

The tavern door opened, conversation stopped and Kel joined with everyone else in looking at the newcomer. Namior Feeron entered, slamming the door behind her and shaking water from her long hair. She spied Kel immediately and smiled. As she came across to them she swapped greetings with most of the tavern's patrons, and Kel looked away. Seeing how well she knew this place sometimes stung him, because he also knew how much she wanted to get away. She was desperate for travel, exploration and adventure. She craved to see Noreela City, Pengulfin Heights, the islands of The Spine that curved out from the north of Noreela, and she even dreamt of a journey far enough south to see the dangerous mountain ranges of Kang Kang. But every time she mentioned this, Kel Boon told her no. He was staying here. *I've had my adventure*, he would say, and however much she pressed, he could tell her no more. That was the dark space between them – a gap which seemed, at present, unfordable.

'The harbour's mad,' Namior said even before taking a seat. 'Boats are crashing about, and some of those waves are breaking over the mole.'

'There's been worse,' Mell said. She had been a fisherwoman for almost eighteen years. She'd been involved in three wrecks, seen two friends drowned and one taken by sea creatures, and nothing seemed to disturb her anymore. At almost forty – just younger than Kel, and two decades older than Namior – Mell had lived enough to fill many lives. *We'd have such tales to tell each other*, Kel sometimes thought. But if he wanted to stay here in Pavmouth Breaks, he could never speak of his past.

Not if he wanted to stay alive.

'And what do you say, young witch?' Trakis asked Namior.

Namior's eyes darkened for a beat, then she smiled. It lit up

her face. 'My mother says there's to be a waterspout just along the coast.' She glanced at Kel, the smile slipping so slightly that he thought he was the only one who noticed.

'I'll drink to that!' Trakis said. He raised his mug, and the rest of them joined him in toasting the storm.

Namior sat on a bench close to Kel, and it only took one mug of ale before she pressed herself against him. He slung his right arm loosely around her shoulders and drank with his left. She looked at him frequently, her ale-tainted laughter a welcome addition to the tavern's underlying noise. Kel drank slowly; he had never enjoyed the sensation of being drunk, and the loss of control it brought on. But he had always enjoyed watching Trakis and Mell drink together, and tonight both of them were truly on form. Conversations turned to bickering, bickering to full-blown arguments, and then they would hug each other, laughing and swearing undying friendship. Kel supposed this was a tavern filled with such people, but these were special because they were his friends.

The door opened occasionally, letting a sample of the storm inside to blow out candles and spatter the wooden floor with rain. Whoever stumbled in was subject of the tavern's appraisal, and more often than not they would have stories of how the storm was progressing. Waves fifteen steps high, they said, battering the mole and smashing boats against the harbour wall. Rain so heavy that some of the paths up to Drakeman's Hill had turned into impassable torrents. 'Looks like I'm definitely staying with you tonight,' Kel said at this, and Namior's hand squeezed his thigh, remaining there afterwards.

The evening turned to night, though daylight had been stolen long ago by the thundering clouds. Lightning flashed at the tavern's windows, followed soon after by the rumbles of

thunder. The heart of the tempest was almost upon them.

Kel knew that Namior saw this as an adventure. Whatever had troubled her earlier had been melted away by the Wanderlust ale and fine Ventgorian wine, and her smile was a pleasure, her laughter a welcome song.

But with each flash of lightning, as though the space between blinks was another world, Kel was taken back to that night in Noreela City.

‘One day you’ll learn to pack your fucking weapons properly,’ O’Peeria says, grabbing Kel Boon’s belt and tugging him to her. The Shantasi woman runs her hands across his body, beneath his cloak, around his belt, loosening and tightening straps and webbing, shifting knife sheaths a finger’s width, lengthening the string on throwing star strings. Kel raises his arms from his sides and watches her, enjoying the opportunity to examine her face while her attention is elsewhere. She’s beautiful, in a harsh way, her pale skin set off against her long dark hair like day against night. He looks down at her own weapon-clad body, lithe and strong.

She passes one hand between his thighs and adjusts the straps of his sword scabbard. Pausing, she glances up, her eyes darker than the Black. ‘If I feel your cock growing hard, I’ll cut it off.’

Kel goes to say something, but he’s not entirely sure she’s joking.

O’Peeria stands, grabs his shoulder and shakes. Kel stumbles and leans to the left to avoid falling over. None of his weapons makes a sound.

‘Good,’ the Shantasi says. ‘A Core agent should know how to wear his weapons, at least.’ She turns and heads for the

door, sweeping her hair over her right shoulder and tying it in place. That way, it won't interfere when the time comes to fight.

'O'Peeria,' Kel says. She turns and stares at him. She's been his lover, and she swears that she's his friend, but she's a hard woman. And with all they've been through he's never found a way to get close.

Kel shakes his head. 'Doesn't matter.'

'You ready?' O'Peeria says, raising her eyebrows.

'Yes.' Kel's voice is quiet, and he cannot meet her gaze.

'Sure, Kel? Are you fucking sure? This is killing stuff, tonight. No more fun and games. We've been watching him long enough, and the Core wants him dead. So are you *ready*?'

'Yes,' Kel says, more firmly this time. He looks over O'Peeria's shoulder at the door. Beyond lie the night time streets, alleys, parks, squares and secretive buildings of Noreela City. 'I'm ready.'

O'Peeria smiles, and not for the first time Kel thinks that he might love her.

By midnight, she will be dead.

The thud shattered one of the Dog's Eyes' windows, cracked floorboards, and shook the door in its frame. It knocked several wine bottles from the shelf behind the bar to smash at Neak's feet, struck at Kel's ears, and sent a heavy shockwave up through his feet and spine.

The rain and wind did not lessen – with the smashed window, the noise from outside increased – but for a few beats after the thud, the interior of the tavern was almost silent. It felt as though the ground itself had moved.

'What in the Black was that?' a soft voice said. The thought

spoken, a ripple of surprise ran around the tavern, and a beat later most people were on their feet and heading for the door.

‘That wasn’t wind,’ Namior said.

‘And no wave, either,’ Mell added.

Trakis raised a mug and drained it of ale, then stood and nodded at the door. ‘Shall we?’

Kel felt a sudden chill of fear – a realisation that nothing was safe. His world – *anyone’s* world – could be opened up and taken apart at any time. He had liked Pavmouth Breaks when he first arrived, and over the years he had grown to love it, but he always knew that safety and contentment were merely thin veneers camouflaging the random cruelties of the world.

‘Kel?’ Namior said. She had remained close to him, and now he saw that strange look again, the one the others had not noticed before.

‘What is it, Namior?’ Mell said.

Namior looked at her two friends, then across at the broken window. Raindrops spat in. A dozen people had gone outside by now, but none of their voices were audible above the storm. ‘My mother and great-grandmother...they were worried, that’s all.’

‘And you?’ Kel asked.

She shrugged. ‘I’m still young. Felt nothing. But if they’re worried...’

‘Then so are you,’ Mell finished for her. Namior nodded.

Trakis placed his mug gently on the table. None of them drank.

Someone burst back into the tavern, her hair made mad by the wind and rain. She wiped water from her face and Kel saw her eyes, the mixture of excitement and fear driving them wide. He’d seen such a look many times, and he knew exactly what it

meant: she had seen something she had never seen before.

‘Something’s coming!’ the woman said. ‘Out to sea, something out there, dark and big and fast!’

‘What is it?’ Mell asked.

‘Don’t know. Something.’

‘Come on,’ Kel said. He grabbed Namior’s hand as the four of them headed for the door, skirting around the woman who evidently no longer wished to see.

‘The ground’s still moving,’ Trakis said as he pulled the door open and stepped outside.

And it was. Kel paused for a beat and felt the vibration entering his feet and transferred up through his bones, and when he pressed his teeth together it felt as if they could shatter. From behind came the musical rattle of wine bottles clanking together. From ahead, the sounds of the storm, and whatever else it had brought.

Namior squeezed his hand. She was outside now, arm outstretched, and he was suddenly desperate not to let go of her.

‘Come on!’ she shouted. ‘They’ve gone up the hill behind the tavern to see better!’

Kel realised that, other than Neak and the windswept woman, he was the only one still inside the Dog’s Eyes. He stepped out into the storm.

Namior was aware of the wildlife that existed in and around the village, and she was also used to rarely seeing most of it. So when something ran over her foot she squealed, unheard in the gale. And when she looked down, pools of light cast from the Dog’s Eyes windows were speckled with dashing shadows. Rats ran uphill; swarm lizards dashed so quickly that they looked

like smudges of shadows; a dog growled past. And around her head, what she had thought at first were leaves blown by the wind were bats, soundless and terrified.

Namior suddenly wanted to be back at home. Her mother was there, and her great-grandmother, and they had seen something more than the storm tonight – something *absent*. Climbing the steps beside the Dog's Eyes, and then the steep banking at the rear of the tavern, and finally mounting the flattened observation area where patrons sometimes drank on hot days and Neak occasionally held flat-ball tournaments, it was the absentness that disconcerted Namior the most. If they'd sensed something more, perhaps she would not have been so afraid. More could be dealt with, seen, challenged. But nothing could be done with nothing.

Mell and Trakis were already up there, leaning on the wall and staring over the harbour and out to sea. Namior held on tight to Kel's hand, desperate not to let go, and he ran up the steps behind her, drawing close.

'What is it?' she shouted before they had even reached the wall. She shouldered in between Trakis and Mell, while the watchers shouted words that the wind stole away. Rain was driven at them across the rooftops of buildings further down the hill, and the water had a slightly smoky taste when it hit Namior's tongue, as though it had picked up chimney smoke.

Kel stood behind her, held her arms and looked over her shoulder.

'Nothing,' Namior said, because when she looked out to sea, that was what she saw.

Down in the harbour, waves crashed against the mole and harbour wall. At the base of the cliffs to the south, the sea smashed, boiled and foamed like a diseased creature, striving

to gnaw into the land. Beyond the mole were violent white-crests, waves breaking and rolling and building again, surging in towards the village and promising chaos. And past the waves, out to sea, where clouds flashed but no lightning danced at the horizon, a wall of nothing seemed to be growing in the darkness.

‘What *is* that?’ Kel shouted.

Namior shrugged, comforted by the feel of his hands on her arms.

‘End of the storm,’ Trakis shouted. ‘Sea growing calm.’

‘No,’ Mell shouted, and Namior listened because the fisherwoman was wise to things of the sea. ‘Everything’s about to get worse!’ Mell looked up at Trakis, then across at Namior and Kel. When she next spoke it was no longer a shout, but still they all heard. ‘We should be safe up here.’

‘A wave,’ Namior said, dreadful understanding dawning at last. The thud, and now the wave. She’d heard of places far to the south, near Kang Kang, where the ground sometime shrugged, cracked and turned over. Groundshakes, they were called, though many people thought they were the result of fledge demons deep underground collapsing another seam of that strange drug.

*Mother*, she thought.

‘They’ll be fine,’ Kel spoke into her ear, saying exactly what she wanted to hear. But how could he be sure? Namior glanced along and down the hillside at the chaos of rooftops, paths and courtyards, trying to place her house. It was slightly lower than the Dog’s Eyes, and closer to the harbour. Lower and closer...to *that*!

She could not look away from the wave for long. It was a blankness on the horizon, a tall dark space above the foam-

capped waves and below the boiling sky. And it was coming closer, making itself known at last.

The ground shook. The air was filled with the taste of the sea. And a roar was rising, building quickly as the sound of this incoming disaster found the land and announced itself.

They could only stand there and watch. Namior thought of all the people she knew who would likely be down in the harbour area; friends who lived there, others who worked through the night dealing with the day's catch. They'd have felt the thud and now they would hear and see the wave. But for them, it was already far too late.

She closed her eyes, but she had to look again.

There was a flash of red lightning across the horizon, as though the flesh of the sky had been slashed.

With a roar greater even than the wave, the water in the harbour surged out to sea, leaving fishing boats resting on their hulls and the pale shapes of sea creatures thrashing in their exposure to the night.

And then the wave came in.