

Sample Chapters from

Fear's Union

Book one of the Age of Ku

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More information and further sample chapters are
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Dusk is Coming

The Age of Ku: that is what he'd heard it called. He didn't know what it meant, but he did recognise the sentiment. It chilled him.

It was just a shame that the reality didn't match the potential. Cris's frustration festered.

"Where are we?" Of course, he bloody well knew exactly where they were, but that wasn't really the point. His esteemed companion had a lot to answer for, but he was devastatingly frugal with information; a strange trait in a scout. The mandahoi turned to Cris with contempt in those eagle-like eyes, and then he turned away once more, leaving only silence and simmering annoyance. Answers were harder to come by than water out here in this dust-bowl called Mikeata, a fact that symbolised Cris's mood nicely. Damn!

Cris looked over his shoulder, at the Finder, gaze lingering on the smudge of clouds that betrayed the distant mountains. That was home, Ahan, and that green haven was what he'd swapped for this environmental and spiritual desolation. This scouting experience was meant to offer the potential of a life-time, an elongated incidence with the finest sensor Ahan had ever known – and a mandahoi no less! – but the reality was at stark odds. If it wasn't for the chilling potential, Cris might even be bored. Bored!

His arse hurt, that was for sure. He had always been a capable equestrian, but his cheeks could only take so much discomfort. His tolerance had broken many days previous, as had the skin of his posterior, but still they trekked on; still they sought it out.

But what did they seek? Another shudder, but there was no wind.

An owl hooted from the shadows, and the Stranger pulsed above them – high and lucid. It was night. They always travelled at night, a way to escape the heat, but it only exacerbated the loneliness. Damn he was lonely. He even craved his brother's annoying voice, and that was saying something.

No, this was not fair. He felt like he was being punished. Damn!

"Please, Aleña, where are we?"

The mandahoi turned once more, the mask in the likeness of a hawk's beak covering the lower hemisphere of his face. The man's grey uniform was a sickly black

in the light of the Stranger, and his eyes suggested that he saw sickness in Cris – the bastard. All he sought was human interaction; was that so much to ask?

“It is a forest.”

The sparseness of the response rivalled that of their surroundings. Arrgh! Of course it was a damned forest, but the trees looked more like ghoulishly crafted coat stands than the symbols of life – elaborate, please! Dear Father, this was excruciating. He had half a mind to start for home.

Of course, he said none of this. His respect for the Mandahoi was too deep-rooted, and the fear too ingrained. The fact that this odd-ball was nothing like the enigma he had expected was irrelevant – he knew that the sensor could kill with the flick of a wrist. Cris was in awe, or at least he had been at the outset.

A crunching noise invaded his senses, and his mind was transported. He was reminded of a local delicacy from his home in northern Ahan – a snack of deep fried pork fat. At that thought, a chasm opened in his stomach and food rushed to the fore of his thoughts. When would they eat? What would they eat? Please, Brother, let it be more than stale bread and heavily watered ale. If he was to be denied human interaction, then at least the stimulation of food would revive him. He decided that this warranted interrogation, and when he came out of his thoughts, he found Aleña alert – like a hound.

The crunching noise was still there, and he desperately scanned the surroundings for a source, but failed. The Stranger throbbed; the mandahoi went rigid; and Cris froze with terror. He went to speak.

“Wh—”

A single finger to the mouth-piece of the mandahoi stopped him silent. The killer came close to him, and whispered those words. They crawled all over Cris.

“Dusk is coming. We must hide.”

His rebellious streak was entirely crushed, and he was pliant as dough. To the casual observer, dusk was long past and night was all-consuming. But that was not what Aleña meant. The Stranger seemed to pulsate in the clear sky, like the beating heart of the dark.

The Age of Ku was upon them.

* * *

This was it. This was what they had come to see. The man beside him had been a frustrating companion – the ignorant Body of Ahan – but now he would serve his purpose. Now he would evidence Aleña’s fears.

At least he hoped he would. Cris had offered very little in the way of promise.

“What is it?”

Aleña pulled a sharp finger to his mouthpiece once more, enforcing silence. He threatened Cris with a look, and his senses reached out for evidence of betrayal. The whispered words of his companion seemed to aggregate through the eerie silence of the dead forest, but alarm remained absent. They were fortunate.

The two had abandoned their horses, instead opting to crawl through the constricting brush of the deeper forest. Aleña’s cloth uniform was shredded in places, and scratches sang at him from his upper thigh, but silence was the minimum. Dusk was coming after all.

Aleña pulled himself to his elbow, and mouthed his response to his companion of the Body – barely a noise escaping. He lingered on the final symbol.

‘Age of Ku-u-u-u-u.’

He expected fear; confusion; unease – that was the effect those words normally had, such was the weight of their hidden menace. But what he got instead was intrigue – the raising of an eyebrow; the subtle elevation onto elbows. Perhaps the man had something after all, and at that moment, Cris tightened his emotions and stared rigidly into the darkness. Aleña felt something ... akin to pride, but it was short-lived. Such was the Mandahoi way.

The crunching noise continued, but Cris seemed oblivious. Only Aleña knew the meaning of that odd sound. It was only he who recognised the structural variations that singled it out, for it was a language, and it was the tongue reserved for the most terrifying of the world’s horrors. He listened intently, hunkering down under the weight of the messaging. They were being hunted.

The Blood Star seemed to shimmer with menace, basking the dead country in the sickly glow of illness. And dusk was an illness, the perpetual sweep that consumed with relish. It was a fairy story, a fanciful tale of the creeping shadow that was routinely used as a moral lesson for children – ‘stay in bed, for dusk is coming’. But it was more than a children’s tale. It was reality.

It crashed suddenly through the scrub, revealing itself to the light of the Blood Star. Its silhouette dominated, and the matt nature of its heavy armour almost razed it of

features. It was a soldier, a warrior, vast brute of a thing, and the only thing more disconcerting than its mass was its constitution. The thing was darkness personified.

Quite literally.

Its head flickered and flowed, a mass of shadow reaching from the open neck of the heavy armour. A cloud of dusk encased in mineral mass, a truly monstrous proposition. Its head danced in the darkness, spiralling into the air, blending with the night – dusk to dusk. The body suggested that the thing was interrogating its surroundings, but there was no way to evidence its line of sight. Just the presence of the thing cowed Aleña, and he found himself holding his breath. Only when the monster crashed on through the woods did he dare to breathe again.

Dusk was coming, and Cris had seen it too.

He braved a hiss, “Did you see?”

A wide-eyed nod in response, but the man was not distraught – he was excited. Perhaps Aleña had underestimated his companion. He was proving a worthy scouting apprentice after all.

“We go east.”

A momentary look of confusion before the mouthed response, ‘ato the Finder?’

Aleña sighed. Too many in Ahan still used the native and inferior directional labelling, and this was worthy of emotion – frustration in this case – but now was not the time. He nodded.

He was first to move from his place of security, triggering the snap of wood as a branch succumbed to his movement. So much for Mandahoi supremacy. He stayed absolutely still, halfway between standing and kneeling, and only breathed out when reassurance leaked into him.

And then the deep bass chorus went up, and Alena’s heart accelerated. They were snared, and dusk was upon them.

He turned to his companion and offered the scant advice.

“Run.”

He had to at least feign hope.

* * *

Each step was precarious, the ground ragged and undulating beneath his feet. Roots and branches reached out, tangling his legs, scraping his shoulders, but Cris did not let up. To let up was to die, that much was apparent.

Dear Brother, that was plain.

A sturdy length of concealed wood got the better of him, and as he tipped towards the floor, his heart accelerated. His eyes closed naturally, stars jumping on impact, temporary disorientation replacing the fear – but not for long. Grazes lined his body, his thin clothing shredded by the unrelenting sharpness of the landscape, but none of this held Cris back. To stop was to die, and to die was to fail. Before the pain had even registered, he forced his feet into the ground and catapulted himself forward, only for his shoulders to snap back, as if restrained by elasticity. The change in momentum was jarring; and then terrible.

Aleña stalled. He turned to face Cris, shock and horror apparent in the cloaked face. It was only when Cris's vision was reasonably restored that the flickering black tendrils struck his attention. He looked to the left and found that he had been hauled into submission by the very darkness he was attempting to flee. Fear dissolved into horror, accompanied as it was by an easing of bodily functions and a flush of embarrassment. It was not long before the cruel facts settled, and Cris calmed.

A storm erupted from just above his head; a great symphony of bass instruments, falling trees, and crumbling cliffs. Damn, these monsters communicated by curious means, but an even greater shock was that Aleña appeared to be listening. Once the verse finished, the mandahoi looked to Cris with a forlorn expression. More of the shadowy entities dissolved out of the skeletal scrub just beyond.

“We have been offered two options. The better of these options is death.”

The slap of the words was numbing, but the sensation quickly subsided. He had been expecting this after all. And yet, how had such an outcome become accepted so quickly? He had so much to live for, so much to lose, but for some unknown reason, he did not fear death. Was he going to gain immortality? He checked that his short-sword was loose in its sheath. It moved freely enough.

“And what is the other option?”

Aleña betrayed astonishment, and Cris winked to reassure his companion. His wits were still with him, for now.

“The alternative offering is a life of servitude in the House of Red.”

The mandahoi was right; death did sound like the better option. So be it. A tear swelled in the corner of Cris's right eye, but he blinked it away. This was no place for fragility. He was about to meet the Stranger.

“Can you escape?”

The mandahoi breathed out heavily, his shoulders slumping. He had misheard.

“I don’t think we—“

“Not we, Aleña; can you escape?”

The man gave him what can only be described as a look of respect. Damn, that was a proud moment.

“I think I have a chance.”

A chance, just a small probability, but it was tangible. Cris stood upright, feeling the iron around his throat tighten. The dark cloud of flesh came close to his face, and he thought he could smell something sickly, putrid even. His stomach clenched, and so did his resolve.

“Speak well of me to my family.”

That was definitely a look of respect, and before Cris had a chance to succumb to his emotions, he straightened sharply, jerking down to loosen himself from the restraint. His shining steel was free, spearing towards the sky, straight at the inky face of his aggressor; into the darkness. A crackling squeal erupted, pride flared once more, and as Cris turned briefly, he saw Aleña dancing through the attention of numerous assailants before melting between the dark trees. He was alone; him and the Gathering Dusk.

His gods looked sadly down upon him from the heavens; but the Brother shone bright. He was done, but not without a showing.

The monster still screamed, and Cris went to finish the task. He crashed his weapon against the target, but each blow was blunt to the cold iron. Metal jerked against metal, and soon his body fizzed with the sensation of the repeated onslaught. He allowed himself a reprise, but to his dismay the shadow had recovered its senses.

It dropped a weight of iron upon him.

He pulled his weapon up, a desperate sortie, hoping for a show of respectable defiance, but all meaning had leaked away, and there was only death. He knew it was futile.

And yet pride was worth clinging to – it would differentiate him. As the iron descended upon him, he gritted his teeth, but as his resistance was just flourishing, life was swept ruthlessly from him. A crossbow bolt burrowed deep into his torso, and with it swept a wave of consuming agony.

His own weapon veered away, all energy sapped by the intrusive dart. The heavy iron of his aggressor continued down, and as Cris opened his eyes, he witnessed a great passage being cleft through his body. The sensation of lucid pain turned to mind-

bending intrusion, and as he screamed, he knew his time was short. His mind was still his own, just, and he would grab that gift with both hands. He thought of his son, the baby he had known only two days before he embarked on this doomed adventure. That sad fact was worth a tear, and the Sister obliged.

Was this outcome a failure? If Aleña succeeded in escaping, then perhaps not. His life was forfeit certainly, but there were greater things to live for than life itself. He only hoped that his son would know this truth as-well: Dusk was coming, and the individual would need to be forgotten. Only the collective might hope to survive the Age of Ku.

Anticipation

She was bored, but she shouldn't have been. It was so frustrating. She chewed her lip harder and felt a scrap of skin come away. It disgusted her, but she swallowed the debris which now slid about her mouth. What else was there to do? She turned her attention to the curious situation that they found themselves in. This dreary mountainside was the last place she had expected to end up.

Everything within the range of her vision was grey, lacking any semblance of stimulation. The sky was an endless sheet of slate, reaching from east to west and north to south. The various mineral shades of the mountains may at least be forgiven, but even the river far below had a flat sheen to it. What little shrubbery that survived up here existed in an ashen state, and even the current incumbents of the pass wore grey uniforms. Twenty-one years of life, thirteen years of intensive training, and this was the result. Her restlessness caused her to rock back and forth.

“What are we waiting for?”

Her loyal friend stirred from a daydream and looked to Anejo. There was a distinct lack of purpose in the gaze she offered.

“I'm sorry?”

It was not worth pushing further; it never was when Xen's mind wandered like this. Anejo went to bite the nail of her longest finger, but the gauze mask got in the way, so she slapped her hand down in frustration. She hated this state of anticipative restlessness, and forced her mind to concentrate on menial things. It would not be a successful venture.

There were over a hundred mandahoi scattered about the high mountain pass. Most were young, like she was, on the verge of tasting first action, but few appeared to reflect her eager spirit. Most were reclined casually, wiling away the early morning in casual indifference. A few lids were even closed, a shocking disregard for the attention this situation deserved, and one pair of eyes betrayed a stunning sense of terror. How Aran had ever progressed this far, only Rhanna knew, but Anejo could not pity him now; something was looming. Just a handful amongst them, the experienced caste leaders of the party, were alert, but what were they expecting? That was the question that rankled.

She stood suddenly, drawing looks from around the group; she didn't care. She had a knack for noteworthy actions, or at least actions that differentiated her. Perhaps it was because she was born into the ruling family of Ahan, but she had an inkling it was actually because she was a woman. That annoyed her, and she felt her cheeks flush. It was time for confrontation.

“Where are you going?”

“I'm going to speak to Keles.”

Xen was stunned from her dreamy state, and she jumped to her feet. Keles, their illustrious leader, was just four years Anejo's senior, but an ocean of experience separated them. Anejo respected the man, she really did, but there was a tension between them that always seemed to dominate. Maybe it was because she was a Jinq, but she suspected it was because of her sex. She bit her lip and felt sharp pain as her oral dexterity failed. No matter.

She turned to her friend, the only other female member of the Mandahoi Order, and was amused to see her brushing down and straightening her uniform. It was a wonder these two companions were amiable at all, so different were their personalities. Twenty-one years of friendship was a strong foundation, though. Xen offered the obvious warning.

“Don't go pissing Keles off.”

Their leader stood alone some distance up the mountain path. He was the most respected mandahoi for two hundred years, and he was their direct superior. In a Mandahoi system based on order and logic, nothing good could come from agitating his displeasure. Anejo, though, had always swum upstream.

“Would I?”

As she approached, he looked cautious and contemplative, but he immediately broke from his thoughts and turned to Anejo. She breathed in, sucking a healthy lungful of air as she continued. Her right hand fidgeted with the cuticles, and her left hand flexed and tightened around the grip of the katana at her waist. It was a fine weapon, a benefit of her illustrious birth, and she was keen to use it in anger. She stepped along the stony pass with purpose.

“Anejo, don't do this.”

Xen had come too; such a faithful friend. Anejo turned her head briefly, grinning from behind the mask. In but a moment she had reached her target, and her attention switched. She spoke with just the correct amount of antagonism.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, sir, but what exactly are we doing?”

He did not look impressed, and the swelling of his wide chest suggested he was about to explode. The words radiated as a hiss from the mask in the likeness of a bear; his favoured caste. He was not best pleased.

“Excuse me?”

It was time to blow this situation open. She could not take this boredom any longer, even despite the pleading touches from her best friend.

“Well, sir, are you going to lead us like the soldiers we are, or are you going to let us die of boredom, right here?”

The antagonism worked, but she wasn’t surprised. It was a particular skill of hers.

* * *

By the will of the gods – all seven of them – it was hard being her friend sometimes. Xen shied away as the provocative outburst tickled their leader from his restful state. He seemed to expand, like a cobra before it bites. She drew her attention from the conflict.

As she looked down to her uniform, she noticed the creases and the grimy marks of repeated use. She tried smoothing the rough disturbance in the grey material, but it would not give. The grime was too stubborn, and she wondered when they would return to civility. Her hair must be a wreck by now.

“And from what position of authority do you speak so boldly?”

Xen’s momentary lapse was cut short as Keles responded. The voice was low, controlled, but there was anger behind it. She put her hand on Anejo’s arm once more, but the suggestion was shunned. Her friend ploughed on.

“Let’s say, for now, that I speak as a member of the Jinq family.”

If anything about Anejo usurped her boldness, it was her cunning. Her status as member of the ruling family of Ahan opened many doors, but this would be a stubborn lock.

“Tell me why you think I should respond?”

Xen looked to Keles, and noticed the almost pleading countenance. He wanted this argument less than anyone, but Anejo was as stubborn as the stains on her uniform. It was then that Keles actually looked at her, and any semblance of logic was stripped away. She blushed, and recoiled timidly from the gaze. She ripped his clothes away with her eyes, relishing the ordered ripples of his muscular physique, and the potency of his private areas. She watched his eyes as her own clothes fell from her, and the

excitement which showed in him bubbled in her too. Glorious Mother, he was amazing; she could not keep her hands off—

This is not the place! She shook her head to clear the fantasy, and found herself back where she'd been; a bland and stony path in a grey and rocky valley. This was not the life for her.

“Because, I think there is something afoot, and I think you do too. We gain nothing from waiting.”

That seemed to strike a nerve, and Keles partially subsided. Perhaps Anejo was right? Annoyingly, she usually was. Before a response could be offered, the situation was made less comfortable still. A second antagonist entered the fray.

“What is it you suspect, Anejo?”

Xen gawped at the newcomer, shocked by his proximity. He was Kato, the Axis, a legend even when lined against the greatest in Mandahoi history; and yet the man was no mandahoi. The feats associated with this oddity were beyond the realms of belief, and yet here he was, stood beside her, breathing lightly. These shivering facts would have overwhelmed her had it not been for the sobering effect of the man's presence: he was unfathomably plain to look upon. The greatest question, though, was why such a legend would be here in the first place? It just didn't make sense, and even Anejo failed to discern the logic.

“This is not your place, Kato.” Their leader sounded even less happy.

“No, I am not here to trump your authority. I am merely curious as to the nature of Anejo's thoughts.”

Keles, the Mandahoi commander, was vast; a great cliff of a man with shoulders that could span a river and legs that could support a house. Only the placement of Mother Bright prevented him from casting a shadow upon his antagonists, and Xen thought that he might break into fury at the slip of a tongue. The Axis, though, was rigid in his objection; it was almost as if he was one string shy of a working lute, and couldn't comprehend the danger of the situation. Anejo too defied their leader, but her eyes were momentarily drawn to Kato in astonishment. Her interruption seemed to be temporarily forgotten, but Keles was not about to entertain either intrusion.

“Both of you can go. This is my design, and I will get us moving when I deem it appropriate. Now, leave me.”

His eyes lingered on Xen as he turned, and she felt her face flush once more. Anejo huffed in frustration and then shook her head in disapproval when she saw Xen's

heated cheeks. Of course her friend knew of the secret affair, but it didn't mean she liked it.

Xen readied herself to return to a state of relaxation upon the boulder they'd left just moments before, but before she even moved, the mountain pass turned to chaos. Her life as a soldier began, and she shivered with discontent. This was not the life for her.

* * *

Anejo's display had been outrageous, and Aran found himself marvelling at her confidence. Oh how he wished to be that bold; but no, he was craven. It was not his fault.

As tension swept through the ranks, Aran felt the darker side of him bubble with intent. It was like a warm alter-ego; a second being; a split personality. It was not a welcome trait. The other half was wrestling him for control, and its intent seemed only cruel. Aran did not want to concede, he did not want to be that ... thing. He had succumbed only once before, and now he was a soldier, but that was enough. The demonic side of him must stay locked away.

The situation changed, and Aran contracted within himself as he saw the first rider hurtle about the stony corner, sending scree skittering into the river far below. Panic showed on the man's face – a panic that was reflected in Aran. The reason for this fear became clear just a fraction later, and the demon within Aran started to claw viciously at him. He had to swallow to contain it.

Three further horsemen charged about the bend, and their demeanour was rather more aggressive. They had weapons held high, and they screamed their threats as they gave chase. The sounds echoed about the valley and reached Aran's ears just as a look of shock was mirrored in the pursuing horsemen. They had clearly not been expecting to find a hundred mandahoi blocking their path, and they were not offered much time to reflect.

It was in a stunning instant that the caste leaders strung their short-bows and let fly. The accuracy was without parallel, and the three horsemen grunted as they succumbed to sudden convulsive ends. The danger was instantly over, and Aran exhaled deeply. His demon receded into the depths of his mind once more. Sanity was restored.

A frenzy followed as Mandahoi seniors vaulted up the road to secure the situation. The fleeing rider was eased from his horse, and even to Aran it was clear he was not long for the world. Keles quizzed the dying man as Anejo buzzed about the periphery

while every other student stood dumbstruck a hundred strides down the path. It was when Keles laid the head of the man gently to the ground, and looked up with horror in his eyes, that the gravity of the situation hit. His spoken orders wafted, like they moved through honey.

“Nazalia has been assailed. We leave immediately.”

Aran witnessed the man who claimed to be Kato disappear in the direction of Nazalia, and he was suddenly very conscious that the danger was far from over. Soon he would be asked to demonstrate his reluctant learning, and his alter-ego purred in anticipation. Aran touched a patch of rough skin at his left shoulder blade, contoured and smooth through the material of the uniform. Touching that deformation was a soothing action, and as he was ushered to his feet, he was grateful for the familiarity. He would need to be strong, and he felt anything but.

It was not a long journey to the devastated town of Nazalia, and each step towards that place stirred the darkness further. He found himself shivering, half because of the cold and half with fear, but fear of what? Was it fear for what they would unveil in the mountain town? Or was it what lurked within that scared him? No, it was neither. It was his paradox: he wanted to be a soldier, he truly did, but he could not succeed in that space without conceding to his anger, an anger that stirred the darkness. But the more the demon grew, the more that he regressed, and so he could not concede. He simply could not concede. The potential of that thing was horrifying.

The scene before him was also horrifying. They had arrived at the devastated town, and Aran was part of a ten strong group perched at the boundary. Nazalia was dying, its soul being ripped away by rampant invaders. Aran wanted to cry, but the darker side of him only sniggered. What would Anejo think if she could see his thoughts? He wanted to hide himself, but luckily he didn't need to – he could blend spectacularly into the background. Anejo sensibly ignored him.

What a mighty soldier he made! The enemy must be quaking at his insignificance. It shamed him to be like this, but rather this than a victim of the carnage in town. Their fate was impossibly worse still, at least for the moment. He hunkered down and hoped the horror would pass him by.

* * *

This was not how it was supposed to be. Any semblance of chivalrous bravado was swept from Anejo's thoughts, only to be replaced with something wholly alien in her privileged existence. It sat in her throat, hot and phlegm-ridden, and it radiated through

her body and charged her muscles. She twitched with anticipation, perfectly still but poised for violent activity. This was anger of the purest kind, utter hatred for the revolting scene before her, and she could barely control it. Control it, though, she just about did.

Anejo watched the young citizen of Nazalia sobbing as she was roughly handled by her captors, but they were not the panicked and desperate cries of what is to come. They were shamed and horrified moans of what has already come to pass. She could barely be fifteen summers, but she was over a barrel, her dress hitched up and her legs splayed like a common whore. Blood was just discernible in the flickering light offered by the burning town beyond, but that did not deter her aggressors. The fourth was preparing himself for his own dose of cruel pleasure. Anejo wanted to see him die.

“You are to lead this group; is that clear?”

The disturbance almost tipped her out of her tense state, but she retained her self-control and turned to look upon the face of her esteemed commander. His cautious wait for perfection was not complementing the hatred that coursed through Anejo, and she saw his eyes flicker to the scene and back again without so much as a nudge of emotion. But this was not the time for conflict with allies; the enemy was numerous enough. She nodded her assent.

“Good. You will use bows until a caste master ushers you out. Wait for the command, and only loose when the signal reaches its zenith.” Anejo nodded again, but was conscious of her screwed up face, a trickle of blood dribbling down the inside of her mouth where she had been chewing once more. Keles seemed to ignore any implication of the contorted expression, and offered mild support instead. “Good luck.”

Was that wilful ignorance or misplaced trust? No matter.

She was left to her simmering fury, but before she could return to the scene of horror, she caught sight of Xen, clear discomfort on her face. She knew what she intended and felt a pang of guilt for the situation that would be left to her close companions, but now was not the time. She turned, and the apologetic sensation disappeared instantly to be replaced with a fresh wave of nauseous anger. She scraped at a fingernail and then prepared for battle.

She held her short bow ready, evidence of her false intent if nothing else. Her arm ached with the effort of resistance, but relent she did not. The tip of the arrow was perfectly angled, targeting the throat of the man who still fumbled with his breeches, but there was a light breeze and it would make the shot tough. Her eyes streamed from

effort and from disgust, and as the flaming arrow streaked into the sky, she saw it through blurred vision. A sharp gust feathered her cheek as she released, and the four aggressors stumbled in shock at the onslaught. Her life as a soldier began.

Her own missile missed, taken as it was by the wind and deposited harmlessly to the right of the assembly. Others had more luck, and the invader who had his chainmail hoisted about his middle slumped forward with a grey fletched arrow protruding from his round belly. The young woman screamed harder as she was smothered by the dying body, but in a moment she was free and ran down the alley as her skirts tumbled to conceal her violated modesty. Anejo had saved her first life, but it didn't even register.

The other three had rallied against the flight of the arrows, and now concealed themselves behind wooden shields. Her fellow apprentices continued to loose, but she was more than just a stock; she was a mandahoi. As she moved effortlessly over the rocky landscape, she let her emotions fuel a rabid cry. The first opponent showed genuine shock at the feminine pitch as her immaculate weapons cleaved through defences and tore at flesh. This slight only served to fuel the anger further, and she surged on with gender injustice fanning the flames. Control was now utterly beyond her, and a life that she had dreamed of came into violent being. It was not as she expected.

Trials Unforeseen

The sounds of battle pressed in on her, freezing Xen to near stillness. Even hidden in the rabbit-warren of Nazalia's streets, the proximity of mortal danger was terrifying; but it was the weight of responsibility which really unsettled her. It was simply overwhelming. Damn Anejo and her recklessness.

She prayed that the Brother was close at hand.

Xen had jumped into the street, an impulsive reaction to cowardice, but her eight fellow apprentices construed her movements as authoritative. She was now their leader, the strong-willed director, but as fear squeezed her, she felt anything but. She was as scared as they were.

The street was miserable; a filthy place of overflowing drainage and general detritus. Xen made her way nervously, the others some distance behind, concealed by the shadows. Her senses were alert, relaying constant messages, but her will was weak and the only objective she truly sought was escape. There was no easy way out of this.

Something plucked at her gut and she firmed her stance, coiling the fear tight in the pit of her stomach. She attempted to convey false authority, but her effort was lacking and a devilish looking man jumped from the shadows, axe dropping fast. Panic struck, and she swung her blade to parry, but as steel struck jarringly against steel, she yelped.

“Is that the cry of a woman, is it?”

He spoke with thickness that mirrored his size. The appearance of the man was hard, like he lived in the constant grip of danger, and had formed robust protection, both physical and mental, against it. He was alert, and betrayed anger that she assumed would be used to drive him in battle, but there was also greed there; wanton desire and impurity. He smiled grimly, revealing a half set of browned teeth. As Xen slunk away, he growled.

“I'm gonna teach you how a woman should behave, bitch.”

What a comic statement. Her foe clearly wasn't smart, but this did little to bolster her spirit. As he approached, she backed nervously away.

“Come help me!”

None of her companions responded, and why would they? They were safe. A tear escaped, and her assailant laughed.

It was Anejo who sparked her from her paralysis, speaking from Xen's memory. Her friend was ever frustrated by the 'unwarranted constraint' of gender, and spent her entire life trying to prove it was no disadvantage, driving her in perpetual over-achievement. Xen allowed these thoughts to rile her, to stir displeasure, and ever so subtly she felt the fear morphing elegantly into anger, an emotion she could use. She smoothed her uniform, and this triggered a laugh.

As she contained the anger, placing it carefully in a mental box, ease seemed to spread forth. She felt as though she was exercising, just another day of relentless repetition, and her path was suddenly clear. It all happened so naturally.

He attacked; a cumbersome strike designed to overpower. Despite its crude execution, it was effective, and would have bowled Xen clean over, but it failed because she stepped deftly aside. As her opponent's heavy weapon swept past, she used her shoulder to unsettle him. He stumbled and fell into stagnant waste, spitting and cursing as he climbed to his feet with mud caking his face. It was Xen's turn to laugh.

"You little bitch." He liked that word.

Anger flared in her, but it was contained, registering in her consciousness, but not altering it. This was the core skill of the mandahoi, a mental control of remarkable capacity, and as the man lunged, Xen reacted impulsively, parrying the blow so that his weight shifted. As he stumbled past, attempting to regain his balance, Xen slid her second weapon silkily into his lower stomach. It struck a satisfying resistance.

He grunted in frustration, not registering the steel which speared him, but as Xen pulled back, she could see the colour drain from his face. He stumbled as the blood flowed, clutching his belly and falling to his knees. He spoke through gritted teeth.

"You will pay for this, bitch."

Her mental control failed, and anger erupted – like a shock of light. It seemed to take an eternity for his body to slump to the path.

The fury receded, and fear engulfed her as the horror of her actions settled. Blood was bubbling from the man's gaping throat, and as Xen fell to her own knees, she realised she was covered in the red of her victim's destruction. That would never wash out.

She wept openly, feeling the warm tears against the cold of her cheeks, and as her fellow apprentices crept from the shadows, she snapped.

"Why didn't you help?"

None of them responded. Xen still felt nothing like the authority she had been afforded, and she cursed Anejo for her hasty charge. She rocked onto her feet, sheathing her weapons without cleaning them, and then turned to her small troop. There were only seven.

“Where’s Aran?”

The others looked at each other in mock bewilderment. Xen was certain he’d made the journey to town, but he was missing now, and she cursed. He was the ultimate coward, and she had a strong urge to abandon him, but if anyone was less suited to warfare than herself, it was Aran.

“Bloody craven.”

The curse was muttered under her breath, but she was certain the others heard. As she retraced her steps, she managed to coil the fear away as the sounds of battle hammered from without. This was not the life for her.

* * *

He was terrified, but of course he was. He was always terrified.

A scream reverberated through the town, the signature of butchery. Aran was safe down here, but this was still a place full of frights; not least the ones that never left him. He rubbed the patch of skin at his shoulder, recognising the change in relief. It was familiar, and he complimented it with mumbled words.

“... Kunati will rise again.”

He mouthed the last line of the poem that brought him such comfort. It was unfamiliar to anyone he dared recite it to, but he knew that it was buried in a forgotten past; a past when perhaps he had existence. He wrapped his hands about himself, stroking the comfort of his shoulder, singing his song.

“... Kunati will rise—“

“ARAN!”

By god, someone had come for him! By all the gods who did, and more likely didn’t, care about him, someone had come to take him from this place! Was it Anejo? Yes, it must be, she was the only one to care, or was care too strong? It must be her.

He climbed from his haunches, revealing himself to the dank street. The barrels that formed his shield were poorly maintained, broken and leaking, but they served as a cloak. He stepped from his concealment, and his demon purred as a consequence. He could control it, he was sure he could, and he breathed in deeply before speaking out.

“Anejo?”

Silence; had he imagined it? He stood for a moment, heart beating and his darkness on the cusp of agitation. He was desperate for a response, desperate to hear Anejo's voice, but when it finally came, it wasn't Anejo's.

"Where are you?"

He rubbed his shoulder, wrapping his arms around his body, as if that could keep the terror locked inside. The voice was Xen's, and she sounded angry. She always seemed to sound angry; at least she did around him. Did he really want her to find him? Too late, he had spoken out.

"There, get the little shit!"

There were two of them, running through the filth towards him. They looked terrifying, dark clothed, dark haired, evil eyes, and meaty weapons poised. One of them was tall and sleek, a cruel edge to him, and the other maintained an almighty beard which disguised his face. Both had murderous intentions, and why wouldn't they? It wasn't every day you got to kill a mandahoi. Prize indeed.

Aran ripped his mandibles free, horrified at how unfamiliar the weapons felt. As he unfurled himself, he feared the darkness might escape, and he heaved involuntarily. His aggressors growled in response, and he succumbed to a knee. What a gallant showing.

"Get him!"

Beardy came fast, hacking down with a length of iron. It was crude, but it was way beyond Aran's capacity. His mandible jumped from his hand, and as he swung his other arm in desperation, he slipped face first to the floor. This was his moment, and it was almost over already. The darkness threatened to crack right out of him.

"Kunati will rise again ..."

His eyes were dragged up as his second weapon was kicked violently from his hand, bruising his knuckle. Beardy stood over him, and Skinny was just beside, pleased with the opportunity. They obviously saw Aran as a trophy; how wrong they were.

The horror clawed within, desperate to escape and to wreak its havoc, but Aran resisted. He'd always held it back ... except once. Now was not the time though, never again. He would rather die.

"Who wants to kill him?"

A nod between the men; it appeared beardy had the honour. The great length of iron went up, Aran rubbed his shoulder, and then all seemed to go dark. A silhouette swept before Mother, someone roared, and a short length of polished steel erupted from

the taut body of Beardy. His eyes glassed over, his muscles relaxed, and then he was falling to the ground. Skinny was shocked, stunned by the sudden momentum, but his confusion was soon remedied. He received the same length of steel through his stomach.

“Get up will you! You’re a disgrace.”

That hurt, but it was clearly true. He clambered to his feet as Skinny hit the ground. Xen pulled her weapon free and turned stony eyed to Aran.

“In the name of our dear departed Father, you are a mandahoi! Start acting like one.”

The horror within him calmed, receding to the pit of his stomach. With its disappearance returned Aran’s sense of control, and he managed a pitiful response.

“I’m sorry.” He rubbed his shoulder and mouthed his poem. This was not the life for him.

* * *

Immaculate skill was only part of the Mandahoi armoury; and the lesser part too. Any well-trained sap could wield the katana with near equalling skill. It was the mind that set the mandahoi apart.

Relentless logic and brutal single-mindedness were part of the formula, but there were so many other components: expert interpretation of the senses; the ability to manage and repress emotions; and an unparalleled link between thought and action. These were but a few. The universe of the Mandahoi mental landscape was a complex one indeed.

Keles was a master of all these things.

A soldier of unparalleled capability, he was the marvel of a dozen generations. His ability to marry speed and skill with strategy rendered him terrible in combat, and he now applied his craft in the mountain town of Nazalia. Few even among the mother organisation of the Mahan could compare to Keles at his best, but he was painfully aware that one among them did hold even greater renown. Kato was a legend in his lifetime, and for the first time in many, Keles had a point to prove. It was almost a shame that the reality of the man seemed a mere shadow of his reputation.

The enemy were massing about a fountain at the heart of the town square. What was left of the place was an open cobbled patch surrounded by pyrotechnic shells, but the flames did not worry Keles. He approached the enemy with an ease that could only grow from a lifetime of achievement. They were cowering, like a wounded deer before

its final desperate sortie, but wounded creatures were dangerous propositions. Desperation was not to be balked at.

He strolled in their direction, his feet searching the slippery cobbles for the surest footing. His blades were stowed, and he walked with a swagger that would unnerve the most stubborn enemy. As he went, he cracked his knuckles, revelling in the sharp control the habit betrayed. That, too, caused the enemy to shiver as a single entity, and he smiled.

A disturbance swept over him, and his attention was drawn. From a dark alley plunged a man in desperate flight, and the reason was soon obvious. Behind him stalked a grey fiend with unrelenting purpose and a barely concealed mood of disdain. It was not long before the chase was up, and an immaculate length of steel punctured through flesh to render the engagement fulfilled. Keles went to intervene before she did herself harm.

“Anejo!”

She turned on him with rabid insanity in her eyes. It was clear that any regard for the ordered Mandahoi process was obsolete. For a moment he thought she might strike, such was her intensity, but he had seen this before. Damn it, even he had let his emotions free in the earliest of days. He cracked his knuckles and spoke with authority.

“Calm yourself.”

For a moment she seemed to snarl, looking truly fiendish as she squatted over her victim, blood dripping from her weapons and pattering on the cobbles. But at his command, she morphed into the frightened young woman she truly was. She wept.

Exactly the reason women should not be permitted as mandahoi. He thought of Xen, and hated himself for it. Absent Father, please let her be safe.

He placed a hand about Anejo’s shoulder, leading her away, desperate to enquire after Xen but not permitting himself. To her credit, Anejo was quickly restored and managed a heavy but regular breathing pattern. It was evident that the realities of war had struck hard, but she was strong-minded, there was no denying that. He only needed to turn her thoughts to purpose, and she would no doubt be challenging his authority in an instant. He cracked the joint of his neck as he offered direction.

“Come, shall we finish this?”

All animosity seemed to be forgotten, and Anejo looked primed to obey; that was a rarity. Only then did Keles recognise the approaching form at the edge of his vision, and he felt acid in his throat. If Anejo was awkward, then this man was infuriating. He

was nothing like the legend he purported to be, and Keles did not want to allow his disappointment to fester. He would ignore it instead.

“Are you ready?”

She nodded, but as she did, Kato interjected; damned timing that was.

“Excellent work. Your students are most adept. It doesn’t look like you needed us at all.”

The gift was too great. “I was about to say the same.”

"Ahh, but we have only just begun, have we not?"

The legend stared with an intensesness that Keles had not seen before, but the irritation did not waver.

“Once we have the square secure, then we can certainly call this victory. Do you disagree?”

Kato sighed, as if in disappointment. Keles felt his heart skip a beat, a rare emotional affliction, and he was about to react when a rolling thunder declared itself. Rain started, light at first but quickly increasing in intensity. Keles stated the obvious.

“We’re in for a storm.”

“You think it thunder?”

There was something different about the bumbling man, a surety that had not previously been there. The plain gauze mask covering Kato’s jaw did little to conceal his facial reactions, and Keles saw the serious concern. This unnerved him.

“Yes of course.”

“If that was thunder, Master Keles, then where was the lightning?”

A heavy feeling settled in the pit of the stomach, a distinctly unfamiliar and unpleasant sensation. It was uncertainty, and Keles did not like its intrusion. It was soon usurped as a second eruption rolled through the mountains, clearer this time with an obvious source. As Keles witnessed two monstrosities rising into the sky, the uncertainty melted into dread.

“Dragons.”

He found himself recoiling despite their distance, crouching as if to seek invisibility. The dragons were vast, over thirty strides long with writhing snake-like bodies. They were smoky grey, but their underside held a hint of orange that could have been reflected firelight. Keles's mind was panicked, desperately seeking out a course of action, but he was lost, and felt vulnerable. No training had instructed him on this eventuality.

It was only when Kato spoke that Keles realised the other was still standing in open defiance. The legend spoke with a calmness that to Keles's ears seemed totally out of keeping with the bumbling personality of before. He shuddered at the words.

“They are sendeté; not dragons. Semantics I know, but a thing is not worth stating unless it is correct.”

Keles felt sick as the horror inside him mingled with something that may have been forging itself into awe. Kato and his student walked casually left of Friendly as Keles watched with cold confusion in his heart; his doubts over the Axis were being washed away by the steadily increasing rainfall, and he still had no plan. That he couldn't help thinking of Xen only made things worse. He tried to crack his knuckles, but annoyingly, they adopted a silent and lubricated state.

Awe

The madness subsided, becoming little more than a dim ache. Cold reason had been restored, but the ordered logic of her mind was unsettled by the exceptional circumstances. The dragons dominated, making frequent attacks upon the town, but they were also being drawn regularly north, intrigued by the endeavours of Kato and his pupil who were scaling a face of sheer stone. The arrogance of the move was bewildering.

Anejo was crouched at the edge of the square with Faculty Blasetté, who was, today at least, acting as subjugate to Keles, the younger caste master. Keles himself remained in the open, defying the dragons and working his sword-craft on an enemy still huddled around the fountain. The forays were generally unsuccessful since the enemy was safely stowed behind a collective shell of shields, but such obstacles did not dilute Keles's enthusiasm. He was certainly determined.

Urgency flashed, an intuitive sensation dragging at her gut, and her attention was drawn to a group of five aggressors erupting from a dark street. Keles had not seen them, and she knew she must intervene. So she did.

Anejo was moving before Blasetté had a chance to restrain her. She accelerated across the square, soaked afresh as she went. The five men did not notice initially, but as Keles became aware and turned upon his assailants, two of the five diverted their attentions to Anejo.

Arrows darted past, making a subtle patter as they carved their way through the sodden air. Anejo was conscious of the missiles and of how close they were, but as she lofted her blades, ready for engagement, she was pleased to note one arrow thump purposefully into an oncoming torso. He fell mechanically to the ground, life torn clean away.

Her challenge was now singular, and it was almost easy. The training of the mandahoi was notorious, and it yielded soldiers of impeccable skill and craft. Her opponent, by contrast, wielded his sword like an axe, marrying its weight with his own bulk. She moved to counter with precise poise, her blades sensitive to the tiniest of commands. There was something surgical about her movement, a delicacy to the strokes as she swept past her opponent like a dancer. The blades themselves were superb pieces, edged to a razor finish, of the finest northern steel, and as she deflected

the weighty onslaught, her swords sung with the joy of work. It was only a matter of time before she elegantly side-stepped an approach, and sliced effortlessly through the defences of her opponent, opening his body into a bloody mess.

The pain shot immediately through her.

She held onto her weapons in desperation as she was flung through the air. Her side was ripped to shreds as she slid to a halt, but once still, she rolled deftly onto her back, swords raised to challenge whoever had assaulted her. What she saw was enough to break down the steely resolve, rendering her meek as an infant. It seemed that God had come to pass judgment.

The dragon landed and was settled over her, one front and two rear legs supporting the weight of the gargantuan body. Its wings were spread wide, casting an ominous shadow over the slick ground. There was malice in the beast's eyes, cruel intent spilling across its face as it bared its teeth in a murderous grin. The other front claw was raised casually, poised to strike at the tip of a heartbeat. Anejo was the object of that intent, and she could do little but stare up in mute horror.

Terror consumed her, rendering her body independent from her rapidly working mind. She could feel her back slowly revealing its agony, but the pain was of little consequence when death hovered over her. She could see Keles in the periphery of her vision, disbelief on his face and a clear lack of perceived options in his inactivity. It dawned on Anejo that this situation was of her own design; it was for her alone to solve, no other's problem. It was her game of life and death, one of the thrills that had drawn her to the soldier's path, and something in her revelled at the prospect. Her stubborn streak wrapped itself around the petrifying fear.

The claw started its descent, the beast's grin widening as the scaly foot accelerated towards Anejo's destruction. She looked on in silent rebellion, allowing urgency to consume as her body fell back within her power. She felt her fingertips twitch at a command, a tiny reflex which eased a mountain of anxiety, and in that moment her focus was restored. The claw continued with increasing force, and it was in a fraction that Anejo planned the path of her fate and reacted accordingly.

The foot slammed into the ground, slapping water into the air and sending tremors through the courtyard, but Anejo was not beneath it. She rolled immaculately from her paralysis, and as the sendeté's face twitched with confusion, she forced steel through the scaly flesh of the foot. The dragon screamed.

It was a cry that reverberated with the age of a hundred millennia. It was a cry so ancient that the very fabric of the world shivered at its outburst: a fundamental balance had been challenged, and Anejo was the antagonist. As the beast darted upwards, clawing at its impaled foot, Anejo felt the pain blossom across her body, and she fell to her knees. When Keles came over, he was not wearing a face of reluctant acceptance, or even quiet respect; his face betrayed genuine astonishment. As Anejo's beaten torso throbbed with rising pain, she managed a barely perceptible smile. It wasn't everyday she earned the respect she deserved. It was just a shame it hurt so much when she got it.

* * *

There was no other way to say it: they were beaten. Anejo's heroics had faded into the near past, and there was only despair remaining. Keles flexed his fingers in that specifically angular way, but still nothing. No click, no resistance; nothing. It was a curious thing that his comforting habit ceased in times of nervousness, and it was even more curious that he'd never recognised this before. And yet it also wasn't strange in the slightest. He'd never been scared before, so how could he know?

A suffocating roar stretched through the town, transforming friend and foe alike into trembling wrecks. The beast swept overhead, its orange belly brazen in the dull light, suppressing the masses below. Keles arced his shoulders, but still there was only silence. His right hand resorted to gripping and releasing the hilt of his paw. Damn useless weapon that was against these flying brutes.

His senses fluttered, and this too was a source of embarrassment. Nothing about Keles ever fluttered: he pounded, dominated, shouted. He was a shell of his former self, reduced as such by the twin incarnation of the Mandari god, Rhanna. The religious implications of seeking the destruction – albeit rather forlornly – of the beasts was at the very back of his mind. He would deal with the disapproving Ranji priests later. His first priority was not dying.

And yet Kato had called them *sendeté*. Did that mean anything? Probably not; the man was an idiot.

The mythology of the Axis had failed to materialise in spectacular fashion. The legend and his pupil had ventured north, scaling, rather arrogantly, a sheer face of stone, and achieving little more than a diversion in the attention of the beasts. It may be more than Keles himself had achieved, but it was not the stuff of stories. And yet somehow, in an impossibly discernible way, just the presence of the man made the whole affair darker. What did the Axis know?

“Sir.”

So that was why his senses had been bubbling; if his day wasn't miserable enough.

“What is it?” He did not even bother to look, and continued to massage his useless weapon. Anejo spoke with her usual vigour.

“I've had a thought—”

“Congratulations.” Probably a little on the harsh side, but his mood was foul. “What have you been thinking, sage honour?”

That would annoy her, but he didn't care. His frustration at a lack of options had shortened his temperament. Anejo wound him up, so it was his time to retaliate.

“Please don't call me—“

Genuine panic consumed him, and he grabbed hold of the young woman, pulling her heavily to the ground. The orange belly swept over, low enough to reach out and touch. The breath of the thing lingered, ancient and putrid, and it screamed in frustration. The beasts may have the mandahoi pinned in their hiding places, but they were not dextrous enough to pick out their victims; a small reason for contentment.

He looked to Anejo and saw pain in her eyes; or agony. He eased her up, remembering where the dragon had swiped at her, and felt guilty. He was a caste master; he should be beyond emotions. He thought of Xen.

“I'm sorry; I am frustrated.”

She seemed to shrug off his rudeness, and spoke her piece. She always did.

“It seems to me, sir, that this is a well considered trap. I think this entire circumstance was designed.”

Silence; nothing more than that. Keles spoke through clenched teeth.

“A trap?”

“Well, perhaps a detour. These dragons are here to keep us occupied, and they're perfect for the job. We're stuck in a trap, sir, and we need to break out.”

Infuriating was not a big enough word. He could not even look at her.

“Your words are duly noted. Now, please return to the fringes and get some rest. You have suffered—“

“What do you think?”

He snapped.

“Of course it is a trap, and we have become embroiled right in it! Your analysis is extremely profound, but it is also useless when stated after the event.” He turned on her, and she looked shocked at the outburst; a fair response in hindsight. This young

woman had done more direct damage to the monsters than every other mandahoi in total. She deserved some respect. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that, but unless you have a way out of this nightmare, your words are weightless.”

He looked around, noting the locations of his caste masters and his numerous students; all well concealed and all utterly useless. They were stuck, and Keles had no inkling as to what the purpose of the trap could be. Kato’s presence had an even darker feel to it, but this conundrum was beyond even the illustrious figure of the legend, let alone the bumbling reality. Keles looked left of, and noted the now sole figure scaling the face of stone in futility. Was this the night that a legend died?

“Something will turn up, sir. We’re mandahoi, and we’ll find a way.”

Not out of this we won’t. “Your optimism is misplaced. What we need is a miracle, a bloody god given miracle.”

Their attention was very suddenly torn left of, and Keles watched on as his miracle was granted upon them.

* * *

The wind whistled around him, clawing as he continued to climb. The rock was slippery and each grip was precarious, but there was no let-up. Kato continued to climb with the same resolve that had served him all his life.

It had taken the sendeté a while to realise what was happening, but they had a good idea now and were making satisfying detours from the shattered town below. Their roaring was the only thing Kato heard above the shrieking gale, but it was not his sense of hearing that he relied upon. It was the mysterious sixth sense the Mahan called ima. He grabbed an out-hanging rock and catapulted himself up the sheer face of stone.

The sendeté sensed the vulnerability and attacked.

Kato’s mind was a blissful peace in a storm of chaos. At the edge of his consciousness, just outside the comprehensible grasp, he could sense the maelstrom of his repressed emotions; the humanity that was forced from him long ago. What was left was pure emotionless logic. Gone was the pre-tense of bumbling simpleton; gone was the outward show of social mediocrity; there was no reason to play human now. This was where Kato thrived, what he was crafted for, and as panic settled on the mortals below, Kato slowly unfurled the phenomenon that lay within.

His mind buzzed, a sweep of perception unwinding in his majestically calm mind. The sendeté were swooping up the cliff in an awesome disrespect of gravity. They were

attacking single-file, covering the space in mere heartbeats. As Kato reacted to his senses, he heard the pained scream of Jilas below. His apprentice was lost.

Kato gracefully slid himself out of death's jaws, and the sendeté streaked past with a stink carrying on the still turbulent air. Kato extended his right arm, grabbing hard stone with precarious purchase, and was moving again before he had even settled. He was unrelenting.

The sound of Jilas screaming as the two monsters played mercilessly with him caused the peripheral cauldron to boil harder, flickering into the edge of comprehension and then melting away before Kato could grab them; ghosts at the edge of his mind. He had battled the sensation all his adult life, fighting to grab a fragment of the humanity that was conditioned out of him, but always failing. Here and now, he let the humanity bubble away without interfering. He had spent two years with Jilas, offering every day to nurture the young talent, but now that his pupil was dropping to a messy end in this bleak mountain town, Kato felt nothing. He was dead to emotion and continued to climb as the sendeté screeched in triumph.

His senses bubbled with activity once more, a frenzy of signals blossoming as ima came alive. He found himself obeying the one thing he truly trusted, and conscious disbelief fell across him for the most fleeting of moments; he found his hands loosening, and his legs kicking from the wall.

He did not fight the action, did not challenge the deep subconscious guidance, but confusion lay there as he watched the scant security fall away. His mind buzzed with the spectral visage of two winged beasts tearing up the mountain, and suddenly recognition triggered in his conscious facets. He was immediately calm.

They were approaching in a pincer, denying the route of escape he had last used. Ima had reacted to this and triggered him to carry out the action the beasts would least expect; he was falling. He felt gravity clawing, felt the weight of his own body dragging him into a reverse spin as he began the long drop. The wind whipped, pulling him randomly about, but the force of falling was greater and his trajectory took him further through the loop.

It was when he was dropping head first that he angled his chin, turning his vision to the ground, dizzily far below. He spotted his two assailants, one to his left and the other coming straight up from below. The face that greeted him was of pure evil.

The beast was flying with its back to the stone, its wings extended in an elegant formation. Tiny movements of the spiny arms changed the structure of the wing and

pushed the sendeté through a delicately managed flight pattern. The action was instinct, the beast's eyes remaining focussed firmly on Kato, but as the Mahan legend looked down upon the threat, he felt nothing but simple clarity. He was pleased to feel the firmness of his swords as he reached for them.

The sendeté recognised the casualness with which Kato revealed the long ghostly weapons, and its grim smile faded as the metal glinted in the fleeting sunlight. Just moments earlier the beast wore a look of dirty pleasure on its snout, but Kato's calm activity unsettled the ancient creature and a shadow of panic swept over it. The sound of scaly hide crashing against stone mingled with a whimpering cry, and the beast writhed madly as it struggled to change its path. But the reaction was late, and Kato was too close. It was with blissful ease that he completed the turn, extended his arms, and dug two spectral blades deep into the body of the floundering beast.

The roar that went up must surely have been heard right through the mountains.

His victim flailed wildly, desperately arcing away from the face of stone, but Kato clung on. As the sendeté screamed in agony, desperate to extricate the mahan from its body, Kato plotted its doom, and even allowed himself to consider how he would tackle the second problem. He eased one blade from dragon flesh, allowing fiery orange blood to flow freely, and started to scale his prey like a climber on a living mountain. He moved towards the vulnerable head as ima commanded, the bones of a plan forming in his silent and emotionless mind.

The legend continued to escalate.

Roguary Revealed

Everyone was looking to the skies, but she wasn't. Everyone watched the miracle unfurl, marvelling at the impossibility of Kato, wondering how the stories fell short of the truth. They all watched as Kato dispatched the first, spearing its head mid-flight, before leaping majestically and shackling the other in his awesome grip. Xen ignored all of this. She had eyes for only one.

He was as startled as the rest, staring wonderingly to the brightening skies, arms by his side, mouth clearly agape. His profile was stunning, turning Xen's brow moist, flushing her cheeks, warming her centre. She smoothed her uniform as she watched, but she dreamed of unhindered nudity. She had never seen him so glorious, and she couldn't break herself from her reverie. She didn't want to in any case.

It was a double noise, two separate sources, one common goal. The sound was not familiar, but she was a mandahoi and she recognised the intent. Her eyes were drawn, angered at the interruption to her glassy fantasy, but the dream was quickly forgotten. An opportunistic crossbowman had cocked his weapon, and he now took aim. The target: Keles.

The mists of hell descended, and control was instantly surrendered. She leapt, not a care for her security. Her weapons scraped from their housing, still damp with blood, hungry for more. She screamed, furious, desperate for intervention, but as the bolt fizzed towards Keles, she knew it was too late. She saw him drop from the corner of her vision, and anger so bright filled her that she continued aggressively on. Tears filled her eyes, but she did not need her sight. She needed nothing but revenge.

She hurtled into their midst, her weapons writhing in a skilled dance; the training flowed naturally through her. The enemy was well protected, huddled behind a wall of interlocking shields, but the impact of Xen's attack prised open a small gap, and without a thought, she was forcing herself deeper into that wound. Enemies lay dead and dying at her feet.

She swiped right, her short weapon biting steel as the enemy rallied. The jarring impact expelled the last of the madness, and with it came sadness of the deepest kind. This was not the life for her. Any life without Keles was not her own.

Light faded as the enemy closed menacingly about. She was surrounded, but she didn't care. What was the point of it all? Keles was gone, and go therefore must she;

they were two halves of a whole. She lowered her weapons and let moistness flood her cheeks.

The enemy laughed, a deep multi-faceted cackle that rumbled through the private shell; the laugh of a hundred foul intents. A set of white teeth flashed as she followed a malevolent snarl. The commander was about to make his introductions.

“You appear to have stumbled into our hive. I hope you can stomach a sting or two.” Xen laughed.

It was not even that funny, just weird. It was the frustration that she laughed at, the fact that her moments of intimate mourning for her lover would be reduced to this. Comedy turned to anger, and determination came with it; like a faithful friend. Xen thought of Anejo. What would she do? It was obvious really.

“You must be the queen?”

He was not easily provoked.

The queen shuffled forward, a pillar of light illuminating his face. He looked hard and unforgiving, a man driven by the thrill of destruction, a man with little in his life other than destruction. He had a surprised look, as if he was not expecting a woman’s voice, but it soon melted.

“A woman! Alive or dead, you will offer much amusement for my colony. They have been deprived of female attentions for such a long time.”

He sounded grotesque, barely human in his guttural slurring. His bees sniggered, and Xen could feel tension in the crowded space. Now was the time to strike, while they were still amused. A tear bubbled up and she thought of Keles. What would she do without him? She desperately wanted to see him, and that drove her on.

She struck quickly, a rapid thrust that jabbed at the queen's face. He was surprised, struggling to react, but from the shadows, a shield was thrown out, and Xen’s onslaught was immediately halted. She cursed under her breath as she struggled to extract her mandible from wood, but before she succeeded, she felt a sharp sensation vault up her right leg. She turned and found a short blade retreating from where it had punctured her thigh.

“Damn!”

The cry encouraged the hive into a flurry. She was stung a number of times in quick succession, cruel prods just deep enough to pierce skin and muscle, not deep enough to do serious harm. Energy was dissipating as her grey uniform turned a rich black from the wounds. She felt dizzy, stumbling on the cobbles as she struggled to

maintain cohesion, and as she looked through swimming vision, she saw the commander just a hand's width from her face. He eased forward so they were cheek to cheek, like intimate lovers, and hissed into her ear.

"I think you'll enjoy my sting best, my little flower."

She could feel vile hands all over her body, groping and massaging. She sensed the commander readying himself, and through tear streaked eyes, she saw filthy excitement in his face. She still held one mandible, the second weapon discarded in her fitful attempts at retaliation, and she turned it about so that it pointed hard into her stomach. She spat at the commander, watching with hazy satisfaction as phlegm ran over his grimy eye.

"I will never give you the pleasure." That was Keles's privilege alone.

She was a fluttering beat from forcing her stomach forward, and the blade in the opposite direction, but somehow, for no conscious reason, she hesitated. It was as a dark veil started descending that her entire world turned to chaos. Everything changed.

Light erupted from somewhere, everywhere, saturating her tear-stained vision. The group of soldiers seemed to melt away, rattled by some unknown interference. A crashing noise came from her right, and she found her mouth was full of dust. The sudden invasion of her senses had lifted the veil, and she sniffed hard, using her left sleeve to wipe her tears away. She took in the sight before her, and then she fell forwards, onto her blade, out of shock, exhaustion, and lack of blood. She braced herself for the crack of bone on stone, and the last thing her mind offered was a fleeting memory of Keles. It was incredibly realistic.

* * *

He came as close to frantic as he'd ever been. He was beating down on the shell manically, trying to break the resolve of those within, but it was in vain. It was all very well having the finest swordsmanship in Ahan, but against a structure of solid wood and leather, these methods would always be useless. Fear again welled inside him, encouraged by the cries that broke from the enemy formation, and it was with mingled horror and exhilaration that his world was utterly rocked.

Anejo, of course, alerted him to the approach, and Keles looked on with disgust as he contemplated the consequences; there was nothing he could do to prevent it. He pulled back, cringing at the guttural moans of the perishing beast that echoed across the square. Kato was sat astride the dragon, his weapon embedded at the base of its head so that he could use pain to control the descent; he was guiding the dying sendeté towards

the fountain in the centre of the town; towards Xen. Keles could do nothing but breathe, and put his hope in a miracle; another one.

The beast hit the ground with an almighty tremor. The whole square seemed to shake, a visible shudder at the impact, and as Keles steadied himself, he noticed cracks in the enemy's shell. He wanted to charge, to prise open the defences and rescue her, but logic gripped him, and he watched the sendeté continue with awful momentum towards the formation. It struck with a sickening crunch, and continued on mercilessly. Those who were fortunate of the enemy fled in terror; those who were less charmed were killed instantly; and those who were least lucky of all were injured beyond recovery, but left with their senses.

The fountain, which had been the hub of the enemy formation, was obliterated by the dragon's mass, and the stone structure crumbled into a cloud of dust. Fiery blood stained the damp cobbles where the beast had passed, and bodies lay strewn everywhere. The enemy that dissipated were being hunted mercilessly by the mandahoi, and the victory that seemed so utterly impossible now accelerated into being. Keles, though, was not concerned for victory. He looked around desperately for the lost mandahoi.

He spotted her on her knees, surrounded by dying bodies, with her short-blade readied just over her belly. She was wavering and could fall either way. She could fall on her blade even, without the will. Her body started to tip forward.

He leapt toward her, slipping in the blood of eviscerated victims, and rounding a slick of internal organs. He arrived with fortunate timing, skidding to his knees, and catching Xen before the steel slid into her. He eased the weapon away from her stomach, and tried to comfort her as best he could manage. She moaned in response, and whether conscious or not, it was a small comfort; she was living at least.

Her body was covered in dark stains, evidence of the assault she had endured. She was losing a lot of blood, and Keles ripped cloth from his own uniform to stem the bleeding where it was worst. She reacted to the pressure upon the wounds, her face scrunching up in suppressed pain, and this Keles took to be another good sign; she was responsive.

He laid her tenderly on the ground, moving delicately to place her head in a position of relative comfort. Once contented, he stood and screamed desperately for his finest physician.

“Blasetté!”

The duelling master looked up, almost oblivious to his long slender weapon that remained safely ensconced through the heart of his victim. He nodded in acknowledgment, removed the weapon with grim ease before wiping it on the crumpling opponent, and then rushed over. Keles tried to retain a look of concerned authority rather than panicked fear. He suspected that he failed.

“What is it?”

“Xen; she has been badly injured. She’s lost a lot of blood.”

Blasetté looked down at her, wincing at the stains on her uniform, but getting quickly to work.

“Dear Solemnity, how did this happen?”

“She was brave.” That was probably a lie. “Will she be okay?”

Blasetté nodded, and then pulled a bottle of spirit and a roll of bandage from his belt. Keles watched on for a moment, yearning for the surety of a definitive answer, but Blasetté was not obliging.

“Get out of here.”

Keles sucked up his uncertainty, forcing his mind from Xen, and tore himself back to the issue at hand. Victory may have been earned by extraordinary means, but he still wanted answers. As his eyes settled on the industrious form of Kato, an undeniable sense of awe blossomed and he had a sense of wanting to be close to the man. Then he saw Anejo hurtling purposefully in the same direction, and the awe morphed into ... something else. She had done great things this day, but he could still not trust her. He went to intervene before she could stir any more mischief.

* * *

Chaos had come, but with it arrived a sense of order. That order was still very much in the making, but Anejo could not wait. Something lay very uncomfortably in the pit of her stomach. She wanted desperately to enquire after Xen, but enough attention was being offered that way. She went to find Kato.

She arrived just as he was slicing clean through the throat of his victim, and her heart fluttered at the brutality. The man’s gullet gaped like a wide mouth, cut from ear to ear, and blood flowed freely down his chest. He would be answering no more questions.

“What are you doing?”

She was shocked at the treatment, but as Kato stood, she recognised. Her stomach boiled, and she retched as she quickly averted her eyes. The lower half of the deceased

was totally destroyed, a devastated mass of tissue and pulp. She was just able to make out the sharp fragments of proud bone, but mostly it was a red obliterated mess. Kato stated the obvious.

“It was a kindness.”

She glanced back cautiously before turning violently away. Only when the nausea had subsided did she notice Kato staring intently in her direction. Keles had just arrived at her shoulder, but the legend spoke first.

“You had suspicions, Anejo. Can you elaborate on the detail?”

The tone was completely out of keeping with the dragon violating potent of moments before. She had to snap herself out of her stunned silence, but she was not quick enough; her unwanted conscience spoke for her.

“This is my conflict—“

“Please Keles, this is not the time.”

The slight was harsh ... and satisfying. Kato seemed to want to listen to her, to her and not the Mandahoi marvel. She struggled to form her words, but her emotions ran hot and they finally erupted.

“I always knew that we were here for a reason, though I question from where the impetus came.” At this Keles looked rightfully sheepish; he had followed where Kato had led. “The question was why a hundred mandahoi would be herded thus. I suspect it was a diversion, though for what, I confess that I do not know.” She scraped at her cuticles, eyeing Kato’s features eagerly. Keles twitched beside her, rolling his shoulders and achieving that frustrating click. It was like a stand-off, her versus her superior, and Kato was the judge. What a judge to have.

“The true target is Altunia.”

She basked in the light of glory, but the victory was sour, and she felt herself heave. Altunia. Home.

“This cannot be. Altunia is defended—“

Anejo stopped listening to the beleaguered pleas of her superior. Everything she knew settled into place, and she was certain that Kato was right. The whole country had been duped, and her home was now at risk. She came to her senses, and watched as the Axis strode purposefully across the sodden cobbles of the square. He had a plan, and she was inclined to be involved. She chewed her lower lip and ran after him.

“You think there is still time, don’t you?” Kato spun about, and may have even had pride edging his gaze.

“If we ride hard, yes. If we can get to the High Councillor in time, the threat may be averted.”

The High Councillor, Anejo’s grandfather: hope fluttered into a tangible concept, and she felt purpose flowing. She looked towards Keles, noting his resigned impression, and then returned her attention to Kato. Her inquisitive streak was burning hot, and she knew she had to go with this strange man. He had little hope of convincing her grandfather with such thin evidence, but if Anejo were to join him, then perhaps...

“Let me come with you. I can help you convince my grandfather.”

He cocked his head quizzically, clearly confused. “You think he will not heed my advice?”

She closed her eyes in disbelief. She had seen wondrous things by this oddity, but to witness him so oblivious to the social isolation he commanded within her country was strangely out of keeping. She was surprised to see genuine interest burning in his eyes, but decided haste must take precedent.

“You must trust me.”

By Dark Means

The ocean was like a gently rippled sheet of glass, the waves casually muscling up to the hull of the Mithras. The sky above was as clear as the sea below, and thick with an intricate structure of celestial decoration. All five moons were proud and full, and even ancient Father of Fortune – the Departed – held a prominent if ghostly presence. To anyone with moral acts in their soul, it would have been a bad omen, but General Kantal of the Delfinian army, was the mischief maker this night. He failed to suppress a smile as his mischief sailed steadily into being.

Reports came to him before he set sail twelve nights earlier, but more had turned up since; birds arrived on an almost daily basis. The gulls were remarkable creatures, and Kantal had never imagined they could offer such value, but out here, isolated, they were a lifeline. His plan was unravelling perfectly.

The Mikaetans descended upon the valley of Aperta in numbers not witnessed for a generation, and left of the Finder, the Gorfinians were pushing through the forest of Los. To the right of, Ahan was well and truly tied up in knots, concerned for a large Delfinian force meandering its way along the defensive might of Lebenthé. Kantal allowed himself a fitful chuckle as he contemplated his devilish genius. While Ahan was being drawn to the three gates that it so valued, he was sailing to the soft underbelly, carried elegantly by stealth and subterfuge. He would strike them where it hurt most, the Mind of Ahan, and they would not know until it was too late.

Nazalia was a last moment stroke of genius. He had always worried that the Mandahoi would not be entirely absorbed in the border scuffles, but the presence of two sendeté was the perfect way to tie up surplus resource. They had cost a fortune, almost as much as the bribe that was sailing with him now, but the sendeté were worth every gold stallion he had paid; they would wreak havoc for days to come. Kantal's wonderment was broken only by sudden commotion.

The cry came from the main mast, the voice breaking from just below the top-gallant sail. The object of Kantal's mischief had evidently surged into view.

“Land afore.”

The Mithras burst into life, and the sailors slipped smoothly into action. They scurried up the ratlines like a swarm, seeking out the highest point from which to confirm the claim. Moments later the night air was filled with the soft whispers of

‘aye’. Gods Kantal hated sailors and their ridiculous self constructed dialogue, but out here, at the mercy of the punishing ocean, he had to concede to their superior skills.

It took the general an age to make out the sight of land with his own eyes. As far as he could tell the entire horizon was a single smooth black line, but as the ship marched on, he finally noted tiny black prominences: the Pillars of Samal. That was Kantal’s gate to Altunia, the back door that would cost a small fortune to prise open, but when his devilish scheme succeeded, he would regret spending none of his king’s money; Ahan would fall, and the fee would be repaid a thousand times. A warming sensation spread through him as he slipped into his plentiful daydream, and his world suddenly turned to chaos.

Blinding light filled the bow of the ship, and Kantal’s dark-adapted eyes were dazzled by the flash, colourful lights swimming across his vision. But he did not recoil: he had been expecting this.

A fizzing sound reached his ears as a heavy fog entombed the front of the ship. A threatening glow remained visible within the darkening mist, and as the cloud slowly dissipated into the almost windless air, the crew grew nervous. A fight was threatening to break out.

“Calm yourselves, there is nothing to fear.”

He listened on as his orders were translated and rolled out through the ranks. A visible ease settled upon the sailors, but weapons were not lowered. The intrusion was still concealed in the mist, but as the glowing light faded, a shadowy outline became identifiable; they had a guest. Kantal shook the last dregs of shock from his vision, and approached with cavalier ease.

“Is such a ridiculous spectacle really required? A simple knock would have sufficed.”

Stepping out of the mist was a cloaked figure, a hood of such depth that the face was rendered darker than night itself. The presence was assured, almost obscenely so, and the metallic clink of the movement betrayed weaponry and armour. The advancing figure moved with ease, boots whispering over the wooden deck, and once Kantal had been reached, a gloved hand was extended in greeting. Kantal took hold of the forearm in the polite manner, but the gesture remained cold. The newcomer spoke with a rasping voice, thick with an awkward lisp that he had learned to decipher with time. This was a man whom Kantal had grown to detest.

“You underestimate the power of theatrics, general. I find that showmanship lends circumstance to my intention; a most useful outcome.”

Kantal’s dislike grew afresh, and he was rudely reacquainted with the basis of his hatred: the ‘Enabler’ was an unlikeable man. He was, though, a useful man, and that fact alone made the relationship necessary. Kantal would endure.

“Let us consider your wisdom in private, shall we? I find myself a little chilly.”

With this, he released abruptly from the empty greeting, and made his way to the captain’s cabin, which he had commandeered. His guest followed silently behind, like a ghost.

Kantal was permitted illumination in the quarters, a luxury that the rest of the ship had been wisely denied. The wide windows at the rear of the cabin were boarded, protecting the Mithras from spying eyes, but within the office, Kantal had oil lamps burning.

The room itself was luxurious, gilded extravagantly. There was a walled bed to the left, wide and comfortable with a down feather mattress pillaged from the pleasure isles of Cullin. There was a broad desk dominating the centre of the room, a large map spread upon it, along with a plethora of tools that Kantal knew not how to use. The desk itself had ornate legs, curved in the likeness of swans; very foreign. The other side of the cabin was filled with expensive furniture and two heavily secured chests, which belonged to Kantal’s king; his bribe. He eyed them nervously as he entered the room.

He sat behind the wide desk and found himself fingering the edging, avoiding the gaze of his guest who settled opposite. The door to the quarters was closed behind the pair by a brute of a sergeant, and Kantal felt comfortable in the fact he was amongst friends. If anyone should be nervous, it was his guest, but there was no sign of disquiet on his countenance. Kantal felt the familiar flutter in his stomach, an apparent consequence of audience with this freak.

Once the Enabler was sat stiffly in the cushioned seat, Kantal turned his gaze to the dark pit hiding the man’s face, and offered a broad smile. He needed to gain the high ground, and he would achieve this through courtesy.

“Would you care for a drink Master, ah, Enabler?”

His guest’s hood was so deep that even in this brightly lit room the upper hemisphere of his face was utterly obscured. The lower half was just discernible, and Kantal cringed at the sight. The right side of the face was covered by a heavy iron mask, hard edged with a disturbingly formed pair of lips forged in the design. The left-

half of the hidden face remained un-masked, and the flesh of the jaw appeared to be a mottled mess of bristly skin and leathery patches; like a lizard. Kantal shuddered at what might exist under the mask, and his dislike mingled with fear of the unfamiliar.

When the anomaly spoke, he did so with the lisp that appeared to be caused by the facial deformation. His skin snapped and cracked as he forged the speech through cumbersome lips, and the words themselves seemed to be spoken around heavy breath. They were suffocating.

“A glass of cool water would be adequate. It is peculiar to be surrounded by water, but unable to quench one’s thirst.”

Kantal expected nothing less of this frugal character, but he decided to tease for entertainment’s sake. It was all part of the delicate game of control he must master.

“Would you not prefer something stronger to celebrate our ... arrangement?”

“You are well aware of my inclinations, general. I would appreciate some consideration on your part.”

Kantal shrugged his shoulders, and made a point of pouring himself a large chalice of ruby-red wine before picking up a solid silver pitcher and pouring water into a wooden tumbler; small slights that he hoped would rankle. The Enabler took the drink with a courteous nod, and seemed to ignore the intended offence. With an edge of frustration, Kantal drank heavily, enjoying the rich and complex flavours as the wine rolled around the different parts of his mouth. It left a fruity note on his palate, very pleasant indeed, but there was also smokiness that made him thirsty for more. He considered it a very clever construct.

The devious side to Kantal’s nature was taking control as he reclined, and the unravelling success of his grand plan was stirring arrogance. Here he had the Enabler, a man he deeply disliked, in a world where he was master and commander, and he consequently indulged. The questions rolled off his tongue, like the sweet-tasting wine.

“What is the reason for such diligent concealment, my friend? Are you a particular fan of Gorfianian fashion, or do you have something to hide?”

The Enabler took a casual sip, his lips cracking with the action. He placed the wooden vessel sternly on the desk, and looked towards Kantal with what could only be construed as amusement. His disfigured mouth curled at the edge.

“I think you’ll find that the origin of Gorfianian attire is hardly a consequence of fashion. Have you ever broached that subject with a Gorfianian, face to face?”

Kantal squirmed: he had no business talking to Gorfinians at all if he had anything to do with it. He felt his command of the meeting slip, and he knew he must retaliate.

“Then I suppose you have answered part of my question, but not all. Why do you see the need to seek such concealment?”

The Enabler laughed, a bristly amusement rolling from the dark space under the hood. He spoke with deep pitch.

“I believe I suggested earlier that the power of mystique is a wonderful thing. I strongly suggest you consider what it could do for you.”

He was being mocked, but he could not quite see how. That hurt, and he decided to attack with the only verbal tool he truly mastered: a subtle threat.

“A mystique may have some purpose, but I find an open personality is far more effective when breeding trust. I don’t trust you, and I am therefore struggling to maintain faith in the outcomes I am seeking. You will forgive me if I require further evidence before I am comfortable with our ... ah ... exchange.”

He let the statement linger, let the tangibility of its meaning sink in. There was not the slightest change in expression on the visible face, but Kantal stayed silent nonetheless. His guest obediently broke after another precise sip of water.

“My work, General Kantal, is to enable. Do you understand what this means?”

Kantal leaned back and shrugged. “By the Uncle’s wisdom, please do enlighten me.”

“Do you think that the work I carry out will always please everyone involved? Do you believe that the events I facilitate are beneficial to all parties?” Kantal shook his head cautiously before the Enabler continued. “Very wise. Do you therefore suggest that my trade is the nurture of trust when certain parties will invariably be displeased with my activities?”

Kantal countered. “And yet, surely the bond of trust is only necessary with those you represent—“

“No, that is not how these things work. I am a facilitator, not a trickster. I have others with whom the bonds of trust are forged. I only enable what others seek. That is all.”

Kantal scowled, recognising the intent of the words. He was trapped. “You dare to suggest that your employers do not always trust you?”

The Enabler reclined casually, and took another sip. Kantal knew he had been outdone, even though he did not yet understand why. The man's response was as arrogant as it was true.

"I usually find that my client's desire for facilitation is greater than their desire to trust my person. My work is to feed off the greed of others, and greed often usurps more savoury faculties. It is a most useful frailty."

It was a frightening synthesis of the human condition, but it ran disturbingly close to the truth; Kantal could try to argue that he was not hungry for his victory over the Mandari of Ahan, but he would be lying. He had yearned after that victory every moment of his adult life, ever since his definition. It was what he was made for. He was the Maul.

But the notion soured Kantal's mood and evaporated any further impudence. He sat back and supped on his wine, not now finding such delight in the drink. His mood was about to depress further.

"If you are so desperate for evidence of my faithful delivery, then I will be happy to offer some up. You have news of Nazalia?" Kantal nodded cautiously. "And what is the outcome? Have you snared yourself anything?"

Kantal sucked down a deep breath. Nazalia had been his stroke of genius, his moment of brilliance, but he felt it slipping away.

"One hundred mandahoi have been embattled there." The Enabler stared back, and his dirty grin cracked even wider. Kantal was ushered to press. "Are you suggesting you have involvement?"

"General Kantal, do you really believe that one hundred mandahoi would roam about that desolate place without coercion? You have too much faith in fortune. I am the Lord of Chance, general. Not you."

He had not heard that one before. "Lord of Chance – what ridiculous title is that?"

"It is my veiled name, and it is beyond your comprehension."

Kantal chilled. His world was crumbling around him, the bricks of his masterpiece revealing varying architects. He had thought to compete with this mysterious freak, but his back was now well and truly bent. Fortunately, the end was in sight and the Enabler pushed for the goal.

"You were saying something about the exchange. I assume you are happy to proceed?"

Kantal remained silent and walked to the two chests. He lifted the lid of the first to reveal a bountiful pile of twinkling coins. In each chest was loaded one hundred thousand gold stallions, more wealth than he could hope to see in his lifetime. To hand it over to this foul man angered him, but it was not his decision to make. He had suggested that they bulk the gift out with painted fakes, but his king was eager to avoid dispute and had dug deep. The sight of the second locked vessel gave Kantal a satisfying idea, a final desperate attempt to save face, and he turned upon the Enabler, eager to inflict a floundering blow.

“You will understand if I keep back half of the coin as, ah, security? It will of course be paid once the services have run their course, but I am inclined to keep it close.”

The freak sat silent, clearly annoyed by the intention in the statement. Kantal wondered briefly whether he had gone too far, whether he should have kept it simple to ensure a smooth execution, but his pride would not let him back down. He gulped, on an edge between joy and horror. Which way would it go?

“You may deliver the second chest to the Lord Nadari upon completion of your passage. It is him that you will be angering with this pathetic gesture.”

The Enabler rose from his seat, drained the last of his water, and moved to the chests. Kantal slid candidly out of the way, and watched as the Enabler elevated the other locked chest with disturbing ease. He offered a frigid gesture of thanks with his free hand, turned smartly, and departed the cabin with his cloak flowing gracefully behind. His feet barely made a noise.

Kantal struggled to keep pace as the strange man marched to the fore of the ship, and he was still moving when the Enabler stood to attention, bowed his head for a distinct moment, and then issued a downward swing of the arm which triggered another great eruption of thick smoke. When the mist finally cleared and Kantal peered through, the Enabler was gone, and so was the gold. The spectacle stirred the crew to burst into astonished exhalations once more.

Kantal shook his head with a mixture of disgust and confusion. The crewmen were muttering in wonder, speculating on whether he had flown from the craft like some winged demon, but something in the timings suggested a more mundane method of departure. He turned to the stern of the ship, noting the tense look on the captain.

“Passage has been secured. You may proceed.”

The Mithras continued on its way, and Altunia would fall on the morrow. That was really all that mattered.