

THE POWERS THAT BE

Book One of 'The Powers that be' trilogy

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*For my Gran,
The most important person to ever have entered my life.
I still miss you Gran. This one is for you. xxx*

Prologue

Long ago during the golden age when the race of men was considered honourable and mighty, men journeyed far across the mountains and the seas in search of new races and new lands to explore. These were times of peace, when men had many friends and few enemies. Its people began to prosper, but this was not to last forever, for the race of men had one vital flaw: greed.

After forging the twin swords A'nur and Nu'ra as a sign of their own power and as weapons of war, the Inner Circle of mages were ordered by the Council of Rulers to sink them lest their power be abused or used for evil means. This decree created a great rift within the magical community for not all were happy with the ruling and many wanted to sever ties with their 'weaker' brethren. Such a divide created many

factions and slowly the magical community began to come apart.

When it emerged that the Va'leri – a race of unparalleled magical ability – had themselves forged a great weapon more than ten times the power of the two swords combined, the mages became jealous.

In secret, a small group of mages, many of whom were involved in crafting the twin swords themselves set a trap for the Va'leri who despite their power were a peaceful, innocent race whose trusting nature made them easy prey for the treacherous wizards. As such, the trap worked perfectly and the mages stole the staff of Valeria for themselves, little knowing the grave consequences their actions would have.

This act of malice and trickery set in motion a series of events that led to the 'Sundering' of the peoples and the nations, for on learning of the mages' treachery the Va'leri made the ultimate sacrifice in activating the staff's defence mechanism. To keep the staff from causing huge destruction, as they foresaw it would, they gave their souls to be its guardians and protect the race of men from themselves – cutting the realm of men off from the outside world and separating the rural south from the mainland in the north. In doing so they left behind a key, hidden in the lands themselves for the one who was prophesised to save them and do what they could not: destroy the staff.

For the three hundred and forty years that followed the Sundering, the realm of men was fractured and

disunited. The mages retreated to their small island, taking with them their knowledge and power, escaping from the repercussions of their actions on the mainland. They left behind a realm full of mistrust, hatred and suspicion. Disputes were common-place between the powerful rulers of men in the northern mainland, and blood was often shed in the name of honour and power.

But there was little honour in these times: the mages of all peoples knew this best, for they had lost their honour through unspeakable deeds in generations past.

Then came the Great War.

The Great War was one of untold scale that ravaged the lands once pure. Brother fought brother as the hatred of years of suspicion and plotting came to a head. The war was bloody and brutal, leaving the land and its people devastated and scarred from the years of battle.

Three years passed as war raged across the lands of men, consuming the once proud race and taking a mighty toll. Eventually though, the factions dwindled in number until but two distinct sides remained: those of King Nicholas and his newly formed 'Kingdom' in the west, and those of the Lord of Rishnaa in the east.

What began as a civil war turned into a battle of good and evil as dark forces slowly sought to gain influence over the Lord of Rishnaa and his court, the motives for war changing from the forming of

borders to the erasure of borders altogether. Rishnaa now wanted domination.

The wizards looked on as long did the two sides wage war with many hundreds of thousands giving their lives on the altar of battle. The rift within the magical community became irrevocably broken as a rebel faction within the Wizards' Conclave made a great sacrifice to shift the balance of power away from the growing dark forces in the east. Their sacrifice was great and their exile guaranteed as the war now shifted in favour of the armies of King Nicholas, who drove back Rishnaa and won a decisive victory to bring the war to an end.

The victory came at a great price however, and the exiled rebels above all others knew of the lingering darkness they left behind as they fled the lands of men to head north over the mountains and escape the wrath of those who would have them killed.

In the realm they left behind peace came, yet dark forces watched with envious eyes as the fate of the realm was decided by a man they sought to influence, a man they thought ailing and weak. They underestimated him completely.

King Nicholas was a fair and honest man and knew the great corruption that power such as his own could bring. Thus he planned that on his death, the northern mainland be divided between his two sons, so as to dilute the power of the Kingship and make the task of ruling the great empire easier. To most, the idea of the King was one of merit, and his two sons, Nathaniel and Alexander were both of good

upbringing and suited to ruling. To Nathaniel, the older of the two sons, he gave the smaller portion of his land (that formally known as Rishnaa). To Alexander, the younger and more popular of the two, he gave the larger portion which he himself had commanded to victory against Rishnaa many decades before.

What the ageing King could never have hoped to imagine though, was the bitter jealousy that would consume Nathaniel, who for all his merits was weak of heart and susceptible to the dark powers that now turned their attentions upon him and led him astray. He fell to darkness and took his beleaguered nation with him, restoring its name to Rishnaa in memory of what he now considered the eastern realm's rightful claim to power.

The wizards watched... and did nothing.

Years passed and the two brothers both had sons to whom they gave their kingdoms. Years soon turned into generations, and generations passed as the two nations went their separate ways, with the Lords of Rishnaa quietly building up their power and wealth under the watchful eyes of the dark powers.

So it was that Nathaniel, as the first Lord of Rishnaa in its second form began a series of events that threaten to throw the realm of men once again to the very brink of despair in a quest for power. The realm is now in grave danger as a second Great War, more fierce and more bloody than the last, looms on

the horizon, ready to throw humanity to the very
brink of despair and beyond in a conflict the like of
which has never been seen.

But with all things, there is hope...

Chapter 1

“Hurry up boy, any slower and we’ll be going backwards!” Garth shouted down the street to his young charge.

Callum heard the call and turned his head to reply, but then thought better of it. Turning away from the shop window that had caught his attention he made his way to catch up with his companion. He knew that it was never a good idea to get on the wrong side of the old thief when he had a job on, and so with this in mind he set off into a light jog.

“Come on son, we’ve got things to do,” Garth said, slightly less cross now as he realised that Callum was standing beside him. The young boy kept pace comfortably and followed his mentor down the alleyway that led to the backstreets, a puzzled look spreading across his face as he considered Garth’s

words. His questions would have to wait until later though, as now was clearly not the right time.

In silence now, they both continued their way through the winding backstreets of Barnett where tall houses rose up either side of narrow streets in which two minor thieves could easily lose any pursuers. Fortunately, they had nothing to worry about and leaving the centre of town that was policed by the local garrison to enter the relative safety of the backstreets did a lot to ease Garth's tension. It was with a sigh of relief that he climbed the steps to his upper floor holding that lay in the south of town.

The location, near the top of the steep slope in the south of Barnett was perfect for Garth's small-scale operations. Out of reach of the garrison patrols and away from any real trouble, Garth had had his home here for as long as Callum could remember. The house itself was sturdy enough, if a little run down, but to Callum, it had been his home for the past eleven years, and the year before, well, he couldn't remember. Although a thief of little ambition, he was sure Garth could afford somewhere of a little more luxury, but when questioned on the matter the old thief would always try and change the subject and so the issue had never been fully resolved. The house issue, like many other facets of Garth's personality, remained a mystery to young Callum.

Dinner as was common practise with Garth was modest to say the least, but Callum was as ever ravenous after a long day's work keeping watch, and

soon finished his meal. It was while the old thief was still finishing off the last scraps on his plate that Callum struck the question that had been playing on his mind.

“Garth, you’ve been acting really strangely these last few days: – is there something I should know?” He paused as he awaited the old thief’s response.

“Oh... sorry lad,” Garth replied between mouthfuls, “I’ve just had a lot on my mind. You see, I’ve got us a job lined up that might give us enough money to last us many months yet, and you know how it is when I get thinking.”

‘Yes,’ Callum thought to himself, he knew exactly how Garth got when he got ‘thinking’. The answer though, did little to appease him and so he pushed a little further.

“But that’s not all is it?”

“Now why would you be saying that? Come now: let me tell you of my new plan! That should answer your questions.” Callum was sure that in fact Garth’s plan was not the real answer to his questions but despite himself, allowed the old thief to continue.

“You see my boy, knowing as you do how I like to keep my ear to the ground, well, word is on the street that there’s a noble coming to the area. His name eludes me... De’lor... yes that’s it, De’lor. Anyway, he’s a returning war hero, and you know what war heroes have a lot of don’t you?” Callum shook his head, not wanting to stop Garth’s momentum, “Spoils of war! Riches me boy! You know what I mean lad – the stuff that could keep a couple of humble rogues

like ourselves well looked after for the next year without the need to work as simple thieves.”

“So you plan to raid his treasure then?” Callum asked, clearly impressed: Garth’s plans were not normally so ambitious, and never really put either of them at any real risk. As a boy soon to enter his teenage years he was more than willing to take a few risks and prove himself. Such a raid was exactly what he needed to cure some of his longing for adventure of late. At least a risky job like this would mean he could put some of his skills to good use.

“Why of course! De’lor shall arrive in two days time, and so we shall strike in the evening of the third,” Garth said, then adding as an afterthought, “So I take it your interested then?”

“Of course I am. I take it you have it all planned out?” Callum, while not having his original worries eased, was now excited and keen to get to work.

“In the morning I’ll show you, but for now I think we could both do with some rest. There’s a lot of work to be done in the morning as a good raid needs a lot of preparation.” With that, Garth stood up and started to clear the table. Callum helped as best he could, but his thoughts were buzzing. A little adventure was just what he needed.

Dawn seemed to come all too early for young Callum, as he realised just how tired he was. He rose with a yawn and made his way to the wash basin to wake himself up with a splash of cold water. With a groan, he found the basin already in use by Garth who

was keen to get moving early this morning and was neatly shaving off his stubble with an old razor. While he waited, Callum decided to make his way to their sparsely furnished kitchen where he made himself a drink, and sat gazing into the small mirror which Garth kept on the table. A young boy looked back at him through the haze of tired eyes.

Callum was a lean boy, lacking the bulk of adulthood and on the verge of puberty. While being rather skinny for his age, he was not lacking in speed and skill and was easily the match of any of the other young boys his age in the town of Barnett. While his profession and his past were things he preferred not to talk about, he was still a talkative lad, with a quick wit and good sense of humour. His wit had certainly saved him from trouble in the past, and his intelligence was a gift of envy amongst the local boys.

Why and how exactly he had come into the care of the old thief, he was still rather uncertain. What he did know however, was that the old man loved him like a son, and would always do his best to look after him.

Callum sighed. Though he loved old Garth dearly he would still give anything to know of his parents and his past. All he had ever wanted was to know his parents.

The tear that had started to form in the corner of his eye was quickly brushed away as Garth emerged from the wash room. "Be up with you lad, we have a hard day's work ahead of us. Gosh, and I almost

forgot – I still haven't looked over our takings for yesterday! I must be getting forgetful in my old age.”

With a drawn out yawn and stretch, Callum pulled himself up and readied himself for the coming day.

He emerged from the washroom to find Garth looking over an assortment of various items laid out across the kitchen table, ranging from a fair collection of coins to a small dagger. With great interest, Garth was examining a parchment he had found amongst his takings.

“Well, will you have a look at this!” the old thief exclaimed. “It seems that this De’lor fellow might prove to be very profitable indeed. If I understand this correctly, our friend Mister De’lor is a former Captain of some renown. Bet he’s bound to have quite a bit of cash to spare eh boy?” Callum came to peer over the shoulder of the excitable Garth, and began to read over the document.

“Means it’ll be a tricky job though doesn’t it?”

“Aye, that it does. But with great risk comes great reward – and I intend on getting my reward from this little gamble of ours.”

And gamble it was, Callum thought to himself solemnly, for he knew all too well the penalty for stealing from a noble...

* * * * *

Dusk fell upon the two companions as the second day since Garth had announced his daring raid drew to a close. The first day had been spent watching the

procession – in which De’lor was a part – arrive in Barnett. The procession had been accompanied by a small street celebration to welcome home some of the veterans from the wars in the south and the east defending the borders of the Kingdom from the mercenary uprisings. Naturally Garth and Callum were all too willing to partake in the celebrations in their own unique way. Callum had even managed to grab himself a small bag of silver which he was very pleased with and subsequently spent in the local bakery.

This second day had been spent in a less ‘celebratory’ manner, and the pair had put a great deal of effort into meticulously planning the route and running order of their raid. Callum had gone to great pains to climb the guttering of one of the outhouses of Captain De’lor’s new estate at Garth’s instruction to take in information on peoples’ movements. In his own particular research, Garth had found to his great delight that the Captain was rather partial to the ‘odd’ drink so to speak. With this in mind, he had made a visit to the local brewery, and brought the Captain a basket of the region’s best malts to, in his own words, “Wish him well.”

“Well Callum,” Garth said as they made ready for bed, “It looks like tomorrow is going to be the big day. We need to make sure we are well rested and at our best for our evening excursions.” With this he grinned, “I do hope our esteemed Captain appreciates the basket of malts I sent him.”

“You hope he will be too light headed to notice any disturbances?” Callum asked, amused at the thought.

“I don’t hope dear boy: I know! A good thief is always one step ahead of the game. I’m almost certain that our dear friend will want to drink to his recent successes, and with that, he will be making our job that little bit easier.” He laughed at this, and Callum was pleased to see that his mood had improved. Things were finally starting to look up it seemed.

The morning of the third day was a bright one, and the sun shone clearly above the cloudless sky which hung above the town of Barnett. The morning cry of the cockerel woke Callum as it did every day. He rose quickly to look out of his small window and survey the day before him. ‘Today is a good day,’ he thought to himself as he got himself ready, ‘A good day indeed.’

“You up yet Callum?” Garth poked his head around the doorway into Callum’s cramped little room. He noticed that the window was wide open, “Good day eh? Let’s hope it stays that way,” he muttered as he took a look around the room which was, like the rest of the house, fairly sparse. A pile of books were stacked in the corner, a regular source of joy to Callum who would regularly engross himself in some book of fantasy or adventure. Garth’s ‘finest achievement’ with Callum had been teaching him to

read – a talent that many folk in the area did not possess.

Reading was not a pastime which Garth would regularly enjoy like Callum though, for the grey old thief had little love for grand adventure, other than the day to day adventure of thieving. “Head in the clouds again I see. Enjoy it while it lasts – we have work to do this evening.” Callum grimaced at the prospect, for it had sunk into him over the past few days of planning that thieving was not something he particularly enjoyed, nor had any great love for. For Garth though, it had been his life for the past twenty or so years since he had given up his former trade as a blacksmith for the local garrison.

“We wont get caught will we Garth?”

Garth smiled, “No chance my boy for you know I don’t take any big risks with you about – maybe before you came along, but not anymore. Take it from me: our chances of getting caught are low.” The old thief then broke into a grin, “And besides, you’ve always had a lucky streak, so with my planning and experience, your sharp wit and a small amount of luck, it’ll be a piece of cake.”

Chapter 2

The night drew in and the main town centre of Barnett started to empty as people went their separate ways, with many folk heading to the various public houses scattered around the town for a night of merriment.

A cold chill meant Callum kept his dark cloak wrapped closely around his frame as he followed Garth through the backstreets, trying not to draw any unwelcome attention to themselves. The task which they had planned intensively over the last few days was now at hand, and he found that his heart was beating a little faster than normal, and his senses heightened.

The buildings of the De'lor estate were located on the sparsely populated edge of town, with a medium sized fence marking out the boundaries of the holdings. The surrounding terrain was lightly

wooded, and would provide good cover to their entry without overly hindering them on their approach.

As they drew closer they noticed a large amount of activity emanating from the front of the main building, with at least five or six loud voices being detectable as the two companions stood down wind of the estate. As they drew near, Callum could hear the different voices and the party atmosphere coming from the buildings.

“Sounds like De’lor is having a party,” he said softly, his growing trepidation stopping his voice from raising to anything above a whisper.

“Yes, it does doesn’t it. Ah well, I think this could play into our advantage if it means the family are all distracted for we shall be able to get on unhindered.” Callum was pleased by this thought, as the less chance of being caught the better. With this thought in mind, he followed Garth as he turned abruptly off of the main road and on into the light wooded area that surrounded the holdings.

Keeping low, the pair worked their way to the rear of the estate, keeping away from the fence while in view of the main building. When they had moved round to the rear, Garth signalled to stop with a raised hand. Silently, the old thief moved towards the fence, checking both ways for any sign of activity before beckoning his young companion to follow.

As rehearsed, Garth clasped his hands together and gave Callum a leg up and over the fence, quickly scrambling over himself shortly after, showing almost unnatural agility for his age. They then both made a

bee-line to the rear wall and stealthily crept along its line until they reached their planned point of entry, a first-floor balcony that stood out ominously above them. Callum knew this was the part he wasn't looking forward to.

With a gesture, Garth signalled that he should begin his ascent, using the trellis that was attached to the wall to bring himself high enough to grab the ledge of the balcony and pull himself up. Easier said than done for a boy of twelve admittedly, Garth had said, but he was the one most suited to it, and so Callum had grudgingly agreed.

With a low grunt, Callum climbed as high as the trellis would allow. Steadying himself and breathing deeply he then slowly edged along the trellis which was by now noticeably less sturdy than it had been when he begun his ascent.

Now for the hard bit.

Stretching as far as his body allowed, he leant across the gap precariously, only just able to get a hand onto the ledge. He looked down at Garth who gave him an encouraging nod, and made the leap of faith.

To Garth, it appeared as if the boy was about to fall and drop nastily to the floor as he swung briefly with only one hand on the ledge. A huge tension came over him as he watched the young boy swing out, though there was nothing he could do now except stand and watch.

It was with a huge sigh of relief that Garth finally saw Callum grab the ledge with his second hand and

strain to pull his weight up onto the balcony and over the rail. He breathed a second sigh of relief as the rope that Callum had been carrying with him was lowered down to him.

So far so good.

Cautiously, Garth climbed the rope and as he reached the top, Callum could see the relief on the old man's face that things were so far going to plan. Just as they had earlier discussed, the rope was left where it was so the pair could make a hasty escape should they need to.

"Let's go," Garth mouthed, leading his accomplice into the first room.

The sounds of the celebrations downstairs made their way gradually up the stairway to the two uninvited thieves, who crept stealthily down the corridor past numerous closed doors which they ignored, instead heading directly to the room in which Garth was sure the goods would be stored. It had taken the old thief a great deal of effort to procure the plans of the De'lor estate, and he had had to call in a number of favours in the process. Even more of a difficulty was getting some insider knowledge of the workings of the De'lor household. It had cost him as well, for nearly all of their takings for the month had gone on the job leaving him penniless and without room for error as he placed a great deal of faith in the job coming off.

"Shhh," he mouthed with his finger on his lips. Callum came to a halt about five paces behind him, any sound his feet were making masked by the thick

carpet which covered every floor of the luxurious household. With a slow, cautious movement, Garth turned the brass door knob which was currently all that was standing between himself and a small fortune. The door didn't budge. 'Locked' he signalled, and Callum understood. With slow, careful movements, Callum fished inside his bag for the lock-picking kit which he had stored there. He passed it to Garth, the old thief quickly setting to work on the door lock while Callum stood by nervously, watching and listening for any sign of movement from downstairs.

None came.

Click the lock was defeated. Garth breathed another sigh of relief, sweat now visible on his slightly wrinkled brow. He wasted no time in trying the door knob again, and this time was successful in his attempt. The door opened with a small creak which seemed doubly loud due to the fear that was keeping the two thieves on high alert. Silently, they both made their way into the room.

It was pitch black.

Instinctively, Callum rummaged in his bag for the two night-light candles he had prepared the night before. Lighting one and handing it to Garth, he lit one for himself and joined his companion in surveying the room.

Though a simple, rectangular room, the lack of windows made it a secure storage location. Callum was glad that the Captain had not had time to deposit his wealth yet, for had they not come this very night,

the riches might well have been stored elsewhere. It was after all, exactly what he would have done.

Through the gloom, it was only a matter of moments before their eyes fell upon a pile of bags in the far corner. The only other distinguishing feature of the room was a large cupboard which stood discreetly against the right-hand wall.

Moving over to the bags in the corner, Garth set to work looking over the riches available for the taking. The plan was not to take too much, for that might be easily noticeable from any quick glances into the room, yet all the same they wanted to be sure their efforts had not been in vain. Garth set to work with meticulous efficiency.

Whilst the old thief busied himself with the bags in the corner, Callum looked over the rest of the room, which was very non-descript for a lavishly furnished building such as this. The cupboard was the sole defining feature and so he walked over to it and opened its doors carefully, peering inside by the light of his candle. The candle cast an eerie glow on the assortment of different oddities that appeared in the cupboard and on closer inspection, the contents were interesting indeed to young Callum who hurriedly started to place some of the 'treasures' he found into his bag.

The books were the first item of interest for the young thief and a cursory glance revealed writings on war, battle and adventure which instantly set his imagination alight. He threw the books into his bag without a second thought. On top of the books he

placed three maps that happened to look vaguely interesting, and an exotic looking dagger – the pattern on which he had never seen the like of before. The cupboard now bare, he carefully shut the cupboard doors and went over to check on Garth’s progress.

He found the old thief crouched in the corner next to the pile of bags which he was sure contained gold or gems. Garth’s progress was good, even though he was being very particular about what he took and what he left. As the old thief picked up each bag, he checked its contents for worth and made sure he didn’t take enough to make the pile look too diminished in value. He turned around as Callum stood over his shoulder, peering down at the bags that had been looted. His voice was barely a whisper. “Don’t worry I’m nearly done my boy.”

“Good,” Callum replied in equally hushed tones, “We’ve been here a long time already.”

Stuffing a handful of the larger gold sovereigns into his own sack, Callum turned to move towards the door. He was just about to reach for the door knob when a sudden movement outside caused him to stop abruptly. He listened intently through the door to the sounds coming from outside. From what he could make out from the level of noise their unwitting disturber made, whoever it was was clearly out of sorts.

His heart began to race.

What if we’re discovered?

What if they see the rope?

What if we’re trapped in here?

Good sense told him that it was best not to worry about such things just yet, though he was worried all the same. He just hoped Garth would have a plan.

More noise came from outside. Drunken conversation filled Callum's ears as he waited for his companion to signal what they were going to do. Garth snuffed out his candle and Callum did likewise, putting both of the candles into his brimming pack. As the room was now pitch black, the old thief reached out his hand to grab him and pull him closer so he would know when and where to move. Knowing the old thief was near also helped reduce his fear... but only a little.

Ever so slowly, Garth eased open the door through which they had entered. Through the thin crack, a shaft of light came filtering into the room and Callum was just able to glimpse the hallway outside. Garth tugged at his sleeve to motion for him to follow as he opened the door gradually wider, until it was just wide enough to squeeze through. From what he could tell, Callum supposed that the person making the disturbance had either gone back downstairs, or was now asleep somewhere dreaming away his intoxication.

With appropriate haste, the two daring thieves crept back the way they had come, but this time instead of passing a series of closed doors, they found the second door to be open. Garth took a quick look around the corner to check that the way was clear, and on looking, found a balding man slumped on a bed in an almost semi-comatose state. He would not

be disturbed by the two thieves that was for sure, and so the pair continued their path back to the balcony.

On reaching their earlier entry point, it was clear that the rope had not been discovered, and was left undisturbed. A quick check of the knot and Garth rapidly descended the rope – keen to get away now the job was done. Callum followed in similar fashion and left the rope where it was as it was an unnecessary risk to try and drop down in the dark having untied the rope. Someone would no doubt find the rope in the morning, but by then the two rogues would be long gone.

And so in the fashion of the common thieves that they were, they made their escape: both remaining deadly silent as they crossed back over the fence through to the wooded surrounds, and back into town.

It was not until many minutes after they had reached relative safety that Callum burst out laughing in an unexpected show of emotion. After some initial shock, Garth also joined in the laughter as they both congratulated themselves on a job well done. Their laughter came more out of relief than anything else, but this didn't matter for they had gained themselves a handsome reward for their efforts.

“This calls for a drink I think me lad,” Garth suggested, remembering that most taverns would still be open, even now. Callum whole-heartedly agreed with this suggestion and so the pair, still carrying their prizes, made their way to the nearest tavern – the ‘Pride of Barnett’ – which was still doing good business at this late hour, and was fairly busy.

Garth entered first and spotted a table in the corner in an out of the way area in which the two could talk quietly and not be troubled. After he called for drinks to be brought over (a pint of fine mead for himself, and a small cider for the boy; this was a special occasion after all!), the pair of adventurous thieves started discussing the raid. Half an hour passed them by as they sat in the tavern drinking to their success, and it was then that Callum – whether through light-headedness, or the sheer delight at his success – produced the dagger he had found.

“Put that away lad!” Garth exclaimed suddenly, “You don’t get out your takings this close to a job, and especially in such a public place!” A pause followed, but on seeing the hurt look that Callum gave him Garth spoke again. “Well,” he said, more democratically, “I suppose looking at this one dagger wont do much harm, but mind yourself boy, you don’t want anyone seeing it ‘cos there may be trouble.” Callum reluctantly agreed and so stopped examining his prize and instead attached it along with its small leather sheath to his belt under his cloak. Not paying any more heed to the incident, Garth ordered more drinks and returned to the topic of the raid. A few more drinks followed as the evening passed in a haze of merriment and good cheer.

The hour soon grew very late, and eventually the old thief decided that it was time to be making a move. He was sure that the hour was past midnight; any later home and they wouldn’t get any sleep at all! Fairly reluctantly then the two stood up, and Garth

paid the barmaid with some coins from his pocket, before leading the way over to the door.

Little did Callum pay any attention to the tall, dark clad figure who brushed past him as he made his way out. The tall figure did not turn around.

Thinking nothing of it, Callum picked up his pace to join Garth on his way home.

Chapter 3

Leaving the tavern, the air was remarkably chill and so the two companions set a fair pace back to the modest little place that they called home. Their mood remained good, for Garth began recounting some of the vast collection of jokes that he had a tendency to repeat every so often. He had heard them all before, but Callum didn't mind, for tonight he had taken part in his most daring raid yet. Nothing at this time could dull his mood.

But dulled it was suddenly, as from the shadows just ahead of them, a tall menacing figure appeared. A shiver ran down Callum's spine as a sense of recognition dawned on him: it was the man from the bar.

At the appearance of the man, Garth immediately halted mid-sentence as fear gripped his tired old

heart. “No,” he mumbled, looking up at the figure who took a step forward, “Not now.”

None of this made any sense to young Callum who hadn’t the faintest idea what Garth was talking about until the figure who approached them spoke. It was a voice that would send fear deep into Callum’s soul for the rest of his days.

“You are the one known as Callum,” the tall stranger said: – no questions asked, just straight fact. “Your life is forfeit.”

“How did you know my...” Callum’s words came out in a stutter. Garth had gone pale, and begun to shake slightly. Callum found himself tensing up.

“I’ve come for your life,” the tall figure said with intent, and this time the words truly sunk home to Callum as he now knew what was going on. The glint of steel from the stranger’s waist told him that this man was deadly serious and meant every word. He was going to die.

The stranger drew his sword.

In an instant Garth was standing between them. “You shall have to go through me first! I shall sell my life dear for this boy holds the key – you know that don’t you!” Garth’s voice was tense, but his words were firm, and he was deadly serious.

The stranger did not bother with his sword at first, and easily flung Garth to one side, the old thief knocking his head against a wall as he fell. Not bothering to follow up his attack, the assassin bore down on his target.

Survival instincts automatically kicked in and Callum leapt out of the way as the assassin stabbed at where his chest had been only a few heartbeats before.

Turning swiftly from his failed attack, the assassin moved with unnatural pace towards his young target who once more did as best he could to keep away from the sword-wielding attacker. The assassin swung at the boy once more, toying with his defenceless opponent, forcing him back against a wall. There was nowhere he could go.

Back now touching the wall, Callum knew this would be the end. More precise swipes from the assassin's blade pushed him down on to his knees.

He cowered, unable to do anything to stop the onslaught. Victoriously, the assassin raised his weapon for the killing blow. Death was now only a heartbeat away.

Just as he thought he was about to meet his doom, a burst of movement from behind the assassin sent the hired killer crashing to the floor giving Callum the seconds he needed to quickly get out of the way. The movement it seemed, had come from Garth, whose head wound bled fiercely from his earlier knock but despite this he had come to Callum's rescue.

The old man's bravery though, would be his downfall, for now the assassin turned his full attention towards the thief who stood defiantly before him. The look of death on Garth's face betrayed the fact that he knew what was coming, though he did not

shirk away from his duty in protecting his adopted son.

The dark eyes of the assassin showed no mercy as he cruelly stabbed into the old man's gut with his darkened blade. Garth's broken body fell to the floor as the assassin released his blade and wiped it clean, licking from its tip a small droplet of blood as he watched his victim struggle to hold on to the last grips on his life. This moment would go down in the book of Callum's life as one of the key defining moments to change them all.

From this moment, his life would change forever.

Staring at the back of the cruel monster that had just taken away all that was precious in his life, a rage started to build in the young twelve-year-old. The world seemed to go into slow-motion at this point, making each waking moment a living nightmare. But this didn't stop him doing what he knew he must do. Remembering the dagger at his side, the young boy drew it in an instant and ran at the dark figure who had attacked them.

A speed and strength built on adrenaline, rage, turmoil and despair sent Callum flying at the assassin, whose one and only mistake was now all too clear. Licking his blade clean and savouring the taste of his kill would be the last thing the assassin would ever do, for from the shadows, the fury of a young boy was unleashed upon him. He only knew of the boy's attack when he felt the piercing touch of the dagger pushed straight into his heart.

Time reverted to normal again, and Callum let out a deep breath. Remembering the events that had just unfolded before him, he rushed over to where Garth's broken body lay on the floor. He didn't have long left.

Callum fell to his knees, placing the old man's head in his lap. Sorrow overcame him as he started to stroke Garth's head, the man who had been like a father to him speaking his final words.

"Callum," the old man wheezed, "I want you to know that I've always loved you like you were my son." There was a pause as Garth drew in another breath. "You see son, you're special. I had to protect you." Another pause, "Under my bed...there's a box. That should provide you with some answers." Garth coughed, and looked him straight in the eye. "Do as it says." The old thief drew breath again, this time a slower breath, and Callum recognised that his dear old friend had little time left. "I...I...I did it for you...remember that."

As quickly as life can be granted, so it can be taken away. The gates of death opened once more as a new soul slowly drifted from the mortal plain.

Sinking to the floor in a well of despair, Callum felt paralysed by his grief. Emotions so deep he had never touched at them before were unleashed inside him as he wrestled with the memories of the last few minutes. He sat there in silence for a few moments, a whirl of images flashing through his mind. Had Garth really just given his life for him? The knowledge that

Garth had died because of him weighed heavy on the young boy's heart.

But what must he do now? It was closer to dawn than it was to dusk, and he was now very alone in a dark backstreet of his home town. Returning to his senses for now at least, and remembering where exactly he was, it was with great effort that he pulled himself to his feet and picked up his back pack. With it he took Garth's as well, for it was not something that should be left on the streets for any old scoundrel to find. Garth's body he was sure would be buried by the town guard, and it was fine where it was until the morning at least for he could do nothing about it by himself. With a heavy heart, he slowly made his way home.

It was about two hours after midnight when he finally stumbled through the front door of the house he had come to know as home. It could not be his home for much longer though he thought to himself, for he couldn't stay after the events of the night. Not now, not without Garth.

It was a weary, exhausted, emotionally drained Callum who finally dragged himself into bed. Even here he was not safe though, for the events of only a few hours back attacked him in ways much worse than any sword could: they attacked his heart.

Realisation soon dawned on him... he was alone now: Garth was gone; he was an orphan; he had no one.

Callum wept.

Dreams... Dreams are strange things... The dreams of a lonely young boy were especially strange this dark night.

The nightmare began.

First came the emotions, welling up in an array of feelings: hate, fear, sorrow, despair – all of which a symphony of horror playing the strings of Callum's soul. Then there were the dreams themselves.

Flashbacks of murder, bloodshed, loss and pain: – all terrifyingly real and shaking the very fabric of his being.

In his bed, he sweated profusely. But there was more...

The dreams became darker and things that were real started to mix with other things... Images formed in the mind of the sleeping boy.

Visions.

The gap between what was real and what was not began to blur. Dark visions as vivid as if they were real swamped Callum in a sea of doubt and confusion.

Then the storm came.

Emotions ran riot through the darkness of the dreams. More visions came to him. They became clearer. Dark lands, enslaved peoples, great evil and powerful magic.

The visions increased in number and pace now, and as their speed increased they began to merge together. Confusion... Fear... Torment... The deluge of visions combined with the infinitely complex emotions inside him, welling up and screaming inside his head.

Then the pain came.

Through the raging torrent, the pain of the nightmare caused Callum's dreaming self to cry out. Faster and faster, more and more, faster still the deluge continued unabated. The storm clouds in the young boy's mind gathered to bursting point...

With a huge roar the thunder was unleashed. The pain was now excruciating and Callum's physical self began to writhe with the pain he was suffering. Lightning struck but the great storm did not let up. On and on it went in his mind. On and on and never letting up for a moment.

The young boy called out in despair, but no one answered his cries. He was on his own now.

Then...nothing.

As quickly as it had started, the storm came to an end, the monsoon stopped and his mind was empty again. It was nearly morning.

Callum woke with a jolt. Strange things had happened in his dreams, and the swell of emotions still screamed for release; and so they did as he wept again. Just as the rain of his dream had drenched his mind through the night, so the great tears of sorrow drenched his bed.