

Christopher Dane

FALL of the NORTH KINGS



Inspired by Ren - The Girl With the Mark
created by Kate Madison and Christopher Dane

A number of years ago I co-created an online fantasy series called Ren - The Girl With the Mark. It premiered on March 1st 2016 and has had millions of views on YouTube, Amazon Prime and a number of great fantasy platforms. This novella takes place many years before the show and recounts a pivotal moment in the history of the world Ren lives in. I hope you enjoy the read.

Christopher Dane

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Chris Dane', written over the printed name 'Christopher Dane'.

Cover design: Christopher Dane

Cover photo: Alex Beckett

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TWIN GODS NIRITH & NARDAETH

Nirith is the god of life, light, and the sun. Nardaeth is the god of death, darkness, and the moon - often referred to as his Tear.

NORTH KINGS

An ancient line of kings from Danarcia in the north. Conquered the Lands and created the empire they named Alathia.

MAHRI SPIRIT

Nirith created 27 immortal Mahri Spirits from her father's last breath. Their purpose is to help, heal, and educate mankind.

NUH'MAHRI

Human hosts to the Spirit, also called Spirit Walkers (later Marked Ones), who bring their knowledge and healing power to the people of the Worlds.

MAHRI RAI

Ancient order of knights, set up by the First North King, that accompanies and protects the Nuh'Mahri.

THE FACULTY

The five Mahri Rai Masters that head up the order and are in charge of the rituals in relation to the Mahri Spirits.

DAH RAI

Ancient order of Scribes that records all history in the Worlds. They are based in the Great Library. The head of the order is the Elder called the 'Holder of the Hands'.

THE OLD FAMILIES

The 12 families that ruled the Lands on the peninsula of Alath, until the North King annexed it. The Darhlmarth family was the most influential.

Watch the online series here: www.rentheseries.com

MA BJORHN

She had never been so petrified in all her life. Fears for her husband and her own children were pursued by a terror — that she could not even comprehend — as she ran down the deserted castle corridor. Her breath and heavy footsteps echoed so unnaturally loud along the thick, stone walls that it scared her half to death. The leather straps that held the heavy apron to her tunic felt like someone punching her on the shoulders every time they flapped up and down. Scores of torches along the castle walls illuminated the vaulted ceilings, and each flicker sent a shiver down her spine. But it was the silence behind her that truly petrified her. *Where are all the soldiers? Why have they abandoned the children and me?* Her head was spinning; what she had just witnessed was beyond what any man or woman should ever endure.

In the early evening, she had taken the children to say good night to their parents, the Rulers of Alathia, as she had done since they were born. Queen Vonnien had cupped each of their faces and said her usual, “Do not fear Nardaeth, for his darkness will pass.”

While the North King had laid his hands on their heads and blessed them with a line from his favourite passage of the Larsil Prophecy in the Great Library, and “the light of Nirith will shine once again.”

Then she had brought the boy and girl back to their bedroom and tucked them into their beds. She had always thought of them as her own, and they had always called her Ma Bjorhn which meant ‘Mother Bear’ in the old tongue. And as they lay there under the heavy furs that provided much needed warmth

in the cold stone castle, they had indeed reminded the Nanny of soft little bear cubs. She had bowed her head, and together they had recited the evening prayer: “We thank Nirith for the light on this day passed, and ask Nardaeth for safe passage through the darkness of this night to come.” *They are such good children*, she had thought. “Now, what would you like me to read tonight?” she had asked, as she always did after the prayer. The youngest, Aarlath — who would one day have become the 14th North King of Alathia — wanted to hear the story of his Great Grandfather’s battle against the Phit. But it was Larani’s turn to choose the story of the night, and the Nanny was not surprised that the choice fell on ‘Ligiwhill and Her Giant Hen’ as it had done so on many other occasions. But, before she could begin the cautionary but amusing tale, an Officer of the Guard had burst into the bedroom unannounced.

“How dare you?” shouted the Nanny as she got up from her seat, “Do you not...” but she had stopped herself at the sight of the young man’s pale face; it was like marble, like a Nightsheet that had been soaked in limewater for days, and his eyes were filled with a panic that his training fought desperately hard to suppress. Sweat pebbled the forehead under the leather-rimmed helmet, and the slim moustache that ran across his upper lip trembled.

“You have to stay in here, do NOT open the door unless it is the King himself who commands you!” With that, the young man had turned sharply on his heels and slammed shut the door behind him.

“What is happening, Ma Bjorhn?” asked Larani with a tremble in her fine, gentle voice. The Nanny gave no reply but walked quickly to the door and locked it with the large key on the

apron chain round her midriff. As her shaking hand had turned the key in the lock, the metallic clicking had sounded like death knells, and all Ma Bjorhn could see in her mind's eye was the face of the young Officer; *He was not afraid. He was petrified.* And she had never seen a soldier scared, let alone an Officer of the North King's personal Guard. With dread in her heart, she had turned her attention to the huge window in the north wall. Through a slit in the heavy drawn curtains, she could just make out a faint orange glow. *What IS going on,* she had thought as she walked over. Nothing could have prepared Ma Bjorhn for what she saw when she drew the curtains open: the entire gatehouse at the entrance to the inner courtyard of Nath'Tenor, the Palace of the King, had been on fire; huge flames roared out of every window, arrow slit, and crack in the roof. It could not have looked more doomsday like if a rampant Dragon had bellowed hellfire from inside the heavy stone building. A gasp from their Nanny was all it had taken for the two children to jump out of their beds and run over next to their beloved Ma Bjorhn. "Why have they set fire to the gate?" asked young Aarlath. His innocence had almost broken Ma Bjorhn's heart. "I don't know, my dear, but you better get back to bed, both of you" she had said as she ushered them away from the window. *But why IS the gate on fire?* The question had troubled her mind as she once again tucked her charges in. Something was terribly wrong, and here she was with two defenceless children. She had walked over to the huge, ornately carved chest of drawers in the corner of the room and opened the top drawer. Her eyes had looked for anything that could protect her from whatever evil was coming; for something WAS coming, of that she had been very sure. Just as her eyes had fallen on a large pair of scissors, the door to the bedroom

imploded. It had flown off its hinges and fallen on Ma Bjorhn. Indeed, had it not been for the sturdiness of the furniture next to her, she would have been crushed. But what she had seen, while hidden behind that heavy door, had made her wish that it HAD sent her to Nardaeth in the Underworld. Captured in a nightmare, like a fly in a spider's web, she could only listen as a man slowly walked into the room. By the sound of metal and leather, she assumed it had to be a Knight. The sound from each step of his steel-capped boots had turned Ma Bjorhn's blood to ice. As the Knight passed the fallen door, she had picked up the smell of burnt flesh. It was the same sickly smell she remembered from her childhood, when her mother would burn hair off a pig or feathers off a pheasant before cooking them. She had craned her neck as much as possible, but could only see the underside of the children's beds, because the huge door pinned her to the ground and obscured the view. A shadow on the wall however, had depicted a soldier drawing a huge sword and lifting it over his head. An intense humming had laid siege to the room like a symphony of impending doom. Yet, it was what Ma Bjorhn heard next that astounded her: "My father will defeat you," it was Aarlath's voice. No panic, no fear, just a calm and firm statement from the young boy. A jolt had burst through Ma Bjorhn when she saw the tip of the huge sword burst through the underside of the mattress and slam into the stone floor. Seconds later, a stream of blood had trickled down the blade. The brutal sharp metal had withdrawn only to appear once again further to the left. As a new trickle of blood had run down the blade, Ma Bjorhn summoned strength from a well she had never known was inside her. She rose from behind the door, pushing it away from her and running out into the corridor. The Queen was her first thought: *She must*

know about these most vile of murders. The torches on the walls illuminated the vaulted ceilings and each flicker sent a shiver down her spine. *Where are all the soldiers? Why have they abandoned the children and me?*

Time seemed to stand still. To Ma Bjorhn, the short sprint from the children's bedroom to the Royal Chamber felt like a marathon. Drenched in sweat, more from the panic than the running, she burst into the King's bedroom. "My Lady!" she half screamed, but the sight that greeted her was not what she had expected and it silenced her. The Queen was calmly helping her husband into his armour without any show of panic and, for a moment, Ma Bjorhn allowed herself to believe that this was just an army exercise. Or, that this had all been a nightmare from which she would now wake up. Then the horrific cries of War from beyond the huge, ornate windows, with their coloured depictions of the North King's ancestors, hit her like a tsunami. "The children..." she began, but the Queen held up a hand and stopped the Nanny in her tracks; in the Queen's eyes she could see that all the horrors had already been realised, but that she refused to be defeated. Just as the Nanny stepped further into the room, a powerful hand slammed onto her shoulder and yanked her out with supernatural force. She flew across the hall, slammed into the wall opposite the Royal Chambers, and could only watch as a Knight in dark blue armour walked in and then turned to close the door. The eyes that looked back at her pulsed with a violent energy. Ma Bjorhn scrambled to her feet. Though she had broken her shoulder in several places, she threw all her weight against the door to open it again—to no avail. Her resolve buckled for the first time in her life. She sank to her knees. Then three soldiers came running down the corridor.

"The King!" she screamed, "you must save the King!"

THE MAHRI RAI

Karn overlooked the huge Harnap Arena that stood proud next to the elaborate Nirith Temple at the centre of the Mahri'Tenor [*House of the Breath*] complex. The oblong shape, with its iconic inward curving walls that provided much-needed shade during the midday exercises in the summer months, had been his home for the last three years. He was standing on the platform that would be reserved for the North King and his family during the Pairing Ceremony. From there he tried to single out which of the young Apprentices practicing in the arena below would be the most suitable when a Mahri Spirit would need a new Host and Companion. Karn had been called back to the King's City, Kahri'Tenor, when the old Master Reather had passed away; a man by whom Karn himself had been trained, and one he had regarded as his father in every sense but the biological. Taking his place had been a difficult task. He had waited and waited to accept the post, until it was almost inevitable that the Faculty that oversaw and ruled the Order of the Mahri Rai would command him to do so. Not that any of the young men, women, boys, and girls under his command would ever have known. To them, he was the granite under their feet, the sureness in their hands when they wielded the swords, and the wisdom that they would seek in their darkest hours. As he stood there in the ornate blue tunic of the Mahri Rai—his face stoic with a carefully trimmed beard, and his grey blue eyes surveying the training grounds—he did indeed look like an immovable rock. Each embroidered circle on the heavy tunic fabric signified one year in the service of his Nuh'Mahri, his Spirit Walker. When he was given his first uniform almost two hundred years ago, it had

been a plain blue. But, on this latest incarnation, there were circles within circles; something that sent waves of inspiring awe through the ranks of the young Apprentices. What they didn't know was that Karn constantly had to hide his impatience and anger at having been called back by the Faculty to fill his old Master's place. He longed for active service. He didn't fit into this world of politics, self-serving, and gamesmanship. He was trained to be a warrior, a Companion, and a Protector. But of the many virtues in which he had been instructed, patience had not been one. There was a war going on, and Karn knew in his heart that he was needed elsewhere. *At the next Pairing I will put myself forward to be chosen*, he thought and allowed himself a rare moment of looking back on a life spent protecting his Nuh'Mahri. It was when his mind wandered from the arena to some faraway place that he suddenly felt a presence that he had not experienced since he took his place here in Mahri'Tenor. "Tallan?" Karn spun round and was completely dumbstruck by the sight that greeted him. A tall, young man dressed in a kaftan-like garment with a heavy sash and a few leather bags round his shoulders, emerged from the shadows and lit up in a huge smile.

"Are you not happy to see me, my friend?" Karn fell out of his trance as quickly as he had been caught by it and walked over to his former Nuh'Mahri with open arms. The two men hugged for an eternity. Karn only broke the embrace when he saw a fellow Mahri Rai enter the platform: it was Erin. Her tunic had just three circles on it.

"Rai" she said and lowered her head in respect.

"Oh, this is no time for formality, come here!" The two embraced heartily, and then Karn stepped back to inspect the girl. "You have truly come into yourself. I'm so glad Tallan

chose you for his Companion and Protector. But the Faculty has ordered you to stay out in the field away from the war, and you do not look in need of Cleansing. So, what are you doing here, my friend?" The question changed the mood between the three instantly.

"I have felt something that I cannot explain," said Tallan, "it is a constant companion, and my unease grows for every week this war carries on." Karn was taken aback. The war with Lord Monfort of Dahrlmath's forces had entered its seventh year. But even though the Dark Lord's newfound powers had pressed them back at first, those powers had become erratic of late and the North King's army had been able to stem the tide and halt his assault. What was it that Tallan feared? The question was answered almost too quickly as Lord Magnuh, the Head of the City Council, emerged on the platform.

"Oh, forgive me, I did not know you had guests, my dear friend" he said, promptly backing away.

"Fear not, my Lord. This is Tallan, the Nuh'Mahri I served for most of my life, and this is Erin, my apprentice—whom Tallan chose to be his new Companion when I was ordered back here". The old Head of the City Council greeted the two strangers with a restrained warmth that Karn couldn't help but notice; the large man, with skin as dark as aged leather, was normally the light in any situation, and his eyes would sparkle under the blue silk hat that would flop down to one side when he laughed.

"Is anything the matter?" Karn inquired of his old friend.

"I did not know where else to turn, dear Karn. It has been made known to us that the King was wounded in an ambush, some five weeks ago."

Karn staggered back at the news. He had personally escorted the King and his family to safety at their winter castle, Nath'Tenor, situated in the mountains far away from the front line. It was a precaution to the threat that Lord Darhlmarth and his new powers posed, and one the Faculty had been advocating despite the King's wish to stay in his capital. "How is this supposed to have happened and when?" he demanded in a voice that strained to stay calm.

"Lord Darhlmarth is said to have attacked the King's castle under the cover of darkness. He managed to overrun the defences with a small, elite force". This kind of cowardice was no novelty in the war, but to completely disregard the rules of engagement in such a way was a new low.

"You said 'wounded'? He lives?" The old man nodded. "And how is the Queen and the children?" Lord Magnuh's face froze. The sunlight that crept over the curbed arena walls reflected in the pool of tears that formed in his eyes. Karn had seen many sights in his long life—sad ones, tragic ones—but this was the worst of them all. "And Lord Darhlmarth?" enquired Karn through gritted teeth. His old friend merely shook his head. Karn was visibly trembling. "Where is the King now?" The Head of the City Council told him that he had heard that the King had been taken to the Mahri Rai Faculty's stronghold at the outskirts of the city, and that he had called on his Scribes from the Great Library two days ago.

"I pay one of the Scribes in the Great Library a tidy sum to get information that normally would be, let's say, 'delayed'; that is how we heard these rumours. The question is not so much whether this is true, my friend, but why we have not been told either way".

“Let me handle this, Lord Magnuh. Please return to the Council and tell no one else”, said Karn and turned on his heels. He picked up his sword from the wooden chair next to where he had been overseeing his Apprentices. As he walked to the edge of the platform, he drew the blade from its sheath and inspected it in the sunlight. The scimitar shaped sword, with the engraved Danarcian steel blade, had seen much action in the past two centuries, but it was in as fine a condition as when it was presented to him at his Pairing Ceremony; he recalled the proud moment he walked out of the line of seven extraordinary young men and women after Tallan had pointed him out. The sun had cast rays of Nirith’s light through the blue flags fluttering from the flagpoles all around the arena walls. Moments before, Tallan had been chosen by a host-less Mahri Spirit: it had bonded with his body and lifted him off the ground. Most of the thousands of people in the stands had never seen this spectacle before, and a collective gasp had escaped the audience. Tallan hovered in mid-air with the Spirit circling him like a whirlwind. When it entered his body, he was softly lowered to the ground and, before he touched the fine sand in the arena, his face bore the Mark of the Mahri; he was a Spirit Walker now, a Nuh’Mahri. When Tallan arose with the golden Mark still pulsating, he had instantly pointed out Karn to be his Companion. It was the happiest moment in Karn’s life. This was the darkest. His voice bellowed across the entire arena and brought the practice session to a halt. All the Apprentices stopped, lined up, and turned toward Karn on the platform, his sword raised toward the sun.

“By the grace of Nirith!” they shouted in unison. Each row bowed their heads, and one by one he dismissed them by putting his open left hand over his face and then onto his heart;

it was a tradition that had lasted hundreds of years, and Karn understood the importance of it only too well. He himself had done it during his five years of training and, each time, the gesture from the Master Reather had filled him with pride and assurance. But, after the fifth row, his sword arm began to shake visibly and, when the last row bowed their heads, Karn only just managed to stay calm long enough to dismiss them. Before they had even lifted their heads, he spun round and marched toward the exit behind Tallan and Erin.

“I’m sorry, my friends. I must go see the King.” But the Nuh’Mahri laid a hand on his shoulder and stopped him.

“We have to go to the Library,” he said in his usual, calming tone of voice. It didn’t make sense to Karn at all.

“The Library? But the King is at the Stronghold!” Tallan merely had to look Karn in the eyes to make it clear that whatever feeling he had experienced, and indeed what had brought him here, this recent development was linked in some way. Karn knew better than to question his former Master. He looked from Tallan to Erin, “The Library it is.”

NAVITHIAN

The old, stoic Elder, and Holder of the Hands, walked slowly down the Sixth Corridor of the West Wing in the Great Library; this was his home, his world, and his life. Navithian had joined the Order of the Dah Rai as a nine-year-old and had become the Nuh’Vi: the Ink Bearer for one of the King’s Scribes. As he walked down along the endless shelves filled with notebooks, his old mind reached back to the first time he entered this wondrous place; he remembered how the smell of the

millions of ancient, musty pages covered in the Old Tongue had overwhelmed his senses. To this day, he couldn't open a book or document without being transported back in time by that particular smell. His new Master had explained the layout of the Great Library as they walked through the South Gate, and he had listened to every word like they were the key to understanding the very meaning of life. And, in a sense, they had been. For this new adventure had turned into a lifelong mission for the now very old man. The library had been built by the Third North King many hundreds of years before; it had been a gift to the Order of the Dah Rai for their service to the King and all his people. Since the beginning of time, the Dah Rai had walked the Worlds in search for stories, myths, and historical facts. They would take their place by the fire or, when offered, by the table with whomever they encountered and listen to their tales. Later, they would recount everything without judgment, prejudice, or adjustment in their notebooks. No one knew just how it all began, but the first recorded Dah Rai was called Larsil, the North Man. The Order simply grew by men and woman recognising what an important task this was. Only if the old myths and fables were recorded would they survive: how would we be able to learn from history, and our ancestors' mistakes, if they were lost beyond the memory of man? No one knew just how many Dah Rai there were, since they would often wander for decades across Alathia, the Known and Unknown Worlds, without returning to the library. There were probably many smaller collections of notebooks in faraway places. But the Great Library was the first place where the Dah Rai could collect the notebooks from their Brothers, safely under the protection of the North Kings. It had been built in the shape of a Dragonfly because that was

the Queen's favourite insect. She had often had a Dah Rai called to her chambers to recount The Old Stories, and one of them had told her how the Dragonfly used to be the companion of the real Dragons that lived in Ancient Times. So, from the Central Hall—where the Scribes sat by their tables cataloguing new notebooks and translating old ones—four Wings extended in an X shape. Each wing was the length of ten Palythian War Galleys bow to rudder and would host ten corridors of wooden shelves two-stories high filled to the brim. Extending back from the Central Hall was a long three-storey 'tail' that functioned as living accommodation for the Dah Rai; those who were either working there or visiting to offload their notebooks before walking out into the Worlds again. At the head-end of the Central Hall was the circular, domed room called the Elder Gallery. When his Master had led the young Navithian through the arched doorway, it had almost taken the boy's breath away. The walls were lined with bronze shelves where the most ancient of the Dah Rai notebooks were gathered. But the most imposing sight was the six-sided plinth at the centre of the room: each side had ornately carved ivory panels laid into the hard, pink granite that depicted the First North King uniting the lands to the south of Danarcia, his birthplace. It was a beautiful structure in itself, but the crowning glory was the huge sarcophagus standing on top of the plinth. It was the last resting place of the Third North King, and it was made of the purest silver Alathia had ever produced. It stood on six ornately carved ivory Lathwolf legs with one continuous, inlaid line of amber orbiting it more than a hundred times. From the line sprung little bursts of leaves made of precious green stones; the effect was a dazzling tribute to the Ivy that was sacred to the Dah Rai and which had played a crucial part in bringing

knowledge to mankind. The Elder Gallery had been Navithian's office ever since his peers had elected him to be the Elder and the Holder of the Hands some thirty years ago. It had not escaped him that the reason for the election had not been his eloquence, or his ability to write wonderful stories, but his strong sense of order in all matters. He did not mind at all because this job included access to the most important and sacred of all the books in the Worlds: the Dah'Phar. This book contained the most important events and Royal decrees in the Lands. Countless of Navithian's predecessors had kept the record unbroken from the moment the First North King declared the formation of Alathia. The lengthy war with the Old Families had given Navithian much to do, but he rather relished the solitary task performed in the crypt under the Third North King's sarcophagus. Right now, however, his only thought was to return a notebook by Cartifact, the Long Boned, to its rightful place in the Sixteenth Corridor of the West Wing. He had made his young Nuh'Vi, Narnonee — a girl of only eleven — read the tale of Ligiwhill and Her Giant Hen: a morality tale of how you should never wish for more than you can handle. He had always liked that story and a smile crept onto his old, dry lips as he walked down along the two-storey shelves bulging with ancient manuscripts and notebooks. But, then, something at the very end of the corridor caught his eye. The gate was wide open, which was unusual in itself, and there was rather a commotion going on. Just as Navithian was about to call for order, he saw the glint of light on the blade of a sword. And silhouetted against the flames in the two huge bronze braziers on either side of the gate, he saw the blade fall on one of his Brothers; a cascade of blood and the sickening sound of a body collapsing onto the huge flagstones

followed the violent slash. What is going on here? he thought, just before he heard the screams from another couple of Dah Rai. Navithian froze to the spot. Far in the distance, he could see several soldiers with red plumed helmets force their way into his library. He took one step forward but was then stopped by a hand that grabbed hold of his right arm. It was Charloth, the Fair Faced, who now dragged him with her toward the Central Hall. She might have had a fair face, but beauty was not her only strength. Soon Navithian found himself in the Hall surrounded by his Scribes, who were all in a state of panic.

“Who has sent soldiers?” asked one.

“What are we to do?” demanded another. Navithian was no Army General; he had no experience in tactics, and his understanding of battle was limited to what was catalogued in the Fourth Corridor of the East Wing. His mind raced, his breathing became fast and furious, and, for once, he could not keep order of it all. Then he felt a hand in his and he looked down: it was Narnonee. His Nuh’Vi looked up at him with her dark, serious eyes. There was no panic in them and that calmed the thoughts in Navithian’s head.

“Where have you seen soldiers?” he asked the Scribes. One had seen the West Wing gate being opened, just like Navithian himself. Three had seen the same in the East Wing, and a Dah Rai that came running heaved for breath as he explained that soldiers were in the South Wing. Navithian processed the information and came to a fatal conclusion: *there are no soldiers at the North Wing gate.*

“Brothers! Tear down as many shelves in the East, West, and South wings as you can. Then flee through the gate in the North Wing!” For a few moments you could only hear the

heavy breaths of the man from the South Wing, and the soldiers drawing closer through the three corridors. Navithian knew exactly why all the Dah Rai and his Scribes hesitated. Just like him, they had spent their lives building up this collection; they revered and cherished every page on those shelves. But there was no doubt that these soldiers were not here to talk, they were here to kill. So, Navithian straightened his back and bellowed a “NOW!” that took each of the men and women before him out of their paralysis. In groups, they headed down each of the three Wings, ran as close to the advancing soldiers as they dared, and then they began to push the shelves over. The noise in the Central Hall was deafening, as avalanche after avalanche of books and manuscripts crashed to the floor in clouds of ancient dust. As the Dah Rai retreated into the Central Hall, they left a sixteen-foot high wall of paper blocking up the three wings.

“Now, run for the North gate. Split up and find your way to the hills of Danarcia. I will see you there.” Navithian knew that it was a promise he probably would not be able to keep. Like a Captain on a sinking galley, he was determined to defend the Dah’Phar to the last. Hardan, the Hairless—one of the King’s Scribes, grabbed hold of his sleeve just as he turned to enter the Elder Gallery. Hardan’s face was pale and sweat pebbled on the crest of his shining, bald head.

“These are the last words of the Thirteenth North King,” he said and tore a page out of his notebook. It was a sight Navithian had never seen in his long life: a Dah Rai’s notebook was as valuable to him as his own life and to desecrate it in this way was unimaginable. In total shock, Navithian simply closed his hand around the folded page Hardan placed in his palm without even reading it.

“Make them safe in the Dah’Phar,” Hardan pleaded as his eyes nervously jumped from corridor to corridor.

“But I...” was all Navithian managed before the sound of advancing soldiers hit his old ears. He looked up, and there at the mouth of the Eighth Corridor of the West Wing, he spotted twenty soldiers that had managed to scale the paper barricade and now swarmed into the Hall. Hardan picked up a discarded staff, handed Navithian a leather pouch, and sprinted toward the North Wing while Navithian began his retreat to the Elder Gallery. He urged Narnonee to leave his side and save herself, but the young girl simply followed him toward the domed entrance. Then a chilling death rattle echoed through the Hall and spun Navithian round. He saw a man cutting through the oncoming soldiers with a scimitar sword. A man in a blue tunic.

THE BATTLE FOR THE LIBRARY

Tallan said nothing as they made their way through the streets toward the Great Library. Karn and Erin had exchanged a few looks, but the mood was not for talking. As they turned up the street that led to the Library, they were stopped by a patrol of soldiers. They recognised Karn but not his companions, and they readied to draw their swords.

“At ease, men. Do you not know me?” demanded Karn with as much gravity in his voice as he could muster.

“Yes, Master Reather, but the Faculty has forbidden...” Karn raised a calming hand and stopped the young Centurion. “I am escorting Master Tallan and his Companion to the Great Library. It is simply research on a matter they have encountered while visiting Landanill, and they will be on their way out again

soon,” he explained with a straight face. He really had no idea why they were going to the library. But he had seen the flicker in the Centurion’s eyes when he mentioned it, and he knew that he had to stop the man’s thought process before he could say anything more; it seemed to work as the officer nodded and let them go on. They were halfway up the earth ramp that led to the East Wing entrance, when they heard a loud rumble from within the massive structure in front of them. It was so loud that it stopped all three at the same time. Karn looked up at the roof over the Central Hall, but there was nothing wrong: it was not collapsing. When the noise continued in wave after wave, he knew that something was indeed very wrong, but it was only when he looked to the South Wing entrance that he understood what. There, in the distance, he just managed to spot the last of a group of soldiers that had forced the gate open. Instantly, he drew his sword. “Erin, you stay here and protect Tallan!” He set into a sprint toward the East Wing entrance that was wide open. Running down the middle corridor, his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he began to make out the enormous mountain of shelves and books at the other end. *What in the Worlds is going on?* he thought as he sped up. He didn’t slow down when he reached the first of the books on the floor, but scaled the slope to the top with an ease that belied his age. When he reached the top, his heart almost stopped at what he saw. The Central Hall was a mess of overturned tables and panicked Scribes and Dah Rai running toward the North Wing. At the bottom of the paper mound on which he was standing, he spotted about twenty soldiers regrouping after sliding down to the floor below. They drew their swords and advanced toward the centre of the Hall. They spotted two people running toward the Elder Gallery and

set off in pursuit. Karn's eyes narrowed. This didn't make any sense to him at all. Why would the Faculty Guard attack the Great Library? The answer would have to wait. For now, he had to protect the Holder of the Hands: it was he the soldiers were chasing. It took him no time at all to reach the first of the soldiers. Without stopping, he merely sliced the man's calves to immobilise him and charged onwards. The rest of the soldiers were no match for the lone Mahri Rai, either. A regular in the North King's Army was trained in combat that worked well against other soldiers with a similar skillset. It had proved sufficient for centuries, but it relied on a basic principle that was easy to pass on to even the simplest of men. The soldiers were told to stand as upright as possible, with a slightly wide stance, that would allow them to move from defence to attack very easily. They only used their shields as defence, and their half-length swords were swung in three basic patterns: defence, advance, and attack that were repeated over and over again. The Mahri Rai were on a completely different plane when it came to combat. A Mahri Rai in full attack mode was like a swallow hunting for insects, constantly moving from high to low, from side to side, and from fast to a blistering pace. The impact of the scimitar shaped sword in terms of damage belied its weight, and the sharpness of the blade was unequalled. Made from Danarcian steel, it was perfectly balanced and extremely light, allowing the wielder to change direction mid swing. The footwork was like an intricate and furious dance. Constantly, the placement of a foot would lead a lesser opponent to anticipate a strike from a certain angle, only for the Mahri Rai to shift the weight mid-move and take the target out from a seemingly impossible position. When all the soldiers were either incapacitated or dead, Karn walked

across the Hall to the Elder of the Library. He had met one of Navithian's predecessors when his master had sent him to the Library on errands as a young man; the opulent chain with the interlocked hands around Navithian's neck was all he needed to identify the most important man in the library. The old man was visibly in shock, and Karn knew that he had to be clear and patient with his orders. "Forget what you have seen, I will protect you. Tell me what happened," he said in a low and calm voice. Navithian took a couple of moments to recover his faculties.

"The soldiers attacked us from the East, West, and South Wings. I have sent my Scribes and Brothers to safety through the North Wing. We have only had a few casualties." Karn looked toward all four Wings.

"I'm afraid you have been tricked," he said with a sigh, "there's no escape that way." Navithian opened his mouth to protest when soldiers emerged in the mouth of the North Wing. At the same time, more soldiers scaled the West and East Wing barricades of books. Karn calmly assessed the situation and turned back to the Elder. He spotted the piece of paper in the old man's hands and asked what it was.

"The words of the King," said Navithian as his panicked eyes looked out at the fifty heavily armed Faculty soldiers that fanned out across the Central Hall; they formed a semi-circle in front of them, cutting off any exits from the Elder Gallery.

"Then, lock the Dah'Phar!" said Karn, ushering the old man and his Nuh'Vi into the Elder Gallery. With a few swift slashes of his blade, he crippled the bronze shelves near the entrance. The ancient manuscripts slid off the collapsing shelves like an avalanche, completely blocking the entrance. This will take them some time to get through — enough for Navithian to

seal the Book of Truth, thought Karn as he turned to face the overwhelming numbers of the enemy. *Oh, how I have longed for this!*

ERIN

Karn had been gone for a while, and the strange noise from the Library had stopped. Erin was getting anxious, and her fingers cradled the hilt of her sword. Tallan had still not said a word since they walked out of the arena. The sight of the soldiers entering the Great Library had unsettled the normally level-headed young Mahri Rai. She knew that being here with Tallan was perilous; when Lord Monfort of Darhlmarr had first revealed the Nuh'Mahri Mark on his face, the sight induced so much panic in the North King's army that the battle had been lost, almost without any bloodshed. No one knew how he had become a Nuh'Mahri, and the powers he wielded were manifold that of others chosen by the Spirit. Rumours spread like wildfire that the Mahri Spirit had sided with Monfort and that the Mahri Rai had turned on the North King. Nothing could be further from the truth. But the Faculty made the decision to order all the Nuh'Mahri and their Companions to go into the field, to keep away from ordinary people, and to stay far away from the front line. Erin had heard that the Faculty had ordered Karn's Apprentices to isolate themselves in the arena and not have anything to do with the outside World. But the news that the King had been wounded, and that the Faculty had sent soldiers to the Library, added a whole new dimension to the situation.

"Is this what you have seen?" she asked as her patience broke. Before Tallan could answer, she heard footsteps behind her. She turned to face the fifty Faculty Guards that marched up

the earth ramp and came to a halt ten feet away. A Centurion stepped through the first line of soldiers and approached. Erin recognised him from earlier, when he and his Guards had stopped them in the streets. He looked nervous and his eyes flickered from Erin's sword to Tallan.

"Master Tallan, the North King is in need of your healing powers: the Faculty commands you to attend him." Tallan smiled to ease the young Centurion's mind and walked down the ramp. Erin instinctively followed. "Your Mahri Rai must stay here!" demanded the officer. Erin's hand curled round the hilt of her sword, but Tallan signalled her to stand down.

"The King lives yet, Erin. Stay here and wait for Karn," he said as he continued his walk. But, when he was just about to pass the Centurion, he stopped in his tracks. "What have you done?" he whispered to the young man. Instead of an answer, the Centurion drew his dagger and sliced Tallan's throat open with a violent swing of his arm. It happened so quickly that Erin didn't even manage a shout of warning. As Tallan sank to his knees, the rows of soldiers parted in the middle, and a masked man in a long black cape marched forward. From inside his cloak, he brought out an instrument the like of which Erin had never seen. It resembled a lantern. However, the light from within the bronze casing was not derived of oil or a candle, but from a Blue Crystal. The cloaked man stretched his arm to full length and aimed the instrument at Tallan. Suddenly, the Mark on his face began to shift, and the Spirit within him blasted out from the open wound in his neck. The Spirit swirled round and fought to escape the pull of the crystal, but to no avail. As it was sucked into the instrument — through the mouths of the five deformed bronze heads cast at the bottom of it — Tallan began to change:

the young man's hair greying and his skin wrinkling in an instant. His appearance became that of an ancient mummy. Contrary to her training, Erin stood as though nailed to the ground and watched this macabre occurrence. It was only when she heard the Centurion order his men to arrest her that she returned to reality. Even though her anger could have ignited a hundred fires, she knew that taking on fifty soldiers would be suicide. Resolutely, she turned and ran into the Library, managing to shut the heavy bronze gate before the soldiers were upon her. She pushed the huge braziers until they gave way and crashed to the floor, creating a wall of fire. Then she sprinted toward the Central Hall. The barricade of books and documents were not a surprise to her as the noise they had heard earlier now made sense. When she reached the top of the mountain, she quickly took in the situation below. Karn was pinned in by the Elder Gallery by forty or so Faculty soldiers. She drew her sword and a huge breath. She was not going to lose two friends this day!

THE DAH'PHAR

Navithian was still in shock from what the Mahri Rai had told him. *You have been tricked*, he had said, *there's no escape that way*. It had hit the old man as a hammer falls on a glowing blade on a blacksmith's anvil. It had sent red-hot sparks to all the extremities of his body and mind, and he now felt feverish and faint. The Faculty's soldiers had deliberately kept the North Wing open, and he had sent all the people in his care into a trap. But it couldn't just be that they were after the Scribes and the Dah Rai — they were after something more. *Of course*, he thought, *they expected the Holder of the Hands to bring the Dah'Phar out of*

the Library that way. His knees weakened at the thought that, if the Mahri Rai had not turned up, it had indeed been his plan. It was a quiet, soothing voice that brought him back to the reality in the Elder Gallery. Narnonee asked him to tell her what to do. He stood still for a while, staring at the mountain of books that were the only things standing between them and death. He smiled at the thought that what had been his life's work was now saving it. "Follow me," was the firm response to the girl he had picked to be his Nuh'Vi only a year ago. She had displayed a wisdom and intelligence far beyond her years and that her parents were mere farmers had counted heavily in her favour. Navithian had had more than enough of the rich merchants and descendants of the Old Families; those who used their wealth to get their offspring a placement in the Library. It was widely known that the education they would receive would almost guarantee a career in the North King's huge administration and, thereby, access to the Royal Court. It sickened Navithian that money would exclude talented children from having a future. So, when Narnonee had come to his attention on a rare visit outside the Library, he had not hesitated to offer her the position. There had been much commotion among the Scribes, whom he suspected had an ample income from selling placements, but his word was still final. *Final*, he thought as he walked to the centre of the domed Gallery and stopped in front of the plinth that was the last resting place of the Third North King: *how appropriate.* He reached up and his fingers slid down the back of the centre Lathwolf leg on the sarcophagus. Even though he had done this a thousand times, the trigger was still difficult to locate. His index finger found the almost unnoticeable indentation and pressed inward. With a click, the carved ivory panel below the leg slid to

one side. Behind the panel was a door with a golden keyhole at the centre of the otherwise smooth surface. Navithian took off his Elderchain and inserted the intertwined hand pendant. The door swung into the plinth without a sound. Navithian walked into the darkness as he had done so many times. He found the torch and the Firestone on the shelf next to the door. He lit the torch, then he turned to Narnonee who stood speechless out in the Elder Gallery. “There’s no need to be afraid, my dear girl. Come.”

THE LAST NORTH KING

When the door slammed shut behind him, the King calmly grabbed hold of his trusted, short-handled battle-axe and sword. He motioned his Queen to step in behind him, and then he levelled his eyes on his opponent. But when the huge man in front of him looked up, the King stumbled back half a step before he could compose himself. His opponent’s armour was deep dark blue as the night. At the centre of the breastplate sat a blue crystal the size of a fist, and a strange golden glow pulsed round him. So much so, that it was hard for the King to focus on him. But what drew the breath from his mouth was the sight of his opponent’s face: an intricate Mark covered his forehead and ran down both temples toward his neck. It was the Mark of the Nuh’Mahri that the Goddess Nirith had placed on the sacred Spirit Walkers. But the King had never seen it like this, nor on someone like him. The Mark constantly shifted, blurred, and refocused, turning from golden to green to blue; it seemed at war with itself. Encased within the Mark sat a pair of eyes that permeated the entire room with an almost physical sense of

anger and hatred. The King managed to compose himself. “Lord Monfort of Darhlmarth... I should have known it was you.” The heavily armoured Lord stepped all the way into the room and pointed his bloodied sword at the King.

“You should, last of the North Kings. My revenge has been a long time coming!” The North King shook his head at the thought that this descendant of one of the Twelve Old Families had harboured a nine-hundred-year-old hatred, passed down through generations in his heart.

“Before the First North King united Alathia, your families were constantly at war over money, land, and women. For almost a thousand years, we have been at peace, and you have broken that. For what?” The calmness in his voice seemed to enrage Lord Monfort even more, and the Mark on his face pulsed with a feverish pace.

“You are not worthy to be ruler of these lands... they are mine, and I will take them back by all means and measures!” The North King shook his head in disbelief at Darhlmarth’s delusions. He raised his sword, prepared his stance, and he spoke for the last time. “Even by Underly Magic.” Then he charged at his much taller opponent. They clashed in a ferocious duel, matching each other blow for blow, parry for parry, and attack for attack. But it soon became obvious that Lord Monfort had an unseen power on his side and, as the North King tired, his opponent only grew in strength. The strikes of his sword became heavier, his defence almost an attack, and his advance was unstoppable. He blasted the battle axe out of the King’s hand with his blade and, as quick as a rattlesnake, he flicked it around and rammed it through his opponent’s shoulder. The King’s sword arm went numb, his trusted weapon dropped to the ground, and

he collapsed on the floor gasping for air. Slowly, the Dark Lord stepped across his fallen prey. He raised his sword and prepared the execution as he had done in the children's bedroom only a few moments earlier. Just before the sword dropped, a heavy brass candlestick crashed into the back of his head. The blow would have killed any other man, but Lord Monfort hardly moved. He slowly turned to stare down Queen Vonnien who had tried to come to her husband's rescue.

“I did not want to harm you, dear Lady Vonnien. But I now see that my mission to quell the bloodline of the North Kings would not be complete if I let you live.” The Queen gasped and held a hand on her only slightly bulging stomach.

“May Nardaeth drown your soul in the Sea of Blood” were her last words. One movement of his hand was enough to blast the Queen up against the wall behind her. As she slid to the floor, she drew a line of blood on the stones. A scream of absolute devastation spun Lord Monfort round. The North King had scrambled to his feet, gotten hold of his axe and, before Monfort could do anything, the heavy blade smashed into the blue crystal on the breastplate. Lord Monfort looked on in horror as the stone flew from his armour, bounced off the hard flagstones on the floor and disappeared down the steps to the crypt under the Royal Chambers. Instantly, a bright light blasted out of the Mark on his face. the Dark Lord stumbled backward and began to tremble. He was thrown from side to side by the unseen forces inside his doomed body. The humming intensified and, with a scream of otherworldly anguish, three distinct columns of light rose like intertwined snakes from the evil Lord. The room seemed to heat up. The three Mahri Spirits, for that is what they were, blasted their way to freedom through the painted

glass in the tall windows, dragging their imposter of a host with them.

As the broken glass rained down onto the floor, the light from the rising sun behind the mountains in the distance caught each splinter and bathed the room in all the colours of the rainbow. It was the last moment of beauty the King would ever experience.

NARNONEE

The young girl had been more and more astonished as she had watched Navithian open the ivory panel, and then the heavy stone door to the crypt inside the North King's plinth. No one had witnessed what she was seeing, other than the Elder Apprentices in their Instruction Ceremony with the outgoing Holder of the Hands. Navithian's face was illuminated by the torch in his right hand but behind him was absolute darkness. She was scared. But she knew what was on the other side of the mountain of books by the door and, if this were to be her last hour, she would rather spend it in Navithian's company than alone. She went into the crypt, the stone door swung shut, and a faint sliding noise indicated that the ivory panel had moved once again and concealed the entrance. When she turned back, Navithian had lit a few more torches. The small room was now illuminated by a golden glow — not only from the flames but also from the golden panels that covered all six walls of the crypt. She had never seen anything this opulent in her short life. Her upbringing at the farm had been both hard and very simple. The only time she had seen wealth was when a nobleman stopped by the well where she fetched water every morning and afternoon. He was dressed in a

purple robe with golden embroidery, and his tunic was dark blue with a black pattern that caught the light when he moved. The man was too important to actually step down from his horse, so he had paid a whole Boar coin for Narnonee to bring him a cup of water. Her family ate well that evening, and her mother had made her describe the nobleman again and again until her father had silenced her; the tone of his voice was strange and only much later did she recognise that it was tainted with jealousy. The Library was an incredible building, but there was nothing frivolous about its architecture, and the living quarters were plain to put it mildly. This room, however, would not be out of place in one of the North King's palaces. But what took her breath away was the slender, white plinth at the centre of the room. It rose from the dark stone floor, emulating the room with its polished six sides. The plinth was crowned with an oversized platform like a lectern. Resting on the golden surface was an open book: it was the Dah'Phar, the Book of Truth. No one but the Elder was allowed to see — or, indeed — write in it. And now she was looking right at it with eyes larger than they had ever been. The book itself had a cover made of the purest gold. The pages were made of the finest and thinnest paper she had ever seen, and the writing was miniscule. She watched as Navithian placed a much rougher piece of paper in the book and closed it. She could see that his hands were shaking, and his forehead was covered with pebbles of sweat. To her surprise, he then folded the lectern around the book. The design was so intricate that what had been one large surface moments before was now a box that fitted exactly round the Dah'Phar. Narnonee watched in silence as the box sank into the six-sided plinth, and Navithian brought a lock from a niche in the walls. He placed the lock on top of the plinth,

and it sank halfway into it. Narnonee gasped when she saw the top of the lock. It was covered with hundreds of beautiful — almost opaque — pearls that surrounded a relief of a Dragonfly made of precious blue, green, and yellow stones. In each of the wings, made out of the finest Mother of Pearl, there was a slit; each of these slits was in a different design. Navithian brought out the black leather pouch that Hardan had given him in the Central Hall, and he poured four remarkable keys onto his hand. Narnonee had heard about the Four Keys from some of the older Nuh’Vi. Each night, when the Elder had closed the Dah’Phar, he would give the keys to two Dah Rai. They would then hide them somewhere in the Great Library in a place only they would know. The next morning they would retrieve the keys, and bring them to the Elder Gallery, so the Holder of the Hands could open the Dah’Phar again. The ritual had been repeated for hundreds of years and had kept the Book of Truth safe all this time. She had also heard that only the Elder knew the sequence in which the keys had to be inserted. Narnonee suspected that this was the last time the keys would go into the lock. The lone Mahri Rai in the Central Hall would surely be overpowered, the soldiers would eventually enter the Elder Gallery, and she saw only one way out of this crypt. Just as Navithian was about to place the keys in the four wings of the Dragonfly, he demanded that she look away. She obeyed, as always, but wondered why he would ask that of her. Would it really matter if she saw the combination? As she looked away and back at the door, she heard the first blow to the plinth. The soldiers did not know how to get in, but they clearly knew that there was a chamber inside the North King’s resting place.

“Do not worry about them, my girl. They will not get

to the Dah'Phar" said Navithian behind her. A subdued rumble turned her back toward him. He had taken the keys back out of the lock, and it sank all the way into the plinth. After a few seconds, three metal arms shaped like eagle claws emerged out of the plinth and locked around the top of it. "They will never be able to get to the Book of Truth. The claws and casing are made of Danarcian steel, the plinth is anchored in the bedrock on which the Library rests, and the lock is a mystery to all but the ancient blacksmiths that forged it in the northern mountains. Without the keys no one can get to it." Another loud thud shook the crypt, and Narnonee looked up at her beloved Master.

"But when they get in here, they will have the keys — won't they?" Navithian walked over to one of the golden wall panels and found a depiction of the Third North King in battle against a fabled monster. His finger found the pommel of the King's sword and pressed it. A few feet away, one of the huge flagstones that covered the floor dropped ten inches, sliding under the one in front to reveal a staircase carved into the bedrock. A rush of damp, rank air flowed into the crypt, making Narnonee's tunic flutter.

"The Most Honourable Architect, who designed the Library for the North King, predicted that a day like this would come" said Navithian with a warm smile. A relieved laugh escaped Narnonee's lips as she ran to the staircase and jumped onto the first step. She stopped only a few more steps down into the dark abyss below.

"Elder, you are not coming," she said more like a statement than a question. Navithian knelt down at the top of the stairs.

"Like you just said, the soldiers will eventually get

through the walls. We both know that they will expect to find someone in here. Take the keys and hide them in the corners of the Worlds, so no one but you will find them until the day the Dah'Phar will be opened again." Narnonee accepted the black leather pouch with the four keys with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"How can I open the Dah'Phar when you have not shown me the combination?" she managed through shivering lips. Navithian laid a gentle old hand under her chin and lifted her head.

"Remember the prophecy of Larsil, the North Man, 'When the Darkness of Nardaeth has conquered the Worlds, a pure young Nuh'Mahri will summon the Twenty-Seven, and the Light of Nirith will shine once again.' That Nuh'Mahri will know what to do with the keys." Narnonee kept her eyes on her Master until the huge flagstone slid into its place and sealed the crypt above. The darkness enveloped her and, when she looked down, she could only make out a pinhead of light at the very bottom of the stone staircase.

LORD MONFORT OF DAHRLMARTH

The war had not been going well of late. When he, Lord Monfort of DarhlmARTH, had managed to get the Old Families to rise up against the Thirteenth North King, the momentum pushed their armies forward at an incredible speed. Within the first few months, it looked like an easy win. But then the Faculty and the Mahri Rai got involved, changing everything. These skilled fighters not only infused the North King's army with tactical knowledge and an ancient understanding of warfare,

they also inspired the regular people to back their — until then fairly bland and unpopular — King. His armies swelled, and for over five long years it had been a near deadlock. *This is all going to change tonight*, thought the Lord as he walked down the cave corridor that was only lit up by a few torches and braziers. Two weeks before, he had sent five teams of his elite soldiers out on a very specific mission. Three of them had returned successful. That was more than he had hoped for, but the more the better. When he reached the heavy metal door at the end of the long tunnel, the Elder of the House of Nirith, who had guided both Monfort and his father before him through many testing times, stepped out of the shadows. Lately, he had not pleased his Lord, and Monfort was in no mood to argue with the old man again.

“My Lord,” began the Elder, “I have to say that I do not appreciate or condone what you are doing here.” Monfort stopped, out of respect more than inclination, as the old man continued.

“I have just been told that the Sorath’Ki of Lilnith is in there with a number of prisoners. Is this true?” Lord Monfort felt no need to explain himself to the old fool. He merely sent him a slight nod as he brushed past.

“But, my Lord, the Sorath’Ki is known for performing Underly Magic, and it is not appropriate — or, indeed, advisable — for you to be in that room.” The door shut out the rest of his so-called advisor’s tirade, and Lord Monfort took a deep breath before he ventured further into the cave. When his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he spotted the two men and woman kneeling on the floor. They could have been ordinary people easily enough, had it not been for the intricate Mark on their faces. He turned to the crow-like woman that stood next to them. This was the Sorath’Ki. She was dressed in rough hides and cloth spun

out of fine roots. Her hair was so long and grey that it seemed to merge with her clothes, leaving the impression that her old, wrinkled face was encased in a living cocoon.

“Did you get it?” asked Monfort.

The Sorath’Ki simply held out her hand, revealing a small box made from lead. She carefully lifted the lid only far enough to reveal the Blue Crystal inside.

“The armour!” ordered Monfort as he turned to the men behind the prisoners. Two of them lifted a dark blue breastplate out of a wooden crate and walked over to their Lord. Monfort stretched out his arms, and the men carefully strapped the newly forged armour onto his chest. The Sorath’Ki then stepped right up to him. Even though he towered over her, it was clear that he was more afraid of her than she of him.

“Is this what you want?” she asked him in a croaky voice. Monfort nodded, but it was clearly not enough for the old woman; she stared him down until he said the word out loud.

“Yes.” Monfort pretended not to be concerned as he walked over to the three kneeling people. The two men were in their late forties, but the woman was no more than twenty. Even though he did not let it show, Monfort found it disconcerting that — while the two men had their eyes on the floor — the woman stared right into his eyes with deep-rooted defiance and absolutely no trace of fear. The Mark on her face pulsed slightly under her dark skin and thinly braided hair. *Too late now for doubts*, he thought as he raised his hand for the signal to bring his men forward. Three strong soldiers dressed more like mercenaries than regulars, stepped up behind the prisoners. They drew their daggers and laid the blades under the chins of the three Nuh’Mahri. The old Sorath’Ki stepped up to Monfort,

opened the lead box, and carefully placed the Blue Crystal in the indentation in the breastplate that had been forged especially for it. A faint glow seeped out from the heart of the crystal, and it slowly crept across the entire breastplate like an electrified spider web. When the old woman stepped aside, the Marks on the prisoners' faces began to writhe and distort their hosts' features. When Monfort looked at the young girl again, he now saw fear but also hatred beyond the plane of this world.

“Now!” he commanded and closed his eyes. The three dagger blades slid across the throats and dragged a cascade of blood with them. As the life ebbed from the hosts' eyes, the Mahri Spirits were released, and three columns of light rose from the dead prisoners. The Spirits circled one another and tried to fight the pull of the Blue Crystal. The tension between the Spirits and the Crystal was almost tangible, and the air between them began to boil. The pull increased and, finally, the resistance evaporated: the three Spirits were pulled into the Dark Lord. A flash of light filled the room, and the five soldiers and the Sorath'Ki were flung onto the floor. When they scrambled back onto their feet, or on all fours, they saw their Master suspended in mid-air. Flashes of green, blue, and golden light pulsed in and out of him, and his entire body shook and writhed like he was being pulled by unseen forces from all corners of the room. The temperature shot up and sweat poured down all the men's faces. In a panic, they got up and ran for the door, only to be stopped by the Sorath'Ki. Her gnarled, outstretched hand forced them back. Even now, they were more scared of her than what was going on all around them. Suddenly, all the light around Monfort rushed into his body, and he crashed to the ground. The temperature in the room dropped well below freezing. The bursts of steam from the men's mouths

betrayed just how petrified these rough and seasoned murderers were. The breath that escaped Monfort, lying lifeless on the floor, was also the only sign that he was still alive. Time stood still in the secret cave as the Sorath’Ki slowly walked over to Monfort’s body. She closed her eyes and mumbled something that sounded more like a curse than a prayer.

With a huge intake of air, the Dark Lord Monfort of Darhlmarrh, scrambled onto all fours. His mouth was wide open but not a sound escaped him. His panicked eyes found the Sorath’Ki, and she smiled. “You have much to learn, my child.”

ESCAPE FROM THE LIBRARY

Even though the soldiers took heavy losses, the two Mahri Rai knew that they would not win the fight. They had devastated the Faculty soldiers ranks with their superior fighting skills. But Karn was wary that more and more soldiers filed into the Library through the now only partly blocked Wings. Erin had spotted them too.

“Archers,” she said as she lunged forward in another fast attack. Karn looked up and spotted the group of five soldiers with green plumed helmets.

“Fall back,” he ordered, “draw them in.” Erin understood what her mentor was trying to do, and, slowly, they pretended to be pushed back toward the blocked entrance to the Elder Gallery. She had already seen the heavy rope that was tied to an ornate bronze hook in the shape of dragon wings, and she steered her retreat in that direction. The soldiers reacted in the primitive way Karn had predicted. They pressed forward and, very quickly, the space behind the soldiers emptied as each of them wanted

to be part of this — sure to be famous — victory. The mistake had a double impact because the Archers could now not use their bows as they would hit their own men. And, when forced together almost shoulder to shoulder, the two Mahri Rai were more deadly than before: it was like fighting one Knight with two evenly strong sword hands. Erin would drop to her knee and slice a soldier's Achilles heel, and Karn would swing his sword right over her head to cut the screaming man's throat open. His sword would travel on and take off a soldier's hand, while Erin would jump to her feet and slice another from navel to chin. It was a bloodbath. But one that Karn knew they could not sustain. Anytime soon a Centurion with a bit more strategic sense would turn up and, surely, order his men back to bring the Archers into play.

“Now!” he shouted and linked arms with Erin. They spun round three times slicing their swords up and down as they moved. The whirlwind of sharp steel created a blood soaked space around them that was enough for Karn to jump over and cut the rope loose. As it flew upward, he grabbed hold of the end of it with his left hand, and Erin with his right. Swiftly, the two Mahri Rai ascended into the dome that capped the Central Hall. The stunned soldiers stopped in their tracks and looked up into the darkness. Seconds later, they ran for their lives when they spotted the huge bronze candelabra, the size of a small fishing boat, thundering toward them. But, as the soldiers had been so eager to engage, most of them were caught in the middle, and they were either crushed or set on fire when the massive ornament crashed to the ground and hundreds of oil lamps exploded onto the granite floor. The fortunate soldiers that were at the edges ran blindly from the inferno. They did not notice the two Mahri Rai that swung through the Central Hall and landed

on top of the books that barricaded the East Wing. And when they did have a moment to try and take in what had happened — Erin and Karn had already vanished into the darkness.

THE STAIRWELL

Shaking, the young girl sat on the last step of the escape stairwell from the Elder Gallery above. She wasn't frightened, but the days had been long and cold. She had not been this hungry since a pestilence had devastated her father's crops, and droven him to slaughter some of the livestock to keep his family fed during the extreme winter that year. It was at that time she had the great fortune to meet Navithian. She had gone with her father to the Spring Market in the nearest town, Lyngarth, to try and get a kid that they could feed up to replace the goat they had lost. Her father was a simple man, and he had spent all his life on the farm with no education other than what his father had taught him about the seasons and what each of them demanded. He was shy around other people, and the market — with the bartering and foreign traders — always made him uneasy. What little money the family possessed, he entrusted to Narnonee and, once he had pointed out the best kid in a flock, he let her do the negotiating. She didn't know how it came to be, but she had always been good with numbers and words, and she was aware that it was unusual. It was something she used to her advantage, and she always came out of a deal better than any adult farmer would have. The fact that this girl understood the game — and she was eloquent compared to the other farmers — took most of the traders, especially the foreign ones, by surprise. It was when she had concluded a deal with a goat herder that an old man, dressed in

a long silk tunic, had called to her. Narnonee had looked to her father for advice and, unexpectedly, he seemed to know the man; her father had nodded. She walked across the square to where the man sat in the shade under a canopy. Her eyes fell on the golden chain around his neck and the heavy pendant at the end of it. It, too, was made of gold and was carved to look like two interlocked hands, like a handshake, and the fingers had inlays of mother of pearl to resemble nails. It was the only extravagant thing about the old man's appearance. His grey beard was trimmed in a simple shape without any beads, as was customary in the bigger cities, and his tunic, though made of silk, was not embroidered, or adorned with precious stones.

"Where have you learned to barter like that?" the old man had enquired. Narnonee had explained, like so many times before, that she had no schooling, but her mother was a very clever woman.

"She must be," said Navithian and looked the girl straight in the eye. "Now, I called you over because I have a problem that I hope you can solve for me?" Narnonee looked back at her father who had found a bit of shade under a tree with the kid: again, he nodded his approval. Navithian handed her a small metal box with a lock that needed a three-digit combination to be opened. He gave her a piece of parchment and said, "I hope you can open this box for me?" Narnonee looked down on the paper and read what it said: "682 - one digit is right and in its place. 614 - one digit is right but in the wrong place. 206 - two digits are right, but both are in the wrong place. 738 - all digits are wrong. 380 - one digit is right, but in the wrong place." She now understood that this was a test, rather than an old man who had forgot the combination. So, she looked at the piece of

paper again, turned the three wheels in the lock, and opened the box. To her astonishment it contained a silver coin — an Eagle, the like of which she had never seen, and she quickly handed the precious box to its owner.

“It’s yours,” said Navithian as he handed her the heavy coin. “And you do not have to look at your father to accept it,” he added with a kind smile. Narnonee blushed and didn’t really know what she was supposed to do now. “Can you go and ask your father to join me?” said Navithian. Narnonee had instantly run to her father by the tree. She had looked on as he walked over to Navithian and took a seat next to him. A younger man had served them cold tea, and the two men had talked for a while. When her father had returned, he explained that the old man had asked if Narnonee would be his servant in return for an Eagle coin for every month that she was in his service. He did not have to explain that such a generous sum would see her entire family through even the hardest of times, and she had been overjoyed to be able to ensure that her sisters and brothers would never starve again. The only sting in the tail was that the old man had insisted she would come with him right away, which meant she would not be able to say goodbye to her family. Her father had looked at her and said, “I do understand if you do not wish to do that.” But Narnonee knew that such an opportunity would never again present itself to a girl like her. She had kissed her father on both cheeks, bade him do the same to her four siblings and her mother, and then she had walked over to Navithian. She had struggled with her emotions but did not want neither her father nor the old man to notice. So, when she reached him, she was calm and even managed a smile when he introduced her to his manservant, Mihael. The journey to Kahri’Tenor had been long, but for

Narnonee this was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her. For every town and city they had travelled through, her mind had boggled at how simple a life she had led until now. She remembered when they had entered the Great Library, and Navithian had introduced her as his Nuh’Vi. The Central Hall had fallen silent. She had watched all the Scribes look from one to another to decipher whether the Elder was making a joke or not.

Finally, Hardan, the Hairless, had walked forward and declared, “With the greatest respect, Elder, this girl cannot be your Nuh’Vi.” Navithian looked from Hardan to Narnonee and said, “And why is this?” Hardan smiled a smile that inferred: isn’t it obvious?

When Navithian did not smile back, Hardan pointed to the left side of Narnonee’s simple tunic, where only a stump was visible inside the short sleeve, and responded, “She has but one arm!”

Navithian looked at Hardan, smiled and simply uttered, “Really? I hadn’t noticed.” Before he walked to the Elder Gallery and disappeared through the domed entrance. Hardan had looked down at the young girl with disbelief. Then he had straightened up.

“You heard the Elder. Take the girl to her chamber!” That night she had eaten the finest meal she had ever had in the company of all the other Nuh’Vi in the Great Library. Here, in the darkness, the image of that banquet was her only companion. Ironically, her memory of the famine was still vivid in her mind: she knew that she was able to cope with the hunger and withstand the temptation to leave this sanctuary too soon. Her mother had always said that: “The fruits of the earth are

a blessing from the gods, but the tears from the sky are the gift of life". So, she knew that if she could only find water she could last longer. In the darkness, she had found large clusters of moss that had soaked up the moisture running off the damp rocks at the very end of the stairwell; she would suck on them and drain them for every drop of life giving water. On the sixth day, however, Narnonee could no longer risk staying hidden without anything to eat. *I might faint and then die if I do not find food*, she thought. Her fingers explored the exit from the tunnel at the end of the escape route from the crypt above. She was convinced that, if the soldiers knew she had gone into the crypt with Navithian — even if they could not figure out just how she had escaped, they would search everywhere for her. They would begin with the Great Library itself, then the surroundings and, by now, she thought that the search would either have been abandoned or expanded far beyond both the Library and Kahri'Tenor. She hoped she was right as she slowly pushed the flat stone that covered the exit to one side.

Narnonee sat under the rough branches of the large thorny bush that obscured the opening for a while, listening to the sounds of the night. She could see Nardaeth's quarter-full Tear in the clear, black sky; she was thankful for what little light it shone on the path through the canyon in front of her. A solitary Kiri Bird let out its hoarse nocturnal mating call, but Narnonee was satisfied that he was the only one out there. She stood up and walked down the narrow path between the steep rock-face on either side of her.

For every step she took down the uneven track, she could hear the four keys rattle in the black pouch.

THE APPRENTICES

Once out in the open, Karn turned to Erin to ask for an explanation. But the tears running down her cheeks stopped him.

“I don’t know what happened. They came up from behind with this strange instrument. A lamp, or something like it, with a blue stone inside. It tore the Spirit out of Tallan, and he...” She couldn’t make herself say it, and Karn didn’t need to hear it. *The Faculty has moved against the Dah Rai, killed all the Scribes. They were trying to get to the Elder when I intercepted them, he thought, and they have also killed a Nuh’Mahri and extracted his Spirit.* With the King wounded, this looked like they were paving the way for taking control of Alathia. They did not want any of the most powerful Orders to stand in their way, especially not the Mahri Rai.

“You must warn the other Nuh’Mahri. Try to keep them as far away from here as possible.” Erin looked at her mentor. She knew at once that he was not going to come with her. “My Apprentices, they will come for them too,” he said with a heaviness that made all further questions redundant.

“May Nirith be with you,” said Erin as she sheathed her sword. She then ran down one of the many narrow side streets. Karn stood for a while watching her until she disappeared round the farthest corner.

“And with you,” he said under his breath. He was dreading this next part. Ever since the Faculty had ordered the Nuh’Mahri and their Companions to disperse, and stay out of sight and contact with anyone, he had felt a growing animosity toward both him and the Mahri Rai in general. He understood

that Lord Darhlmarrh had shown himself on the battlefield with a Mahri Mark on his face; it had terrified the soldiers and rumours had run like wildfire across the Lands. But he wasn't entirely sure that the Faculty's interest was purely the safety of the Spirit Walkers and their Protectors. Unfortunately, right now, there was a more pressing matter to attend to. If the Faculty had ordered the attack on the Great Library, and the killing of the Dah Rai, there was no doubt in his mind that the same would happen to the Harnap Arena and his Apprentices. As he approached the arena, he noticed straight away that there were no people in the streets or the plaza in front of the huge building. A couple of carts had been left unattended by their vendors, and a child's abandoned doll on the ground told the story of a hasty escape needed for anyone in the square. The steps leading up to the Arena were also empty, and the guards that would normally stand in the shade of the huge columns on either side of the bronze gate were nowhere to be seen. *Not a good omen*, he thought as he drew his blade and half ran up the stairs. The cool, long corridors leading from the entrance hall to the living quarters and the indoor training facilities were ghostly silent. Karn stopped and stood completely still, listening for any sign of life. There was nothing but the slight draft that always cooled these marble lined hallways. But, far from being a calming sound, it filled him with dread. Finally, he picked up something.

It was the faint echo of a Centurion's command to: "Fall out!" from the practice arena. *Maybe they have been arrested and are being taken away*, he thought as he jumped up the stairs to the North King's platform, running out into the sunshine. The sight that met him was devastating. There — on the soft white sand that would cushion a stumble or a fall during practice —

lay all his young Apprentices, scattered like freshly cut hay in the summer sun. Lines of blood trickled out from under each of the plain blue tunics. He had known each of these brilliant young people by name, by what they liked, and by where they came from. Every Apprentice had been presented to him by a proud family from one of the main cities, or they had travelled from their homesteads and villages on their own to become part of one of the most revered and respected Orders in all of Alathia. Rich families hoped for favours from the King, or a placement at the court, rather than actually being named Nuh'Mahri: Companion and Protector. But for the poorer families being a Mahri Rai was in itself an honour and a sacred duty. That there was a monetary reward attached was secondary. That was why Karn preferred to take on Apprentices from the provinces rather than the five Capitals. It was not always possible because of the influence the Old Families still had. But he prided himself on being rather unpopular among them, not that all that mattered now. They were all dead. Karn had no doubt that the Faculty had silenced these young girls and boys as a means to an end. *But what is their end game?* he wondered as his eyes caught a glimpse of the last group of Faculty soldiers, marching out of the furthest entrance to the arena.

THE FACULTY

The Five Faculty Masters stood at the foot end of the huge, ornately carved four poster bed. In their long, heavy red capes, they looked like monoliths in the flickering light from the fireplace. The wounded North King lay cradled in the bed by huge pillows and soft duvets. His eyes were closed, and his skin

almost as pale as the sweat-soaked sheets beneath him. When he had first been brought in, the Masters had been convinced that they could nurse him back to health within weeks; they had called on the city's most talented physicians, doctors, and surgeons. But, one by one, these proud professionals had given up as the King — in spite of countless remedies — seemed to get worse and worse by the day. The last of the doctors was an elderly man called Johratnian, and he was the Faculty's last hope. The venerable doctor had examined the North King and his wound carefully. Then he revealed his diagnosis to the Masters. "Our Lord has been wounded by a poisoned blade, honourable Masters," he had said in a low rumble of a voice, "but the poison is not of this world. I'm afraid it has come to be through Underly Magic." Those words had shocked the Five Masters, and they had held council in private. Ever since the first reports of Lord Darhlmarth and his newfound powers had surfaced, the Faculty had suspected foul play, but to have those suspicions confirmed was earth-shattering. At first, Lord Darhlmarth had been seen to pave the way for his troops with strange occurrences, such as a favourable wind for his fleet when he attacked the port of Ostinsia in Palythia that seemed against nature. Or the sudden ice storm that ravaged the camp of the North King's army at Krongarth in the middle of the summer. But it was when more detailed reports reached the Faculty that alarm bells began to ring in earnest. In the battle for Hastnost, when the two armies had been lined up against each other, the evil Lord had ridden through his own lines all the way to the very front. There, he removed his helmet and revealed the mark of the Mahri on his face. The sight had made the North King's army crumble before a single arrow had been loosened, or a single blade fallen on a shield,

and even the officers had fled the battlefield. Each man that ran from the battle brought with him the tale of “Lord Darhlmarrh the Nuh’Mahri” to the furthest corners of Alathia. Master Onairi had been the first of the Five to hear the stories. He was a tall, spindly presence with an oddly oblong face that — in combination with the heavy red velvet robe that rested on his shoulders — accentuated his long limbs and made him look even taller than he was. Like his four colleagues, he struggled to comprehend the implications of the information brought to them, and to answer the huge question of just how Lord Darhlmarrh could have become a Nuh’Mahri in the first place? The twenty-seven Mahri Spirits had existed ever since the beginning of recorded time. They had wandered the Worlds in their human hosts, the Nuh’Mahri, and had helped mankind with their deep-rooted understanding of nature, healing powers, and connection to the past both ancient and recent. The Spirits were immortal, and they gave their human hosts an extended lifespan that could be hundreds of years. When a host finally died, the Spirit would select a new host and bond with them. It was during the First North King’s reign that it became clear that this natural selection wasn’t sustainable; the accumulated knowledge in the ancient Spirits demanded more and more of their human hosts. It proved too powerful for the common man or woman: many died in the process. The First North King established the Order of the Mahri Rai and charged the Faculty with training and conditioning suitable candidates. In council with the Nuh’Mahri, he put a system in place for the Spirits to choose a new host. When a Spirit was about to lose its host, it would travel to Mahri Tenor and select a new one in a Pairing Ceremony. At the same time, it would choose a Mahri Rai to be its Companion and Protector.

These highly skilled warriors were needed for three reasons: firstly, because mankind had evolved — and not necessarily for the better, which meant that certain people would seek to exploit the Nuh'Mahri for their own gain. While others would be in genuine need of help, but they would be so desperate for a Nuh'Mahri to assist to the point that they would turn violent or try to prevent the Spirit from leaving. Secondly, because a Nuh'Mahri would occasionally have used its power to the point of exhaustion and would need a time of recuperation, which could take weeks in some cases. Without a Mahri Rai present, the Spirit Walker would be too vulnerable. Finally, it was the Mahri Rai's duty to escort the Nuh'Mahri back to Mahri Tenor before it got too weak. If a host died too far away from the Pairing Ceremony, there was a risk that it would have to find a host elsewhere which was dangerous. For hundreds of years, the Faculty had fulfilled its duty. These days they knew exactly the age of each Nuh'Mahri, and there was a system in place to predict when a Spirit would need a host. So, how could Lord Darhlmarrth have become a host? When a more detailed report reached Master Onairi, the picture became clearer. In one of the latest battles, an officer had gotten close enough to Lord Darhlmarrth to clearly see the Mark on his face. The Officer reported that there seemed to be more than one Mark, and they flickered in different colours. He also noticed something strange about the Lord's armour: In his breastplate sat a large, blue pulsating crystal. Master Onairi had reported to the other four Masters that he was convinced that Darhlmarrth had extracted three Spirits, and he had bound them to himself by Underly Magic. Now Doctor Johratnian had confirmed their worst fears.

CAPATH

Karn steered straight for the arena exit down the cool corridors in the huge complex. His head was in turmoil, and his heart pumped wave after wave of furious blood through his veins. His sword arm pulsated with pent-up energy, and his hand had never held his sword this tightly before. *You need to relax your grip or this fight will end too quickly.* His stride became pacier and, finally, he could hear the marching footsteps of the Faculty soldiers, flooding out of the smaller exit to the square at the back of the Arena. This is where my last stand will be. He raised the tip of the scimitar sword into the attack position and began the process that he had taught to his now dead Apprentices. “Fear will lose you the battle before it has even begun, and thinking of the victory ahead will wound you in the now,” he would say to them, “clear your mind and body of all restraints, tensions, and fears. Flow through the fight like a river that will not be stopped until it reaches the ocean but address each bend as it appears.” It was easier said than done, especially if you faced an enemy army, but he was the Master of it. As he reached the zenith of this state of mind, and could see the backs of the last row of soldiers moving through the archway into the pale daylight beyond it, he heard a faint call from a side corridor.

A young voice cried, “Master... Rai!” and it stopped him in his tracks. One of his Apprentices had managed to escape and was hiding in a storage room. Karn stood there in the middle of the corridor. He looked toward the soldiers as one question raced through his mind: *is it better to avenge the multitude of dead or to save the one that is still alive?* Though the lust for combat coursed through his veins, and the spilling of blood would

undoubtedly ease his anger at this moment, he still had a duty to the Apprentices under his charge. Whether it was fifty-four or just the one, it did not change what he had sworn to do. He ran down the side corridor to the slightly open door to the storage room. Inside, he found Capath. The boy was only twelve, and he was both frightened and wounded.

“They came and dragged us all into the arena, Rai, and then they just started killing.” Karn ripped a piece off one of the white sheets hanging from the drying lines in the ceiling and bandaged the boy’s left arm. “I was trying to defend the younger ones, but a soldier slashed my arm open and was about to kill me when Barnad jumped onto his back. They fell into the dirt, I couldn’t see... and I ran. I’m sorry, Rai. I have failed them all.” The boy broke down in tears and fell back onto one of the large baskets that held linen for the dormitory. Karn took in the account and sat down next to the distraught Apprentice.

“You did not fail them, Capath. You have been chosen by Nirith to bear witness to what happened here today,” he said and put an arm around the young boy’s shoulders. When dusk descended over the complex, Karn made Capath hide in an empty laundry basket while he himself ventured out into the arena once again. The pale light from the moon, the tear of Nardaeth, shrouded the bodies in an otherworldly hue as Karn went from one fallen Apprentice to another. He used his short sharp knife from the hidden sheath in his leather boot to cut a lock of hair and a piece of cloth from each one. He paused by every one of the bodies, placed a hand on their heads, and whispered a prayer that included the name of each individual. For each prayer, the anger and darkness in his chest grew. He gathered all the cuttings in one of the canvas bags hanging off his broad

leather belt and returned to the storage room. Karn found two large grey blankets in one of the washing baskets, fashioning them into hooded capes for the two of them to wear. He knew that the sight of their blue tunics would make them targets once they left the Mahri Rai complex. Surely, by now, the Faculty had made some sort of announcement to the people of Kahri'Tenor. Even though many of them would still respect and honour the Order, there were other elements that would see an opportunity to make money or get into favour with the new rulers of Alathia. For that the Faculty's endgame was total control over the Lands was becoming ever clearer in his mind. He draped the smallest of the blankets over Capath's shoulders and fastened it with a leather strap from one of the laundry baskets. With his sword drawn, but hidden under the grey cloak, Karn guided the young boy out of the storage room and down toward the arched exit to the back of the arena. Behind one of the large columns on either side of the doorway, he scouted the small square that lay between the arena and the first row of houses. He knew that he would be able to make a successful escape if they could reach the small side streets and alleyways in the lower part of the city without being detected. From there, he planned to go to the harbour and hire a boat to take them out of harm's way before the Faculty got reports back from the Great Library. Once the Five Masters knew that Karn was still alive, they would shut down any exit from Kahri'Tenor. *Time is short.* He could not see any people in the square, concluding that the appearance of a large number of Faculty Soldiers had frightened the neighbourhood enough for them to stay indoors for the foreseeable future.

“We have to move swiftly, Capath. We will not stop for anything or anyone. Do you understand?” The young boy

looked more frightened than ever but managed to nod. Karn grabbed hold of Capath's shoulder and dragged him out into the open square. They maintained a speed that was quick but not suspicious. The entrance into the maze of streets in the quarter between them and the harbour got nearer and nearer.

"HALT!" The command bellowed across the square and bounced off the two storey stone buildings. Karn did not stop as he turned his head and spotted the City Guard Patrol, emerging from round the corner of the arena.

"Keep going," he said and pushed Capath further out in front of him. But the four soldiers were fast, and Karn knew that they would be too close even if he and the boy got to the alleyway first. So, he gave Capath another push that sent the boy into the mouth of the narrow street, and then he turned toward the soldiers. The Centurion at the front had not expected this move, and his hesitation was the last mistake he made in his life. Karn swung the sword from under his cloak and targeted the weak spot in the soldier's armour: the exposed space between the bottom of the cheek guard on his helmet and the top of his breastplate. The exposed skin instantly broke open when the Danarcian steel sliced through it, cutting the main artery. A few twists and turns later, the other three soldiers lay dead in the dirt. The battle in the Great Library had been self-defence, but about this one he wasn't so sure. Any taking of life had to be justified according to the Mahri Rai Code. Could he have escaped without killing them? Was it the frustration of not having been there for his Apprentices that had swayed his decision to engage? The solemn moment of contemplation was disrupted by cries and screams from behind him. When he turned, he saw a gathering of citizens that stood dumbstruck,

horrified by what they had just witnessed. In the fight, Karn's crudely made cape had slipped completely onto his back and, as he now stood there with his sword dripping with blood and four City Guards lying dead by his feet, his blue Nuh'Mahri tunic was fully visible. *These people have no way of knowing what has just happened in the arena behind them, he thought. This will play right into whatever the Faculty is planning as their next move.* There was nothing he could do about it now. So, he drew the cloak round him, disappearing into the network of small streets and passages that would hopefully take him and the boy safely to the harbour.

THE CRYPT

The girl's heavy robe had fluttered in the rank updraft from the deep stairwell as the huge flagstone slid back into its place. Navithian had never seen her so fragile as just now. *I have put the hope of the Worlds onto her shoulders,* he thought as he sat down with his back up against the smooth wall. *But what choice did I have?* There was no one there in the dark chamber to answer him anymore, only the deep thuds from the soldier's ram. He knew that they would eventually gain access to the crypt, as he had said to Narnonee, and he was certain that they would be aware of the keys. What he did not know was what they would do to him when they couldn't find them. Maybe they would simply split him open to see if he had swallowed them? *I wouldn't put it past them,* he thought as he smiled at the ingenuity of the Honourable Architect who had built the Great Library and this crypt. He had clearly foreseen that this day would come, and he had carved the stairwell into the bedrock himself and not told anyone but the El-

der of the Library. The secret had been passed down through the generations of Elders, the Holder of the Hands, so only one man in the Worlds knew of it. The trigger was concealed among thousands of intricate details. The Architect had even foreseen that someone might tap at the flagstones in the floor — to hear if one sounded different than another — and had carved out hollow spaces under each and every one of them, so that they all sounded like the one that concealed the stairwell. *The Dah'Phar is safe, the keys are safe, and Narnonee is safe*, he thought as he stood back up. *So, there is no reason the crypt should be destroyed.* He walked over to the doorway and pressed the trigger to open it. The eight soldiers that manned the ram stopped in their tracks when the ivory panel next to the one they had been pummelling slid open. They stared at the old man who slowly emerged from the crypt with the look of a flock of predators that were confronted by their prey much more easily and unexpectedly than they had ever imagined. It took a few moments before their Officer composed himself. He ordered them to drop the ram and seize the Holder of the Hands. The soldiers grabbed Navithian and dragged him away from the crypt. The Officer walked over the debris toward the opening into the crypt.

“NO!” The loud high-pitched shout turned both the officer, his soldiers, and Navithian toward the domed entrance to the Elder Gallery. Master Onairi emerged from the narrow path through the mountain of books and parchments. Everyone watched him closely as he walked past the soldiers and their prisoner, then past the Officer, entering the crypt. The silence in the Elder Gallery was only disturbed by the breaths of the soldiers who, only a few moments ago, had been running the ram against the hard marble again and again. When Master Onairi returned,

his face did not show any disappointment or anger at not finding the keys. He walked over to the large oak table and sat down in the Elder's ornately carved wooden chair. A nod to Navithian signalled that the Holder of the Hands should join him. Navithian looked at his capturers and then at the Officer. They all stepped back and opened up a path for him to the desk. With a gentle smile on his face, he walked across the Gallery and sat down in the chair that would normally be reserved for his own visitors.

"How are you, dear friend?" started Master Onairi.

"Not better for seeing you," replied Navithian. "To know that the Faculty is behind this atrocity, fills my heart with a sadness born out of despair at how low even the mightiest can stoop." The reply made a few of the soldiers behind them gasp, but Master Onairi looked untroubled as he leaned forward.

"Where are the keys?" he demanded with just a hint of strain in his voice.

"In a much darker place... dear friend" was the reply that dripped with sarcasm. Master Oraini looked at the old Holder of the Hands for a while, then he motioned the Officer to come closer.

"Seal all but the East Gate. Set up camp outside, and find me a cage," he said and turned to Navithian. "You will tell us where they are sooner or later. But, if they are where I suspect they might be, they will present themselves in due course — with or without your consent."

THE HARBOUR

Karn and Capath made good use of the darkness as they closed in on the City harbour. Even at night Karn knew that the

docks would be awash with people, and that the hustle and bustle was perfect for them to move around without attracting much attention. They emerged onto the wide cobbled landing area by the commercial ship dockyards, following the flow of people to the nearest tavern, Sea Man Tenor. Once inside, Karn placed Capath at a table in a corner. He tucked the heavy grey cloak around the boy so the light from the roaring fireplace wouldn't reveal his traditionally shaved head. By the bar, he ordered two cups of ale and, contrary to what was his custom, asked for the cheapest to not rouse suspicion. He doubted that any of the rough sailors and street rabble would even care, but he needed to be careful as long as he had the boy's safety in his hands. When the Tavern Keeper slid two clay cups in front of him, Karn asked if an Actress called Nirafathis was around. The Keeper sent the man in the cheap grey cloak a toothless smile and asked if he could afford a song let alone a whistle. Karn opened his hand and revealed four Boar copper coins.

"I will send for her," said the Keeper, beginning to serve the next customer in line. Capath had not tasted ale before, but Karn insisted that the boy drink the sweet, thick substance to both calm him down and give him some sustenance until they could get a meal in a safe place — which this wasn't. After a while, a middle-aged Actress approached their table. Her face was painted in wild, vivid colours that exaggerated her slightly fading features, and her dress could light up the entire tavern should the fire go out. When she saw Karn's face under the grey hood, she quickly glanced around the room and then sat down next to the boy.

"There is a price on your head, Master Reather," she said in a controlled whisper. "They say you are in cahoots with the

Lord of Darhlmarth, and that you have killed your Apprentices and several City Guards when they tried to detain you. There are a hundred Eagles on your capture, 'either way' as they have put it."

"Half of that is true," replied Karn, explaining what really had happened in both the Great Library and outside the Arena. Nirafathis was dumbstruck by Karn's story. But she did not question his account, because she knew that the man she had first encountered more than ten years ago would never lie to her.

"We need somewhere to stay, and a contact to a captain that will give us passage to Palythia" said Karn as he pushed a leather pouch across the table. Nirafathis swept the moneybag up under her heavy sleeve and lent forward across the table.

"What in the Worlds makes you think that I can make contact with a sailor?" Capath looked from the Actress to his Master with disbelief in his eyes. Had this painted woman fooled them? Would she give them away? Then both Karn and Nirafathis began to laugh, and the young boy's shoulders settled back down. Nirafathis got up from the table, raised her voice to make sure everyone could hear her and said, "Well, it will be extra if both of you want a private audience!" The drunken sailors and street crawlers that sat closest burst out in raucous laughter. But the rest of the tavern paid little attention to the two cloaked people that left in the wake of the larger-than-life Actress. Nirafathis guided the two fugitives through the docks and into the most run down part of the city. It was a world in itself, and no Faculty Soldier or City Guard would risk setting foot inside its invisible boundary. They encountered only a few shadowy characters on their way down the narrow, labyrinthine streets, reaching the actress's house without incident. The humble building was only two stories high but had three basements, one upon another.

Capath's eyes widened for every level they passed at the sight of actors of both sexes milling in and out of the numerous rooms. Finally, they reached the lowest level, and Nirafathis cleared one of the rooms of its occupier with a very authoritative bark that was at odds with her soft and feminine appearance.

"You can rest here for as long as you like," she said in a contrasting mellow tone, "I will have to go back to work. But I will get one of the others to bring you some food and wine. It might take me some time to find you a willing captain that will not cut your throats before he casts anchor, but I will find you passage." Karn took her hand and, to Capath's surprise, he kissed it gently.

"I owe you for this," he said with a grateful smile on his lips. But Nirafathis simply lifted his hand, kissed it in return and said, "We both know that is not true." With that, she walked out, leaving Karn and his Apprentice to settle in.

"You know this... lady... well?" asked Capath when he climbed into the bed in the corner, drawing the old, faded blankets over his still trembling body.

"Well enough, now get some sleep."

On their third day in the basement of the safe house, Nirafathis made good on her promise. She had found a Captain whose ship had only just been released from the Harbour Master's lockdown order. The Captain had maintained that he had not been bringing in a secret cargo of leaves from the Agahn Valley. That it had in fact been a rival Captain on the trade route who had falsely accused him. The Harbour Master's men had searched the ship for three full days but had been unable to find anything inside to indicate any illegal activity. The lockdown order had, however, been in place for another two days because

the Harbour Master's wife had celebrated her birthday with a three-day long banquet, and the man himself had been too drunk to attend to his duties. In other words, there was no love lost between the Captain and the local authorities. It also helped seal the deal that Nirafathis had rendered her services for free to the Captain, and that the crew had been given a generous discount at the Sea Man Tenor for one night only.

"You have to wait till darkness falls, and then I will take you to the ship that's moored at the far end of the East Quay," said Nirafathis while ruffling Capath's hair as though he was her son.

"You can have him," said Karn in a rare moment of playfulness.

"Nah, you better get him back to his mum, so she can fatten him up." The smile on Capath's lips faded, and the boy looked to the floor. Nirafathis was confused and looked over at Karn. He gently shook his head. *She couldn't have known that the boy is an orphan.*

"I promise I will find him a place where he is both fed and loved," Karn said. Nirafathis felt sorry for the boy, and slightly ashamed that she had assumed anything about this young man. She herself had lost her parents and knew the hurt that never goes away.

"Any news about the Library?" said Karn to change the mood.

"The official line is that there has been a quake of the Earth, and that the Library is unsafe at the moment. But no one has seen any of the Dah Rai or the Scribes for days, and there are persistent rumours that the Holder of the Hands is being held prisoner up there — that he is being tortured. But no one knows why or what the Faculty is looking

for.” Karn took in the information. *Navithian has been taken prisoner. So, the soldiers must have got to him in the crypt, he thought. The question is whether they captured him before or after he locked the Dah’Phar?* He got up from the table, gathering his cloak and sword from the simple bed that had been his home for the last three days.

“Are you leaving, Rai?” asked a clearly nervous Capath.

“Take the boy to the ship tonight, Nirafathis. If I am not there when Nardaeth’s Tear is at its zenith, then tell the Captain to take him to Palythia and get him to the Golden Galley Tenor in the upper town.” Nirafathis knew that there was no point in asking why or, indeed, what Karn was planning. So, she got up from the bed, caressed the boy’s soft cheeks and left the room. Karn draped the grey cloak over his shoulders and made sure it covered the sword in his leather belt. He walked over and sat down next to Capath. The boy had ripe tears in the corner of his eyes, and Karn knew he was struggling to hold them back.

“Do not worry, Capath. I will see you tonight or at the tavern in Palythia.” He pried the large silver ring off his left hand index finger. It had a simple design embossed in the gold disc that was inlaid in the flat top of the ring: a shepherd’s staff and a sword crossing each other. It was the symbol of the Mahri Rai Order. It reminded each of them of the pledge they had sworn to when they were accepted: to guide and protect. Capath’s eyes widened when Karn placed the precious ring in the palm of his trembling hand and closed his fingers around it.

“If you get to the Golden Galley Tenor before me, you show this to the Landlord. He will take good care of you until we meet again.” He put his arms around the boy, giving him a reassuring hug that didn’t betray the doubt that had occupied his

thoughts for the last few moments. He could not afford to hold the embrace for long, and he walked to the door without looking back.

“Where are you going, Rai?” asked Capath with a telling tremble in his voice.

“To see a friend in need” was the sombre reply.

HARDAN, THE HAIRLESS

Hardan found it incredibly difficult to concentrate on writing down the words of the Fourteenth North King who lay wounded in the bed. There was a palatable sense of doom in the darkened chamber. Even though there were no mirrors, he knew that his bald head was covered with beads of sweat, but he was too anxious to wipe them off in case he missed any detail. The North King had nine Dah Rai Scribes from the Great Library assigned to his service. They worked in groups of three, so they could be available day or night; their function was to note down any decree from the King. One would dispatch the written order to whom-ever it concerned, another would place a replica in the King’s own archive, and the last would relay a copy to the Elder so he could include them in the Dah’Phar. The nine Scribes were well versed in all the languages of the Worlds: old and new alphabets. They had mastered a blistering pace when they wrote in their notebooks. On any other day, being there in the presence of the King and the Five Faculty Masters would have been a great honour. But Hardan could not help being overwhelmed by a sense of dread. It took all his concentration to banish the feeling and get on with the writing. It was only much later that he would truly reflect on what he had written. The King’s speech was slow,

punctuated by heavy intakes of breath into his affected lungs.

“The Faculty has served me well in this time... of war... my last thoughts are of peace... robbed of my successor... my son... I give dominion over my... Kingdom to the finest... amongst the... Nuh’Mahri. Give them this as proof of their right... to rule in my stead.” Hardan watched as Master Onairi walked over to the King’s right-hand side, accepting the heavy golden Ring of Sovereignty. Soon after, the King closed his eyes; no one in the room was in any doubt that he had uttered his last words in the Worlds. With a nod to each of them, Master Onairi dismissed the three Scribes and Hardan quickly. Then he joined his two fellow Dah Rai to leave the room that already felt like a tomb. They did not exchange a single word as they hurried down the narrow corridor that led to the gate from the Faculty’s fortified stronghold. Only when they were past the guards by the heavy wooden doors did Hardan allow himself to breathe. They walked down the steep hill street lined with townhouses which had gradually crept closer to the stronghold over the years.

When they turned down one of the side streets, Hardan’s body reacted to what had just happened. A mumbled “Sorry” was all he managed as he ran into a small, dark alleyway. He found an old, broken barrel discarded at the end of the narrow passage and vomited violently on the ground behind it. Three large convulsions emptied his stomach of whatever he had consumed that day, and it left him barely able to stand up. It was only the sound of running feet, and the clanging of armour against leather that made him turn to look out onto the main street. His two colleagues stood nailed to the spot, looking up toward the stronghold with faces that could have been those of deformed gargoyles on any temple roof. Moments later, six soldiers rammed into the

two Scribes, swords first. In an instant, they were gone from view as if a runaway cart had hit them. Only their short-lived screams echoed down the passage toward Hardan. His instinct was to run, but the state of his legs bought him enough time to think about his situation. *They will kill me on sight, he thought. As long as they didn't see me run in here, they will assume that I'm further ahead.* He crept into hiding behind the barrel, curled up to make himself as small as possible. *I must get to the Library... they were after the North King's decree.* When he felt sure that the soldiers were gone, Hardan carefully walked down to the end of the alleyway. His breath almost stopped when he looked out to see if there was anyone in the main street. To his relief, the road was empty and he scuttled down the hill. Nardaeth's Tear was almost full; it was so clear in the night sky that it gave him plenty of shadow to walk in as he made his way toward the Great Library. *The soldiers will not know which of us were going to the Elder, so they will try to intercept me anywhere they can,* he thought as his mind struggled to stay clear enough to formulate a plan, trying not to panic over what was a blatant attempt to suppress the will of the King by the Faculty. *The least well-known way into the Library is the North gate... I hope the soldiers are not familiar with the road through the Alahri Forest.* Hardan sped up as much as he could, soon reaching the edge of the forest. Alahri was the wife of the Seventh North King who had died in childbirth, and he had dedicated the forest to her memory. He decreed that the trees could never be felled, not even to make way for the ever-expanding city. The Old Families that owned most of the land and houses in Kahri'Tenor had often complained. But the ordinary citizens had grown to like this remnant of nature in the middle of the stone maze they inhabited. No one was there when Hardan made his way down

the more obscure dirt tracks, finally getting to the huge steps that would lead him to the North Gate. They were so seldom used that trees and undergrowth had claimed almost the entire bottom half; it made the ascent very difficult. As Hardan struggled to find his balance, all he could think was that it would be so much more difficult for a soldier: a relief under these circumstances. When he got to the plateau in front of the North Wing, he was elated that there were no soldiers in sight. *Thank Nirith!* But then a strange rustling in among the trees at the bottom of the stairs caught his attention. He was not able to see anything in the darkness. *A flock of deer? Must be.* He sprinted toward the huge wooden gates, steered for the smaller door that had been cut out in one of them, and prayed it was not so late in the day that it had been locked. He readied his shoulder against the wood and put all his weight into a huge push. The door was hardly ever used, so he knew the hinges had to be brutally convinced to move. When he felt the inward movement, his heart almost skipped a beat. *I'm safe,* he thought as he slid into the building as soon as there was enough space. Once safe inside the familiar place, the true magnitude of what had happened earlier — and what it might mean for the future — hit Hardan like a boulder. He knew that he should go find Navithian and hand over his notes. But his legs would not listen to his brain anymore and both of them buckled at the same time. Hardan sank down onto the cold flagstones just inside the door, curling up once again. He was shaking and tears ran down his cheeks, as the image of his two friends gored to death by the Faculty Guards kept playing in his mind's eye. He had no idea of how long he had been sitting there when he was awoken by a cacophony of noise. Crash after crash that sounded like mountains crumbling

or huge waves pounding a defenceless coastline. What is going on? He found the strength to stand up and make his way down the central north corridor. When he entered the Central Hall, he found that everything he had known all his life was in chaos. His fellow Dah Rai were tipping over each and every one of the two-story shelves in all of the corridors and, for every one that fell, so did Hardan's world. This is the end, he thought as he managed to grab hold of one of the Scribes.

"What has happened?" he asked, struggling to hold the man still.

"We have been attacked... soldiers... the Faculty! The Elder has ordered us to flee through the North Corridor," said the Scribe. His eyes were filled with panic and his face covered in sweat. So, when he wrestled himself free, Hardan simply let him go. He just stood there in the chaos of it all and wondered if this was indeed the end of the world. Then he spotted Navithian by the entrance to the Elder Gallery, and it reminded him of his duty. He ran over to the man he had known most of his life, wanting to tell him everything — and to have him say some words of comfort and hope, but he knew there were none. Navithian looked at him with horror written in every line of his face when he tore the last written page out of his notebook.

"These are the words of the North King" he managed, "make them safe in the Dah'Phar!" There was no time for farewell as the sound of the advancing soldiers began to spill into the Central Hall. He picked up a staff to defend himself and joined the panicked crowd of Scribes, Dah Rai, and their young Nuh'Vi that scrambled for safety through the North Wing. Hardan was toward the back of the throng when the gates at the end of the wing suddenly flew open. Silhouetted by the moonlight outside,

he could easily make out the plumed helmets and the raised swords. As the screams started, Hardan stopped in his tracks. He saw soldiers running their spears through anyone standing in their way, getting closer and closer in an unstoppable assault. He shut his eyes. *I should have locked the gate, I should have—*

THE MAN IN THE CAGE

The Faculty Soldiers had blocked three of the entrances to the Great Library by rolling huge boulders carved from the surrounding rocks up against the solid oak doors. The only way in was through the East Wing and, to get there, you would have to go through the camp they had set up on the earth ramp leading to the entrance and then pass the checkpoint just before the gate. To anyone who would look on from afar, it would be impossible to enter the Library unseen. But Karn was not just anyone. When he was an Apprentice, he had often been sent to the Library to fetch books for the Master Reather. The Master was a good friend of the then Holder of the Hands and, probably, the only one who was allowed to bring anything out from the enormous collection. While one of the Dah Rai would go looking for what his Master had requested in among the maze of bookshelves, Karn would explore the rest of the incredible building. One day, he had made it as far as to the very end of the Tail that housed the sleeping quarters for the Dah Rai and the Scribes; the last part of it contained the rooms for the servants, the Nuh'Vi, and the kitchen. Karn had marvelled at the huge room that bustled with activity. Young boys and girls were doing the washing of dirty plates and cups, one of the less enjoyable aspects of being a

Nuh'Vi, and an army of chefs chopped, butchered, and cooked the next meal for the multitude of people in the Library. One of the cooks, a very large woman with apple-sized red cheeks and sweat running down her forehead, had given Karn a great chunk of tender beef, sandwiched between two slices of freshly baked bread. It was a meal he had never forgot — not just because of the taste but also because of where it was served. While he sat there on a small wooden bench in the corner of the bustling kitchen, enjoying the food, he had noticed one of the cooks walk to the far end wall with a bucket of discarded vegetables and peels. He had lifted it up on his shoulder and tipped it into a slit in the stone wall. When Karn had finished his beef and bread, he had walked over to the slit and looked out through it; the sight had been quite dizzying. The opening led to a slide that would force the rubbish to spill out, past the near vertical rock face, into the gully that lay several hundred feet below the Library. Most people would not consider that an entrance, least of all the soldiers posted at the front, but that was where Karn intended to gain access to the Great Library. The climb up the vertical rock face had been difficult in itself, but now he was faced with the steep slope that led into the kitchen. It had been several days since it had been used, and the rotting remains of meat and vegetables made the smooth surface slimy and slippery. He had to get a few feet into the disposal tract before he could use his climbing hook to hoist himself the rest of the way. Twice his footing failed, and the first time it nearly sent him flying into the gully. The third time, he managed to press both feet onto the left-hand side and his hands against the right. By rocking back and forth, he managed to 'hop' up the slope far enough to get the hook across the slit in the wall. Then he proceeded to drag

himself up until he could get a firm grip with both hands. Once inside, he sat in the darkness for a few moments to get his breath back. He had been away from Tallan for over three years, and he could already feel the ageing process speeding up. For almost two hundred years, he had benefitted from constantly being in the close proximity to the Mahri Spirit inside Tallan, and he had not aged more than twenty human years. Now that he was away from the powerful energy of the Spirit, he could tell that it wouldn't be long till he would age like a normal person. Maybe in ten years time, maybe fifteen, but it was happening — of that, he was sure. And one of the side effects was that he wasn't as untroubled by physical exertion as he used to be. While he sat there in the huge kitchen, the smell of smoke still clinging to the walls, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Eventually, it became clear that it had been abandoned in haste. Rotting vegetables still lay on the big wooden chopping boards, knives discarded on the long central table, and plates were strewn on the tiled floor by the stone washing-trough next to the dead fireplace. To his surprise, he didn't encounter a single body as he walked through the kitchen. *They have been thorough*, he thought, *leaving no sign of what happened here just in case someone gets in.* But, right by the door to the hallway that led past the sleeping quarters toward the Central Hall, he detected the unmistakable smell of rotting flesh coming from a storage cupboard. When he opened it, he didn't reel in disgust at the bloodied old man that lay curled up and dead inside. Instead, he pitied the thin cook. *Poor man*, he thought. *Though mortally wounded, he believed he could hide from death.* There was nothing Karn could do for the man, so he closed the cupboard and walked through the doorway. For every step he took down the empty corridor, he half hoped a Dah Rai or a

Scribe would step out from one of their rooms as if nothing had happened. But the halls were silent. Every sign of life had been eradicated — first by a sword and then by a broom to leave no evidence behind. Karn carefully looked out into the Central Hall from the open doorway in the Tail. He was quite surprised not to find any soldiers or sentries stationed in the vast space. *They must fully trust that they have blocked all the entrances*, he thought. He weaved his way between the tables and chairs that had clearly been placed back in their original position after the massacre. Only the mountains of books and parchments that had blocked three of the Wings were still there, and he could see that even more shelves had been tripped over all the way down to the end of each corridor. *A quake of the earth indeed*, thought Karn as he slowly made his way toward the Elder Gallery. There was a very faint hint of light coming from within the domed room, and Karn silently drew his sword. He kept it down along his right-hand side as he edged round the corner, stopping with his back to the wide wall of the vaulted entrance. He had a quick peek into the Elder Gallery to assess from where the light came. There was a lantern on the large, heavy table that once was Navithian's, and it illuminated a guard sitting in the Holder of the Hands' grand chair; he was half asleep. The light also reached the iron cage that hung just over the opened entrance to the crypt. It was only just large enough to fit the man that was standing upright inside it. If Karn had been in any doubt about who it was that had been encased by the metal bars, the reflection of the light in the gold pendant around the old man's neck removed it completely. Under the cage, he could just make out a dark pool undoubtedly formed by both blood and urine from the frightened and weakened prisoner. Karn fought the rush of blood that screamed

in his ears and steadied himself by the wall. After a few deep breaths, he sheathed his sword and silently bent down to draw the sharp knife from his boot. Slowly, he edged his way through the dark shadows along the wall until he was right behind the guard in the chair. Without making a sound, he lifted a small bottle out of one of the pouches hanging off his broad leather belt. He held his breath as he unscrewed the top and poured a few tiny drops of clear liquid onto the tip of his knife. Then he gently wiped them off on the rough scarf around the guard's neck. A few columns of thin vapours rose from the distilled dullberry droplets as soon as they made contact with the dirty fabric. The soldier's heavy breaths drew the almost invisible fumes into his large nose, and, within a few moments, he was in a deep, impenetrable sleep. Karn put the top back onto the flask and put it in his pouch, finally allowing himself to breathe. He stayed hidden behind the chair for a moment. Had any noise, however faint, raised the alarm? But the Library was as silent as before, and he broke cover to pick up the bundle of keys that lay on the oak table. He lowered the cage to the ground and carefully laid it flat on the floor. Once it had been opened, he could see the true extent of the cruel punishment. The old man had clearly not been given food or drink, and he looked shorter, thinner, and frailer than when they had met three days ago. As Karn lifted Navithian out of the cage, the old man opened his eyes. They looked up at his liberator with both gratitude and bewilderment.

“Who are you?” The confused look in the Elder's eyes told Karn that he had no recollection of their meeting earlier, and was no longer able to grasp reality and simply carried him to the table and carefully laid him out on it. He gave him some water from the guard's flask and a handful of dried dates from

the wooden bowl the guard hadn't finished.

"Who did this to you?" asked Karn as he gently dried the caked blood off Navithian's still swollen face.

"One of the guards got over excited when they put me in the cage, but I am sure Master Onairi didn't want them to do that" answered the old man. *So, Master Onairi is behind all of this*, thought Karn as he contemplated his next move. *The guard will wake up, either by himself or by a very angry officer, and they will raise the alarm as soon as they see the empty cage. I need more time than that to get the Elder to safety.* Then he remembered the kitchen.

"I will be back soon," he said to Navithian. The old man nodded and, as Karn walked away, he looked around his beloved Elder Gallery. His eyes flooded with sorrowful tears as they took in the now empty bronze shelves. Back in the kitchen, Karn laid the body of the cook out on the kitchen table and looked at the old man in detail. The resemblance wasn't great, but the beard had a similar length, and the physical differences could conceivably be explained by the lack of food and drink after three days standing up in the cage. Apart from the face. *Needs must*, he thought and found a wooden rolling pin that lay idle by a large clay pot full of mouldy dough. "I am so sorry," he said as he raised the implement over his head.

Navithian wasn't able to see what was going on behind him in the Elder Gallery. The man that had freed him from the cage had come back moments before and had taken his tunic and Elder Chain off him. Then he had dressed him in what looked like a cook's clothes. He was too weak to protest or ask why. By the breathing and scraping along the stone floor, the man was lifting something heavy, but Navithian could not see what. He could

only hear the click of the lock in the cage and then the clanging of the heavy chain as it was hoisted up into position again. It was only when Karn lifted him up onto the table, and helped him sit upright, that Navithian could see the silhouette of the man that had taken his place in the cage.

“I hope Nardaeth gives him safe passage to the Sea of Blood in the Underworld,” said the old man with tears in his eyes. Karn turned around and made Navithian cross his thin arms over his shoulders and his legs around his midriff. He bound the old man’s wrists and ankles together with strips of clothes, and then he made his way to the slit in the kitchen wall. As he stood in front of it, he could see Nardaeth’s Tear working its way towards the zenith in the night sky. The moonlight bathed the mountains and the top of the gully below in its pale, harsh light. Karn felt the breath of the old man on his neck and steadied himself. *And I thought the way up was hard.*

BIRTH OF THE KAH’NATH

Master Onairi was painfully aware that the revelation that Lord Monfort of Darhlmarth had acquired the Mark, and that he possessed a power stronger than any Nuh’Mahri in the Worlds had weakened the people’s faith in the Faculty. Even though they in their role as the King’s War Council had been instrumental in safeguarding their freedom from tyranny. When the wounded North King had first been brought to their stronghold, the Five Masters had agreed that it would not be advisable to let the people of Alathia know. Lord Darhlmarth’s seemingly unstoppable march on the Capital had fired up the resentment toward the Nuh’Mahri and the Mahri Rai, and if news

of the King's condition were to get out it could lead to a populist movement in favour of peace negotiations. The King had made it very clear that he was not allowing any talks with the opposition after the loss of his queen and his children. It had been agreed that The Faculty had to divert the attention away from the missing King. So, they had moved themselves to the forefront of a counterattack, dividing the army into five divisions, and placing each under the leadership of one of the Masters. In the following weeks, the tide had begun to turn, and reports would have it that Lord Darhlmarth himself was now, at all times, wearing a fitted, closed helmet that did not reveal the Mark he had so proudly showed off just months before. Master Onairi had also received reports from his spies in the Lord's army that the Sorath'Ki of Lilnith had been seen in his main camp just before he had revealed the Mark. This had made the Master even more curious about the strange blue crystal that had been brought back from the North King's winter castle along with his broken body. It had been found on the steps leading from the King's chambers down to his personal chapel immediately after he had fought off the evil Lord. Onairi had ordered the best physicians in Kahri'Tenor to examine the crystal under the supervision of Doctor Johratnian. He was the one that had concluded that Underly Magic had poisoned the King's wounds. Master Onairi had, for a while, been convinced that the crystal was the one that had been reported sitting in Lord Darhlmarth's dark blue armour. And that it had played a central role in his acquisition of the Mark. Contrary to public belief, he suspected that the Spirits had not willingly chosen Darhlmarth, but that they had been forced to inhabit his body by Underly Magic. Now all the evidence pointed to the fact that he had somehow lost them again. His army was

on the retreat, the rebellion was not helped by any supernatural occurrences any more, and he was wearing a new breastplate and helmet that completely covered his face. All of these thoughts ran through Master Onairi's head as he tried to take in what the North King had just decreed. He looked down into his open left hand at the huge, intricate gold Ring of Sovereignty with the North King Seal engraved in the flat, polished red signet stone at the top of it. *Give rule to the finest among the Nuh'Mahri*, he thought, *was that really what the King had just said?* One look at his four equals standing at the foot end of the bed, and their stunned, ashen faces, was all the confirmation he needed. He dismissed the three King's Scribes with a quick nod of his head, watching as they scuffled past the guards and out of the room. The bald one looked back at Master Onairi just before he vanished out of sight; it was a look filled with dread and confusion. He himself was confused. The King's decrees had always been followed to the letter, and his right to rule had never been doubted. But now that it had been established that he was under the influence of Underly Magic, were they to obey without question? He found the eyes of his fellow Masters and found consensus in each of them.

"The Scribes must not be permitted to reach their destinations," he said with the deliberate sentence construction of a politician who did not want any order to come back to haunt him. The Commander of the Faculty Guard bowed his head, then he put his red plumed helmet on and marched off. Onairi commanded the two Guards by the door to stand fast, then he motioned to the other four Masters to follow him. He drew back one of the heavy draperies that hung on the walls from the vaulted ceilings, revealing a secret passageway. It led to a larger room filled with mechanical instruments, books, parchments and

a workbench at the centre. Onairi closed the iron door to the other room and composed himself for a while.

“We cannot allow the Nuh’Mahri to rule Alathia, the people will not tolerate it, and we cannot in good faith advocate that there will not be another Lord Darhlmarrh as long as the Nuh’Mahri walk free. It is our duty to rule in the King’s name. We must make both the Spirit Walkers as well as our Mahri Rai subject themselves to this new order.” Master Onairi looked from one of his peers to the other and, again, found consensus.

“We will recall the Twenty-Seven and hold council with them, so that—” a knock on the door interrupted his reasoning. Onairi opened the door and as soon as he saw the Commander’s eyes searching for the floor, he knew there was bad news on the way.

“The bald Scribe called Hardan is missing,” said the Commander without looking directly at any of the Five Masters.

“Then we have no choice but to isolate the Library. Make it so,” replied Onairi, expecting the Commander to be on his way. But the Commander stayed in his position.

“We have had reports of a Nuh’Mahri called Tallan that has entered the City Gates this day, heading for the Harnap Arena, Master.” This was a most unwelcome second piece of bad news. Onairi walked across the room to a heavy wooden cabinet in the corner. From a strongbox inside, he lifted a lantern-like contraption with a fragment of Darhlmarrh’s blue crystal in the central glass chamber. When he placed it on the workbench, Master Kirlath’s face paled as he backed up a few paces.

“Nirith protect us! You have summoned Underly Magic?” he stuttered.

“We must fight on a level playing field, dear Rais. This was intended to extract the Spirits from the evil Lord. But now I see that it must have a different, but no lesser, purpose.” He ran his long fingers through the sparse hair on the top of his head as he prepared himself to issue an order that would change Alathia forever.

BEST LAID PLANS

On board the proud ship Konkilia, Karn stood at the stern. He wondered how he had ended up on the run with an old man and a boy. The lights from Kahri’Tenor faded behind them, and the darkness deepened out in front. The broad, wooden bow of the merchant ship ploughed through the black water, and the tarred hull gently rolled across the shallow waves. *I will know who did this and why, and I will avenge one and all.* Karn turned his head to look to the horizon when he felt a hand on his arm. It was Capath. The boy didn’t say anything but took Karn’s hand and placed the Mahri Rai ring in his open palm. He pressed himself into the man that had saved his life. Karn laid a fatherly arm around Capath’s shoulder and caressed the top of his head.

“I will keep you safe,” he said as the ship ploughed its way through the black, calm sea.

“Promise?” said the boy with a voice thinner than paper.

“You have my word,” said Karn as his thoughts returned to the carrier pigeon he had seen leave the rear of the ship, steering back toward Kahri Tenor in the cover of the falling darkness. *Someone will be waiting in Palythia,* he thought as the wind began to pick up. *So, the plan will have to change.* He ordered Capath to his cabin and headed for the other end of the ship.

The Captain of the Konkilia was a hardened sailor in his late fifties. Nirith's sun and the Sea had traced his face with wrinkles, running from the corners of his eyes through the darkened skin to his cauliflower ears. When Nirafathis had approached him with her proposition, he had been only too happy to help. His crew had endured a very unpleasant journey from the slave colonies on the Storm Islands, and he had only just managed to steer his faithful ship through the Talis Reef in one piece. Taking on the supply route to the islands had always been a dangerous enterprise that he had avoided. But his ageing ship was not a favourite among the Sea Fare Insurers, and at least the long journeys paid well. He had always been friendly with the Harbour Master in Kahri'Tenor as it was important to his trade, but when he had been accused of smuggling he had sworn to get back at the fat, oily, career servant to the King. It was only what he had heard in the hours after accepting Nirafathis' trade that had made him anxious: the fugitive on board his ship had killed all the Apprentices in the Harnap Arena and then everyone in the Great Library. That was the official line anyway, and the Captain wasn't much for the officials of late. *A deal is a deal*, he had thought to convince himself.

However, now that he faced the Mahri Rai in all his might, he was not sure if he had done the right thing.

"I will need you to change course and let myself and my companions disembark at Ignotus" said Karn, pointing to the exact spot on the Captain's stained map of the Thisian Sea. The Captain looked closely at the map and then at the Mahri Rai.

"The deal was to sail straight through to Palythia." Karn knew that he could easily take on all the captain's men if necessary, but he preferred to let the Captain in on what he knew

and hope for his peaceful cooperation.

“Palythia will not be safe for us now,” he ventured to see how far the Captain was into the plot that surely was afoot here.

“What has changed?” asked the Captain with what sounded like genuine surprise.

“The carrier pigeon that was sent back to Kahri” Tenor before we were out of reach,” replied Karn, holding the Captain’s gaze. “The bastard weasel!” The insult flew out of the Captain’s mouth as he got up from the table and marched past Karn toward the cabin door. “I have had my suspicions ever since he joined us” he said, ripping the door open. Karn followed the Captain across the deck but stayed there when he disappeared down the hatch to the crew’s quarters. He noted that the wind had picked up, and the ship was now rolling across the top of the waves. Moments later, he heard screaming from below and was taken aback when the Captain emerged onto the deck again, dragging a kicking and screaming young man along by his long blond hair. Without any ceremony the Captain grabbed hold of the man’s trousers and swung him over the railing into the black, raging sea. A prolonged scream vanished into the night.

“I will get you to Ignotus within two days, you have my word.” Karn looked at the crew that had assembled on the deck. They did not look shocked or surprised at what had just happened. *Swift justice around here.*

“And you?” he asked the Captain who had already reached the door to his cabin. The short, sinewy man stopped without turning.

“We have no choice but to join the pirates at Krata Riamh,” he said and walked through the door, “this rabble knows half of them anyway.” The crew laughed out loud and

dispersed, leaving Karn alone on the deck. He looked up at the stars above. Out here, away from the city lights, there was not much room for the blackness in the sky. *I hope you will look down at us with mercy*, he thought. Then he headed for the cabin, where a frightened young boy and a frail old man were going to be less than comforted by his news.

THE BODY IN THE LIBRARY

Master Onairi entered the Elder Gallery at pace, not even stopping to acknowledge the flustered Centurion, or the shaking Guard with the pallor of a long-deceased corpse. He walked straight to the metal cage and looked up at the body inside. Blood covered the face of the old man and had turned the top of his white tunic a dark red. The Elderchain stood out even more than it usually would on the deadly backdrop.

“Take him down!” ordered Onairi in a penetrating tone of voice that spurred the two soldiers into action. They quickly lowered the cage and laid it flat on the ground. The Centurion demanded the keys from the Guard and opened the front, so the body inside was fully visible. Onairi took in the sight with a growing sense of nausea making its way from the depths of his stomach. The sandals were the ones Navithian had worn, the tunic was the same, and the Elderchain would have convinced anyone that this was indeed the Elder of the Great Library. But the body’s face had been so badly beaten that there were no recognisable features left.

“Who did this?”

The Centurion was quick to push the blame away from himself and said, “Some of the men must have been a little too keen to get

the confession you so badly needed, Master.”

I must make a note of this Centurion, thought Onairi. *In one sentence he has deflected blame and indicated that my own orders led to the death of the Elder, he could be useful.* He then turned to the Guard, who instantly staggered half a step back. He looked like he had been in a tavern fight after an evening enjoying too much ale, and his eyes were filled with terror.

“Has anyone been in here apart from me, your fellow guards, or the Centurion?” demanded Onairi.

“No!” The response escaped a little too quickly from the mouth of the terrified soldier, and the Centurion felt he had to do something to convince the Faculty Master. He drew his short sword and laid it across the throat of his man.

“Are you absolutely sure?” he said and edged the blade a little closer to penetrating the skin.

“Yes, I swear by Nirith, I have not seen anyone else in here!” The Centurion looked over at Onairi who sent him a slight nod, dismissing both soldiers with a wave of his hand. *Sweet Navithian*, he thought as the men left the Elder Gallery and silence descended on the dark room. *I did not want this.* Then he drew a short dagger out from under his red tunic and kneeled down next to the cage. He placed the tip of the dagger just above the body’s belt, then he took taking a deep breath and drove it through the rough fabric.

IGNOTUS

It was a long while since the town of Ignotus had been one of the main stops on the trading routes. Sand and silt had, over many years, built up in the harbour faster than it could

be removed, and the docks were now only accessible by very small boats. The Captain had piloted Konkilia's small landing dinghy through the maze of narrow canals, and he had gotten Karn, Capath and Navithian safely on dry land. Karn had paid the loyal man a very handsome sum of money as they said goodbye and made their way up the steep hill streets to the main town. It was midday, and the heat from Nirith's sun kept most of the townsfolk indoors for a few hours. Even the North King's slightly tattered standard at the top of the fortified keep at the town's highest point hung motionless from its flagpole. There were no harbour master, soldiers, or guards in sight which suited Karn just fine. Many of the houses stood empty, with birds flying in and out of the broken doors and shutters, and it was clear that the decay was getting closer and closer to the heart of the settlement. At the top of one of the wider streets sat an old fisherman on an upturned bucket, surrounded by broken fishing tools and a swarm of flies that circled the rotting nets. When they passed the man, Karn noticed his milky white eyes and thought it safe to ask where they could find food and shelter. The old man was not very talkative and simply replied "The Anchor Tenor" before pointing up one of the side streets.

From the outside, the tavern looked like it hadn't seen a paintbrush for a while but that was nothing compared to the inside; time had stood still for many a moon in the dark cavernous main room. Once he had adjusted to the lack of light, Karn sat the young lad and the old man by a table. Then he walked up to the barkeeper who reluctantly emerged at the far end of the tavern.

"What can I do for you, Rai?" said the stout man without a flicker in his narrow set eyes. *News hasn't reached as far as this*

yet, thought Karn and relaxed his grip on the hilt of his sword.

“We have tired of the food on our ship and could do with one of your famous casseroles” he flattered, “we also need beds for the night and horses for our onward journey in the morning. I trust you can provide all of it?” Karn placed a silver Wolf coin on the counter and looked the keeper right in the eyes to determine if they were safe in his tavern. But his smile only revealed that he had lost more than one tooth in bar fights over the years.

“Food coming up, beds are upstairs, and I have two good steeds in the stables behind the tavern,” he said as he scooped up the coin in his shovel-sized hand. Neither the boy nor the old man said anything when Karn joined them at the table.

“A hot meal is on its way, my friends.” The silence in the room lasted till the Keeper placed three large clay bowls full of steaming hot meat stew on the table. He then asked Karn what they wanted to drink. Karn ordered the best ale for himself and Navithian and turned to Capath.

The young boy looked up at the Keeper and said, “Ale too for me... please, Rai.” The laugh that came out of the Keeper’s mouth had travelled all the way from deep within his belly, and it ricocheted round the entire tavern.

“That is the first time I’ve ever been called a bloody Rai,” he managed through his laughter as he waddled back to get the drink. Capath looked completely lost, until he caught a glimpse of the smile that broadened on Karn’s lips. When his two companions began to laugh out loud, Navithian saw no reason why he shouldn’t join them, though he did not quite understand what was so funny. In truth, neither did Capath nor Karn, but it felt so good to let go of the tension and anxiety that had built up over the last three days.

“A couple of days ago you had never even tasted ale, and here you are in a tavern demanding it. Didn’t take long for me to ruin all the discipline,” said Karn as he tucked into the food. He glanced over at Navithian who was halfway through his bowl already, wondering if the old man would ever recognise him or talk about what had happened in the Great Library. *Best to let him work though the experience in peace and let him speak when he is ready.* The room above the tavern was nothing special, but the two beds were all they needed. The Keeper had suggested that Capath could sleep on the floor on some old blankets he had sourced from a storage room under the staircase. But Karn had insisted that Navithian and the boy should have the beds. The Elder had crawled into one of them straight away, while Capath had tried to refuse the offer. His heart wasn’t in the protest and one stern, but kind, look from his Master was enough to send him under the blanket on the straw-filled mattress. It didn’t take long before both the boy and the old man were fast asleep. Karn opened the window to the street and crawled out onto the yawning below. He sat down next to the crumbling chimney, folded his legs under him and placed his sword across his knees. The blue tunic blended in perfectly with the shadow created by the moonlight; no one would have been able to see the watchful figure even if they had looked up. On the other hand, Karn had a perfect view of the street that ran past the tavern below, and he would easily pick up any movement from either end. As he sat there on the roof, he allowed himself to think back on the events that had occurred over last few days. The Great Library had been overrun and all his Dah Rai killed, which could only mean that someone was trying to suppress the written stories that they were sworn to protect. The Apprentices had all been killed, and he was sure

he himself would have been a target had he been in the Harnap Arena: he supposed in order to eliminate any threat from the Mahri Rai. Finally, someone had killed Master Tallan and extracted the Mahri Spirit from his body. Karn deduced from these acts that someone was trying to imprison the Twenty-Seven and keep them away from the people of Alathia. Karn was certain that that ‘someone’ was in fact the Faculty — his former Masters — which made these acts a betrayal so vile that he would never be able to forgive them. His blood began to rush more quickly through his veins when he heard the distant scream from a falcon. *Could be nothing, or it could be a Messenger.* Without being able to see the stronghold from his position he couldn’t be sure. But either way, Karn knew now that he would not sleep this night. It was just before Nardaeth brought his Tear down, and Nirith prepared to travel her beloved sun across the skies, that Karn saw the group of six armed men emerge at the far end of the street. It didn’t take him long to notice the traits of army training that drove their movement. From the Keep, he thought, so the falcon did bring a message. He waited patiently until the six men were one door away from the tavern. Then he stood up, untied his rough cloak and jumped down onto the street. The first two men did not even manage to blink before they lay dead in the dust. The next man recovered enough to block Karn’s sword with his shield, but he never saw the dagger following the Mahri Rai’s rotation that cut his throat open. With the element of surprise gone, Karn squared up to the remaining three guards. To his surprise, two of them were old and the last no more than eighteen years of age. *They do not deserve this.* He lowered his sword from the attack position and looked at the two older men.

“You know who I am?” Both of them nodded in

reply, but nervously kept their basic, chipped swords out in front of them. “Then you know you will not see Nirith’s sun ever again, if you do not leave this place at once?” said Karn and thought how little he wanted to hurt any of them.

“We... we have been told to arrest you!” stammered the oldest in defiance but nonetheless took a small step away from Karn.

“There is a prize on your head, so we... we...” said the other. His voice faltered as Karn spun his knife in his left hand. It was, however, the youngest that signed their death warrant. Maybe it was a sense of duty, or maybe it was the realisation that the reward for the capture of the Master Reather could take him away from this forgotten place and give him a chance in life, that made him fly forward with a scream on his lips. Karn sidestepped with ease. He grabbed the young man’s sword arm and swung him hard into the tavern wall, breaking the arm in the process. Then he planted his knife between the youngster’s shoulder blades and ducked down just in time to avoid the impact of the oldest soldier’s sword. One step, and Karn curled under the old man’s outstretched arm with his blade trailing him. The Danarcian steel sliced the arm half off, and the main artery burst open. Before the old man hit the dirt in a pool of his own blood, Karn advanced on the last standing soldier. From his lower position, he scooped up a handful of dust from the road and threw it into the stunned man’s eyes. Digging his heels into the dirt, Karn drove himself upward, punched his shoulder into the shield and sent the defenceless man flying backward. The soldier’s heavy body crashed to the ground with a dull thud, and, moments later, Karn’s sword sliced through his leather breastplate that was no match for the perfectly forged blade. Kneeling alongside the body

of the unfortunate soldier, Karn noticed the first rays of sunlight catching the top of the houses on the highest point of the town. *I will not have time to hide the bodies.* Karn got up and walked back into the tavern. He was halfway through the main room when a commotion by the stairs stopped him. Silhouetted by the light from upstairs, he could make out the Keeper pushing something down the last couple of steps in front of him. When the light from the smouldering fireplace dispersed the shadows, Karn could clearly see that the large Keeper had Capath in a chokehold and held a knife to the boy's chin.

“So, there's a reward for your arrest, I hear?” said the big man with his few remaining teeth lighting up his sly smile. “The sword. Slide it over here!” Karn's fingers tapped the hilt as he held the Keeper's gaze. “Now, or the boy gets it!” Capath looked at his Master and shook his head as much as the hold allowed him. Karn admired the youngster's courage, but he knew that the Keeper would not hesitate to use the knife on the boy should he not obey the order. How quickly the world turns, a few days ago no one would have dared raise a weapon against a Nuh'Mahri or their Mahri Rai. He bent down, placing his sword flat on the cold flagstones, and pushing it toward the Keeper.

“Now, boy, slowly pick it up and give it here!” said the large man and released his hold on Capath.

Karn caught the boy's frightened eyes and said, “It's all good, boy, just do as he says, and you will be just fine.” What happened next unfolded so fast that Karn had no time to react. Just as Capath stepped forward to pick up the sword, Navithian emerged on the stairs behind the Keeper. The creaks from the old steps alerted the big man and with his head turned away, Capath sensed an opportunity. He spun round and drove the

sword into the Keeper's huge belly. The large man stumbled back with his eyes fixed on the hilt that stuck out of his stomach, and the blood that spread outward from it. With eyes ablaze with rage, he managed to force himself forward again, and collapsed like an avalanche of flesh over Capath who was unable to get out of the way. The two of them crashed to the floor. Karn ran across the room and pushed the large Keeper off Capath. The boy didn't move. The Keeper's crude knife protruded from his chest, and his eyes were fixed on eternity. Karn sunk to his knees in despair. He had held it together in the Arena, but now the tears flowed freely down his cheeks. This young man had done nothing wrong — had been the enemy of no one — and yet, here he lay with his life cut short by the greed and cruelty of a man he had never met until just now.

“What has happened?” asked Navithian from the stairs. Karn brought out his knife and sliced a lock off Capath's hair and a small piece of his plain blue tunic. Then he placed them in the leather pouch in his belt with all the others.

“We have to leave at once” he said, helping Navithian down the last of the stairs. After a quick rummage round the kitchen, where he gathered provisions that he wrapped up in some worn-out cloth, he helped the Elder onto one of the horses in the stables behind the tavern.

“Where are we going now?” asked the old man as he settled into the aged, rough leather saddle.

“We shall honour the dead” said Karn and set both horses in motion.

“Ah, I see, you want to go to the forest,” mused the Elder. Before the sun illuminated the entire top of the down-trodden town, Karn and Navithian had left it behind.

THE FUNERAL

The vast plaza in front of the Temple of Nirith was filled to the brim with thousands of people from all walks of life. The last few days had flooded the city with rumours and half-truths about the North King, the rogue Master Reather of the Mahri Rai, and the rebel Lord of Darhlmarth. The low hum of gossip and confusion reverberated between the tall buildings, like swarms of bees seeking out nectar on the hot summer days, and people looked for any sign of why there had been a call to gather in the square this night. The rumble stopped as soon as the golden gates to the stairwell that led from the King's palace swung open. Six soldiers wearing black plumed helmets carried the North King's body out into the plaza on a simple stretcher, balancing him on their black caped shoulders. He was dressed in his silver coated battle armour and on his chest lay the war-hammer that famously had been wielded by the very first North King when he united the Lands and created Alathia. Just as the procession left the shadows of the gate and filed out in the open, the setting sun sent its dying rays through the columns of the Temple of Nirith and directly onto the King's body. The silver armour sparkled and sent flecks of light flying in all directions like the sun reflecting in the water of a stirring lake. The sight stunned the crowds and a complete silence fell over the spectacle. People closest to the procession parted as it advanced and created a path to the fifty steps that led to the temple entrance. A slight murmur rose from the throng when the Five Faculty Masters walked out from the gate and followed in the wake of the King. Behind them emerged the Generals of the army and Admirals of the fleet, which did quell the nervous chatter, but also elevated the anxiety in the

crowds to bursting point. The six soldiers placed the stretcher on the plateau in front of the bronze gates to the temple, then they retreated back down the stairs without ever turning their back on their departed ruler. Master Onairi walked up to the body and gently took hold of the war-hammer. Slowly, he continued to the temple doors and drove the weapon into the bronze three times. When the echo of the strikes died out across the plaza, the gates opened and the High Priest, the Elder of Nirith, emerged from the darkness within. At the centre of his long white robe sat an embroidered depiction of the sun made with silver and gold thread. His shaved head was covered in intricate tattoos that told the story of how Nirith created the sun from her father's heart, the earth from his remains, and the Twenty-Seven Mahri Spirits from his last breath. As Onairi stepped aside to reveal the North King laid out on the ground, the Elder held out his right arm toward the people gathered below. In his hand, he held a small gold amphora.

“The sacred water of Esbur” he said and poured the content of the flask over the King's body. The last light of the day caught the water and made it look like liquefied gold. On a signal with his free hand, five priests walked out from the temple, each holding a small golden statue in their hands. One by one, they laid the animal figurines by the King's side: first, a Horse. Then a Boar followed by a Wolf, a Stag, and an Eagle.

“The North King has received the Five Qualities for his journey to the Underworld. Where we pray that Nardaeth will place the light of his soul on the shores of the Sea of Blood, so it may reflect upon the night sky as a guiding light for all of us that are to follow,” proclaimed the Elder. With his five priests, he lifted up the North King's stretcher and carried the body into

the temple. The huge doors closed as the sun gave up his daily task, plunging the plaza in the fine dusk of the newly born night. For a moment, the crowds stood in silence and looked up at the temple. As it had been done in Ancient times on the shores of the holy lake, Esbur, a single horn blower stepped out from one of the many niches in the walls of the temple. He began a lamenting, single tone tune that flowed across the thousand bowed heads in the crowd. One after the other, horn blowers emerged from the rest of the niches. The sound from their horns, all different sizes, mingled and caressed the original tune, and the air filled with a mournful but somehow uplifting melody. Then a light that seemed brighter than the sun burst out from within the temple and through the circular windows that sat just under the roof like pearls on a necklace all around the temple.

Shafts shot out over the thousands of heads like beams from a hundred lighthouses, and the crowds replied, “May the light of Nirith guide you”. Then each and every one of them put their right hand over their face and then placed it on their chest, looking up at the thin column of smoke that snaked its way towards the dark blue night sky from the hole at the centre of the domed temple roof. Master Onairi knew that this was the moment he had been waiting for. The crowd would now expect the King’s son, Aarlath, to step out from the palace behind them to be handed the Ring of Sovereignty and be crowned the 14th North King. Without hesitation, he walked to the edge of the steps and made sure that the bright light from the temple fell on him and that he could be seen by everyone.

“Beloved citizens of Alathia” he began, “we have lost our courageous King to the cruel intent of the Lord of Darhlmarth. But I am here with a heavy heart to bring you worse news yet”.

The crowd that before had been apprehensive of the Five Masters in the procession was now caught in Onairi's net, and all eyes were on the red-cloaked figure at the top of the steps. "Not only did the evil Lord cowardly kill the King, using Underly Magic and the power of the Spirit, he also murdered our Queen... and his children!" The stunned silence began to break up into bursts of raw emotion across the square. People sobbed and cried, seeking comfort in each other's arms.

"Our heroic King fought the coward even though he was mortally wounded, laying the foundation for the counter-attack that we have successfully launched against the rebel army. A foundation to which he was so dedicated that in his final breath from his broken heart he called upon his War Council to rule in his stead." Master Onairi paused to see how the information had gone down among the masses. *Silence is good*, he thought as he picked the King's ring out of his pocket.

"We have prayed to our just goddess Nirith for her guidance for three days and three nights, and last night she spoke to us". Again, he paused but this time it was more to determine his own reaction. Was he really ready for this gamble that could elevate the Faculty to rulers of Alathia or forever turn the people against them? *Press on*. "And the goddess said unto us: I have witnessed the evil of the dark Lord and his use of Underly Magic. For the sake of my people, I have reconciled and sought council with my brother, and together we will guide you to victory!" He could feel the mood change in the masses and thought this is it. "And she said to us: hence forth you shall be MY war council and be called the Kah'Nath, the thought of the Gods!" A few people shouted out in support and joy, and Onairi quickly walked half-way down the stairs to get closer to the crowds. "This is the will

of the Twin Gods,” he said as he lifted the Ring of Sovereignty over his head, “this is the will of the North King!” A roar began to gather pace in the square. Onairi rode the wave and shouted “I promise you that the Kah’Nath will be the eye of justice and the mouth of truth, and together we will defeat the Evil Marked One!” The plaza ignited in a victorious roar of anticipation. *This is the beginning of a new Alathia, but the end of the Mahri Spirit*, he thought, wondering just how the Twin Gods would now receive and weigh his own soul when that time came.

On a rooftop across from the stairs where Master Onairi was standing, Erin was stunned at just how easily the Faculty had managed to elevate themselves to rulers of Alathia with the more than dubious “blessing of the gods”. The light cape over her shoulders fluttered in the evening breeze and exposed her blue tunic, but no one in the square was looking up. She had travelled for a few weeks and tried to send word to any Nuh’Mahri still out in the field, using the network of Dah Rai that wandered the Worlds. But only days after the attack on the Great Library, she had witnessed how soldiers loyal to the North King and the Faculty had dragged defenceless Dah Rais off to prison; never to be seen again. It became clear to her that this was all an attempt to distort the truth of what had happened in Kahri’Tenor and at the Faculty’s Stronghold. When she had heard the rumours of the rogue Master Reather that supposedly had killed all his Apprentices, she knew she had to return to the capital to ask the questions that piled up in her head. She had just had them all answered. She was suddenly overcome by a devastating sense of being completely alone, and her eyes filled with tears of anger and grief. She tried to pull herself together and caught a glimpse

of the silver Mahri Rai ring on her finger: Serve and protect. She straightened up and cleared her mind. *When they told me about the Master Reather, no one said he had been captured or killed, she thought. If anyone could have escaped this, it would be Karn.* She got up with renewed purpose and hope in her heart.

KIRRI'DAETH

The old man had not uttered a word since they left Ignotus. He just sat in the saddle on the back of the well-worn horse and seemed content with looking out at the passing vistas on the way to Kirri'Daeth. They only made one stop on the journey. Karn had jumped off his horse at the edge of a forest to dig up a young oak sapling. He carefully wrapped it in another piece of cloth from the tavern, putting it in one of the saddlebags and then moving on. When they camped for the night, Karn had hoped that the Holder of the Hands would finally open up about what had happened in the Great Library. But he had merely gobbled up the food Karn had prepared over the small fire and gone to sleep. Karn spent the night thinking about what, if anything, he would be able to do with the Faculty against him and his name probably written on every Fralit stone in the Lands by now. But hired assassins and bounty hunters were the least of his worries as he looked up at the star-studded night sky, trying to find a connection between the wounding of the King and the attack on the Mahri Rai and the Great Library. The thoughts in his head began to move in circles, forever ending up at the beginning, and he felt his pain and frustration grow. In order for him not to go mad, he forced himself to count the stars and recall all of his forefathers that were looking down on him. Eventually,

he was rewarded with some sleep.

The following day they reached the vantage point from where you could overlook the Kirri'Daeth, the forest of the dead, on the Xiliad Plateau. The tabletop mountain that rose up in the valley between the two impressive mountain ranges stretched for miles on end. From above it was clear to see that the trees, on the otherwise barren plateau, had been planted in endless straight rows in a strict symmetrical pattern. It reminded Karn of a chessboard or a Dohl'Leg game-hide. Ever since the First North King had united Alathia, every soldier that had fallen in his and his successor's service had been laid to rest here. Each body was marked with a newly planted tree, and over time the soldier would become the tree and the tree would become the soldier. For once, Karn wished that he believed in prophecies, and that the 'Army of the Dead' indeed would rise to defend the North King in an hour of mortal danger. But the trees still stood immovable on the plateau. As the two horses entered the plateau from the narrow road that snaked up the side of the mountain, Karn and Navithian felt the full impact of the forest. The crowns of older trees had intertwined and now formed a canopy held up by the massive, column-like trunks. They rode through the huge natural 'hallways' until they reached the section of newly planted trees. It reminded Karn of how much the Lands had sacrificed in the near seven-year long war with the Old Families. *These are just the fallen on our side*, he thought as he reached the barren ground at the end of the forest. He dismounted and helped Navithian off his horse. The old man sat down by the very last of the trees that had just been planted. A tear rolled down his wrinkled cheek as he mouthed a silent prayer for whoever was lying under the roots of the young tree. Karn measured out the exact spot where the

next tree would be on the enormous grid and dug a hole in the dirt with his knife. When it was large enough, he opened the bag in his wide leather belt and poured the fifty-four pieces of fabric and locks of hair into the hollow. Then he took the five coins that depicted the animals of the noble virtues: strength, courage, respect, honesty, and wisdom from his purse, laying them on top of the little mound. He brought the oak sapling from the saddlebag; he placed it on top and scraped the dirt back to cover the hole. He stayed kneeling as he said the only prayer he thought would be appropriate.

“We thank Nirith for the light on this day passed and ask Nardaeth for safe passage through the darkness of this night to come.” When he opened his eyes again, Navithian was kneeling right next to him. The Holder of the Hands passed him one of the water flasks from the tavern, and Karn poured the content out over the tiny oak. *It is not the water of Esbur, but I pray that Nirith and Nardaeth will take it as such.* Karn was the first to pick up the faint distant rumble that broke the solemn silence on the plateau. Slowly, he got up and strained to identify the sound. Soon he realised that a horse was galloping through the forest toward them.

“Stay behind me,” he said and drew his sword. The old Holder of the Hands hid behind the Mahri Rai and stared into the forest to get a glimpse of the threat. Karn spotted the faint outline of a horse and rider and brought his sword up into the attack position. He was determined to strike first. As the horse came closer, he caught a glimpse of blue in the rider’s tunic but kept his weapon raised. *Be on guard.* The rider emerged fully out of the forest at full speed and only brought it to a halt ten yards in front of Karn and Navithian. The horse had clearly worked very

hard and foam dripped from its mouth.

“How did you know I would be here?” asked Karn as he sheathed his sword.

“I knew you would honour them,” replied Erin and jumped off the back of her horse. She was surprised to see Navithian step out from behind her old mentor.

“I went back to get him,” said Karn and told her what had happened since they parted on the road beneath the Great Library. Erin listened intensely and then relayed everything she knew to her former mentor. As she told how the Faculty had attacked the Nuh’Mahri and their Companions out in the field, how they had seized power at the North King’s funeral, and how they had elevated themselves to half-gods, everything began to make sense to Karn.

“How many are left?” he asked and feared the answer.

“I fear we are all here” said Erin, and looked up into the gathering darkness in the sky above. Karn walked back to the newly planted oak and stared at it with tears in his eyes. “Then all is lost.”

“The answer is in the Dah’Phar.” It was the first thing Navithian had said for two whole days, and it took Karn by surprise.

“What do you mean?” he demanded of the old man, and Navithian recounted what had taken place in the Elder Gallery crypt. When the Holder of the Hands finished his story, Karn gently dragged Erin over to the horses.

“We must find this girl before Master Onairi. She may already have been caught or hidden the keys and... how I wish the old man had told me this when I was in the Library. Now it’s near impossible, she could be anywhere.”

“I may be old, but I’m not deaf,” said the Holder of the Hands behind them, and Karn quickly apologised.

“I met Narnonee in a town called Lyngarth, if that helps?” Karn found it unlikely that the girl would risk returning to her family, but it was a starting point, nonetheless.

“Erin, you go there, while I find a safe place for the Elder to hide until we can figure a way to end this.”

“The Nuh’Mahri will know,” said Navithian as Karn helped him onto his old horse. *The poor man doesn’t know.*

“There are no more Nuh’Mahri, Navithian. The hosts have all been killed and their Spirits imprisoned by the Faculty.” The Holder of the Hands smiled and looked from Karn to Erin.

“When the Darkness of Nardaeth has conquered the Worlds, a pure young Nuh’Mahri will summon the Twenty-Seven, and the Light of Nirith will shine once again.”

Navithian gently pushed forward in the saddle, and the horse started to walk. Karn shook his head when the old man began to hum a familiar nursery rhyme as he moved in between the trees. He was sure that the fall of the North Kings was only the beginning of their fight. He struggled to understand what comfort the old man’s words brought them in terms of an end.

“I am not much for prophecies,” he said as he mounted his steed, “and I have no way of knowing if what he says is even true.”

“For now, that is all we’ve got.” Erin resolutely jumped on her horse, and she soon disappeared into the gathering evening mist among the trees. Karn stayed until the sound of the galloping hooves faded away, wondering if he would ever see his most valued Apprentice again.

“May Nirith protect you.”

EPILOGUE

Master Onairi stood at the centre of the newly carved circular cave inside the massive Mahri Mountain. He pulled back the heavy hood on his imposing red cape, then he removed the stern metal mask from his face. There were Five Kah’Nath Masters, but the identical masks they now wore symbolised that they were interchangeable and, therefore, ruled as one. It had been his idea, but he was still relieved to feel the air that pulsated with heat on his face, as he looked at the twenty-seven niches that had been carved into the rocks with satisfaction. Except from one, they all housed a lantern-like instrument similar to the one he had used to extract Tallan’s Spirit. The trapped Mahri Spirits swirled round the small blue crystals at the centre of the main glass chamber in a doomed attempt to escape, bathing everything in the huge, domed room in a golden glow. *Only one left and our victory is sealed* thought Master Onairi. He donned the mask and left the cave. Two of his Kah’Nath Guards closed the heavy, bronze double doors behind him, turning the key in the intricate lock and handing it to their Master. He ordered them to leave and waited until they turned a corner further down the long entrance tunnel before looking to a dark side corridor.

“Seal it with the powers you command,” he said and marched off. The old, crow-like Sorath’Ki of Lilith emerged from the shadows.

“Yes, Master.”

ANCIENT LANGUAGE OF THE NORTH KING

In the Ancient Language the 'H' is silent unless preceded by a 'T' or a 'P' (i.e. Kah'Nath is pronounced Ka-Nath and Dah'Phar is pronounced Da-Far). The apostrophe used between two words often infers the meaning 'of 'or 'of the' (i.e. Kah'Nath means: Thought of the Gods, and Nuh'Mahri means: Walkers of the Breath) and each word has a double meaning, for example:

Arna: *Planet or World*

Bjorhn: *Bear or Bear-like*

Daeth: *Dead or Darkness*

Dah: *Paper or Document*

Dohl: *Money or Coin*

Garth: *Gate or Opening*

Ia: *Big or Great (used as an add-on i.e. AlathIA = Great Alath)*

Kah: *Thought or Idea*

Kahri: *King or Ruler*

Kerri: *Army or group of soldiers*

Ki: *Speak or Say*

Krata: *Crater or Chimney*

Leg: *Play or Game*

Lyn: *Branch or Twig*

Ma: *Mother or Fosterer*

Mahri: *Breath or Life*

Nai: *People or Mankind*

Nath: *God or Gods*

Nuh: *Walker or Traveller*

Man: *Blood or Relative*

Or: *First or One*

Phar: *Truth or Teaching*

Rai: *Keeper or Shepherd (also formal title equal to 'Sir')*

Rith: *Living or Light*

Riamh: *Rogue or Pirate*

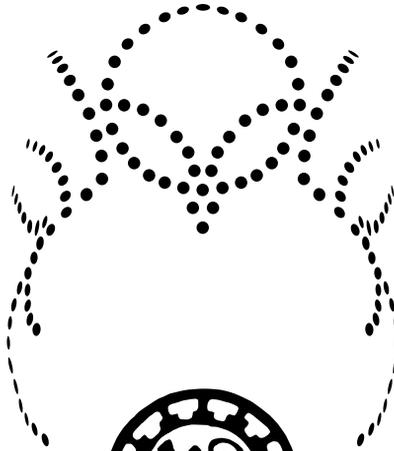
Sorath: *Foresight or Future*

Tenor: *House or Home*

Vi: *Ink or Writing*

SYMBOLS

Nuh'Mahri
The Mark



Mahri Rai
To guide and protect



Kah'Nath
Eye of Justice
Mouth of Truth

