

A Petal Fallen

~ Tale of Queens Book 1 ~

Matthew Lane

Chapters 1-3 and part of 4.

Chapter One

THE air was particularly unkind that morning, filled with bitter mutterings and angry whispers. But Xanthem didn't care. He had long since stopped caring, just as he had long since stopped remembering, and stopped hoping. There was no use looking back, that much was for certain. And the boy who was almost a man was resigned to never make it into manhood.

Death in the prisons had become inevitable. Fate.

And there was no use fighting fate. If the fickle gravens had wanted to teach him only one lesson, that must have been it.

He let out the breath he had been holding, trying to keep the last of the warmth in his chest from being stolen away, but it didn't work. His body ached and his cough was like a toy rattle. The air took his warmth like he was a baby. If only it would steal away his rattle-cough as well.

He shivered.

If the others didn't kill him, then maybe the cold would. He wasn't sure which was worse.

Rubbing the grit from his eyes and trying not to splutter, he rolled from his pallet and peered blearily into the semi-darkness. The other inmates were still asleep – a small mercy – but that wouldn't last. He could hear the clashing and coarse laughter of the prison guards somewhere outside. Unlike the others, he still couldn't get used to sleeping through the noise, which was ironic.

Xanthem had been able to sleep through anything before.

But that had been before.

Before.

He sighed, managed not to cough, and rubbed his eyes again. The day was on its way towards beginning, and there was no use looking back.

Creeping as best he could around the sleeping bodies that ranged from misshapen to massive, he made his way to the door and pushed it open. It swung loosely, brittle grey wood uncaring as the cold blasted in. It was incredible how much that simple door managed to keep the cold out, for all its wholes and scrapes. But he slipped through the fleeting gap as quickly as he good. The others would have beaten him again for sure if he'd let the precious warm out. Even if it did smell of dirt and filth, of unclean things and cramped inescapable convicts.

A quick visit to the water troughs, made quicker by the fact they water had frozen solid, and Xanthem's calm resignation cracked a little. They really might just kill him today. Somehow, the dawning realness of the thought made it that much more of a horrible thing, and he was afraid.

The featureless sky, all bleak rotations about disinterested horizons, stared down at him as he looked upwards and released a prayer from his mind, to any graven that might be listening.

And maybe one of them heard him. Because he didn't die that morning. The others woke, or rather, were woken by the kicking and raised voices of the prison guards. Xanthem was sure to be back on his palate, feigning the appearance of sleep, frantically trying to be one of them. And remain unnoticed.

One of the others never got up. His body was taken away quickly. It was likely the cold that did it.

Xanthem didn't die when the others found the water trough had frozen over. He anticipated their rage and kept to the back where misdirected blame couldn't reach him.

Another one died at the trough, his blood the only thing wetting the stone, a victim of the fury of desperate people. His body was taken away even quicker; the guards new not to invite bloodlust among the inmates. They were cruel, the guards, but at least some of them weren't stupid.

Xanthem didn't die when they assigned him to raking the fields, not that there were seeds in the soil, or that the soil was fertile; there were none, and it wasn't. It was frozen and barren, devoid even of the beetles that usually called tilled earth home. If there had been insects, he might have eaten one. The thought didn't seem terrible anymore.

But one of the others died, tripping over on the rock-like dirt and breaking a brittle bone clean through his paper skin. The guards killed him, a kindness, and his body was removed.

Then they stopped for feeding, broth, and Xanthem refused to wonder what the meat was. There was a pause at midday so that the guards could eat, not the same broth, and then work resumed. So lost in the pointless tilling was he, that he didn't register that something had changed until someone shook his shoulder roughly.

“You, pretty boy,” jeered one of the guards. “Duty rotation.” Xanthem gulped. “You’re on for the silver-white. What’re you waiting for?” And he pushed him roughly again.

But Xanthem didn’t move. It wasn’t defiance, and anyone who saw the look on his face – the dread expanding in his eyes – knew that, even the guards.

“Get going,” he said. “I don’t wanna have to say’t again, hear me?”

Xanthem nodded numbly, not only because of the cold, and trudged across the fields, past the bunkhouses one, two, three, four, five, six. Past the barracks and the keep and the storerooms until he reached the prison gate. The other delinquents headed for the silver-white were already there, and he could tell immediately which one’s had been making this trip for days.

No one had survived the silver-white for a week.

They were loaded into the back of an open top wagon and pulled out of the prison by mean horses that didn’t seem to mind the cold. There was no use running, not when the guards had crossbows. At least not yet.

A short while later they arrived at the mine, a silver-white mine for shining jewellery and expensive mirrors, silver coatings and who knew what else.

The words of the Commonwealth cavalry officer rang in his ears, as the well-built man had pulled him from the bed. A memory.

“Just you wait, *boy*, I’ll see they kill you slowly for what you’ve done,” he had said, spitting. “You want to pretend you’re a man? Then you’ll die like a man, and endure the suffering, I’ll see to it.”

The silver-white was a death sentence. Noble-metal for noble people enjoying the finer things of life, mined by the criminal convicts already knocking at death’s door.

They were instructed to remove their footwraps, and given cloth boots. It seemed an unnecessary kindness, but then Xanthem realised that if an inmate died down there, the guards would have to lift them out. He looked down at his foot wraps and took them off, careful to keep his heels facing the ground always so that no one would see the tattoo. After a moment of sleight of hand, even his dagger had been moved from one hiding place to another. He would rather die than let them have his dagger, his thorn, the only thing he had left of his stolen childhood.

Then the cloth boots were on his feet and a crude pickaxe was shoved into his hands, the point so obviously blunt it might have been funny if he wasn't being led to the worst possible death.

"You don't have to be so aggressive," muttered one of the guards. The one who had shoved the axe towards Xanthem glared at him past a broken nose that had set badly. "What?" continued the first guard. "You don't."

Xanthem gave him a fleeting look. He was an armsman of the Commonwealth, not a guard, middle aged and infinitely more professional, his dark green undercloak giving him away, even if it was faded. He must have just been passing through and had stopped to help, which explained the abnormal kindness, for the guards stationed here were never so kind.

Then the darkness of the mine shaft closed overhead, and any hope he had faded with the light.

What felt like lifetimes later, with numb feet and fingers coated in frozen red droplets, Xanthem emerged, gulping in air that tasted so pure after the thick darkness of the mine. The cutting cold of it set him coughing. The armsmen was already right there, and gently took his pickaxe from him with an expression of sadness. It was well masked and Xanthem knew that no one else would be able to see it, past those grey eyes. But he did.

Then they were moving back towards the cart.

Something brushed against his neck. It was the guard with the bent nose, fingers pulling at Xanthem's hair, bringing his head back with a crack.

"I know who you are," he hissed, eyes burning. "I know what you did. The Officer told me."

Kill me, thought Xanthem. It was a begging thought. Just let it be done. Let it be over. The guard leered at him

"And he told me not to let you die, at least not fast. You'll be getting double rations, and all the others will know it. They won't like that, but it'll keep you in the silver-white for longer."

Whether it was the sick enjoyment on the guard's broken face or the prospect of long days in the silver-white and nights filled with bruises and cracked bones, Xanthem didn't know. His hand was down at his ankle, reaching into the new cloth boot and grasping at the handle of his thorn. The dagger was up at the man's throat before the final syllable had faded into silence, its strange curves still somehow beautiful amidst this desolation. The splattering of blood was warm, and-

And Xanthem hadn't stabbed him yet. Instead, there was a black arrow protruding from his eye, and he fell with a scream. Immediately, there were other cries from around the mine and the alarm was raised. Too deadened to understand, Xanthem just stood there as arrows whistled by and the night sang in agony. Perhaps one of them would have taken him, but the armsman appeared by his side and dragged him down.

"Stay with me!" he ordered.

"Why?" mumbled Xanthem, too quietly for it to be a real question.

They ran away from the mine, and away from the attackers, dodging between sparse trees that peppered the frigid tundra. Another guard joined them, and

another inmate, but only for a moment before he fell with an arrow in his back. The armsman paused for a second to pull the arrow from the still dying man, taking in its frayed black feather in an instant.

“Bandits,” he muttered. “Claybournes.” The prison guard nodded. It must have meant something to him. He threw the arrow to the ground, and the inmate at his feet breathed his last.

Doggedly, Xanthem kept running, somehow keeping up with the armsman and guard, and then he was a step ahead of them. Suddenly, a bandit appeared from the shadows, the lower half of his face covered by a cracked clay mask and a splash of white chalk paint. The bandit rushed at him, heavy iron sword swinging in the half-light, but Xanthem ducked, turned on his heel and rammed his elbow into the base of the bandit’s spine. He went down with a groan, and before he even knew what he’d done, Xanthem pulled his thorn from the man’s side.

This time, it *was* wet.

Looking up in a daze, there was another bandit behind the armsman.

“Behind you!”

The armsman turned just in time, true steel glinting, and the bandit fell in a spray of red and a scream. They paused – inmate, armsman and guard – and checked they’re surroundings.

“How far is it to cover?” asked the armsmen.

“Bleakwood is only an hour away,” gasped the guard.

“Which way?”

The guard pointed, and the armsmen started running.

With a last look back, Xanthem beheld the silver-white mine where he should have died for the last time, a strange mix of flickering torches against the mauve dusk, a theatre of silhouettes playing out some final scene of some sick battle.

Then they ran towards Bleakwood – an inmate, an armsman, and a guard.

Chapter Two

IT was no accident that the prison and mine entrance had been built where they were. The lands of Harper Fields, a vassal to one of the three Commonwealth Kingdoms, had a natural abundance of silver-white scattered across its desolate winter plains, making it perfect for the Commonwealth's prisons. The Winter Plains were sparse, and bare, with only a few thin trees for miles around. Bleakwood was too far away for any inmate to make it and live, and they knew it.

That hadn't stopped those who were more mad than desperate from trying, but they had either died with a crossbow bolt in their back, or been found a few days later, mauled by the wolves that called the vast empty swathes their home. The corpses were brought back to serve as a reminder, not that anyone really ever forgot.

This was part of what made it such an effective prison: that it was impossible to escape from, even with only a handful of guards.

It was even harder to escape from, when the guards had been replaced by bandits, both more numerous and better equipped.

“How many do you think there were?” asked the armsman, still whispering against the backdrop of death cries emanating from the prison. His grey eyes were darting between the shadows as they ran, calm and unafraid, unlike the guard.

Apparently unused to the running in the cold, the guard was panting as he ran, clearly terrified, but managed a half-answer: “Forty, more,” he gasped.

The armsmen nodded. “Must have been, to take the guards. Can’t have been more than seventy, though, or you’d have seen them coming.” Xanthem almost interrupted. The guards had no reason to be guarding against the outside. Their only concern was inside the prison walls. “If we make it past a couple of minutes, we should be fine. They won’t have set up patrols; no reason to.”

They only made it a minute before a whooping cry came rising from their left, and the harsh chime of swords being drawn rang across the dusk. The guard made a pained sound, fear like madness spreading over his face, and he went to draw his own sword. The armsman stopped him.

“We can outrun them,” he whispered, a hushed rustle on the wind, “if we lose them.”

There was a second whooping cry, this one a little closer, and the armsman peered into the darkness.

“There’s no way they can have seen us,” he whispered to Xanthem. “They must have heard us. Move quietly, and pray to Gersemene that she will mask your footfalls.” Too tired to draw any comfort from the armsman’s hope, Xanthem simply nodded, and offered up a silent prayer to The Shadow-Witch. He wasn’t used to being addressed like an equal.

The three of them started moving again, slowly this time. Less than a minute later and the next shout was further away, and frustrated. Xanthem even thought he could hear arguing in the distance, and by the time he realised the air was silent, now bereft of both dying cries and bandits' shouts, he was too cold to care.

Sometime later, the brush underfoot turned to frosted leaf litter and the thin trees were replaced by heavier pines. They had made to Bleakwood.

And they were alive.

For about an hour, they stopped, just three people – alone, cold and hungry – fleeing from the same fears, the boundaries of prisoner and prison guard apparently forgotten.

They didn't dare light a fire, not even a small one, so they drew what little rest they could from stillness, before having to move further into Bleakwood. Moving would help keep away the cold, and put more distance between them and the bandits. Xanthem hoped their two swords would be enough to fend off any wolves that found them.

A sudden deepening of the darkness, and a distant wolf's howl, marked the full descent into night.

"It's no use keeping going," huffed the guard. "The wolves will find us whether we're moving or not. We might as well stop." The armsman didn't seem to agree, and they started to argue. "If we stop, we can light a fire," continued the guard, and that went some way to deciding. Xanthem could see the still form of the armsman, a silhouette in the darkness, turning to him to hear what he had to say. He was careful in his reply.

"The wolves will find us," he said. "They always do, every time. I've seen the bodies." The guard made a satisfied noise. "But we can't light a fire until we're sure that it won't be spotted."

“What do you know, prisoner?” spat the guard. “Since when did you become an expert in not being caught, huh? Coz as I remember it, you were caught, weren’t you? Caught right in the middle of-”

Hot blood rush up into Xanthem’s cheeks like embers, and he wondered whether anger and fear alone could be enough to stop him from freezing to death. He thought probably not, and the thought was sobering. The armsman stepped between them.

“That’s enough!” he exclaimed, his voice still not rising above a whisper. “The prison is gone, and right now you’re not a prison guard and he’s-” He gestured towards Xanthem, his hand a ripple through the blackness, “not a prisoner.” The guard went to argue, but the armsman spoke over him.

“As an Officer of the Commonwealth, I clear this man of his charges. Let it be known that he walks a free man in the Commonwealth Kingdoms of Palommer, Galiweth and Caynnor, and all Her vassals, of which Harper Fields is one. If any man or woman wrongly raises a hand against him, they will answer to the Law of the Land. I am Officer Maro, and I have spoken as a Standard Bearer of Commonwealth Law. It is done.”

There was a shocked silence, broken a moment later by the spluttering of the guard in disbelief. And then both Xanthem and the guard replied: “It is done.” Beyond that, Xanthem remained silent, struggling in disbelief, so accustomed to his inevitable death in the prison had he become, that he had stopped dreaming of the day he might hear those words and repeat them.

It is done.

The guard, however, was much less restrained. “I didn’t know you were an officer,” he muttered, standing a little straighter with such lazy disregard that he

would have been punished in normal circumstances, “*Officer Maro.*” He was the image of disdainful duty.

“Now you do,” replied Maro coolly. “Are we done here?” The guard must have nodded, not that Xanthem could see it, but Maro was satisfied. “Good. We’ll go further in for a couple of miles and then stop to light a fire. Wolves or not... well, we have our swords. And you have your dagger.” Xanthem nodded, thinking it best to keep the words from tumbling incoherently from his mouth. There would be time for gratitude later, he hoped. If they survived.

The cold and dark made for slow walking, with added care taken to keep silent slowing the pace further. When Officer Maro deemed it appropriate to stop, Xanthem was shivering as though he had fever, numb to the trail of blood that his bare feet left behind. There was little point in keeping quiet, since the trail screamed red to any beast that might be out prowling through the night, but he remained oblivious to his broken skin.

Maro and the guard fared better, their clothes and armour offering far superior protection from the biting chill. But even the officer had a gaunt look in the mauve light of the dawn, as though the night of trudging into Bleakwood had drained him of his very lifeblood.

“This will do,” he intoned raggedly, hoarse from the long hours of silence. “Go and get some dry wood.”

Xanthem nodded blindly and limped from the small clearing that marked their temporary respite, blearily searching the brush for kindling. Everything was frozen, and beneath that, damp, and the trees were grey and unyielding. But he set about pulling at the weaker branches until he had amassed an armful of brittle wood and a new collection of cuts and bruises. Officer Maro had already got a small pile of tinder ready, so Xanthem set about laying the kindling atop it, leaving plenty of

spaces for the fire to breathe. There was a flint and firestriker on the ground next to it, but no sign of Maro.

The guard glared at Xanthem.

Xanthem shrugged and finished rearranging the wood. He was too tired to care, but before he knew it the guard had pushed him roughly to the ground with a dull blow to the back of his head. Xanthem fell to the floor, his slim frame no match for the weighty momenta of the guard, and hit the ground with his hands. The flint gauged into his palm, and he felt the warm trickle of blood against his skin.

The guard pinned him down, and after a brief struggle Xanthem gave up, faint and fading.

“I dunno what you did to get that officer,” he spat, “but he won’t always be around to look after you, and I don’t care what he says, *prisoner*.”

And then he was up and leaning against a nearby tree, picking at his fingers. Slowly, Xanthem sat up, confused, as Officer Maro came back into the small clearing. Maro frowned at him.

“Get up,” he said, and the guard smirked. “Light the fire. It may be dawn, but I don’t want to freeze to death.”

People were always loath to relinquish what power they had, thought Xanthem. Especially when it was power over someone else.

They kept the fire going for a couple of hours, during which Maro disappeared again, before returning once more with a clutch of rabbits and the stringy remains of a trap. He prepared them in silence, a deep frown settling on his forehead, and the silence persisted while they ate.

When they finished, he said: “There were wolf tracks about twenty minutes that way, fresh. They’d have to know we’re here.” The guard rose to his feet.

“Then we should leave!”

“No,” replied Maro firmly, not moving from beside the fire. “If we were in danger from them, we’d be long dead. The tracks extend around in a circle, but never come any closer.” He looked over at the guard who was hovering skittishly, looking out into the forest. “Which way is the nearest town?”

“The Anne runs East,” replied the guard uncertainly.

“So?”

“That’s all I know.”

There was a moment of strained silence. The guard shifted while Maro looked at him with a blank expression that spoke volumes.

“How far along the Anne are we?”

The guard looked nervously to the ground, but it seemed that he didn’t find an answer there. “I don’t know.”

“What do you know? Anything?” Maro sighed in frustration. “We need to get to city and send a messenger ahead, to alert the Duke’s men. Word must be sent from to Caynnor.” He slammed his palm into a tree angrily, continuing. “I can’t say where we are unless I know how far along the Anne this is. I know how she runs Westwards out of Harper Fields, but her route North into the wilds is unknown to me.”

“Haybury should be closest,” said Xanthem. “Continuing straight past the river where she turns off to go north.”

“Are you sure?” asked Maro.

“It’s what the other prisoners used to say,” he replied. “If you were going to try and escape, that was where you were heading: to Bleakwood, around to the Anne and then East where the river turns, to Haybury.”

“If we can get to Haybury, we’ll be fine,” murmured Maro. “I didn’t realise I had come so far south.” He shook himself. “I can get us to Ostburn from there and send word to the Duke in Lormont, the gravens willing.”

Xanthem’s heart fluttered. Lormont. He wondered how many months had passed since he had even thought of that place? Once, it had been his wishful destination. Fate had not been so kind. But fate was fickle.

Maro looked flatly at the guard. “And you’re sure that the river is east of here?”

“Yes,” said the guard, but Xanthem interrupted.

“It’s not,” he said.

“How do you know?” snapped the guard.

“The Anne runs east, but is just north of Bleakwood.”

“So?”

“So, if we went east now, we’d miss the river entirely.”

The guard stepped forward, ready to dispute, but Maro raised a hand to stop him. “Don’t,” he said, rubbing at his brow. “Don’t speak.” He looked at Xanthem. “We will go north until we hit the Anne, and then east past her turn until Haybury, and onto more civilised country.” Xanthem nodded.

So they left on Xanthem’s suggestion, his first suggestion since becoming a free man once more, and one which he was certain had earned him an enemy for life in the guard. Given the murder in his eyes, Xanthem resolved to leave Maro and the guard as soon as he could in Haybury. For the guard had been right: Officer Maro would not be watching out for him forever.

They had travelled for little more than a mile when the bandit cry arose behind them.

Xanthem and Maro looked at each other and understanding passed between them.

“They followed us,” said Maro. “They must have found the clearing, and remains of the fire.”

“Why would they do that?” whispered the guard, his voice breaking ever so slightly. Xanthem had been wondering the same thing, but then it came to him.

“Because they don’t want word of the attack to reach the Duke,” he said. “There’s no other reason. If it was just a raid on the silver-white they would have made sure that some of us escaped so that the prison could be repopulated for the next raid. We get harried often.”

“Then the Claybournes mean to hold the mine,” muttered Maro. “I was sure they had been routed further north... Enough of this now. We must run.”

And run they did, but this time they were not so lucky. Xanthem was slowed by his feet, blackened and bruised with a rusty coating of dried blood, and even Maro seemed to struggle. It wasn’t long before their ragged breathing sounded more like the tearing of brittle cloth than the simple drawing-in of air. Another cry rang out behind them, this time closer.

“They’ll know we’re trying for the Anne,” gasped Xanthem, wiping the tears from his eyes. Whether they were for his feet or the raking fire he felt as the air tore his windpipe raw, he didn’t know. “We can’t outrun them.”

Maro stopped, bent over for a moment with his hand on his knees, as he drew in breath. “Draw weapons,” he said as he straightened, his steel sword ringing out. The guard’s eyes widened in fear like those of a panicking horse. “Draw your weapon,” instructed Maro again, this time with greater force. The guard drew his sword. Xanthem fumbled and pulled out his thorn from where the blade had been stowed, wincing as he tried to grip the handle, the gash caused by the flint flaring in pain. He transferred the blade to his other hand, and then back again.

Maro had them move to a more favourable position behind a ridge from which they could look towards their attackers. Then they waited, the blood pumping around Xanthem's body and roaring in his ears. It was deafening. The muscles across his chest went into miniature spasm as fear wrenched through him like an inconsiderate thug, knocking over chairs and tearing down shelves. The boom of his heartbeat shook the earth; he could feel it in the ground beneath him.

The sound of the bandits drew closer, cries of anger and jubilation, the stamping of their boots, and then they emerged: five men with rough swords and maces, thick leather and furs over heavy cast iron armour, all brown and black. The leader stopped and raised a clenched fist, causing the others to fall into silent rank behind him immediately. He was the biggest of the five, broad shoulders and thick wrists betraying the strength of the man. Little of his face could be seen, covered by a thick brown beard as it was, and a helm from which spouted the horns of a ram. All of them wore the same clay masks and chalky white paint, covering different parts of their faces.

Xanthem's hopes fell. Officer Maro would not be able fend off these five, not with only a witless guard and a malnourished prison-slave at his back. The bandits must have sent their finest, especially Ram Horns.

Slowly, the bandits progressed forwards, and two of them pulled short bows from their backs and drew arrows black-fletched arrows. Every sound – every cracking twig or rustling leaf – was filled with desperate tension.

Xanthem turned, only to find that Maro and the guard had crept further along the ridge, both crouched low to the ground. But where the guard was twisting his hands nervously, his eyes darting between the bandits, Maro was like a statue, still as stone and studying the horned leader.

The bandits had stopped again. At a signal, the two with bows jogged ahead, up past the ridge and beyond it. The three that remained stood still, and the otherwise disquieting silence of Bleakwood returned. Xanthem raised a shaking hand to his head, and it came away wet. He was sweating despite the cold. At a nod from Ram Horns, the remaining three moved up again, this time right up to the edge of the ridge. Then in an instant, Maro leapt over the lip of earth and plunged his sword down into the throat of the first man, smashing his clay mask in the process. For the briefest of seconds as the man died gurgling, nobody seemed to move. It was as though he was gliding to the ground, rather than falling.

Xanthem could almost hear music in the silence.

Then time was restored and the gurgling ended with a wrenching sound as Maro charged forward again with his sword, the prison guard following a few steps behind him.

Xanthem forced himself, still shaking, up over the ridge but his legs dissolved beneath him. The pounding in his head turned to ringing, and sweat seemed to pour down into his eyes. He wiped away at his brow furiously and stumbled towards the others, Maro pacing around Ram-horns who paced around him with the same keen look in his eyes, as though it was some kind of ritualistic dance.

Each step sent shuddering pain ringing up through Xanthem's body, resounding backwards and forwards inside his skull. His eyes burned and his teeth felt rough, the metallic taste of blood filling his mouth. He must have bitten his tongue, hard.

What would Ma Pence say to that? he wondered. But he was a world away from Ma Pence.

He heard the whistle as the arrow caught the prison guard in the back, and then another that sent him to the ground, but not before he'd somehow manage to

leave his opponent gutted and bleeding out into the unforgiving dirt. Maro half-turned, and swerved to avoid another arrow as Ram Horns charged towards him.

The pain rang out, a sharp tone ripping at the fabric of his mind, and Xanthem sank to the ground as it seared across his head. A moment later and another arrow whistled by into the bark of a tree next to him.

This is it, he thought, the hands against his head soaked with blood. He wondered vaguely whether there was an arrow lodged in his brain or whether it had simply split open his skull.

In his dying moments, he perceived three things around him. The first, and by far the largest, was the driving pain where the arrow had driven into his skull, the second and third little more than a dying boy's final and feverish thoughts.

A strange sound swooping down overhead, *rboouoos*, as the driving pain intensified.

And ruby red eyes watching in the distance, as the world faded to black.

Chapter Three

It was the smell of wine and spices that brought Xanthem back from a sleep that had been close to death. It reminded him so strongly of his room in Coburn – not the room where he worked, but the room above the kitchen which was his – that in the foggy moments before his consciousness fully formed, he thought that was where he was. But then the memories of the prison and of escaping into Bleakwood came crashing back. His first complete thought was to wonder why they hadn't killed him. His second was to wish that they had. He would kill himself before submitting to another form of slavery, especially to bandits, who would be worse than the prison guards.

Opening his eyes proved difficult, so instead he gingerly went to feel his face and head, expecting bandages or the clamminess of hot, puckered skin. But his face was smooth, apart from the vagabond's stubble he had been unable to curtail. There was no sign of significant injury on his head, not even broken skin. He probed

further, pressing more firmly, but there wasn't any pain where he thought the arrow had punctured his skull.

Perhaps he had lost all feeling, he thought.

So he let his hands fall back to his side, eyes still closed, and instead turned his attention to his surroundings. He was lying on a bed, a padded straw pallet by the feel of it, and propped up against some rolled up linen on the headrest. It was light; the soft red glow that made it past his eyelids told him as much. And there was the faint clattering of people going about their business both below him and what he assumed was outside. It sounded like an inn. And it didn't sound like bandits.

Then there were footsteps, and the creaking of a door opening. Xanthem turned to face the newcomer, and moved his hand up to his eyes, perhaps to protect himself from his own blindness.

"Oh, pet, you're awake," came the voice of a woman as she hurried across the room to the bedside. A stool scraped as she sat down. "How do you feel?"

"I," began Xanthem. "I don't know."

"That's okay pet, everything's fine."

"I can't open my eyes."

"That will probably pass. We've had it in people coming out of Bleakwood before, probably some kind of fungus, says Abe. But enough of this, you must be starving, you haven't eaten for days! I'll be going to get you some stew."

"How long was I out?"

"Four days'n nights," replied the woman. "We was worried that you'd pass just from the hunger. Now I'll go get that stew, just a minute."

She returned quickly, and helped Xanthem eat from a bowl of simple vegetable stew. It tasted like nothing Xanthem could remember, better than anything he could imagine, and he realised that he hadn't eaten proper food for almost a year.

He started to cry, but the worried cooing of the woman soon stopped him. That was over. Things were different now.

“How did I get here?” And then: “Where is here?”

“The armsman was carrying you when you both came first into town. He said you’d been attacked by the banditry about the edge of Bleakwood on the way to Ostburn, so detoured here, which be Haybury.”

So they had made it. “Was it just us?”

“Just you and the armsman, aye.”

Xanthem half smiled, not even ashamed of the small flickering pleasure he felt, knowing that the guard hadn’t made it. One less person that might want him dead.

Xanthem fingered his face again. “I can’t feel any injuries...” he said tentatively, not quite a question, but he could hear his own fear and confusion. “I remember taking an arrow to my head. I thought it had split my skull.”

The woman placed her hand over his own, resting on his cheek. The gesture caught him by surprise, unable to see it coming, and he recoiled. But her touch was firm and kind and she kept it there. She had rough and wrinkled hands.

“Your feet were pretty beat,” she said, “and your hands, and you were bruised all over and in need of a feeding and a washing, but you’d not been hit around your head none, pet. You look just fine. Blimey, if we get some food in you all the ladies will come running, just you wait! And some of the married woman too, mark me for saying so. You’ve got that kind of face, and that body too as I’ve seen it, boyish an’ all!” She cackled and clucked and laughed, and Xanthem couldn’t help but laugh with her. “There now!” she exclaimed. “It’s not all so bad.”

She nattered on for a little while, slowly replacing Xanthem’s worry with the sound of her earthy and gentle nonsense.

“Could I get some of that wine?” Xanthem asked, sniffing at the scent on the air, and the woman went to fetch some. “Wait, I don’t know your name?”

“I’m Gretta,” she replied warmly from the door. “Aunty, most people know me by, and my husband is Abe. We own the inn, and Abe is the town herbalist when he isn’t brewing ales if you catch my meaning!” She returned with the spiced wine, the scent so strong that Xanthem wondered whether he’d be able to drink it. But he had always loved spiced wine, and even if all he could manage was a sip, then sip away he would.

Over the course of the day, Xanthem found that he could open his eyes, until in the evening he could see just fine, apart from a slight sense of puffiness. Gretta, or Aunty, as it turned out she insisted that he call her, was everything her voice had betrayed her as being. She had a flyaway bun of brown and grey hair tied up by a strip of cloth, and was ample in both drollery and form, the image of the innkeeper’s wife. Xanthem had once heard it said that there was an innkeeper’s wife at the heart of every keep, and a keep without one was without its heart. He thought that this saying was true.

Officer Maro came that evening. Aunty opened the door and ushered him in. He was no longer wearing his armour, simply garbed in the cotton and leathers that he had worn beneath, his green cloak stowed away somewhere.

“Gretta tells me you’re doing well,” he said. Gretta slapped his arm hard enough that he winced.

“Aunty,” she snapped at him, and from then on, he called her Aunty too.

They talked for a brief while about nothing in particular until Aunty declared that she had an inn to see to and left. Then Maro’s face grew marginally more serious as he studied Xanthem.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” Xanthem replied cautiously, before appending a “sir”. They were no longer fleeing bandits through the woods. Maro acknowledged the formalism with a nod.

“I was fighting the one with horns and as he charged, he must have seen something behind me because he paused so I ran him through. When I turned to look, there was nothing there except you passed out, and then there was a strange animal cry. Suddenly I was on the ground, as though someone had grabbed my hair and forced me down. When I recovered, the two archers were dead.”

Xanthem didn’t believe it. It was too strange to be true.

“What was the animal?”

Maro frowned. “I don’t know. I didn’t see it.”

“Could it have been a wolf?”

“No. The claw marks were not that of a wolf, nor any other creature that I know to haunt the woods of Harper Fields.”

Maro was watching him carefully, and Xanthem was beginning to grow restless under his gaze. “What happened after that? How did we get here?”

“I carried you,” answered Maro. There was no sign of emotion from the man; it was simply a statement of fact.

“I am forever in your debt,” said Xanthem, “for this, and for my freedom. How can I repay you?”

Maro wave a hand. “You do not owe me your freedom. I lied. I’m Second Captain of the Ostburn Garrison, not an officer.”

“Then I-” The words caught, and Xanthem couldn’t say them. Maro continued to watch him dispassionately.

I’m still a prisoner.

“There are no records from that place,” Maro said coolly, “and the only other man to know who you are is dead.” The guard. “Even I do not know your name.”

“You aren’t going to turn me over?”

“Not yet. Not today.”

Xanthem didn’t know whether to feel relieved or terrified. He gulped. “What do you want?”

“I want to know who you are. And I want to know if you had anything to do with what happened. Then I will decide what I am to do with you.”

“My name is Xanthem, and I had nothing to do with the attack on the prison.” It seemed that the sounds of the inn had receded, and there was only the quiet of their breathing in this small room. Xanthem was acutely aware that this man held the fate of his life in his hands.

“Not the raid – I know you had nothing to do with that.”

“Then what, sir?”

“In Bleakwood. The creature.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t follow.”

Maro leant forwards, his grey eyes like pin-point razors. “Did you do magic? And answer me truly, for I have a good ear for catching lies.”

Xanthem couldn’t help but smile at the suggestion he had done magic. “If it was magic, then it was nothing to do with me. I thought I’d been split open by an arrow and was sure to die.” Maro sat back on the stool, his brow creased in thought.

Then: “You are a free man, if you wish to be, Xanthem. Though you will accompany me to Ostburn to recount what you saw of the Claybournes to the governor’s men there before I go on to Lormont to report to the Duke. Then you may be on your way.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied Xanthem, and Maro’s eyes warmed a little.

“I will go and see that Gretta, ahem, I mean Aunty, gets you some clothes.” He got up to go.

“But I cannot pay for them. I have nothing.”

“Then consider them a gift.” Maro was watching with that same piercing look again. “They seem quite besotted with you, the folk that have seen you. They wouldn’t let me pay for your care, for one thing.” And then he was gone.

They didn’t stay for any longer than they had to, waiting only for Xanthem to be well enough to travel comfortably. But that took long enough, and Maro was impatient to get to Ostburn. In the meantime, he had spoken with Haybury’s own garrison, small as it was, and helped organise better defences, in case the Claybournes decided to wander much further east.

Xanthem had been able to earn a few coins to contribute to his keep, much to the protests of Aunty, by singing down in the inn in the evenings. He knew that he had a good voice; or at least, his voice had been good once. Now it was cracking and rough, from almost a year of a neglect and mistreatment, but he could hold a tune better than anyone else there. It helped that there hadn’t been a travelling singer passing through for many a year, and he was well received by the townsfolk.

As soon as Abe was sure his feet would not get infected, he covered them in foot-wrappings and they left, now able to follow a rough dirt road rather than trek through the wilds. Certainly, this was a different side to Harper Fields than Xanthem had seen, as the featureless grey of the Winter Plains gave way to rugged and broken pastures, but pastures nonetheless. On the second day of travelling they passed a hamlet where they were offered a meal, but Xanthem thought it little more than a dishonest courtesy. The people here were not trusting of travellers, and it was little wonder why. Three time’s they passed by a body at the side of the road, and Maro stopped to search the corpse.

“Robbed, again,” he said grimly. “It would seem that things have changed in Ostburn, for when I left, these roads were guarded and this would not have been permitted.”

This was the first time that the Second Captain of the Commonwealth garrison in Ostburn had volunteered information about himself since Xanthem had woken, but he didn’t press him for more. It wasn’t his place. He was little more than a vagrant traveller. Maro glanced at him, perhaps sensing his stiff silence.

“If you have a question, Xanthem, then by all means ask it.” He stood up from the body, dusted himself off, and they continued along the path. By now, it was unevenly paved, and they passed other travellers every few hours.

“How long have you been away from Ostburn?” he asked.

“Two years,” replied Maro.

“What were you doing?”

“I was seeing off the Claybournes to the north west. We routed them before they could cross into the Lesser Sways, causing them to flee up to the Wild Lands. But it would seem that one of the clans must have detached much earlier and moved behind us. The prison would have made a decent defensible position.”

“Do you have any family?”

Maro nodded. “My wife, Tara, and our daughter Lucile.”

“How old is Lucile?”

“By now she will be twelve years old.” The brittle edge that appeared in voice was enough to let Xanthem know that Maro had revealed all that he wanted to, so he questioned no further.

On the fourth day of travelling they stopped to buy new provisions at a small village, and Xanthem was relieved to learn that they were less than a day away from Ostburn. Now, with a hot meal in his belly and the end in sight, Xanthem’s mood

was much improved, despite his sore feet. Compared to a fortnight ago, his outlook on life was infinitely brighter.

Maro's mood seemed to brighten as well, as did their surroundings. Every couple of hours they would pass another farm, or the shape of a windmill in the distance. They even passed an oast house. By the time the low city walls rose into sight above the horizon, they had been joined by a cobbler and his son, travelling from the south. Maro was keen to catch up on as much of what he had missed as he could, so Xanthem simply listened. For the most part, the world was as he remembered it being before his imprisonment, full of petty rivalries and the whims of the wealthy at the expense of those less fortunate. Maro, on the other hand, was somewhat disquieted by the news.

"So the Duke of Kendar still lives. That much of what you have told me I can at least be happy about," mused Maro.

"Aye, and it's a good thing he lives, for though his body might be frail, at least his mind is strong." The cobbler leaned in towards Maro. "The same cannot be said of the Duke of Lormont, or so I've heard."

"What have you heard?"

"That he leaves the running of Lormont and the rest of his domain up to the Anne to his advisors. Meanwhile he worries about politics!"

Maro snorted, though his eyes remained serious, even troubled. "What has he to worry about? There is no politics up here in Harper Fields."

The cobbler laughed. "Aye, leave it to the rest of the Commonwealth, that way we can just get on with our lives."

They entered Ostburn that evening, passing through the wooden gates with only a nod to the guards, Maro's armour providing all the identification that could be needed.

“I must report my return to the captain of the guard,” said Maro. “Make your way to the Raven Inn; Tara and I live next door. Tell her that I am back, and that you’re to stay with us for a while. She should look after you.”

Maro gave Xanthem directions to the inn, and then as Xanthem turned to go he grabbed his arm, the steely glint returned to his eyes.

“Mark me well, Xanthem. I get the feeling that I can trust you, and I believe that you have spoken true, but should you have lied – if even a word has been false – and you bring harm into the house of my family, I will make sure that you end up back where I found you.” And then he turned and walked towards the centre of the city, his feet treading confidently on stone that he knew as well as he knew himself.

Xanthem shook his shoulders, trying to relieve the sudden spike in tension. He understood Maro’s actions all too well. If it had been magic, then the armsman had every reason to be concerned. Other than the clerics, there were very few magic users that were not viewed with distrust, or even downright fear, by those that lacked their skills, with the possible exception of Illusionists. Though, even then, they were usually treated with suspicion.

Walking through the city, Xanthem took his time. It had been almost a year since he had last been free to wander cobbled streets, past bakers and a smithy, savouring the mixing aromas of fresh bread and the hissing smoke of steel fires. Nobody gave him a second glance as he ambled in the direction Maro had told him; he was just another nobody in a small city of nobodies. He could be anyone.

Eventually he passed the Raven Inn and stopped in front of the small house next door. Suddenly nervous, he took a breath and stepped up to the door, knocking twice. For a moment, nothing happened, but then the door cracked open and a woman looked out, her mousy brown hair tied up in a flyaway bun. She was very pretty, with sharp eyes that saw much.

“Can I help you?” she asked, looking him over once before her eyes settled coolly on his face.

“Tara?”

She nodded, betraying nothing.

“My name is Xanthem. I’ve been travelling with your husband across the Winter Plains. He told me to tell you that he is back, and will come here as soon as he has finished with his captain.”

Tara’s face lit up before the words had even finished forming sentences.

“Come in!” she exclaimed. “You must come in at once!” There were tears in her eyes.

When Maro returned later in the evening, Xanthem had already been offered the spare room, and was eating supper by the fire and chatting with Lucile, making her laugh. The reunion between husband and wife and daughter was passionate, and full of emotion, and the three of them spoke in hushed whispers by the fire for much of the evening, Lucile sitting on her father’s lap, her head against his chest, and face the picture of things being right.

Tara insisted that Xanthem stay at least the week while he went with Maro to second the account of the Claybournes, so that he had time to find his feet in Ostburn. When the week ended, Lucile insisted that he stay for longer, so besotted with him had she become. He got work at the inn next door and soon joined Lucile in the evenings when Tara taught her letters and arithmetic. The week became a fortnight, and the fortnight became a month, and the spare room became his room. He kept singing at the inn, just as he had been in Haybury, and doing what other work they asked of him, but Maro had other ideas.

“Well, it looks as though you’re set to stay,” he said one evening as they sat together over a game of chess, as had become their custom.

“I can leave as soon as you ask me to,” replied Xanthem quickly, putting down the green glass chess piece. “Mercer has already told me that he’d have a room for me in the inn, if I agreed to work the stables as well.” Mercer owned the Raven Inn.

Maro raised a hand to silence him. “That’s not what I was saying,” he said. “And besides, I think that Lucile would have me flogged for even suggesting such a thing. No, Xanthem, you will stay with us until you decide that you wish to leave, if indeed that is what you want to do.”

“I would love to stay.” It was more than he could have hoped.

“Excellent. Be that the case, you need to get a proper trade, not just working at the inn. What can you do?”

Xanthem felt the heat rise to his face, but held it back and kept his expression neutral. “I do not have a trade, sir. At least, not one that I wish to go back to.” It was not because he was ashamed; he wasn’t. But he knew that it could cause him difficulty.

Maro regarded him thoughtfully. “I won’t ask, as long as your past remains far away from here.” He glanced over at Tara and Lucile, and Xanthem nodded. “Tara says you’re quick to learn, but you’re a long way yet from scribing.” Xanthem smiled. Tara was a scribe at Ostburn Keep for the city’s governor, and was not quick to give praise. “She’ll keep teaching you, along with Lucile, and it won’t be long before you overtake our daughter.” Maro gave him another searching look. “You’re strong, and quick, whether that is from your time working in the prison or before, matters little. You could train with the guard if you liked; they would certainly take you.”

And so Xanthem did. He trained and did drills for most of the day, studied with Lucile in the evening, and then sang at the inn into the night. He was tired, but it was the tiredness that accompanied fulfilment, rather the mental and physical

exhaustion of imprisonment and death. By the time winter had passed into spring, he could read and write, hold his own with a sword, was running messages about the keep and often didn't have time to sing in the evening, much to the disappointment of a small group of young ladies who came regularly to hear him. He could feel his body changing – recovering – and returning to its former state. His slim frame filled out, and while he would never be as strong as many of his friends in the guard, he made up for it with speed. On more than one occasion, he had lifted an opponent from the ground to the cheering of his peers and been told that he was stronger than he looked.

By no means was he yet as fit as he once had been, but this was much better than starvation.

Maro had returned from Lormont, having reported to the Duke there, and was soon to become First Lieutenant. Tara had started running a small school of scribes in training, and as a result Xanthem often found himself looking after Lucile, something that he loved. She had fallen in love with him, in the way that a young girl might love a gentle brother, and they laughed endlessly. Entirely by accident, he had gained a family where before he had none, and six months became a year, one year became two, and the creeping winter that was never far away in Harper Fields started to return for the second time.

Then Tara took him to one side.

“Xanthem,” she said, watching him seriously. “I have a favour to ask of you.”

“What can I do?”

“Maro is going to be sent out soon.”

“Sent out?”

She nodded, worry blooming in her normally calm face. “He received word from Lormont a few days ago, and one of the clerics of Mhoth came to speak with

the governor today. The Duke is expected to give orders to sweep up through the Winter Plains again to push the Claybournes back.” She sighed. “Why it couldn’t have been done in the spring months instead of the winter, I don’t know, but apparently the raids on Haybury have worsened and now we must act. They should have dealt with it when Maro first came back with you and told them.”

“What would you like me to do?”

“Will you go with him?” She watched for his response, and Xanthem had to be careful not to let his surprise show. He hadn’t even considered leaving Ostburn, especially not to travel back into the Winter Plains. “He won’t have time to pick an attendant that he knows well.”

“I don’t know anything about battle,” replied Xanthem reluctantly.

“You wouldn’t need to,” she countered. “I’ve seen you with a sword, and I’ve seen you with Maro. It would be a great service to me if you went with him. It would put my mind some way towards being at rest.” An edge of desperation had entered her voice, and Xanthem realised that – after everything she had done for him – he couldn’t say no. Not now.

“I’ll go with him.”

Tara swept forward and embraced him. “Thank you,” she whispered into his ear. “Thank you, Xanthem.” And then: “You know, he’s too proud to say it. But he loves you. Maro. He loves you. He always wanted a son, and we tried to conceive again after Lucile, but we couldn’t.” The mix of pain and happiness in her voice was bittersweet, and the outpouring of emotions rare. “We couldn’t have asked for a better son. Nor Lucile for a better friend.”

Xanthem didn’t know what to say, so he simply returned the embrace with the pressure of his own body, trusting that the closeness would convey the debt of gratitude that he felt.

Then he pulled back, and looked her in the eye. “I will keep his armour clean and his sword sharp,” he said. “I will tend to his horse, keep him company in the cold, and protect him with my life. This is my promise to you, in the sight of the gravens.”

Tara stroked his face, and bent his head to lay a kiss on his brow. “He will protest,” she said, “but in the end, he will let you accompany him, and be glad of it. I will bring it up with him tonight.”

“What of Lucile?” asked Xanthem, thinking of the girl that he now loved more than anyone else in the world. “Does she know?”

Tara shook her head. “Not yet. She will be devastated. I imagine the sight of you leaving will be the death of her. But it won’t be for too long. A year at most.”

Xanthem nodded sadly, picturing Lucile’s laughing face, and committing it to memory. He would see her later that evening, he knew, and in the following days. But already he missed her, feeling that his time had been too briefly spent in Ostburn.

Chapter Four

Tara had been right: Maro was not pleased with the idea, nor that she had asked Xanthem without speaking to him first, and they argued in hushed voices long into the night. Lucile sat with Xanthem, her feet spread across his lap as they often were, listening to their murmuring voices as she read from a book.

“What do you think they’re arguing about?” she asked suddenly, catching Xanthem off guard.

“You don’t know that they’re arguing,” he said. She gave him the fond rolling-eyes look that she reserved especially for him, as though he was particularly stupid but she forgave him anyway, and returned to her reading.

“Of course they’re arguing,” she said. “That’s their arguing voice. And don’t pretend that you don’t know what it’s about. You always know what it’s about.” She closed her book and turned around to lean her head against his chest. “Ma sent all of us away today.”

“Hm?” Xanthem was only half listening, trying to catch the faded echoes of Maro and Tara’s conversation, but he gave up. His hearing was good, but they were being especially quiet tonight.

“The scribes,” explained Lucile. “She sent us away today, because she had a visitor from Lormont.” Xanthem perked up. “I was going to try and stay though, and just hang around and tidy up or something, but she wouldn’t let me.”

“Who was the visitor?”

“An old man. Everything he wore was grey. But I liked him. He wasn’t there for long.”

“How long?”

“They talked for an hour, maybe? And then he left. Ma sent one of the others to show him the way out of the city.” They sat in silence for a little while longer, enjoying each other’s closeness, and Xanthem stroked Lucile’s hair. “I think he was a cleric.”

“Probably.”

“Grey is Mhoth, isn’t it?” Xanthem nodded. “We’ve been learning about the graven.” When Xanthem didn’t reply, she turned to look at him, her eyes almost rolling fondly again. “You’re not really listening, are you?”

“Sorry,” said Xanthem, planting a small kiss on her cheek. He had been wondering how long he and Maro would be away.

“That’s okay.” And she went back to letting him stroke her hair.

“Lucile,” he started, and regretted speaking as soon as her name left his lips. If he started to tell her, he wouldn’t be able to stop. She turned to look at him again, eyes wide, and the pain of leaving her threatened to spill out of him. Then the door opened, and Maro came out.

He looked at them, and Xanthem knew that he had agreed. He came over, kissed Lucile once, and gave Xanthem one of his all-seeing grey looks. Only this time, a sliver of thanks escaped from his practiced composure, in the form of a slight nod. And then he walked away, his tired footfalls dwindling upstairs. Tara followed him some time later, telling them not to wait too long before turning in. In the end, Xanthem had to nudge Lucile to wakefulness, as she had fallen asleep with her head resting lightly against his chest.

The Claybournes came that night.

It started many hours before anyone realised, and the first that Xanthem knew of it was Maro shaking him awake.

“-to the keep. Damn it, Xanthem, wake up! You must take Tara and Lucile to the keep, and get them out of the city if you have to!”

Xanthem shook himself awake, up and staggering with Maro down the stairs, Tara and Lucile already waiting, Lucile’s beautiful eyes wide with fear. Maro pushed him forward into his spare room, and handed him a short sword and some leathers. Without comprehension, Xanthem automatically threw the leathers over his head and fastened them about his waste, the sword at his side.

“What’s happening?”

“We never received word from Haybury, whether that was because they skipped the town entirely, or the riders were killed on the way, I don’t know, but the Claybournes have pushed down from the plains in strength.” Maro ushered Xanthem along with Tara and Lucile to the door. “What they hope to gain depends on how large their force is, but there has been little word of movement from the plains. They were forced from the prison some weeks ago – but more than that I don’t know. Argh, the Duke should have listened when I first reported on the prison, and not left things so late!” Xanthem finished tightening Maro’s armour, and

they stood before each other. “I would have been glad of your company,” said Maro seriously, “and with luck you will accompany me yet when we push them back, but for now: get my family to safety.”

Xanthem nodded.

He could hear cries and the clashing of steel on steel outside. He guessed, from its distance, that it was still at the walls, but the outer reaches of Ostburn were not built to withstand a sharp attack. The governor’s keep was much easier to hold, and the keep guard could fend off a smaller force with ease, but it was expected that the people would have to flee to Lormont. It was not the first time that the city had been emptied but for the keep, and subsequently retaken, though there were few that remembered the last time the Claybournes had ventured this far south.

Maro turned and ran towards the walls without a backwards glance, three young armmen accompanying him from the door, and Lucile started to cry. Xanthem grabbed her, held her tight, and looked her full in the face.

“It will be alright,” he said, and she nodded with a child’s bravery.

Tara nudged them. “Come now,” she said, looking nervously in the direction that Maro had disappeared. “There will be time for that later.”

Xanthem nodded, and they ran to the keep, following other families also making their way to safety. They passed two small groups of green clad armmen and a gathering of city guard going the other way, pausing to let some horseman clatter across the cobbles.

With every step, the sound of fighting and smell of smoke faded. But as they reached the keep, Xanthem’s heart fell. The entrance was barred by mounted keep guard, hemispherical axes setting them apart from the rest of the guard. Pushing his way forward until he was standing alongside their horses, Xanthem shouted up at them.

“Why is the keep closed?”

The man dismounted, seeing Xanthem’s leathers, and pulled him to one side, handing his reigns to another. “They have come up through the sewers,” he muttered. “Until we have them routed, no one gets into the keep. It’s not safe.”

“It’s not safe out here, either!” replied Xanthem, careful to keep his voice below the background murmuring. He looked back towards the fearful huddle of townsfolk that had gathered at the gate, keeping an eye on Tara and Lucile. He leant in towards the guard. “They need to feel safe, even if they’re not. Where can I take them?”

There was a scream, and both Xanthem and the guard turned in time to see eight Claybournes, their masks hiding their faces, coming up the street. The keep guard, a captain, lifted his axe, the two hemi-spherical blades shimmering in the light of the dawn, and raised a cry: “Archers!”

There was a responding cry from the barricade above the keep entrance, followed by successive twangs as bow strings were released, sending the bandits falling to the ground at the feet of the weeping townsfolk.

Xanthem turned back to the guard. “They need to feel safe,” he said again, and this time the guard nodded.

“The eastern reaches remain quiet, last I heard. It would seem they want to leave the way open for us to flee, probably in the hope that we’ll take it early so they can loot the city. You can take them there.”

Xanthem nodded, and gestured to the crowd behind him. “With me!” he cried, catching Tara’s eye. She pulled Lucile to the front, and they ran east. In the rush, he could barely recall the two Claybournes that came flying from an open sewer gate. The first he ran through with his sword by instinct, and the second paused in surprise for a moment too long.

Apart from that encounter, the way to the east gate was open, the broad square empty but for a small group of guards and two lone horsemen. Xanthem breathed a sigh of relief, and led his group of tired followers into the square. One of the guards raised a hand in greeting, and gestured to the armsman next to him, waving them over. With everyone's attention away from the sounds of distant fighting, the sudden whistle of bows and crossbows being released failed to register as a warning, almost immediately followed by a series of thumps, and the harsh cry of pain.

A horse reared, the armsman fell with a bolt in his neck, two of the guards clutched at arrow shafts, and Xanthem turned to see five of the townsfolk prone on the ground, their unarmoured bodies pierced and bloodied.

"Down!" he cried, dropping to a crouch and ushering those that remained towards the guards who rushed forwards to meet them, round shields raised. He scanned the streets that led off from the square until he found the Claybournes, two of whom were coming forward, crossbows raised to fire again. Without thinking, he threw himself at them, the sound of arrows whistling by, and struck the first with his shoulder. Ramming the handle of the crossbow into the man's head with one hand, Xanthem swung his sword wildly at the other, who stepped nimbly back to finish reloading his own weapon. The deadly click of the bolt falling into place signalled Xanthem's inevitable death, and the man swung to face him just as an arrow to the chest sent him spinning.

The arrows kept coming, from the guards and the Claybournes, and Xanthem lunged out with his sword when he could, but otherwise stayed crouched down by a stall at the corner. A moment of quiet passed, and he dared to lift his head. The bandits had fallen or fled. He looked for the townspeople, but there were few of them left standing.

Staggering over, Xanthem searched for the faces that he loved, begging any graven that would listen that they had been spared. When he found them, pressed against the stone, he wept.

For some time, no one tried to move him. He sat there, Lucile's head in his lap like it so often had been as he stroked her hair. Tara's body was nearby, two arrows protruding from her waste. He could see it play across the theatre of his mind's eye: Tara, pushing Lucile back and turning to protect her with her own flesh. But it had all been in vain. He had failed them.

A shout brought him from his darkness, and he peered through tear stricken eyes. It was an armsman, with word from the western wall.

"It's been breached," he heard the man say.

"What of our forces?"

"The First and Second Lieutenant have been killed. The governor has given the order to evacuate the city before the Claybournes sweep past the keep. Lormont will take it back in a couple of days."

So Maro was dead. And his loss was complete.

At some point, he must have gotten up, or been lifted to his feet, for he found himself walking mindlessly with those that were left. A look back told him he was outside of the city, most likely heading east, away from Lucile and Tara.

Away from Maro.

Maro, who had not left him behind.