemies did not come after him after your departure and we ensured that his meals were all well taken care of. He just misses you a lot. I can sense that even if he doesn't say it. He would stare blankly at the fireplace in the cottage where he hugged you and from time to time, I swear I saw tears rolling down his cheek. Promise me that you will visit him after this' replied Yania to the worried Misuri.

'I will. I will. He has waited half his life for me to return and I won't let him wait any longer' said

Misuri as he nodded his head to himself. The thought of his aged father staring at the fireplace brought a sourness to his heart but he held back his tears. He had to finish this properly first.

Yania, Vanira and Misuri continued to chat by the campfire as they recounted what had happened to each other after they parted. Under the care of Misuri's father, most of the bugs within Vanira's body had been purged. However, as Vanira had been under the effects of the spell for too long, certain effects of the transmutation could not be reversed and left its mark on him in the form of patches of green scale. Luckily, even if there were still any residual bugs within Vanira's body, with the old man's death, there was no longer anyone who could activate the spells again. Yania and Vanira exchanged a loving glance and held their hands tighter together. Their reunion was indeed not something easy to come by and they cherished every moment they had together.

After a few hours, it was time for the four city leaders to enter the Tarean Ice Caverns. As the four city leaders made their way in, everyone else could only wait outside with abated breath. No one could rest easy till the leaders came out once more.

Chapter Thirty Seven: A Second Divine Audience

As the four city leaders entered the Tarean Ice Cavern that was slightly warmer than outside, a sense of familiarity came across them. Just fifteen days ago they were summoned here and shaking at their knees as the threat of piking their heads in front of their respective cities had been delivered. Fifteen days later, they were back here standing proud as mortals to a Divine to show that they indeed, were worthy to lead their cities.

After a few moments, that same familiar gale picked up and blew at them from an unknown source. As they grabbed the sides of their clothes in nervousness, the moment that they were waiting for had arrived.

'Fifteen days. That was how long I gave you. Have you proven that you are worthy to lead your cities?' boomed the same loud voice that talked to them fifteen days ago.

'We cannot claim to have been the best leaders in history but we have led the land to bring the culprits to justice, found a solution to the plague and quashed all the rife rumours that were spreading like wildfire' said the Feral Will of Duiran in a respectful manner.

'Well done. However, have you all thought why all these happened and why so many innocent lives were lost? The four of you represent the largest and most influential cities in the land with many villages subservient to you. Had you led well, there would not have been pirates who pillaged the island of Miraan and the residents there would not have sought revenge and bring so much misery to the mainland' said the booming loud voice once more.

'We will reflect on our mortal failings and ensure that these mistakes will not be made again. Accept our apologies Divine One' replied the Chair of the Secretariat of Spinesreach, not wanting to anger the unknown Divine.

'Very well. Remember this promise you have made to me and your citizens today. I will hold all of you and any of your successors to task if you should fail to live up to this promise. Lead well mortals and you will enjoy the protection of the Divines' said the booming voice.

As the last words died off within the walls of the Tarean Ice Caverns, the four city leaders could feel that the Divine presence was no longer around. Suddenly, they felt their spirits soar as a Powerful One had granted all four cities Its Divine Blessing that would last for a whole year. Exchanging a

smile, the four city leaders began to make their way out of the Tarean Ice Caverns.

The four city leaders reappeared to the joyous cheers of their people. The whole issue that was worrying everyone across the land was finally put to an end. The four cities could finally focus on their own development or given their deep rooted animosity, go back to fighting each other once more. That however, would be another story for another time.

Misuri picked up his dhuriv and put out his campfire before walking over to his Feral Will. As the Feral Will praised Misuri for his strength in both body and mind and promised a bountiful reward for his efforts in solving this mystery, Misuri expressed his will to resign from the guards. This mission had let him built a valuable friendship with the guards from the other cities and seen many of his newfound friends die in battle alongside him. Misuri knew that once the matter of resolved, the four cities would once again be at each others throats and the guards would become pawns they used to clamour for victory and dominance. Misuri could not bring himself to face off against his friends in battle. They had fought hard together and he was not going to fight harder against them. It was through the lives that were lost be it those of his brethren or those he took that made him cherish the people around him even more. It was through the battles he fought and the blood he shed that make Misuri understand that life was too short to use it all in combat. Misuri had spent his entire life learning the art of combat and gained powerful abilities that was the envy of many. However, at this moment, he felt that he last lost more in his life than he had gained and the only way to reclaim what he had lost was to give up what he was holding.

The Feral Will of Duiran could not bear to let such a skilled warrior go and tried to keep him with promises of large rewards of gold and promotions with the guards. However, nothing offered could keep the heart of Misuri once he had made up his mind. After firmly rejecting the offer, Misuri kept his dhuriv that had accompanied him through all his battles and walked over to Yania and Vanira to say his farewell. The friendship he had forged with the couple was something he would cherish for life but for now, it was time for him to go home.

Chapter Thirty Eight: Going Their Separate Ways

'Higher! Faster! You call yourselves guards? If I were your enemy you would be dead. When I was in your position, I was ten times faster and stronger!' barked Rikza as a group of young soldiers trained in front of him. Rikza spotted a fierce look as he observed the every move of the soldiers in front of him. He knew that every drop of perspiration during peace time would mean a drop less of blood shed during war time. After all, he had survived one of the most harrowing battles throughout history and this time, he did earn the right to brag about it.

Rikza had chosen to take up the position of master trainer of the soldiers in Duiran after the whole issue was resolved. He was tired of constantly charging into battles but a side of him could not just sit back home and do nothing. As such, he rejected the offer for Captain of the Guards and opted for a lower position of Master Trainer. However, no one ever looked down on Rikza just because he was a Master Trainer. His contributions to the solving of the mystery that shook the lands was known to all and he was respected far more than any Captain of the Guards. As Rikza looked into the sky in the company of the training soldiers, he could not help but think what his new friend Brania was doing now.

Bright lamps lit the entire library and one could not figure out if it was really day time or night time because they were both as bright. Books and scrolls filled every shelf and a huge table laden with papers and writings was placed right in the centre. A hand peeked out from behind that huge mountain of scrolls and books on the table and a young voice could be heard from behind it.

'I think I have found it! This flower is can only grow when watered with alcohol and will wither the moment it comes into contact with water. No wonder no one has managed to grow it for centuries. I told them that nothing would stand in my way from finding out the truth and they laughed me off. Hmph, this should teach them to laugh at me!' chattered the young scribe before he realised that there was no one around and that he was talking to himself.

Brania had chosen a life in the place he loved the most, the Grand Library. Through the years after the mystery was solved, Brania not only recorded every detail that happened during the mystery as a book, he also helped to rearrange the information from the books in the Grand Library so as to facilitate reading. Brania would spend his time reading the books in the Grand Library and there was always something new for him to discover. His life was full of surprises and he truly understood how the pursuit of knowledge would never end. However, he did miss the dangerous days he spent with the elite guards. Those were days of bloodshed and adventure but he never felt alone. Nowadays, he could only talk to himself. At times, he would wonder what the cold Ivana would say if he were here.

'Hurry up! Can't you hear that the baby is crying! What are you doing taking your time!' screamed a beautiful young lady as the sound of an infant's cry resonated through the house.

'Coming! Coming!' shouted a voice from the room as a cold-looking man hurriedly walked out. This man was Ivana.

Ivana, like Misuri, had decided that a life in constant combat was not one worth living. Once all the matters were resolved, he resigned from his position of city guard and turned down all offers of rewards or promotions. Deciding to abandon the flourishing city for a quieter life in the villages, Ivana relocated to the Salma Settlement and lived there. It was there that he found his true love and got married. Within a year, his wife had given birth to a lively baby and his days were spent attending to the needs of his wife and child. Looking at how he circled around his wife and child every day, one could not help but wonder what happened to that ferocious Indorani who could slit the throats of his enemy within seconds. The kind father and loving husband was a far cry from the Ivana a few years ago.

A soft rap on the door indicated that there were visitors. As Ivana rushed over to open the door, a young couple stood before them at their door.

'Yania, Vanira you two are finally here. Make yourselves at home, my little one needs my attention' said Ivana as he rushed back to his baby leaving the door open.

Yania and Vanira had also returned to live in the Salma Settlement where they had met. In fact, they were neighbours with Ivana and his wife and the two families often visited each other regularly. Yania was four months pregnant and often came over to see how Ivana's wife attended to the baby in preparation for her future child. Vanira's patchy green scales subsided slightly but they did not fade totally. That however, did not stop Yania from loving him and the green markings were something that would remind them how they had come so far to be together.

Just as the couple was about to close the door behind them, a flapping sound could be heard behind them. A white pigeon flew into the house just as Yania and Vanira were about to close the door and cooed as it perched itself on the nearby chair.

'Ivana, I think you have a message!' shouted Vanira as he gently shut the door behind him.

Ivana made his way out once again and gently grabbed the pigeon in his hands. Checking the leg of

the pigeon, he did find a small roll of paper tied to it. As he removed the small roll of paper from the bird's leg and unrolled the message, Yania and Vanira crowded over to take a peek.

'15 Haernos. Delosian Bar. For brotherhood' wrote the message.

The trio exchanged glances before a smile broke out on their faces. It had indeed been a long time since the guards had met up and it was time for them to enjoy each other's company once more.

Chapter Thirty Nine: Those were the Days

As Yania, Vanira and Ivana made their way into the Delosian Bar, they were met with loud cheers from the patrons inside. Rikza, Brania and the four guards were already seated around the table in the centre and drinking away. As the guards rushed over to make their greetings, they quickly helped the pregnant Yania to a seat and ordered a glass of milk for her.

'You three are finally here. We have been waiting for about an hour! Ivana, you have got to down a glass of scotch as punishment' said Rikza in a poker face he tried to force out even though it was clear that he was more overjoyed than upset with their presence.

'What is one glass of scotch. I'll take two!' replied Ivana to the roaring crowd.

'Brania, I swear if I see you staring at your scrolls one more time I am going to dunk them in the alcohol and set them ablaze' rebuked Rikza as he caught the young scribe taking a peek at his scrolls.

Sticking out his tongue, Brania quickly stashed his scroll behind him. His scrolls were too precious to be burnt in flames.

'Don't worry, we are not having wine tonight' shouted Rikza to the crowd with a wink as the guards burst into laughter remembering how that wine from the Valley of Kalebb had brought them together.

'Did anyone see Misuri?' asked Yania as she took a sip from her glass of milk.

'We sent him our invitation but he sent us a reply saying that he had things to attend to and wouldn't be coming. Frankly speaking I do sort of miss him' replied Rikza. It was evident that Rikza was the one who organised the meet up today.

Yania was clearly disappointed but Vanira took her hand in his and gave it a small squeeze as he nodded at her indicating that there were still the other guards around. Rikza took a glass of scotch in his hand and tapped on the side of the glass thrice to get the attention of the crowd.

'Tonight, our first toast will go to our brethren that are no longer with us today. To Malivan, to Sinza and to all the other brothers who fought valiantly to protect our homes' shouted Rikza.

The crowd erupted into conversation as they held up their glasses for a toast. They had started out as a legion of twenty elite guards and though they saw the addition of Yania, Vanira and Brania subsequently, thirteen of the team had sacrificed their lives to defend theirs. All the families of the guards who sacrificed themselves in battle were given their due compensation in recognition of the valiant battles they went through and painful sacrifices they made. The guards did not reveal Sinza's betrayal and his family who was eventually rescued, was also given a hefty compensation for Sinza's death. Though Sinza had erred, the guards had forgiven him for his misdeeds and still

recognised him as one of their brothers.

'Our second toast goes to our brotherhood and all the people here including Brania, Vanira, Yania and that little baby kicking inside her tummy' said Rikza once again as he raised his glass for a toast.

'My child would kick so hard you would fly a few feet after he kicked your ass!' joked Yania as he brought her glass of milk up for a toast.

'Nobody ever kicks my ass, I'll teach that little brat a thing or two if he dares to try kicking his Uncle Rikza' protested Rikza in response to Yania's taunt.

'I wonder who was it that got his assed kicked by Malivan so hard that he flew right into my Universe tarot map' said Ivana as the entire room burst into laughter and Rikza face blushed red from embarrassment.

'Fine. I admit that I got my ass kicked once but only that once by Malivan. If he were here with us I wouldn't mind letting him kick my ass again' replied Rikza as the room suddenly quietened down. No one could forget how Malivan the Ascendril had sacrificed himself in exchange for the safety of the people here in the bar. The thought of his sacrifice even brought tears to some of the guards.

Noticing the awkward atmosphere clouding the bar after the mention of Malivan, Rikza quickly tried to change the topic and gulped down his glass of scotch. He had to try to liven up the atmosphere.

'Let's only talk about the happy things tonight and catch up with each other. To those who are waiting to find out how each other have been doing, as how Ivana always shouted in the battles we fought. GO! NOW!' shouted Rikza as he imitated Ivana's voice to a laughing crowd.

The guards continued with their drinking and feast as they caught up with each other on how each other were doing. Ivana was sharing to the other guards about his wife and baby while Rikza was busy bragging about how he was so strict with the young soldiers under him and complaining how soldiers these days had no sense of discipline unlike them. Brania slowly walked over to Yania and Vanira and brought his glass along with him.

'How many more months before the baby comes out? If the baby is a boy I am sure he would grow up to be a very handsome man and if the baby is a girl I am sure she will be as beautiful as her mother!' chattered Brania in his usual talkative nature.

'It is still early for all that, it would be another five to six months before the baby is born but thank you for your well wishes. I see that you still have yet to change that talkative nature of yours Brania!' said Yania with a chuckle.

'As long as the baby does not grow up to look like me I would be happy enough' joked Vanira as he pointed at the green patches of scale on his face.

'Nonsense. I am sure our baby will be proud to have such a brave father' said Yania as she admonished her husband lovingly.

Just as the guards were busy with their conversations, Rikza stood up once again and tapped the side of his glass thrice to get the attention of the crowd. When the guards turned towards him, he continued what he had to say.

'Let us not forget our great leader Misuri even if he is not here with us today. Our third toast for today goes to Misuri the Sentinel, the one that was always ready to charge ahead in battle before us and ensure that we all returned safely. To our strong, clever Misuri!' said Rikza as he raised his glass high into the air and a bit of scotch spilled from the glass.

The crowd roared with shouts of agreement. After all, who could deny that without Misuri, they would not have been able to solve the mystery and sit here today drinking and eating. To Misuri! Wherever he was.

Chapter Fourty: I Missed You

As the warm sunlight bathed the small cottage in his warmth, a frail aged old man was sitting in a rocking chair staring into the fireplace. Even as the birds were chirping and the forest around him bustling with wild animals, none of them could make him any happier. As he rocked slowly in the chair, he could not help but remember how he had hugged his son just in front of this fireplace twice. Once when he returned and once before he left. He knew that his son shouldered the responsibility of saving the entire continent but that fatherly part of him still could not let go. It was almost as if the image of that embrace was right in front of him, just a reach away. As a single tear trickled down his cheek, the old man let out a sigh. This sigh was a culmination of sadness, longing and love.

It was time for lunch. Even though the old man could barely enjoy the food he ate every day, he knew that he had to ensure that he did not collapse if he wanted to be able to see his son again. Grabbing the staff by the side of his rocking chair, he slowly got up, shaking as he supported himself on the staff. Slowly, he began to walk over to the table to prepare his meal.

Then, there was a knock on the door. For a moment, the old man thought that he was hearing things. No one could have made it through the maze of trees surrounding the cottage. Not unless it was... Using his staff as a walking cane, the old man hurriedly made his way to the door and gently opened it. Right before him was a tall fine man standing in front of him. Dropping the dhuriv in his hand, the man at the door quickly brought the old man into his embrace. His son had returned!

No words were needed for this moment as father and son hugged each other tightly at the door. Misuri's father was overjoyed that his son had returned alive and Misuri was equally happy to have survived and come home. The father and son duo had spent most of their lives apart from each other but this could not erase the love they had for each other.

As Misuri's father wiped off the tears from his eyes, he quickly motioned for his son to enter the cottage having realised how silly it was that they had been standing at the door.

'Quick, come on in. Have you eaten lunch? I'll prepare something for you, it will only take a moment and the food will be ready' said Misuri's father in his aged voice quivering with joy.

Misuri grabbed his father's hand and helped his father back to the chair. He knew that his father loved him a lot but this time, it was his turn to prepare a little something for his father. As Misuri's father sat in his rocking chair with his gaze fixed on his son and a smile on his face, Misuri busied himself preparing their meal. In between the cooking, Misuri would steal a glance or two at his father and as their eyes met, his father would never fail to flash him that contented smile. It was not long before Misuri finished cooking the food and though he wasn't the best chef around, his father could not stop exclaiming how good the food was. What food could be tastier than one made with love?

As they slowly tucked into their food, Misuri recounted the happenings after their departure to his father. Father and son shared story after story and after they were done with the happenings of the mystery, they were talking about the time when Misuri was still a little kid. Laughter resonated through the little cottage and though there were only the two of them, the warmth from their hearts was enough to make the place cosy.

'So when are you leaving for your next mission. I'll make sure all your clothes and supplies are well prepared' asked Misuri's father as he looked lovingly at his son.

'I am not going anywhere Father. I have resigned from my position of city guard and left the city of Duiran. I am back here to stay and am going nowhere. Of course that is unless you don't think I am bothering you' replied Misuri with a chuckle.

'Really? You are not going to leave anymore? Of course I'd welcome you to stay for as long as you like. If you didn't think a hagged old man like me was bothering you why would I complain that you are bothering me' said Misuri's father with a smile so wide he could barely close his mouth.

Knowing that his father was overjoyed from the news, Misuri stretched out his hand and took his father's hand in his. As he cupped his father's hand in his and looked at the wrinkles that lined his arm, he could not help but regret how he had been the unfilial son for so many years and left his father alone in the forest. How could his father be so overjoyed over such a simple matter. What kind of pain had he let his father undergo for the past few decades in his absence. As thoughts of his selfishness flooded his mind, tears began to trickle down his cheek and drop onto his father's hand.

'Don't cry my son, what matters is that you are back right? We can plant trees together, cook meals together and do whatever we did not manage to do together when you were young.' said Misuri's father in his comforting voice as he patted his son's head.

As Misuri tilted his head up to look at his father. He was fighting hard not to choke on his emotions. After a moment of silence, Misuri finally managed to utter what he wanted to say.

'I Missed You!'

END