

**A STUDY OF CHARACTERISATION AND MORALITY IN FANTASY
FICTION, EXPLORING CREATIVE TECHNIQUES WITH IMMORAL
PROTAGONISTS**

By
Aaron Laurence Miles

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Abstract

This project is a study of writing techniques used when constructing immoral protagonists, focused on identifying, categorising, and utilising these techniques. With an understanding of these techniques I will be able to write more engaging and successful immoral protagonists.

This work includes a study of fantasy literature and writing craft as a way to identify techniques in practice, as well as my own creative element where I incorporate the techniques I have studied into my writing. The creative element is an example of these techniques put into practice with an accompanying analysis on their use in my work.

The project helps to identify and establish the practices and concepts of the current trend towards darker protagonists in the fantasy genre.

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Chapter One

The rain beat down like it had a grudge against the ground. Stars shone faintly between the dense clouds and the moon was hidden in the sky. Dirt streets were sucking mud pools, devoid of life. The polished stones of the city shimmered with rain slicked lustre and every exposed surface in Kar Noval glistened. A damp smell hung in the air; the wet, loamy smell of the ground.

Cras lay under the patched tarp of a rotted wagon, his cloak wrapped about him in a vain attempt to keep off the deluge as it soaked through the bowing sheet above. Chill water trickled down his neck and back, icy fingers tracing his spine. Bundles of sodden hay pressed in around him, matted and damp. It had lost its barnyard sweetness; now it smelled stagnant and mouldy. He shivered, soaked garments clinging to clammy skin, stealing the warmth from his blood. His hands clutched an oiled cloth wrapped around a bulky object. They opened and closed slowly in an effort to keep the blood flowing.

“Come on,” Cras whispered to himself as another fit of shivering racked his body. Keeping an eye on the street through the gap in the wagon boards, he let go of the bundle and drew out a small hip flask from under his tunic. Pulling the stopper, he tilted his head and knocked back the drink. The burning liquid raced down his throat, kindling a flame in his stomach and chasing away the shakes. He slipped the flask back into his jerkin, silently cursing himself.

Should've pissed before I came.

He shifted uncomfortably, feeling the straw scrape along his back as it got into his clothes. Cras scratched viciously, twisting his body in the cramped confines. *Would've been so easy to get a sturdy pottery wagon.*

Settling back into his former pose, he peered through the hole in the wooden boards of the wagon. He could just make out the manse of Questo Kor across the street. His limited view was focused on the elegantly carved doorway, hemmed in by the rotting wood of the wagon. He tilted his head to get a better

look. There was a side window by the door, but the shutters were drawn, with a bright glow emanating from the edges. The golden light spoke of comfort and warmth. Cras imagined he could feel the heat from inside as the liquor lost its effect. Envious and miserable, he felt a sudden surge of hate for this man who got to dwell in luxury while he was freezing his arse off in the pouring rain.

If he doesn't come out soon, I'm going in.

He began to shiver again, long tremors that ran up the length of his body. Trickle of rain ran down the hood of his cloak, dripping in front of his face. He shook his head, the pattering of the water hitting the wagon floor was lost in the relentless drone all around him. Open. Close. He continued to flex his hands, keeping them supple and ready. Cras sifted his fingers through the oiled cloth, momentarily comforted by the faint warmth it provided. Normally he was patient, he could wait for a target. Normally...

In front of him the door creaked open a fraction and all his attention became focused on that. The shivering stopped as his muscles snapped taut, he watched intently through the gap. An arc of light opened up from the door, shining into the murky streets as if stabbing at the night. Both his hands reached under the oiled cloth, gripping tightly at the wood and metal, fingering the sharp edges.

Voices could be heard from the house, mingled with faint laughter. After a pause the door closed again, slamming shut with awful finality. *They were mocking him.* Lying here in this downpour for hours, staring at a haven of warmth and dry, Cras was drowning in bitterness and rage.

He pushed himself up onto his elbows, ready to barge in, consequences be damned. Another fit of shivering wracked his body; he sneezed, jerking. The tarp jolted as his head hit the material, knocking a corner loose, and a miniature waterfall poured into the wagon, soaking his shoulders.

"Bastard," Cras cursed, making to get up, but the door opposite opened again. He dropped to the floor of the wagon, pressing his face up against the hole. The door opened wider, revealing something of the inside. Bright torches

blazed behind dark silhouettes. A press of bodies, laughing, dancing. A party. That was why Questo was so late coming out. Cras' blood boiled. A figure with a flickering torch stepped out and the door closed. Even at this distance, he could make out the paunchy outline of Questo Kor in the faint light. The minor noble was fond of indulging his sweet tooth and it had not done the man any favours.

Cras quickly unwrapped the bundle before him, moving by touch. The oiled cloth fell back to expose a crossbow, the metal and wood painted black to prevent it catching any light. The bolt was already fitted and he drew it back in silence, winding the crank.

Questo stayed in the arch of the doorway, trying to shield the torch with his hand, its flames struggling for life against the downpour. Cras sighted along the crossbow, ignoring the water pooling around his elbows. He took his time to aim, unable to accept failure after all he had been through. His finger tightened on the trigger. The street plunged back into darkness as the torch guttered and died. *Fucking rain!*

He heard Questo curse the rain too, but now could only just make him out in the darkness. It was impossible to aim accurately. Still, he might not get another chance if Questo went back inside. He would just have to trust to luck. Cras aimed at the rough shape of the noble, breathing slowly. *Oh, no.*

He sneezed.

Thankfully he shifted his finger as he jerked, and the bolt stayed where it was. But the noise of his sneeze must surely have alerted Questo. Cras heard footsteps approaching the wagon, squelching in the mud. He peered out of the gap but couldn't see anyone. Again he shivered, his chin quivering with the cold.

The tarp covering him shifted, showering him with collected water, soaking him all over again. The shock stunned him for a moment, then the tarp was ripped off his back and the rain came down on him.

"Hello? Who's there?"

Cras rolled over. Questo was staring down at him, a look of concern on his face. Until he saw the crossbow. Cras brought up the weapon and pulled the

trigger. Nothing happened. The water had ruined the mechanism. Cursing, he dropped the crossbow and leapt off the wagon, barreling into the noble.

“You bastard!” he cried, crashing into Questo, taking them both down into the mud and knocking the extinguished torch from Questo’s hand. Cras struggled to rise, feet skidding in the slick surface. The noble was trying to escape, dragging himself across the street. Cras grabbed his shoulders, heaving the struggling man back. Tossing Questo on the ground, Cras jumped onto his chest and hammered a fist into his face, and again, again.

“Help!” Questo cried, spitting blood.

Cras hit him again, feeling the crack of bone under his fist as Questo’s jaw broke. “Four fucking hours!”

Frantic hands clawed at Cras’ face but he would not be denied. Cras pulled a concealed knife from his boot and stabbed the noble in the stomach. As Questo folded over on the ground, he hacked at his chest, stabbing wildly with no technique, fury in his veins. Over and over the blade punctured Questo’s chest, making a bloody ruin of his elegant shirt.

After a moment Cras stopped, breathing heavily. Regaining his wits, he looked around to check if he’d been seen. Muffled voices could be heard from the manse but no signs of alarm. Quickly he got up and sheathed his knife, sweat running down his face. *At least I’m warm now.*

He grabbed hold of the noble’s legs and lugged him along the street, digging a track in the mud. Puffing, Cras threw the body into the wagon and covered it with hay. Retrieving the torch, he tossed that in as well. He slipped the tarp back over and stepped back, dragging his foot across the ground to get rid of the track marks.

“See how you like it.”

He checked himself for blood, but any stain was indistinguishable against his mud-spattered clothes. He pulled his cloak tighter about him, glaring up at the sky. Without a backwards glance, Cras walked away.

The wooden door banged open, barely noticed in the clamour of drunken revellers packed into the tavern. Cras stepped inside and the heat hit him like a wave after the driving rain; he welcomed it gladly, the tension easing from him. The building reeked of sweat, beer and piss. He coughed from the cloying smoke filling the air, as much from smouldering pipes as the fire crackling merrily in the corner of the common room. The bar was packed with a mass of drunken patrons, crowded around the counter like soldiers storming a barricade. The stools were long gone, the first casualties surrendered to the baying horde, making more space for the coming assault of the inebriated frontline.

Before he moved from the doorway, Cras reached a hand behind him to stroke the familiar two pin lock on the door. *Eight seconds*. He then slipped through the staggering obstacles, weaving through slim paths as they appeared without making a ripple in the dense crowd. Ignoring the bar, he headed for the scattering of tables in the rear of the building. Most were crammed with hunched forms crooning over mugs of ale. The missing stools were much in evidence as the fragile circles of wood struggled to accommodate the weight of sagging bodies.

There was one table nestled in the corner with only a single occupant; an oddity in the cramped confines of the tavern where every inch of space was sought after. The occupant in question was little more than a mass of rags, with a faded cloak stretched over a wisp-thin frame. The man was hooded, his face concealed as he lay sprawled over the table in a drunken stupor. The table around him was covered in empty tankards. Cras reached for one that still held some unfinished ale and drained the dregs, the lukewarm brew rolling down his throat.

“High Crown?” He set the tankard back on the table. “Must have been a good day at the contest, Loker?” Cras sat down as the man raised his head off the table. A wizened face and rheumy eyes stared at him from under the hood.

“Every one a winner.” His voice slurred and Loker peered over his tankards in search of fresh ale. “Picked by the hands of chance, they never fail.”

“I expect you knew I was coming?”

“Of course.” Loker reached for a tankard and knocked it over, a trickle of amber liquid pooled across the table. He cursed.

“Hardly fair though.” Cras shifted back to avoid the spreading beer.

“Some might say you’re misusing your gifts.”

Loker laughed, gesturing to Cras’ attire under his cloak. “If it’s alright with you, I won’t take my moral advice from a killer.”

“Professional killer,” Cras countered.

“Yes, congratulations on your latest. Though many say anger leads only to death, yet all your roads lead to the same darkness.”

“Of course you knew it would turn out well, despite everything?”

Loker looked him up and down, a grisly smile stretching across his haggard face. “Mischievous follows chance, it’s hard to tell them apart.” He giggled, eyes wide with glee.

“Yeah, right.” Cras looked over the tavern, comforted by the familiar surroundings. “I just want a warm meal, a warm bed –”

“And perhaps a warm serving girl by your side?”

Unasked, Rayna leaned over and placed a tankard in front of Cras, ringed with foam. Shifting with practiced grace, Rayna manoeuvred her sturdy form around the packed tables to top up Loker’s tankard from a pitcher. Amber liquid poured out of a dented metal container that looked almost toy-like in her massive hand. This woman was a titan; The Hanged Man had no need of muscle at the doors like other places. Any trouble and Rayna would simply toss them out with her bare hands.

Cras lifted the brew to his lips; Mule’s Kick was so thick you could chew it. He wiped the foam off his lips, and turned to Rayna. “Thanks, perhaps you know of some pretty young maiden?” He casually leaned back and slapped Rayna across the rear, making her jump and her flesh wobble.

“Touch me again and I’ll slice off your manhood and serve it up in one of my pies.”

She turned away as Cras laughed. "She's a sweet, delicate flower..."

Loker was looking at his drink with evident disdain. "Oh Rayna, this is not High Crown."

She didn't look back. "You've drained us dry." Rayna shouldered her way through the crowd and vanished.

Loker took a swig of the beer and grimaced. "Loker foresees a very small tip in Rayna's future."

Raising his tankard, Cras toasted. "To this fine tavern and its patrons." Loker clinked his tankard and then downed it, gulping rapidly as the liquid spilled down his chest, his earlier aversion seemingly forgotten. "Careful, if you drink yourself blind, who's going to partner me at cards?"

Loker didn't look up from his beer, but giggled into his brew. "The cards say only misfortune, no matter who reads them." He finished his drink and set it down.

"That's a cheerful thought." Cras took another gulp of his beer.

"Doom approaches from every side, and every step we take speeds it towards us."

"And we are all threads in the tapestry of fate," Cras said, letting a mysterious undertone creep into his voice. He smiled and toasted his friend. "To fate."

Loker slapped his hands down on the table, sending several tankards clattering to the floor and drawing the attention of those at the nearest tables. "Fate!" he repeated. "All webs folded in on another. An impenetrable veil from all sides, now pulled back as the release nears. What was hidden now walks in plain sight and all things draw together." The bones stood out in his hands as Loker gripped the table; his eyes were wide and the pupils massively dilated.

"What release?" Cras asked, for once curious about Loker's ramblings.

"Death." Loker grabbed Cras' arm with surprising strength. "As the struggles of men screen the sight, the last gate opens and sweeps over the land. Lust for power will bring ruin to all things as the Realms break and the Throne is

taken.” Loker shook, his whole body vibrating. Cras stared, transfixed by the seer’s distended eyes. In a second it was over and Loker collapsed face first onto the table, already snoring softly.

Cras stared at him for a moment, then chuckled. “Yeah, I’ll get right on that.”

Rayna stomped up by his side, a stern look on her face. “Don’t you have anything better to do than break my cups?” She bent down to retrieve several of the tankards Loker had knocked down, deftly balancing them on a serving tray.

“My apologies, Loker seems to be having trouble with his drink.”

“Troubling times for us all,” Rayna said, grabbing the last of the tankards. “Apparently we’re all doomed.”

“Oh?” Cras pointedly avoided looking at Loker.

“Threats of war from neighbouring powers, rumours of armies from Kar Korus, traders hoarding their wares and diverting from the city. The craftsmen are up in arms.”

“I’m sure you’re making the most of it.” Cras lifted his tankard. “Fear’s good for business, it drives people to drink.”

“As long as it stays at fear. You can’t drink if you’re dead. Even you’d be out of a job if there’s no one left to kill.”

He looked over the tavern, reassured in its sense of safety. “Korus would never invade, they don’t have the strength, nor could they last a siege,” Cras said, with the absolute confidence that comes from hearing rumours and repeating them.

A glass broke and there were sounds of a scuffle as the crowd rapidly backed away. A meaty thud and a muffled grunt cut over the din.

Cras made to stand but Rayna put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

“Easy lad, I’ll take care of it. Can’t have people thinkin’ it’s you who keeps this place in order.” He’d actually been getting up in case he needed to leave in a hurry, but gave a nod to Rayna anyway. She shouldered her way through the

crowd, knocking a man and woman sprawling. Rayna forced her way through the press towards the trouble, yelling for people to clear a path.

“I see a painful future for someone,” Cras said.

“Doomed,” Loker muttered in his sleep, a dribble of saliva rolling down his chin.

There was a loud crash and a strangled yelp from the door as a patron was forcibly evicted by Rayna, followed by a chorus of drunken cheers. Cras looked back to his drink, his face reflected in the dull metal shine. Though distorted by the curve of the metal it wasn't an impressive sight anyway. A scruff of dark hair shading a rough face that looked half-finished. It was a forgettable face with bland features, the kind that blended in anywhere. The only distinguishing feature was a tiny scar above his right eye.

The nobles and their bickering, the council and their problems, and the grand affairs of cities. Cras cared nothing for them. Not for their problems or their people; this city was his home but that was as far as his affection went. *It won't affect us.*

Even as he told himself, the words sounded hollow.

Suddenly the tavern felt less reassuring. His home, less untouchable. He glanced over the assembled tankards, standing to proud attention like a group of battered soldiers. The number concerned him. Cras reached for a leather purse at his belt, feeling an uncomfortable lightness. He looked back over to the door as Rayna made her way to the bar amid drunken cheers. *She wouldn't throw us out...*

He wasn't ready to take the risk. Getting up from his seat, Cras made sure to crouch low and avoid Rayna's field of vision. He would have just enough time to make it back. After all, he'd done the job and nothing was ever free. *As the Guild knows.*

Cras pushed his chair back in. “Looks like there'll be no maiden tonight.” He looked down at Loker, still drooling. “Sorry to leave you alone.” Keeping a

sizable body of people between him and Rayna, Cras slipped through the crowd and headed for the door.

Chapter Two

“Ladies and gentlemen of the council.” Malus threw his arms up expansively to the whole chamber as if conducting music. “For years I have had to put up with your endless complaints, your pathetic problems, your maddening competition and scheming. But no more!”

The rows of empty chairs remained silent. But he could see the faces of the council now, watching him with lifeless eyes. Fury raced through his veins at the thought of them. The vermin of the upper class, trying to undermine his power, to weave their own plots into his carefully arranged schemes. “Your dreary faces have been a constant damper on my spirits, so that I can barely bring myself to face this miserable council each day.”

His eyes roved over the deserted seats. The inner circle rose up nearest to him, with a ring of chairs for the twelve council members of the city. The outer ring held seats for the nobility and advisors who wished to view the council meeting, making almost a complete circuit of the chamber. He felt the wood grain under his fingers as they stroked the carved podium upon which he stood. The tall wooden stand loomed above even the council table. From here a man could address the entire chamber if he had a mind to, looking down on them all.

“We’ve our few paltry concessions to service, to acting humble.” He looked over the cavernous chamber, lit by blazing lamps spaced around the room, it was anything but humble. Stone columns of alabaster held up a domed roof that was engraved with tilting scales, scrolls and other symbols of truth and justice. At its centre was a glass dome that looked upwards to the cloudy night. This was a room that conveyed immensity and power. Malus felt a moment of awe for the majesty of this place. It suited him. “Yet how can you fools sit there and think that we are the same as the common people with all this around you?”

He pulled a dagger from his belt; the silver hilt shone in the torchlight. Spinning in a graceful arc he levelled the blade at one of the empty seats on the inner council. He could see the fat sloth that was Councillor Gargen, with his ever present assortment of gaudy jewels clinging to his sagging form. "Gargen you insufferable pig, perhaps you would care to challenge me? That's if you can rise from your seat without a score of servants?"

He turned sharply, shoes squeaking on the floor.

"And you, Councillor Melistro, perhaps you'd care to interject, if you could see beyond your enormous nose?" Malus centred himself on the podium, juggling his blade from hand to hand. "All of you," he gestured to his phantom audience, "will wish you had heeded me sooner, will beg for mercy! You will all pay for holding me back!"

He hurled the dagger, crying out in rage. The blade stuck in the carved oak of the headrest on a chair in the inner circle. It stood, quivering in the wood before stilling, and the chamber was silent once more. "Of course, you never learn. You sit and preen, and pretend that you are no different from any other man or woman in this city. Why?" The empty rows made no reply. "My blood is that of the Navian Emperors," he said slowly. "Though you may have forgotten, I haven't. I will rule this city. It is my right." Malus took a breath. Steadying himself, he put on his best smile to face the empty room. "Thank you for listening."

"Not at all."

Malus jerked, eyes roving over the deserted chamber, trying to pick out the source of the voice. The grand doors that served as the main entrance were shut now, the lamps around the room revealed no movement.

A slow handclap built up from behind one of the supporting pillars and a tall, sinewy figure stepped out from behind the polished stone. He was dressed in a dark tunic and breeches, with bronze skin that gleamed in the light. "That was a moving speech, I almost shed a tear."

Malus felt a twinge of anger mixed with embarrassment as he turned away from the newcomer. *Sneaky bastard, how long was he standing there?* “You’re late, Talos,” he snapped, walking with as much dignity as he could muster to the council chair and retrieving his dagger. A hole had been gouged in the wood and he tried to brush away the splinters.

“I was busy.” Malus turned as Talos stepped up beside him. The sellsword would have been handsome were it not for the cruel sneer perpetually etched across his face. Talos held himself with an easy confidence, his hand lightly resting on the pommel of his sword.

“I’ve had subordinates executed for less.”

“Maybe, but I’m not one of your couriers.”

Malus stiffened, giving Talos a stern look, reminding him of who he was. “Nonetheless, you *will* know your place,” he said, sheathing his dagger.

“I have news.”

Malus stopped, frozen. He looked out over the council chamber once more, gazing into the flames of the lamps. A chill raced through him, despite the warmth of the room.

“They’re coming?”

“They’re already here.”

Malus turned and walked to the rear of the chamber. “We’ll speak in my office.”

Quiet footsteps assured him Talos was following. He led him through a small door at the back of the chamber. They passed into a long corridor, its bare walls lit by the regularly spaced lamps. Ignoring the rows of closed doors, Malus walked up the spiral staircase at the far end of the corridor. They climbed the steps in silence for several minutes before reaching a large oak door, the sturdy wood imported at great expense from Kar Prius. Malus withdrew a key from his pocket and unlocked it.

He stepped confidently inside a darkened room, knowing the layout perfectly. Walking to the lamp on the wall, he twisted the ring on the bottom. A

bright flame sprang to life, filling the room with light. Malus' office was far more elegantly furnished than the council chamber. Woven rugs from across the Kolean Sea covered the floor; artwork from all over Elkar adorned the walls. The paintings showed lavish palaces and great leaders clad in the trappings of power. On the far wall was an image of his grandfather, sternly looking down from the back of a magnificent horse. Nestled in between two pictures was a liquor cabinet filled with long necked bottles of various sizes and colours. Exquisitely patterned curtains were drawn around a closed window. And then there were his curios, set upon a polished desk. A collection of various artefacts and mechanisms, toys of incredible complexity, and purchased at great expense. They were fascinating, arcane devices that spun and whirred softly, contraptions that moved when wound or fuelled. Malus ignored them, stopping to look only at the full-sized mirror set into the wall, admiring himself.

A finely tailored tunic of deep crimson and black spread itself over a lean body, matching the silken breeches and rich leather boots. A council signet ring flashed on his hand as he ran it over his sleek black hair, cut short and slicked back. He retained the fair skin of his bloodline, despite the hot climate, possessing noble features and the characteristic sloping nose of the Navian Emperors.

He saw Talos reflected in the mirror as he stepped in behind him, waiting patiently at the door. *Let him wait.* After a moment he turned and sat down. Talos moved opposite the desk, waiting to be offered a seat.

Malus leaned back on his velvet lined chair and looked up at him. "You're certain they've arrived?"

"It looks that way," Talos said, "my men have sent reports of a group of travellers heading towards the city."

"Lots of people travel towards the city, it doesn't make them spies."

Talos pulled out the chair opposite and sat down, uninvited. He leaned back, his expression carefully neutral. "Most don't go to so much effort to avoid notice, or prove so effective at it. I lost six men trying to track them down."

“How many are there?” Malus began to caress one of the many devices on his desk, a tiny orb affixed with several rings that revolved around each other in intricate patterns.

“We’re not sure of their exact numbers, maybe five or six of them?”

“They’re in the city now?”

Talos shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “We lost track of them in the outlying towns, but they were headed in this direction. It’s a good bet they’re here by now.”

Malus stopped playing with the device and looked at Talos. “Have you learnt anything about their plans?”

“Not yet. We can expect them to try and sabotage the city defences to soften us up. They’ll probably try to poison our food supplies, destroy vital equipment, and assassinate key personnel. All those classic party favours. You should give some thought to your own protection.”

“I have bodyguards.”

“Jumped up footmen for keeping away the rabble. They wouldn’t last five minutes. You’ll need some heavier muscle than that.”

“Your concern is touching, but let’s not risk it. I want you to neutralise the infiltrators. They cannot be allowed to interfere with my plans.”

“They are the best that Kar Korus has to offer, it’s not going to be easy.”

“I have every confidence in you.” Malus got up to show the meeting was over.

Talos rose and walked to the door. “I’ll take care of it. Are you going to tell the rest of the council they may be in danger?”

Malus thought for a moment, thinking how little he cared. “Perhaps some of them. Leave the politics to me, Talos, just do your job.”

Talos bowed before turning to leave. Malus was left assessing who on the council he cared to save. There was only one name that jumped out at him.

“Wait.” Talos turned in the doorway, an eyebrow raised in question. “Perhaps

some extra protection would be useful, not just for my benefit, but for the good of the city. What would the citizens think to see their beloved councillors fall?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Contact the Guild, have them send someone to watch my back."

"You want an assassin as a bodyguard?"

"Who better?" Malus sat back in his chair, enjoying the look of astonishment on Talos' face. "You said I should think about protection."

He spluttered "Yes, though what I meant was more bodyguards, or mercenaries. But an assassin?"

"Don't sound so shocked, your own profession is scarcely honest." Malus took a tiny clockwork device off his desk and began to turn the coil on its back. "Besides, if any of the infiltrators do try to *remove* me, it would be far better to have a man with...experience."

There was silence in his office, save for the slow, metallic scrape as he wound up the device.

Talos coughed, clearly disturbed by the idea. "I'll see to it. But the Guild's not cheap, it's going to cost you."

"Who can truly put a price on life, Talos?" *Epecially mine.*

"I assure you, they will."

"Call it a contribution to the city's defence."

"Fine, I'll see to it. Should I inform them about our new guests in the city?"

"They probably already know." Malus placed the windup toy on his desk. Several golden legs unfolded from the disk shaped object and it proceeded to skitter across the table. "I also want you to impress upon the Guild how grateful I would be if these infiltrators met with an unfortunate end."

"Anything else?" The clockwork spider ran off the edge of the table, plummeting to the floor with a hollow ring.

"No," he got up to retrieve the toy. "Now get to work."

Talos nodded. Without another word he left the office, closing the door behind him.

Turning over the clockwork spider, Malus pondered the problem of the spies, trying to guess their next move. If indeed they were inside the city, they presented a serious threat to his plans. What would he do to counter them? What could he do?

The hour was late and darkness ruled the streets. Malus listened to the patter of rain and the faint clack of hooves on stone as his coach exited the Northgate. The transport was unmarked and austere compared to his usual carriage, but Malus kept this one for discreet trips when he wanted to avoid attracting attention. Aside from the functionally dressed bodyguard sat opposite and the driver outside he was alone and hopefully unnoticed. Anyone who saw the carriage would likely dismiss it as a merchant or a low ranking nobleman. At worst they might assume someone was sneaking out to meet with a courtesan or mistress in the twilight hours. Malus, however, had a much more productive task in mind.

He could see nothing beyond the curtained windows yet he knew when they left the city because he felt surface of the road change. They rode for a short time, with not a word exchanged between Malus and his bodyguard. He was too focused on the coming meeting, his mind lost in thought and planning.

The coach stopped at a rustic shack off the beaten path almost a mile from the city. His dour bodyguard stepped out first, bearing a lantern, and Malus followed behind after a moment. Pulling up his hood against the rain, he stepped off the high carriage steps and his foot slipped in the mud. A flung hand caught the edge of the door, steadying him with a muscle-wrenching jolt. Cursing, Malus looked down in the faint light to see his fine leather boots were streaked with chalky mud, turning their lustrous black a grainy grey.

His guard said nothing as Malus hopped, trying to shake off some of the muck in what must have been a comically undignified fashion. Giving up, he shot the bodyguard a glare and dared him to comment. The man's face remained

blank and he found himself wondering if the assassin he'd sent Talos to hire would provide more stimulating company.

Eager to get out of the rain, he stomped through the mud towards the crudely built shack. It was the only building within sight as the darkness hid everything beyond a dozen feet. The wood was stained with the same chalky mud as his shoes and had a temporary look about it. There was a flicker of lamplight between the cracks in the boards, the shack's single window covered by a lopsided shutter. Still, it was better than nothing and Malus pushed open the door and stepped inside, not bothering to knock.

He stepped into a cramped room lit by a single oil lamp suspended from the roof. There was a rough bed in the corner and on the opposite side what might have been a table, buried as it was under stacks of papers. Maps of all shapes and sizes overlapped each other, covered in annotations and intersecting lines. Piles of notes bore strange markings and faded writing. Nowhere was there any sign of organisation. Malus looked sternly at the wiry old man crouched over the desk. He jerked as Malus slammed the door closed against the wooden frame. A slew of papers tumbled onto the floor.

"Councillor Malus!"

"Report, Dalen." He looked around the small shack with contempt. Water dripped down from scores of holes in the roof, and from the amount of rain getting through he might have been better off outside.

"I'm afraid we're still several weeks behind schedule."

Malus rounded on him, already angered by his ruined boots. "That is unacceptable!"

There was the scrape of a chair as Dalen tried to back away. "There's nothing I can do, we're tunnelling through solid rock. With limited manpower it could be months till we breach the Lower City from outside the walls."

"You said there was a tunnel, an access point from outside the city. You pointed it out on your maps!" Malus gestured to the pile of papers on the desk,

the furthest of which were under a dripping crack in the ceiling. "I need access to the Lower City, soon! There can be no further delays."

"There's nothing I can do, Councillor. We cannot work any faster."

Malus growled in his throat. He grabbed a pot of ink from the desk and hurled it at the old man. With surprising swiftness Dalen ducked and the pot shattered on the wall behind him, leaving a black streak against the wood.

"I don't want excuses!"

Dalen quailed, peeking out from behind raised arms. "I'm sorry, the only way to regain the time we've lost is to start closer inside the city. There are several access points that we could use to gain entrance to the Lower City."

"Fool!" Malus yelled. "How could we avoid notice then? Especially with the threat of war –" He stopped mid sentence, a plan crystallising in his mind. With the threat of war from Kar Korus it would be perfectly reasonable to shore up some of the city's defences. That would mean building work, repairs. A perfect cover. "Dalen!" The old man jumped. "A map of the city, quickly."

Hurriedly the old man scabbled though the stacks on the desk to come up with a large sheet of paper. Unfolding it revealed a detailed map of the city that covered nearly the entire desk. Malus grabbed the archaeologist's trembling hand and thrust it to the sheet. "Show me the best point for an excavation."

A shaking finger touched down on the map. Malus smiled.

Chapter Three

The blood was warm on Arracan's hands; it trickled down his palms and between his fingers as it pumped from the slashed throat. He looked into the child's eyes without compassion, watching the dimming orbs desperately pleading with him. It had as much impact as it might have on a rock.

The flow slowed and her skin paled as he watched, turning a sickly grey pallor. The child bucked once more, weakly, held firm by thick leather straps secured to the rough stone behind her. He had found her crawling through the refuse looking for scraps of food. A common street urchin, she would not be missed. None of them ever were.

His hands freshly coated, Arracan turned away even as the child gave up her last breath. Behind him was the altar, lit by flickering torches on either side, and a single candle on a rich velvet cloth. The wax was made from the melted remains of a dozen hanged men, their bubbling fat mixed with blood to create the sickly burning candle that smelled like rotting meat. The sacrificial knife glittered to one side, its edge gleaming red.

A chill wind ruffled his robes as he approached. He flicked some of the blood off his hands onto the candle, drops burning up in the flame and running down the sides. Thick dark smoke issued forth, along with the choking smell of burning blood. Instead of guttering, the flame grew brighter as the stolen fuel was consumed. He placed his hands on the altar at either side of the candle, looking deep into the flame.

"You are called and paid, Narkel. Answer!"

A gust of wind billowed around him, and Arracan felt a presence sweep into the room as the demon's essence manifested itself. He felt a tugging on his mind as if something was clawing its way in; a voice dripping with malice spoke behind his eyes.

“I know what you seek, but do you?”

“Yes, yes, cryptic bullshit.” Arracan ignored the word games. “Tell me what I want to know, where is the prophet?”

“He is beyond my sight. Fortune veils him in shadow.”

Arracan felt a spark of annoyance, sweat beading on his forehead from the effort of concentration, trying to keep his mind separate from the demon’s. “What good are you then? I called you to find him!”

“There are many who might know, this city is full of secrets and knowledge.”

Arracan swallowed, his mouth dry and parched. He felt a pressure inside his skull as the demon sought to breach his mental walls. “Where is the last person he worked for? Tell me now.”

“I will show you.”

An image punched into his mind, like something roughly jammed into a drawer. A building, a man, a face. Then it was gone and so was the presence. The demon left a faint, indefinable feeling behind; it almost felt like it was mocking him. Arracan let out a slow breath as the candle winked out. Though it had only been lit for a moment, it was burned down almost all the way; a spreading pool of hot wax seeped across the cloth and around his bloodstained fingers.

He plucked his hands from the melted wax, feeling a deep weariness settle over his limbs as he pushed himself away from the altar. It had taken much of his strength to keep the demon separate from his psyche. It didn’t matter, he had what he wanted. The man he saw was a merchant, one of the more successful in the city. His home wasn’t that far, he could make it tonight. *There will be guards, but it shouldn’t be a problem, I can –*

He crashed to his knees, retching, his stomach convulsing. A burning lance speared through his head; the presence of the demon had been a pinprick compared to the molten agony that filled his skull. He vomited pale slime that splattered the floor. His limbs shook. Arracan distantly felt himself collapse onto the hard stone. Nothing mattered but the pain. *Make it stop! Make it stop! He*

cried out on the floor, screaming in anguish. His mind filled with shadowy images, coming straight at him. He clawed at nothing, they were getting closer, he howled in fear.

Suddenly it was over and Arracan found himself on his back, lying in his own vomit, the acrid smell filling his nostrils. His body was drenched with sweat and his head was pounding, yet he welcomed it. It meant it was over. It was the worst hangover ever, but he found it soothing. As his mind began to work again, he decided that it was a blessing; it was rare the pain would strike twice in one night. He should be able to continue uninterrupted.

He picked himself up and pulled off his soiled robes; there was a merchant he needed to meet.

The easiest way into a home is to knock. Arracan rapped smartly on the door to the merchant's home and waited under the archway. A modest dwelling, nestled snugly between similar unremarkable homes. It was some time before the door was opened by a young porter in a silken doublet. He tried to sound authoritative, but his voice was an adolescent squeak as he tucked his shirt into his breeches.

"Do you have any idea what –"

His words cut off when he saw the body at Arracan's feet. The guard was face down on the ground, a red circle pooling around him. The porter drew in a breath to yell and Arracan gestured, feeling a rush of power through his hand. Blood burst from the porter's mouth, his nose, eyes and ears. His face vanished under the wash of scarlet. He collapsed, gargling, legs twitching on the ground. Arracan stepped over him quickly, the layout of the house firmly fixed in mind. He could have tried sneaking in, but Arracan drew on Nasan, The Tempest, it was not a Realm suited to subtlety.

"Who is it, Adren?" A young woman poked out from a room to one side of the entryway, blonde hair cascading down her nightshift. She saw him coming and pulled the garment down to cover her legs. "Hey, who are you?" Her eyes

flickered to the body behind him. "Adren!" she cried out, her voice piercing the night.

Cursing, Arracan raised his hand and clenched his fist tightly. The girl's neck jerked with a loud crack and she crumpled, her scream abruptly cut off. Before her body had hit the ground he was moving toward the staircase at the side of the entrance.

He rushed up the stone stairs, grimacing as he saw two men appear at the top, no doubt alerted by the scream. They skidded to a halt when they saw him. A pair of bulky house guards; the one on the left was still hurriedly trying to buckle on a steel cuirass. The other, a bearded slab of muscle, drew his sword and lunged down the steps.

Arracan calmly stepped aside, pressing up against the wall and whispering under his breath. As the guard charged for him, the steps began to shift under his feet with a dull grating sound. The guard lost his footing. Dropping his sword, he clutched for the banister, which leaned away from him of its own accord. The man stumbled and fell, arms grasping at air. His chin hit the stone step with a muffled crunch as his jaw broke. He kept falling, tumbling down the unforgiving stone that hammered into him without sympathy. The guard ploughed past Arracan, who turned to continue his ascent.

The other guard had given up on his cuirass, dropping it to the floor with an echoing clang. He drew a tarnished blade from a sheath at his hip and advanced, much more gingerly than his comrade. Arracan didn't wait for him, springing up the steps. He swept his hand over the staircase and the guard was lifted off his feet. He toppled over the banister with a yell that was cut off as he hit the ground with a dull thud. Without sparing the man a glance, Arracan pressed on up the stairs.

He reached a sparsely lit hallway, a single torch flickering on the wall. Arracan raced straight for the door at the end, following the demon's directions. Another guard stood before the ornately carved door, feet spread and sword at

the ready. Though he looked impressive, his eyes were glazed and there was an empty wineskin on the floor beside him.

Arracan stretched out a hand and the guard doubled over, picked off his feet; he crashed through the door in a shower of splintered wood. The sound echoed through the house and Arracan stepped quickly into the room.

A shuttered lamp burned to his left, showing a bedroom dominated by an immense four poster bed with carved wooden panelling. Soft woollen rugs lay underfoot, covered in exotic patterns, and now the body of the guard. Ornaments and jewellery were piled on a table to one side, gleaming in the light of the open window. A mound of papers buried a desk opposite.

Arracan was breathing heavily as he entered. The summoning had sapped his strength, along with the magic he'd expended to get inside. The merchant was cowering on the bed, a thin dagger trembling in his hand. Sweat darkened the fine silken pyjamas struggling to cover his fat form.

"Don't come any closer!" His voice was high pitched and panicky, and he waved the dagger in what Arracan presumed to be a threat.

"Oh please." He gestured and the blade flew out of the merchant's fingers. The startled man looked at his hand dumbly for a moment before trying to back further against the headboard.

"Orsen Malvic, you're in possession of information I need."

"But, but –"

"Now shut up and listen," Arracan cut him off. He leaned in close, allowing the moonlight from the window to reveal his face, watching carefully as the merchant caught sight of him. Malvic's eyes roved over the patchwork of scars covering his face, open-mouthed in horror. Arracan smiled, letting him see the full effect, stretching his lips into a twisted grimace.

"You had a prophet tell your future some time ago." He took a step towards the merchant. "A nobleman. I'm having trouble tracking him down, perhaps you know –"

Arracan staggered, hands frantically grasping at the wooden pillar of the bed. His body shook and his mind crumbled under the savage onslaught of pain. *Not now!* He whimpered, choking on bile. One hand clawed at his head; he barely felt the fingernails dragging tracks in his skin. A wash of darkness covered his vision, forcing itself into his mind.

He glimpsed Malvic's face, eyes widening in morbid fascination. Arracan's legs buckled and he stumbled, cracking his shoulder against the bedpost. A dull fire bloomed in his collarbone, but the pain was nothing to that in his skull.

He just caught sight of a foot through the haze of agony as the merchant made a break for it, racing for the door. Arracan lurched, throwing out a hand. Malvic was hurled into the wall with a sickening crunch, as if struck by an enormous fist. He slid down the stone, leaving a bloody smear. The vibration knocked the lamp off the wall, throwing up a wash of shadows, and half the room fell into darkness. Arracan clutched at the post with both hands, fingers digging into the wood, splinters driving under his nails as he forced them in harder. Again he cried out, then nearly collapsed as it finished.

Pulling himself up with trembling arms, he rested his forehead against the wood, spit dribbling down his chin. With one shaking hand he wiped off the drool and turned back to Malvic. Snarling he gestured and the merchant flew back onto the bed, arms and legs splayed.

"Tell me," he hissed, each word an effort, clenched through gritted teeth.

Dazed, it took the merchant a moment to respond. "He's not a nobleman any more...lost it all..." Blood trickled down from his broken nose.

"Where. Is. He. Now." Arracan's legs were shaking.

"Some tavern in the Rat's Nest. The Dead and Swinging or something."

He'd never heard of the place, but it was a start. Legs sagging, he rested a hand on the soft silk of the bed. How soothing it would be to just lie down and sleep. *But there's so much left to do.*

He looked down at Malvic, the familiar headache returning like an old friend. He barked a word and the merchant's limbs turned rigid, frozen in

position. His eyes twitched frantically but otherwise, Malvic could not move. Sighing, Arracan drew a small blade out of his robes. He picked up the fallen lamp and set it to one side, the blade gleaming cruelly as the light caught it. He would need to see clearly for this.

“Thank you, I’m sure the information will prove useful.”

He sat down on the bed next to Malvic, struck by the softness of the mattress. He leaned over and ripped open the merchant’s nightshirt to reveal his bare chest. “However, you may help me in another way. Just relax, it’ll all be over soon.”

He leaned down, taking special care with the blade and began the first incision. Malvic lay there as the blade sliced into his soft flesh, his eyes screaming.

Chapter Four

“You going to stand there all night, or you going to buy something?” Arko glanced at him. The man took his act as a surly shopkeeper seriously and Cras flashed him a grin as he checked the lock on the door, the Guild paid for quality. *Forty seconds.* He turned back to Arko.

“I’m looking for Shadow’s Tears; it’s a rare flower that blooms only in darkness.”

“Sounds like a whore I know, she opens right up.” Arko chuckled, gesturing at a door to one side, half concealed by the star shaped-leaves of a sprawling Fuji tree. “Try the basement, it’s where we keep our most prized specimens.”

Cras walked towards the back of the store. Arko’s herb shop was the only one open at this hour, for those with a nocturnal need for all sorts of herbs and potions. It was a densely packed room with narrow channels between rows of shelves filled dirt. Faint rays of moonlight shone between cracks in the roof, filtering through the measured joins where panels could be moved to allow the sun to shine into the shop. He stepped between rows of potted plants of all colours and sizes. There was the Makis flower with its striped purple and gold petals, Trionen mushrooms that glowed ever so faintly; everything here had its uses. He breathed deep, the rich scent of lavender, thyme and other less common aromas he knew were illegal suffusing his nostrils.

Cras walked over to the door and brushed aside the soft branches. There was no lock and he pushed through, emerging into an unlit hallway. He closed the door behind him, plunging the corridor into absolute darkness. Confidently he strode forward, counting the steps in the pitch black. *Twenty three, twenty four. Ah.* His outstretched hands came upon a wooden door. He fumbled for the handle and stepped inside.

Cras was surprised to find two men silhouetted by a roaring fire. One sat behind a desk laden with neatly organised papers, the other reclined in a chair in front of him. Vors, he recognised, his contractor. He was a thin man wrapped in several layers of robes despite the heat. But the other was a tall, swarthy figure Cras had never seen before. His bronze skin glittered in the light and he was well dressed in a dark tunic and breeches.

“Cras, welcome. This is him.” Vors nodded to the seated man, who turned to regard Cras with a sneer on his face. Ignoring him, Cras focused on Vors.

“I’ve come for my payment.”

“In a moment, I daresay we may have found another use for your talents.” Vors smiled.

The man in the chair stood up. “This wretch doesn’t look like he could guard the door at a village tavern, much less a Councillor.”

Cras took an instant dislike to the man. “I’m just here to get paid.”

Vors tossed a purse to him and Cras caught it deftly. “There’s more in it for you than that sack of pennies on this one.”

Cras hefted the bag, it didn’t feel like pennies, yet he knew he’d burn through it in a few weeks. “What’s the contract?” He slipped the purse into his belt and leaned back against the wall, not committing himself.

“No contract.” Vors kept his smile plastered to his face. “You’re going to protect our beloved Councillor Malus.”

He snorted. “Not likely.”

“The money’s good.”

“I don’t babysit.” Cras turned to leave.

“Ten thousand.”

He stopped, hand inches from the door handle. *Just walk away. Don’t do it.* “Ten thousand?”

Vors laughed, an ugly sound. He knew he’d won. Then the other man spoke.

"I said I didn't want this lout, I wanted your best." Cras turned to face the man, saying nothing.

"I assure you Talos, he's the best man for the job." Vors said from behind.

Talos got up, striding over to face him. "You must be joking. He reached out and prodded Cras in the chest. "I bet you wouldn't last five minutes with the Councillor."

He made to poke him again but Cras was already moving. He grabbed Talos' hand and yanked it towards him. Gripping Talos' shoulder with the other hand, he stepped back and twisted, pulling the man along. Talos slammed into the oak door, his skull bouncing off the wood. Gripping his head, Cras smacked his face against the door once, twice more, then let go. Talos dropped to the ground, unconscious. He turned back to Vors who was staring at him with an exasperated look on his face.

"I'll take the job."

Cras dragged open the door, kicking Talos' leg out of the way. *A bold career choice.* He stepped back into the tunnel and walked away.

Cras sat down next to Loker, now accompanied by two others. The Hanged Man was mostly empty; a few limp forms were slumped over tables, while others tilted precariously back in the seats as they struggled to continue a coherent conversation.

Loker set the trend as always, insensible and drooling. The others at the table seemed more sober. Sabalt crooned over his solitary mug, a lean, wiry snake in tight fitting leather, draped in a tattered cloak. His eyes glinted as Cras settled himself and a smile split his lips, but he said nothing.

By his side, Jearl raised his tankard in greeting as Cras sat down, a welcoming grin on his roguish face. For all his friendly manner there was something that prevented most people from getting close to Jearl. Something in

his eyes. It was a sort of haunted look, faint, hidden, but enough. Cras supposed that was common enough in a mage.

Once again he scanned the empty tankards for any unfinished beer but this time he was out of luck. Feeling more confident with a bulging purse under his belt, Cras lifted an empty tankard towards the bar and caught Rayna's eye. She nodded. He turned back to the table.

"When Loker was conscious he said you went to get paid. Another job well done?" Jearl asked.

"Excellent, drinks on moneybags," Sabalt grinned.

"I got paid and then some." Cras leaned back in his chair to coolly regard his friends when a beefy hand grabbed his shoulder and dragged him back.

"Then you can afford to clear Loker's tab. I went through his purse and he didn't have nearly enough to cover."

Cras tottered off balance, Rayna's grim face above him, giving him a nauseating view of her nose hairs and the way her neck moved as she spoke. With one hand she held the back of his chair, in the other was a tankard ringed with foam.

"Of course, Rayna." Reluctantly he reached into his purse and withdrew a handful of coins. He held them up to Rayna, who set the tankard down then snatched the money, and probably some skin out of his hand.

Cras teetered in the chair, trying to balance as she leaned over him, then he was rushing forward and the edge of the table slammed into his guts, punching the air out of his lungs.

"And don't lean on the chairs, you'll break the legs and I'm not paying for replacements."

He heard her heavy footsteps as she stormed away behind him. Cras massaged his stomach while taking a swig from his drink, the rich taste comforting the pain as it had done so many times before.

"She's in a fine mood tonight," Jearl commented.

"Probably just hungry," Sabalt said.

Cras felt his heart skip a beat and he twisted, nearly dislocating his hips as he turned to check Rayna was out of earshot. She was over by the bar, holding a customer by the scruff of his neck, and appeared to be using him as a washcloth to wipe down the counter. He caught her words in the dull murmur of the room: “Spill my ale, will you?”

He turned back and reached over the table to clout Sabalt round the head. “You idiot, what if she’d heard you? Jearl, change the subject, quickly.”

The mage spluttered, then spoke. “About your job?”

“Yes.” Cras risked another quick look behind him. If he stared too much she would know they were talking about her. “Not only did I get paid but Vors offered me another contract.”

“Who do you have to gut?” Sabalt asked, rubbing his head.

“Nobody.” He smirked.

“Then it’s not a contract,” Sabalt sneered. “What else would Vors hire you for?”

“You heard of Malus Vern?”

“The councillor?” Jearl asked, a flicker of interest in his eyes.

Cras started to lean back in his chair before remembering Rayna’s threat, so settled for clasping his hands in front of him. “Vors has asked me to watch his back. What with all the rumours about spies from Korus, the councillor feels the need for some experienced protection.”

“And they chose you?” Sabalt burst out laughing. “He’ll be dead in a week.” Jearl sniggered into his beer by his side. Even Loker, though unconscious, let out a snore that sounded suspiciously like a snort of derision.

“It’s hardly your area of expertise,” Jearl said. “I mean, have you any experience of keeping someone alive for a change?”

Cras could feel himself flushing. “I’m still here aren’t I?”

“There’s a difference between surviving and taking care of someone.”

“Jearl’s right,” Sabalt said. “You might be adept at saving your own skin, but that’s only because you don’t care about anyone else. I don’t think the skills are transferable.”

“Yeah, well for what I’m getting paid, I’ll make it work.”

“All the money in the world couldn’t make you care about a human life.”

Cras shrugged and took a mouthful of his beer. “I don’t have to care about him, I just have to keep him alive - how hard can it be?”

“If even half of what I’ve heard about him is true,” Jearl said, “you’ll have your work cut out. He’s a power hungry tyrant; it’s said he has trouble getting new servants because he goes through them so fast.”

“Wonder how long before he gets through you?” Sabalt drawled.

Cras glared at him over the table. “Thanks for your support. Some friends you are.” He had the feeling that once again he may have bitten off more than he could chew. It was obviously a bad idea, he’d known that from the moment Vors told him the payment; but he couldn’t just refuse so much money. That kind of coin could keep a man in luxury for years, or make for a fantastic month at Shylo’s brothel.

“It’s no fun if you’re going to sulk,” Jearl said with a mocking gleam in his eye.

“I’m not sulking.”

“Yes you are,” Jearl said. “Just watch your back on this one. Those spies won’t be messing around, and I’m pretty sure there’re enough people in the city already who want Malus dead.”

“Yeah, well my purse says that isn’t happening.” Cras jangled the coins in his leather pouch.

“I hope it’s worth it. Did Vors tell you how long you had to guard him for?”

Cras made to reply then stopped, a sinking feeling in his gut. “Well, we didn’t exactly hammer out all the details.”

“Why was that?” Jearl had the stern look of a father about to take off his belt.

“I was in a hurry to leave,” Cras said, trying to sound innocent.

“And why would that be?”

“Probably killed someone,” Sabalt muttered, only half listening. His attention seemed to be focused on one of the waitresses as she leaned over to pick up some cups.

“I didn’t kill anyone.” Cras paused. “I’m almost certain.” Jearl groaned. “He had it coming,” Cras said, defensively.

“I’m sure.” Jearl took a swig of his drink. “So you’ve made no arrangements for the job?”

“I believe I’m supposed to report tomorrow.” Cras affected a posh voice in what he thought was a good imitation of the nobility.

“And where will you be reporting?”

Cras opened and closed his mouth. He licked his lips. “Uh, I assume the council chambers, that’s where all the councillors are, right?” He had dropped back into his usual tone.

“Yes, I’m sure Malus would want his hired assassin strolling into the council chambers to ask where he should start.”

Cras looked away to hide the blush in his cheeks, he hadn’t been seriously considering doing that. Well, not too seriously. “I’m sure I can think of something, I’ll be discreet.”

Sabalt snorted. “Right...”

Cras shot him a look before rising to his feet once again, leaving the rest of his drink on the table. “Well, I’d best get some rest if I’ve got so much work to do tomorrow. See you later.”

Jearl and Sabalt nodded to him and he left The Hanged Man. He slipped out of the door and back into the cold night, the bracing wind setting a shiver through his bones. Now he’d been paid, a warm bed was looking very appetizing.

Of course, he didn't have to sleep alone. Hunching against the rain he set off for Shylo's. *I can always rest later.*

Shylo's brothel was in another part of the Nest, and with scarcely a single straight road in the district Cras was forced on a winding course through the rain. Damp and miserable, he weaved through the empty streets, it was late enough that even the rats in the Nest were asleep. The lazily built tenements and broken down buildings stood silent and still. It was a welcome change to the pomp of the Public District where he had killed Questo. These buildings weren't for show, they were for survival. The wretched constructions stood in various states of dilapidation, competing, not to outdo each other, but to remain standing. Scrawled slogans and gang tags overlapped on rotted wood, as comforting and as helpful as any street sign. Cras took a left at the caricature of a man being whipped, then a right at the looping symbol of the Broken Maze gang, splashed across the side of a butchers.

His boots squelched loudly in the sucking mud, every step becoming slightly heavier from the accumulated filth clinging to his feet. The streets weren't paved in the Nest, where stone was quickly scavenged and incorporated into one of the buildings, anything to add a sense of stability in the constantly changing district. That was why Cras used the graffiti, because the street signs couldn't keep up. Entire streets fell to ruin or were burned out to cauterise a plague outbreak, only to be rebuilt somewhere else. The darkness was thick and impenetrable; he navigated by the faint moonlight and the occasional glow from a window. Even those who had grown up in the Nest got lost sometimes, but Cras had a great sense of direction, and excellent motivation. All that kept him going was the thought of the girls at Shylo's. Just thinking about them warmed his –

Cras rounded a corner and slammed into a pair of cloaked and hooded men. They all fell sprawling in the mud. "Watch where you're going," Cras snarled, scrabbling to his feet, one hand clenched around the grip of a concealed

knife. The two he'd collided with rolled across the ground and came up smoothly side by side. Cras couldn't see much of their faces in the moonlight, but a flash of tanned skin marked them as southerners. Both men drew long knives from within their cloaks and settled their feet into a fighting stance.

Shit! Cras backed up a few steps, blinking the rain out of his eyes. He tried to keep both men in sight as they split up to circle him.

"You know, it was my fault, I apologise," he said hopefully. The two advanced towards him, keeping close enough to cover each other. They moved with professional grace, keeping him boxed between them with economical movements. He tried to get a better look at their faces. One of them had a bent nose, likely broken at some time in the past, and the other had a series of rings through the skin of his cheek. Neither looked in a forgiving mood.

"Look, I've got your clothes all stained." He reached towards his purse. "Let me pay for the damage." Quick as a viper he flung a dagger from his belt at the one on the right with the rings, simultaneously diving for Bent Nose on the left. While Ring Face dodged, Cras slammed into Bent Nose. He brushed aside the long knife and ploughed forward with his shoulder, taking them both down into the mud.

Cras felt a blast of warm breath on his face as he drove the wind from his opponent. He reared up and followed it with a punch, breaking the man's nose once again. At the same time he pulled another blade from his belt. Hands scrabbled at him and Cras leaned back out of reach. Reversing his grip on the dagger, he lunged downwards. Something caught him in the ribs with enough force to flip him over, sending his world spinning and a pulse of agony through his chest. The blow also ruined his aim, and instead of puncturing the throat, Cras' blade stabbed into his foe's shoulder, glancing off bone.

Cras rolled as he hit the ground, hands slipping in the mud as he tried to push himself up, eager to get as much distance as possible. But Ring Face wasn't about to let up. Cras ducked a slash of a long knife only to take another kick to the chest as he tried to rise, this one solidly crunching into his solar plexus and

knocking him on his back. Cras coughed and writhed as all the breath rushed out of him, he felt vomit rise up in his throat, and gagged. With one foot he lashed out and caught Ring Face squarely in the groin, doubling him over. Cras stumbled to his feet, just as Bent Nose was gingerly pulling the dagger out of his shoulder.

There was a whistling sound and he felt something fly past his cheek. Instinctively he dropped to a crouch, risking a glance back. Cras saw another man behind him, dressed the same as the others. One hand pointed something at him, probably a small hand crossbow, a favourite amongst assassins. Two more men came up behind the shooter and while Cras didn't have much of a head for numbers, he figured that five against one didn't add up. He turned round to see Bent Nose helping his companion, who was still clutching between his legs.

Cras slipped his hand down his boot and pulled out a pair of throwing knives. Spinning, he launched them towards the shooter without looking and sped off between the two groups down a narrow side street. His feet slipped in the dirt but he didn't stop running, racing through a maze of twists and turns. He slid around a corner, catching his arm on the edge of a building in a burst of pain, then ran through a quick series of connecting alleys, turning bare seconds before he would have slammed into a wall. Cras risked a glance back a couple of times, but there didn't seem to be any sign of pursuit. He ran further, stopping only when his lungs forced him to. He drew in great gulps of air, wincing at the pain in his ribs. Looking around, he tried to figure out where he was.

Just above him to the right was a sign swinging gently in the breeze, the rain trickled down a lewd picture painted on the wood with the letter 'S' underneath it. A smile split his lips as he walked up to Shylo's. Even in a blind panic he'd found his way to a whorehouse. The building seemed innocuous enough, appearing as a common tavern. Yet even at this hour the lights were still lit and there was the sound of music and voices from inside. Cras gleefully mounted the wooden steps and rapped a pattern on the door with his knuckles.

Even his ribs seemed to hurt less as he stepped inside the dimly lit audience chamber. Coloured veils were draped over the windows and the room

was lit in a sinful shade of red light cast from tinted lamps. He smelled a dozen varieties of perfume and incense that went right to his head. But the real delights of the place were for the eyes. Everywhere he looked Cras saw flesh on display. There were women to suit every fantasy, all gorgeous and smiling invitingly. Some had already partnered up with a client, teasing and fondling each other on one of the plush couches that dotted the room. The more adventurous patrons were even entertaining two or three women. Cras let his eyes feast on the exotic costumes, or lack of them, for a moment, before moving further inside. He nodded to a tall brute of a man to his right, watching him intently despite the other sights on offer. Cras caught the man's eye and winked before strolling up to a nearby table, he wiped some mud off his hands and picked absently at an assortment of pastries on a tray. He'd almost stopped thinking about the confrontation on his journey; the professional way those men had moved irked him, but his interest quickly waned as he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Looking for more than desserts?" She was a slim brunette dressed in a gossamer thin dress that hugged every curve in just the right way. Cras looked into her bright blue eyes; probably tinted, but he didn't care as his interest quickly moved lower. "If you can afford it, we can go upstairs." Her voice was like the brush of silk on skin.

"No worries there." Cras definitely felt he deserved this after the night he'd had. He slipped a hand down to his belt and groped for his purse, fingers clutching empty air. He looked down. His purse was gone.

Chapter Five

“What happened to your nose?” Malus looked over his desk as Talos sat down. Sunlight poured in through the open window, revealing every detail of the sellsword’s smashed face. His nose was covered with a bandage tied around the back of his head. The tip of a wooden splint poked out between his blackened eyes, and Malus could see the anger flare in them as he spoke. There was something else too, though it was hard to read his face behind the cloth. Shame perhaps?

“Walked into a door,” he grunted.

Malus raised an eyebrow, but said nothing further. Returning to his papers, he looked over the draft of his plans for the city construction projects. He’d had Dalen work all night, going over maps and historical records. The man had been employed as an architect in the past and his knowledge had proved essential in detailing the construction work. Dalen pointed out several locations for changes, both substantial and cosmetic, to cover for Malus’ real goals and the excavation. He hadn’t returned home till the early hours of the morning, but the basic plans were finished. Though he would have preferred more time to prepare, the threat from Kar Korus forced him to accelerate his plans. *Speaking of which.*

He looked back up at Talos. “Did you hire the assassin?” Again that spark of anger flared, a grimace on his broken face. There was a long pause.

“I contacted the Guild.” Talos’ voice was muffled, with a nasal wheeze. “They said they’d put their best man on it.”

“You met him in person?”

“I did.” Another pause.

“And your opinion of him?” Malus was getting irritated by his halting speech.

“I think you wasted your money. I could dredge any pit in this city and come up with five of him.”

“I hope for your sake that’s not true, it was your job to bring me the best. I hope you put the money to good use.”

“We’ll see, I kept half the payment for now.”

“Prudent of you,” Malus acknowledged. He glanced over his papers again. “Did you make the arrangements to get him inside? When can we expect to meet this noble protector of mine?”

“He’s already here.” A voice spoke from the window. The plush curtains rippled and a man stepped out from behind the heavy material. Surprised, Malus’ hand dropped to his dagger. The man was maybe in his twenties, with a lean physique and few distinguishing characteristics. He stepped forward, tossing the cloth aside so it fluttered behind him. “Cras Alder, from the Guild.” His voice was rough and blunt to match the rest of him.

There was a pause and Malus saw Talos had drawn his blade, eyeing the assassin.

“Is that so?” He made a mental note to fire his guards.

Cras stepped forwards, seeming to deliberately avoid Talos’ gaze. The assassin stopped in front of his desk, fidgeted for a moment, then made an awkward half-bow, seemingly upset about it.

Malus watched him with interest. He didn’t look like much, yet he’d managed to make it into his office. The building was patrolled rigorously by the City Guard, not to mention the personal escorts of the nobility. Cras seemed uncomfortable with the silence so Malus let it continue. The assassin had surprised him with the curtain trick, even if it was a childish deception. He didn’t like surprises. “You know why you’re here?” he asked.

“Greed,” Cras grunted. Malus continued to stare at him and the assassin shrugged. “The Guild wants me to act as your bodyguard, to protect you from assassination by the spies from Kar Korus.”

“Or anyone else,” Malus added. There was a pause. “So, how do you intend to go about it?”

“What?”

“Protecting me.” He allowed a touch of irritation to enter his voice. “I’m sure you have some plans to introduce, checks to security, and the like?”

“Umm, well...” A colour rose in the assassin’s cheeks and Malus inwardly groaned. He shuffled some papers across his desk, hoping fervently that his life did not depend on the competence of this man. Organising his notes, Malus checked one of the small mechanisms on his desk. The device was a flat disc with concentric rings that slowly turned, indicating hours and minutes. It was nearly time for the meeting and he decided to worry about it later. Tucking the mechanical clock into his pocket, Malus rose.

“We can go over the details later,” he said, gathering up a few sheets of paper. “Talos,” the hired sword still held had his weapon out, “put that away before you hurt yourself and get out of here.”

Talos nodded grudgingly and sheathed his weapon with a faint rasp. Malus was already out of the door, leaving Cras standing there speechless. Idly he wondered if it was a good idea leaving the two alone, but he was too preoccupied with his notes to care.

He reached the foot of the stairs and his secretary fell into step with him as Malus strode down the corridor. The skinny, bookish man struggled to keep up in the clumsy robes he wore. He carried a stack of books and papers in both hands that tottered dangerously in his grip. Malus had never bothered to learn the man’s actual name; he called him Elras because that’s what his previous aide had been called.

Malus caught sight of a tattered sketch and yanked it out of the pile. “Are these the blueprints I wanted?” he said, not turning as Elras stumbled, off balance.

“Uh, yes,” he said from somewhere behind Malus. “I went through the records and dug up everything I could find on the city plans from today until as far back as I could go. It took all night, and I don’t think I missed anything.”

“You’d better hope not,” Malus muttered, looking over the blueprints. They showed the major water intersections and plumbing of the city, overlaid with the known entrances to the Lower City. Kar Noval had been rebuilt and expanded several times in its long history, building on the bones of its predecessors. “Make sure you’re ready with any documents I need when I address the rest of the council. Don’t keep me waiting.”

“Of course, I’ll be ready.”

They walked in silence down the corridor; there was far more traffic than there had been last night. Scribes and clerks bustled about. Like Elras, they were laden down with papers or books. When they passed Malus, they pressed their backs to the side of the corridor or ducked into doorways, heads bowing. The swarm of clerical staff showed no such deference to each other, bodily shoving one another to the side. Legs stuck out to trip scurrying feet and coins jangled in purses affixed to elbows to give greater weight behind blows. Occasional gasps of pain sounded from a particularly vicious jab, given by a servant who had seen a vassal of his lord’s enemy and made a special effort.

Reaching the end of the corridor, Malus and Elras entered the council chamber. There was a scattering of activity, though the meeting wasn’t due for some time yet. A few seats on the outer rings were taken up and several scribes hurried up and down the channels between chairs, but the cavernous room was largely silent. Malus walked quickly down the rows of seats, with Elras struggling to keep up behind him, his hurried footsteps scuffing the polished floor. Malus passed the meeting table without pause, heading instead for a plain door behind the podium. His words were not for public scrutiny, not yet.

The door led to a smaller room a fraction of the size of the council chamber. The light from an arched window shone on a central, circular table like the one from the council chamber, surrounded by chairs. Most were occupied by

the other councillors, each with their secretary standing behind them. He received a few acknowledgements from his allies amongst the leaders of the city as he walked up. There was Logram Arvis who owned more than half of the stables in the city and made a fortune selling his thoroughbred racing stallions to rich noble sons. Though you couldn't see it while he sat, the man was slightly bow-legged from so much time in the saddle. Seated a few places to his left was the vulture-like Arkan Belleris, head of the Bankers' Guild and possessed of enormous capital, both political and financial.

There were some less friendly faces too.

Thron Harven, proud and prominent member of the Merchants Guild, stared at him with all the expression of a belligerent rock. There was nothing in his basic features that expressed dislike, nonetheless it was there. And a few paces to his right, Madame Melistro, resting in the shadow of her muscular aide as he loomed over her. He was a sharp contrast to the bookish types like Elras. Malus knew that the man was a simpleton, barely able to speak, much less read. Of course, Melistro didn't keep him around for his brains. Biting back his distaste at the old hag's appetites, Malus seated himself in one of the vacant chairs. Elras moving to stand behind him.

He largely ignored the other councillors, occasionally having Elras pass him a scroll or map as he laid out his notes on the table. Malus took care to keep as much of the maps covered as possible; there was no need to give the other councillors any hint of what he was planning. The rest of the councillors arrived; predictably Gargen was last, his enormous bulk eased into a specially reinforced chair by his straining aide.

"Shall we begin," said Westner Keiss, civic administrator of Kar Noval. The man was possibly the most boring individual Malus had ever met. Westner reminded him of a breed of night-owl that frequented the towers of the city, with immense eyes peering from a small face perched atop a pencil thin body. "As you are doubtless aware, a situation has arisen —"

“Get on with it Westner,” barked Arkan in a wheezing voice. “Some of us don’t have years to waste.” He let loose a hacking cough, showering the tabletop with specks of phlegm.

Westner gathered himself and continued. “I’m sure you’ve heard rumours of the threat from Kar Korus? Each of us has our own contacts—”

“You mean spies?” Melistro sneered. “Come dear Westner, let’s not be coy about this.” She affected a pout in an attempt to look girlish, but the effect was profoundly disturbing. “We’ve all been keeping tabs on the situation, so let’s follow Arkan’s advice and do away with the pretence.”

“We don’t yet know the seriousness of the situation. The threat hasn’t been confirmed,” Thron said.

“I’m afraid we do,” Malus interrupted, his voice a sinuous hiss. “My sources have confirmed that Kar Korus is making plans to attack our fair city.” He avoided mentioning the infiltrators; this meeting would help him determine who among the council could be useful to him, he would warn them privately.

“Sources that we can verify?” Thron asked.

“They have my confidence, I trust that will be enough?” Malus let the question settle. No one would call on him to expose his resources, for fear they would have to reveal their own.

“If the threat is real then we should do something about it!” Gargan spat, jowls trembling. “Muster the army, meet them on the field!”

Malus stared Gargen for a moment, wondering how a man so stupid could manage to hold his position on the council for so long. He certainly wouldn’t be informing him about the spies from Kar Korus.

“Our forces would be cut to pieces,” said Logram, saying what they were all thinking. The city had no true standing army. Each noble house maintained a body of men to serve it, drawn from citizens in service to that family. The size of the forces varied according to each house’s status and power, from a few bodyguards to entire contingents of men at arms. As with all forces, their level of proficiency varied; some were indeed battle hardened. Yet their only practice

came from small skirmishes against brigands or even the forces of another house in some internecine dispute. Against a trained army on the field they would be slaughtered.

“Perhaps a more subtle approach?” Malus suggested, picking his moment. He was almost grateful to Gargen for giving him an opening. “I’m sure there are a number of preparations we could make to bolster our defences without being too obvious about it. We don’t want to cause a panic after all.”

“What preparations?” Westner leaned inwards, wide eyes fixed on him.

Malus gestured to the array of maps and notes in front of him. “I have been looking into several construction projects that could prove quite beneficial to the city, without arousing too much suspicion. I propose that the council make an announcement of a new city renovation project and allows me to take steps to covertly fortify the city. Meanwhile we consolidate our supplies and muster our forces in case they are needed. All done with the minimum of disruption and fuss.”

“And who’s going to pay for all this?” Arkan snapped, his allegiance only going so far as his purse. “A city wide renovation won’t be cheap. Have you forgotten the cost of repairing the Temple Plaza six years ago?”

“I am aware of the costs, and would be willing to contribute a significant sum to the effort,” Malus said, noting with satisfaction that Arkan’s mouth snapped shut. “Though of course all contributions would be welcome. After all, the cost if the city falls will be much higher.” He had them now, and it was so easy. By agreeing to shoulder the lion’s share of the cost, Malus had quickly snared the other council members who had been quick to snap up the opportunity to save their fortunes. They hadn’t even discussed the merits of his plan or whether it should go ahead. With the councillors blinded by their greed, it had been set in stone after the first mention of money.

“Are we sure this is the best course?” Thron asked. “These renovations won’t be completed quickly. Can we be ready for an attack? If these reports about Kar Korus are true, we may not have that kind of time.”

Malus smiled at the merchant's transparent attempt to derail his plans. He imagined Thron assassinated by one of the spies, an expression of disbelief on his face as a dagger burst through his chest. "Well, we had best get started then."

It was time for the public meeting and the council were beginning to arrive. The council chamber was fuller than he had seen it for some time, clearly rumours about Kar Korus had been circulating. Sunlight shone from the glass dome above onto the city's finest. The outer ring was populated with a scattered collection of influential figures. The minor nobility reclined in their seats, various members of the noble houses in Kar Noval sitting in groups or with their aides. There were scores of businessmen, public figures and civic servants, forming loose coalitions according to title and position in society. They covered the outer ring in a sea of glittering jewels and stylish clothes. No matter how serious the meeting, the elite of the city never failed to wage their war of one-upmanship. Malus ignored them and walked straight up the central channel to the inner circle for the councillors.

Most were already there, ready to start the meeting. All present were dressed in state robes that gave them the appearance of priests or holy men. They were supposed to be a tradition from the Navian Empire, yet Malus was convinced they were worn simply because it was easy to conceal items beneath them. Officially no weapons were to be carried inside the council building, except by the City Guard. Yet he knew that the councillors and most of their personal servants walked around armed. It was rare for an open assassination in the council, but not unheard of. Politics in Kar Noval were often quick and bloody.

Still, he didn't think he'd have to knife anyone at this meeting. The announcement was just a formality, all the details had been hashed out in the closed session. Tasks had been grudgingly divided up between Malus and the other councillors. Decisions over who would be responsible for bringing in supplies and discreetly expanding the City Guard had already been settled. When they presented a front to the audience, the council would at least appear united

in their purpose. Although the residue of their bitter arguments still lingered in the air. Malus had pushed the other members for funds, but mostly because he was expected to. After doing his best to bleed them dry, he was left with the decision of how to allot the money for the city renovation. He tried to gauge how much he could siphon for his excavation project against the work he would need to do to convince the other councillors of his intentions and conceal his real goals.

Malus seated himself in his usual chair at the side of the table, consigning the problem to the future. From there he could see the entire council, or if someone spoke from the podium, tilt his head to view them without moving his chair. Elras was ever present behind him, silent and still. With a quick nod and polite smile to the rest of the table he arranged his papers and waited for the others to arrive.

The rest of the councillors quickly appeared, last as usual was the sparkling blob Gargen. Officially there were no set seats, everyone was equal. But without mention one of the plain chairs had been structurally reinforced with extra posts to accommodate the corpulent councillor's weight. Even then it groaned as he settled himself down. Malus could pick out the crumbs in his robe dropping on the table as the fabric shifted. With everyone seated, the murmur of the nobles quietened behind him as the meeting came to order.

Malus stood up without asking; it had been decided at the closed session he would speak for the council. They had acceded with only minor protests, grudgingly admitting that as the architect of the plan, he would be the best choice to present it. Privately it would allow him to control the meeting and ensure sufficient cover for his plans. He made a polite bow to the council and stepped up to the podium to address the entire room. His notes lay in front of him, the culmination of his manipulation of the council and frantic planning last night. A lot was riding on this address, but Malus remained calm. With the skill of a practiced orator he began his speech to the people of the city, all of them in the palm of his hand and not suspecting a thing.

Chapter Six

“What happened to your nose?” Captain Hrun stared up from his desk as the visitor sat down, uninvited, in front of him. There was a flash of anger in his eyes when Hrun mentioned his nose, but he sensed it wasn’t totally focused on him. The man’s face was mostly hidden under the bandages, but there was a seedy, coarse look about him. He dressed in basic, functional clothes, without any obvious sign of wealth or jewellery. Yet he sat down with an air of arrogance, not like the bred-in pomp of the nobility, but a kind of rough self confidence. Although there was something in his stride, not to mention the nose, which said the man had been humbled recently. Hrun prided himself that he could take the measure of a man in an instant, to mark his nature with a look. He took an immediate dislike to the man sitting before him.

“Walked into a door,” the man replied, trying to sound gruff but wheezing a bit too much to be convincing.

“And would you like me to arrest that door?” Hrun asked. He gestured to the papers scattered over his plain desk. “I am very busy, you know. But I can assure you, if you speak to one of my officers they’ll take your statement. We take the issue of *domestic* violence very seriously around here.”

The man did not reply for a moment, but simply stared at him across the desk. Then in a quick motion he tossed something to clatter over the sheets on Hrun’s desk with a muffled rattle. Hrun picked up the object and turned it over slowly in his hand. It was a signet ring of a member of the council, Councillor Malus of the Vern family if he wasn’t mistaken. Hrun was careful not to let it show in his expression, but inwardly he groaned. He tried to make a point of staying out of the nobles’ politics as a matter of course, such entanglements never ended well.

“My name is Talos, and I’m here on behalf of the councillor,” his eyes narrowed, “unofficially of course.”

“Of course,” Hrun replied in a voice decidedly lacking enthusiasm. “How may I be of service to the councillor?” Hrun had heard this was the proper mode of address in a meeting such as this. While officially these meetings never happened, some of the old hands were content to pass down the knowledge to their younger comrades in case such a situation should arise.

Talos smiled and Hrun felt the gulf of power switch, along with an unpleasant sensation in his gut. “The councillor wishes to bring a certain group to your attention.”

“A certain group?” Hrun had a great deal to do today and he didn’t have the patience for word games. “I’m at the councillor’s service, but if you want my help I suggest you tell me what the fuck you want and stop wasting my time.”

Talos looked at him for a moment, then shrugged. “Very well, you’ve no doubt heard the rumours about Kar Korus, maybe even about them sending spies into the city?” Hrun nodded. “Well they’re not rumours, we believe there are in fact several operatives of Kar Korus inside the walls and the councillor wants you track them down.”

Hrun swallowed, absorbing the news with a shock. Among all the questions about the task swirling in his mind, there was one that leapt to the forefront. “Why me?”

Talos shrugged. “Because you’re nobody,” he said simply. “Yes, there are those higher up with more resources, better connections, but that means they may have been compromised. Honestly, you were picked because you’re not important enough to have been bought. Your best interests will lie with the councillor, and the city.” Talos leaned back in his chair. “Besides, you have a reputation for honesty, the councillor believes you can be trusted.”

Hrun relaxed back in his chair. This *request* was certainly a big step. If he succeeded, the councillor would doubtless be pleased, perhaps even to the point of pulling a few strings for a promotion. He knew of other officers rumoured to

have risen through the ranks that way. This would certainly kick start his flagging climb up the ladder. Not only that but he would be helping the city. Even with all its faults, Hrun still believed in his home. There was only one choice. "Well, when you put it that way," he looked Talos in the eye, "I would be honoured to serve my city... and the councillor."

"We don't have a lot of information," Talos launched into the details immediately, "if they're not in the city already, they will be soon. We don't know how many there are, perhaps five or six men. They'll be well trained and very difficult to track."

"Where should I start looking?" Hrun asked. This wasn't like catching criminals, he was on new ground here.

"Our assumption is they'll be trying to sabotage the city to make it easier for Kar Korus to invade. Problem is, that could take the form of anything. We don't know if they're just here to gather intelligence and pass on information about our defences, or if they're planning something bigger. They could try to poison the water, to assassinate the council, or even start a plague in the city..." He shrugged.

"Well, I'd hate to get off easy."

"The councillor has every confidence in you." Hrun was sure Talos was mocking him as he got up. "You are to make this your top priority, all other investigations will be put to one side, the councillor demands your full attention. You're also to keep the investigation as quiet as possible so as not to incite panic."

"Yes, I understand." Hrun bit back his anger. He understood the importance of this task, but still hated the idea of letting any criminals off the hook. He nodded, but Talos was already leaving.

"The councillor expects progress and regular reports. Don't fuck it up." Talos departed without another word, leaving Hrun alone with his thoughts.

He stared down at the scattered papers on his desk. Every sheet was another investigation, another crime. Hrun would have to assign them to some

of the other officers. There was a rape, a murder, petty theft, arson, another murder, extortion, another rape... With a growl he swept his hands across his desk, throwing all the records onto the floor. He heaved himself off his chair and grabbed his sheathed shortsword from where it lay by his desk. Hrun pulled the blade out a few inches; a couple of nicks marred the blade, yet the steel still shone brightly. He stared at his weathered face in the mirror shine, a man in his thirties who looked ten years older. It was a cost of the job, but he'd never had doubts, until now. Hrun had sworn to serve the city, not only because the job required it, but because he believed in it, in justice. If you'd asked him yesterday if helping a noble would be helping the city, he'd have said no. Still, there was no sense questioning it now.

He slammed the sword back into its sheath and belted it on at his hip. Hrun walked purposely to the door, leaving dark footprints across the records on the floor. He wanted to get this investigation over with, and he had a powerful urge to hit something.

Without any real leads, Hrun headed to Southgate; it was probably the best place to begin his investigation. Though every entrance to the city was guarded, Southgate was still the most likely place for anyone to bring in smuggled goods or enter the city discreetly. It opened up right into the Nest where it was easy to disappear.

He brought three officers from the station with him, Tenna, Brishan and Kallen. Tenna and Brishan were twins from one of the outlying farms, both thick and sturdy, while Kallen was a medium build, but very adept at digging out information. Hrun had wanted the business kept quiet, he'd been told to be discreet. But he'd rather have backup and not need it, especially in the Nest.

The group made all speed from the station through the lower east part of the city. The streets were already teeming with masses of unwashed humanity, even in the early hours of the morning, everyone seeking to get the drop on everyone else. This portion of the city was about as far from the Noble Circle and

his employer as it was possible to get. In a parody of the fine tower homes of the nobility, ramshackle buildings leaned up against one another for support, much like their drunken owners leaned against each other. The dreary buildings balanced precariously on rotted foundations, every square foot of space overburdened so that the only thing keeping the tottering structures up was the lack of space to fall.

Hrun did notice a fraction more colour in the streets; he saw a group of Kolon priests in bright orange robes handing out scraps of paper to people. Each wore a facemask contorted in an expression of pain. There were others as well, a trio of flagellants in clashing clothes scourged themselves as they walked down the street. He caught a snatch of their cries of doom and death. Hrun noticed more signs of fear; there were beggars in the gutters bearing warning notices, crying out for alms and preaching about imminent destruction. There were always a few doomsayers among the destitute in the Nest, but clearly the rumours about Kar Korus were having an effect on the populace.

Crowds seethed in the narrow, bent streets. People trudged along the dirt roads with a weary watchfulness; it never paid to let down your guard in the Nest. Even the City Guard made sure to police the district in pairs. Their crimson uniforms attracted sullen stares and stony looks as they moved through the streets. If that wasn't enough to discourage them, there was the smell. It hung over the place like damp seeping through the plaster, pervading everything. Newcomers to the city might find their eyes watering at the cloying stench of the Nest. It was a combination of refuse, rotten food, mouldy buildings, a poor sewage system, and of course, the inhabitants.

If possible the smell grew even worse as he approached Southgate, with the morning traffic of farmers out to work and supplies coming in. Wagons drawn by horse and oxen trundled along the dirt roads, creaking all the while. The gate itself was about fifteen feet wide, a curved half circle cut out of the wall. Above was a fortified gatehouse, barred windows looking out over the traffic. The gates were open to allow the morning travellers to move freely. In truth it was seldom

closed, except for times of war, something Hrun felt was uncomfortably close. Still the heavy doors looked formidable, reinforced with steel plates riveted to the wood. Oiled hinges and bolts as long and thick as a man's forearm fixed the daunting barriers to the white granite walls, now stained with age and dirt.

A scattering of guardsmen stood at either side of the opening, with more looking out from the gatehouse above. Yet despite the security, Hrun knew this gate had the highest criminal traffic. Bribes changed hands and all manner of things entered or left the city unsearched. It would be useless talking to them, he was after the night shift. That was the most likely time for anyone to try and sneak in. He strolled up to a pair of guards casually observing the flow of traffic. Both made a casual salute when they saw his captain's bars. Hrun's men hung back behind him.

"What brings you out here, Captain?" the one on the left said. The guard had a thick beard that obscured much of his face. His companion had a birthmark on his cheek and eyed Hrun curiously, then looked back over to the procession of wagons and people.

"I need to know who was on gate duty the past few nights."

"Uh, that'd be Harks and Logan, they've had the night shift all week."

"Where can I find them?"

"Probably sleeping at the station dorm."

Hrun nodded, he gestured to the gate. "Did you see them before they left?"

"Sure, it was me and Chell that relieved 'em." He jerked a thumb as his companion.

"They mention anything."

"Like what?"

"Anything out of the ordinary,"

"Out of the ordinary?"

Hrun made an effort to control his temper. He'd had enough evasive talk with Talos. Still, it wouldn't be a healthy move to walk up to a group of men

armed with pikes and crossbows and accuse them of corruption. “Yes, specifically a group keen to enter the city without a lot of fuss. They’d want to pass through quickly and avoid inspection. They’d probably be willing to pay for a quick passage.” Hrun left it hanging, hoping the hint would be subtle enough to put an end to this conversation but not earn him a quarrel in the back.

“Haven’t had anything like that today,” the bearded man said. “But as I said, we only just got on.”

“I’ll be having a talk with Harks and Logan. I want you to keep an eye on the gates, a *close* eye. In particular you’re on the lookout for southerners; you’re to treat them as highly dangerous, and keep a full complement of the guard on duty at all times. You’re to search them thoroughly, without exception. And make sure all the other gate guards know.” Hrun nodded at the two men and they saluted.

They might keep a look out for the spies, they may even actually detain them, but Hrun couldn’t be sure. He’d have some of his own men transferred over to all the gates. It rankled that he was forced to do it, but he couldn’t trust these men, and the councillor would expect results. He made it a few steps without a quarrel in his back and judged the meeting a success. Hopefully Harks and Logan would be more helpful.

Hrun and his men quickly made their way to the Southgate station. It was slighter better built than the majority of structures in the Nest, but still not particularly impressive. It was a squat, ugly place, three stories tall and wide enough that it took up a good chunk of the street. The stone walls were cracked and discoloured with age, giving the building a sickly look. A couple of officers stood by the entrance, watching him approach. Hrun nodded at the men as he stepped inside the double doors.

The ground floor was a clerk’s nightmare, chaos in paper form. Rows of desks lined a broad open space, all of them covered with sheets and scrolls. Guardsmen dragged struggling criminals to the cells, their flailing limbs knocking

over carefully stacked piles of reports, sending them to join the mess on the floor. Scribes scratched with their quills, flinching at vulgar threats delivered by thugs in shackles. Guardsmen shuffled around or sat at desks. All of them looked haggard and overworked. With a few cursory nods to officers he recognised, Hrun led his men up to the dorms.

Every station had a dorm on the third floor where the majority of the officers slept. It wasn't fancy, but it was better than a lot of places in the Nest. The dorms took up most of the top level, a wide open space with simple pallets laid out along the floor. Sliding partitions fixed into the ceiling could be used for some privacy, and at the foot of each bed was a small chest with a lock where the officers could store their personal possessions. The rest of the floor was taken up with a couple of private rooms and a small kitchen. The dorm was almost empty. A few officers sat on battered chairs playing dice, the carved bones clattered across the bare wooden floorboards as Hrun and his men stepped up.

"Any of you Harks or Logan?"

The men shook their heads, intent on their game. One looked up, he had glasses that teetered precariously on the end of his nose, and he wore only his trousers and nightshirt, clearly he was having a productive time on his day off.

"Never saw 'em come in, they usually come back to sleep after their night shift."

"Yeah, and Harks owes me two silver imperials," one of the officers grumbled. He wore his full guard uniform, either just about to go out, or just come in. The guard looked up at Hrun and shrugged. "Not that we're gambling or anything, just a friendly game."

"So none of you have seen them?" Hrun asked, and received another round of head shaking. It was possible the men had a reason for not coming back, Hrun knew. Maybe after their shift they went to a tavern for a drink and were sleeping it off on the floor even now. But this business with spies didn't sit

well with him, and Hrun didn't like waiting around. "Any local watering holes they might have gone to instead?"

"There's The Crooked Arm," Glasses said, "down on Bone Street." Hrun nodded his thanks and gestured his men to leave. "If they get back, have them report to the station on Trader's bend, ask for Captain Hrun."

Glasses nodded then raised his hand, rattling the dice. "They ain't in trouble, are they, sir?"

Hrun paused, wondering how much to tell them, he decided on as much of the truth as he could. "I think they can help me with a case."

Glasses nodded again and tossed down the dice. "Right, sir."

Hrun made to leave. "And if any of you hear anything..." He left it hanging.

One of the guards coughed and looked up at him, a small man with a pocked face. "I did hear there may have been a fight up in the alleys," he coughed, "somewhere near Shylo's."

"Not that we'd know anything about that place," the guard owed two silver imperials said.

"Right," Pocked face replied with a grin.

Hrun stared at the men for a moment. "Thanks for your help." He turned and left.

Chapter Seven

There was an awkward moment before Talos left when he and Cras locked eyes. Cras saw the anger there, the rage peering over the bandages. Talos' hand drifted over his sword hilt and Cras flexed his wrist a fraction, enough that he could slide out the dagger concealed under his forearm in a heartbeat. Then Talos spun and walked out of the room without saying a word, he relaxed. *Yeah, that's going to come back on me.* Cras walked around behind Malus' desk and sank into the plush chair. He leaned back and stuck his feet up on the polished surface, hearing the creak of wood as he rocked back.

The meeting could've gone better. He felt he'd made his point with the entrance, Malus was definitely unsettled that someone could get into his office. Cras had already changed out of the stolen scribe's uniform he'd used to accomplish the feat. He was glad he hadn't had to do anything more dramatic. His ribs still ached from the fight yesterday, stinging as he ran a hand over them. And then there was the loss of his purse. He'd been tossed out of Shylo's the second the whore had found out he had no money. Cras may have been a killer, but there were levels of cruelty even he wouldn't stoop to.

He shifted his foot and knocked over a polished gold ornament, it tottered over the edge of the desk. Cras threw out an arm to catch it, just moments before it would have fallen. He leaned back and hefted the ornament in his hands, feeling the weight. Likely it was solid gold, carved in the shape of a spider. He looked from the ornament to others on the desk, then around the lavish office. The councillor clearly enjoyed the trappings of wealth. Cras ran his fingers over the desk, down the drawers underneath.

After a moment's hesitation he yanked open the top one and began rifling through the contents. There were mostly papers and scrolls, a few maps and blueprints. He moved onto the next. Barring a dagger that may have been for

defence or a stylised letter opener, it was the same. It was in the third drawer things got interesting; stuffed in a corner at the back was a small jingling purse. Inside were a dozen small jewels and twenty gold imperials. Someone as wealthy as Malus wouldn't miss a few, so Cras slipped a few of the jewels into his pocket and replaced the purse. Suddenly he didn't feel so bad about losing his money last night. Perhaps working for the councillor wasn't so bad.

Still he didn't expect it to be easy, Malus had caught him off guard with all the questions about Cras' plans for security. He didn't have much experience with that; Cras' plans tended to lean towards taking lives, rather than saving them. He figured that the councillor would want something more subtle than bars on all the windows, a locked door, and telling him to hide at home with a score of bodyguards. His eyes flickered over the liquor cabinet, a glass or two of some ridiculously expensive vintage would doubtless help him think. It took only a few seconds for him to pick the lock, and soon he'd retired back to the desk, swirling the liquid thoughtfully as he planned how to keep the councillor breathing.

Several hours and a few glasses later, Cras had long grown bored and decided he would make a start. A plan had been forming as he drank, the thick red liquid reminding him of the job in hand. He would approach the situation in a manner more suited to his nature, then simply work out the opposite. Cras got up from the desk, and after carefully replacing the now empty wine bottle and glass, checked himself in the full sized mirror and slipped outside the office.

His plan was to try and kill Malus.

He wouldn't go through with it of course, that would be crazy, then he'd never get paid. No, instead Cras would work out every way he could kill Malus, every trick and trap, every way he could slip in, every possible way he could pull it off. Then he'd work out how to stop it. Cras crept down the stairs, keeping his footsteps as quiet as possible. He'd play it just as a real assassin would.

He came upon a hallway; along each wall was a row of offices, any of which might be occupied. The doors were shut, but it wouldn't be hard to sneak past. And even if someone did hear, would they not think it was a scribe scurrying about? Jearl had told him the council building was full of scuttling clerks. Apparently the mage had posed as one when he accepted a contract. It was what gave Cras the idea, though it was unlike Jearl to try something so mundane, surely he could have used magic to gain access? Cras made a note to ask him about it.

He found himself in a curving passage, sunlight streamed in from a window on one side to splash against an elegant mosaic on the walls. It showed a group of men around a great table waving scrolls at each other. No doubt some exciting and historic meeting on crop dividends or some shit. He looked back to the window; the glass panes opened out, the gap easily wide enough to accommodate a man. Cras walked over and peered out. His stomach churned somewhat at the swell of vertigo he felt looking out over the city. It was just like one of those damn tower homes of the nobility. Cras never liked taking a contract that meant he would have to crawl about those bridges. Still, this window might have been reachable to an experienced climber.

The council building was a huge dome with several floors. It loomed over the city skyline, about half as high as the tallest tower of the nobility, but far wider at its base. Its tip was a smooth, rounded bubble of glass. Dotted the curved surface were open balconies staggered along the sloping sides. There was one about fifteen feet down, and below that was a drop to the ground. He ran his fingers over the windowsill, pressing down with a fraction of his weight, gradually increasing. Would it hold if someone were to pull themselves up? How easy would it be to climb inside?

He shifted position, turning and hoisted one leg over the side of the window, it was about chest height so it was awkward. Depending on how a person hauled themselves over the ledge they might have a sharp drop to the floor. It would be difficult, but not impossible. With some climbing equipment –

“Hey you!”

Cras froze, poised like some dancer stretching before a show, one leg hooked over the edge of the windowsill, balancing on the other. With his black leathers he looked every inch the assassin sneaking into the building on a contact. Cras slowly turned his head to see two council guardsmen, dressed in full armour, with the white tabard of the city council on their chests.

“I can explain!” The guards reached for their swords. “Fuck!”

Cras twisted his leg, shifting it in so his foot was against the wall, and pushed off, lunging for the guards. He barrelled into them, dragging them both to the ground with a tremendous clatter of metal and cursing. A mailed fist smashed into his jaw and he reeled, tasting blood. Cras pulled back a hand and slammed his palm down onto the forehead of one of the guards. The sculpted grooves of his helmet dug into Cras’ skin but the guard’s head bounced on the stone floor. Even with the protection of his helmet, the man was knocked unconscious.

But the other had rolled away and succeeded in drawing his sword with the chilling rasp of steel. Cras slipped a dagger into his hand. Malus would probably be annoyed if he killed someone, but right now he was more concerned with his own survival. The guard lunged with an overhand swing and Cras sidestepped. He slashed with his dagger, aiming for the gap between gauntlet and arm guard, scoring a red line and causing the guard to drop his sword with a surprisingly girlish cry of pain.

Pressing his advantage, Cras followed up with a kick to the man’s groin. His foot clanged off metal and he hopped backwards, clutching at his bruised appendage. The guard grinned, balled a mailed fist and sank it into Cras’ gut. Cras folded up as the breath whooshed out of him. Coughing, he staggered back, his dagger clattering onto the floor. The guard stooped to snatch it up and Cras reached out to clasp his helmet with both hands. Heaving with all his weight, Cras swung the guard around by his helmet, slamming him into the wall and slashing a groove in the mosaic. Breathing heavily, he swung him back the other

way. The guard stumbled across the floor, falling back and tearing the helmet clasps so it came off in Cras' hands. Unprepared, the assassin fell back to the floor, his head bouncing off the stone.

Cras fought off the blackness creeping into his vision, lurching back up to his feet. As the guard struggled to rise before him, encumbered by his hand wound, Cras swung. The steel helmet tore through the air and crashed into the guard's skull with a sickening crunch. Cras pulled back at the last second, just shy of a killing blow. The guard dropped like a stone, a shallow graze bleeding down his scalp. Cras crouched, breathing heavily, rolling his jaw as he probed for loose teeth with his tongue. He could see the rise and fall of both guards' chests so there wasn't any permanent damage.

His ribs twinged as he picked up his dagger, Cras decided he'd had enough exploring for one day. Favouring his left foot, he limped back down the passage, hoping he could remember the way back to Malus' office.

Cras was working on his second bottle of wine when Malus returned. He slipped the empty glass into a pocket as he stood up, thankful he'd decided to sit in front of the desk instead of behind it. The councillor stared at him from the doorway, and Cras caught a glimpse of a skinny man in robes similar to Malus' standing behind him. A look crossed the councillor's face and he waved the man away, shutting the door behind him.

Malus walked past, making no move to acknowledge him. He set a sheaf of papers on the desk and sat down. The councillor slowly reached out and shifted the spider ornament just a fraction to the left, then folded his hands in his lap. "What happened to your face?"

Cras wondered what he meant for a second, then involuntarily reached out and touched the swollen bruise along his jaw. Wincing at the contact, he hurriedly withdrew his hand. "Walked into a door."

Malus stared back at him. "Lot of that going around." There was a long silence. "On my way back from the meeting, I heard a rumour." Cras focused all

his effort on not looking at his shoes. “There was talk that two guards had been attacked in the east wing. That an intruder had climbed in through one of the windows and was killing everyone in sight, that he was a ghost who disappeared without a trace.”

“You know how rumours get exaggerated.”

Malus locked eyes with him. “In the future, I expect your presence to be more discrete.”

Cras shrugged. “Just haven’t got the hang of the place yet.”

Malus eyed him for a moment more then got up, he walked over to the liquor cabinet which Cras had prudently left just as he found it. The councillor picked up a bottle, hefting it, he seemed surprised at its weight. Cras kept his features carefully neutral. Malus selected another bottle and poured himself a generous measure of an amber liquid. He sloshed it round the glass and took a small sip. “Now, I trust you have been working the situation while I was at the meeting.”

“I have,” Cras said, for once not having to lie. “I’ve been making plans on how best to use my skills to ensure your safety.” He allowed a trace of pride and smugness into his voice.

“I should hope so. Do you think I’m paying you for your company?” Malus sneered at him. “You’ve had all morning, I would have expected you to come up with something.”

Cras bit back a retort, he’d already screwed things up enough for one day. *Then again...* “I’ve decided to kill you.” He enjoyed the frozen look that came over Malus’ face. “Or at least plan it out. I’m going to plan out how I would do it and then work out how to counter it.” He waited for the praise to come.

“Of course,” Malus snapped. “What did you think I expected of you, I have enough bodyguards. You’re only here to cover anything we’ve missed.”

Cras felt his confidence deflate somewhat as Malus took another sip from his drink. He’d been rather proud of his plan. “Now wait –”

There was a knock behind him and his words cut off. Malus shooed him over towards the curtain and Cras grudgingly obliged, swirling the fabric around to conceal himself. He left just enough of a gap that he could see the door, the soft material brushing against his face.

“Enter,” Malus said calmly and the office door was opened by a squat servant dressed in clothes that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a minor lord. He carried a silver platter balanced in one hand and a crystal carafe in the other, filled with a pale orange liquid. The servant stepped inside, giving a modest bow while balancing the meal. Cras couldn’t see Malus’ reaction but he didn’t see much of a threat in the man. Of course that would be exactly what an assassin wanted.

While he was deciding whether to do something or not, the servant set the meal down on the desk with a faint clink. He removed the silver lid to reveal an assortment of gourmet foods, most of which Cras couldn’t even identify. Still the smell that emanated from the platter was certainly appetising, a rich blend of sweet and savoury aromas. The servant took a knife and fork from his pocket and began to cut small slices off each bit of the meal. He’d place the small morsel daintily into his mouth, chewing and swallowing as he cut up the next one. Afterwards he pulled out a small cup and poured himself a drink from the carafe. After he’d finished, the servant gave another bow then left without a word spoken. Cras left it a moment before stepping out from the curtain. Malus sat behind his desk, unharmed, regarding him coolly.

“I always take my meals at this time.”

Cras snorted. “You could have told me, why did I have to hide?”

“Our relationship is hardly one I want to advertise, servants talk, you know.” Out from the curtain, the scent of food was stronger, Cras realised he hadn’t eaten since his early breakfast before coming here. He looked out of the window, from the position of the sun it was close to midday. His stomach rumbled.

“You always have someone test your food?”

“A council position brings risks, especially now.”

“I hope you won’t be expecting me to throw myself in front of your meals. I’m paid to protect you, not to die for you.”

“You’re paid to serve, remember that. As far as I’m concerned, you’re nothing but a killer.”

“Professional killer. And for what you’re paying for me, I could be put to better use.” Clearly Malus wasn’t used to being questioned, but Cras wanted it clear now that he wouldn’t risk his neck for the sake for an inattentive chef.”

They stared at each other for a moment. “As if your palette could tell the difference. I’d have to wait for you to drop dead before I knew for sure.” Malus smiled, and while it irked him, for ten thousand imperials, Cras could let the councillor win. He tried to change the subject.

“Have any of the other councillors taken their own precautions like you have?”

“I haven’t told them about the spies,” Malus said. Cras wasn’t surprised. Without the backstabbing of the council and the noble families the Guild couldn’t sustain itself. Malus speared a cut of meat and popped it into his mouth. “If some of my opponents on the council can be caught unawares by the infiltrators, so much the better. You have to look at the positives in a situation like this.”

A part of him balked at the arrogance of the councillor, but it was about what Cras had expected. The nobles would still be fighting each other when the walls came down around them. In this city, it couldn’t be any other way. Perhaps the job would be harder than he thought.

Chapter Eight

Two of them lunged for him, knives out. Both bore feral grins stretched across their faces as they leapt out of the night. Arracan threw up his hand, power and rage rushing through his veins. The two cutthroats burst into flames, their laughter turning to cries of alarm before cutting out entirely. Skin crumbled to ash in an instant, bones blackened and blood boiled in the conflagration. The flames guttered out in seconds, flaring brightly in the lightless street, and two charred corpses dropped to the ground, still smoking faintly. Arracan cursed himself, it was sloppy, an overuse of magic. He darted a quick look around the deserted streets, ready to incinerate any potential witnesses. A part of him almost hoped someone had seen. It was good to be doing something, to see the results of his actions, even if it was a waste.

Finding no one in the gloom, he jerked his fingers and the two bodies slid across the ground, tracking twin grooves in the mud as they glided back into the alley they'd sprung from. Following behind, he dragged his foot over the tracks to hide their passage. With a last look around he followed the corpses into the alley. They were laid against a rotted wooden wall, and amid the stinking refuse packing the narrow space he could still smell the horribly alluring scent of burnt flesh. Still, if it couldn't block his nostrils then the stacks of rubbish would have their uses. He made another gesture and a pile of discarded detritus toppled over, heaps of rotten vegetables, broken bits of wood and other unidentifiable objects enveloping the two bodies. Hopefully it would keep them hidden until Arracan had finished his task. He had spent the last day and night searching through the Rat's Nest to try and find the tavern Malvic had mentioned, and this was the fourth attack he'd suffered in his search. Every attempt meant more effort, more magic, and most importantly, more time.

He thought about trying another location spell, but gave up the idea. Every try had ended in failure or sent him off on a wild goose chase. It was like something was purposefully blocking his divinations, sending him in the wrong direction. The feeling was too elusive to get a bead on, too unfocused, just a general presence that seemed to set itself against him. He'd find the bones he cast all pointing in different directions, the blood trails would lead in circles. Arracan slammed his fist into the wall, punching into the soft, rotten wood. It didn't help his mood. With a curse he left the alley and strode down the streets of the Nest, continuing his search.

The dirt streets of the Rat's Nest were a twisting maze of poorly constructed tenements pressed together in a claustrophobic nightmare. The buildings had a rough, shambolic look about them, pieced together from whatever materials could be found or stolen. The streets had no sense of order or planning. Abruptly they'd halt in a dead end, terminating at a structure that had been constructed in the middle of the road by people who didn't know the meaning of civic planning. Narrow alleys twisted in spiral patterns, forcing you to backtrack with no other way through, becoming an easy target for thieves. The streets widened and closed up unexpectedly as buildings pushed in. It was a hazard to navigate in the daytime, much less the dead of night. Arracan had spent most of his life in the winding passages of ancient temples, yet even he couldn't find his way through the streets of this unfamiliar city.

Occasionally he came upon other people, usually travelling in groups. Every time he spied a pack of staggering drunks he would dart a glance around, looking for the tavern they had come out of. He cast more location spells, drawing a vial of blood and shattering it on the ground, yet the crimson fluid only tracked another circle, just visible in the light, but always useless. As the night wore on, he became more and more frustrated. It shouldn't have taken this long to find the place. Arracan reached another dead end, barred by a teetering wooden wall. He almost blasted his way through it out of sheer anger. Power

crackled through his body, yearning for release, yet he pulled it back. It would draw too much attention, another fruitless waste, just like his entire search.

He doubled back, peering through the night at paths on either side of the street. Where to go? Where had he been before? He tossed another vial of blood onto the ground, more grateful for the physical release than for any hope of divination. Arracan had only a few vials left, but they weren't much use anyway. He'd drained Malvic dry but the former merchant hadn't given him any more information than that night in his home.

There was movement to his right. A figure lay in the crude gutter, sprawled at an awkward angle, his clothes tattered and stained. Shattered pieces of pottery lay around his outstretched hand, likely a wine jug, judging from the smell. Arracan caught the man's scent from across the road, and it only grew stronger as he approached. As usual, he shot a look about the dark street, seeking any sign of a tavern or alehouse, or anything that might fit the description Malvic gave him. Magic had failed him miserably, he thought, eyeing the man. The drunk seemed completely unaware of him, snores rattling out of a pudgy nose.

On impulse he kicked the man savagely in the side. "Get up!" Arracan growled. The drunk gave a cry and jerked, twitching and confused on the ground. The man turned to look up at him. Arracan wore his hood and it was too dark to see his scars. Nevertheless the man balked to find himself rudely awaked by a sinister, hooded man glowering over him. He expressed his fears in a bluster recognised by drunks the world over.

"What the fuck do you want?" The drunk staggered to his feet, weaving uncertainly, the light from a nearby window glancing off his features to reveal a face almost as ghastly as Arracan's own. A few rotten teeth jutted out of stained gums, and the light cast a yellowish tinge on his skin, Arracan could make out the thick capillaries in the man's eyes like a bloody spider web.

“You look a little worse for wear, friend.” He wanted the man compliant, and made no threatening moves as the drunk struggled with the complexities of standing up straight.

“What’s it to you?” came the slurred reply.

Arracan shrugged. “It’s late, and I find myself in need of a warm fire and a drink, I imagine you’d know somewhere. Perhaps if you could point me in the right direction, I might buy the pair of us a round.”

“Well,” the drunk drew himself up, “I do happen to know –”

“I’m looking for one place in particular,” Arracan quickly interrupted, “a friend recommended it, The Dead and Swinging.”

A puzzled look came over the drunk’s face. “Can’t say I’ve heard of it.” Arracan resisted the urge to add another charred corpse to his tally.

“Oh.” He made to turn away.

“Unless you mean The Hanged Man.” The drunk scratched his head.

“Only place I can think of.”

Arracan slowly turned back to him. “What was that?”

“I said The Hanged Man, your friend must have got the name wrong.”

Arracan smiled. “He was somewhat distracted.”

“Yeah, well, The Hanged Man’s over in Beggar’s Row, it’s not that far, though there’s a few places closer if you just want a drink.”

“Would you take me?” Arracan thought about using a compulsion spell, but instead he slipped a coin out of his purse and rolled it between his fingers. “I was hoping to meet someone there, and we could see about getting you that drink.” He flexed his wrist and the coin vanished, much to the drunk’s disappointment.

“Well, I’m sure I can spare the time.” The drunk smiled a rotten grin. “And I could use a drink, it can be dangerous for a man to be sober too long.”

“Oh, we’ll take care of that,” Arracan said. Sometimes a flash of silver had a greater result than even the most potent magic. “Lead on.”

The drunk lurched one way, then stopped, looking about. He staggered around and stumbled back down the opposite direction, gesturing for Arracan to follow. Daring to hope that this inebriated fool might guide him to success, Arracan allowed himself to be led, a burning need rising within him now that he was closing in.

After a painfully slow trawl through the Nest they came upon The Hanged Man tavern, its tarnished sign swinging from a hook, shaped in the silhouette of a man dangling by a noose.

Like most of the Nest's buildings, this one looked like it had seen better days, though it appeared solidly built and better maintained than many he'd passed. The Hanged Man towered over the other buildings in the street, scaling the lofty heights of two or three stories, depending on how high the ceilings were. Around it stood the usual assortment of ramshackle dwellings that characterised the Nest. Even at this hour there was still light from inside, and Arracan's hopes rose a fraction more. His guide beamed at him, pointing to the sign. He'd only gotten lost twice.

"See, I told you I could find it. Let's go have that drink."

"Hold a moment." Arracan reached under into his pocket and drew out a small flask. "This stuff is better than anything they'll have inside, I want to thank you for taking me here, have a sip." He handed the flask to the drunk. "Only a sip, mind, it's strong stuff."

The drunk puffed out his chest and took the flask, pulling off the lid he took a long draught and smacked his lips. He gave a small cough. "I've had bet—" The drunk's face twisted, eyes widening. He put a hand to his throat, wheezing noises issuing from his mouth as he tried to draw in air. Arracan caught the flask as it dropped from twitching fingers, slipping it back into his pocket as the drunk collapsed onto the street. The man convulsed, vomiting a thick sludge before slumping, he did not move again.

“Thank for your help,” Arracan said. The poison was a potent extract of the Valru flower. He didn’t want to use magic so close to his goal and risk alerting someone. He stepped over the body and entered The Hanged Man.

The first thing he noticed was the smell; it clogged his mouth as soon as he entered, typical odours of beer, sweat and wood smoke. The ground floor was given over to the common room, with a small section for the bar counter. A loose collection of tables, chairs and stools were scattered across the space, battered but serviceable. The floor creaked as he walked across wooden boards stained with years of grime and spilled booze. Despite the worn down-look, there was a certain sense of stability about the place, like a man could rest his head for a moment without worry. The only occupants were a frail old man slumped amid a circle of tankards on a corner table, and the barkeep. Arracan looked upon a woman so big he wasn’t sure two large women hadn’t collided at speed to form her. She looked over the bar at him with a distinctly unfriendly gleam in her eye. Arracan made sure his hood covered as much of his face as possible and stepped up to the bar.

“It’s late, so it’ll have to be a quick one,” the woman barked before he had a chance to say anything.

“I’m actually looking for someone.”

“Then you should have gone to a whorehouse, I serve food, drink, and a room if I like you. So if you’re not going to buy something, piss off.”

He felt an urge to kill the woman but quelled it. Now he was here, Arracan didn’t want to do anything that might scare off the seer. “I’m sure there’s something I can afford.” He did the trick with the silver piece again, rolling it along his fingers. “The man I’m looking for...”

The woman’s eyes flickered from the coin to him, squinting as she tried to make out his face in the shadow of his hood. “A man is it? Well I’m not one to judge. I hear Shylo’s has some boys –”

Arracan raised a hand to cut her off. “I have reason to believe the person I’m searching for can be found here,” he swept a hand across the room, “in your

charming establishment. He's a seer, or used to be. Was once held in very high regard in the city. Perhaps you've seen him?" The woman's eyes flickered behind him for a moment and Arracan's heart gave a start.

"What do you want with him?" she asked cautiously.

Arracan spread his hands out in front of him in a gesture of innocence.

"Why, I just want him to tell my fortune."

The woman stared at him a moment longer before nodding over to the man at the table. "That's Loker, before he got into the ale he was a seer, a prophet if you can believe it. Doubt you'll get much out of him now though."

Arracan released his held breath slowly, his body tingling with anticipation. "Thank you," he breathed, honestly grateful. "Now may I return the favour to you?"

"That silver piece you were twirling doesn't look so bad," the woman said.

Arracan laughed. "I'm sure, but perhaps a different service. I thought you'd like to know about the man outside, sprawled in front of your establishment. He looked somewhat distressed, perhaps not the sort of thing you want in front of this place, bad for business..."

The woman scowled. "Shit, some drunk passed out. Still, people probably expect it."

"Probably," Arracan conceded. "However he didn't appear to be breathing. It was dark though, so I can't be sure."

She gave him another squinty look and then shuffled her bulk out from behind the counter. "Nobody's kicked it tonight, though if there is a body, I'll bet it's Topper's doing. He runs the Blind Nag down the street. Last time it was rat corpses he snuck in and left everywhere. Tried to get me shut down with the plague, I had to bed the civic inspector to get out of that one."

Arracan had seen, and indeed inflicted a great many terrible things. He'd conjured unspeakable demons, carved up small children for his rituals, but the mental image the barkeep's words brought left him nauseous.

As she left he walked over to the hunched form of Loker. This old drunkard was the man he'd been searching for. Arracan drew out a chair and slammed it down onto the floor. The old man jerked awake, sending several tankards clattering to the ground with a metallic ring. Rheumy eyes looked up at Arracan and a smile split the old man's face.

"Finally found me, have you?" he wheezed. "I sensed you casting, trying to track this place down, determined, aren't you?"

"It was you blocking my spells?" A flash of anger raced through him. He would enjoy tearing the information he sought out of the old man. "You knew I was coming?"

"No, I only sensed your presence, those spells are to keep the debt collectors away." He barked a harsh laugh. "Makes this place difficult to find; can't be good for business though," he winked at Arracan. "Don't tell Ranya, eh?" Loker reached out for a half full tankard and took a long swig.

Arracan knocked the drink out of his hand and sent it clattering to the floor.

"What'd you do that for, it was still a quarter full?"

He slammed a fist on the table, making the other tankards rattle. Arracan stared into the seer's eyes and saw a flicker of intelligence light up in that alcohol soaked mind. "It's taken me a considerable amount of effort to find you," he rasped. "Now I want you to help me."

"Or what?" Loker crossed his arms and stared back with drunken belligerence. Arracan lunged over the table, dragging Loker up, and scattering the remaining tankards. He slammed the old man into the wall, holding him off the floor, literally shaking with fury. Raw power arced through his body, sparks of magic crackled around his fingers, dancing over the old man's chest where he held him. "Why didn't you say so?" Loker gave him a manic grin. "How can I be of service?" The old man cackled.

"I suffer from...an *affliction*." Arracan ran his tongue over the word, his rage burning at saying it out loud, to admitting weakness in front of this pathetic

man. "I have these visions, painful visions. But I can't make sense of them. I figured a seer would have some experience in such matters."

"Hmmm..." Loker reached up and scratched his lip, as if he wasn't held up by a furious mage. As if he wasn't staring death in the face. "Well, let's have a look."

Before he could react, Loker reached out and touched his face.

Arracan's mind tore apart at the contact, like someone was grinding his brain into a pile of salt and broken glass. He felt his jawbone click as it snapped open, unable to contain the howling scream that roared out from him. Shadowy shapes crowded his vision, blotting out everything else; they were coming for him, so close now. Something in his skull seemed to twitch and then he was somewhere else.

Arracan opened his eyes in a place of such utter darkness that he wasn't sure he had really opened them. Behind him there was a dull scuffing sound and he turned to see a great stone archway before him. It must have been twelve feet high and just as wide, a half circle leading nowhere. The arch was made of black rock, he shouldn't have been able to see it in the dark, but somehow it gave off its own light. Inscribed on the stone was a multitude of symbols scrawled over the entire surface, overlapping each other, daring the mind to try and follow their twisting paths. The script tore at his sanity; it hurt his eyes to look upon it. Gritting his teeth and ignoring the pain, Arracan continued to stare at them as the symbols began to glow a radiant blue. The light illuminated a faint circle around him, and Arracan saw that he was not alone.

There was a shape to his left, indistinct, perhaps the rough silhouette of a man. Its edges blurred as Arracan turned to look, a hazy outline. It was definitely a man; he seemed to be entirely composed of a collection of shifting shadows. It was possible to separate them if you squinted, he realised. Arracan tracked a shifting mass of black that flowed up the figure's chest to become part of his

face, a nose and hint of a cheek, before slipping down to form a shoulder, then he lost track of it as it moved down the figure's back.

"Who are you?"

The figure said nothing, instead merely flowing across the floor closer to the gate; it seemed to be studying it. "Just thought I'd take a peek, what with you offering your mind up for anyone to walk into, I just couldn't help myself." His voice was what Arracan imagined the night would sound like if it could talk.

"My mind is crowded enough lately," Arracan snarled. He stretched out both hands, drawing in his power. A sooty red light illuminated his hands, coalescing along the outline of his fingers. "Now who the hell are you?"

"Temper temper." Despite the lack of features, Arracan could tell he'd angered the apparition. "Don't forget your place, mortal."

Mortal? Arracan looked the figure up and down. "You're a god," he said simply.

The figure inclined its head. "My name is Anestair."

"The Blade of Night," he breathed. "I *hate* gods." Arracan threw his hands forwards, pouring all his power into the attack. His anger burned through his veins as he put everything he had into the spell, pain racing through his limbs. A lance of burning red speared across the distance between them, it passed right through the apparition without disrupting it in the slightest, before vanishing in the endless black around him.

"My, that was rather reckless, don't you think?" Arracan could only stare back. "It hardly matters anyway, this isn't real, not that you could hurt me in any case." The rage still boiled inside him, but he felt so weak. This was just like when the visions struck, the feeling of being absolutely powerless. "Interesting tidbit you have here, locked away in that mind of yours." The god floated around the gate, continuing to study it like nothing had happened. "I can feel your need for it, for answers, you scream it with every part of your being."

"You don't know anything about me!"

“I can tell you’re not religious,” the god chuckled, a sound that set Arracan’s teeth on edge. “Interesting character trait for a priest, or should I say, former priest.”

Arracan stiffened, muscles tensing rigid. “What?”

“That’s how you got into this mess wasn’t it? Dabbling in temple secrets? Naughty.” Anestair ran a hand over the inscription, tracing the web of script as it coiled and twisted. “Clearly you’re talented. Not many could hold this in their mind and live.” He continued to move around the gate. “Perhaps you could be of some use? Not as my avatar though, far too unstable.” He seemed to be muttering to himself, talking as if Arracan wasn’t even there.

“I’m not here to serve,” he yelled, his voice echoing back off nothing, over and over again.

“I just want a cure.” His own voice came out of nowhere, echoing back to him, though Arracan hadn’t spoken the words. “It hurts so much!” His voice came again, Arracan was sickened at how pathetic he sounded.

“Well you won’t find the answers here,” Anestair said, not looking at him.

“Where?” This time it was his own mouth that spoke the words, filled with desperate need.

“Where would you go to find anything magical in this city?” Anestair looked back at him, not turning; instead, one side of his body reformed into the front of a man. “Oh I’m keeping you, sorry.” He waved a shadowy hand.

The scream was still in his throat, seeming to go on forever. The pain was back tenfold. Arracan threw himself backward, tumbling over the table behind him and crashing to the ground. Dimly he saw Loker drop to the floor in a heap; Arracan couldn’t remember having let him go. Agony blazed in his skull, blotting out all thought. A part of him begged for death.

It stopped as suddenly as ever, leaving him panting on the floor. His fingers clawed at the wood of the table, hauling himself up. Loker was just stirring as Arracan backed away, a driving pain pounding in his skull. He stumbled

around, looking for the door, it was hard to think clearly. He reached it just as the barkeep returned, wiping her meaty hands on her apron.

“Tossed the guy in front of the Blind Nag, see how Topper likes that!”

Arracan slid past her and out onto the streets, every step jarring him and sending another stab of fire through his skull. He staggered through the streets before collapsing into an alley, breathing heavily as he took stock. Yes, he was in pain, but that would fade. And he had learnt something at least; the focus of his visions seemed to be that gate. Whatever it was it must be important, he wasn't used to having his mind frequented by deities. Still, his brain latched onto a key point Anestair had made. Where would you go in this city to find out about something magical? Despite the pain, a smile crept across his face. Arracan was going to the Mages' Guild.

Chapter Nine

Malus blinked the sun out of his eyes as he looked upon the outer wall of Kar Noval, tasting dust in his throat. Teams of masons and builders crawled along the towering structure like insects, laden down with stone and mortar. Scaffoldings clung to the wall like ivy, teetering precariously as the dry wind gusted. Old cracks had been patched, foundations and buttresses shored up, rusted hinges on gates had been oiled or replaced. Before, the wall had looked imposing in a sort of detached, reliable way at best. Now it was slowly coming to look formidable, well maintained and secure. *And so it should*, Malus thought, thinking of the cost.

The wall ran around the entire perimeter of the city and the expense of restoring it to battle readiness was ruinous. The masons said it would take weeks to restore fully, given the state of disrepair. It was, however, the only place any real work was being done. He'd had Dalen come up with enough construction projects and repairs within the city to mask his own work at the excavation site, but Malus had cut corners everywhere he could, despite what he'd said to the council. Most of the sites focused on purely cosmetic changes with a lot of fanfare to make it seem more impressive. He'd initially worried that someone might notice, but in Kar Noval people would just assume it was another expression of the nobles' greed and the renovation project was just another hollow gesture on the part of the council.

He strode along the length of the wall, looking up as an attacker might, he realised. Malus tried to imagine the scene; smoke billowing from fires in the city as catapults launched flaming missiles through a sky turned the colour of blood. There would be scores of grim-faced soldiers manning the wall, arrows filling the sky like a deadly hail to rain down on him. Torrents of molten fire pouring down from murder holes over the gates as the besieging army struggled to batter

down the walls. He almost pitied the men of Kar Korus who would have to assault this place. Almost.

A cart passed by in front of him, laden down with crates marked as building materials. He wondered if it actually contained construction supplies or if it was another supply of arms and equipment for the military forces stationed on the walls. Materials for the war effort were being brought in under the cover of construction materials so as not to worry the public, another of his ideas to prevent civil panic. Much good it would do, lately the city was filling with prophets and doomsayers foretelling destruction. The rumours about Kar Korus could not be silenced, but Malus didn't want to add to the panic. Those crates might contain stacks of arrows or barrels of pitch to be lit and poured down onto a besieging army. It seemed a fine use for the money he'd prised out of the other councillors.

Still, he had his own plans to attend to, and no time to stand gawking. Malus moved on, a pair of bodyguards following behind him; he heard their footsteps crunch in the dry earth. His own feet kicked up a cloud of brick dust, clogging his throat. Malus resisted the urge to spit it out. He had to maintain the dignity of his position, but what he wouldn't give for a cool glass of Beleros wine to wash away the taste.

Thankfully he didn't have to endure it long. Catching sight of Dalen directing a pair of surveyors, he strode to meet him. The old man was dressed in a ragged shirt and breeches, heavily stained with the white granite dust of the walls. His skinny limbs shone a burnished bronze in the blazing sun, yet Dalen paled when he saw him coming. The architect shooed away the surveyors as Malus reached him, flanked by the shadows of his bodyguards. Seeing their silhouettes on the ground beside him, he briefly wondered where his pet assassin was.

"Councillor." Dalen bowed his head.

"Dalen, how go the preparations?"

The architect wiped a bead of sweat off his forehead. "Well, there are various construction projects going up all over the city as you specified. A lot of fanfare and movement, the people are all talking about the project." He leaned closer to Malus, casting a furtive look around. "I followed your instructions, keeping the changes light." He gestured to the wall. "As for the outer defences, we've been working to repair and strengthen the walls to withstand any assault. It's been harder than we expected. Since it was built there hasn't been a lot of effort at maintenance, but we'll get there."

Malus stared at him levelly. "Thank you for the update, but I don't care about any of that." His voice took on a dangerous tone. "I was speaking," he looked Dalen in the eye, "of the excavation."

The architect nervously wiped his forehead again. "Ah, of course."

Malus gestured and his bodyguards backed off a few steps. "Tell me."

"Right." Dalen produced a map from within his ragged shirt. He rolled it out and took a step closer. Malus could smell the rank odour of sweat on the man. "This is where we began digging," he pointed to a mark on the map of the city, "under the cover of a new drainage system, it would give us the justification to spend a great deal of time underground and excuse us from scrutiny of our work."

"Yes, get on with it!" Malus said.

"Right, we fashioned a suitable shaft, going through the existing drainage system shown in the older maps."

"Dalen!"

The architect almost dropped his map as Malus startled him, but answered, "We're through, Councillor, we've breached the top levels of the Lower City."

Malus grabbed him, knocking the map out of Dalen's hands. He yanked him close, the smell of sweat growing stronger. "So soon?"

Even held in Malus' grasp, Dalen still managed to look a little smug as he nodded. "I told you it would go much faster inside the city. Our water and

drainage systems are built on the upper levels of the Lower City, I selected one of the smaller water mains that had the best chance of accessing them directly, without being too disruptive. We only had to dig down through two levels to reach the outer limits.”

Malus let him go. “Then don’t let up, I want full access to the entire Lower City as soon as possible, it’s your top priority.”

“Yes Councillor, after I’ve finished here, I’ll –” Dalen stopped when he saw the look in Malus’s eye. “I’ll see to it immediately.”

“I want to be buried under your reports.” With a final look he turned away. Given the latest news on the excavation, Malus wanted to get the rest of the day’s tour over with. He’d decided to make an appearance at several construction sites to make his presence known. After all, he was supposed to be architect of the renovation project. Abruptly he cut his list in half. With the failures and delays at the previous sites, Malus hadn’t expected to be this far along. It changed everything.

He increased his pace, his bodyguards struggling to keep up. Clouds of dust rose into the air, but the taste didn’t seem to bother him so much anymore.

“This is what I’m paying you for?” Malus stared at the crude wooden effigy before him and turned to Cras at his side. “I could have hired a craftsman if I wanted this.”

Cras leaned over the effigy and adjusted one of Malus’ coats he’d wrapped around the figure. “When you’re looking at it through a window, there’s only a silhouette. They expect to see you in your rooms, the only person there, and take the shot.”

“And how would they even get up this high?” Malus gestured out of the nearby window of his tower home. It was one of the tallest in the Noble Circle, with a commanding view of the whole city, visible now only as a scattering of lights in the dark. He could look down on the whole world from his tower.

“That’s what you’re supposed to think, the nobles’ tower homes aren’t nearly as secure as they’d wish to believe. But as long as they do, practically no effort is made at security.”

Malus looked around at his chambers, his palace in the sky. Gas lamps burned on the walls, lighting up the finely crafted desk in one corner. The floor was polished marble, pristine and shining in the faint light from the lamp and reflecting the mosaic on the curving ceiling. The image depicted Emperor Tellan, the last ruler of the broken Navian Empire. He stood triumphant over a sea of fallen enemies, wreathed in a crimson light before the sun. The mosaic loomed over his plush bed, so that it would be the first thing Malus saw as he awoke. Something to aspire to, a reminder that his birthright awaited. As in his office, the walls were adorned with priceless art. Malus liked to be surrounded by signs of wealth and power. His chambers occupied the entire top floor of the tower; he would allow no one else to be higher than him, save the Emperor himself.

It was unsettling to think it might not be secure.

He watched Cras shift the effigy a fraction so that its face was turned away from the window. It wouldn’t fool anyone up close, a dress-maker’s mannequin garbed in Malus’ clothes. But it just might fool an assassin at a distance. Of course, he would not tell Cras that. Just having the assassin in his private chambers was bad enough.

Seemingly satisfied, Cras beckoned him over to the window. “I’ve also added some security measures for the window.” Malus leaned over to look at the windowsill. Glimmering in the moonlight was a row of razor sharp blades studded into the wood. The wicked metal barbs were curved to catch someone’s hands if they sought to pull themselves up in through the window. He reached down to brush one with his finger, but a hand grabbed his. “I wouldn’t,” Cras said. “It’s coated with a poison that relaxes the muscles. Even if an intruder doesn’t fall at cutting himself, their limbs will go slack as the poison takes effect.”

Malus pulled his hand away, “What other changes have you made?”

The assassin moved off, stopping to nudge the decoy a fraction more to the right. "There aren't many entrances to this room, so it's fairly secure, but I've added a new lock to the door." Cras tossed him a key which Malus caught automatically.

"I assure you, my lock was fashioned by the best locksmith money can buy."

"I hope you can get a refund, it took me fourteen seconds to get in," Cras said, walking over to the door and tapping the handle. "The mechanism I've added works on a disc tumbler system, and is much more difficult to pick." Malus looked at the oddly shaped key in his hand, lined with a row of uneven ridges. Again, he was unnerved by the flaws in his security. "There's also a few weapons hidden about the room should you need to defend yourself. That's about it for your chambers."

"If I need to defend myself, then clearly you aren't doing your job," Malus said, angry at feeling threatened in his own chambers. Cras had quite literally brought home the reality of assassination for him. Though it had always been a possibility, it now seemed much more real. "And who authorised you to make these changes? Should I be watching my step every second to avoid setting off another trap?"

"They are here for your protection," Cras said, a little stiffly. "I don't get paid if you die."

"Your concern is touching, but I feel safe enough, you may go." Malus suddenly wanted the killer out of his chambers. Cras' eyes flashed at the dismissal, but then he turned and left without another word. After he'd left, Malus took a seat behind his desk. Papers and missives were spread over the surface, some weighed down with ornaments against the faint breeze from the window. He didn't feel like getting up to close it now.

Malus shifted in his seat, stretching out the kinks in his neck. After the meeting with Dalen he'd rushed the rest of his appointments, putting in enough time with the builders at the various renovation sites throughout the city to

solidify his image as architect of the renovation. Despite cutting down on his stops, he was still exhausted when he'd reached home, only to find Cras fooling around with his replica.

Putting the assassin out of his mind, Malus turned his attention to the work on his desk. One hand traced a stack of ledgers and supply manifests, while the other pulled out a sheaf of maps and blueprints hidden under a report. After Dalen's news he'd been working on a way to discreetly move all the equipment he thought they'd need into the Lower City. It had caught him unawares, and he hadn't made the necessary preparations. He had to make sure there were trusted men at the checkpoint, or pay for the bribes to keep people quiet, purchase nearby warehouses for storage, anything to lessen the noise that moving masses of excavation equipment underground would make. Of course some of it could be accounted for by the renovation work, but if he moved too much too fast, people might start to ask what the supplies were for. How much could be needed for a new drainage system?

Malus groaned, rubbing a hand on his brow. A lot of the materials were interchangeable, yet there was some specialist equipment that would have to be moved. A rumble in his stomach reminded him that it had been several hours since he'd eaten. Reaching for one of a series of nearby signal ropes that hung from the wall, he gave it a sharp tug.

Returning to his work, Malus decided he would hide the necessary supplies in with the tunnelling equipment; it would take a specialist to know the difference, even if he were to allow it to be checked. Satisfied, he looked up at a knock on his door. "Enter."

A servant stepped into his room, bearing a platter with a silver cover. The aroma of food spread and his stomach growled once more. The servant set it down on his desk, manoeuvring with exaggerated care as not to disrupt Malus' work. He wore a doublet and hose in the red and black colours of the Vern house. Malus gave him a quick glance to confirm the familiar face, only sparing that second because of the infiltrators. This man had worked for him for years,

Reman was his name. He could be trusted as much as anyone, and would certainly know the penalties for betrayal. Yet after the meeting with Cras, Malus was still wary. Reman quickly tested the food before leaving, then shut the door behind him.

Malus barely noticed. Instead he fixed his eyes on the replica, then the window, wondering what else his assassin had changed. If it wasn't enough that he had to worry about being assassinated by spies, he now had to worry about setting off deadly traps in his own home. *Wouldn't that be an ignominious end, to open a desk drawer only to be impaled by a spring loaded crossbow quarrel?* Pity the Guild didn't offer refunds.

In need of a strong drink, Malus reached for the bottom drawer of his desk. His hand paused, inches from the handle as images of darting crossbow quarrels flashed in his mind. Cursing himself, he wrenched open the drawer with unnecessary force, nearly dragging it out entirely. Retrieving a long necked bottle and a glass, he pulled out the stopper and poured a generous measure of brandy. Swirling it once, Malus downed the entire contents in a single swallow. The fiery liquid burned its way down his throat, kindling a pleasant warmth in his stomach. It helped to counter the chill from the wind that still blew in from the open window, but there was no way in the Deeper Hells he was going to touch it.

"Damn assassins." He poured himself another glass.

Chapter Ten

“Keep your eyes in your skulls, lads,” Hrun said as they entered the brothel.

The room was dimly lit, even though it was daylight. Coloured veils had been drawn over the windows and tinted lamps smouldered in unmistakably phallic holders. Almost everywhere he looked, Hrun saw beautiful women dressed in a variety of exotic costumes, their painted faces smiling from the shadows. They moved across the room with seductive grace, or lounged provocatively in the half light on plush couches. His nostrils filled with a blend of exquisite perfumes, jasmine, lavender, honey and others he couldn't identify.

To his left was an array of food and wine on a table. The selection of confectioned delights contained more tarts than the entire building; pastries, cakes and sweet rolls covered the table in all shapes and colours. He heard the booted footsteps of his men behind him, overpowering the soft music that filled the room. Hrun took it all in with a sweeping glance that ended abruptly as his gaze stopped on a bear of a man standing in a recess beside the door.

A tailored suit stretched to cover his massive frame, silk cloth transparent over bunched muscles. The effect was like putting an embroidered cover on a war hammer, a poor disguise on something clearly intended for violence. Hrun felt his hand brush the pommel of his own sword, resting comfortably at his belt. He looked into the narrow set eyes of the doorman but there was no reaction and the moment stretched.

“If your tastes run to men,” a silvery voice sounded from behind him, “I have some boys who'd be more obliging than Fenton.”

Hrun turned and beheld a goddess.

She stood in profile, in the centre of the room, surrounded by a cadre of beautiful women who looked drab by comparison. Shining blonde hair caressed her shoulders, framing a face that outshone the sun. Emerald eyes peered out

from milky white skin, perfectly complemented by her scarlet lips. She wore a matching red dress that was modest by the standard of the room, something a noblewoman would wear to a fine ball, yet it somehow looked scandalous on her. It was something in the way she stood, everything about her screamed with desire. Even her voice, dipping from sweetly chaste to haunting and sinful. Despite himself, he felt a stirring in his groin.

She glided across the room, moving with the grace of a dancer. As she passed, Hrun caught a whiff of her scent, it was intoxicating. She laid a hand on the guard, Fenton, and turned to face Hrun with a smile that stole the strength from his legs. "Perhaps my boys aren't as...imposing as Fenton, but I assure you, they're exceptionally talented." She smiled at him.

Hrun coughed, "Actually I'm here on official business. I take it you're Shylo?"

Her smile turned into a pout that just made him want her more. "You must be mistaken." She leaned in closer; again there was that exhilarating scent. "There's no *official business* here." He looked into her eyes and saw steel behind the seduction. "If you're here for the entertainment, we're at your service, otherwise I can't help you."

She turned away and Hrun made to stop her, throwing out a hand. Before he could lay a finger on the Madame, Fenton interposed himself between Hrun and Shylo. Unwilling to risk a fight, Hrun peered round the side of the doormen.

"This isn't someone petty thug I'm after. It concerns the whole city!"

Shylo turned around, with one dainty hand she brushed Fenton on the shoulder and the doormen stepped back. "The city and I have an agreement, we don't bother one another."

"If war comes there may not be a city." Even as he said the words, Hrun feared he had revealed too much. Yet a knowing look blossomed on Shylo's face.

"Ah, so it's the spies you're after?" She gave a coquettish laugh at the look of surprise on his face. "Don't look so shocked, you can't imagine the things I hear from my girls."

“Have you heard anything about the spies?”

“A man will reveal many things to a girl’s ear, but I doubt they’d confess to being an enemy of the city.” She gave that smile again. “Though I have heard some unusual boasts in my time.”

Hrun cursed inwardly, it would be too much to hope that he’d stumble onto the information here. “I’m also looking for two members of the City Guard.”

“Afraid we haven’t had any boys in uniform come in, other than the ones that work here of course. Some of the outfits are quite intricate.”

He tried another lead. “I expect you wouldn’t know anything about a fight that may have occurred nearby either?”

Shylo shrugged again in what must have been a calculated fashion to thrust her chest out. “Just rumours, a scuffle, no bodies, I don’t know who was involved. As long as it doesn’t bother my guests...”

Hrun slumped. He had no leads now, there was no trace of Harks or Logan at their other haunts. He didn’t know what had happened to them. Nor did he have any other way to track the spies. He didn’t even know if they were in the city, the investigation so far had been a giant waste of time. “So you can’t help me?”

“I didn’t say that.” A smile flickered across Shylo’s face. “My girls are always at your service.”

He turned away. “That’s not the kind of help I was looking for.”

“Well, perhaps I do have information that might be useful to you.”

Hrun paused, almost certain he would regret this. He looked back around. “What kind of information?”

“You think I’m just going to tell you?” Shylo raised a hand to her mouth in a shocked pose. “Do you know what this place is? It’s like I tell my girls, no freebies.”

“I’m a Captain of the City Guard, not a merchant,” Hrun said. Why did this have to be so difficult? “How do I know it’s even going to help me?”

“Looks like you don’t have many options.” Shylo kept her face neutral, but her eyes showed a certain smugness.

He thought about threatening her with an investigation, but it would likely be an empty threat. This Madam probably had more clout with the higher ups than he did as a Captain. “What do you want?”

She gave him a lascivious look. “Perhaps you could... owe me a favour? I’m sure a man in your position could be very useful. What do you say?”

“As I’ve said, I’m a Captain of the City Guard, I won’t do anything against the law.”

Shylo seemed surprised; a smile of honest amusement broke out over her face. “I’m amazed you’ve got so far with that attitude. Very well, I’ll take into account your *sensibilities* when I collect my favour. Believe it or not, even whores need justice sometimes. Do we have a deal?”

Hrun stared into those gorgeous eyes and knew with utter certainty that he couldn’t trust them. But he couldn’t disappoint the councillor either. What would be the cost of following the trail? His task was vital to the safety of the city. Was the pursuit of justice worth serving a lesser evil, damning himself in the future? Shylo was watching him expectantly, wearing a look he’d already seen today. Just as when Talos had set him the task, Hrun had no choice. He did the only thing he could. “Deal. What can you tell me?”

Her smile this time was pure triumph. “The Black Hands were forced out of their territory in Arden’s Folly. These gangs are ruthless when guarding their turf, it must have taken something big to shift them. Maybe your spies were looking to move in?”

“That’s it? For all I know it could just be business as usual, a rival gang making a move.” Hrun couldn’t believe he’d traded a favour for that.

“It could be. Of course then all this would have been for nothing. You’d best hope otherwise.”

He thought about arguing, but it wouldn't do any good. At least he had a lead, however tenuous. He tried not to think about what it cost him. "Thank you for your time." Hrun turned to leave with a churning feeling in his stomach.

"Wait," Shylo called after him.

"Have you remembered something else?"

She sidled in close to him, until their faces were barely inches apart. "Maybe when you're off duty you'd care to come back. I'll even give you a discount."

Hrun had gathered a few more men from his station to accompany him into Arden's Folley, so named for the foolish merchant who braved its streets alone. Supposedly the arrogant man had been robbed seventeen times as he tried to cross the narrow stretch. Hrun wondered why the first group hadn't taken everything Arden had, though that would probably have made for a less interesting story.

Arden's Folley was technically one street, yet because civic planning was unheard of in the Nest, it was a street that twisted, sprawled, and curved back on itself so that it formed a miniature maze a few acres big. It was a dangerous patch, notorious for its gangs and crime rate. There were eight of the City Guard in the group, including Hrun, yet still they kept a watchful eye as they moved through the area. The buildings were the typical dilapidated, ramshackle affair of the Nest. Some were little more than burned-out ruins, evidence of gang activity, along with the scrawled graffiti painted on the buildings. Hrun noticed that the Black Hand sign still dotted Arden's Folley. If they had been forced out by another gang, the first thing to happen would be that mark vanishing under the victor's symbol. A few were scrawled over, but it was just more of the doomsday warnings that had been plaguing the city lately.

There was a subdued atmosphere about the place as he walked. While there was some traffic on the street, it was not as thick as it had been at Southgate. Instead of the roar of the crowd there was a dull mutter, the people

hunched and furtive, dressed in shabby, stained clothes. The inhabitants of Arden's Folley were downtrodden and impoverished, here only because they had nowhere else to go.

It was a sad fact, but he wasn't here to cure the city's ills, he was here to track down the spies. The absence of any new gang markings lent support to Shylo's lead. If they were here, the infiltrators from Kar Korus wouldn't care about gang wars or turf. The Madame had even stretched to telling him where a few members of the Black Hands had been seen licking their wounds, acting as if she was doing him a good turn. It still irked him that she'd wheedled a favour for this crumb of knowledge.

He saw the old bakery Shylo had mentioned and gestured to his men. The group turned down a narrow alley, two of his men breaking off to block the exit. The alley lay between the bakery and a dull, blocky structure that might have been a warehouse, likely storing flour and supplies for the bakery. It was shadowed and damp, and a thick smell of mould clogged the air. Several men occupied the alley, leaning against the walls or slumping in the mud. All of them were injured. One man's face was a mottled mess of bruises, another had a deep gash above one eye. There was a stocky lad sat with his back against a wall and a bloodstained cloth wrapped around his thigh. Another lay flat out in the dirt, his shirt ripped and punctured, crusted over with dried blood. He wasn't moving. A lean youth with a scruff of blond beard was wrapping another man's arm in a sling made from a torn shirt. All had their right hands tattooed black.

Hrun heard the footsteps of his men as they spread out behind him, though the five gang members made no threatening moves, and looked too battered to be much of a threat. As Hrun stepped forward a few sullen looks were all the hostility he received.

"Well if it isn't the sorriest group of Black Hands in the Nest." Hrun looked around the alley with contempt. Half his time as an officer was spent dealing with the gangs in the Nest. They preyed on the weak, and constantly fought each other for turf, resources, or just for the hell of it. After all the crimes he'd seen

committed by gang members, Hrun wouldn't be sorry to see the whole lot of them stamped out. Still, this group looked so wretched it was pitiful.

The youth with the beard tied off the sling and got up to meet him as Hrun approached. "We're not causing any trouble," he said. Closer now, Hrun saw the youth had a split lip, and he walked with a limp on his left side.

"You in charge here?"

The blond nodded. "I reckon so, now that Wrex is dead."

"What do they call you?"

"Totts," he grunted. "We weren't doing anything."

"I know," Hrun said. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Totts shifted awkwardly.

"Doesn't look like nothing," Hrun said. "In fact, I hear you been forced out of Arden's Folley."

"We're still here," Totts said, defensively.

"Barely. You're clinging to the outskirts because you have nowhere else to go."

"What do the Reds care?"

"I need to know what happened, it might help my investigation."

"Maybe I don't feel like talking."

Hrun tried to hold back his anger. He had spent the day being jerked around by people he couldn't touch, because of their position or connections. This scum had no friends in high places, he was not untouchable. *To hell with it.* Hrun reached out and grabbed Totts, twisted and slammed the Black Hand face first into the wall. Totts' face bounced off the warped wood of the bakery and he collapsed onto the ground. The other gang members made to get up, but the rasp of steel from behind Hrun froze them in place.

"I have a job to do. tell me what I want to know!"

Totts looked up from the ground. The façade cracked and Hrun saw real fear in his eyes. "I...I can't."

“Why not?” He knelt down before the Black Hand, knees squelching in the mud.

“Those men, they...” Totts faltered. “We barely got away, they hit us so fast.”

“Tell me.” Hrun reached out to grip his shoulder but Totts batted his hand away and scrambled back.

“No! I don’t want anything more to do with them. If I talked... they’d know. One of them, he...”

“Damn it, Totts! Tell me, I can stop them.” Hrun got up and chased him down, half raging, half pleading. His men and the Black Hands watched the exchange intently.

“No, one of them, a mage, the things he did...” Totts struggled to his feet.

“Just tell me what they look like, where to find them.” Hrun stopped a few feet away. “That’s all I need. How did they dress, did they look like southerners?” Totts’ eyes widened and Hrun felt a surge of hope, he wasn’t about to let go now. “They might be the people I’m looking for, it’s very important.” He stepped forward, backing Totts up against the wall.

The gang members were hardened criminals, whatever their age. Whoever spooked them this bad would have to be professionals. Hrun had his lead, he just needed to push a bit more. “How about you just tell me where they are, where they drove you from, that’s all. Maybe then I could see about getting a squad medic to patch your boys up.”

Totts looked at him, Hrun met his gaze. “Fine, I’ll tell you.”

Chapter Eleven

Cras sighted at the target, eyeing that smug face down the length of a crossbow. Poison glistened on the iron tip, a deadly concoction that would kill within seconds from even a scratch should his aim be off. There was no excuse for that now though. Hidden as he was in the rafters, Cras had all the time in the world to aim. He wore his black assassin's gear, the dark shape of his form blending perfectly with the shadows in the grand dining room where his target was taking an evening meal. Cras rested in a crouched position, knees bent. It was a pose that would have been agony after a few minutes, had he not spent time developing the muscles in his thighs. He held the crossbow in both hands, resting his elbows on his knees for balance. He breathed slowly, in and out, finger resting lightly on the trigger. *Got you*, his mind whispered as he looked down the sights at Councillor Malus.

Cras paused, savouring the familiar moment, power over life and death.

With a quiet sigh of resignation he took his finger off the trigger and let the crossbow dip. *That's another avenue I gotta seal up*. He set the crossbow before him and shifted position, looking along the wooden beam of the rafters and the hanging curtain he had used to climb up. He could set up trip wires along the wooden beam, poisoned spikes, or maybe just jangling bells. Any way he did it, Cras would have to spend hours climbing about the ceiling. It would be easier just to remove the curtains, yet he knew Malus wouldn't tolerate any change to the decor, even if could mean his life. Besides, he thought ruefully, an intruder might be equipped with a grapple and could just swing up there. Feeling spiteful, Cras decided on the poison spikes.

He looked back down at Malus as the councillor ate, completely unaware of his presence. This job required a lot more work than he had expected. Cras had only seen how difficult it was to take out a target from the perspective of an

assassin. He never knew it could be this hard to keep someone alive. For a moment he felt a flicker of admiration for all the locksmiths, architects and bodyguards of the world, and the difficulty of their jobs.

Over the past couple of days Cras had worked like a dog, planning out the most likely angles of attack, setting traps, checking security, exploring entryways all over Malus' home and the council building. He was looking for anything Malus' guards might have missed. Never had he worked so hard for his money. Yet despite spending so much time around the councillor, Cras had done his best to avoid him. The casual contempt Malus obviously felt for him and the way he treated Cras like another servant was grating. Cras had been in a position to kill the councillor dozens of times in the past few days. As tempers frayed, with so much opportunity, it became harder and harder not to pull the trigger. The thought of the gold was all that kept him from killing Malus.

He crawled along the rafters till he was behind the curtains, over the narrow gap between them and the wall. Cras let himself drop along the wooden beam. Hooking a leg under, he spun in the air and released, letting go and somersaulting. His booted feet landed with a soft pat on the marble floor. Moving quietly, careful not to disturb the fabric, Cras circumvented the room till he was by the door. He leaned around the curtain to check Malus hadn't noticed anything. Sure enough, the councillor was sipping contentedly at his wine.

Slipping out from behind the fabric, Cras padded over to the door. He slowly pressed the handle and turned around. With a quick slam he closed it and stepped forwards, just as if he had entered the door. Malus looked up from his meal, a hand dropping to his belt before Cras saw the flash of recognition on his face. He gave the councillor a mocking wave.

"Enjoying your dinner?"

"I was." Malus went back to his meal as Cras approached. "What are you doing here?"

"My job, Councillor," Cras replied, "improving your security."

"I hope so, I'm not paying you to lounge about my home." *A moment ago I had him in my sights.*

"Any word on the spies?" Cras asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Nothing. What about *your* progress?" Malus wouldn't let it go.

"Ongoing," Cras said, "I've done what I can to make this place and your offices at the council building more secure, but there's still more to be done."

"Then you'd best get to it." Malus looked back to his food, dismissing him.

Cras stared at the councillor for a moment, then turned and walked away. He thought about retrieving the crossbow.

One of many things Cras resented about his new job was the travel time. Malus' tower home was in the Noble Circle in the centre of the Public District. Cras didn't have very formal terms of his contract as the Guild didn't have much precedent for keeping people alive. Even so, it was expected that he would be near the councillor at all times. But he needed a break.

To get back to the Hanged Man tavern, Cras would have had to get past the towering inner wall that sealed off the Noble Circle from the rest of the Public District, then somehow get through the Net. The Net was a layered wall separating the Public District from the Rat's Nest. A channel of high walls and narrow corridors, it marked the dividing line between the two sections of the city and stepping from one to the other was like entering another world. Yet it was not nearly so simple as stepping over a line. The Net was as wide as two or three streets, containing the central barracks for the City Guard, a sprawling mass of dorms, squad rooms and offices stretching across the city in a narrow streak. There was no straight route through the Net, no central gate. Anyone trying to get through from the Nest would have to pass through a score of checkpoints and gatehouses, travelling down winding pathways, all under the watchful eye of the guards who patrolled the maze of walls.

That is, unless you knew a way around it.

Cras normally slept in the servant's quarters of Malus' home, exhausted and irritated at the end of each day. The trip back to the Nest was simply too much effort. But tonight he felt a powerful tug of homesickness, and there were a few people he wanted to see. He'd been pushed to his limits working for Malus, and had decided to take matters into his own hands regarding the spies. Cras had a contact in the Nest who might be able to track them down, and so speed up his mission, and payment. As he slipped out of the servants' entrance at the rear of Malus' home into the chill night air, Cras spared a thought for the councillor sleeping warm in his bed. *The things I do for you.*

Malus' home was near the centre of the Noble Circle, and it would take hours to get to the Nest by the usual route. Cras hunched down, pulling his hood up about him as he picked his way through the streets. The architecture was different from the Nest of course, and the rest of the Public District. Here the buildings were more graceful, with greater attention to detail and aesthetics, whereas a structure in the Public District would be built economically, with perhaps a nod to design and appearance, depending on the owner. The buildings here were less angular, more curved and sloping, like the winding bridges that twisted through the sky and connected the high towers to each other. Every building in the Noble Circle exuded a sense of wealth, a corner of the city made to be looked at, admired. The money could have been put to much better use. The girls at Shylo's came to mind.

Cras ignored the sweeping rooftops, the delicate balconies that looked over the streets, throwing him into a deeper darkness as they blotted out the starlight. The streets were almost empty, even at this early time of night. Clearly the nobles liked their rest. In the Rat's Nest the streets would be thronged with people, rowdy and staggering, and ripe pickings for the thieves, pickpockets and muggers. Again he felt a pang of homesickness.

That wasn't to say the Noble Circle lacked dangers. Cras ducked into a doorway as two city guards appeared around the corner or a wall. Luckily it was a gaudy, decorated entryway, stretching back a few feet and Cras pressed himself

flat against the wall, sinking into the shadows. As was typical in the Noble Circle, the guards were vassals from one of the noble families, their tabards bearing the colours of the house they served. They wouldn't stray too far from the family home, patrolling a short circuit through the surrounding streets. Cras waited until they passed and moved on.

Slipping through the empty streets, he came to what appeared to be a dead end, nestled in an alley between two flower shops. He crouched at a grate in the base of the wall. With a quick glance around, he slid his gloved fingers under the bars and pulled. There was a faint scrape of metal on stone as he heaved the cover free. Setting it gently down, Cras hooked his legs over the edge and dropped about five feet, his boots landing on solid stone. Moving quickly, he reached out and slid the grate back over the hole, ducking low as he pulled it into place. The cover dropped into the grooves with a faint clang.

He crouched low, the faint moonlight that shone through the metal bars barely made a dent in the pitch darkness he stared into. Reaching down, he groped blindly for a moment before his hands found an oiled bag. Working by touch, he pulled out one of several long sticks with a rounded top. As he took the object out of the bag, the tarry smell of pitch trickled into his nostrils. Cras struck the torch along the wall and it caught, bursting into flames which revealed a rough stone tunnel a couple of feet wide and just high enough for a man to stand upright. Quickly, so the light wouldn't give him away, Cras replaced the bag of unlit torches and hurried into the darkness of the Lower City.

You could reach almost anywhere in Kar Noval via the tunnels. They extended beyond and far under the city. They connected with water reservoirs, sewer systems, and deeper into the Lower City, if rumours were to be believed. The Guild and other unscrupulous characters often used them to get around without being seen. This occasionally led to conflict when a man or group came across another, and frantic fights broke out in the darkness of the tunnels without those on the surface ever knowing. Cras' trip was uneventful as he worked his way

quickly across the city. The upper levels were mapped somewhat and Cras had spent a lot of time travelling them, he didn't get lost too much, as long as he stuck to the main trails. Most of the side tunnels had fallen to ruin, joining the rest of the old city that Kar Noval had been built over. Now only the useful tunnels were maintained, like those that served as the waterworks of the city.

Finally he reached the Nest, rising up out of another grate from the stale air of the Lower City tunnels to the slightly fetid, rotten taste of the Nest. Cras breathed deep of the noxious atmosphere. *Ah, the sweet smell of home.* He'd arrived in the north east of the Rat's Nest, not too far from the Net. He slipped into the crowds moving across the road. The street around him was as different from the Noble Circle as day was to night. If you didn't know it, one would think they were from different cities. It was hard to imagine this shanty town and the Noble Circle existing with only a few miles between them.

Instead of the paved stone streets he had grown used to, Cras' feet sank into thick mud. Sloping white marble had been swapped with warped wood, rotten and mouldy green in colour. The graceful towers that speared the sky were replaced with toppling hovels that seemed to be trying to sink further into the ground. In the Noble Circle, colourfully clad elites stalked the streets with contempt, heads held up, surrounded by their uniformed bodyguards. Here the people were drab and brown, like the mud they trudged through. They walked hunched and hurried, moving through the night as quickly as possible.

A sudden jolt to his shoulder staggered him. Cras never saw it coming, lost in his reverie. He flexed his wrists and a pair of knives dropped into his hands, even before he fully registered the hit.

"Watch where you're going," came the slurred voice of the drunk who'd slammed into him. He must have been in his fifties at least, with chalk white hair. His bony frame packed a punch though. Cras rubbed his shoulder, a smile spreading on his face as the drunk staggered away. Seeing the drunk stumble off made him long for a beer himself. Idly he thought that The Hanged Man wasn't far.

With a groan he took a left fork, instead veering away from his beloved tavern. He had things to do tonight and he'd lost time in his trek through the Lower City. Besides, surely he could get a drink where he was going.

Cras stepped into the welcoming embrace of Gallows' Humour, nodding to a couple of muscled doormen as he entered. The expansive building served as a tavern, pawnshop, drug den, gambling house, and theatre where jesters and jokers performed. The place was packed, every table full. Bodies pressed up against the bar, shifting forms meshing in a dense mass of human flesh.

He drew a breath and inhaled an intoxicating mix of various drugs, burning in all corners of the room. Cras caught the sickly sweet scent of Reaper's touch, a blue flower that brought its user to the brink of death. Chogum too, with its distinctive bite in the back of the throat as you breathed it, along with Black Tears, Quiver, and others even he couldn't identify. The narcotic fumes mixed with the heady smell of booze and smoke, creating a churning miasma that pervaded the entire building. Faces appeared in the darkness, some rapt with ecstasy, some drawn with despair. Dress here was both high and low, Gallows' Humour turned no one away. On stage a shabby man with a multicoloured cane projected his voice as he stood before the crowd and announced the punch line to some joke. The words were drowned out in a fit of laughter.

Cras weaved his way through the mass of patrons to the bar. He gestured with his hand and a tankard appeared, as if by magic, in front of him. If that was a trick then the way the barman made his coin vanish was sorcery in truth. Cras leaned against the yielding wood and surveyed the room. He had come to Gallows' Humour looking for the owner, the crime lord Versaius, who virtually owned this part of the Nest, with dozens of informants, thieves and thugs at his call. Versaius liked to put on a harmless exterior, jolly and smiling, but he was not someone to be fucked with. Though he did act like he had a soft spot for Cras,

who had worked for him a few times. On rare occasions, Cras even gave him a discount. If that wasn't friendship, he didn't know what was.

He discreetly made another gesture to the barman, catching his eye. The man nodded curtly before going back to his work. Cras left the bar and made his way to the far wall and the row of private booths. Despite the packed establishment, one booth remained vacant, a small island of emptiness, inviolate. There were no markings, no guards, but the regulars knew that booth was reserved for Versaius. Cras sat down on the empty bench and waited.

Shortly he saw the familiar form of Versaius approach. The crowd parted before the short, fat man with the jolly smile. "Cras, son, it's good to see you."

Cras rose and shook the proffered hand. He might have felt relieved at Versaius' smile, on most men it would mean friendship, joy. But he'd seen that smile as Versaius ordered the fingernails pulled from a shopkeeper who wouldn't pay protection money. Versaius always smiled.

"Likewise," Cras said and they both sat.

"So what brings you to my little corner?"

"Well I've got this new job –"

"Ah yes, safeguarding our noble Councillor Malus." Cras shot him a look of surprise. "Oh please, as if I wouldn't know. Continue."

"Right." Cras took a swig of his drink while he processed the information. He knew Versaius was connected, but for him to have that information suggested he had sources in the Guild itself. Contract details were supposed to be absolutely secret, under penalty of death. Only the client, the assassin and his contractor would know. He filed the information for later. "The thing is, the job's proving harder than I expected."

"Yes, your talents never did lie in protecting people. Rather the opposite, if memory serves." Versaius flashed him a grin.

"It's not the work, it's Malus, I..." Versaius raised an eyebrow. "Okay, I want to knife the bastard!"

Versiaus laughed, "And what do you want me to do about it? Lend you a knife? I wager a man in your profession should have a few lying around."

"No, it's not that." Cras shifted in his seat. "I take it you know the reason for my job?"

"Threats from foreign powers, spies, intrigue, secret deaths in the night." Versaius waved a hand dismissively.

"Yes well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I need to find these spies, if I end the threat to Malus, I end the job, and finally get paid."

"I wondered how quickly this was going to come to money."

"It's not just that," Cras said earnestly. "I had him under my crossbow today. I was so close to pulling the trigger. And I'm pretty sure my contract's forfeit if Malus dies under my watch, especially if I'm the one who kills him."

Versaius' cheeks twitched into a flabby grin. "As I've said, your talents always did veer in the other direction." His smile faded. "You know these men are dangerous, they won't go down easy. You sure it's worth dirtying your hands, when you could let someone else handle it? That's not like you."

"I'll make the exception, will you help me track them down?"

"For you?" Versaius laid a hand on his shoulder in a fatherly manner, "I'm sure we can come to a suitable price."

Chapter Twelve

“So you’re interested in joining us?” The weasel-faced man peered at him down a pointed nose with the practiced pomp that belongs exclusively to mid level administrators. His name was Kerel, and his eyes travelled over Arracan, taking his measure as the two stood in a small alcove off the main entrance. Kerel made no comment of his scars, such as were visible under the hood he wore; injuries and deformities weren’t uncommon among mages. Like being in the army, the profession came with some expectations. It was a refreshing change.

“The Chelle Kronan Guild is renowned far and wide, pre-eminent in the entire city.” Arracan left out that the other groups of mages were cults or petty covens that scarcely qualified as organisations. “Your library in particular is said to be extensive.”

“It is,” Kerel swelled like a blowfish, “it was almost without equal at the height of the Navian Empire. Whatever you’re looking for, odds are it can be found here.” *That’s just what I was hoping.* Arracan had set out for the Mage’ Guild as soon as he’d recovered from the incident with that drunken seer...and the god. He thought of the casual ease with which Anestair had brushed aside his attack, feeling the hateful and unfamiliar tingle of fear. His blood burned just thinking about it.

It hadn’t stopped him taking his advice though. He’d given a great deal of thought as to how to get into the Mages Guild. If he tried to sneak in, the magical wards would detect him, and using brute force would be foolhardy. Even he couldn’t prevail against an entire guild full of mages. Finally he’d decided the easiest way to get in would be under the guise of a prospective applicant. The Mages Guild was easy to find. Located in the Public District; it was a sprawling compound of training grounds, study halls and other faculties, all built of pale

white marble. He'd simply walked up to the entrance and asked about joining. *And if he was lucky...*

"I was hoping you could give me a tour of your facilities." Arracan gestured around the small meeting alcove, nestled between two pillars. "If I were to join, I would need to make sure the guild could meet my needs."

"If the guild *allows* you to join, I'm sure you will find its facilities appropriate."

Kerel's voice dripped with smug superiority and Arracan had to remind himself that eviscerating the man would gain him nothing. "Still, to avoid wasting too much of your time, I would like to make sure it has everything I need."

"I'm afraid before that there is an extensive interview process, testing measures and querying. We have only the highest grade of practitioners here, you understand?" His tone clearly indicated what he thought of Arracan, and as if that wasn't enough, there was the condescending sneer that simply looked ridiculous with Kerel's nose.

Arracan gave Kerel his best smile, lips stretching so that they merged with the scars on his face, giving the impression of a grinning skull. He accessed his Realm and let a fraction of his magic bleed through. "I'm sure you'll find my humble talents acceptable."

Kerel faltered as he was buffeted by the waves of energy emanating from him. The administrator visibly paled as Arracan's power washed over him. He sensed a flicking token of resistance as the administrator tried to access his own Realm and form a barrier, but Arracan brushed it aside as a man might push through a cobweb. Kerel gasped and reached out a hand to steady himself on a nearby pillar. Arracan let it go on for a moment longer before pulling back, shutting off his Realm. The surge of energy filling his limbs abruptly stopped and he waited patiently as Kerel gathered himself.

In the light from an arched window, Arracan saw sweat beading on the administrator's forehead. That smug face was gone, now he had a watchful, almost awed look.

“I, uh...” Kerel faltered. “You’re obviously very skilled, I’m sure you won’t have a problem with the interview process.”

“Thank you,” Arracan said, “now about that tour?”

Kerel led him through the compound. It was even bigger than Arracan had first guessed; many of the structures had extensive underground components, there were store rooms, classes, warded summoning chambers, all connected by a series of tunnels underground. Kerel led him through a great hall where scores of other mages mingled. Some were clustered in groups, others sat alone in meditation, or read from scrolls and books. Still more emerged from the numerous doors lining the hall, either to join one of the groups or merely passing through, laden down with more books, alchemical equipment and other, unidentifiable objects.

Normally a diverse group, the mages here all wore their guild robes over the rest of their clothes. The robes were pale blue and marked with the Chelle Kronan crest, three stars in an inverted triangle, the sign of The Whisperer. Whether priest or mage, all practitioners who joined the guild were assumed to acknowledge The Whisperer, whatever their beliefs. Legend said he was one of the first mages and learned sorcery from the dragons. Now whenever a mage studied in a guild or place of learning they were said to honour The Whisperer.

Arracan had his own experience, as former priest of his temple, and a user of Nasan. The Tempest was The Whisperer’s claimed realm, a storm of pure magic. It seemed wherever he went, Arracan couldn’t get away from his past.

Despite the principles of the guild, there were many here who would offer only a token acknowledgement to the guild’s patron. Arracan saw a high level Kel’shin. The bald fire weaver had intricate tattoos of arcane script from fingertip to elbow on both arms. Sat in a meditative pose was a cultist of the blood, his face ritually scarred in overlapping patterns that seemed to writhe in place. And over there was a trio of warrior mages from Kar Torus, their blue guild robes doing little to conceal the bulky weapons sheathed at their belts and

backs. There were others, more than he could identify, both outlandish and unassuming in their dress and features. The hall was filled with the tingle of magic, and he sensed a dozen different Realms, more. Arracan couldn't separate them out enough to determine who each belonged to, it was like sorting out a collection of spices after they had been stirred into a broth.

Kerel led him down the long hallway, past the tapestries, symbols and diagrams that covered the walls. They went through a door at the end of the hall and ascended a maze of staircases and passageways. Arracan had hoped he would be able to memorise the route in case he had to make a quick exit, but in minutes he was lost, and it became even more important to avoid a confrontation. He didn't look forward to fending off magical assaults while trying to find his way out of this place.

They climbed another staircase, coming to a long tunnel. He figured they must be in one of the grand towers now. The sun shone through scenes of myth made from stained glass, the vibrant patterns of the windows broke the tedium of the blank marble walls. They passed through some kind of checkpoint, with twin pillars on either side that were inscribed with a warding symbol. Arracan felt a tremor of magic as they passed through, but nothing else happened.

"Your security is impressive," Arracan said, hoping for more information.

"The pillars stop anyone from removing the most sensitive material from the library," Kerel kept his tone flat and civil. "If you want to be impressed..."

The tunnel opened up into another wide chamber. Arracan couldn't see the outer limits as his view was blocked by towering library stacks. Solid looking constructions, fixed from floor to ceiling for stability, they still seemed overburdened by the masses of books lining the shelves. Tomes of various sizes and colours were filed in neat rows, stacked next to piles of identical cylinders marked with preserving runes, likely holding scrolls or maps. The stacks were arranged with geometric precision, each row marked with a different rune. The rich, musty scent of knowledge filled his nostrils as he entered, taking in the

scene. Light filled the space, pouring in through large oval windows set around the room.

“I give you, The Grand Library.” For a second he’d forgotten Kerel was there. Their footsteps seemed out of place in the cavernous room, intruding on the silence, broken only by the soft rustle of a turned page. There were other mages here, though far fewer than in the great hall. All of them seemed deep in study and not one looked up as they entered.

Kerel led him silently through the library, deeper into the musty labyrinth. Arracan peered about, seeking any clue about the gate in his vision, and to convince Kerel of his genuine interest in their library. He found his gaze drawn to a door nestled between two stacks. It was made of riveted steel and etched with more wards.

“What’s that?”

Kerel looked to where he was pointing. “That leads to the inner archives. Only –” Before he could finish, Arracan was already walking towards the door. He heard hurried footsteps as the administrator caught up with him.

“Looks interesting.”

“Only the highest ranking guild members are permitted inside.”

Arracan turned back. “But how I am to make an informed choice without seeing the entire facility?”

“Surely you have seen enough? Regardless, I’m afraid I cannot permit you to enter the archives. It’s where the most potent and treasured works of the guild are kept.”

What a coincidence, that’s exactly what I’m looking for. “So you can’t even grant me a glimpse?” He quickly checked to make sure no one else was around.

“I don’t even have the clearance to get in,” Kerel said, not without some bitterness.

“That’s too bad.” He reached out a hand and clamped it over Kerel’s face. “Sleep.” The administrator instantly dropped to the ground, falling out of

Arracan's grip with a dull thud. He took another quick glance around, hoping he hadn't been noticed. It was possible someone had sensed him accessing his Realm, but hopefully they would take it as part of the background noise of the guild.

This corner of the library seemed secluded enough, not that there was much cover to hide the unconscious administrator. He turned his attention to the door, studying the markings. Tentatively he held out his hand and risked another brief connection with Nasan, probing the wards at a distance.

A shadow moved behind him, he caught it out the corner of his eye. Arracan turned, already drawing in more power. There was nothing. Left, right, no one there. Kerel, still on the floor. He took a step forward, ears straining. Still nothing.

Hurriedly he let go of Nasan, allowing the energy to dissipate, shedding it slowly so as not to arouse any more suspicion. He'd come so close to discovery, for naught. But something cast that shadow. Or perhaps it was a precursor to one of his visions? The thought sent a chill through him, and Arracan turned back to the door. His breath caught.

It yawned open a couple of inches, a dark crease. There was no damage, no sign of forced entry, though the warding symbols looked somehow diminished. He no longer felt any trace of magic, and had he accessed his Realm, Arracan was sure he'd find the wards negated.

He thought back to the feeling that drew him here. Was it just curiosity, intuition, or something else? Doors didn't just open. Did somebody want him here?

Cautiously he approached the door, alert and watchful. Just because the circumstances were suspicious didn't mean this wasn't an opportunity. With another glance around, he pulled open the door and slipped inside, half expecting to be attacked at any moment. Arracan held his power within reach, not quite drawing on his Realm, but ready. The door led to a narrow passage, lit

by pale blue glowstones. Meeting no adversaries he quietly pulled the door closed, so that just a crack was open. It was heavier than it looked.

Feeling the need for haste Arracan hurried down the passage, still watchful. It led to a smaller replica of the grand library. There were no windows here either. Instead more glowstones were set into the walls and ceiling, bathing the room in an eerie light. More books dotted the stacks, though they were spread out; some tomes had an entire shelf to themselves. Warding runes were everywhere, engraved into the wood.

While modest in comparison to the library, there was still a vast amount of material here. It would take him hours to sort through it all. With no real idea of where to start he grabbed a book at random and began rifling through it, searching for any link to his vision. Arracan tried to bring to mind the writing carved into the arch he had seen, but the images just wouldn't resolve, the symbols kept overlapping and intermingling. He tossed away the book and yanked another off the shelf; a heavy volume with a dry crackling binding that Arracan recognised as human skin. Beneath the rustle of pages, he thought he heard something. A hushed sound, like whispering voices. He froze and strained his ears, looking around, there was no one there.

"He's never going to find it in there. I thought priests were supposed to be scholars."

"This one's an ex-priest."

Arracan slowly placed the book on a table, opening his Realm and directing a surge of power into his eyes. He blinked quickly, eyes stinging as he muttered a spell, and the world took on a new level of clarity. He scanned the room, looking for any hint of magical concealment.

"What's he doing? He's never going to get anything done just standing there."

"He's looking for us."

"What? That's impossible!" Arracan still couldn't see anyone else in the room, but the voices were clearer now. The talkative one sounded familiar.

“Well, if that’s the case, I may as well point him in the right direction. Time passes, and I’m getting bored.”

“You will not interfere again. You have already meddled in this one’s life.”

“He would have got in anyway, I was just speeding things along. But if you want to try and stop me...”

Arracan felt a crushing pressure bearing down on him, the bones in his body creaking under the strain, he tasted blood. The room seemed to contract and he became aware of someone standing in the shadow between two stacks. The glowstone above the figure had dimmed to the merest spark. Even so he felt a surge of recognition, looking at the shifting mass of the shadow man, an outline darker than black.

“Anestair,” he spat a mouthful of blood.

“You go too far.”

Again came the surge of crushing pressure. This time he was driven to his knees, and his vision clouded with dark spots. Then it was over. He blinked against a searing light that burned his eyes. Hurriedly he cancelled the vision spell and the light dimmed somewhat.

“Now look who’s breaking the rules.” Despite the light, Anestair’s corner remained wreathed in shadow.

Arracan dragged himself to his feet. Shielding his eyes, he turned to look at the newcomer. A man stood before him, blazing with light. A shining gold aura surrounded him, dispelling the pale illumination of the glowstones. He wore silver plate, trimmed with white, the armour seemed sculpted to fit his lean form. On both shoulders, his pauldrons bore a set of scales etched into the steel. He wore no helm, revealing a face that was stern and angular, topped with smooth golden hair. Arracan caught his eye and for an instant was unable to move. Memories flooded his mind, visions of past crimes, people he’d hurt or killed. Their screams howled in his ears.

With an effort he tore himself away, a cold sweat sending a shiver along his back. But the newcomer didn't seem interested in him. He strode to face Anestair, and again Arracan felt a trace of that earlier pressure.

"I will not allow this." His voice was every judge who had ever passed a sentence.

"Would you stop me, Kelendor, with your own hand?" Anestair stepped forward. A line formed between them. Dark and light. It was like something out of a painting or one of the mosaics in the old temples, a battle between good and evil. Recognition struck him then. The scales, that name. Kelendor, the god of justice and judgement. *Just what I need. They're coming out of the woodwork.*

He accessed his Realm, drawing deep of The Tempest, feeling its coursing power fill his body, banishing the lingering aches from the pressure he'd felt earlier. Arracan stood strong again, facing down the two gods. "You will —"

"Silence," both gods said together.

It was gone. His power vanished and Arracan stumbled as his aches returned. He tried to reach for it again, but Nasan was closed to him somehow. Concentrating, he drove for it with his mind, but it was like slamming into a wall.

"The rules —" Kelendor turned back to Anestair but he cut him off.

"Yes, your precious rules. How long do you think they'll last when the Throne is recovered? When it's found —"

"Not by you!" The two squared off again, the air between them rippling. "Traacherous snake, you will never sit on it."

"Justice has no place in this world. You cannot stop me!"

The room began to shake. Ancient texts tumbled from vibrating shelves, hitting the floor with a series of muffled thuds. Shadows flickered across the room, strange shapes forming on the walls, only to vanish as motes of light flickered into existence before fading away. Arracan's head felt like it would explode. This was different from the visions, like his skull was being squeezed from the outside. A metallic taste filled his mouth and he felt a wetness on his skin as blood began to trickle from his ears and nose.

Gritting his teeth, Arracan fought to remain conscious. He was no stranger to pain, he wouldn't let it stop him and forced his limbs to work, struggling to remain standing. The violence in the room increased, cracks snaked along the walls. One of the stacks toppled with a crash.

A piercing cry went up, pitching higher, pulsing outwards, blotting out all other sounds. Instantly the conflict halted, the tremors died and the wind fell as the room settled. Anestair and Kalendor faced each other, while Arracan clung to a shelf for support.

"Now look what you've done!" Anestair cried, his shadowy outline seeming to spasm.

"The alarm."

Arracan felt a sinking feeling in his gut. Any second now Kerel would be discovered and scores of guild members would descend on him. Cut off from his Realm, he was weak, helpless.

"Guess you better get going," Anestair tossed him a book. "Run."

He seemed to shift then, his form twisting and expanding. It lunged towards Kelendor who charged it. There was a flash that seared Arracan's eyes, then they were both gone. Arracan looked at the book in his hands; its cover was marked with a language he couldn't read. The alarm sounded again. Hurriedly he stuffed the book into his robes before racing out of the room and back down the tunnel.

Lights flashed by as he ran past the glowstones set into the wall. He ran straight for the door. No use hiding now. He burst through, then skidded to a stop before a trio of mages who were helping Kerel to his feet. They all wore the blue robes of the Chelle Kronan and looked up at him as he barged through the door.

"He's here!" one of them cried, a skinny man with a snake tattooed on his cheek. They spread out, blocking his path, Kerel too. The administrator rose to his feet with a hateful look. Arracan felt it as they accessed their Realms. The four mages crackled with power, and behind them he saw more approaching.

Come on! He reached for Nasan and this time The Tempest came to him. He flooded his limbs with the fury of the storm, Arracan's robes whipped around him and his body surged with strength.

With a roar of fury the guild members attacked. They threw a storm of magic against him, spells mingling and combining into a sheet of iridescent power. It surged down the narrow path between the stacks, charring books to ashes and crumbling shelves. Arracan thrust his hands out and formed a protective barrier. A shield of vivid crimson materialised before him and the attack smashed into it. Arracan staggered as the wave crashed into his defences, pouring in more energy to strengthen it. The world in front of him exploded in a riot of clashing colours, streaks of light sparking and colliding. In a second it was over and Arracan blinked away the coloured afterimages as he tried to clear his vision.

He clapped his hands together and his shield exploded outwards, blasting through stacks and books in every direction with a deafening boom. A quartet of shields blossomed before him as his attack swept over his foes. The world erupted in a storm of torn pages and splintered wood. Scraps of flaming paper twisted through the air to float down over the carnage. But the four who faced him were only momentarily stunned, and he saw more figures in blue picking their way through the devastation to join the battle.

Already another volley of magic came his way. Arracan reformed his shield and braced himself as an icy cold lashed into it, chilling him to the bone. No sooner had it struck than a fiery explosion jolted him from the opposite side. A spear of rock burst from the floor, lancing towards him and shattering on his shield. Dozens of phantom snakes materialised, snapping and biting at his flickering barrier. Arracan tried to reinforce it, but he was outnumbered and still more mages were joining the attack. There was no pretence of subtlety or wit, the guild members sought to overwhelm him with sheer power.

He drew deep from his Realm, needing more and more just to maintain his defences, never mind attacking. Arracan began to feel a tingling in his limbs,

an undertone to the rush of magic he was channelling. He knew it meant he was reaching his limits. As the attacks increased in intensity his barrier flickered again. He could barely see past its burning surface to the mages beyond.

Still he drew in more power. *If I'm going to die, I swear they'll suffer for it.* He reached into The Tempest, taking in as much as he could. The raw power burnt his veins, but he didn't stop. He saturated his body with it, his very skin beginning to blaze with light. *Not now!* Arracan felt a tremor in his mind, like the beginnings of a vision. He fixed an image of the gate in his mind. The cause of all his problems. His shield flickered again, and he could not withstand them anymore. He snapped back his head and let out a howl of rage.

A lance of pain spiked through his skull. The image of the gate seemed to grow more vivid. He felt a sudden surge of unnatural power coursing from the dark place in his mind where the visions lay. It bolstered his defences a hundred fold. He was invincible, he could do anything. The crimson barrier before him expanded, growing larger and thicker, now shot through with miasmic traces of sickly grey. He felt the guild mages redouble their efforts but it was no more than the wisp of a breeze. Arracan took a step forward, and another, forcing the fools back, exulting in his triumph.

He saw easily through the barrier now, fixing his gaze on Kerel, fearful and backing away. The trace of his spell still lingered on the administrator, and now Arracan reached for it, changing it, he sent a spark of his new power into the effort.

With a wet pop Kerel exploded, showering the library with blood and pelting his colleagues with razor sharp shards of bone. Arracan took advantage of the distraction and hurled a wave of virulent power before him. The writhing maelstrom tore through the air, crashing through a flurry of hastily raised shields and washing over the mages before him.

Screams erupted as flesh liquefied and ran off their bodies, muscle and bone rotted away in seconds. Hands stretched out in pleas for mercy dissolved under the onslaught. Walls cracked and stone tumbled from the ceiling, the floor

shook and whole stacks of books exploded into confetti. The attacks on him stopped abruptly as the spell spent itself, dissipating with a dull crackle. Arracan felt his lips split in a grin, striding forwards, unstoppable.

The flow of magic vanished. His legs gave out under him, and his body filled with pain. By reflex he shut off his own Realm, collapsing to the floor. His limbs felt like they were made of lead, his head was splitting and he was suddenly so weak.

It took a massive effort to raise his head from the floor, flecks of gelatinous ooze clung to his chin as he rose. There was no one left to fight, the entire library had been decimated. He didn't know what in the Deeper Hells had happened, but his questions could wait. Arracan had to get out.

He snatched a guild robe from the floor, more purple than blue thanks to the blood drenching the wool. He swung the robe about his shoulders and stumbled to his feet in search of a way out.

Introduction

Whether they're good or evil, engaging characters have always attracted readers. With recent trends towards morally ambiguous protagonists in literature, particularly in the fantasy genre, the idea of good and evil with clear boundaries might seem dated and traditionalist. While typically the reader is expected to side with the hero, many novels now have less clear cut protagonists, adding an extra challenge to the writing. The author must work to make characters not inherently "likable" in the traditional sense, into characters that the reader will connect with.

This process is what I will explore in my thesis, alongside the methods of writing craft and technique which are used to create characters that, while not fitting the traditional hero archetype as expressed by theorists like Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey*, nonetheless capture the reader's interest. In the fantasy genre there have been an increasing number of novels with central protagonists that do not fit the hero archetype. There are immoral characters whose actions are anything but heroic, yet the reader is still drawn to them. How does the writer turn these unscrupulous characters into protagonists that the reader can empathize with? How do they create individuals that the reader will care about and support, even if they're not noble or heroic as we have to come expect from our leading characters?

We can look at the basis for this expectation. Is it just media induced trends of literary convention, or is there a deeper soci-cultural reason for our support of the hero archetype? As readers, how we engage with a character will be affected by how we judge them as people in terms of the morality of their actions. The hero archetype is something we can aspire to, an ideal of virtue. They can represent the pinnacle of traditional moral norms. Although the idea of moral norms in themselves is a complex topic, as while there may be consensus

on some issues, there are numerous theories of moral truth that the reader can subscribe to. The reader's perception of morality can affect their judgements of the character. A protagonist's actions may be described as immoral by one theory but justified when looking at it from a different perspective. For example, the contrasting theories of Kant's Categorical Imperative, in which he strives to set out the ultimate moral norm, and Utilitarianism, which determines the moral worth of an action based on its outcome in a consequentialist manner. Kant states "necessity is never an adequate excuse for violating moral standards," (Sullivan, 1997, p22). While Utilitarianism justifies whatever act led to "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." (Blackburn, 2001, p75). Our definition of immoral can change with our perception of the character and our beliefs, affecting whether we classify them as a hero or villain.

One of the fascinating things about the books I am looking at is the way the author gets the reader to side with obviously immoral characters who knowingly do evil. The very fact that the reader can engage with such a protagonist that is aware of their immorality provides an insight into how we relate to characters as well as showing the quality of the writing techniques used to achieve such an effect. However, these aware characters are not the only type that occurs in fiction in regards to morality and negative actions. There are those who believe they are doing the right thing, characters with the opinion that the end justifies the means. This changes the dynamic of the relationship with the reader in how they perceive a character. It's one thing to look at a character who is immoral and knows it, but another to see a character who honestly believes they are righteous. The character may simply be misguided, or their morals might be skewed, they may even feel like they're justified as with many revenge stories, and their actions take on a different tone. While these characters can be very interesting, my focus will be on those who are truly immoral, that is, those who perform bad actions knowing it is evil, in order to focus on the techniques of a specific character type.

Now as I've said in reference to moral theories, what qualifies as immoral can be difficult to define. Many moral systems are based on the concept of happiness and what a "good human" is, like Aristotle's Virtue Ethics. There are philosophers who question the origin and worth of our moral values in Meta-ethics, and look at the foundations of how we class something as immoral. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* the self proclaimed Immoralist Nietzsche, talks about the development of our moral values and how we assigned worth to them, dividing morality into Master and Slave morality. He states that the first notion of morality came from the ruling class who assigned worth and caused the language development of good and bad: "this lasting and dominant collective and basic feeling of higher ruling nature in relation to a lower nature, to a 'below'—that is the origin of the opposition 'good' and 'bad.'" (Nietzsche, 1998, p11). But after a cultural "slave revolt" lasting thousands of years caused an inversion of what Nietzsche calls the aristocratic value equation, the standards were reversed and moral value was assigned to traits common to the working class:

On the other hand, those qualities which serve to make easier the existence of suffering will be brought into prominence and flooded with light: here it is that pity, the kind and helping hand, the warm heart, patience, industriousness, humility, friendliness come into honour - for here these are the most useful qualities and virtually the only means of enduring the burden of existence. (Nietzsche, 2003, p197).

This statement could cause us to question the worth of our moral norms, as it implies that what we take as moral truths and things to aspire to are nothing more than qualities deemed useful to society in a form of Utilitarianism; that instead of being natural rules, their worth is assigned by society for maximum gain.

Now there are other possible influences, Nietzsche talks about the impact of religion and Christianity in its support of Slave morality. Many people look to a higher power for their values and guide in what is immoral, but their "truths" are open to challenge in the concept of belief and lack of proof in religion. Nor is religion the only source that is questioned in this manner. One of the supporting

arguments of Subjectivism and Relativism is the lack of empirical evidence with regards to morality. The idea that “there are no moral facts; there are only the sorts of facts that science or common observation can discover, and the values that men place on those facts.” (Williams, 1972, p28). This leads to the idea that without universal moral absolutes, values can only be subjective. This again relates to perspective in how we assign values and how the reader may judge a protagonist based on their personal views as well as the character’s actions.

How the reader perceives the immorality of a character is very important in how they engage with them. Our moral judgements can be based on contextual issues that will affect how the reader sees the protagonist. These may be a factor of the reader’s perception or of the rules established within the novel. There may be societal bias with regards to gender, class, or some other factor that colours the character’s actions in a different fashion. In Scott Lynch’s *The Lies of Locke Lamora* the idea of class is used to endear us to Locke and lessen the impact of his actions. To the reader, the plucky underdog that robs from the rich is likely far more acceptable than if the situation was reversed and a noble was extorting money from the working class. While in terms of the book, the class morality is seen as unfair and corrupt with the idea of the “secret peace” that protects only the rich. These contextual aspects may be used specifically to evoke sympathy or for some other purpose and could help make up some of the writing techniques used to make the immoral protagonist engaging. While in regards to the reader’s perception, their cultural perspective may affect how they view the morality of a character. A liberal Western cultural view that stresses freedom and questions its government would view the morality of a revolutionary differently than a reader from a more regimented culture. The author may use these ideas in the creation of their world and character construction.

The nature of how we relate to these characters could be interesting as well, given the protagonist often has standards different from moral norms readers are accustomed to. Kant described morality as a limitation on our desires

and inclinations, with the Categorical Imperative keeping us in check. He believed that everyone has the inherent capacity for evil, saying that “we seem naturally inclined to act immorally when that promises pleasure or seems to promote self-interest.” (Sullivan, 1997, p133). Perhaps one of the reasons readers are able to relate to immoral characters is that they embody some of their natural inclinations that are kept repressed in society. This may link with the ring of Gyges scenario in Plato’s *Republic*, the idea of a ring of invisibility that removes consequences would alter people’s behaviour and that “people perform just actions for the wrong reasons.” (lane, 2007, pxxv). Nietzsche too thought that morality was limiting, though in a much more harmful way, believing that “it stands in the way of a kind of human perfection,” (Clark, 1198, pxviii). This follows on from his work undermining morality by exposing its non-moral basis in books like *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Nietzsche’s thinking could be seen as amoralist in its rejection of traditional morality, and focus on the sovereign individual or “Superman” and self mastery:

When the same thing happens in an individual, when he imposes commands upon himself, and obeys them, so that he too as it were changes from a rabble into a nation, the result is ‘the superman’, the man who is master of *himself*. (Hollingdale, 2003, p26).

A true amoralist who is indifferent or refuses morality may not be possible according to some theorists. In *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Bernard Williams talks about the problems and limitations of an amoralist, and how one would be defined in their actions. For example, when discussing the idea of other people treating him as he treats them, Williams states the amoralist cannot “resent it or disapprove of it, for these are attitudes within the moral system. (Williams, 1972, p19). An amoralist must tread a fine line to avoid morality in their thoughts and interactions with the world, but theoretically represent another way of living.

In contrast to the characters I am focusing on, who are aware of their immorality and that their actions are wrong in comparison to moral norms, an

amoralist disregards morality and its conventions entirely. They will not see an action as having moral value because they discount the idea of moral value. The characters I am focusing on have an understanding of moral norms, and whatever their own justifications and motivations that drive their actions, these characters act within a moral spectrum, which is central to the idea of the thesis. It is important for the reader to acknowledge the immorality of the characters as the focus of my thesis is on characterisation techniques of immoral protagonists and looking at the way the reader engages with those character types.

I chose the fantasy genre as a platform to explore this topic for two reasons. Firstly, there is the greater freedom of choice available to the author over other genres. One of the common conventions of the fantasy genre is the construction of a new world with its own rules and concepts. The reader is prepared to learn the rules and situation of the world of the novel. Tolkien describes this process as creating “a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he [the author] relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of the world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.” (Tolkien, 2001, p37).

This means that the concept of morality can be established anew in the context of that world. While we can expect the reader to be a product of their society with regards to morality, they will observe and learn a new set of rules set out by the author, and understand them as the standard in context. The population of the Secondary World may not have the values and ideals of the reader, but they will be accepted as part of the world construction. This means I can create my Secondary World with its own customs and morality to best suit my character and thesis goals with greater control than if I were to set my novel in a more realistic genre like historical fiction, and avoid being bound or heavily influenced by any other existing morality scale in the work.

As an example, in George R.R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones*, Eddard Stark, one of the noblest characters in the book, is seen executing a deserter. It is shown in one of the earliest chapters, not only as part of the plot, but as a device

that serves to establish the laws and moral rules of the world. That the concept of capital punishment is accepted tells the reader about the nature of the world and helps to establish a baseline for what is morally acceptable in context for Westeros. In regards to my work, by having total control of the establishment of the world morality, I can place my characters wherever I want on the moral scale in order to effectively demonstrate specific writing techniques.

My second reason is the variety of the genre. Fantasy covers a wide body of material, from epic poems to Dr Seuss stories, from Tolkienesque fantasy to the techno/steampunk hybrid work of China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station*. It contains a host of subgenres such as High Fantasy, Sword and Sorcery, Dark Fantasy, and many more. Because of its many influences and paradigms, the fantasy genre can be easily shaped into different formats and respond to changing cultural tastes, such as the trend towards darker heroes. The fantasy genre is already veering away from the traditional hero archetype with works like David Gemmel's *Waylander*, Joe Abercrombie's *The First Law* trilogy, and the hugely successful *A Song of Ice and Fire* series by George R.R. Martin. These works have central protagonists that in some cases are the virtual opposite of a hero and make great character studies.

Since the first tales came into being we have had our heroes in stories. Vogler defines the hero as "someone who is willing to sacrifice his own needs on behalf of others." (Vogler, 2007, p29). The very word is an expression of noble intentions and chivalry. It has become the norm to define the central character of a novel or film as the hero without any thought to the protagonist's actions. Rather than creating plausible individuals, writers have geared their characters to sometimes unrealistic heights of nobility and heroism to fit with cultural expectations, as with Richard in Goodkind's *Wizard's First Rule*, or Frodo in Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings*.

What I'm exploring is the idea of a character possessed of his own values and morals in realistic terms, without following the heroic path because it's what the story needs. Instead they lean towards immorality to explore a new series of

techniques. Raymond E Feist said “characters can’t just do things because the writer wants them to do things.” (Feist, 2003). So it could be argued, a character shouldn’t act like a hero just so the story can have one. If characters are well developed, with flaws and quirks, they shouldn’t all be expected to take up the hero archetype. Instead you can have a flawed protagonist who will work to their best advantage, unconcerned with notions of heroism or nobility, who will behave realistically, focused on their own petty ambitions. These “real” characters are already seeing success in works such as *A Game of Thrones* with characters like Tyrion, who acts largely out of self interest.

Writers in the fantasy genre have been pioneers of this sort of character since the days of short fiction in magazines like *Weird tales* and *Unknown* with protagonists like Leiber’s Gray Mouser and Fafhrd whose selfish exploits of thievery and thrill-seeking adventures filled magazines before Tolkien’s epic *The Lord of the Rings* was published. These characters captured our interest despite a lack of knights in shining armour, and the flawed, darker protagonists behaved in a far more realistic fashion as well. But because the reader expects a hero, the writer has to work all the harder to convince us to invest in them. Literary tradition has taught us to root for the heroic characters, so these flawed, unscrupulous figures conflict with our typical definition of a protagonist. Even so, there are characters like the treacherous drunk Cosca created by Joe Abercrombie in *The First Law* trilogy and *Best Served Cold* that are just so entertaining that the reader can’t help but be pulled along with him.

In order to utilise the techniques I looked at, I decided on a creative element with protagonists and a narrative that would be best suited to explore the nature of characterisation and morality. I define protagonists in this case as central characters without the typically imposed moral standards of the hero archetype. When coming up with the story I structured the plot and characters so that the reader would see a collection of true protagonists caught up in events and serving their own goals, rather than noble heroes forced into the role by archetypal convention and the author. The majority of my central characters

were designed with an immoral quality in mind: an assassin, tyrant and power hungry mage. None of their natures are inherently heroic; only Captain Hrun of the City Guard has that quality, and provides a counterpoint to the darker narratives as well as a comparison of the techniques used in creating “normal” hero characters.

I set my piece as the opening of a novel to serve as an introduction to my characters. While this may limit their development during the narrative, the true test of the techniques I’ve explored will be creating fully formed characters that the reader will engage with from the offset. There may be interaction between the protagonists, but each will have their own story arc so the reader follows them individually and develops a relationship with the character from their perspective. The only real contact the protagonists have with each other is between Malus and Cras, while Arracan and Hrun have separate storylines. Having a selection of different characters with their own plots and goals meant I could explore a variety of techniques for each in creating engaging protagonists.

Creating an opening also allowed me to take it further after my Masters and continue with an idea to publication. Seeing the success of recent works with similar characterisation, I feel that if my project can incorporate the techniques used in making engaging protagonists it would help the work find its place in contemporary fantasy literature.

Background writing

That was the difference between a hero and a villain, a soldier and a murderer, a victory and a crime. Which side of the river you called home. (Abercrombie, 2009, p541).

In my own reading experiences and my writing life, I have always been more focused on whether the character is interesting rather than what side they are on. What is important to me is whether the character is engaging enough to make me want to read on, not the morality of the individual. After all, on an intellectual level, reading fiction, there is no harm in rooting for the antagonist. No one really dies if they succeed in their plans, so the reader has relative freedom to indulge in their darker side. If the antagonist of the piece is dynamic and exciting, why shouldn't the reader be interested, eager to see what happens to the character they have invested in, even if the character isn't the "hero?"

My work has ever veered away from traditional archetypes, pushing at the established conventions of the hero and traditional narratives. In a way this thesis is a follow on from my dissertation work on the villain narrative. It was focused on the idea of a novel written entirely from the villain perspective, and whether the reader could adjust to a work that was the opposite of the standard hero-centric narrative explored by theorists like Campbell and Vogler.

The dissertation explored the idea that a reader could follow a character who was not just immoral, but actively villainous, as long as the story was gripping and the character was interesting. My creative work is an extension of that idea, but rather than focusing on antagonist characters, the plot follows a selection of immoral protagonists who aren't given defined roles by the author as intended heroes or villains. Though in context my characters may see each other as a villain, serving as the antagonist to their goals, that is a matter of perspective within the narrative.

Both works explore the idea that a reader can to some extent ignore the morality of the character, as long as they are engaging. That they can deal with the morality of the characters on an intellectual level, while being offered greater freedom in who to root for because of the fictional nature of the content and the lack of consequences in their choice. Therefore the quality of the characters is what decides the issue, not necessarily their moral standpoint, or the “side” they are on.

Morality as it relates to fiction

“Evil is relative, Annalist. You can’t hang a sign on it. You can’t touch it or taste it or cut it with a sword. Evil depends on where you are standing, pointing your indicating finger.” (Cook, 1984, p281).

Given the focus on my thesis, we must establish what is meant by morality as it relates to fiction. There has been extensive debate and research on the nature and concept of morality which I’ve talked about briefly. In the introduction to *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche is said to describe it as “any internalised code of conduct or system of values that constrains behaviour in relation to other people.” (Clark, 1998, pxviii). There are actions which the average person would describe as morally good, or morally bad. For the purpose of this thesis, and to avoid the conflicting debates, morality is established as a set of rules of conduct, used in judging a standard of behaviour. A “moral person” is expected to be someone virtuous in character based on cultural norms.

There are two ways this affects fantasy fiction. The first is the morality of the reader, their outlook will likely be a product of their culture and upbringing. The second is the contextual morality established in the work of fiction by the author. Often the two are very different, given the fantastical nature of the genre. For example the Drow, a fantasy race of dark elves created by R.A Salvatore, have a different moral view than that of the average Western reader that makes up the fantasy market. The Drow psyche is based on the superiority of their race giving them the Nazi like belief that they have the right to dominate all other life, along with the right to indulge in favourite pastimes like torture, manipulation and backstabbing.

On one level, the reader will judge the characters and deplore their actions because they seem abhorrent to the reader’s standard of morality. On another level, they will hold their views in abeyance and accept them as a fact of the world of the story, in order to continue reading. They will accept that a different standard of morality exists for the characters and use that in their

future understanding of the story and the world. Though as I stated in the introduction, a reader's personal morality and perceptions can affect how they view and judge characters based on contextual circumstances.

The Traditional Hero

The protagonist of every story is the hero of a journey, (Vogler, 2007, p7).

Vogler's line is more than just an idea of literary convention, it is a socio-cultural statement on our perception of fiction. The common use of the word "hero" rather than protagonist or central character shows how pervasive the archetype is when literature is described. When attempting to establish a formulaic convention for narrative structure, Vogler bases his construction on a moral premise.

The traditional hero is based on archetypal conventions that govern the actions and nature of the character. While there may be variations, even to the extent of sharing another archetype, such as the Trickster Hero as described by Vogler in *The Writer's Journey*, the basic characteristics of the hero remain the same. The traditional hero typically possesses "a mix of universal and unique characteristics" (Vogler, 2007, p30) in order to allow the reader to identify with them. They are normally depicted as brave, intelligent, selfless and kind. Not all heroes possess all of these traits. In order to keep the character fresh and differentiate him from other heroes the author will likely have given them flaws and deficiencies in order to humanise them and make for a well rounded character. But even with these attributes, they typically maintain the moral standard that makes them a hero, or even an anti-hero which I talk about later.

The reader is expected to identify with the hero in some way. They might identify with the moral drives of the hero, fighting injustice to save the world like Pug in Feist's *Magician*. They may empathize with the hero's bad situation, like Harry Potter living with the Dursleys, feeling that they are in a similar position. They may simply see aspects of themselves in the hero, or things they wish were

true about themselves. Farah Mendlesohn cites one of the reasons for Tolkien's success with *The Hobbit* as the relatable, everyman nature of Bilbo:

His [Tolkien's] master-stroke was to invent a new species for Middle-earth, the hobbits. This allowed him to shift the perspective of fantasy; instead of writing about great wizards and warriors whose motives are hard to understand, he introduced us into middle-earth through the eyes of the very ordinary "little man" from a kind of England still recognizable to his readers. (Mendlesohn, 2009, p45).

It is important for the story to work that the reader should identify with, or at least understand, the central character in order to form a relationship. Using the hero archetype is one of the easiest devices, as cultural influences have trained us to root for the hero. When defining the nature of heroism, psychologist Philip Zimbardo talks about the book *50 American Heroes Every Kid Should Meet*, and though not all the examples in the book meet Zimbardo's definition, it still shows the way that Western society and culture inspire people to emulate and root for hero characters: "All of the examples are role models upheld as worthy of emulation," (Zimbardo, 2007, P466). The idea that the hero is in the right and worthy of our support is ingrained in our psyche since birth by parental and societal pressure towards a moral attitude that is reflected in our view of the outside world, fictional or otherwise.

One of the central precepts of the traditional hero is the morality of the character, being synonymous with the title. A large proportion of literature and other media make use of the traditional hero as their main character. This has resulted in a feedback loop and caused the reader to have expectations of the central protagonist as an archetypal hero, shown in Vogler's words, as he cannot seem to separate the idea of the hero and protagonist from each other. The reader expects the character to perform in a certain way as defined by a moral standpoint drawn from following traditional narrative formulas like *The Monomyth* and *The Hero's Journey*. These formulas are models for the structure and events of the traditional hero's narrative based on patterns in stories, and

the basic model is described as “a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return.” (Campbell, 1993, p35).

What we think of as a hero today is the classic archetype, a gallant, self-sacrificing character who will act in the best interest of the world. Whether they are big or small, strong or smart, it is the character’s morality that defines the traditional hero of fantasy. Even should the hero waver, with the personal moment of crisis common to the Ordeal stage of Vogler’s Hero’s Journey, the reader can expect them to overcome the inner conflict and strive to do good at the expense of all else. Their actions can be predicted to a certain extent, at least in terms of the macro plot, because of the limitations of the archetype.

The Traditional Hero in the Development of Modern Fantasy

The fantasy genre is perhaps the most wide reaching classification of literature, encompassing a huge variety of works. Some of our earliest stories like the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, we can define as fantasy. The genre covers myths of ancient cultures, legends of past heroes, and entirely new worlds and peoples from the author's mind.

The archetype of the Hero has its roots in the fantasy genre, littered with tales of brave men performing daring feats and slaying monsters. It arose from a sea of myths, heroic songs and folk legends about figures going on adventures and triumphing over adversity. The common traits typically included great physical prowess, intelligence and cunning. The heroes could be folk figures who fought for the people, arising from tales and legends like King Arthur and Robin Hood. Or they could be epic leaders and demigods like Hercules and Achilles. Early peoples like the Greeks portrayed these heroes in vivid stories that inspired the populace and helped them connect to their gods and mythology. These people would seek to emulate their heroes as a mid-point between humanity and the divine, hoping to establish a link between themselves and these figures. This is shown in the way Homer routinely traces the lineage of his characters in *The Iliad*, allowing his contemporary audience to trace their ancestry to great heroes who often had divine ancestry: "Then Paris killed Menesthus, who lived at Arne and was the son of lord Areithous the Maceman and ox-eyed lady Phylomedusa." (Homer, 2003, p114).

The hero archetype would vary with different cultures and evolve over time, based on societal views and beliefs. A Western reader today might view Homer's Greek hero who left bodies in their wake and stole the armour of fallen enemies as barbaric when comparing them to heroes in contemporary media. While the Greek's belief system worshiped such heroes, possibly due to what

Nietzsche describes as their predilection for blaming the evil of man on the gods, who saw it as a form of entertainment. He talks about their notion of blame, saying: "Thus the noble Greek wondered for centuries in the face of every incomprehensible atrocity and wanton act with which one of his equals had sullied himself. "A god must have beguiled him," he said to himself finally, shaking his head... This way out is *typical* of the Greeks." (Nietzsche, 1998, p65). This shows the effect of contextual circumstances influencing how we look at fiction and judge the morality of a character's actions. Thus the hero of a culture would likely reflect its social norms of morality. Today one of the most common representations of the Hero is the figure in fantasy fiction.

Our notion of fantasy has developed along with the idea of the hero archetype. Fantasy as we know it began to surface in the 1920's with the first "real" fantasy genre of Sword and Sorcery pioneered by writers such as Robert E Howard and Fritz Leiber in pulp magazines like *Weird* and *Pall Mall*. These stories featured roguish heroes like Fafhrd, Gray Mouser, and Conan. Then came Tolkien in creating Epic Fantasy with *The Lord Of The Rings* (1954). Epic fantasy focused on grand, world changing events and plots set on a huge scale, rather than following an individual or group. These works had very clear boundaries between good and evil, and commonly included traditional hero characters with a selfless and honourable nature, such as Aragorn.

There were writers that branched out from this concept; Michael Moorcock's character Elric first appeared in *Science Fantasy* in 1961 as one of the first antiheroes. This was a type of hero lacking the typical attributes like nobility and kindness, with more of a dark, edgy feel. Trapped in a symbiotic relationship with a demon sword, and cursed to murder friends and family, Elric was a marked change from the traditional fantasy heroes. The character was one of the first examples of the Dark Fantasy sub-genre, characterised by elements of horror, sinister ideas and plots, as well as moral ambiguity in its characters. This development meant that protagonists became less clichéd heroes and more realistic as people, possibly a result of the reader's need for more mature

characters, or the mockery the conventions of the genre received from writers like Terry Pratchett and Dianna Wynne Jones as they parodied conventional fantasy motifs like the barbarian hero.

After the millennium came the idea of New Weird, a sub genre of fantasy that didn't follow the normal rules and conventions, but was characterised by "secondary world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place in traditional fantasy." (VanderMeer, 2007). One of the earliest works of New Weird was China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station* with its incredible Secondary World and morally bankrupt inhabitants. Challenging traditional conventions, these books explored territories seldom trod. Writers like Joe Abercrombie challenged the idea of the traditional hero, with morally reprehensible protagonists like the crippled inquisitor Glokta, who routinely tortures innocents. Other authors created similarly immoral protagonists, like Scott Lynch with his *Gentlemen Bastards*. There were those who opted for a more varied approach like George R.R. Martin with his cast in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, featuring a wide variety of characters ranging all over the moral spectrum. These fully realised, morally realistic protagonists are growing in popularity as more novels break away from the traditional hero character with its inherent standards of morality and explore ideas of moral ambiguity and different methods of characterisation.

The current trend in fantasy leans towards darker, more realistic protagonists over the traditional hero archetype, with the massive success of writers like Abercrombie and Martin showing that readers are responding to the more complex characters. There has been much debate over what this means for fantasy, with articles talking about a tendency to Nihilism in the writing, such as David Cesarano's *Realism and Nihilism in Contemporary Fantasy* and Leo Grin's *The Bankrupt Nihilism of Our Fallen Fantasists* – see selected bibliography. Some of these responses quite vehemently oppose the current trend in fantasy, yet the growing success of some writers may point towards the approval of the average reader. I personally see the trend as the natural development of a genre that's pushing at the established boundaries and conventions of fantasy. I think it's a

fascinating concept and a necessary evolution of the genre in order to avoid stagnation and repetition.

A note on Anti-Heroes

An anti-hero is a difficult concept to define, it is not the opposite of a hero, but a specialised kind of hero whose behaviour differs from traditional convention. Vogler defines the anti hero as “one who may be an outlaw or villain from the point of view of society, but with whom the audience is basically in sympathy.” (Vogler, 2007, p34). He splits the anti-hero into two types, the cynical or wounded variety who are outcasts but attract sympathy and reader support because of their rebellious nature, such as Howard’s Conan, and the tragic heroes who are destroyed by their inner flaws, like Shakespeare’s Macbeth.

Aristotle believed that the best tragic hero should rest between virtuous and wicked, I believe this extends to all heroes, all protagonists. Vogler’s view is narrowed by his insistence on calling his characters heroes rather than protagonists, and imposing a moral framework. What I am focused on is the study of immoral protagonists and not heroes of any description. Both of Vogler’s types of anti-hero have a predictable framework when it comes to their actions, the cynical or wounded anti-hero must eventually do the right thing and “save the day”, while the tragic anti-hero is doomed to failure.

In his book *Heroes and Villains*, Mike Alsford describes the key factor in defining a hero as motivation; “Once again, the hero, it would appear, has less to do with power and ability than with attitude.” (Alsford, 2006, p129). However different from traditional heroes a writer makes a character, it is their moral attitude that casts them as an anti-hero, rather than a villain.

The protagonists I am studying and writing exist without a morally biased framework. They exist without a requirement for redemption or poetic justice in their failure, but as more realistic characters in a world that responds to logical actions rather than an idealised moral conscience imposed by the author. Works

like *The Prince of Thorns* have no righteous ending forced on the wicked, instead the actions of the protagonist play out in a contextually realistic framework.

The immoral protagonists in my creative element have no moral structure forced on them, they act in accordance with their motivations and nature. While some of their actions may be heroic, like Cras saving the city, the motivation for that action has no moral basis. My characters are not merely heroes with some negative qualities, they are protagonists who have their own drives and ideas of morality. Instead of behaving in a predictable fashion according to the standard “good and evil” format, they will act in a rational and logical way based on the situation and their nature.

Characterisation Techniques

The majority of critical theories and formulas are based upon the concept of observing patterns and identifying common traits. Works like Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots* and Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* are based on repeated patterns identified in stories throughout time in cultures across the world. In the same way, I have studied a variety of literature in the fantasy genre in order to examine the techniques used in creating engaging characters who don't fit the traditional hero archetype and whose morality is in question.

The traditional hero has a host of familiar ways to get the reader to engage with the character, and while there is some crossover with general characterisation methods, there are a number of techniques used specifically in order to get the reader to engage with immoral characters. I have analysed successful writers in the fantasy genre and their writing practices in order to form a list of techniques that are used, so that I can understand the methods and attempt to incorporate them into my own writing.

My original proposal described my intent to study techniques that cause the reader to like/engage with the character despite their morality. However, while conducting my research I determined that many of the techniques used don't fit the pattern. Instead all of the methods I've analysed tend to focus on establishing some link between the character and reader in order to get them to invest and make the character engaging, but not necessarily to get the reader to "like" the character.

An example would be the *Nagash the Sorcerer* by Mike Lee: while it contains P.O.V's from more heroic characters, the central figure of Nagash is given the most focus. The reader follows Nagash's rise to power, his growth as a sorcerer, delving into forbidden magic, the birth of his empire, until his defeat at the hands of the other protagonists. Throughout the narrative the character of

Nagash is utterly horrific, there is no attempt at redemption or growth for the better. Instead the techniques used focus on making the character interesting and accessible to the reader. The author does not attempt to make him relatable or to humanise Nagash, but instead makes him exciting and dynamic enough to hold the reader's interest, while also helping the reader understand the character in some way. It creates a character that on one level, the reader is repulsed by, while on another they find him vivid and exciting.

Given the variety of methods I have encountered I have separated these techniques into three categories with regards to their purpose: Sympathy, Understanding, and Admiration. While there is some overlap, these categories broadly state the response a particular technique is supposed to evoke in the reader. Not all, as I've stated, are intended to get the reader to "like" the character, but are merely a way of establishing a link and engaging the reader with the character.

Sympathy is self explanatory in characterisation. Whatever the method, be it an action like Gen's imprisonment in Megan Whalen Turner's *The Thief* or an aspect of the character like Glokta's crippled body in *The Blade Itself* by Joe Abercrombie. The author creates a situation intended to inspire sympathy for the protagonist. This provides a counterpoint to whatever immoral acts the protagonist performs, creating a conflict within the reader. While they may deplore the character's actions, the pity they feel for the character is intended to prevent them from condemning the character entirely.

Whether the sympathy the reader feels makes up for the actions the protagonist has committed is beside the point; a sympathetic take stops the situation from being so black and white because the reader knows that character is suffering. This in some cases creates a sense of justice, or serves to confuse the issues, making for a more complex character.

Understanding is a more complex category. It is not about getting the reader to like or identify with the character, but to form a link with them. The more the reader learns about a character, the more they invest in them, with their time, and possibly their emotions. Readers like characters to make sense, for their actions to be logical in context, to have a rationale behind them that can be understood. Even if the character's actions are deplorable, the reader can engage with them if they understand why the character is like that. For example Mark Lawrence's protagonist Jorg in *Prince of Thorns* is a reprehensible character despite his young age; he is callous, manipulative, bloodthirsty and ruthless. Initially the reader would see him as abhorrent, yet as the novel progresses, they learn about his traumatic past, the loss of his mother and brother, his wounds and illness, and the lack of retribution that drives him.

All this serves to give the reader a greater understanding of the character. Of course opinions will differ on whether their actions were justified or out of proportion, but whether the reader sides with the character or not, they know the reasons behind Jorg's nature. Instead of having a protagonist that's evil and vicious for no reason, he becomes a complex character that can be understood and possibly sympathised with as well. This creates a character with far more depth than a random psychopath with no reasons or history to explain their actions and helps to make the character more engaging. If the reader understands the character, even if they don't like them, it's a way of engaging them in the story with the protagonist and building a relationship.

Admiration again is complex when applied to immoral characters. Vogler states "Heroes need some admirable qualities, so that we want to be like them." (Vogler, 2007, p30). While the protagonists I am focusing on may not fit with the hero archetype, the principle remains the same. Regardless of the reader's take on the morality of the protagonist, if the author makes them interesting, the reader has an aspect of the character to identify with, something they see in themselves, or wish they could be like. Even if the character as a whole isn't

someone the reader approves of, or even likes, they may have traits that are admirable in of themselves such as courage. These characteristics may serve to outweigh the negative qualities of the character, helping the reader to forget about their immoral actions or nature.

The qualities don't even have to be technically admirable, just interesting enough to engage the reader, Orson Scott Card talks about leading the reader into intense emotional involvement with the characters, saying "the audience won't necessarily *like* the characters, but they certainly won't be indifferent to them." (Card, 2010, p95). Admiration isn't strictly about liking the character, but liking something about the character. However, I still list such qualities in this section, categorising admirable with entertaining as it serves a similar function. Both admirable and interesting traits provide something to keep the reader entertained, whether it's because they admire the character or appeal to the reader's curiosity.

Take Cosca from Abercrombie's *Best Served Cold*: even his interesting traits are flaws; a notorious drunkard, he is shameless in his alcoholism. When the writing takes his perspective his methods and need for alcohol are incredibly entertaining for the reader, while at the same time evoking a sense of pity. His other idiosyncrasies, like his vast collection of flamboyant hats and pet goat, give his character depth and originality, while providing humour for the reader. This encourages affection for the character, though it may be countered by the Cosca's immoral actions, like sneaking past Monza to take control of the Thousand Swords from her. But even that serves to enhance the complexity of the character, creating a real conflict in the reader whether they like the character or not. Ultimately this category focuses on making the protagonist interesting, so the reader engages with them, regardless of where their sympathies lie.

Note: As I have stated, many of the techniques used cover more than one category, I have organised them into the categories that fit the best intention of the technique.

Sympathy

Forced by Circumstance - Unwilling

A large body of evidence in social psychology supports the concept that situational power triumphs over individual power in given contexts. (Zimbardo, 2009, px).

An early stage of Campbell's Monomyth is the Refusal of the Call by the hero who is "walled into boredom, hard work or culture," (Campbell, 1993, p59). Yet not all protagonists are given the same option. Many have their adventures thrust upon them, which is again a motif of fantasy. Yet what happens when they are placed into a horrible situation, forced to make bitter choices to survive?

There have been many psychological studies conducted on how people will act if pushed, or put into certain situations, like the Stanford prison study conducted by psychologist Phillip Zimbardo in 1971. The study placed a selection of people in a simulated prison environment, dividing them between guards and prisoners with the intent to observe their behaviour. Because of the situational pressures the participants quickly took to their roles beyond expectations, with abuse by the guards and distress of the prisoners.

The depths a person will sink to in order to survive a situation make for fascinating reading in literature and this has been the theme behind many works, both in fantasy and other genres. It is important not only to look at the effect of the situation on the character, but also what it means for the perception of the reader.

Many of the protagonists I have studied do not willingly engage in immoral actions; their nature may be ambiguous, their morals sketchy, but few of the characters I've looked at are cold blooded killers. More often they are pushed into their dark acts out of necessity, with sometimes even the blackest

deed being a lesser evil. It may not even be as clear as a direct choice of good and bad. Azoth in *The Night Angel* trilogy trains to become an assassin, begging for his apprenticeship, even going so far as to reject the offer of a peaceful life in favour of training to be a killer: "*Happiness? I just don't want to be afraid anymore.*" (Weeks, 2008, p88). Yet because the reader has followed Azoth, his wretched life as an orphan guild rat in the slums, the abuse from a sadistic older child, the hunger and struggle for survival, they are less inclined to judge him for his actions. It's not really a choice to be bad, after all, just for a life without fear, an entirely understandable motive.

If a character is unwilling, the reader finds it harder to judge them for their crimes, although they may still hold the moral view that the actions were wrong, as with Turner's protagonist Gen in *The Thief*, who steals an ancient artefact. But the reader knows that a horrible fate has been promised to Gen if he does not comply. While the reader may not approve, they cannot wholly condemn the character for the action, because the choice was not completely in their control. This may be taken to extremes, for even Abercrombie's ruthless Inquisitor Glokta from *The First Law* trilogy is a victim of circumstance. For most of the horrible acts he commits are on behalf of his cruel boss Arch Lector Sult. *Before They Are Hanged* charts the siege of Dagoska where Glokta ensures a bloodbath instead of allowing the city to be betrayed, though the Inquisitor himself believes it's not worth the cost: "*There will be no end to the carnage now. Gurkish, Dagoskan, Union, the bodies will pile up until we're all buried under them, and all my doing. It would be better by far if her scheme had succeeded.*" (Abercrombie, 2007, p260). The fact the protagonist knows what's happening but is trapped by his loyalties portrays him as less the villain and more the victim.

The technique does not even have to use moral choices from the character's perspective, it can be the reader's perceptions that are used to make the technique work. Take the character of Tyrion Lannister from George R.R. Martin's series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. He is arguably one of the most likable characters on the Lannister side. The reader identifies with his nature, so that

when he gets involved in battles the reader is rooting for him, even though he's on the "wrong" side, opposing more archetypal hero characters like Eddard and Robb Stark. However, the reader cannot fault him, as Tyrion is simply doing what is right from his perspective, and is in fact very moral from his point of view.

Ultimately the purpose of this technique is to mitigate the judgement the reader feels for the character, providing a complex situation that will cause the reader to question their own values, enhancing the quality of the narrative and helping to build a relationship with the character. The reader sympathises with the horrible situation and subsequently the protagonist's actions are no longer so abhorrent because it was necessary rather than an act they enjoyed. This technique does not even have to be used to get the reader to sympathise with the character, but can help build depth. Jaime Lannister in *A Game of Thrones* tries to kill the boy Bran, not because he wants to, but to protect the secret of his incest: "The things I do for love," he said with loathing. He gave Bran a shove." (Martin, 1996, p71). It can help the reader to understand a character; Jaime is seen as ruthless, but not completely "evil", reluctant as he is to kill the boy.

Shades of Grey

As vicious and immoral as some of the protagonists I have studied are, a lot of the time, they are fighting someone worse. If the actions of the protagonist pale against the enemies then the reader is likely to side with the lesser evil. In order to diminish the horror of the character's actions, the author creates an enemy that goes to similar or even further depths of evil. The author uses the principle of fighting fire with fire, that the character's actions are a necessary evil, or that for all the protagonist's flaws, they are still not as bad as the prescribed enemy.

When all the characters are similarly immoral, with no heroic or "good" side to root for, the reader instead is allowed to focus on which characters they like more, rather than what characters they *should* root for.

This technique requires well developed and complex characters, to ensure the reader engages with them and takes sides in the midst of all the action. This usually requires the use of another technique: Likable Traits, in order to differentiate the protagonist from the other immoral characters. Take the thief Locke from Scott Lynch's *The Lies of Locke Lamora*, living in a city filled with thieves, gangs, the uncaring nobility, and a corrupt police force. None of the characters inspire empathy from the reader except for Locke and his group The Gentlemen Bastards. The characters are the most detailed and relatable in the book. The reader follows Locke through his early life and the group's escapades, developing a relationship with what's essentially one group of scum among many. Because the reader has invested in this group of entertaining, relatable characters, they support them, engaging with the characters and caring about them. Indeed, the reader begins to see the world from their perspective as the novel progresses, learning about the corrupt world through the eyes of Locke and the Gentlemen Bastards:

"Gods, I love this place", Locke said, drumming his fingers against his thighs. "Sometimes I think this whole city was put here simply because the gods must adore crime. Pickpockets rob the common folk, merchants rob anyone they can dupe, Capa Barsavie robs the robbers *and* the common folk, the lesser nobles rob nearly everyone, and Duke Nicovante occasionally runs off with his army and robs the shit out of Tal Verarr or Jerem, *not to mention*, what he does to his own nobles and his common folk." (Lynch, 2006, p40).

In *Lies of Locke Lamora* this technique is put to good use towards the end, where the members of the Gentlemen Bastards are killed off and the reader really feels the loss. With all the other characters committing brutal crimes, the con-artist style of Locke and his group seems harmless by comparison. Without a traditional hero to root for, Locke and his group of engaging characters become the best "side."

There may not even be such a wide gulf between the characters when using this method. Jorg in Mark Lawrence's *Prince of Thorns* is utterly ruthless in

pursuit of his vengeance, coldly sacrificing his own men and committing mass murder.

The bolt hit the Nuban square in the chest. It put a hole through both of them and took them off the edge. Neither of them screamed, and it took forever before they hit the bottom. (Lawerence, 2012, p236).

Yet Jorg acts this way because he fights to survive impossible odds and vicious opponents, and later we learn that he is just a pawn of powerful magicians manipulating whole countries. With such horrible foes, even the atrocities Jorg commits are diminished in the eyes of the reader.

This technique presents a question of scale to the reader, it denies them the traditional hero character that their culture and upbringing says they should support, giving them a greater degree of choice than most books. Erik Kain summed up the idea well in his article *The First Law Trilogy Is Fantasy At Its Finest*, saying: “We root for the good guys even when the good guys aren’t always good.” (Kain, 2012).

Humanisation

Keep in mind that while some villains or Shadows exult in being bad, many don’t think of themselves as evil at all. In their own minds they are right, the heroes of their own stories. (Vogler, 2007, p165).

In *The Writer’s Journey*, Vogler has a section on “Humanising the Shadow” where the Shadow archetype represents negative energy that is usually personified as a villain or antagonist. The section talks about ways to create better antagonists and villains, yet the same principle can be used with regard to immoral or amoral protagonists.

Giving the character more depth and realism makes it harder for the reader to see them as a two-dimensional villain, and more as relatable protagonists. Even from early on in fantasy this method was used with characters like Fafhrd and Grey Mouser in Fritz Leiber’s work. He made two thieves a pair of

lovable rogues with simple touches like the realistic banter between the two. Humanising takes the focus off their immoral actions and helps the reader overlook their nature. For all the evil he commits in service to his master, Azoth from *The Night Angel* trilogy, is fiercely loyal to his close circle of friends and adoptive family. Indeed his first kill is a reaction to the mutilation of his childhood friend Doll Girl. Weeks builds the character from the ground up, showing the reader his life and early friends, up to how he loses them for his life as an assassin: "Azoth turned his back on his best friend and stepped into the shadows' embrace." (Weeks, 2008, p89).

By giving the character real relationships, the author shows the character's depth and that they are capable of real feelings of affection. By making them a more well-rounded person the author challenges the reader's perceptions of the protagonist as just a villain, showing them the character as a whole. Even the most sinister individuals are not beyond redemption this way. David Gemmell uses this technique with his character Waylander, giving the assassin a humane side. Waylander rescues both a priest and band of refugees, risking his life for them, and in a later book is shown to have adopted two as his own daughters. This shows a much more paternal side to take the edge off his bloody past, compounded by the very poignant sorrow he's seen to have after the death of his wife: "Miriel fought a lion today," he said. "She stood and did not panic. You would have been proud of her." (Gemmell, 1993, p10).

By making the characters more human it helps the reader judge the protagonist as a whole, rather than just looking at their actions when forming an opinion. Despite the deeds a protagonist performs, the reader may look at his close relationship with his friends, or the grief in his past, to make the character more relatable. One of the great aspects of the *Gentlemen Bastards* is the banter between the group that convinces the reader of their "thick as thieves" friendship and make the characters more lovable than your average pickpocket.

Progressive Challenges – The Downward Spiral

Here's the thing I do. Whatever your hero is at, make things worse. Make the dangers greater, make there be all sorts of different kind of dangers – that is, threaten not just his life, but also his marriage, his status, his dog, his comic book collection. And then make the dangers real – make him actually lose the dog, or the marriage, or the best friend, just so people know the threats are real. (Weeks, 2012).

Weeks' idea is based on solid principles; if the author endangers a character the reader has invested in, they will be concerned for their safety, even if the character isn't a hero. The reader will want to continue following the actions of an engaging and interesting character, just like they want to find out what happens next in the plot. If the character dies, they lose the chance at progression. It may be that the author has used other techniques to make the immoral protagonist engaging and likable, so the reader is even more hopeful that the character will survive. Of course, the quality of the writing must be sufficient that the reader cares about the character and finds the plot interesting anyway.

Adversity adds spice to the plot, it creates exciting and often deadly challenges for the characters to overcome. How the protagonist deals with the obstacles in their path is what makes up the narrative. As the reader follows the protagonist, investing and developing a relationship, they join the character in his struggles and conflicts, feeling like they're a part of them. When the author hammers on the obstacles and adversity, if they have established a link to the character, the reader really feels it, giving the events much more impact.

Even if the protagonists are immoral and deserving of retribution, the authors usually make the form of adversity out of all proportion with their crimes so as to side the reader with the character. Even Glokta has a succession of truly impossible tasks thrust upon him, from holding the city of Dagoska, working for two heartless masters on opposite sides, being ordered to perform treasonous investigations, torturing his treacherous Practicals, and thwarting and arresting his former boss and one of the most powerful men in the Union. The succession

of steadily worsening situations and Glokta's ruthless unwillingness to fail at any cost makes for a great protagonist. The reader not only grows concerned after they have invested in him for two books, drawn in by his cynical humour, but they also share his triumphs when he succeeds, as below when he thwarts an attempt of his life by Practical Frost:

Glokta's lips curled away from his empty gums. *I do not mind dying. But I refuse to be beaten.*

He set his feet as best he could, ignoring the pain that stabbed through his toeless foot and up his front leg. He brought up his cane and jammed his thumb into its hidden catch. It had been made to his precise instructions by the same man who had made the case for his instruments. *And is an even finer piece of craftsmanship.*

There was a gentle click as the wood sprang open on secret hinges and dropped away revealing a two-foot needle of mirror bright metal. He let go a piercing shriek.

Jab, jab, Glokta. Jab, jab.

The steel was a blur. The first thrust ran Frost neatly through the left side of his chest. The second darted silently through the right side of his neck. The third punctured his mask and scraped against his jaw bone, the glinting point showing itself just under his white ear for an instant before it whipped back out. (Abercrombie, 2008, p388).

It's a classic "looks like the end for our hero" moment, or the Ordeal section from Vogler's *The Hero's Journey* where the character faces death and the tension is highest. Yet with the cunningly hidden fencing steel Glokta triumphs in a manner that certainly fits his character, with the prior establishment of him as a past fencing champion and the constant presence of his cane. It is a very visceral moment for the reader; the danger to a character they have developed a relationship with is very real. The drawn out unsheathing of Glokta's steel adds tension and the final painful triumph is excellent, especially from a character who's physical actions have been virtually non-existent till now, thanks to his crippled body in comparison to the more traditional action hero. As Vogler puts it: "Emotions depressed by the presence of death can rebound in an instant to a higher state than ever before." (Vogler, 2007, p161). With the threat of death

overcome, the reader shares the triumph and elation of the character, despite his moral nature.

This technique plays on the reader's sympathy, even if they don't find the character very sympathetic. Shovelling more and more problems on an overburdened character and letting the reader see how they react to it is a great way to deepen the relationship between reader and protagonist as well as an opportunity to explore the character. Will they break under the strain? Will they find a way to succeed against all odds? It is a technique that turns the protagonist into the underdog character that the reader may love to root for, despite their morality.

Even the cruel Jorg from *Prince of Thorns* suffers from a succession of hardships and impossible burdens raining down. This begins with the loss of his mother and brother, then the challenge to conquer a castle with a paltry army or even to take vengeance on his mother's killer with his threadbare force of "brothers." Jorg fights his way through these challenges until, despite his nature, a part of the reader begins to root for the protagonist.

The Lies of Locke Lamora is another example, as the gentlemen bastards are used by the grey king, robbed, and then murdered. The reader feels the loss because Lynch has put such effort into making them relatable characters and building the relationships between them.

"Forgive me," Locke mumbled through his tears. "Gods damn me Bug, this is all my fault. We could have run. We should have. My pride... you and Calo and Galdo. That bolt should have been for me." (Lynch, 2006, p346).

Despite the nature of the group as a pack of thieves, the reader can't help but feel they don't deserve such a harsh fate. And as the situation plummets further, the reader sympathises with Locke, rooting for him to win and sharing the joy of his triumph. The succession of adversity and the triumph of the character help the reader and protagonist to bond, opening up the reader's sympathies and using them as a method to draw their support for the character.

Awareness

“For what it is worth, my friend, I think it is better to be unsure. It seems to me that most of the problems of this world have been caused by men who were too sure; men who always knew what was right.” (Gemmell, 1992, p263).

A large number of fantasy stories are based on conflict, but it doesn't have to be physical in the form of clashing armies. It can be a conflict of ideas and conscience. The best characters are complex; they have flaws, doubts and fears. The same applies to the immoral protagonists. If a protagonist is brutal and ruthless, without any moral compass governing his actions, they are much harder to relate to as the reader is likely to have their own moral values that conflict. Of course such characters do exist in fiction. Jorg from *Prince of Thorns* could be an example, the character has few moral qualms through the novel, and the author uses other techniques to encourage reader engagement.

But if a character does suffer from moral doubts and dilemmas that's something the reader can relate to, or at least understand. It also affects how they judge the character, if the protagonist commits horrific acts without a flicker of remorse, then most would term him evil. But if the character struggles with the choice it shows the reader the character's conscience, and whatever the choice made, the reader knows it was not blithely decided, but agonised over.

Croaker from *The Black Company* by Glen Cook is a great example of this technique, much of what makes the book so interesting is the situation he finds himself in. As a member of a mercenary company, the character is forced to fight for the “evil” side and the reader sees the moral dilemma that presents for the character:

I am haunted by the Lady's laughter. I am haunted by my suspicion that we are furthering the cause of something that deserves to be scrubbed from the face of the earth. I am haunted by the conviction that those bent upon the Lady's eradication are little better than she. (Cook, 1984, p193).

Not only does it make it harder to judge the character, but it establishes a link between the reader and the protagonist, almost as if they are being included in the decision making, helping them to feel closer to the character, and their situation. If the reader can be made to experience the hard decisions the character has to make, it creates a much more complex and relatable character. It can also link in with Forced by Circumstance which can make the reader even more sympathetic to the protagonist. In Jacqueline Carey's *Banewrecker*, where Tanaros is forced to kill a group of old tribesmen by his lord, the reasons are explained and tactically sound, even to the reader. Yet the moral dilemma is what plagues Tanaros:

“Slayer,” he said. “You do not have to do this.”

“Give me a reason, Ngurra.” Rage and bleak despair stirred in Tanaros’ heart, and he tightened his grip on his sword-hilt, raising it with both hands to strike. “*Give me a reason!* Tell me that you’re wrong, tell me you’re sorry, tell me the Bearer made a bad choice! Send a delegation to bring him back! Can you do that, old man? Is that so much to ask? I didn’t ask for this choice. *Give me a reason not to make it!*” (Carey, 2004, p372).

And when he strikes the reader really feels the pain of the choice, they know he did not take any pleasure in the act and while it does not absolve the character, it alters their perception of the protagonist. Instead of a bloodthirsty killer, they see a man torn between his duty and his morals. Even though Tanaros is on the “evil” side of the book, this creates a fascinating character with a lot of depth.

By seeing the protagonist at a vulnerable, conflicted moment, the reader develops a link with the character, sharing the choice with them as they debate the dilemma. The technique creates a more complex character that the reader can engage with instead of solely judging them on their actions.

Fallible, Flawed, Imperfect characters

No one can relate to perfection. We know that. (Boughan, 2012).

A tried and tested technique, making protagonists flawed and fallible is a way of helping the reader to relate to them and making the characters more realistic. It is much easier to be sympathetic to a character if they have their own problems and issues. It can even serve to make a character more interesting if he is flawed, limiting his actions. The introduction on the back of *The Lies Of Locke Lamora* describes its central protagonist as “Slightly built and barely competent with a sword,” differentiating him from traditional heroes like Aragorn or Conan with their renowned blade skills. It proves an important element in the plot as well, during the last chapters Locke must duel a master fencer, and instead of beating him with skill or bravery, tricks the Grey King.

Some tiny, detached part of Locke’s mind coolly registered his own inadequacy as he desperately flailed parry after parry, chasing phantom thrusts with his eyes and hands even while the Grey King’s steel was punching through cloth and flesh. (Lynch, 2006, p515).

There is no heroic last surge of strength that has almost become a cliché. Locke is battered and broken in the physical confrontation but his brilliantly cunning mind is what gets him out of the trap with the ruse of awaiting help: “I don’t have to beat you, motherfucker. I just have to keep you here...until Jean shows up.” (Lynch, 2006, p517). It is his mind Locke uses to win, which fits perfectly with his character, the flaws of the protagonist helping to make them original and exciting.

Many other characters have even more pronounced flaws; Michael Moorcock’s Elric is an albino weakling without the symbiotic relationship of his sword Stormbringer. His dependence on the cursed sword makes him a very complex character, especially given its penchant for attacking those closest to him. It serves to evoke pity in the reader as they see the self loathing weakness of Elric’s need for the sword:

Gasping, a sickening sense of defeat overwhelming him, he dropped over the side and plunged into the bone-chilling water, striking out with

strained, grotesque strokes, towards the hovering sword. He was beaten – the sword had won. (Moorcock, 2001, p34).

The reader feels the struggle within the character, sharing his pain as the sword takes the people he loves from him. Despite the horrible acts Elric commits, the reader sees the character as partly a victim of his situation, making it harder to judge him for his actions, especially given the remorse he feels for his crimes.

These flaws and weaknesses do much to help the reader understand the character; it's far easier to understand Malekith's transformation into a tyrant when you look at his pride and arrogance and ambition. Kylar's lack of understanding and desire to save everyone cause him a series of problems and moral conflicts that give the reader a better understanding of the character's nature and help to develop a relationship between the protagonist and reader.

Flaws can help to make a character seem more accessible to the reader, even with their fantastical nature. Jant in *The Year Of Our War* by Steph Swainston is an immortal with wings, he is also a drug addict. The reader sees the character at his very lowest moments, strung out in need of a fix, or lying in a pool of his own vomit. Immediately it gives the reader a very intimate view into the protagonist's life. The character flaw pervades the writing, even in the midst of important events, Jan is focused on his next fix with constant references and jokes:

Lightning might give me my syringe back. A soldier might have some medicine – I mean Cat – to arrest my decline. I told myself, Jant, don't be so fucking ridiculous. I stopped trying to control the shivering, relaxed and it took over completely. (Swainston, 2005, p338).

With all his problems, like the guilt he suffers, the knowledge of the other world, and the other characters' dismissal of Jant as a junkie, the reader really feels for the character. While Jant isn't an especially "bad" character morally speaking, the technique can be used to good effect on even the most reprehensible characters. Abercrombie's character Glokta is a perfect example of this. Readers expect immoral characters to get their comeuppance, but in his case, Glokta has

already had his, suffering two years of torture to leave him a ruined cripple. The concept makes for a fascinatingly twisted character, especially with his job as an Inquisitor after what he has been through, but the way Abercrombie uses his crippled nature is excellent.

There isn't a single chapter of Glokta's where his pain isn't at the forefront, from the moment we are introduced to the character, we are introduced to his pain: "Click, tap, pain. That was the rhythm of his walking." (Abercrombie, 2007, p10). Glokta's pain colours everything the character does, it comes across in his point of view and even his description of the world, down to his obsessive and lengthy description of stairs:

They're everywhere. You really can't change floors without them. And down is worse than up, that's the thing people never realise. Going up, you don't usually fall that far. (Abercrombie, 2007, p10).

Despite his actions, with the constant references to pain, the reader is almost forced to pity this character, for all the evil he commits during the books; he's certainly paying for it already:

"So you think the thought of a slap or two scares me?" He chuckled bloody laughter in her face. "It hurts more when I piss! Do you think I'm scared to die?" he grimaced at the stabbing through his spine as he leaned towards her. "Every morning...that I wake up alive...is a disappointment! (Abercrombie, 2008, p204).

The reader grows to admire his grim determination throughout the novels, his unwillingness to fail despite his infirmity. Being a character very much in his head, the reader grows to understand more and more about Glokta. They learn how his pain blots out his ability to feel, allowing him to commit such horrendous acts on others, how he works because the alternative is to sit in bed and wait for death. Glokta's flaws are what make the character, he is the antithesis of the traditional hero, being physically weak and morally bankrupt in his actions. Yet

he is a vivid and engaging character, not in spite of his flaws, but because of them.

A character may have flaws that, while being detrimental, make them more amusing to the reader. In his epic *The Malazan Book of the Fallen*, Steven Erikson has a huge cast of characters, and as such, the task of making them all interesting and engaging is difficult. Sergeant Hellion is a belligerent alcoholic with a colossal fear of spiders. Her actions, like sending her soldiers to fetch booze off a burning ship, are selfish and foolhardy, yet the delivery of these events and the way she is portrayed means the reader finds her flaws entertaining, rather than condemning her actions. When the narrative dips into her perspective the reader gets a clear sense of her alcoholism, delving into the mind of a character that is both flawed and funny:

Or a sword. I could trade the bottle for a sword. I did it the other way around didn't I? Half the bottle. I'll drink the other half. Half a bottle, half a sword. A knife. Half a bottle for a knife. Which I'll stick in his throat, then trade back, for the other half of the bottle – if I'm quick that should work fine. I get the knife and the whole bottle. (Erikson, 2008, p470).

Her utter ignorance of the world around her and focus on her flaw makes Hellion a lovable character, despite the fact that objectively she's a lousy person. Her single minded focus on avoiding sobriety, while a deep character flaw, serves to amuse the reader and creates an easily understandable character. *"Gotta be measured about these things, in case something terrible happens and I can't get a fast refill."* (Erikson, 2008, p614).

However the technique is used, having flawed protagonists helps the reader relate to the characters; the flaws help to make them original and interesting. Even if the character themselves isn't very moral in their attitude, the reader can take heart that they have their own issues to compensate for their actions.

Understanding

Thought Track

This is another technique used widely throughout literature, yet it proves particularly effective with regards to the protagonists I have studied. It is a formatting method that works by using italics to represent the character's direct thoughts at the time, rather than having them reported or explained to the reader in another way. They may be separate or interspersed within the normal narrative, even breaking up sentences, dialogue and description. The technique has been established in literature and is accepted as a viable and recognised writing technique.

The benefit of this method is it allows the reader a direct line of communication to the character and can give them a greater insight into their mind. In building a relationship with a protagonist, what can be a greater aid than knowing the innermost thoughts of the character? It automatically establishes a relationship; the author is letting you into the protagonist's mind and there is a very real connection to the character.

One of the writers who best use this method is Joe Abercrombie, his extensive use of the technique, especially with Glokta, gives the reader an in-depth look into the psyche of all his major protagonists. This method makes it much easier for the reader to relate to even the foulest characters. If the reader was not privy to the innermost thoughts of Inquisitor Glokta, they would see him as sadistic and cruel. Yet with a window into his mind, they can see how his own pain dominates his life and makes him a more complex and sympathetic character. They can see how his past affects him, even on a daily basis:

There's no need to rush, Arch Lector. That's the trouble with good legs, you tend to run around too much. If you have trouble moving, on the

other hand, you don't move until you damn well know it's time. (Abercrombie, 2007, p114).

Not only does the method attract sympathy for his pain, but it also gives the option to create greater character depth. With a crippled body, Glokta is very much in his head as a character, and so his personality has to come through with his mind. His cynical, misanthropic humour helps to make him entertaining for the reader, whether idly hoping for his Practical to fall off a wall and become as crippled as he is, or the sharp mocking contrast between his thoughts and whatever actions or dialogue is happening:

“How the hell did you manage it?” and he gazed at Glokta expectantly

I sold myself to the bank that funded the Mercers, then used the proceeds to bribe the world's least reliable mercenary. Then I murdered a defenceless emissary under flag of parley and tortured a serving girl until her body was mincemeat. Oh, and I let the biggest traitor of the lot go free. It was, without doubt, a heroic business. How did I manage it? “Rising early,” he murmured. (Abercrombie, 2008, p441).

The thought track is a way of accessing other techniques such as Likable Traits, Humanisation, and Awareness. Take Week's assassin Kylar, without the thought track it would be much harder to see the emotional turmoil of the character, the fears that make him human and the awareness of moral issues: *“Was it like this for you, master? Is this where that ocean of bitterness began? Is giving up my humanity the costs of my immortality?”* (Weeks, 2008, p249). The technique helps make many of the others more accessible and easier to implement.

Morality in context - Different Standards

In much the same way that the world of your story requires a certain logical coherency, the events that occur there require a certain moral coherency. (Stableford, 1998, p14).

As I have already stated, the fantasy genre and its common establishment of a Secondary World with its own moral standards can be very useful when creating

immoral protagonists. When the reader begins the book, they are learning about the world as much as the plot or characters and what it means for their actions in context. This technique shares elements with *Shades of Grey* in that the purpose is to lessen the impact of the protagonist's actions and alter the judgement of the reader. The author establishes a new set of moral rules for the reader to learn in an effort to make them judge the characters by those standards rather than their own.

For example, R.A. Salvatore's subterranean world of the Underdark is as cruel and harsh a place as anywhere found in literature. The Drow as one of the primary character races, are cruel and sadistic, and set a far different standard of morality than is likely of its reader. While Salvatore made a point of this with his hero Drizzit Do'Urden rejecting the twisted nature of his race, many other books take a different approach. *The War of the Spider Queen* series written by a collection of authors and guided by Salvatore follows a group of Drow on a traditional quest plot. However the characters are a far cry from the fellowship of Tolkien, consisting of a group of treacherous, backstabbing, power hungry dark elves, constantly at each other's throats.

The moral standards of the race are established in the first book. Even if the reader has never seen the Drow before, it is shown through the nature of the characters, the world construction, and even some hard hitting points in the plot as when Pharaun leaves his friend Ryld to die. The reader may balk at this as an action totally opposite to the traditional hero expectations. Yet after Ryld escapes and the two have a tense reunion, the psyche of the Drow comes through in how they greet each other:

“My friend,” Pharaun said, having lowered his voice. “I truly regret what happened.”

“What you did was tactically sound,” said Ryld. “It was what any sensible Drow would have done. I hold no grudge.” (Byers, 2002, p367).

The betrayal is certainly in character for the race and creates a very interesting moment. While Ryld of course seeks revenge later, his words capture the spirit of

the Drow. This action creates a real conflict for the reader, Pharaun is the most relatable and likable character, but the reader too feels a sense of betrayal and must decide whether to root for him still. This is part of the power of this technique, with the standard of morality altered, the reader has much more choice in who to engage with and therefore uses other characteristics than good and evil to choose their favourite characters. Do they go for Pharaun's sardonic wit, or Ryld's quiet honour? It allows for much more focus on the quality of the character rather than the more traditional route of supporting the "good side."

The scale does not even have to be so skewed as the Drow's view. The standards of morality can be altered or set up with relative ease and have a considerable impact on the story. The first chapter after the prologue of Martin's *A Game of Thrones* has young Bran heading for an execution of a deserter. The scene is focused on Ned's character and his values: "we hold to the belief that the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword." (Martin, 1997, p14). But it also has the effect of establishing a world where capital punishment is accepted. Whatever the reader's view on the subject, they know a little more about the nature of the world, that killing is acceptable in certain situations and must take that into account when looking at the characters and their actions. It will colour how they perceive the characters' acts in terms of morality.

This technique is more a function of world building than characterisation, yet it certainly has an influence on how the characters are perceived by the reader. If a person is willing to accept the idea of fantasy worlds and creatures, then they must also accept the moral systems that come with it, at least in context.

Progression

I told Bovid Tor that by fifteen I'd be King. I told him over his steaming guts. I'm telling you that by twenty I'll be Emperor. (Lawrence, 2012, p373).

Progression for the character is separate from character development; I am referring to progression in context of plot and reader understanding. There are

documentaries and biographies of criminals and mass murderers; most readers would not admit to enjoying the subject matter, but simply being curious about the events and the person. There are books and films where the villain “steals the show,” where the viewer finds the villain more interesting or exciting than the hero. A perfect example is the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, though it’s technically not a fantasy.

The characters I’ve studied tend to be closer to the villains’ side of the scale than the hero, and the same idea applies to them. The technique will hold as long as the author can find the correct balance of interest in the protagonist’s actions, while holding back from totally alienating the reader.

Nagash the Sorcerer, a Warhammer novel by Mike Lee, uses this method. The protagonist Nagash lacks most of the techniques I’ve mentioned in making characters likable or sympathetic, but instead relies on the plot and the interest of the reader, who is with the character every step of the way. They watch as Nagash learns magic and puts it to horrific use in betraying his brother, taking the throne and establishing a cruel empire. The reader gets to understand the character’s thoughts and motivations, and even if they can’t justify them in terms of morality, the protagonist is interesting enough that they read on. The reader learns with Nagash, sharing his triumphs and failures, the more the character progresses in the novel, the more understanding the reader has. Having invested in the character, the reader feels a sense of build-up, they follow Nagash from the first tentative experiments, noting his findings, up to his grand plans:

This was but a prelude, a gathering of strength for the real work was about to begin. Wrapped in ethereal mist and glowing with unholy energy the Grand Hierophant stretched out his arms once more and turned his attention to the wooden cage just a few feet beyond the magic circle. (Lee, 2008, p192).

Even if his actions are horrific, there is an almost morbid curiosity that keeps the reader going. Whether they like the character or not, they are interested in his plans, even if it's only because they are concerned for the other protagonists.

This idea is developed in the next book, *Nagash The Unbroken*. Having invested in the character in the first book, followed his plans and failure, the reader is keen to see what happens to the character. When Nagash is alone, wounded and in danger, despite the fact that he irrefutably deserves it, the reader is concerned, not so much for his well-being, but for the continuation of their entertainment.

This technique is a useful method of building a relationship with characters whose morality makes them hard to engage with on a personal level. Even the reprehensible Jorg has a Machiavellian cunning that lures the reader in, teasing them to find out what his latest plan will entail, how he will accomplish this impossible feat. “The words I did recognise were interesting enough though. ‘Weapons’, ‘Stockpile’, ‘Mass Destruction.’” (Lawrence, 2012, p174).

This technique relies not on the reader liking the character, but simply by them being interested and entertained. While it lessens the human relationship with focus on plot and action, as long as the character and events are compelling it will draw the reader in.

Admiration

Humour

“One I expected. One I could of taken. But both? Why?”

“Because you’re a ruthless, plotting, bitter, twisted, self pitying villain?” Glokta stared at her, and she shrugged. “You asked.” They set off again through the nauseating darkness.

“The question was meant to be rhetorical.” (Abercrombie, 2008, p401).

This might be considered an element of Likable Traits but it’s not necessarily part of the character construction but a feature the writing and narrative itself. There is a difference between a character being funny and acting funny. Comedy can help to make a more well rounded piece of writing, breaking up the dramatic and tragic elements. Vogler talks about a rule of drama: “Make ‘em cry a lot; let ‘em laugh a little.” (Vogler, 2007, p78). This method tugs the reader’s emotional state in different directions and helps to give some scenes more dramatic impact. Of course, the comedic elements must be appropriate to the story. Comic actions must be reasonable in scope and serve a purpose, otherwise the reader will find it hard to take the characters or the work seriously.

With regards to the characters, humour can help to take the edge off their actions by countering it with comedy. The authors make it hard for the reader to be mad at a character they find so entertaining. The rascal camaraderie of The Gentlemen Bastards in *The Lies of Locke Lamora* is one of the more successful parts of the character development, creating a real close knit feel to the group and endearing them to the reader with a series of little touches like their mocking toast before dinner:

“Liar!” They chorused.

“I only steal because this wicked world won’t let me work an honest trade!” Calo cried, hoisting his own glass.

“LIAR!”

“I only steal because I have to support my poor lazy twin brother, whose indolence broke our mother’s heart!” Galdo elbowed Calo as he made this announcement.

“LIAR!”

“I only steal, “said Jean, “because I’ve temporarily fallen in with bad company.”

“LIAR!”

At last the ritual came to Bug; the boy raised his glass a bit shakily and yelled, “I only steal because it’s heaps of fucking fun!”

“BASTARD!”

With a general clamour of whooping and hollering the five thieves banged glasses together.” (Lynch, 2006, p107).

The boisterous banter that the group enact makes it much easier for the reader to identify with them, almost to the point that they could dismiss the thefts as childish pranks. The nature of the story is that the group have to face reality as their games attract the attention of greater and more brutal powers and they suffer the consequences. The comedy of their actions and banter help the reader to side with them, even if they don’t share their morals. The characters are amusing and so the reader continues to follow them, slowly building a relationship with the gang to the point where they support them against the other immoral groups of the story.

Humour can be used to get a reader to warm up to a character, even if they feel they shouldn’t. In *A Game Of Thrones* Tyrion the dwarf’s crude and blunt humour not only give an insight into his character, but also serve to make the character more likable: ““What, me, celibate? The whores would go begging from Dorne to Casterly Rock. No I just want to stand on top of the wall and piss off the edge of the world.”” (Martin, 1996, p76). In contrast to the more serious characters, Tyrion’s humour makes him the one of the most amusing protagonists. Humour can be used to make even the foulest characters entertaining to the reader; Glokta’s cynical thought tracks provide a counterpoint of levity, even if they do have a sinister quality:

She could just as easily walk down here and stop making a spectacle of herself. But at least this way there is always a chance of her falling off. (Abercrombie, 2008, p63).

This is a typical example of Abercrombie's style of humour, though his most amusing character is probably the drunken, treacherous mercenary captain Cosca. His shameless attitude, unpredictable and eccentric nature make him an incredibly entertaining character. His unapologetic treacherousness is refreshing and creates a very original and engaging character:

“Came on us with cavalry before dawn, sun behind and all, damned unfriendly trick, the bitch –”

“I heard you were passed out drunk at the time,” muttered Vitari.

“Yes, well... Then I held Borletta against Grand Duke Orso for six months –”

Vitari snorted. “Until he paid you to open the gates.”

Cosca gave a sheepish grin. “It was an awful lot of money. But he never fought his way in! You’d have to give me that, eh, Shylo?”

“No one needs to fight you, providing they bring their purse.”

The mercenary grinned. “I am what I am, and never claimed to be anything else.” (Abercrombie, 2008, p71).

Both in *The First Law* trilogy and the stand alone *Best Served Cold*, Cosca's humour helps to break up the fairly bleak picture of Abercrombie's work. But as a character himself, the author has managed to make a faithless drunk into a character the reader can engage with and find entertaining despite his moral nature. Again, no secret is made of Cosca's immoral actions, yet it's the execution and use of humour that makes the reader side with him.

Character Development

Durzo froze. He could only guess Kylar had already intervened in the castle somehow. *Very well, Kylar. I'll do this for you, and the count, and for Jorsin, and for all the fools who believe that even a killer may accomplish some good.* (Weeks, 2008, p558).

As bad as a character is, there is the potential for growth and change. In the works I have studied this normally takes one of two routes: the path to

redemption or the descent into evil. The reader and the character build a relationship as the protagonist progresses and develops, with the reader watching the whole way, following the changes in their personality. Some characters even have both elements, a rise and fall narrative or with a spiral into darkness before an ultimate redemption.

An example of the descent would be *Malekith*, a Warhammer novel by Gav Thorpe, charting the fall of its title character the Prince Malekith. The story begins with the protagonist put aside for the throne in favour of another. Taking the insult stoically Malekith leaves home and sets off on adventure and conquest, largely playing the part of the traditional hero. There are a few sinister events such as the murder of an opposing prince, but it's executed so that the reader is on Malekith's side and the action is put across as typical Elven politics rather than an ill deed. Yet as the story continues, Malekith undergoes a series of setbacks like the rebellion of his homeland under rule of his mother. Despite defeating her, he allows her to live and the reader watches as Malekith is corrupted by this character, described by Christopher Booker as a "Dark mother," who is normally portrayed as a "heartless and oppressive figure" (Booker, 2004, p241) that is the opposite of the hero in traditional plots. However, Malekith grows to become more like her as the story progresses. The reader watches as Malekith slowly changes from a noble hero to a power hungry tyrant, his ambition and lust for new challenges twisted until he becomes the very thing he fought against:

"If I am to rule Nagarythe, I shall rule it alone," said Malekith. "Without you. When you are slain, the army of Nagarythe will be mine again. I shall hold power over the pleasure cults and with them secure the Phoenix Throne." (Thorpe, 2009, p350).

The reader follows the protagonist along his journey, inwardly crying out at his decisions as they see the character making the choices that will lead to his downfall. Yet even at the end of the novel, there is still a part of the reader that

supports Malekith, having seen the entire story, it's hard to blame the protagonist after supporting him for the length of the book.

Another path is the story of redemption; the reader often finds it easier to relate to an immoral character trying to be better than a protagonist who is unashamedly "evil." Many fantasy protagonists have a redemptive element in their stories; Waylander, the slayer of the king, Kylar the assassin, even Glokta tries to do his best to help West's sister:

And yet Ardee West thinks me a good man. A strange feeling, and not an unpleasant one. It feels almost like being human again. What a shame that it comes so late in the day. (Abercrombie, 2008, p437).

After investing in the character, with the redemption angle, the reader feels better about rooting for them, hoping that they can transform into the traditional hero character that it's okay to cheer for. Often the moment is teased out, adding tension to the writing and building concern for the character with the reader, will they do the right thing? In *Johannes Cabal the Necromancer* the protagonist Johannes appears to have given in to the devil at the end of the book, only to reveal that he tricked Satan and saved the innocent souls:

"No," said Cabal. He rose slowly and looked the thing in the face. "The deal was for the contracts in the box. You've got them." (Howard, 2009, p333).

The moral confusion of the reader is eased, the conflict they may feel about liking the character diminishes or vanishes entirely as they "save the day in the end." The reader is allowed to share in the triumph of the character as they do the right thing, becoming a more recognisable hero character.

Likable Traits

Even the worst characters can have traits that the reader finds admirable, or if not admirable then at least interesting. The technique is based on drawing the

reader in, providing them with a reason to develop a relationship with the character. It also gives the protagonist more depth and believability than one who is written wholly negative.

These traits may be in direct opposition to the perceived nature of the character, like Tanaros' sense of honour in *The Sundering* duology. Throughout the series Tanaros is portrayed as noble, and honourable, just on the opposite side. His choice to release Cerelinde is a perfect exempt of how his better nature wins out:

“This cannot be, Blacksword. If you will not kill her, I will.”

“No,” Tanaros said gently, raising his sword a fraction. “You will not.”

Ushain inhaled sharply, his knuckles whitening as his grip tightened. “Will you stand against Godslayer itself?”

“Aye, I will.” (Carey, 2005, p383).

Even characters who the reader knows are immoral can be made engaging by giving them likable and interesting traits. Locke from *The Lies of Locke Lamora* is obviously no hero; he's a thief, liar and accidental murderer, yet his rascal attitude and his character make it possible for the reader to like and engage with him. One of Locke's most prominent traits is his overwhelming confidence and cocky attitude. Even in dire situations this never leaves him. It serves to make the character amusing and reveals a lot about his nature. When suffering a setback, Locke responds with this attitude and wit, and because the reader has grown to support the character, they share the defiance of the moment, rallying with the character as below. Lynch uses a split narrative to introduce the Bondsmage, with the past Locke listening to his teacher:

Chains shook his head. “Sorcery's impressive enough, but it's their fucking attitude that makes them such a pain. And that's why, when you find yourself face to face with one, you bow and scrape and mind your “sirs and madams.” (Lynch, 2007, p213).

While the reader can see Locke's irreverent attitude, completely ignoring his teacher's advice as the next chapter begins:

“Nice bird, arsehole,” said Locke.
The Bondsmage stared coldly at him, nonplussed. (Lynch, 2007, p214).

As a cocky rascal, Locke is instantly likable, despite his profession and moral attitude. Because he is different from the more serious but just as immoral characters, the reader grows to like him and even begins to root for the protagonist. Humour and attitude are commonly used to make thieves more relatable, Turner uses the same method for Gen in *The Thief*.

Even the truly dark characters may use this technique. It’s hard to see what likable traits Inquisitor Glokta from *The First Law* trilogy might have, but there are several instances where the protagonist displays qualities that make him more engaging to the reader. Glokta has a tenacious ruthlessness about him that slowly draws the reader to the character. His stubborn refusal to fail inspires a grudging admiration, until finally the reader begins to root for this crippled monster set against all the odds. His methods may be deplorable, but Glokta’s single minded pursuit of his goals, and his cynical honesty give the reader a man with recognisable goals and motivations, helping them to engage with him.

“You are a good man, a fair man, a just man. You expect me to believe this?”

“Honestly? I don’t care a shit about what you believe, and I care about doing right even less – that’s all a matter of who you ask. As for being a good man,” and Glokta curled his lip, “that ship sailed long ago, and I wasn’t there to wave it off. I’m interested in holding Dagoska. That and nothing else.” (Abercrombie, 2008, p90).

Glokta does even show a kinder side at times, particularly in reference to his friend West and his sister. The realisation that the character does possess a heart, a kind nature and willingness to help people, instead of his typical misanthropic attitude, shows a more human character to the reader, a likable trait that gives Glokta more depth.

“Come on, Collem, this isn’t you.” He reached slowly across the table, half pulled his hand back, then patted his sobbing friend awkwardly on the shoulder. “You’ve made some mistakes, but haven’t we all? They’re in the past, and can’t be changed. There’s nothing to be done now except to do better, eh?” *What? Can it really be me talking? Inquisitor Glokta, comforter of the needy?* (Abercrombie, 2007, p461).

Providing a character like Glokta with these likable traits gives the reader something to relate to despite the nature of his actions which could easily paint the protagonist as a villain. It doesn’t even have to be a profound trait that helps to humanise them, it could be something innocuous like Waylander’s kind nature to animals, shown when he adopts the dog Scar in *Waylander Two*. Even characters like Jorg from *Prince of Thorns* have traits that could be seen as admirable, like Jorg’s brilliant tactical mind and ability to manipulate people.

“Think about it, Makin. I made Roddat here fight like a madman because I told him if they think you’re not going to give up, they’ll break. Now I’ve got fifty enemies who’re out there telling everyone who’ll listen, ‘That Prince of Ancrath, he’s not going to break.’ It’s a simple sum. If they think we won’t break, they give up.” (Lawewnce, 2012, p58).

The technique doesn’t even have to rely on a true “trait,” it could simply be a quirk or eccentricity of the character that adds something to the character to make them stand out. It may be something to do with their nature or just a habit. Kylar’s master Durzo from *The Night Angel* Trilogy repeatedly locks and unlocks a door when entering a room, a personal quirk that fleshes out the character. It raises some questions as to the source of Durzo’s idiosyncrasy, is it a show of paranoia because of his profession as an assassin, or something else? The trait could be something more overt like Locke’s love of theft:

“But nobody, and I mean *nobody*, has ever been hungry for it like this boy. If he had a bloody gash across his throat and a physiker was trying to sew it up, Lamora would steal the needle and thread and die laughing. He...steals *too much*.” (Lynch, 2007, p12).

It is a quirk that transforms Locke from a basic thief character, into something special. The attribute reveals something about Locke's nature to the reader in an amusing fashion that really helps develop the character concept and make him interesting.

Though I call this technique Likable Traits, I don't necessarily mean characteristics that will get the reader to like the character, though that's part of it. The idea of this technique is to give the reader something to engage with, something to interest them; if it also makes the character more likable, all the better. But the idea is to provide the reader with a reason to keep reading, something to draw their attention to the character. Will Jorg's lust for vengeance be the end of him? Will Elric's drive to be free overcome his dependence on Stormbringer? It may be a "good" or "bad" trait, it just has to be interesting.

Creative element: The plot

The line between good and evil is permeable and almost anyone can be induced to cross it when pressured by situational forces. (Zimbardo, 2003).

The plot was designed with the idea of providing a platform and opportunities to explore the techniques I studied. The characters have their separate plotlines to let the reader connect with each protagonist on an individual basis. The overall plot idea and style could place the piece in the Epic Fantasy genre with the world-changing events that are occurring, but the plot is largely character driven in terms of pacing and action. This was inevitable given my concentration on characters, and allows for greater focus on the protagonists.

My method for writing involves planning the story out in advance, chapter by chapter, detailing the basic events and the occasional important scene. The actions and events were designed to fit with the protagonists' characters, and to give me a chance to explore the techniques I looked at. The plot varies from conventional fantasy story archetypes presented by Christopher Booker in *The Seven Basic Plots* like Overcoming the Monster, which details the hero's triumph over an external evil and reward with a prize, or Voyage and Return, that follows a journey to a strange new world, an escape, and transformative return. The closest match would be the Quest narrative, which charts a journey to find and retrieve something, though a non standard model. It might fit with Booker's Dark Inversion idea of the quest narrative that contains egocentric and unbalanced characters. The plot fits the Quest concept in that all the characters are seeking something, though their individual goals differ, not to mention their reasons for acquiring them. Instead of finding a magic crystal to save their world, Cras is simply looking to get paid, Arracan seeks a cure. Malus is the most traditional in desiring an artefact, while Hrun desires nothing but the

preservation of his city. None of their goals save Hrun's is motivated by noble intentions, and most of the protagonists will go to any lengths to secure their prize, in defiance of the expected nobility of the Hero archetype.

I think the plot allows a greater scope for what I'm trying to examine with morality and characterisation. Most of the characters have no lofty aims or ideals, but are simply acting in their best interests as real people are wont to do. The plot allows each character to confront exactly what level they will stoop to in pursuit of their goal. For the micro-plots of the characters, they each have a goal, and one or more obstacles are set in their way, all the while the backdrop of the macro plot and war goes on, though this is not heavily featured in the opening.

The section included to accompany my thesis contains the opening chapters of the book. While it may limit scope and development of the characters, it works as a more coherent narrative and allows for a truer test of the techniques I've studied with immediate reader reaction, instead of being influenced by long term character development. The opening allows the introduction of the central protagonists, and enough time for the reader to engage with them, learning their characteristics and personality.

In his introduction to Aristotle's *Poetics*, Malcolm Heath states that "character sets agenda" (Heath, 1996, pxix) based on Aristotle's ideas about character and reasoning. This concept that the nature of the character and the circumstances predict their actions if it is to keep with logical expectations, follows the Aristotelian idea that the poet is "concerned, not with what *has* happened, but with 'the kind of thing that *would* happen," (Heath, 1996, pxiv) keeping the events plausible, and realistically imitating what would happen in a given situation. This means that with my protagonists being of "wicked" character, the plot can be expected to follow a darker course than might be expected of a narrative with a heroic protagonist. Most of my protagonists have a much more ego-centric plotline rather than what could be expected in traditional fantasy. This attitude suits their character while simultaneously allowing me to explore characterisation techniques. For example, Cras is

motivated by greed in his narrative on becoming a bodyguard, while the unfamiliar situation provides an opportunity to explore his character using various techniques as he goes against his nature in trying to save someone.

According to Christopher Booker the morality of characters affects not only the development of the story but how it will end, as he talks about traditional narratives and Dark Inversions of standard plots. In *The Seven Basic Plots* he states “The nature of the story’s ending then depends entirely on how its hero or heroine have aligned themselves to the dark power.” (Booker, 2004, p219). While in his examples this “dark power” is usually personified as an antagonistic figure such as the wolf in *The Three Little Pigs*, if the dark power is a function of the character, or a choice they have to make, then my immoral characters are likely follow the negative side of Booker’s idea: “If, on the other hand, the hero or heroine have become irrevocably identified with the dark power, the story will end in their destruction.” (Booker, 2004, p219). While my piece only contains the opening of the novel, the final outcome does end in the deaths of most of the protagonists. Yet Booker’s work is limited by his insistence on a typical hero-centric narrative, and the conventional happy ending as the “right” ending, with other formats as Dark Inversions, applying it to tragedy. Should the protagonist identify with the dark power, and veer from the hero archetype, he discards them and focuses on the benefit to the “wider community” living under the shadow of the protagonists and the benefit their deaths bring. The idea that the story thus ends on a note of liberation away from the central characters and clings to traditional narrative ideals instead of keeping the focus on the negative protagonists and the consequences for them of their actions.

My creative piece is less biased in its conceptual morality, closer to writers like Abercrombie whose works lack any moral resolution or sense of justice, with more of a nihilistic worldview subject to random chance. An example would be the character of Glokta, the crippled inquisitor, while he does perform some redeeming acts like the rescue of Ardee, all his numerous crimes

of blackmail, murder, and torture are never brought to account. He actually finishes the story massively elevated in both political power and personal life, though still suffering and crippled. It is an odd parody of Booker's concept of balance and growth. Glokta does achieve the union with the feminine anima in his marriage to Ardee, but it's far from a storybook ending.

As an opening, even if my characters do differ from archetypal convention, the plot moves smoothly and in a logical progression according to the protagonists' goals and their reaction to events. It ends having established the central characters and their identities, hopefully giving the reader enough time to engage with the characters and form a relationship with them. It has a mix of action and an involving plot that should draw the reader into the work with the characters.

Creative element: Central Protagonists

I had decided early on that my story would have a small group of central protagonists and that the narrative would be seen from their point of view in separate chapters, a technique that Abercrombie and Martin use. I wanted the opportunity to portray each of the characters individually to better utilise the techniques I have studied. In order to create engaging characters, there was some overlap in the techniques I used, though I tried to differentiate the protagonists in terms of their nature and what techniques I would use in their construction.

While I originally set out to have my protagonists in varying levels of immorality, in order to show the reader necessary plot information the other protagonists wouldn't see, I added Captain Hrun. I thought perhaps that a moral character like Hrun would detract from the purpose of my thesis, however during my studies I've found that having characters like Hrun can affect the way readers sees characters like Cras and Arracan. In *The First Law* trilogy by Abercrombie, the character West is a virtual opposite to most of the other main protagonists in terms of morality. West's first introduction is shown as a direct counter to the callous Chamberlain Hoff, and by being so moral, West serves to make the other characters seem worse. While writing his chapters I tried to make Hrun's actions and motivations very noble to separate him from the other characters and create a clear opposition between the protagonists. His actions then serve, like West's, to make my other characters seem worse. Hrun does however correspond to the traditional hero archetype, and therefore, few of the techniques I've studied were applicable to him, save the basic characterisation technique of giving him flaws.

Cras was intended to be the most relatable of the protagonists; despite his apparent lack of morality he bears similarities to the "everyman" character that

writers use to forge a link with the reader. Though Hrun was a more typical hero, his morals were slightly exaggerated and unrealistic, while Cras is more down to earth and easier to identify with. A common man, without any great powers or influence, the reader finds it easier to connect with him. Tolkien himself used the method to make Bilbo and Frodo successful characters, though the protagonists are at opposite ends of the moral spectrum.

Cras' introduction in the first chapter is set to evoke sympathy from the reader for his situation, countered by the growing realisation of his task. The detail of the scene and how uncomfortable Cras feels not only allows a moment of world construction, but an opportunity to dip into the mind of the character. The reader shares the suffering of the character, and the use of the thought track provides a chance for humour as Cras expresses his misery, cursing his choices: "*Would've been so easy to get a sturdy pottery wagon.*" (Miles, 2012, p5). There is a slow build-up as Cras waits for his target, frustrations building so that when he finally does snap, the reader at least understands his reasoning, even if they cannot condone the raw brutality of his actions. Because Cras is an assassin, the reader comes to expect a kill from him, but I wanted to introduce him with something extra violent to establish his character. While the reader may grow to relate to him through the narrative, they begin with a scene that shows what Cras is capable of.

The scene in the tavern, while revealing plot information, helps to humanise Cras after the reader sees his violent side. The banter with Loker and Rayna establishes the idea that Cras has friends and relationships, showing him as a more well-rounded person than merely a brutal killer, again using humour to blunt the fresh memories of violence from the character. In a different environment I attempted to make the character more engaging by adding some Likable Traits such as the elements of wit and a cocky attitude similar to Locke from *The Lies of Locke Lamora* with things like the recurring "Professional killer" joke. The scene was useful to reveal plot information and followed a logical progression, but I think it really works in giving Cras a place in the world. Instead

of being just another killer, the reader is shown his human side, which offers an opportunity to develop a relationship between protagonist and reader.

The scene also hints at a sense of vulnerability in Cras with the threat of war and gives an insight into the motivations of the character, showing him to be self sufficient, and self-involved:

The nobles and their bickering, the council and their problems, and the grand affairs of cities. Cras cared nothing for them. Not for their problems or their people; this city was his home but that was as far as his affection went. *It won't affect us.* (Miles, 2012, p13).

The heart of his motivation is revealed as Cras goes to get paid, his greed coming into play later, serving as a motivator, character flaw and a source of humour in later chapters. Again this conflicts with traditional hero characters like Hrun with their innate sense of justice driving them. In Cras' next chapter his character is revealed a little more with the introduction of a flaw. The reader learns about his inability to plan for the future, further supporting the idea of Cras' greed: "Cras hefted the bag, it didn't feel like pennies, yet he knew he'd burn through it in a few weeks." (Miles, 2012, p32). Then the offer comes, taking the character out of his comfort zone, forcing him to protect someone. Once again it's Cras' greed that drives him to take it, despite an early "refusal of the call" with the unusual conditions of the contract. Though the character does still follow this Hero's Journey format, even though his reasons are selfish rather than heroic:

"I don't babysit." Cras turned to leave.

"Ten thousand."

He stopped, hand inches from the door handle. *Just walk away. Don't do it. "Ten thousand?"* (Miles, 2012, p32).

This character flaw is the cause of the majority of his problems in the story, a way of driving the action that fitted with the protagonist. The reader gets to see the lengths that Cras will go to for money with regards to morality and how much the character will put up with. It fits in with the greater idea of my protagonists, that each has an ultimate goal, and the reader is allowed to see

how far each will go for it. Already knowing that Cras will kill for money, the reader then gets to see what level of difficulty and suffering the character is willing to accept for the payment and what it means for the morality of the character that he may kill but not work hard for his payment. I think this helps solidify the character concept and gives the reader a greater understanding of Cras' nature.

Also in the chapter is the confrontation with Talos, a sellsword. He is portrayed just as bad as Cras in the Shades of Grey method, introduced to the reader in Chapter Two. Without a clear "hero," the reader roots for Cras as the character they have built a relationship with and seen some good traits in. This means when Talos arrogantly insults Cras and he responds, the reader sides with Cras and shares the triumph of victory, as well as ending on a humorous note with Cras' thought track: "*A bold career choice.*" (Miles, 2012, p33). I think the scene is useful in developing the relationship, and because the reader has already sided with him once, they may be more inclined to do so next time.

Then there is another use of the Humanisation technique when Cras returns to the tavern. The idea that someone in his profession has colleagues and friends helps give the character more depth and realism, as well as detracting from the nature of their job. The scene is perhaps a bit long, but I think it's important in humanising Cras, making him more accessible to the reader. Immoral characters often work best when the reader doesn't realise how different they are to themselves. By seeing Cras in an environment to show his human side, the reader can find it easier to relate to him once he is shown to have a part that is capable of building relationships and forming bonds. The almost mundane banter of the group helps break down the vicious killer persona and show a more normal side, subject to the jibes and insults of his friends like anyone else:

"And they chose you?" Sabalt burst out laughing. "He'll be dead in a week." Jearl sniggered into his beer by his side. Even Loker, though unconscious, let out a snore that sounded suspiciously like a snort of derision. (Miles, 2012, p35).

The conflict on the way to Shylo's takes on a more serious tone. Once the reader has invested in Cras as a character, when he is placed in mortal danger there is a moment of concern, despite his nature. Not only that but the people Cras fights are clearly dangerous as well, the writing hinting at the idea they are the spies so that the reader characterises them as enemies anyway with the reference of southerners: "Cras couldn't see much of their faces in the moonlight, but a flash of tanned skin marked them as southerners." (Miles, 2012, p39). The reader is right with the character as the odds slowly stack up against him. Cras' desperate struggle and retreat, making use of both *Shades of Gray* and *The Downward Spiral*. It also lets the reader see what Cras is like in a fight, with his tricks and low cunning:

"Look, I've got your clothes all stained." He reached towards his purse, "Let me pay for the damage." Quick as a viper he flung a dagger from his belt at the one on the right with the rings, simultaneously diving for Bent Nose on the left." (Miles, 2012, p39).

In the same way the reader follows Jorg's actions in *Prince of Thorns* they see the use of his quick wits to try and get out of a bad situation. Its intention is to impress Cras' admirable traits on the reader, that while he is an immoral killer, he is a skilled and cunning fighter, the action helping to keep the reader interested in the character.

In Chapter Seven where Cras is introduced to Malus, the narrative is slower paced and more reflective, allowing the reader to observe the character. With the theft of the money and wine, Cras shows his utter arrogance and cocky attitude with regards to his employer, the reader already veering towards Cras given Malus' nature. By disrespecting a character the reader may be opposed to, it serves to help build the relationship and cement them on Cras' side. Cras' blatant theft is an example of the same cocky arrogance of characters like Locke and Gen. While it's perhaps not a "likable trait" it serves as being entertaining to the reader. I did struggle to make the conflict between Malus and Cras

believable given the difference in their station and power, but I think most of the scenes are successful in putting Cras in the underdog role that the reader can cheer for, while being realistic in context.

The misunderstanding with the guards allows both a humorous element and an opportunity to show Cras' skills. In the split moment where he is caught, the reader sympathises with the character, knowing his motivations and equally knowing what is about to happen.

Cras froze, poised like some dancer stretching before a show, one leg hooked over the edge of the windowsill, balancing on the other. With his black leathers he looked every inch the assassin sneaking into the building on a contact. Cras slowly turned his head to see two council guardsmen, dressed in full armour, with the white tabard of the city council on their chests.

"I can explain!" The guards reached for their swords. "Fuck!" (Miles, 2012, p63).

It also provides a moment of tension and antagonism when Cras returns to Malus, with the recurring "walked into a door" comment, as well Cras' attempt at wit mentioning "how rumours get exaggerated." (Miles, 2012, p65). The conflict between the two characters grows throughout the piece, a dual method of Forced by Circumstances and Progressive Challenges as Cras' situation gets worse and worse the longer the two are forced to be together. From their initial meeting with Malus' disdain and the food tasting argument to the moment where he's aiming a crossbow at Malus. The conflict between the two is intended to provide amusement for the reader while getting them to sympathise with Cras as is he forced to put up with an arrogant nobleman. With most of their joint scenes from Cras' perspective it's easier to get the reader to root for Cras over Malus, and I think the reader will side with him, thus deepening their relationship with the character.

In Chapter Eleven, the reader sees Cras much more in his element in the seedy side of the city, instead of his scenes with Malus in the Noble Circle. The reader gets a glimpse of the lengths Cras will go to for money and gains a better

understanding of the character's nature. Though his actions in trying to stop the spies may help the city, Cras' motivations are purely selfish and rather funny. Having built a relationship with the protagonist, the reader's interest now lies in what Cras will do next, the success or failure of his venture, and wondering whether or not he will snap and kill Malus before he finishes.

As a protagonist Cras is intended to be relatable and interesting to the reader with a touch of humour to keep him from being too serious a killer, though it was difficult creating a balance and avoiding making the character too comedic to be plausible. I think the reader will identify with Cras the most because he is understandable and interesting enough to overcome his moral stigma. Cras is portrayed with enough of a human side that the reader will not dismiss him as a killer, but actually develop a relationship with the protagonist. I think he represents a successful use of techniques that get the reader to admire, relate and sympathise with the character.

Malus was the most difficult character to work with, the problem of making him original and interesting rather than a stereotype of the "evil councillor" was challenging. Because of his station, Malus is perhaps the least relatable character, so I tended to use techniques to capture the reader's interest rather than making him "likable."

His introduction was an attempt to separate him from the stock character ideal of the councillor misusing his power. The speech at the beginning of Chapter Two not only serves to explore the nature and motivations of the character but also gives him an interesting character trait. His out loud musings perhaps hint to the reader of mental instability and an arrogant, almost megalomaniacal personality. This is not a truly original idea in itself, but the execution of the speech helps to draw the reader in and make the character more interesting. I think it helps in separating him from the stereotypical councillor, and giving him the speech quirk makes him more entertaining.

I tried to instil a sense of purpose and determination into Malus in an effort to differentiate the character from others like him. Like Glokta with his drive and ruthlessness I wanted Malus to have an obsessive need to accomplish his goals, hinting at his belief in destiny and right to rule with the references to past Navian emperors:

The image depicted Emperor Tellan, the last ruler of the broken Navian Empire. He stood triumphant over a sea of fallen enemies, wreathed in a crimson light before the sun. The mosaic loomed over his plush bed, so that it would be the first thing Malus saw as he awoke. Something to aspire to, a reminder that his birthright awaited. (Miles, 2012, p84).

One of the main techniques I tried to use with Malus was Progression, a lot of plot information comes across in his chapters and much of Malus' time is focused on his plans for the city, which are slowly revealed and hinted at to the reader to keep them interested and eager for more. With most of the other characters in the dark, the reader is the only one privy to his plans, helping to build a sense of intimacy and strengthen the relationship with the protagonist. His conversations with Talos at the beginning and the measures Malus takes for defence shows a clear sense of progression and moves the story forward so that the reader feels like a part of the action, even if there are no true "action" scenes for Malus. With his meeting with Dalen and other groups, Malus appears to be the only one truly aware of everything, so the reader follows him to ensure they have all the necessary plot information, if only to find out how it affects the other characters they care about, like Cras and Hrun who are more sympathetic. I tried to give away only a little at a time with regards to Malus' plans, to keep a steady sense of pace and not give away too much, keeping the mystery about his ultimate goals and tantalising the reader. Because it's an opening and not that much of his ultimate plan is revealed, I'm not sure there is enough of a draw for the reader, but I think this is due to the pacing of the creative element and not a failure of the Progression technique.

Malus also provides an opposing view to the conflict with Cras, I deliberately portrayed him as arrogant and unreasonable as it fits with his character concept and makes it easier for the reader to hate him and side with Cras. As I've said, it's hard to make Malus relatable, but even showing him as cold and cruel can provoke a reaction in the reader, the adage of a character "you love to hate" can be applied. Though I'm not sure it is successful with Malus, perhaps more scenes showing his contempt and cruelty for people would have helped to evoke stronger feelings in the reader. Even if the reader doesn't like the protagonist, the strong feelings will help them to engage with the character, though it may only be in the hope that they suffer for their nature and actions.

The political manipulation and plans of Malus serve to draw the reader in, almost making them feel part of a conspiracy, as they see things none of the other characters do. With the majority of the other councillors just as scheming as Malus, the reader is content to follow Malus' plans as long as they are interesting. And of course the entire council is seen from his perspective so the reader will have their views coloured by the narrative presentation of the information. The intrigue and manipulation help keep the narrative interesting for any fan of skulduggery and political manoeuvring as well as further revealing plot information and Malus' plans.

In addition, there is the way Malus and his political manoeuvring is seen by the other characters like Hrun and Cras. Hrun dislikes the corruption and games of the nobles, but has no choice but to obey Malus, his idea that it helps the city rather than the councillor fits with his values. Cras learns about the councillor through his friends with their description of him as "a power hungry tyrant" (Miles, 2012, p36) when he takes the job. This reporting of the character gives the reader an impression of how Malus is viewed, helping them to build a picture of his perceived character, even while they learn about him.

With little physical action in his scenes, I tried to make more of Malus' character come out through the narrative in his opinions and descriptions to

better give a sense of character. The tone of the writing allows me to get a sense of presence in the narrative by getting across Malus' views and ideas, helping to keep the more mundane parts of the narrative engaging:

All present were dressed in state robes that gave them the appearance of priests or holy men. They were supposed to be a tradition from the Navian Empire, yet Malus was convinced they were worn simply because it was easy to conceal items beneath them. Officially no weapons were to be carried inside the council building, except by the City Guard. Yet he knew that the councillors and most of their personal servants walked around armed. It was rare for an open assassination in the council, but not unheard of. Politics in Kar Noval were often quick and bloody. (Miles, 2012, p49).

The same method is used by Abercrombie with Glokta, thanks to the physical frailty of the protagonist it is up to the writer to keep the reader engaged by making the narrative interesting through language. It also allowed me to give Malus a bit of depth and establish his views on various aspects of the world, from the other nobles to the common populace, all with an arrogant superior tone in the writing:

Malus had never bothered to learn the man's actual name; he called him Elras because that's what his previous aide had been called. (Miles, 2012, p44).

Chapter Nine shows Malus' plan in motion and gives the reader a bit more information on his goals. Malus' observations of the defences show a sense of progression and action in the build-up to battle, while also revealing more of his plans as he confronts Dalen. It shows something about the level of cunning Malus has to dupe an entire city and the other councillors, causing the reader to wonder how long he will get away with the deception. The chapter ends with his frustrations with Cras, again letting the reader see the protagonist "taken down a peg" and building up the tension between the two. In that way it does serve to humanise the character a little by inflicting problems and setbacks on him to allow the reader to see how he deals with them.

Malus is perhaps the weakest character in my piece, I tried to make his actions interesting enough to get the reader to engage with him, but it's difficult because of his character and few of the other techniques were suitable given what I wanted to accomplish with the character with regards to plot.

The story needed a character with Malus' personality in order to justify the events and move the plot along the way I planned. Yet if I had been more flexible in changing the overall plot, I could have worked on the character of Malus more, and utilised some of the other techniques I've looked at in order to make him more engaging. Or it could be a sign of the limitations of the techniques I have studied. Because of the nature and situation of Malus, maybe the techniques I have studied are incomplete or unsuited to working with the character.

If I decided on keeping the plot structure the same, I believe that the best method to enhance Malus would be to have play up the eccentricity angle, as I began in his opening chapter with the speech to the empty council chamber. Exaggerating the protagonist's idiosyncrasies might have made him more interesting to the reader, without detracting from his immoral actions and qualities, thus keeping the reader engaged without altering the nature of the character.

Arracan is one of the more complex characters and very fun to write. Initially revealed as brutal and evil, the reader slowly learns why Arracan acts the way he does, finding out about the punishing pain of the visions that he suffers, which helps to inspire sympathy for even this violent character. Visually he is also one of the more dynamic characters, acting as a "wild card" in the greater plot and upsetting the balance. He comes across well as a character very outwardly powerful, but crippled by a devastating weakness so as not to seem wholly antagonistic but with more depth to his character. I like the conflict this creates both in the character concept and for the reader as they are forced to decide how to judge the character.

Clearly Arracan's morals are even worse than Cras' with the sacrifice of the girl when he is introduced, yet I made sure that the character would take scant joy in most of his actions so as not to appear too sadistic, even at his most brutal:

He had found her crawling through the refuse looking for scraps of food. A common street urchin, she would not be missed. None of them ever were.

His hands freshly coated, Arracan turned away even as the child gave up her last breath. (Miles, 2012, p24).

His actions are cold and calculating, the morality of his deeds doesn't enter into it. The child was selected for logical reasons, and he doesn't mock her or make any attempt at cruelty. Arracan simply performs a task. There are times when he gets angry, like when he confronts Malvic, though in that case the anger is born from his pain and hatred of his own weakness, which adds to the complexity of the character. The contrast of his brutality to others and the weakness he reveals to the reader, "*Make it stop! Make it stop!*" (Miles, 2012, p25) complicates the external view of a ruthless killer with very understandable motivations.

I wanted Arracan to have a similar quality to Glokta with his stubborn ruthlessness in pursuit of his goals. With Glokta, the reader grows to admire the character's refusal to admit defeat, fighting back with the most vicious responses. It is a method I phase in through his chapters, building obstacles in his path in order to show Arracan's determination, and how it drives him to further acts of brutality, like the massacre in the Mages' Guild. I wanted to establish a sinister fascination for the character from the reader, making his motivations obvious and understandable, but also creating a protagonist whose actions were horrifically brutal, even in the standards of the world I created.

The reader gets a sense of progression as they follow his admittedly bloodthirsty path, helping to build a relationship with the character until they grow interested in his success and what lengths the character will go to in order to achieve his goal. Arracan is a direct contrast to Hrun who is very focused on

the moral consequences of his actions. Instead Arracan acts like they don't even matter. There is no nagging conscience for Arracan; he is so focused on a cure to his pain that he doesn't flinch, no matter what act of evil he commits. Because Arracan acts this way, I think he makes a great example of the techniques I've studied in context. The protagonist commits horrific acts, yet the complexity of the character makes it hard to condemn him as a simple villain.

Because he exists in isolation from the other protagonists, Arracan's narrative is much more focused on himself. The reader follows his success and failures, and I wanted them to really *feel* his disappointment when things don't go his way, and with a clear understanding of what's at stake for the character, it has more impact. Even if his actions cannot be justified the reader understands the reason for his actions and anger. I also made an effort to keep his enemies from being purely innocent victims where possible so as to lessen the impact of his actions, as with the attempted mugging where he incinerates his attackers. Yes, it's technically an act of murder, though not only is it in self defence but the two men he kills are brutal criminals, and as such, their deaths may be easier to forgive than when Arracan sacrifices the child in Chapter One.

He had spent the last day and night searching through the Rat's Nest to try and find the tavern Malvic had mentioned, and this was the fourth attack he'd suffered in his search. Every attempt meant more effort, more magic, and most importantly, more time. (Miles, 2012, p68).

Arracan takes no joy in the action; to him it is merely an impediment which serves to reveal the character's views on the world and his callous attitude towards murder. Still, given the unscrupulous nature of the thugs, the reader feels little sympathy for the men he kills. When Arracan gets a lead, I tried to make sure the reader sides with him during the scene. The brief touches of humour in his scenes with the drunk are intended to diminish the brutality of his actions, and as Arracan nears his goals, the reader gets drawn into the sense of anticipation instead of focusing on the morality of his actions.

His meeting with the other characters was intended to create a sense of danger. While only minor characters, Rayna and Loker represent a part of Cras' life. The reader has invested in, and hopefully warmed to the characters, so that when a violent character like Arracan enters there is an appropriate level of tension. In contrast to his usual methods, he uses cunning to remove Rayna with the dead man prop he created which allows a more leisurely approach with Loker. His reasoning is logical and it allowed me to write a more complex scene than a short violent encounter. Also it provides a small way to humanise him with Rayna's comment about bedding the inspector:

Arracan had seen, and indeed inflicted a great many terrible things. He'd conjured unspeakable demons, carved up small children for his rituals, but the mental image the barkeep's words brought left him nauseous. (Miles, 2012, p74).

The banter with Loker as well provides an interesting moment, as the reader knows how murderous Arracan can be in contrast to Loker with his jokes. The scene reveals more of Arracan's character, his self-loathing for his weakness and shows a more vulnerable side to the reader to attract a measure of sympathy and greater understanding:

"I suffer from...an *affliction*." Arracan ran his tongue over the word, his rage burning at saying it out loud, to admitting weakness in front of this pathetic man." (Miles, 2012, p75).

I think this works well, showing the vulnerable side of his character, maybe even attracting some sympathy, or at least understanding from the reader.

The sequence with the gate and Arracan's mind reveals even more about the character and his back-story, not to mention his hatred for the gods. The confrontation between Arracan and Anestair hint at his nature that he would contend with a deity, as well as giving the reader an idea of his powers or how strong he believes them to be. The indignation of the character and the difference in strength is a first for the reader who has seen Arracan as virtually

unstoppable before now. This cracks his armour of invincibility and further draws attention to his weakness with the knowledge Anestair holds over him about the nature of his affliction.

“I just want a cure.” His own voice came out of nowhere, echoing back to him, though Arracan hadn’t spoken the words. “It hurts so much!” His voice came again, Arracan was sickened at how pathetic he sounded.

“Well you won’t find the answers here,” Anestair said, not looking at him. (Miles, 2012, p78).

This chapter highlights the flaws and imperfections of the character, laying them bare before a superior being, yet Arracan tries to keep his defiance and drive, still utterly focused on a cure. The reader sees him vulnerable to attract sympathy, while learning a lot about Arracan and following him in his struggles, developing a stronger bond with the character and sharing the sense of anticipation when he finds his next lead.

The scene in the Mages’ Guild allowed me to develop the concept of magic and explain its structure and rules to the reader, helping also, to understand Arracan’s character as a magic user. The rapid decline of the situation when the alarm sounds adds an element of danger, and again vulnerability, to Arracan as he mentions the impossible odds. There is a scene of brutal triumph which also adds to the mystery of his character when he is able to overpower the other mages. I think the scene is quite effective in that while it could easily be a traditional show of heroic triumph, because of Arracan’s character, it becomes a massacre, and yet the reader may feel a note of triumph too, if only because they get to find out more of the mystery.

Arracan as a character was intended to be the furthest point on the morality line of the immoral protagonists, with Cras as the other end as the most relatable and Malus in the middle. The nature of his affliction makes for a complex character and narrative, someone who the reader can understand but not really justify. Arracan’s narrative means the reader will be able to directly see how he deals with his affliction, whether he finds a cure and what he will do to

achieve it. He is a good example of the techniques I've learned in action, which suitably blur the classification of him as a villain, and complicate the reader's relationship with him.

Conclusions

The ultimate measure of a story's success or excellence is not its compliance with any established pattern, but its lasting popularity and effect on the audience. (Vogler, 2007, p232).

My work on this thesis has allowed me to study and explore various writing methods I have been interested in. It has allowed me to continue my work on morality and characters, a subject that has always fascinated me and provided the opportunity to test out some of my ideas and theories. By studying the various patterns in fantasy literature I have been able to identify and detail various techniques successful writers have used when creating engaging immoral characters. It was admittedly more difficult putting them into practice, but I feel I have learnt enough from these methods to substantially improve the quality of my writing and particularly my characters.

My work has been a combined process, not merely attempting to make already formed immoral characters engaging, but building the idea up as I conducted my research. Building my characters and story with the intention of exploring these techniques allowed me to create an ideal platform to conduct my study. I believe my thesis shows not only an analysis of the techniques I've studied, but a successful example of how they can be employed. As I have stated, some characters are more successful than others, but that too serves as a method of evaluating the techniques when judging the quality of the final character.

This project has allowed me to evaluate the strengths and weakness of my own writing as well as taking on challenges like the difficulty in developing a character's history and nature without slowing the pace of the narrative. My tutor has been very helpful in providing another viewpoint and helping me think

through several areas of my work in ways that I would not normally have considered, and my writing is better for it.

The research I have looked at is a testament to the validity of my studies. Already there are scores of novels with protagonists that do not conform to the traditional hero archetype. The “gritty hero” is becoming more and more popular in fantasy, with many articles I’ve looked at discussing the evolution of the genre and the change in tradition with a positive response, as with Scott Lynch’s interview:

I think the fantasy readership has developed a definite taste for richer and more genuine character portraits. We seem to want all the traditional trappings, all the color and adventure and magic and so forth, but we want to see more authentic and multi-dimensional protagonists having these adventures. The segment of the readership still clamoring for the simplistic, broadly-sketched plaster idol sort of hero has shrunk pretty sharply, though of course you can still find them howling in the wilds of the web. (Lynch, 2011).

I feel my work has a place in contemporary fantasy given the changing nature of the genre and that my work studying the techniques and methods of modern writers is highly relevant to the current state of fantasy literature and its further development.

The true test of the success of my work would likely be publication and reader reaction. But I think at least on a theoretical level I have succeeded in identifying and establishing a selection of viable techniques that can be used as aides in understanding writing as well as used in practice. They can be used to help explain the success or failure of some characters in literature and learned from in order to write better immoral protagonists.

I hope to continue with my opening creative element, building it into a complete novel. *The Throne of Fate* has given me a chance to explore many ideas and character types and I would like to develop them. There is a clear shift in the fantasy genre towards a darker breed of hero and it is an idea I would like to explore both in my writing career and as a reader. This project has allowed me to

greatly advance my knowledge in the area, and I look forward to putting it to use.

Appendix A: Character profile, Cras Alder

Cras is an orphan brought up in the Nest with no idea where he came from. At the age of eight he was abducted by the pit fight organiser Blaus, after he'd seen Cras beat another boy bloody for a rotten apple. Cras was brought up in a state of brutal competition, fighting to the death, just to get his next meal.

After five years of vicious competition, Cras became one of the best pit fighters. At one match he caught the eye of Lorun, an assassin. Lorun watched the boy fight, impressed by how Cras handled himself. He continued to stalk him, watching Cras argue with Blaus who treated him like an animal, even caging him at night. Lorun offered Cras escape, and a new life, if he killed Blaus. Cras accepted without hesitation, he killed Blaus, and even freed some of the other pit fighters before joining Lorun.

After a month with Lorun, Cras began to miss the pits. The assassin put Cras through an endless series of gruelling tests and training exercises, often with fatal consequences for failure. Lorun indoctrinated Cras into the guild, but without any regimented training method, he was allowed to devise whatever tests he could imagine. He left Cras in impossible situations to fight his way out, abandoned him in the woods to fend for himself. Memorably Lorun used to poison Cras and lock the antidote in a box to test his lock picking skills. This led to his quirk of working out how long it would take to pick the lock when he enters a room.

At the age of twenty during a training session Cras was able to disarm Lorun and knock him unconscious. Taking advantage of the situation, he locked the assassin in the building and set it on fire. Cras assumed Lorun's contracts from the guild for more than a year before he was discovered. By then no one cared.

Because death has always seemed so close to Cras all his life, he is incapable of planning for the future, never having seen the need, or developed the skill. He goes through life seeking the most advantage for the least work, his hard upbringing having taught him to exploit any opportunity. Cras is entirely out for himself, he has no higher goals or sense of justice, just the will to survive. His skills as an assassin are his only marketable feature. Cras takes the contracts in order to fund his drinking and whoring. His only real relationships are a few colleagues and friends at The Hanged Man.

Appendix B: Character profile, Malus Vern

Malus was born into one of the great noble families of Kar Noval and raised with every privilege. He was taught by the finest educators and raised in luxury. His mother died in childbirth and his father was often busy, leaving Malus to be brought up by a succession of carers and tutors.

Malus' father, Tolbrun Vern was a member of the city council and worked hard to increase the fortunes of the house of Vern, by any means necessary. What time he did spend with his son was spent grooming Malus for leadership. Tolbrun took great measures to instil into Malus a sense of entitlement, that the power and position was his by right. He told Malus that the Vern house was descended from the line of Navian emperors of old and that one day they would claim their birthright. Malus was taught and trained in the manner of the Navian emperors, with a focus on politics, leadership and strategy.

Malus grew up surrounded by the idea that he had a role to play, that he was destined for greatness, and he began to believe it. As a child he had been adept at playing his tutors and carers off against one another to have his way, and he only grew more deft as he matured. Malus became interested in politics and the running of the city, and his father began to occasionally trust him with tasks to advance the house.

When Tolbrun died, Malus took his seat on the council. Though the position was not hereditary, Malus crushed all opposition in a flurry of bribery and blackmailing. Once his position was secure, Malus turned out to be even more ruthless and ambitious than his father ever was. He expanded the family's holdings across the city and beyond, making the Vern family more powerful than ever before. Still it was not enough for him.

As part of his long obsession with Emperor Tellen, Malus began searching for the fabled Throne of Fate, the artefact which caused the destruction of the

Navian Empire when Emperor Tellen challenged the gods. After extensive research, he found hints of where it was buried, and began an excavation to breach the Lower City.

Malus will stop at nothing to achieve his goals, no matter who gets hurt. He believes himself superior, destined for greatness thanks to his upbringing and the influence of his father. Because of this, he has no qualms about manipulating others for his own ends, treating people as little more than pawns. His obsession with advancing his family and fulfilling his “destiny” has consumed Malus so that it’s all he thinks about.

Appendix C: Character profile, Arracan

After a confrontation with an abusive father triggered his nascent magic abilities and destroyed his home, Arracan became an orphan. He sought out and joined the temple of The Whisperer so he could learn to control his magical abilities. He pushed himself to excel, fixated on becoming stronger. Arracan spent hours poring over ancient texts, practicing his spells and honing his abilities. He was constantly looking for shortcuts to increase his powers; it became his obsession.

The other apprentices grew jealous of his skills, and a group of them confronted him in a disused part of the temple. Even four of them couldn't match Arracan's skills and a section of the temple was reduced to rubble in the fight. Arracan was sent to another temple in order to keep the other acolytes safe.

Pleased at the chance to study somewhere else, Arracan left. He spent several years at the new temple without incident, learning all he could before moving on. He travelled across Seronos, always seeking something to give him an edge. In one of the oldest temples of The Whisperer he discovered a hidden room buried deep underground.

Arracan spent years translating the inscriptions on the walls, he discovered what he thought was a ritual for carving a Realm out of the Primus, a way to become a god. Ever eager for a shortcut to power, Arracan set about performing the ritual as soon as he had gathered the materials for the spell. The ritual caused a magical explosion that killed everyone else in the temple and left Arracan horribly scarred. After that he started having excruciating visions that he couldn't stop. The room he'd discovered was destroyed, along with the inscriptions, so Arracan set off in search of a cure as the visions grew steadily worse.

Arracan is driven by a desire for a cure that supersedes all other thoughts, even his lust for power. Always seeking the quick path, his desire for power stems from the treatment he suffered as a child, resulting in a need to become strong enough that nothing can hurt him again. Ironically it was this trait that led to his condition, and his current situation. Always callous and self-involved, Arracan becomes a true monster as the pain takes its toll and his need for a cure consumes him.

Appendix D: Character profile, Captain Darion Hrun

Hrun originally grew up in the Public District, the son of a moderately wealthy merchant. Yet when his home burned down and his parents died, Hrun had nowhere to go but the Nest. With few choices for employment, he joined the City Watch, to have a place to sleep in the station dorm as much as anything else.

Hrun joined one of the many squads patrolling the nest, serving under Sergeant Lock. Hrun was hopelessly inept to begin with, yet the sergeant took him under his wing, teaching Hrun about life in the Nest. As Hrun patrolled the streets, instead on moping about his tragedy, he saw how wretched life could truly be. Not only were people cursed with poverty and blighted by misfortune, but the criminals made life even worse.

This window into the harsh reality of life changed Hrun, though the Public District was not without crime, it was nothing next to the Nest. He was sickened by the way the criminals preyed on the weak and the innocent. This spark of moral outrage grew into a flame that sergeant Lock encouraged as the two grew close, becoming an effective team and working hard to fight crime in the Nest.

Hrun's determination and sense of justice helped him climb the ladder and he quickly became a sergeant himself. From there it was harder to move up; his friend Lock told him why. Because Hrun refused to get involved with the nobles and "play the game," his advancement was stymied. Despite the advice of his friend, Hrun stood by his principles and avoided taking part in the games of the nobles.

After a lot of hard work, he eventually became a captain, gaining a reputation as an honest and respectable officer. He wasn't much loved by the nobles, but Hrun felt like he was doing some good, and always stood up for what was right. Resigned to the fact he was unlikely to advance any higher, Hrun

devoted himself to doing the best job he could, helping people and fighting crime.

Hrun is a conflicted character, struggling to be a good person in a city that crushes good people. He tries to hold up his moral standards despite the crime and corruption in the world around him, doing his best to avoid being drawn into the political games and power play of the nobles. The reality of the world has taught Hrun to pick his battles, but he will always try to do the right thing, no matter what it costs him.

Appendix E: Magic System

Magic is widely present in the world of Elkar. Magic users of all kinds are taken as part of life, if not exactly commonplace. From powerful court mages, guilds of wizards, to street corner alchemists and fortune tellers. There is no stigma and magic is widely accepted, although magic users are somewhat feared. Their power comes from their chosen Realm, drawing on the same energy as the gods. Their power is limited by their knowledge, control and skill. If a mage draws too much energy from their Realm and cannot control it; the energy will consume them. The use of magic can drain the user physically; the effort of concentration and focus; if a magic user is tired or wounded it is more dangerous to use magic.

Throughout history there have been instances where an exceptionally powerful magic user has carved his/her own realm out of The Primus (first Realm) or forcibly (or through trickery) taken a realm from a deity. In either case they become an immortal.

Appendix F: Religion

The world of Elkar contains dozens of different religions and pantheons of gods. There is no restriction on religious practices, though some of the more sinister or zealous sects are viewed with suspicion or even outright fear.

Each deity is the lord of one of the Realms of magic and will represent ideas or concepts such as death, chance, fire, or battle. These realms exist on a separate plane of existence as separate worlds, the landscape reflecting their concept. Most of these Realm Lords are worshiped properly as deities; others have only small cults or followings. These beings possess godlike powers but are not omnipotent. They have abilities linked to the idea they represent and can affect the mortal world, either directly or through agents; magical or mortal.

The gods are often at odds with each other, seeking to manipulate the flow of events for gain or simple amusement. They have influenced the course of history directly in the past and their existence is unquestioned. All are treated with wariness and respect, lessons in history and the fall of the Emperor proving that the gods setting foot on the mortal plane means destruction and death for the mortals caught between them.

Main gods in The Throne of Fate

Anestair – The lord of Veru, Realm of Shadows. He is the patron of assassins, but has no formal temple. Anestair is seeking the Throne Of Fate in order to reign over the other gods.

Kelendor – The lord of Relion, Realm of Order. Kelendor is the god of justice and judgement, and the patron of judges. He is trying to stop Anestair claiming the Throne Of Fate.

The Whisperer – The lord of Nasan, Realm of the Tempest. The Whisperer is the god of magic and learning. Arracan was a former priest in his temple and draws on the same Realm.

Twitch – The lord of Lineos, Realm of Chance. Twitch simply enjoys causing havoc among the other gods.

Appendix G: The Throne Of Fate Synopsis

The story is set centuries after the death of Emperor Tellen and the fragmentation of the Navian Empire into an uneasy collection of city states. War is brewing between Kar Noval and Kar Korus, and *The Throne Of Fate* charts the progress of a group of central characters through the conflict.

There is the cynical assassin Cras who takes a contract to protect the life of Councillor Malus from a group of spies. Driven by greed, he must contend with his employer's arrogance while keeping him alive. Malus is ruthless and power hungry, working to defend the city while seeking an ancient artefact underground. Causing havoc throughout the city is Arracan, a mage tortured by painful visions. He is utterly merciless in his search for a cure, doing whatever it takes to find one. Finally there is the idealistic Captain Hrun, a believer in justice, in a city where the word is barely a memory. He is ordered by Malus to track down the spies and is thrust into the complex criminal underworld as well as the power games of the nobles. All the characters have their own, mostly selfish motivations, and as the novel progresses they each learn how far they will go to achieve their goals.

At the start, Malus is warned of hostile intentions from Kar Korus, he is told that a group of spies have been sent to pave the way for the army. He sets about preparing the city, while speeding up his own plans for personal power. To protect himself from the spies, Malus hires the assassin Cras to augment his bodyguard while sending Hrun to track them down.

Elsewhere, the mage Arracan, tortured by painful visions, is seeking a cure for his affliction. Cutting a bloody path across the city, summoning demons and murdering noblemen, he is given the name of a washed up seer, Loker. After

forcing him to help, Arracan creates chaos in the Mages Guild following a lead when the competing gods Anestair and Kelendor seek to manipulate him.

Cras is out of his element, struggling with the complexities of keeping someone alive. He and Malus both have different ideas about what protection entails and the tension builds between the two. He contacts the crime lord Versaius in an effort to track down the spies and speed completion of his job. As Hrun descends into the criminal underworld, he is forced to compromise his morals when dealing with the criminal element in order to get the job done and protect the city. He has little success other than finding rumours that the spies are smuggling something into Kar Noval.

As Malus makes preparations to protect the city, he diverts attention from an excavation he is conducting, searching the ruins of the Lower City for a hidden artefact, enlisting the help of the Mages' Guild in his search.

Despite the antipathy between the two, Cras becomes interested in Malus' plans and tries to find out more, asking for help from his fellow assassins Jearl and Sabalt. As they attempt to discover what Malus is up to, Jearl is possessed by Anestair who tries to make a deal with Cras, but is refused.

After fleeing the city, Arracan uses a stolen book from the Mages Guild to track down a mysterious gateway that is the source of his visions. He travels the surrounding countryside of Kar Noval, breaking into an ancient temple in search of clues.

After a succession of assassinations by the spies, the council is decimated and Malus takes control. With the army staff cut down as well, he places Hrun in charge of the army and defence of the city. As the army from Kar Korus approaches, Malus focuses all his attention on the Lower City, while Hrun struggles to prepare for a siege.

Cras tracks down Versaius once more to learn of his progress. He discovers the crime lord has sold out the city to Kar Korus. Versaius is responsible for smuggling in gunpowder to be used on the city walls, while also providing maps of the lower city to sneak their army inside the city. After killing Versaius,

Cras forms a plan to save the city by drawing part of the army of Kar Korus into the Lower City and collapsing the tunnels on them with the explosives.

The forces of Kar Korus arrive and Hrun stages a desperate defence, while in the Lower City, Cras gathers the entire Assassins Guild to enact his plan. Through his cunning and guile, the plan succeeds, burying a large part of the army. Yet while the battle rages, Malus has vanished, going in search of the artefact now the excavation is complete.

Outside the city, Arracan finally tracks down the mysterious gate and engages in a magical battle with its guardians. After a vicious battle, he triumphs and begins a ritual intended to cure himself.

While Hrun is still fighting on the walls, Cras tracks down Malus as he approaches his goal. He finds out Malus is seeking the Throne of Fate, the former seat of the Emperor and an item that will raise him above even the gods. Braving traps and guards, Cras kills Malus before he can retrieve the artefact. As he reaches the throne, Cras is blocked by Sabalt, who has taken up the deal with Anestair that Cras refused. The two fight.

Arracan's ritual backfires, killing him and opening the gate. Before his death, Arracan realises it was never meant to work and he has been manipulated all along. On the city walls Hrun is confronted by the spies as they seek to use the gunpowder to breach the walls. He fights off the spies, but is caught in the explosion as the gunpowder goes off.

Thanks to the tremors of the explosion reaching into the Lower City, Cras gains the upper hand and kills Sabalt. While Anestair rages at the death of his avatar, Cras approaches the Throne of Fate, but before he can choose to sit in it, the cavern collapses from the explosion. Cras claws his way out to find Kar Korus has been defeated, barely, and the city is dealing with the aftermath. Despite killing Malus, he heads to the council building to steal his payment.

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