

INTERREGNUM

By S. J. A. Turney

I would like to dedicate this book to my parents,
who are largely responsible for who I am today.

Also to Bren and Sue, one of whom was my first
reader and has been incredibly supportive, and the
other is in it.

I'll leave you to work out which is which...

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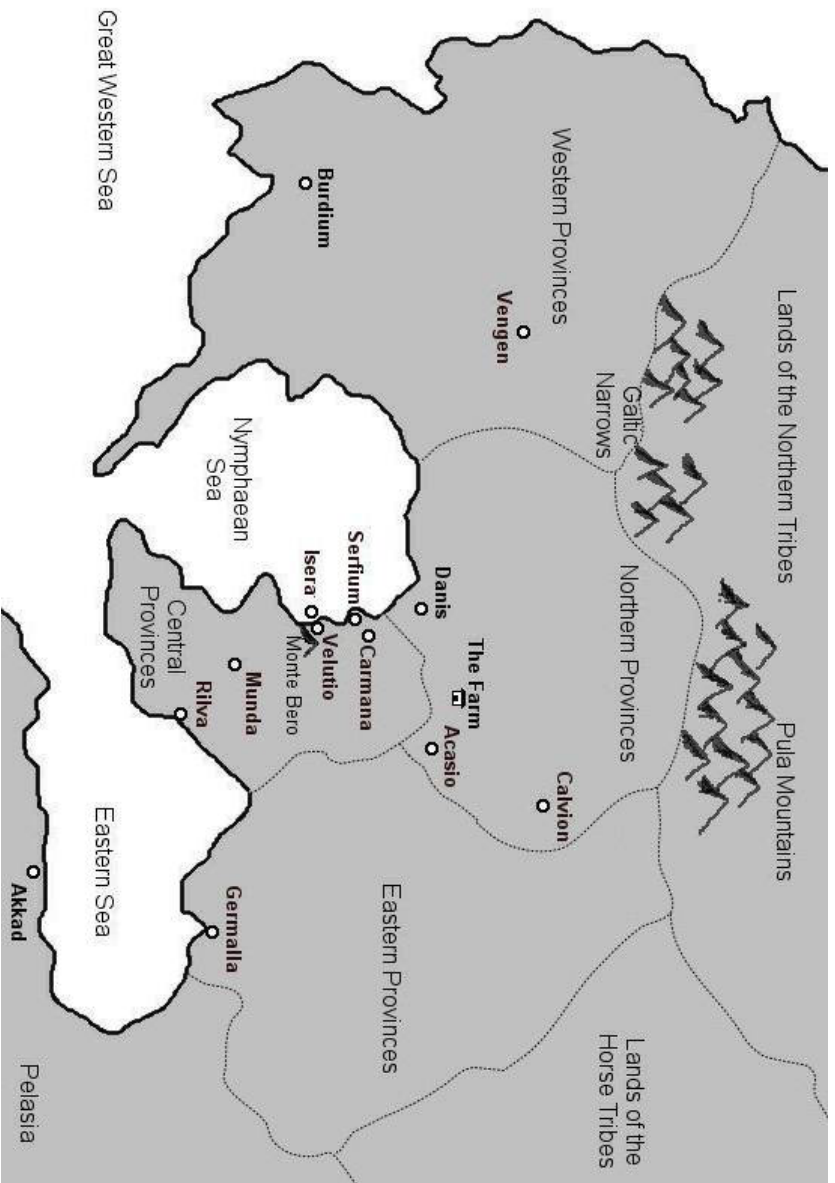
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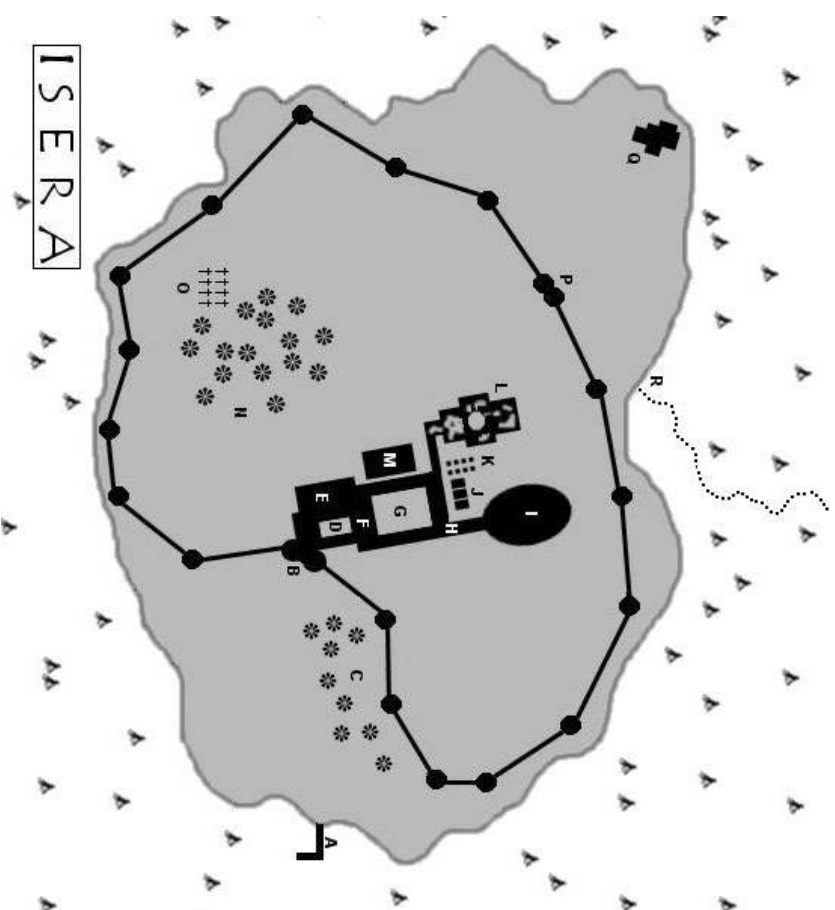
First Edition

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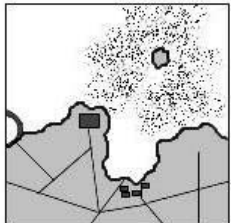




I S E R A

- Key:
- A Dock
 - B Gorgon Gate
 - C East Orchard
 - D Ibis Courtyard
 - E Raven Palace
 - F Arch of Four Seasons
 - G Great Courtyard
 - H Hall of the Swans
 - I Peacock Palace
 - J Temples of Divine Triad
 - K Imperial Shrines
 - L Golden House
 - M Student Dormitory
 - N West Orchard
 - O Graveyard
 - P Water Gate
 - Q Bath House
 - R Secret Route

V E L U T I O



Part One: Wolves and Sheep

Chapter I.

Kiva hadn't always looked like this; dusty, grey, scarred and hollow. Once, long ago, he'd been a fresh faced blond youth with piercing green eyes and a lithe build. In the days when he'd come out of the Northlands he'd had a budding, wispy beard and long, braided hair. He'd worn furs and leather and travelled out of the cold, swampy lands of his people into the heart of the Empire, golden and prosperous. It hadn't been unusual in those days, when the Empire was at its greatest extent; when the borders were being forced north and east by generals whose names even now carried the weight of history and valour. The tribes at the fringes of the Imperial world had sued for peace with the Emperors and were beginning to see the benefits. For the first time in the history of the north the tribes had running, clean water, with aqueducts and drainage systems constructed under the expert eyes of Imperial architects and engineers. The young men had begun to learn the Imperial language, and many of them had begun to travel south to find service in the Empire's bureaucracy or its military. All those years ago, the idea of a heated floor was unheard of in the north.

He sighed when he thought of that first day in the army. His braids had been cut away, his beard shaved and his favourite furs burned for fear of infestation. He'd stood with other young men of all colours both skin and hair, naked in a parade ground, while they were shorn and prepared for their training. Very little made Kiva smile these days; not properly, as though he actually meant it, but he'd laughed loud and often in those early days with his comrades. He shuffled under his blanket, trying to find a slightly more comfortable position against the rough wall. Pieces of plaster broke off and dust showered down his back causing him to shrug uncomfortably. He reached out and picked up one of the larger pieces. Painted plaster; an image of some sort of ornamental lake with a colonnade. This place must have been a rich house once.

He could remember just such decorative plaster work at the commanding officer's house in the Northern Army's headquarters fortress of Vengen, when he'd received his first military decoration. Over a mere three years, he'd made it through the lowest ranks and had become a non-commissioned officer. Then, little over a year later, as he received a golden torc for his defence of the Galtic Narrows against the barbarians, he'd also been made Captain, with his own unit. Barbarians?

Now that really *did* threaten to make him laugh. The force of northmen he'd held back with less than a hundred troops had been his own people, or people very much like them. It had been in that action he'd met a young soldier called Athas from the far south, his skin dark as night, who had grown throughout the following years to be Kiva's best friend and most trusted lieutenant. Others came to be trusted; his men had been a good crew even then, in the early days.

He glanced across the ruined building to Athas. The man slept little, but loud. Currently the big man crouched on a low and broken wall, watching the countryside in the night, alert and guarded. The charcoal-grey tunic, along with the colour of his skin, made him barely visible except for the eerie dancing light of the fire. The rest of the unit were asleep around the floor as Athas would be soon, once he'd woken the next watch. Then there would be snoring like the collapse of a marble quarry.

As he watched the fire flickering in the light breeze, his memory strayed once more to the age of glory in the Imperial army. In those days, the tunics had been emerald green and the arms and armour had been a standard issue. He remembered when he'd finally reached a position where he was not bound by the uniform code. He'd been made Prefect and given command over a thousand men, all new and eager for glory under the acclaimed commander. By that time he'd stopped wearing his military honours. They'd become numerous and bulky and had been taken to safety at the new estate that he was building at Serfium by the sea. Meteoric, people had called his ascent to command. No one in living memory had risen from the lowest ranks, without even Imperial citizenship, to become such a high officer. He'd made sure too that his trusted friends moved with him. Athas had been made Captain shortly before, and continued to hold a position as Kiva's right hand man. By then there had been others; men who had proved time and again that they could be trusted in and out of battle. In those days of fire and steel and the glory of Kiva's campaigns, with the ever-present Athas and a dozen men of skill and virtue, the Wolves had been born.

That was what they'd been called. Despite his command of a thousand, Kiva continued to travel chiefly with a party of a dozen men as his close companion unit. He'd made sure that they all achieved at least the rank of Captain; his influence in the Imperial bureaucracy was becoming powerful indeed. They'd taken to wearing wolf-pelts as a shoulder cloak. He'd also put in requisitions and had them agreed such that the regimental insignia was now a profile of a howling wolf, on both flag and standard. Their shields came to be painted with a wolf's

head. And the analogy was good, too, for they became predatory. The army no longer held the borders against the Empire's enemies, guarding passes and constructing fortifications. Now, the Wolves forced campaigns into the wilderness, bringing the light of civilisation on the tip of a sword. They'd become hunters of barbarians and heroes of the Empire.

Once more Kiva's attention was drawn back to the camp. The firelight was beginning to burn low. He would have to get some wood before long or the light and heat would be gone altogether and the unit would have nothing to cook breakfast on in a few hours. Across the fire he could see the wiry Thalo, hunched asleep by the wall, his grey, oval shield propped next to him. No lupine symbols in evidence these days. The days of heroes were gone, and the Wolves had been consigned to legend.

Even when he'd been made Marshal, one of the four commanding Generals of the Imperial Army invested by the Emperor himself, he'd been wearing his distinctive shoulder cloak as he received his baton of office. Behind him, the Captains of the Wolves had stood straight and true, pride and discipline emanating from them. Those had been such great days. The glory and the vigour of constant battle, secure in the knowledge of a righteous cause and a goal: to bring culture and civilisation to the whole globe. He'd been proud; but then he'd been ignorant... they all had. To serve in the Imperial army was to serve blindly, and no yet man can stay voluntarily blind his entire life.

With a yawn and a stretch, Kiva straightened his legs, the blanket falling to the floor. For a brief second Athas's head snapped round at the noise. As he saw Kiva stirring, he nodded barely perceptibly and then turned his attention once more to the undergrowth. Stepping lithely between the slumbering forms of the unit, Kiva wandered out into the brush. His boots, old though they may be, were hardy and comfortable and he felt virtually none of the fractured pieces of crumbling masonry under his feet. At the fallen wall surrounding the once opulent room he picked up the hatchet Thalo had left there earlier and unfastened his belt, leaning the sheathed swords against the stonework.

The brush was prickly and painful, but Kiva's thick leather breeches and heavy tunic protected him well enough. His armour remained in the building where he'd slept, too bulky to rest comfortably in these days. For a moment he almost tripped, cursing himself for his clumsiness. He was still inside the boundary of the crumbling building and had failed to notice the raised threshold between two chambers. The

villa had been abandoned long enough that bushes grew within the rooms and much of the painted decoration had been eaten away by moisture or covered by lichens and thick green moss. Even a few small saplings tapered up from the walls, staking their claim to the light where one day the entire building would be lost in a forest floor. This place, Kiva thought, must have been one of the earliest casualties of the wars. He righted himself, considered turning to check if Athas had seen him trip, but changed his mind with a wry smile and continued on. Of course the hulking dark-skinned Sergeant had seen him; the man missed nothing. Beneath his feet as he followed a trail into the scrub he detected a flat, decorated area. Crouching, he hung the hatchet from a branch and peered at the ground. He was too far from the circle of firelight to get a clear view and yet still too close for his night vision to be fully attuned. He brushed the dirt floor with his fingertips. Mosaic. Despite a life of martial activity and an increasing despair with the world, he'd always maintained his fascination with mosaic, perhaps because they'd never had such a thing in the north when he was young. The need for firewood momentarily forgotten, Kiva reached into his pockets and withdrew his flint and tinder. After a few strikes, being very careful not to set the brushwood alight with a stray spark, the tinder took and a small beacon of orange light illuminated the floor. He moved the flame further away from the dry twigs; forest fires had their uses, but now was not the time. The dust was thick and with gravel, sticks and leaves and even small clumps of grass scattered among it. Leaving the light to one side, he began to brush away the dust and dirt with his hand, noting with interest a tooth and the broken tip of a dagger among the refuse, signs of the violent end the owners of such an opulent villa had met. Retrieving his water bottle, Kiva poured a small quantity onto the floor and watched as the colourful image came to life in the light cast by his small flame.

The God of wine sat in a gold and crimson chair, petting his goats, Tersiphory and Cilamna, while nymphs dropped grapes into his mouth with bright smiles and scant clothing. In the background were fruit trees and fields. Beautiful. Reaching out, he brushed more of the dust away from the edge and there was the first surprise of the night. A wolf.

Kiva had never been a deeply religious man; had never paid devotions as a boy to the Gods of the forest and, despite his oaths, had never truly taken on the Gods of the Empire. He wasn't sure that he liked the idea of Gods at all; Gods would imply a plan or some sense of purpose and the things he'd seen in his eventful life had made him

doubt the existence of anything but chaos and individual will. Besides, the Empire raised Gods from the mundane world, which was ridiculous in Kiva's opinion. One thing he did know was that, while the wolf was a revered creature among his own people, it was considered a barbarous symbol here and no respectable Imperial religious imagery would include such a thing. Frowning, Kiva began to brush further at the mosaic. Other images were revealed and he had to blow to move the dust, pouring yet more of his precious water onto the design. The images couldn't be right. If it were at all feasible, he'd have suspected a practical joke; an image designed specifically for him to see.

And yet there it was, the image of the sheep bearing a crown, the wolf running alongside - perhaps protecting it, perhaps hunting it. The image was deliberately ambiguous. Kiva sat back on his heels and stared at the mosaic. Unlikely imagery for the Empire. Not entirely dissimilar to a mosaic he'd paid ridiculous sums to have lain at his own estate so many years ago. Curious, the way coincidences...

A sudden rustling in the bushes drew his attention. He grasped automatically for his swords before remembering that he'd left them back at the wall. Reaching above him instead, he withdrew the small, chipped, but dangerously sharp hatchet from the branch where it hung. His had been the only unit on this side of the hill, guarding the flank of the largely mercenary army. After yesterday's skirmish there would be numerous corpses and wounded scattered over the battlefield, but they'd all be in the dip at the other side of the crest; unless perhaps one of the wounded had managed to creep all the way around the periphery of the field. Kiva drew a deep breath and challenged the intruder.

"This is Captain Tregaron of the Grey Company. Declare yourself" he intoned in a loud, clear voice. There was no answer. The rustling had stopped.

Without glancing around, he knew that Athas had joined him. He could smell the uncommon Basra oil that the sergeant used on his armour and moreover he recognised the eerie silence that was the only sign of Athas moving unobtrusively. He also knew Athas' *modus operandi* well.

"My Sergeant is here with a bow" he continued. "He's an exceptional shot. Declare yourself or prepare to meet the Gods in person."

There were several moments more of silence before the rustling began again and finally a pasty white hand appeared through the scrub. Kiva swung the hatchet back in a threatening fashion and growled "if you can't declare a unit, show yourself."

He waited, aware of a slight creak near his ear as Athas put a little more pressure on the bow. A moment later a second hand joined the first in a gesture of supplication and a pallid young face appeared among the leaves.

A light, well-spoken if nervous young voice called out “I don’t belong to a unit. I’m a civilian. Please?”

Kiva raised an eyebrow in surprise and stepped back slightly, giving the young man room to manoeuvre.

“Come on out where we can see you” he said, his voice still clear, though less forceful.

With more rustling and the tearing sounds of cloth on bramble, the figure struggled out into the light. He was young, though not as young as Kiva had initially thought. Perhaps eighteen or nineteen years of age, he’d have been fighting battles for years had he been born among the northern tribes. This lad, on the other hand, had quite obviously never used a weapon in anger in his life. He was clean shaven with short, blond clipped and curly hair, the pale studious look of a scholar and a white tunic that had seen much better days. The material was torn in numerous places by thorns and here and there spattered with mud or blood. Indeed there was a spray of blood on the lad’s neck and arm, though none of it appeared at closer inspection to be his own. Kiva pointed at the boy and gestured angrily out over the landscape.

“What the hell are you doing in the middle of a battlefield?”

The lad opened his mouth to speak, but Kiva cut him off sharply. “Nah, forget it. Don’t really care. Just turn and head that way, downhill. Don’t stop ‘til you’re well clear of this place. There’s a town about five miles away where you’ll be safe.”

The young man looked frightened and raised his hands in supplication. His cracked voice warbled “I can’t go on my own. Everyone else is dead.”

Kiva became aware that Athas had his hand round the hatchet haft and was gently encouraging him to lower the weapon. He relaxed his stance and dropped the hatchet to ground level. He’d never even heard the second creak as his second in command had released the pressure on the bow.

The captain sighed. “Look, we’re in the middle of a campaign here. I’ve a dozen men hungry for food and pay and I haven’t got time to deal with your problems too. Fuck off and find someone else to bother, just stay out of the way of my camp.”

He growled in irritation as he felt Athas’ reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“I’ll handle it sir,” the hulking sergeant said in a reassuring voice.

With a shrug, Kiva stood and swung the hatchet in small circles around his wrist, glaring at his sergeant as he spoke.

“Don’t be long. You’re still on watch until three. And don’t do anything stupid.”

He walked back up the slight incline toward the ruined walls that sheltered the men of the Grey Company. With a sigh he took a seat on the wall and, while he began to strap his armour of interlocking plates back on he watched Athas and the boy in deep conversation among the scrub at the edge of the light. An irritating suspicion crept over him that the sergeant was busy consoling the lad rather than getting rid of him.

It never ceased to amaze him, with all the years gone by and the hard, rough, bloody life they’d lived that Athas could never let a problem go past without getting himself involved. Still, they’d all had pride and cared about these small things once, he supposed, in the days when they had been the Wolves and the Empire had celebrated their actions. So much time had passed since then. They’d been the Grey Company for around fifteen years, and Kiva’d been a mercenary Captain; money was the name of the game these days. There *was* no centralised army. Oh, some of the old guard were signed up more or less permanently with one Lord or another, but when the day came that that Lord fell, so would their military force and any renowned veteran among them became just another victim. Safer by far to be a mercenary, serving no longer than a season with a single Lord. Last season they’d been serving with Lord Jothus at Avarilum, and they’d wintered in the city before moving on to join another faction. During their season of rest they’d been unlucky enough to see Lord Jothus’ fall, from the storming of his palace right down to his breaking on the iron bed and disembowelling in the public square.

Kiva suddenly became aware of movement on the hill and returned his attention to his Sergeant. Athas and the boy were coming up the hill together. Damn it. Why’d he left the sergeant to deal with it? He fastened the last thong on his body armour of overlapping steel plates and stood.

“What the hell are you doing, Athas?” he asked, gesturing angrily with both hands.

The huge sergeant stopped a few feet away, lending some support to the obviously weary lad. “He’s got a proposition” the man replied.

"I'll bet he has," Kiva growled. "Not interested." The captain turned his back, reaching toward his paired swords.

Athas grinned and, stepping in front of Kiva, held out his bunched fist. "I think you might be." He opened his hand.

The clink of coins was loud in the quiet night as the gold coronas hit the ground. Kiva looked down at the coins and then back up, surprise and irritation struggling for supremacy on his face.

"Gold?" he queried. "Where did a lad like you get gold currency?" He waved a hand dismissively. "I don't deal with thieves; we're honest men."

The young man took a step forward and fell to his knee in front of Kiva, his face downcast. "I'm no thief sir, and I know you're an honest man." He looked up into the captain's face and his voice took on the slight lilt of a youth trained in poetry and rhetoric. "I know who you are, General Caerdin." The voice had been low, but the intonation carried so much weight.

Athas blinked. Kiva growled and leaned forward in a menacing manner, his extended finger pressed against the young man's cheek.

"Don't be so damned stupid boy" he replied. "You know as well as I that Caerdin died when the Emperor fell. I'm Kiva Tregaron of the Grey Company, not some poncy 'hero' out of the days of old."

The boy shook his head and reached out, clutching the hem of Kiva's tunic.

"I'm not stupid! I've read the histories of Carolus and Phrygias, and all about your past. I've even seen your portraits. I know who you are, General, whether you care to admit it or not."

Athas leaned forward and whispered into the boy's ear. "Whether he *were* that man or no, it's not something you go around shouting. Be quiet for all our sakes."

Kiva nodded and, stretching his shoulders, drew on his gauntlet, fastening it round his wrist. He pointed an armoured finger at the boy, his face coldly neutral.

"Regardless, whatever you have to offer us, we're not interested. We're already commissioned by his lordship."

The boy shook his head as words tumbled from his mouth. "What I'm offering must be well over a year's pay for your company. You don't even know what I'm proposing, so you cannot tell me you're not interested."

Kiva turned his back on the boy again and reached down to the wall for his other gauntlet. "I said I'm not interested" he said coldly. "Now piss off and find someone else to bother."

The lad knelt for a long, quiet moment and then stood, nodding slowly and forlornly as he swept the worst of the dust and dirt from his white tunic and khaki breeches.

"Very well, Captain" the boy said in an emotionless tone. "If you won't help, you obviously *aren't* the General that I thought you were. I must be mistaken. *He* was a man of honour."

Kiva whipped round at the insult and opened his mouth to put the boy in his place but, as he caught sight of the pathetic figure, his words flitted away unspoken. He pointed angrily down the hill and the lad turned and stumbled painfully down the slope toward the brush once more. Athas wandered across to his commander and sat on the wall beside him, sighing.

"You do know that you've probably just condemned him to death, don't you?"

Kiva shrugged. "The whole world's gone to shit Athas," he sighed, "and we've not got time to help every stray you come across, no matter what he has to offer. We're contracted to Lord Bergama for at least the next two weeks and you know it."

Athas nodded and reached into his tunic, withdrawing a canteen of spirit. He unscrewed the lid with a thoughtful look on his face and took a quick swig.

"True," he replied, "but you know as well as I do the odds we're up against tomorrow. Only sunset saved us today. We're outnumbered about five to one. Bergama's gone; he just doesn't know it yet. Another tower fallen in the game."

Kiva stared off into the distance, his eyes slightly defocused. "Maybe soon all the Lords'll have fallen" he muttered. "Then there'll be peace." He snorted. "But of course there'll also be no one to pay our keep."

Athas grasped his Captain's shoulder. "The lad had gold" he implored. "Real gold, in Imperial currency. More too. He only wanted a bodyguard. Stupid not to even consider it."

Kiva turned to look his sergeant in the eye and Athas recognised the steel in it.

"The lad thinks I'm Caerdin and that's not something any officer wants to hear, least of all me. He's either crazy, stupid or reckless or all three at once. Any way you take it, we're better off without him. I don't care, I just want to get through tomorrow and then we'll think about the next step."

Athas smiled sympathetically. "That's crap sir" the big sergeant said. "You want your men to get through tomorrow, not you. *You've*

never wanted to get through the next day. You've just been looking for a way to get yourself killed for twenty years now. Problem is: you got so damn good at surviving, it became second nature. I doubt if the Gods themselves could kill you now."

Kiva pulled away from his sergeant's hand and pointed down the hill. "He's coming back, damn him." The Captain picked up a small pebble and hoisted his arm back to throw.

"I don't think you should do that sir," Athas said quietly.

Kiva sighed as the lad ran up toward the wall.

"Come on lad, piss off. I told you the answer's no." He rolled the pebble in his palm for a minute and then dropped it to the floor.

The young man stopped and rested his hands on his knees, gulping down air. As soon as he stopped heaving, he spoke in a breathless rush. "There's ... there's an awful lot of soldiers ... in dark ... green down there, creeping along the ... gully. Thought you should know."

"Green?" Kiva asked sharply. "Dark green?"

Athas glanced for only a second at his captain and then turned and leaned over the wall, cupping his hands round his mouth.

"Stand to!" He called, his voice echoing round the ruined building. "Enemy sighted."

In a testament to the training and the fighting spirit of the Grey Company, every man was upright and arming in a matter of seconds. Kiva nodded at his sergeant and then vaulted over the wall, grasping his swords from where they still leaned against the crumbling stonework and sweeping them from their scabbards one after the other.

Athas turned to the young man. "Thanks lad" he uttered. "Now get inside behind the walls and keep yourself out of sight."

As the young man walked across the threshold into the ruined building, Athas stopped him and handed over the hatchet that had been left on the wall. "Just in case."

Moments later all twelve members of the Grey Company were at the wall. Like mercenary units everywhere, no two of them wore the same armour or bore the same weapons. The one thing that *was* uniform was the charcoal grey of their gear, from tunics to breeches to shield faces. Grey was the colour. Indeed, when fully ready, they were barely visible in the darkness, an army of ghosts in the flickering firelight.

Athas took his position at the far left as Kiva took a place on the right. The sergeant drew a long, curved southern blade from his back scabbard and stuck it point first into the ground near the wall before removing half a dozen arrows from his quiver and planting them into

the loose mortar on top of the wall in a similar fashion. With a creak of his recurve bow, he prepared himself and then nocked an arrow. Kiva nodded at Thalo next to him and the dark haired archer put down his bow and struck a flint and tinder, sparking until the dry substance on the ruined wall caught light and blossomed. He put a few small sticks and knots of dry grass on it and then, nodding at the captain, took up his bow once more. Kiva hefted his two gently curved swords and gave them a practice swing. He'd never taken to using a shield and had never been a great marksman. Along the wall, between the sergeant and himself, a number of men drew their own weapons of choice, three more of them bows.

An eerie silence fell across the ruin as the Grey Company waited for battle. Ten of the company waited at this wall, while two others kept positions at the opposite corners where they could watch for any kind of flanking action.

The only sound that announced the arrival of the enemy was the scrape of a boot on rock as a man tried not to fall foul of the treacherous slope. Kiva nodded a second time to Thalo next to him, and the small archer dipped the tip of his arrow into the burning tinder before lifting and firing it deep into the thick undergrowth. There had been no rain now for almost three weeks and the brush was so dry that they'd already started three small fires accidentally and consequently could be fairly assured of a burning oil-covered arrow triggering a blaze. Indeed, the moment the arrow hit, orange flame leapt up from the flora, throwing back the curtain of the night and crawling along the intertwined branches at breathtaking speed.

As the fire spread among the bushes at a phenomenal rate, Kiva was beginning to ponder on the wisdom of his plan when a scream announced that the fire had taken its first target. The horrible crisping, gurgling sound of a man suffering an agonising death by fire was something that Kiva had never truly come to terms with. He'd hardened himself such that he could usually ignore it, but in the depths of night when dream came in his black robe, with unbidden images of fire and death, to take the remaining fractured shards of his soul, then the flames still ate away at his conscience.

Moments later a number of agonised voices added to the tumultuous roar as the flames took man after man, dragging Kiva's attention back to the fight.

Almost a minute went tensely by before the first intact figure appeared from the brush, looking startled, having exited the smoke and the undergrowth and come face to face with the waiting Grey Company.

They barely had time to register the surprise on his face and hear his brief monosyllable before Athas' first arrow took him in the throat. The man toppled backwards, his blade clattering to the floor, and disappeared once more from view into the roiling thick black smoke. Glancing round, the big sergeant spotted another smoke-wreathed figure ghosting out of the brush.

"Here they come!"

Shapes began to appear, those who'd managed to find their way around the edges of the ever-growing conflagration and stumble through the smoke. The company let fly with arrows as fast as they could, each marking a single target as it appeared and announcing their shot to preserve their companions' ammunition. Few of the attackers managed to move more than a couple of feet from their cover before being struck, invariably with instantly fatal results.

Gradually, fewer and fewer of them appeared until at last there was just the crackle of flames and the groans of the few who lay bleeding their last. Athas waited for a moment to be sure of the lull and then called down the line "count off!"

"I took three," shouted Scauvus.

"Five," Thalo called, nocking another arrow ready.

"Four for Marco," called a light voice, "but only three for Alessus!"

There was the sound of a punch landing on an upper arm somewhere along the wall and a carefree laugh.

Athas nodded as he carried out his mental arithmetic. "And I took five." He added. "That's twenty down to arrow shots, plus however many dead in the flames. Not enough to turn a full brigade away, sir."

Kiva strained to see into the distance. "They won't come that way again until the fire's gone out" he confirmed. Turning to face his unit, he added "three groups! One remaining wall each."

As the dozen men split off to watch the walls, Kiva walked over to where the young man in white cowered, hatchet clutched in equally alabaster knuckles.

"Make yourself useful," the captain barked, "long as you're here. Stand and watch the fires. If a single living thing comes towards you up that hill, shout me or Athas, right?"

The young man nodded, the look of a startled rabbit about his eyes. Kiva returned to the rear wall, shaking his head, and looked up the hill toward yesterday's field of battle. He glanced across at Athas and beckoned to him.

“We’d see them if they came at us from there, but we still don’t know how many of ‘em there are. I can’t run an effective defence without knowing what’s happening or what we’re up against. Get Scauvus to make a run to the top and see what’s going on.”

Nodding, Athas ran across to a side wall and spoke to a small, wiry looking man with dark, close-cropped hair and at least four days’ growth of facial hair. Scauvus dropped his bow next to his shield and walked across to the other side of the ruin. Dropping to a crouch and taking a couple of deep breaths, he tore off at high speed for the crest of the hill. The company watched as he ran, fast and nimble as a mountain wolf, up the steep incline and to the top, where he slowed considerably. A bad sign thought Kiva and, as the scout reached the crest and dropped to his stomach, his worst fears appeared to be realised.

“Ahh, shit” the captain groaned.

Athas appeared to have had similar thoughts. He began to nock and store arrows, gesturing to the men to be ready. Kiva strained his eyes once more to see Scauvus hurtling back down the hill as if the hordes of hell were at his heels his form disappearing momentarily from view as a brief change in the wind drove the column of choking smoke across in front of him. A couple of seconds later, the scout appeared out of the grey and jogged back up to the wall, out of breath and wild-eyed.

“The other camps are...” he gasped “all on fire and the enemy ... are everywhere. I think ... we’re the last.”

“Shit! Fuck!” The captain spat. “They’ve done this deliberately to catch us!”

Kiva stood for a moment, fighting the obvious decision. He hated abandoning a contract, but if the rest of the army had gone, what chance did twelve men stand against thousands? He sighed unhappily and gestured once more at Athas.

“Get the kit together as fast as you can” he ordered. “We’re leaving, and we’re leaving *now*!”

Without questioning, Athas relayed the orders to the men. As the company gathered their gear, two men still on watch for the enemy to reappear, Kiva jogged back to the young man in white, crouched by the wall and keeping a close eye on the burning mass.

“We gotta move, so you’re on your own, lad” he said. “Surrender fast and they’ll probably just rob you; they can’t mistake you for a soldier.”

He turned to retrieve his kit bag just in time to see Athas glaring at him.

“What?” he growled.

The sergeant merely shook his head and then returned to his work. The company's bags were already shouldered when one of the lookouts called out the warning.

"Here they come again!"

Athas waved Kiva away. "Take the rest and get to the farmhouse, sir. I'll keep Thalo. We'll cover you for five minutes, then follow on ourselves."

Kiva nodded. The two were quite capable of taking care of themselves. Better to risk two than to condemn twelve. He followed as his men started moving out, and then stopped. Some strange need drove him to turn at the last minute and look at the lad in white, standing by the wall with a look of defiant despair. There was something hauntingly familiar about that look and Kiva tried very hard to push it to the back of his mind. Deliberately turning his back on the boy he joined his men as they rushed down the hill, around the perimeter of the forest fire and into the concealing darkness.

Chapter II.

The marble columns wreathed in fire. The purple and gold drapes blazing and falling away into burning heaps on the floor. A chalice of wine on a small table by a couch, boiling in the intense heat. The panicked twittering of the ornamental birds in their golden cages as the room around them was consumed by the inferno. And in the centre of the room, standing in robes of white and purple, a man. He doesn't look frightened, though the flames lick at his whole world and his face is already grimy with the smoke. What he looks is disappointed, his arm extended toward the sealed and barred door separating him from a future and a life. Extended toward the figure standing behind that door, turning the final key in the final lock.

Kiva woke, the grimy soot and dirt on his forehead running down and into his eyes with the sweat. Despite the sweat, he felt so cold and so agonisingly sad. Of all the thoughts jostling for a return to his mind after the horror of the nightmare, strangely, his first and most insistent thought was 'did the birds die?'

He glanced around the room. The farm had been unoccupied for three or four days at most. When they'd made their way to the field to meet up with the rest Lord Bergama's army, they'd found this building the night before the battle, already empty. There had still been half-eaten meals on the table and the fireplace had been warm. Yet another case of the constant feuding between Lords disrupting the lives of the ordinary folk. This family had probably heard tell of the armies descending upon their district and fled, hoping to return after the trouble and find their home intact. He clicked his tongue irritably. He was starting to think like Athas. Screw it. They made their way and he made his. Every man has a path and some are easier than others. He'd move on to the next contract; the next battle. Kicking out in irritation at a table leg, he scraped the chair back and stood. The night was old, with dawn not far off. They'd reached the house around an hour ago and set up shifts for watch. Kiva had immediately surrendered to exhaustion and would still be in the arms of dream had not the old problem driven him to wakefulness. It was no wonder really that his once proud blond hair was now almost entirely grey and that his face had taken on a dark-eyed, haggard look. Sleep was neither a friend nor a comfort to Kiva Tregaron.

He had been the only one in the kitchen, seated by the thick wall on a heavy bench padded with a blanket. He approached the door to the main living space and peered round into the darkness. The

slumbering forms of the Grey Company filled the floor. Trying not to disturb their rest, he rounded the corner and climbed the creaking stairs to the upper floor. On one side of the upper room Scauvus sat on a stool, peering out of the upstairs window and watching for any stray scout that might stumble on their location. At the other side, Brendan and Marco sat on the balcony, keeping the rest of the valley under surveillance.

Touching his brow in recognition to Scauvus, Kiva made his way to the balcony.

"Morning. Any sign of Athas and Thalo yet?"

Brendan, a bulky man with a shaved head and greying whiskers nodded and pointed down into the grounds of the farmhouse.

"They got 'ere about 'alf an hour ago an' collapsed into that 'ay. If yer listen real 'ard, yer can 'ear Athas snorin' from 'ere."

Kiva followed the soldier's gesture and growled, leaning so heavily on the balcony rail that the wood creaked threateningly and a shower of dust drifted down into the yard.

"There's a boy in white down there" he uttered through gritted teeth. "Did they bring him with them?"

Marco turned, a piece of straw jutting from the corner of his mouth. "Nah, he came in a few minutes later. They let him join 'em though."

"Idiots" Kiva snarled.

Ignoring the questioning look from the two on the balcony, he snatched a piece of broken wood from the edge of the rail and hurled it down into the hay. Despite his almost legendary lack of prowess with aimed weapons, he noted with satisfaction the thump of the wood hitting something hard and a groan. Athas sat up suddenly, his hand reaching for the sword slung over his back. He spun several times, eyeing every dark corner of the farmyard and then looked up. Kiva made an angry gesture, motioning him toward the house. As the heavy sergeant walked toward the door, the captain turned and padded back through the room and down the stairs. He reached the bottom as Athas entered and he gestured toward the kitchen. As soon as they were both in, he closed the door and jabbed a finger at Athas' chest.

"I told you before," he growled "we don't need the kid."

The sergeant looked around to make sure none of the other soldiers were listening in on their conversation and then grasped Kiva's gesticulating finger and, jerking his hand aside, brought his angry face very close to that of his captain.

"I've had enough of this" the big sergeant rumbled in his deep voice. "The kid needs help and he's got money. We've no contract and we need the money." He waved aside Kiva's protests and continued. "I agreed never to gainsay you in front of the rest, but I've known you far too long to tiptoe around something like this. I know you think I'm a soft touch, but the fact is that I still care about things. You may be bitter and burning with resentment at everything fate's thrown at you, but you can't take that out on the innocent. You *think* you're cursed, so you make your own misery." He gestures with his hand open-palmed at the captain, but anger jammed up the words in his throat. With a sigh, he waved the arm dismissively. "Ah, fuck it."

Athas turned away angrily and raised his arms in irritation, seething silently for a long moment before spinning back round and jabbing his finger at the captain.

"All right, if there's no soul left there to appeal to, at least wake up and smell the money. If you don't help that lad, you're turning down easy cash for the sake of helping yet another petty claimant to the throne and I *know* you don't give a fig about *them*."

Kiva knocked the sergeant's hand aside and leaned forward, his face almost touching Athas' and his voice croaky. "Don't underestimate the shit I go through each and every waking day and the crap I live with in between. You of all people know why I am what I am. We don't *do* bodyguard. We never have. It's not the way we work. First over the wall and last off the field, remember? We always take it to *them*!"

Athas reached out gingerly and placed his hand on the shorter man's shoulder.

"I don't want to make it difficult, but you know that we're starting to get a reputation. A lot of the Lords won't touch us anymore and after tonight, we're unlikely to be heroes. We're a unit and you know that not one of us would contemplate leaving; we've been together since before the collapse, so you *know* that. But your whole attitude to battle frankly scares our employers. You're a risk. We could do with some steady work to help us with funds and maybe even boost our reputation."

Kiva sighed. "Look, I know we run a lot of risks, but you tend to do that when you fight a war. I won't do anything the easy way if it means..."

"I know that" Athas interrupted. "Gods, of all people, I know that. All I'm saying is you need to give the boy a break and you need to think of the men. They've fought five campaigns this last three months. They need a rest, but we keep getting stitched up over pay, so we can't

afford one and here's your golden opportunity to do what's right on both sides. Speak to the boy."

Kiva sucked air through his teeth, turning over the idea in his mind. "Athas..."

"Speak to him" the big man interjected again.

Athas and Kiva stood little more than a foot apart, a determined look on the sergeant's face. The captain sighed. In the face of the sergeant's logic, he was running out of excuses. He folded his arms and exhaled.

"I don't like it," he muttered, "but you may be right. Ok, bring him in and I'll see what he's got to say."

Athas nodded and wandered out through the door. Kiva watched through the window as the big man went to the pile of hay and gently shook the other two awake. He spoke for a moment and as Thalo made his way into the main room to sleep among the rest of the company, Athas and the boy made their way into the kitchen. Now that he felt calmer, Kiva noticed as the two entered the large cut down Athas' arm and the wounds on the boy's shoulder and leg. He looked up at Athas and gestured to the bench upon which he'd slept. While the two made their way across the kitchen, Kiva leaned through into the main room and looked around. Spotting the company medic next to the cold, burned-out fire, he threw one of the worthless tin coins he seemed to be permanently saddled with across the room and bounced it off the man's head. The medic sat up, startled, and looked around the room.

"Mercurias, bring your bag into the kitchen."

The medic followed the sound of the whisper and spotted Kiva standing in the doorway. Muttering miserably, he returned Kiva's gesture and stood, stretching. The captain made his way back into the kitchen and took a seat on the rickety wooden chair opposite the other two on the bench. Moments later Mercurias entered, his usual sour, miserable look compounded by lack of sleep and a rude awakening.

"What the fuck d'you do that for?"

Kiva pointed at the other two and growled at the medic. "Enough lip. Take the sergeant upstairs and see to that arm. And when you've finished, come down and have a look at this lad."

Still grumbling, the medic turned abruptly and walked out. Athas shrugged at his captain and then followed. A moment later, Kiva was alone with the young man. He looked the lad up and down for a long moment. The stranger made him feel uncomfortable, and he'd felt uncomfortable with no one but himself for so long that the feeling was unpleasant and unwelcome. He cleared his throat.

“Alright, lad” he began. “I’m Kiva Tregaron and these are the Grey Company. Athas and Thalo you’ve met, and the man who’ll be looking at your wounds in a minute is Mercurias. Now you know us, but I don’t know you. If you want any help I want to know who you are, what you’re doing in the middle of a battlefield, who was with you when they all got killed, where you’re going and how much gold you have and are willing to spare. *And* why you would suggest anything as dumb as you did when we met on the hill.” The captain sat in silence for a moment, and realised the boy was waiting for more. “Go on” he prompted.

The young man slouched slightly.

“Ok, my name’s Quintillian. I’m a scholar from a small off-shore community. I was sent with two colleagues to find an art dealer in Calvion. They knew where we were going and we had with us a cart containing some very rare and beautiful works. We need the money to help support the community. With the constant warring, things have become very expensive, and we don’t deal with the mainland very often. Our elders arrange delivery of what goods we can afford on a twice-yearly basis. We were on our way back to the island when we accidentally stumbled into those men in green. They killed Tomas and Enarion before we could even speak. They put me in a cage because I had gold and I suppose they figured there must be more somewhere. Fortunately the knots on the ropes that held the cage shut were childish and facile. I got them open as soon as it got dark and made my way away from their camp. Good thing, too; I believe they were planning to torture me to find out where I got the money. They took most of what I had on me and you saw what they didn’t take, but most of the gold is hidden in a bush somewhere on the other side of that battlefield. I need to get back to the coast near the city of Velutio and take a boat from there to the colony, and I need someone who can escort myself and the money to there. Before the battle, we had three hundred corona. I suppose I needn’t tell you what that’s worth to us?”

The boy looked up again at Kiva, but the Captain had a far-away look about him, as though he was paying only the slightest of attention. In fact, the boy thought he looked slightly sad; haunted even. He tapped a gold coin on the desk and the Captain focused his attention once more on the conversation.

“Three hundred corona?” he mused. “That’s a lot of money for a scholarly community. How much were you thinking of sparing?”

“A third of it?” the boy suggested with a shrug.

Kiva had been rocking his chair slightly on its rear legs as he listened. Suddenly the chair came down to the floor with a thud.

"A hundred corona?" the captain barked. "That's crazy. You'd hire an army for that?"

Quintillian smiled.

"I don't need an army, captain. I just need a little help to get home. A hundred corona *is* a lot of money, but if I take two hundred back to the island, it'll have been worth it. Without your help none of that money will get back. Do we have a bargain?"

Kiva smiled an unpleasantly predatory smile that the boy thought didn't suit him.

"What makes you think we won't just get you a few miles out into the wilderness and gut you for the whole lot?" Kiva asked.

A laugh. Quiet, but with true feeling.

"I don't think that's who you or your men are, Captain Tregaron" Quintillian replied. "*If* that's who you really are."

Kiva growled.

"Knock that off" he spat. "I don't want any more of your fantastic theories as to my origin. I *do* know the area round Velutio very well and you're right. You'd never get back on your own. The Lord of Velutio's probably the most powerful claimant in the Empire. And he's not a very nice human being. Less pleasant than me and a lot less forgiving. Ok. You've got a deal. We stay here until Celio's men have cleared the area and stopped patrolling for survivors. Then we'll go get your money and take you to Velutio."

The boy nodded at the captain.

"Agreed."

"We'll have to kit you out in some better gear though" Kiva said thoughtfully, tapping his finger on his chin. "Dressed like that you tend to stand out a bit. I'll ask Athas to sort you some kit; I think we've got a few spare tunics here and there. You'd best head upstairs and see Mercurias before you bleed out completely. Get him to send Athas back down here. Oh, and that's another thing before you go: as long as you travel with us, you're part of the company. You follow any orders you're given, whether they're from me, Athas or any of the others."

The lad, standing to leave, opened his mouth to object, but Kiva held his hand up.

"That's the rule" he said with an air of finality. "Think of it as for your own good. If we give you orders it's because we all rely on those orders for our survival. Also, it's because you're going to *be* one

of the company as far as any outsider knows. If you don't like the rules, feel free to piss off and find another unit."

Quintillian stopped and then smiled as he turned back and made his way to the stairs.

"Aye, captain" he said with a grin.

Kiva sat in the dark and silent room, grumbling to himself. It was more money than the Grey Company had made the entire last year, and it'd only take a month at most to get him to Velutio. It was good business sense, but he couldn't shake the feeling that the lad was going to be trouble and he was starting to get very edgy and fidgety. The first ray of sunlight appeared at the window, with a shaft of light that fell across the ceiling by the window. Kiva rose and paced back and forth for a moment.

He stopped and idly examined a large kitchen knife on one of the cupboards for a moment, before growling and storming across to the door. He was about to call upstairs for Athas, when he saw the bulky southerner turn the corner at the top on his way down. He was holding his arm gingerly and, as he reached the bottom and was more clearly visible in the pool of light from the kitchen's lamp, Kiva could see the fresh stitch marks on his arm. They were not very neat. Mercurias really *was* in a bad mood. He gestured impatiently toward the kitchen and followed Athas inside and to the seats by the table.

"I'm very uncomfortable with this" he reiterated. "I've agreed to take the job on but I'm very uncomfortable, and not for the reasons you think. D'you notice anything familiar about the lad?"

Athas shook his head, blankly. "Nothing particular. Why?"

Kiva leaned heavily across the table and grasped Athas' shoulders, pulling him close. The sergeant winced as the stitches pulled. Kiva ignored the look and gritted his teeth.

"I noticed it almost immediately" he whispered. "He looks so like his uncle it's untrue."

"His uncle? Who do..."

Athas tailed off and slapped the side of his head in irritation.

"It's true. He even talks like the Emperor."

Kiva motioned for quiet with his hands.

"Don't use that word" he replied. "It's dangerous around the wrong ears. Anyway, I don't think he knows anything about his uncle. He's got to have been a newborn when Quintus died. He looks like him; he sounds like him; he's a scholar from Velutio. Hell, he said it was an offshore community, so I'll bet they're even on the Imperial Island. And he called me Caerdin, so he knows his history."

Athas frowned.

“Not too well, though” he said. “He’d never have trusted someone he thought was Caerdin if he knew what the General actually did.”

“True. Still, I’m not sure there’s much hope of us covering him by using a different name. He’s a bit naïve and he’ll make mistakes. We’ll just have to hope no one else makes the connection. There aren’t many people who met Quintus in those last few years, so they won’t click the same way we did. He’ll be safer when he’s dressed like one of us. Can you see to that? Maybe a short sword or something too?”

Athas nodded. “No problem, captain. The only problem I foresee is the men. A lot of the Grey Company will remember the Em... Quintus from the old days. They’re not daft and I’ll guarantee you some of them’ll have worked it out very quickly.”

“We’ll have to act fast” Kiva replied. “Get the lads together and explain things to them. Explain most of all that forgetting the name Quintus and any past affiliations is going to be worth eight corona each. That should shut ‘em up.”

As Athas nodded, stood and made his way back into the main room, Kiva wandered up the stairs to find Quintillian sitting on a stool and being treated by the ever-surly Mercurias. The burly and thick-set Bors stood by the fireplace watching the medic at work. Kiva glanced around and gestured at Bors and the lookouts by the window and on the balcony.

“Get downstairs and see Athas.”

The three made for the stairs, leaving Kiva, Mercurias and the boy together. He watched as Mercurias cleaned out the shoulder wound. The young man had delicate, pale skin and dark, curly hair, cropped short. His eyes were a light blue, probably piercing when seen in a better light. Strikingly familiar. Kiva cleared his throat.

“Quintillian...” he began.

He noted the pause in Mercurias’ work and the sharp glance the medic gave him. He shook his head barely perceptibly and returned his attention to the boy. Athas had been right. Most of the company would make the connection with the name pretty fast.

“Lad,” he began again, “I need to know a few things before we go any further. Are your family still in this community, what’s the name of the place, what’s the aim of the community and who’s in charge?”

The boy’s eyes narrowed.

“I can’t see why any of that matters, but I was orphaned. Brought up by the community on the island. I don’t know much about

my parents, except that they died during the civil war. They must have been supporters of the Emperor; they *did* name me for him.”

Somewhere inside, Kiva heaved a sigh of relief, though he didn’t show it externally. It would have been nice to doubt the validity of the boy’s heritage, but he’d known the Emperor Quintus far too well for that. The boy could have been a model for Quintus’ earlier statues.

Quintillian continued “the island’s called Isera. We’re a community of scholars and holy men. The leader’s a man named Sarios. A very intelligent and kind man who used to be a priest and scholar in the days of the Empire.”

Kiva reached out and grasped the boy’s arm.

“It’s not a good idea to go round shouting out words like Emperor or names like yours. There are far too many bloodthirsty Lords out there, claimants to the throne, and talking too much would just get us noticed. Isera’s probably not a name to use either...”

Again, that intuitive narrowing of the eyes. Quintus used to do that too.

“Why do you not want to be noticed?” the boy replied. “You’re just mercenaries. You’ve not done anything wrong. Have you? Or have I?”

This was going to be hard work. Truths Kiva didn’t really like to divulge were going to have to be shared. Damn Athas. Why couldn’t they just have left the boy and found another Lord in need of troops? He sighed and looked the lad in the eyes.

“Quintillian,” he sighed, “why do you think there *are* so many mercenary units or private armies? There were over two hundred thousand men in the Imperial army before the civil war. Most of us over the age of thirty-five have served with the military before the collapse. My entire unit here were all soldiers then. The Grey Company weren’t always grey. They wore military green once. And a number of us met the Emperor on occasions. It’s a very complicated political landscape right now and there are some things that are best left in the past. Deal with it.”

He sighed again as the boy’s innocent face contorted with the effort of coming to terms with lies and half-truths. Just like Quintus in the early days; before the rot set in.

“It’s not much of a problem here in the Provinces,” the captain explained, “but when we get near Velutio, things will be a whole lot different. The world’s a different place there. You have to be *very* careful what you say. The Lord of Velutio and I are ‘acquainted’ and

we don't see particularly eye to eye. He won't take very well to someone with your name, either."

Kiva reached into his pocket and withdrew a small silver flask. The container had a wolf's head engraved on it, and an inscription, but Quintillian barely saw it as the captain moved his hand to grip around the decoration. Lifting the flask to his lips, he took several deep pulls on it before lowering it once more and replacing the lid. He leaned back and closed his eyes, exhaling deeply. Quintillian watched him as did Mercurias, the first to speak.

"Don't you think you're hitting that a little hard?" the medic queried.

Kiva flicked one eye open.

"I'm not your worry. Keep your mind on your patient. I'm going down to see Athas and the rest."

He stood, swaying slightly as his knee almost gave way and then, righting himself with the support of the chair, squared his shoulders and started down the stairs. Once he was safely out of sight and with the rest of the men below, Quintillian turned to face the medic, his voice full of uncertainty.

"Should he be drinking strong liquor when we're all still in danger?" he asked.

Mercurias turned the lad back round and continued work on the shoulder, his hands remarkably light and gentle, considering his general disposition.

"It's not liquor" the medic replied. "It's Mare's Mead."

Quintillian's brow creased as he sought out memories.

"I've heard of that" he said brightly. "One of the priests at home kept it for something."

Mercurias raised his brows in surprise.

"It's quite rare and not very well known" he said quietly. "Your priest must be well versed in the medicinal arts. Mare's Mead is an extremely powerful pain suppressant. It's very acrid and bitter in its normal pollen form, which is why people mix it with mead to take, hence the name. Problem is, it also has a number of side-effects that vary from person to person. Kiva takes it for a pain in the side, legacy of a wound he took a long, long time ago. I dread to think what it's doing to him, 'cos he'll never let me examine him. I *do* know he averages about three hours a night sleep in a *good* week and he's a very troubled man, but then he's always been like that, ever since the days of the collapse."

"I don't think he likes me very much" the boy added.

“He doesn’t like anyone very much. Just don’t antagonise him.”

“Done.” With a short, sharp tug, Mercurias tied off the thread and then cut the spare away. “Try not to wave your arms around over your head for a few days, or I’ll just let you bleed next time. If you’re getting kit from Athas, can you give me your tunic afterwards? It’s quite good quality material and I could turn it into good bandages with some washing.”

Quintillian nodded, wincing as the activity tensed muscles in his neck that pulled gently on the stitches. He craned his neck in an attempt to examine his own shoulder, but couldn’t see far enough round and the movement hurt. Instead, he examined the smaller wound on his leg.

“Your stitching’s very precise” he complemented the medic. “Did you ever practice in one of the major hospitals or temples?”

Mercurias shook his head.

“I’ve always been in the army” he replied. “Thirty some years I’ve been with these men. I’ve treated everything from splinters to deep slashes to gangrene to trench foot. When I joined I knew nothing, just apprenticed myself to one of the combat medics. In the old days there was a lot of activity on the northern borders. Particularly with Kiva’s unit. I was well and truly dropped into the shit at the deep end.”

He frowned.

“You have a habit of asking earnest, simple questions and getting more truth out of people than they should be willing to give. I don’t think you’re half as naïve as you act, Quintillian. I think you play people to find out as much as you can.”

The lad raised his hands in defence, but the medic continued. “Oh, don’t get me wrong. I don’t think you’re sly or devious or manipulative in any bad way. It’s just how you deal with people, isn’t it. People find themselves telling you things that they perhaps shouldn’t. I *know* that I told you things I wouldn’t, and I think the Captain did too. That’s a useful talent to have, but it could get you into a lot of trouble. Be careful. I’ve known people just as incisive who’ve fallen a long way because of their wit.”

Quintillian smiled benignly.

“My tutor always told me to find out everything you can about a subject before you pass any kind of judgement on it.”

“Wise words,” the medic replied, “but bear what I said in mind. Now stay here while I go and get a tunic from Athas for you.”

Mercurias reached the top step and turned to look at the young man, standing at the window with his hands clasped behind his back.

This boy was really something; much like his uncle used to be. Maybe that's why Kiva'd agreed to take him on. Sighing with the weight of the world, he turned back and descended the stairs.

Quintillian stood at the window and gazed out into the dawn light. The farmyard was in shadow on this side, the sun still barely rising above the horizon. Perhaps two miles away, over the crest of the hill would be a bag of coins hidden beneath a thorny bush. Many miles beyond that was the city of Velutio, and beyond that: the sea. If he tried hard, he thought he could almost smell the brine and hear the gulls. Below, whatever meeting the company had had must have broken up. Two of the men he didn't know left the house, moving out toward the hill. For a moment, he pondered the possibility that the captain had sent them after the gold but, even if they'd had the faintest idea where to find it, these men were not the sort to do that. The two men would be scouts, out to see whether the enemy army had left and the coast was clear.

These men, for all their brash roughness and mercenary cause, were men of honour. He'd played a dangerous game earlier with the captain to test that, impugning the man's honour. Most of those who'd served under the Emperors were dutiful and honourable and, despite the changes the world had undergone around them, many of them would not have changed in their hearts. The army had had a code. Oh, Quintillian hadn't been born during those glory days, but he read so much. Voracious, his tutor had called him, and he read far too much to wander this world innocently. Darius would be so jealous when he returned to the island with all these stories of adventure.

Stories of the Grey Company and their leader, Kiva Tregaron.

Quintillian chuckled and whispered quietly to himself.

"Tregaron indeed." Caerdin had had a reputation to be sure, but he'd been the stalwart of all the military in the days of his uncle and while grey hair and a lack of insignia might fool some of the power-hungry Lords of the realm it had not deceived Quintillian, nephew of Quintus the Golden, Emperor, genius, and God.

Chapter III.

The sun was now high, having beaten the darkness back and flooded the world with the hope of a new day. Kiva was first out of the house and into the farmyard. He stood in the bright sunlight, crossing his arms behind his head and pulling on his elbows to stretch the shoulder muscles. Behind him the rest of the company wandered out, blinking, into the sun. Athas grunted and squinted into the yellow fiery globe. It struck Kiva often that, for a man born in the searing desert lands of the south, Athas seemed to be generally uncomfortable in direct, warm sunlight.

Kiva wandered as far as the gate in the wall and examined the farmhouse. Under more long-term occupation, it could be made quite defensible. The yard was fairly narrow, but very long and level. The perimeter wall stood around three feet on the inside, and the same on the outside at the western end. The eastern end had been bolstered up as the ground fell away sharply into a small valley. At that side the wall was high and as secure as a fortress. He wondered whether it had ever been used as such. Perhaps if he had time, he would wander round and take a look. It was always worth knowing of defensible positions in case they ever found themselves in the area again.

He looked around at the unit and saw the runner adjusting his footwear. He turned to Scauvus and cleared his throat.

"You ok? Clear on directions?"

The scout nodded. "Yes sir" he replied. "The lad's got a good grasp of map making."

Just behind him, Quintillian smiled.

"Cartography and Geography lessons. Every day from three until four" the boy smiled.

Scauvus grinned. "I never had time for any kind of -aphy, but I *do* know how to find places. I shouldn't be more than an hour; two if it's too well hidden or I bump into trouble. If I'm not back in two, presume I'm gone."

Athas looked over at Kiva and then back at Scauvus.

"*Be* back in two" he said vehemently.

The scout dumped the majority of his pack by the perimeter wall of the farmyard and, taking only his sword and small bow, jogged out of the gate and off across the fields. Kiva joined Athas at the wall and together they watched until the scout was out of sight. Bors stood a short distance away playing dice with Pirus and Alessus, two of the older men.

Once Scauvus was no longer visible, the captain turned to look at the company's latest recruit. Quintillian stood in the sunny yard, wearing a grey tunic only marginally too large for him. Over the top was slung a harness of leather straps to help protect him from blows. Armour was too cumbersome a thing for a constantly-mobile mercenary unit to carry spares, so Athas had suggested that they make their way to the nearest village or town of any size and speak to a blacksmith. In the meantime, a few strips of leather would have to do.

Thalo had donated a bow, which now hung across the lad's back diagonally, a quiver slung at his side, and Athas had given him two long-bladed daggers and the rest of the standard kit, from tinderbox to canteen. He was actually beginning to resemble a soldier, albeit a pasty and thin one.

"Starting to look like one of us now, lad" Kiva said thoughtfully. "Next thing is: we might as well train you how to use those weapons."

Quintillian tapped the pommel of one of the daggers; long, straight-bladed steel knives with dark iron handles and red velvet grip.

"I'm not very good with these, but I *can* use a bow" he replied. "We had morning training at the colony. My friend Darius was always better with swords, but I could outstrip him with a bow."

Kiva glanced across the group with a sceptical look until he saw the sergeant.

"Athas, come over here a moment."

The burly dark-skinned officer put down his sword and the whetstone that he'd been using and wandered across the farmyard to stand by his captain. "Mmm?"

"The lad reckons he's good with a bow" Kiva said, a trace of disbelief in his voice. "I'm not exactly the best judge. If I set up a couple of targets, you and he can spar for a bit. We've a couple of hours to kill."

Athas nodded and retrieved his bow from where it stood propped against the wall, while Quintillian unhooked his weapon from around his shoulders. Kiva called over the others and between Thalo and himself they manhandled two large pieces of wood along the full length of the farmyard. Once there, the wood was propped against the perimeter wall. The two squinted back toward the house and made out the figures testing the tensile strength of their bows. Marco grinned.

"Best get along before they mistake us for the bloody targets, eh sir?"

With a nod, Kiva joined Marco and the two jogged back along the wall to where the company had gathered to watch the sparring archers. Taking a seat on the wall, Kiva cleared his throat.

“One target each” he announced. “Six arrows. See how many you can get in the wood. Fire in your own time.”

Kiva sat back and the others joined him at the wall where they could observe the results. Brendan offered him a chunk from a loaf of bread, which he declined. He turned the other way to see Marco chewing on a piece of dried beef before returning his attention to the competitors.

Athas exhaled and released the first arrow almost before Kiva had finished speaking. The arrow sailed in a low arc and, even at that distance, they could hear the splintering of wood. The sergeant drew another arrow from the quiver and turned before setting up his shot, watching the lad. Quintillian pushed his shoulders back in a stretch and then flexed the bow. Reaching to his side, he drew an arrow and nocked it in one smooth, flowing movement. Staring down the length of the arrow’s shaft, the lad tensed, his breath held, and released the missile. The arrow arced through the air, considerably higher than Athas’ had, and yet came down with great force and splintered the wood of the second target. The sergeant nodded at him and nocked his arrow.

Kiva and the rest of the company watched as the two archers nocked and released arrow after arrow, Athas in short, sharp motions; Quintillian in fluid, graceful sweeps. As the last arrows hit home, Kiva stood and wandered across to the two archers.

“No need to go count ‘em” the captain addressed the archers. “I think we all heard them strike. Five each, I believe?”

Athas and Quintillian both nodded and the large sergeant, having leaned his bow against the wall, patted the lad on the shoulder.

“Damn good shooting for a scholar” he complimented his competition.

“Plenty of practice” the boy smiled as he replaced the bow around his shoulders.

The captain and the two archers strode across to a free area of the wall and took a seat. Athas looked at the lad and sighed.

“What you do, though,” he added, “is sport or hunting archery and I presume that you learned using seabirds for targets. That kind of archery has two practical uses: hunting, where your targets are often far off or high up and at low speeds, and large scale warfare. It’s true that in the days of the full regiments we’d have had archers firing high and far, but that was when there were hundreds of archers firing at a time

over our own men and into the mass of the enemy. We're a unit of a dozen men. You simply don't have the luxury of being able to set aside a unit to fire from distance. If you want to learn how to fight the way we do now, you have to learn to aim your shots low and direct and to be able to release a number of them in quick succession."

Quintillian raised one eyebrow and the sergeant went on.

"Your preparation and firing's pretty to watch, but it's quite slow. I daresay I could get three arrows off in the time you fire one if I'm on form. Thalo'd get four. He *is* good. Your arrows are too high; too indirect for a modern battlefield. Remember your targets are on the ground, probably too close for comfort, and they'll be moving. The lower the arc you can manage, the less chance there is of them getting out of the way in time. Speed. A lot of it's about accuracy, but a lot's about speed."

Athas picked up his bow and an arrow and began flexing it and demonstrating to the lad. Kiva yawned and stood. Since he'd never been able even to hit a building at ten paces, the whole conversation was way above his head. The principle was ok, but when they started demonstrating technique it was time for him to move. Stretching again, the captain wandered off along the yard toward the wooden targets. The day was bright and becoming noticeably warmer. Flies buzzed around the dung in the farmyard and the smell was more than a little pungent. With a look at the two wooden targets it took Kiva some time to work out which arrows were whose. Whatever Athas thought about the lad's technique, each archer had struck home five times of six and the grouping was fairly good. The results had looked much the same.

To say Kiva didn't trust the lad would be to make too much of it. Quintillian was naïve and young. The deeper problem was that, as far as Kiva was concerned, he was a disaster looking for someone to happen to. One day someone who recognised the boy would capture and use him. Then everything would explode and the world would probably go to shit. He was too valuable a piece in the eternal game of power and politics and, as the last living descendant of the late Emperor, he would be important to some factions alive, but to a lot more dead.

Following the perimeter wall, the captain wandered away from the increasingly unpleasant smell of warm dung. With the farmer and his family having fled, no one had cleared the yard for several days and the acrid aroma at this end where animals had obviously been fed was too strong for prolonged exposure. Scanning the distant tree line for any sign of activity, he walked around the building and to the rear gate.

There seemed to be plenty of time. Even at best it would be three quarters of an hour before Scauvus returned. He exited the gate and wandered down the gentle gradient alongside the farm wall. As he moved toward the north western corner, the ground began to slope away toward a stream and he brought his attention back sharply, almost losing his footing on the loose earth and stones of the slope. Concentrating hard on not sliding down the hill, he reached the corner.

His years of combat-honed alertness saved Kiva at the last minute. He heard the stretch of a bowstring and a couple of skittering pebbles as he rounded the heavily buttressed corner and allowed himself to slip along the loose ground as he passed. The arrow, loosed in perfect time to pass through the air where Kiva's chest would have been, whistled off into the distance. The captain arrested his sliding descent with a kick and rolled to one side, coming back up into a carefully balanced stance for his next move.

Four men stood in a small knot, one fumbling for another arrow, while the other three hefted their swords menacingly. They wore the pale green tunics of Lord Celio, a lighter shade than the old Imperial Green. They also had the look of professional soldiers, rather than mercenaries. As always in situations like this, instinct took over, leaving no time for practical thought. As he came up and before he'd fully registered the situation, already his hand had wrenched his two throwing knives from the leather thong on which they hung and had brought them up in a sharp, underhand throw. The knives; straight, chisel-tipped steel blades with bone handles, hurtled through the air and hit the bowman in the left shoulder and the left leg. Athas had tried time and again to teach him with the best weighted knives available but, regardless, Kiva would never make a marksman. Still, the bow was effectively out of commission. The archer grunted and stumbled, the bow dropping from his suddenly spasming fingers.

As one of the four soldiers opened his mouth to speak, Kiva was already diving into his next move, rolling between them with his fingertips touching the pommels of his swords.

"Captain Tre..."

The soldier's voice tailed off as Kiva's blade tore through his hamstring. As the Captain had dropped and somersaulted, he'd whipped both his slightly curved blades out to the sides and had come up half a sentence later behind the middle two, having sliced neatly through the tendons at the back of the knees. From rounding the corner to standing behind them and watching them fall had been mere seconds.

With a sharp cry of pain the speaker collapsed in a heap, his blade flailing out at random. The man on the other side had slid to the ground, whimpering and clutching his knee. The archer began to back away down the hill, while the remaining enemy soldier stood facing the captain, looking somewhat startled. Kiva lifted one foot and kicked against the high perimeter wall, spinning in a half circle and lashing out with his swords as he turned. Before he even saw his opponent, he heard the slicing sound of carved meat and felt the slight resistance tugging at the blades. As he landed, catlike, on his feet before the man, he watched his victim's torso slide gently off the pelvis, the spine entirely severed. He looked down at the half body, registering with distaste the startled look still on the face as the lower half of the body toppled slowly backwards. Kiva stepped back.

He looked down at the two crippled but active men flailing around on the floor and clutching their wounds. They looked a great deal less smug now than they had a moment ago.

"The problem with full-time soldiers" he noted coldly as he trod carefully among the viscera, "is you tend to stand there and bluff and bluster when you could be busy actually killing."

He kicked the half-body out of his way and strode over to the two.

"Another problem is that you're hampered by certain codes" Kiva said with a feral grin. "I'm not."

Stepping on the hamstrung knee, causing another scream of pain, he leaned forward and thrust his blade into the second man's gullet. As he pulled the sword back out, he twisted and a large piece of the soldier's neck came with it. The gush of dark blood washed over his companion who was now visibly terrified.

"I don't like leaving a live enemy" he continued as if instructing a new recruit. "They tend to come back to haunt you."

With a heavy slash, he beheaded the remaining man and, turning, shaded his eyes with his hand, trying to spot the archer. The severed head rolled past his feet and off down the hill. The archer hadn't got very far, clutching his painful, bleeding leg and stumbling down the slightly treacherous slope toward the stream. Kiva growled. He hated having to chase people down.

"Can we help, sir?"

The captain turned and glanced up at the top of the wall. Three of the company were peering over the parapet at the grisly scene and he could hear the others scrambling across the farmyard now. Athas gestured down the hill.

"I might miss at that distance," the big sergeant admitted, "but it's a shot I'd bet the lad could make. He's more of a huntsman."

Kiva merely nodded and then set about the job of looting the bodies below the wall. Athas and Quintillian appeared at the top and the lad looked down. He squinted for a moment as he tried to make out the details of the scene below and then the colour slowly drained from his face. Muffled gagging sounds accompanied his desperate attempts to hold in his breakfast. The captain crouched, grey and unconcerned, among the severed pieces of human beings, busily rifling through their pouches. Athas grabbed a handful of the boy's tunic and hauled him back upright.

"I know it's not nice when you're not used to it," he told the lad soothingly, "but we haven't got time for this. See that man in green? Down near the river?"

Quintillian continued to stare blankly at the sergeant, his face white.

"Can you hit him or *not*?" Athas queried, his voice more commanding.

The boy turned robotically to look down the hill, trying not to catch the huge splash of red beneath him out of the corner of his eye. The archer had almost reached the stream. It would be a very long shot, but he'd hit worse. He nodded, gulping in air rapidly.

"Then do it."

Athas stuck three arrows in the wall while the boy unhooked his bow and tested the string gingerly. As the sergeant looked across, he saw some colour returning to Quintillian's face. The lad plucked one of the arrows from the wall and nocked it, aiming carefully. Steadying his breath, he released the arrow.

The shaft arced up into the sunlit air and curved down, picking up speed as it fell toward the river. Athas realised he too was holding his breath as the arrow narrowly missed the soldier and splashed into the water. The lad let out his breath in a huge rush and slapped his hand on the wall in irritation.

"It's too far" he shook his head. "He's almost out of range."

Athas plucked the second arrow and thrust it towards Quintillian, who accepted it reluctantly. The sergeant gestured to Thalo, who nodded and proffered another bow. In return, Athas held the arrow to him. Thalo stepped up to the wall, stretched out the bow, took the arrow, nocked it and fired with barely a pause to aim. Quintillian's carefully-aimed shot flew out away from the wall a mere fraction of a second later.

Even Kiva stopped and turned to watch as the two arrows reached their apex and then began their descent. Thalo's came down first, remarkably accurate considering his lack of aim, punching deep into the man's calf, splintering the bone and jutting out of his shin. Before the figure even hit the water the second arrow, quintillian's, struck him in the back, entering just below the shoulder blade. The distant figure crumpled into the stream, quickly staining the slow-running water red. Kiva stood back and looked up at the wall.

"Whoever goes down there to get my throwing knives back gets to keep anything they loot from his body."

As Kiva stretched and made his way back along the wall toward the gate, Marco and Thalo turned and raced toward the gate in the wall. Athas slapped Quintillian on the shoulder.

"Not too bad" he said admiringly. "That was a hard shot."

The lad was still very pale and shaky. He smiled weakly and then leaned forward over the parapet and retched convulsively for the best part of a minute, though nothing actually came up. Wiping his mouth with an exceedingly shaky hand, he leaned heavily on the wall, letting the bow fall to the ground, unheeded.

"He... the captain... butchered them all himself, didn't he?"

"He did, lad" Athas answered mildly. "He's very good at it. You could be that good one day with enough training and practice. Unfortunately, like me you've got a conscience and they tend to get in the way. He hasn't. Not any more."

The rest of the company had drifted back toward the main door of the farmhouse. Kiva had continued on round the wall of the house, and Thalo and Marco were racing for the body in the stream. The sergeant and the young man were practically alone. Quintillian looked up at the huge warrior.

"What made him this cold?" he asked with true feeling. "You've known him a long time. He must tell you everything, yes?"

Once again, Athas raised an eyebrow. The boy was always prying; probing for information. In another man it might be indicative of a spy, but for some reason Athas was sure of the lad's trustworthiness. The sergeant rarely pried too deeply into peoples' lives, tending to rely mostly on gut instinct. He sighed; gut instinct was good, but some things weren't his to tell.

"I'll tell you a lot of things you need or want to know lad, but not things like that." Turning, the big sergeant fixed Quintillian with a direct glance. "You want to know about the captain, you'll have to ask

him. And I'd recommend you get to know him a lot better first. D'you drink?"

Quintillian smiled. "I've been known to have a few glasses of wine after lunch."

"Hah. Well never mind." Athas grinned and proffered a flask. The boy took it curiously, unplugged the lid, and sniffed delicately at the contents. He recoiled in horror.

"What in the name of ... What *is* that?"

The sergeant grinned.

"It's something they make in the northlands" he laughed. "The captain introduced me to it many years ago. It tastes like someone scraping their boot on your tongue, but it grows on you and there's nothing better for hiding the smell of fresh carnage and the taste of bile."

Quintillian took a slight pull at the tip of the flask and the look of horror intensified. He made a hollow throaty noise, reminiscent of his earlier retching.

"That's foul!"

"Isn't it though?" Athas beamed. "Have more. It'll do you good."

The sergeant glanced down once more at the scene below the wall.

"Come on" he sighed. "Let's get back to the house."

The two of them wandered along the farmyard until they reached the front gate, where Athas collared Brendan.

"Can you take someone and dispose of the mess below the wall. I don't think we want the kind of attention that brings. Let's not leave a trail for anyone to follow."

Brendan rubbed his shaved head unhappily, but nodded nonetheless.

"Aye" he said reluctantly. "S'right. We'll sort it sarge."

Kiva wandered back in through the gate as two of the soldiers left to deal with the mess. He eyed Athas and the boy thoughtfully.

"They were pretty good shots" he said to the boy. "Care to get up in one of those windows and keep watch for us? Four of Celio's men were looking for our unit, so I'd bet there'll be more out there."

Quintillian looked up at Athas questioningly, and the sergeant nodded. The boy frowned.

"I don't mind keeping watch sir, but I'm not sure I'm the right man for shooting people. I've never shot anything animate before other

than rabbits and birds. I'm not really sure how I feel about what I've just done."

Kiva narrowed his eyes.

"What you just did helped save the company" he replied, his voice firm but understanding. "Get used to it. There'll be times in your life when you'll need to be capable of acts of brutality."

His frown deepened as his thoughts raced and the monologue continued inside his head '...and your family carry the most brutal of all madnesses.'

Instead, he forced a smile and slapped Athas on the shoulder.

"You'd best go with him and talk" he added. "You're the sensitive sort. I just border on 'don't give a shit!'"

As Kiva wandered off to sit in the shade of an old haywain, Athas escorted the young man up the staircase to the top floor of the farmhouse. The wide balcony let in a great deal of light, though the window on the far wall stood shuttered, blocking the worst glare of the sun. Athas gestured to the balcony and the two chairs that sat there. The pair wandered over and made themselves comfortable, the sergeant with his feet up on the worryingly rickety balcony. He shifted his weight and dust and fragments of worm-eaten wood drifted down into the farmyard.

Quintillian glanced out of the corner of his eye at the now relaxed-looking sergeant. Athas rubbed his nose and then drew out his flask of brew. Taking a slug, he recorked it and returned it to its accustomed place on his belt.

The young man cleared his throat nervously and Athas realised another difficult question was looming over him.

"What now?"

Quintillian sat up straighter in the chair and turned to face the older man.

"Your flask" he said, "has some engraving on it, yes?"

"Mmm. So?"

"A wolf's head and some writing?" pushed the boy.

Athas narrowed his eyes. "What are you getting at lad?"

The boy shuffled uncomfortably.

"I saw the same markings on the captain's flask. The wolf and the lettering. Does it have meaning for the Grey Company? The flask you issued me doesn't have it on."

Athas let out a long sigh.

"You've got to stop asking questions" he implored. "They make everyone feel uncomfortable. We're a mercenary unit and that means

that there isn't a single man here that doesn't have *something* to hide; usually something he's ashamed of in his past."

Quintillian smiled.

"Just one more, then."

"What?" replied the sergeant.

"Was the captain ever married?" the boy asked, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

Athas growled and turned to face him.

"All right," he answered, "but this is the last time you ever mention that subject, and I'm only telling you so you don't make a mistake and ask him. Yes, he was. She died just after the collapse. It's not a very nice or happy story and it's one I *never* want to hear you ask the captain. Understood?"

Quintillian nodded and shuffled back to face the countryside over the balcony. The sun was glorious, lighting the green and gold fields as far as the eye could see.

"I'm just interested in what makes him what he is" the boy continued. "I've never met anyone who seems so bitter and yet I can't get over the feeling that that's not really him. D'you know what I mean?"

"Story closed. Ok?"

The two sat in silence for a long moment and finally the sergeant sighed.

"Tell *me* something for a change" he said, rounding on Quintillian. "You studied in that community. I find it hard to picture a scholarly community getting by these days. It was ok in the old days before the Emperor went m... Before the collapse. But now? There's precious little room in the world for quiet thought and study. What kind of people are they?"

The lad smiled.

"So now you'll interrogate *me*, yes?"

Athas merely raised an eyebrow and made a beckoning motion.

"Ok" the boy began. "Well, I suppose the most important person to *me* on the island is my best friend Darius. I suspect you'd like him. He's about the same age as me, but a little more active. He doesn't study as much as I do. Well he does, but only really history, war, geography and politics. He *is* good at sports; and at fighting. We used to be trained in all sorts of fighting, even unarmed, and the only thing I ever regularly beat him at was archery. I can usually trick him into things though."

“So why wasn’t he sent out instead of you?” the sergeant queried, his eyebrows raised in genuine interest. “Sounds more like someone you want charging round the countryside with money, no offence intended.”

“None taken” the boy replied. “The honest answer is that I don’t actually know. He *would* be better in truth. And he would fit in much better with the Grey Company. Still, I’m here on the orders of the elders and he’s not.”

A shout from below drew their attention to the grassland before the farm. A figure was jogging down the hill at some pace. Athas had the bow at the ready but, after a moment he laughed, dropped the weapon and leaned over the balcony.

“Scauvus is back already” he grinned. “He looks happy and he’s waving something.”

He turned and smiled at Quintillian as he began to make for the stairs.

“Conversation’s now for another time. Gotta go. Coming?”

The lad returned the smile.

“I’ll follow on in just a moment” he replied.

Quintillian had always thought of himself as a lateral thinker; a planner. He hated having to lie to people, but he knew when he had to and he was good at it. He’d *always* been one step ahead of the game, his entire life. And yet no matter how much he tried to think it through he couldn’t figure out why they’d left. They’d put the rest of the community in danger and fled in the middle of the night to gather money for heaven knows what purpose. No matter what reasons the elders had given him, he was well aware of the island’s status and the complete isolation from the world in which they were kept. Darius would have been much better on that dangerous night-time boat trip; much better at the hiding and travelling by night they’d have to put up with before they’d reached a safe enough distance from the island. Why was *he* here then, and not Darius? Why *did* they need money when they’d never have the opportunity to buy something? With Tomas and Enarion dead, there was little hope of finding anything out until he made it back to Isera. The elders were too clever by far and their reasons escaped him. As he turned and followed down the stairs to see his gold returned, he couldn’t help but wonder what the whole point was.