

Marcellus: Origins

By

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(Beta version 0.1)

(Updated October 2016)

Chapter One

From a distance it was beautiful, like a shining beacon of tranquillity and hope. Its lighted ambience caressed the near distances of the long thin bridge upon which it sat. Its brilliance showered the dark empty depths beneath, as if suffusing the area with something too pure to exist. The bright rounded egg began to pulse, shadowed by the odd few brownish splotches. As it hummed and glowed with warmth, it altered colour; changing from a pinkish-white, to a blood-red, and then to an indigo colour. The glowing lime-green mucus membrane of its surface stretched tentatively. Progressively the stretches became more forceful. There were mild tremors close to the bottom of the egg. Then there was suddenly a “plop” noise.

Out came a limb, darkly indigo and hairy, with ivory claws at the end. The long pointed claws ripped the wall of the lime-green mucus egg shell apart. These were claws with a purpose.

The hand-shaped purple protrusion reached out far. It rotated a few times, and then grasped at the cool atmosphere outside.

Coughing and spluttering with all the mucus spread over his exterior, he hatched.

The thick black birth hairs on his arms and chest began to recede, fading into the tough purplish skin of his young and supple body. He had toned muscles all over, coating his body with bulk. He was now stood erect, and he regarded his impressive physical stature with pride.

His sharp teeth cut into his lip, his nose felt chunky, and his jaw was heavy like a jutting cliff. It was as if ages of physical change had occurred. He stretched his wide shoulders and broad chest a few times, and roared loudly to express his might.

It was night, and the stars twinkled invitingly.

Marcellus considered them, and thought about a word, but it didn't rise to his perception immediately. He had to think the concept over, for the juices inside his brain were not used to moving.

Opportunity!

His feet rested upon a long thin bridge, connecting two tall floating grey buildings; floating because of the black chasm that existed below. All of the grey tubular buildings he could see in the distance floated side-by-side. It was how things appeared, he concluded.

There was a faint peach colour on the horizon, marking the start of a new day.

A flicker at the corner of his eyes made him snap his gaze to the right, and then the left. He was acutely aware of some presence close to him that he couldn't see. It was still dark, but he knew he wouldn't even have seen this presence during the day.

A cool silky sensation slid down his back, and he spun in fright. A black presence clung to him, enveloping him from behind and clasping together in front of him. He thrashed viciously, suffocated and oppressed by this alien object. It throttled him painfully, and he moaned like an animal; a call for help. Still the silky blackness pushed inwards, cutting off the beauty of the night and hurtling him backwards.

Onto his back, his repeated punches into the black fabric failed to change his situation, and he gasped. The resistance stopped, and he rested in a black cocoon, mental oblivion replacing the cool serenity he had felt upon being born.

He woke alive, to a bright new day. The sun shone powerfully through the layers of grey mist that swirled in the sky above. Marcellus sat up and rubbed his head. It took a moment before he remembered the nightmare that had assailed him last night.

He jolted at the creepy silken sensation at his back; and leapt upwards, staring behind at the long black cloak, which swept by his ankles, and was fastened to his neck by a chrome clasp. It was unbreakable, he realised with consternation, tugging at it with his primitive hands.

It took time for Marcellus to realise that he could hear voices, and even see purplish beings moving on the balconies of grey buildings all around him.

Am I one of them?

He walked to the entrance of the building on his left, still struggling to rip off the chrome clasp that bound him to this unknown evil.

Everything was going fine before this burden...

It appeared that he was standing in a lobby that was bustling with creatures that looked as he assumed he must to them. After all, what else would he look like?

Around him, there were slender females standing behind desks with easy smiles on their faces, and large muscle-bound brutish guards positioned around the circumference, with implacable expressions painted on the sculpted musculature of their faces. The contrast between the two types of creatures was confusing to him at first, before he realised how much shorter and slimmer he was than the guards, despite having their body hair.

Am I a third type?

He glanced at the females first, and their smiles elicited a pleasant uplifting sensation in his heart, before it was momentarily cut off by the dangerous glare of a nearby guard. As with the other guards, he proudly hefted a large pole-axe, and while Marcellus' eyes were meeting his, he looked like he was going to move the weapon into an attacking stance if eye contact was maintained for a moment longer; and so Marcellus shrunk away from the bad emanating aura of intimidation, which he could somehow sense, because he didn't know how to react safely..

As he proceeded further into the lobby he realised that he felt quite exposed. Groups of these purple creatures started to point or gesture to their friends.

Marcellus felt like he stood out.

Marcellus?

He had just realised that was his name.

Powerfully aggressive Tekromun Guards closed-in on his position, hefting great silver pole-axes and bearing armour that resembled silver exo-skeletons, which hid the hues of their skin behind the bright reflective flashes that rebounded from them.

There was a dozen of them, surrounding him and muttering curses. Their slow and ponderous gasping breaths were marked by their large chests repeatedly pushing the armour up and down.

Marcellus was much shorter than these Guards.

Why do these Guards wear exo-skeleton armour?

Marcellus scanned the lobby for the explanation. He noticed that the general populace was scurrying out of the exits, as if aware that something dangerous or violent was afoot. The slender female receptionists were escorted out of the spacious lobby discreetly, leaving the place empty.

'Take that cloak off!' one of the brutes barked, before Marcellus was able to ask why he was being accosted.

'Why?' Marcellus challenged back boldly, his back upright.

The closest brute stepped forward and slashed downwards in a heavy arc. Marcellus stepped to the side easily enough, just avoiding the vibrating hum of the axe.

The attacker paused, as if at a loss because he had missed. The others narrowed their eyes, and their perverted breathing increased in tempo.

'Take the cloak off now!' a slightly taller and more commanding Tekromun Guard ordered with an imperious finger pointed at the chrome clasp.

Marcellus considered taking the cloak off, to avoid further confrontation. His hands grappled with the chrome clasps, but it was futile. The chrome was too hard and solid, and the black cloak seemed to be magically bonded with it.

His struggle continued for a few moments, while the Tekromun Guards watched quietly.

'I can't,' Marcellus breathed in frustration, giving up and letting his hands fall to his sides.

'Take him!' the commanding Tekromun Guard ordered.

They converged forward. Marcellus felt threatened, and didn't want to be handled against his will. He prepared for combat, spinning on his toe and evading the first oncoming assailant.

The remainder crossed the floor in swift large strides, their pole-axes crashing down upon his space. Marcellus stopped the progress of a pole-axe by grabbing its handle and using force to try and wrestle it away, but the Tekromun was too strong, and threw him off. Marcellus landed to the floor painfully.

A pole-axe smashed the floor beside his head, causing splinters to avalanche to his left. Marcellus rolled forward, and was back on his feet. He used his thumb to attack the eye of a Tekromun Guard, and then rolled backwards. But a brute grabbed his waist and squeezed tightly. A moment later the handle of a pole-axe thudded heavily into his stomach, wounding him.

Marcellus looked downward, not even seeing his attackers as he fought against the tidal impact of the pole-axe handle. The Tekromun who had grabbed him threw him powerfully to the floor, and stood on his shoulder, pinning him.

They turned him around and pummelled his face with their wide fists, using their full weight to smash his face in. Marcellus couldn't even feel the blows, but he could feel his face becoming a distorted mess as each blow landed too quickly for him to count.

He blacked out.

When Marcellus came to his senses, he found that he was in some darkened cell. It was night again, he could tell from the window set in the ceiling, which was far out of reach. There were no glorious stars to behold, only a chill wind to make him feel more uncomfortable. His face felt numb, and he had a nasty stomach ache whenever he sat up or bent.

He took a tour of the cell, but there was only a wooden bench.

Why? Why was I burdened with the cloak? Why can't I even take it off?

Marcellus was very confused, just as much as he was by the actions of the Tekromun Guards. Who would have ordered the activities of the day to be ceased in order to attack a lone Tekromun who happened to wear a black cloak?

It didn't make sense.

It was true that he hadn't seen anybody else wearing a cloak, but Tekromuns still wore contrasting clothes.

Possession: they must have wanted the cloak for themselves.

The truth of it hit him like a wave. He wondered where all these truths came from, and why they seemed to be self-evident in hindsight. Was it to do with the cloak, or was it just how he was? He hadn't lived long, so he couldn't make an accurate assessment.

As Marcellus sampled the material of the cloak between his fingers, he realised that it was fine, of a high quality and very nice. It was therefore understandable why *somebody* would want it...

Marcellus pondered many questions in his imprisonment. Food and drink were pushed through the bottom of the cell door, which was too thin to crawl through. Sometimes he heard the thudding feet of guards outside. Besides the chill wind, Marcellus spent the night alone, huddled in the quiet on the wooden bench that was his one companion.

When day came Marcellus' face felt ruined. Parts of it would drip blood, and the aches it gave him were unbearable. The sharp pains sometimes caused him to yell in agony. The pains and aches gave him headaches, but overall his head and mind still felt numb.

The terrifying images of yesterday's fight came rushing back in the morning, causing his heart to beat very fast.

He knew he wouldn't survive another harsh beating. It was likely that he already had severe internal head damage, or at least it felt as if he had, though his knowledge of the extent of damage was limited to his physical perception.

The Tekromun Guard unlocked the cell door and beckoned Marcellus out. Marcellus felt timid, and was slow to respond. The Tekromun Guard yanked him out and dragged him by what was left of the fine black hair on his head. Small tufts of hair had been falling out, presumably because of the swelling on his face. Marcellus submitted, if only to avoid further harsh treatment or physical violence.

Marcellus was led outside, in broad daylight, and then up a flight of concrete steps to a higher level, where there was a spacious chamber that had windows that were open to the air. Marcellus was ushered inside and thrown before a Tekromun sat on a large luxurious brown couch, at odds with the dull appearance of the grey featureless chamber.

He lifted his heavy head to see the figure on the couch, which was set against the wall.

The Tekromun was muscular and lean, wearing only a loin-cloth and golden bracelets and anklets. His white eyes spoke of violence and murder, having only a small black pupil in the middle.

'My name is Aerol. I saw you enter the building of my headquarters. Are you a spy, and if you are why wear that distinguishable black cloak?'

'I'm not a spy, I entered without knowing whose building it was,' Marcellus spoke softly.

'We tried to rip your cloak off, but it wouldn't be removed. Is it a weapon?' Aerol spoke threateningly.

'I don't know what it is,' Marcellus confessed helplessly.

'Wrong answer!' Aerol said icily.

'The cloak doesn't come off. We have tried everything possible,' the Guard behind him grunted in a deep voice.

Aerol nodded and began to speak in guttural tones. He raised his mottled purple fingers to his pink thin lips, and looked speculative.

'If it is a weapon, then it is one we know nothing of. The other Warlords have not developed anything this advanced that we know of.'

'It could be sorcery, Mighty Warlord!' the Tekromun Guard boldly suggested, promptly bowing afterwards to signal his subservience.

'Yes, it could be...' Aerol pondered. 'The Sorcerers of Banuk are potent and secretive. It is conceivable they could have created such a cloak.'

They spoke as if Marcellus was not there to hear their words. Aerol wasn't even looking at him. It was the cloak they were interested in. As far as they were concerned it was only an accident that it was attached to him, or at least he hoped they thought that.

Aerol's face pressed close to Marcellus', and he breathed his next words in rapid succession:

'I need that cloak, or a weapon that can help me defeat the other Warlords. You will be the key to achieving my aims. Do not cross me!' he finished, sitting back up and looking back at the Tekromun Guard he had been speaking to earlier.

Marcellus did not even consider betraying Aerol. There was something sinister about his threats and his bearing. Besides, it wasn't as if Marcellus had any other option, for he knew very little of this world and its inhabitants, though their appearance was similar.

Marcellus nodded briefly.

'Good,' Aerol cooed in mock humour. 'Summon Commander Cress here immediately! Take this individual back to his cell, and double the guard; he will be very important to us I am sure.'

The Tekromun Guard nodded and roughly yanked Marcellus by the neck to lift him up.

'Wait!' the steel tone of Warlord Aerol resounded.

There was a palpable stillness in the air.

'What is your name?' Aerol demanded.

'Marcellus,' he replied obediently.

'Ensure Marcellus is not harmed!' Aerol commanded, switching his glance to the Guard.

The Guard nodded meekly, and instead gestured for Marcellus to follow, which he did.

Chapter Two

'You are unusual,' Commander Cress stated brusquely, striding at the head of the armed unit. Marcellus silently considered his words.

Commander Cress had huge rippling purple muscles on his arms and legs. He wore steel chain-mail, a spiked helmet, and shoulder-plates. As he surged forward, the ranks followed behind swiftly, and Marcellus had opportunity to study this Tekromun.

Cress wasn't remarkable in appearance, but he was in bearing. He carried himself proudly, rather than aggressively or violently. It could have been his high rank, he reasoned, but there did seem to be something different about him. It was ironic, after having heard Cress' first words to Marcellus.

'We are going to the Sorcerers of Banuk?'

Cress' gaze was vicious as his head spun to face Marcellus, his sickly green eyes flaring in warning.

'Never address a Tekromun Officer without first acknowledging his rank!' Cress reprimanded.

Marcellus bowed his head in acknowledgement.

'Commander, are we visiting the Sorcerers of Banuk?' Marcellus tried again.

'Yes, we're going to *visit* them with an invasion,' Cress replied, seething with impatience.

'Is that wise ... Commander?' Marcellus added ruefully.

'They are our orders, given by Mighty Warlord Aerol. We must obey, regardless of what we think of them,' Aerol confided.

The armed march was at a fast pace, but he felt as if things were moving slowly. Their progression covered expanses of long grey bridges and walkways. He had no idea how far they would have to march, and he had a headache from the beating he had received only yesterday. Nobody seemed to have noticed the mess that was his face, perhaps because some of the company were guilty of having caused it. It didn't bother him, for he couldn't remember the faces of his attackers; they were like phantoms that had come at him too fast for him to perceive and register as reality. Besides, if he had to blame one Tekromun, he would have blamed Aerol.

'That dark domed edifice you see rising beyond the walkways, is the Tower of Banuk,' Cress informed him.

On their march Cress had seen it as his responsibility to make him aware of the various landmarks they had passed, and the Tower of Banuk wouldn't have been an exception if it had not been the intended destination. Though the brief names and basic facts given about the landmarks piqued his interest on occasion, nothing was committed to memory because he was too preoccupied with his own thoughts: his purpose among a group that was full with an intent he didn't understand.

From the way Cress treated him, it was obvious he had a privileged status as the bearer of the cloak, compared with the other soldiers or any ordinary Tekromun. He began to understand that they couldn't dispose of him without disposing of the cloak, which was knowledge he could use for his survival. He was unsure how he felt about being special, but it may keep him alive until he learnt more about his strange predicament.

'Why are there no walkways connecting to the Tower, Commander? How does a Tekromun gain entry?'

'That is a mystery none of us know,' Cress admitted.

'Do they suspect an attack, Commander?'

Cress sighed, ignored his question, and proceeded to inspect the ranks behind him to ensure there was adequate discipline. Marcellus could vaguely sense their anxiety.

'We don't know, but we'll have to try to attack them,' Cress said fatalistically.

'We can't reach the Tower without dropping to the Black Chasm, and none of us can fly, Commander...'

'I know, we'll think of a stratagem.'

They camped on the edge of the walkway. For the rest of the day they didn't see anything move outside or within the Tower. It stood there motionlessly, as if it was abandoned.

The Tekromuns started to fall asleep, their armour clinking and rustling unsettlingly. Their loud snores irritated Marcellus, for he wanted greater awareness of his surroundings now that it was dark.

Marcellus' senses had been on high alert, with his hearing stretching across the distances, touching the empty featureless sky and rebounding back. The air was cool, and when buffeted by the wind the sensation of it made him feel small in this giant world he had been born into, or as if all the elements in existence were watching him, keen to his every slight movement or twitch of his eye.

Despite this, after a short time his mind ceased activity and thoughts dissipated. Marcellus was drifting off to sleep, which was still an unfamiliar and occasionally scary process for him, because he didn't have control over when he slipped into its irresistible embrace. He wondered if sleep was a regular and normal activity for a Tekromun – it must be if the others were fast asleep. Yet, it was odd that they were unaware while he could freely observe them. Their vulnerability made him think of his.

At the same time, it was comforting to be sleeping in close proximity to the burly soldiers, with their laboured breathing. Their presence was reassuring, like a bunch of buildings that combined to protect against the boundless unknown.

While his mind became dizzy with his increasingly frequent thoughts, his legs and arms started to ache, so he slowed his thoughts down and surrendered to the will of nature, releasing a few yawns before turning over.

Snap.

He jolted to attention, to see the perverse apparition of an extremely thin Tekromun with a bald head, dressed in a dark umber robe. The Tekromun didn't look as if he was standing on the platform where they were collectively sleeping, for his feet were a few inches from the ground, and the entire apparition flickered repeatedly. *Is he normal size, or does he just appear to be smaller? It's a dangerous trick, of some sort.*

Marcellus hissed, baring the rows of his sharp pointed teeth, to ward away the Tekromun.

'Marcellus,' the sorcerer whispered. 'Come with me,' he entreated, holding out an emaciated hand. 'I've been listening to you and soldiers before you went to sleep, and that's how I learnt your name. Please, come with me, and I will protect you from them.'

Marcellus took it, seeing no alternative if he wanted more answers about this world, and because he felt slightly uncomfortable as the centre of attention among Aerol's soldiers.

He was taken to a different realm, inside a vast library composed of dusty scrolls in murky brown covers, and with glowing candlelight throwing dancing shadows across the warm beige and brown room.

'Where am I?'

'My name is Galouch. I am the Sorcerer of Banuk,' the Tekromun announced.

'There is only one of you?' Marcellus asked in astonishment.

Galouch continued to touch the texture of the black cloak, and to take scrolls from the rotting dark brown shelves.

'I don't yet know what it is. It is not something with which I am familiar.'

'If I can take it off, you can study it all you like.'

Galouch's warm hazel eyes gazed into Marcellus'.

'I don't think you understand how serious your predicament is.'

Marcellus stared at him, clueless.

'On the home-world, there are no powers that can help you to take it off. There is one sorcerer, and you are staring glumly at him. And I am ... uncomprehending.'

'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying this cloak you wear did not come from the home-world. It came from the stars. In other words, there is no power here that can help you, I'm sorry.'

'I won't give up,' Marcellus vowed. 'There will be other sorcerers, if not now, then in the future.'

Galouch shook his bald head in hopelessness.

'I was telling the truth, there is only me. If you wish, I can help you to become a sorcerer. It may aid you in your endeavour?'

Marcellus was shocked at hearing the offer.

If I became a sorcerer, then I would learn much. Maybe I would be able to see where this sorcerer cannot.

'That sounds tempting, but there is an invasion force outside that wants answers.'

'The Tower of Banuk is unassailable, so we'll be safe.'

'Warlord Aerol is looking for answers. He thinks the cloak is a weapon he can use to defeat the other Warlords.'

Marcellus realised he was talking himself out of the offer, and partly because he feared what Aerol was capable of.

'Warlord Aerol is no more of a threat than any of the countless other Warlords,' Galouch answered.

Despite the words, Marcellus still felt uneasy. There was something about Aerol that made him squirm. The steely determination in Aerol's eyes showed he would stop at nothing to achieve his ambitions.

'Will you allow me to return to Commander Cress?' Marcellus wondered aloud.

'If you learn to prevent me from stopping you...' Galouch smirked testily.

Marcellus briefly cycled through the alternatives in his mind. It was clear Galouch might be capable of much more than his pleasant demeanour suggested, and was it worth fighting through a sorcerer just to return to Cress, who Marcellus only wanted to return to because of his familiarity?

It's as if I felt an obligation to accompany Cress to invade the Tower of Banuk just because it was Aerol's will to do so. Now I am faced with another will; the will of the benign sorcerer whose personality appears at first glance to be easier to turn down.

Cowardice or to make the correct decision?

It was Marcellus' first moral dilemma, and he struggled with it for some time, as Galouch stared at him expectantly with his mouth moving back and forth.

I do not feel up to challenging the sorcerer for the sake of fear. Do I fear everyone I come across?

It was a problem he would come to be familiar with; that many Tekromuns wanted to coerce others into doing what they wanted. Many had a plan or goal in mind when they did, but the only thing Marcellus wanted was peace and personal safety, and couldn't as of yet fathom any motive that would involve others, unless it concerned his damned cloak!

I will accept.

'I accept, if you try your best to help me remove the cloak. In return, I will learn sorcery and offer any help you need,' Marcellus said boldly, standing up straight with his chest puffed out into a posture that he thought was unlike him.

Galouch turned away and used a downward motion with his palm, presumably to signal agreement, but from the side Marcellus could see the large smile coating the sorcerer's face, completely transforming his mottled features and making them look momentary ambitious.

I feel I can trust this sorcerer, and I suppose it's okay for him to be excited and to have ambition. I wonder if my judgement of his reaction is accurate.

Chapter Three

'What you must learn about sorcery is that it is not some arcane instrument,' Galouch said. 'Sorcery is simply a name given to anything that is not widely understood, such as a special branch of knowledge.'

'What do you mean?' Marcellus asked in naivety.

'I mean that the sorcery I know will not satisfy your preconceptions of it.'

'The only preconception I have of sorcery is of an attached cloak that cannot be undone,' Marcellus replied.

'Okay, well we'll proceed then. The sorcery is known as Banuk Sorcery. I mainly use it as a tool to fool everybody. You see, I am a coward; I run and hide.'

'Tell me of this sorcery!' Marcellus demanded, surprising himself.

Galouch leant forward, the skin of his jaw stretched taut against its lean curve. His eyes beamed with the chance to discuss sorcery.

'There are seven disciplines. You will learn them all.'

Marcellus nodded in understanding. He was excited, and his mind was already spinning with the potential possibilities. He wondered how Galouch had used Banuk Sorcery to make sure the Tower of Banuk appeared differently.

As Marcellus sat, he was entranced by Galouch's words. Galouch took out scrolls and showed him diagrams that he had drawn and even diagrams that had been drawn by his Master, the Tekromun who had taught him sorcery. They depicted sketches of Tekromun bodies appearing in different positions and how the correct channels in the mind were applied for different results.

After days of being engrossed in Galouch's study and his scrolls, Marcellus started to practise outside, listening attentively to everything Galouch taught him. They practised the basics together in abandoned areas, out of sight of any patrols.

One evening, Marcellus was reading the last scroll on one of Galouch's shelves; he had been that enthusiastic to learn. Galouch came up to him and took the scroll away firmly, but gently.

Marcellus looked at Galouch questioningly.

'I won't always be here Marcellus, but these scrolls will.'

'What are you talking about?' Marcellus asked, wondering if there was some imminent danger to Galouch's life that he was unaware of.

'It is better to spend time to practise than it is to read. The more experience you have the more successful you will be when I am not here.'

'Are you going somewhere?' Marcellus asked.

'We live in a time of Warlords Marcellus. Life is never permanent in such conditions.'

Confused at his answer, Marcellus looked away and thought carefully about what Galouch wasn't telling him.

Marcellus' interest in Banuk Sorcery became an obsession. He would be engrossed in the many scrolls throughout every day, sometimes forgetting to respond to anything Galouch said to him. During the evenings they would both go outside under cover of darkness, to practise the theory Marcellus had learnt.

Most of the time, the evenings were silent, being completely devoid of noise. Marcellus found it strange that a place where there was so much life could have as many places where there were no audible or visible signs of it.

Galouch was not perturbed by the silence. For some reason he feared something, and loved the peace and quiet that made Marcellus feel uncomfortable. It felt like the cell in which he had first been imprisoned.

As stars twinkled overhead and large ponderous clouds sailed above, Marcellus was almost able to forget the pervasive chill during these practice sessions.

Galouch was a patient tutor, encouraging and nurturing Marcellus' abilities.

'It's about opening new channels in your mind,' Galouch explained. 'Imagine a new building being built in your mind; before it becomes complete you need to start arranging and laying the foundations and properties.'

Marcellus could feel the strain these sessions took on his mind. He could feel parts of his brain straining and growing. It was a euphoric feeling; of new eyes opening that had never seen or received any external stimuli.

Galouch was wise, he started to understand. He must have been very old, maybe a thousand years or more. One day Marcellus asked how old he was, but his tutor didn't answer.

As Marcellus started to gain proficiency in each of the seven disciplines, and read shelves more of the scrolls in Galouch's study, he started to think about what he wanted in life. This was moreover the case because he had begun to ignore the presence of the black cloak that marred his existence simply by existing. It was a discomforting puzzle Marcellus could not understand. When he had been born, he had been pure, and then this alien object had come and ruined his peace of mind, by holding him a captive and drawing the attention of ruthless Warlords and their soldiers. It was a silent object that wrapped itself around him, hinting at malevolence but never delivering, as if it was indifferent to its host.

He started to look out of the miniature decorative holes that characterised the domed edifice of the Tower of Banuk. His eye would squeeze neatly into the space to glimpse the light of the outside, and he would dream, as if he was a caged animal who needed to escape.

Meanwhile Galouch would dally about, continuing with the routine that was his life.

Marcellus felt ambition swelling in his breast. As time went by, the fleeting memories of the brutality of his life before he had met Galouch would invade his dreams. There was a craving in his heart to reach out and touch the world, if only to find a purpose, a life where he didn't feel as isolated and ... individual.

In his supine position, he was shadowing his face with his fingers as he thought about this. He sat up and resolved to go out without the consent of Galouch. Unfortunately Galouch noticed him and questioned him:

'Why Marcellus, when there is everything you could possibly require for your survival right here? If you go alone you risk endangering yourself.'

Somehow, through his panic and questioning nature, Galouch had hit the crux of the matter: that Marcellus could no longer remain in this cage Galouch called home.

'I need to find out, for myself,' Marcellus justified.

'Find out what?' Galouch demanded, unwilling to let the matter drop.

'Learning Banuk Sorcery has been my life, and I have learnt much, but I need more.'

'What about your cloak?'

'My cloak is an intrinsic part of me...'

'You're going to give up your quest to discover and understand the nature of the cloak that binds you? I think that foolish,' he castigated.

'I haven't given up, but I'll continue after I have been outside.'

'Outside is dangerous Marcellus.'

'Why?' Marcellus challenged, implacably folding his arms.

Galouch breathed in defeat.

'There are monstrous things outside. Inside is safe.'

'You need to do better to convince me of the danger. There are Warlords, I know, but they are not always at war.'

'How would you know?' Galouch snapped bitterly, throwing his fist downwards.

Marcellus stared at his Master, the Tekromun who had taught him everything about Banuk Sorcery.

'I'll be back,' he said resolutely. He turned around and left, leaving Galouch staring after him.

The adventure outside had been terrific. Marcellus had seen sights during the daytime, and on his own he felt he could form his own image of the outer world without the limiting constraints of practising Banuk Sorcery.

He had spied Tekromuns moving everywhere, chatting. There had been couples, young tykes, and groups of males patrolling the walkways. Marcellus had seen Tekromuns trading goods he had never seen in his life. He had climbed steps to view vistas he had never seen before. He had even spoken to lusty receptionists without the interference of male rivals.

It was as if Warlords had never existed. It had been a day of lively activity and pleasure. Marcellus knew tomorrow could be bloodshed, but only between the Warlords. Unless somebody wore a black cloak! He thought ruefully.

When he returned after a satisfying day, it was to walk in on a brooding Master.

'Master Galouch, what troubles you?'

'You trouble me, Marcellus. I fear for you, for your destiny.'

'Why fear, run, hide, or live by cowardice?' Marcellus posed.

'It's what keeps us alive,' Galouch proclaimed loudly, lifting himself up from the couch and turning around to regard Marcellus.

'You think we are that different from ordinary Tekromuns? Sorcery can be hidden, can it not?'

'It can, but will you hide it?' Galouch tested.

It was a good question, and Marcellus didn't know the answer.

'I repeat: would you use sorcery to save your life?'

'It is likely,' Marcellus admitted.

'It is as I feared ... you will one day find yourself in the uncomfortable position where you feel you must use sorcery, and when you do you will expose yourself to the Warlords. They will hunt you down, and they will scour your body and your mind to learn your secrets. You will never be safe, and nor will the secrets you hold in your mind and your heart.'

And then it clicked in Marcellus' mind: the reason Galouch lived as a hermit was because he had seen it as his mission to preserve and safeguard Banuk Sorcery.

'I see, your point,' Marcellus replied.

'I can't stop you,' Galouch said helplessly. 'I love you too much Marcellus. You are my student, and you are my family. You are my greatest joy in the world. I do not wish for ill to befall you, but I accept your need to live a life outside of the confines of sorcery.'

'Master,' Marcellus bowed in respect. 'Guide me!'

Seven Years Later

Chapter Four

'I wasn't always a hermit,' Galouch announced unexpectedly one day, causing Marcellus to choke on his drink.

They had known one another for several years now and in that time Galouch had become severely ill, for no discernible reason.

He lay down, reflectively gazing at the wall of his study.

Marcellus waited for him to continue.

'I was a mercenary for a Warlord Sorcerer. His name was Arch, and he was very powerful. This must have been seven hundred years ago, or more perhaps. He took me under his wing because I showed promise as a warrior. I was lean and lithe, and ruthless at dispatching enemies. He adopted me, but not just as a lieutenant. The truth was that Arch had a love of the written word. He would unfold all of these scrolls from a nearby cabinet, and would share the writings with me. It wasn't clear to me at the time that he had been lonely, immersed as he was in his own worlds and imaginations from the scrolls he read. It also wasn't clear to me at the time that he was a sorcerer. In those times sorcery was a label that was unheard of. It was therefore a shock to me to behold his capabilities.'

'He taught you everything you know?'

'I am ashamed to say that he taught me almost everything I know. I discovered very little myself, in reality,' Galouch believed.

'Then there is still hope for my cloak,' Marcellus was pleased to hear.

'Yes, of course there is hope, however small it first appears to be.'

'What happened to Arch?' Marcellus ventured.

'He was killed by a rival Warlord, whose cruelty and ruthlessness were too excessive to resist. I fled, like a coward, from my Master's burning and tortured corpse as his tormentors raided his cabinet and put his warriors to the sword.'

'You escaped with the scrolls, your Master's legacy?'

'Yes I suppose I did, at the expense of my own dignity.'

'Why torture yourself for his demise?' Marcellus wondered aloud.

'Because my Master lives on, in the scrolls all around you,' Galouch said, raising his voice.

'You saved what he discovered, and you dedicated your life to it. It's a noble cause.'

'No Marcellus, it is the life of a coward, of one whose life has been permanently and irrefutably marred by his past actions. I should have found a new purpose, as you should do when I pass away.'

'If it's any consolation Master, you are a success. You have trained me to your standard. Whatever past actions you regret have been absolved by your good deeds in tutoring me.'

'Marcellus, you are an innocent soul, but I cannot forgive myself for the past, and you would not if you had seen me. Your tutoring has been my pride and joy, the star in the dull black void of hundreds of years. Without pressuring you, I wish to make you aware of the responsibility you have with Banuk Sorcery. I spent hundreds of years saving it, and progressing a bit, to pass onto you. You must use Banuk Sorcery wisely; you must see to it that it is preserved for a good reason.'

'I will try, Master.'

'Goodbye!'

Marcellus widened his eyes, and noticed that his Master had stopped moving. He couldn't believe it. His Master had taken his last breath!

On the floor Marcellus picked up a note that he thought he had seen his Master write assiduously on, ten minutes or so prior to their conversation.

'Marcellus, I believe you will be grieved when you read this letter. I know you will be confused at the reason why I have died. I didn't want to tell you and worry you. I practised a new aspect of Banuk Sorcery that was highly dangerous. I will not tell you the particulars, and nor have I recorded them.'

Suffice to say that I warn you not to play with dimensions idly. It is my hope that you never practise what I did in my pursuit of learning. Some paths lead to a dead end. I did it in secret, to try and solve the mystery of your cloak, but I failed. I'm sorry. I hope you live a life unrestricted by sorcery and my rules. You have much to offer this turbulent world, and I know you are destined for great things. Your friend, tutor, and father. Galouch.'

Tears crowded Marcellus' eyes, and a yell of anguish escaped his throat.

It was a painful lesson for him not to rely too heavily on sorcery and to delve too deeply and rashly. It was a painful lesson that he would have to split from the life he had lived for seven years. It was a painful lesson ... because his Master had died.

Marcellus stepped solemnly forward, towards the gleaming pale ochre portal door, bearing the heavy covered body of his master, who he tried to avoid looking at for fear it would bring back recent events before his passing; events that felt so recent that it was as if a cord between them had been struck abruptly, permanently severing his master from this world. His master was held out horizontally between his forearms. The weight strained at his muscles and limbs, pulling downward with such force and intent, that Marcellus half expected the body to shoot through the floor, taking his arms with it. But he couldn't be burdened by the deceased form of his master. He needed to let go, of the body and tense emotion assailing him. It was as if he was about to let go of himself, to forget about everything he had been for these past seven years and to start life again. It was torturous and painful, but what choice did he have? No sorcery that he knew could bring back Galouch!

He started walking through the rectangular portal door to the short, dull, light grey balcony that was shaped around it. The pebbly surface of the balustrade and the ground were seen by him with such great clarity brought upon by the severe force of emotion. He knew he would remember this moment for years to come, as a visual memory of import forever ingrained into his consciousness. The balcony was hidden from the outside with a permanent illusion, so he should have had no fear of his vulnerability being seen, yet a part of his mind pondered how effective the illusion was from concealing from all eyes on the home-world. Would it be a guarantee?

I still can't even create a permanent illusion. There was so much more I could have learned from him, and now I'll never have the chance.

Marcellus had already decided he had to burn the Tower of Banuk. He didn't want to stay within its confines any longer for it would only remind him of his deceased Master, and a life spent studying sorcery was, in his opinion, no life at all.

What if I could have learnt the secret of the cloak here in the Tower of Banuk, if I had stayed patient and not ventured outside?

It was a doubt that continued to nag at him, giving rise to tumultuous thoughts.

Yet instinct, if that was what it was, told him to move on and confront the world instead of sheltering away from it.

I may be a sorcerer, but I am also a Tekromun and am therefore given to Tekromun impulses.

Besides, by burning the Tower, he would be eradicating a potential danger if any Warlords grew powerful enough to infiltrate or reach it, despite what his Master had told him about it being unassailable.

I'm also safeguarding sorcery within me, keeping it close to my heart and away from those who would use it for selfish insidious purposes. I'm going to do the right thing!

He tossed the bound form of his Master over the precipice of the balustrade, seeing the wrapped rags diminish so quickly that Marcellus reflected over how quickly things changed.

On cue, an aspect of master's advanced sorcery began to come alive. Bound books would right now be shooting out from shelves behind him on the other side of the portal door. Fiery wrath would now be cascading throughout the channelled structure of the edifice, flowing with release.

The portal door's alluring ochre glow tempted Marcellus to look back, but he would not. The entire edifice rumbled in displeasure, seemingly discontent with the passing of its master.

Marcellus had left open a particular book on the correct page and placed it underneath a post scratched with soot. It was a spell master had taught him to use as a security measure in case the tower was ever compromised. The death of the tower's master and the end of Marcellus' life as he knew it, Marcellus had judged to be such a situation. He couldn't remain in the tower and continue his master's work in the vain hope he would find in past writings and old history the answers he sought. No, the answer was out there, and he needed to find it. Above all, the knowledge of sorcery had to be safeguarded.

I think it's time to make myself scarce.

Banuk Apparition!

Snap!

On a walkway, Marcellus appeared, seeing the black domed structure ignite and burst into majestic flames. The grey structure it sat on began to tilt and sway dangerously with the internal explosions, which shot into the air much like giant fireflies. It looked like a brilliant celebration, showering the dark in the splendour of sorcery.

Soon the edifice began to crumble away, revealing soot-covered apertures, which fell in on themselves. He could feel hundreds of tremors rattling the walkway, which traversed the black chasm as if challenging the empty space's expressionless indifference to the occasion.

As the Tower of Banuk caved in, waving its final haphazard goodbye, he felt what he could only have described as a sharp sting that he was convinced had intersected through the breezy air from behind him. He was unsure what it was, and belatedly decided to turn to look and confront whatever had caused the sting. Before he knew it, his legs fell from under him, and his body was held down in a prone position under the crushing force of sturdy beings that he could not yet perceive.

Why are they so strong compared to me?

This time, Marcellus wasn't too keen on the idea of being captured before he had chance to make a plan, and attempted to toss and turn vigorously to escape, but it was fruitless and he hissed in aggressive frustration at his assailants, who found his writhing hilarious as they bellowed with blatant laughter at his vulnerability.

Banuk Apparition!

Marcellus snapped out of reality, much to the disgruntled noises and consternation of those who thought they had held him. He had not been able to get far, been held with tight grips, but it was enough to break away and make a run for it.

He navigated around a corner of a building, panic making his footfalls rapid. No thoughts entered his mind but those of physical escape, as he raced down a darkened alley, not even sure if he was walking on top of the Black Chasm and that he was already sinking to oblivion.

Something solid blocked his progress at the end, and his body faltered. In the murky light at this time, he could only discern it as a muscular arm with rusty armour plating and a clenched purple-pink fist.

Dazed, two iron-like arms picked him up and a deep pitiless voice tittered.

'Almost sorcerer, but we're posted here by Warlord Aerol to ensure no sorcerer appears,' the same voice reprimanded.

A fist collided with Marcellus' abdomen and he went down, winded and clutching his crumpled and damaged stomach. All air escaped out of him in a rush, along with his will to fight back.

He was picked up and unceremoniously slumped onto the back of one of the few hard sturdy forms as they marched to the end of the street, underneath an arch that rained disintegrating powder on his head.

Seven years of sorcery had not adequately prepared him for soldiers, he realised, and he felt humiliated that his great adventurous purpose that he wanted to plan for his future had already been put to an abrupt end in a humiliating display of defeat at the hands of soldiers, which had happened for the second time in his short life.

Chapter Five

'Do you know why they call it Banuk Sorcery?' Aerol asked Marcellus, clearly not interested in his reply.

Marcellus struggled forcefully against the binding iron grips of the Tekromun Guards, but after a few pathetic attempts to free his limbs he saw that it was no use. They held him with too much strength, weight, and purpose.

Marcellus spat white foam onto the floor before Aerol's seat.

'You should not be bitter Marcellus, for anywhere you roam you would be found by the warriors of Warlords. Wearing that black cloak is a sign of prestige and success, and it draws everybody in. But I digress, what was I saying? Banuk Sorcery: founded by Arch Banuk over seven hundred years ago...

'Does this sound familiar to you?'

'How do you know?' Marcellus retorted, angry at the physical helplessness that had led to this predicament.

'I am familiar with the story, and its relevance is important, for I sit before one such Sorcerer of Banuk, do I not?'

Marcellus thrashed viciously and bared his teeth.

'Calm down! You have made mistakes before, and I would not put it past you to make mistakes again. Burning the Tower of Banuk was a mistake: it drew Warlords to your position. Thinking you could outfight my warriors was a mistake: they have beaten you before. And last but not least, wearing that cloak was a mistake!'

'I can't take the cloak off!' Marcellus protested forcefully.

'So you say, but several years under the tutelage of a Sorcerer of Banuk convince me otherwise. How many of them were there?'

'I wouldn't tell you...'

'I see you are the only one surviving. Did you kill them?'

Aerol's torrent of penetrating questions startled Marcellus. He could see right through him, Marcellus realised.

'My Master died,' Marcellus stated. He did not trust Aerol, but he must have felt the need to share this information to somebody, if only to share the pain of his passing.

'He was important to you, wasn't he?'

Why did Aerol have superior intellectual reasoning?

Marcellus nodded, turning away as he did so.

'I have need of your abilities Marcellus,' Aerol said softly. 'In the seven years since our last meeting I have extended my territories by a third and have inspired profound loyalty among my warriors. However, it has been at a terrible cost; thousands of warriors have lost their lives, and the civilian populace have become disaffected with my rule.'

Marcellus waited patiently, not understanding where this conversation was going.

'I have need of something unique, some lever that can propel me to heights that the other Warlords could not hope to reach. I have need of superior weaponry, and you, wearing that cloak and being a sorcerer, are my best hope,' Aerol confided.

'Why should I help you? How are you different from any of the other bloodthirsty and cruel Warlords that plague the home-world?'

Aerol stood up imposingly and stared into Marcellus' eyes.

'I will conquer this planet, with your help or without it. Nevertheless, it is within your interest to help me. Your Master is dead, and your home burnt. You have nowhere to go. Indeed, you are a walking target outside. Other Warlords would kill you to learn the secrets of that long black cloak you claim cannot be removed; whereas, I am offering you a position by my side, as an ally. Together we can make the home-world a better place, free of the plagues of Warlords,' Aerol proclaimed, holding out his lean muscular hand and looking deeply into Marcellus' eyes.

Suspicion laced Marcellus' thoughts, and trickery seemed to ooze from Aerol's tongue. There seemed to be something Aerol wasn't saying, and this made him uneasy. He didn't like the idea of helping Aerol achieve greater heights of power either, for it went against Marcellus' instincts.

Sorcery used as a weapon for an ambitious and power-hungry warlord...

'No, this is foolish! You want to use my sorcery as a weapon!' Marcellus accused, finger pointed in an act of impertinence.

Aerol's glare of intimidation was steely, and he didn't even twitch.

But despite the truth of the statement, Aerol was right about the fact that Marcellus had nowhere else safe to go and he had to learn to protect himself in this vile world of violence and death. Who could be a better teacher than Aerol? At least it would give Marcellus the time he needed to decide how he would use sorcery for a noble cause, or otherwise safeguard his sorcery from the many threats in this turbulent environment of war.

Marcellus had to balance how much he disliked Aerol against the fact that there was no foreseeable alternative. Some particular meanings of Aerol's words reverberated through his mind: his freedom would always be compromised by the cloak unless he had a level of protection or understanding about the home-world, which he currently lacked.

After a tense pause where Marcellus had been unobservant of Aerol's intent, he gently nodded in what must have appeared to be him reconsidering his stance on this issue.

The Guards relaxed their grips and Marcellus tentatively held out his hand.

They both shook hands, and then Aerol grabbed and grasped his shoulder from behind, a sign of allegiance and respect between Tekromuns.

'I, Aerol Cantalore, recruit you Marcellus in the name of my Warlordship; to use any powers at your disposal to see an end to this war,' Aerol vowed.

Marcellus nodded in grim acceptance. He would do what was necessary to end the blood-feuds between the Warlords, and he would do it using Banuk Sorcery.

There were ranks and ranks of them, purple-skinned Tekromun warriors armed to the teeth with plates, spikes, mail, and heavy weapons. The sun glinted on their mighty aspects as they rallied towards the enemy. They marched impressively across the grey bridge, which led downwards to the headquarters of Warlord Feroc.

The sound of their passage was loud and organised. It gave Marcellus satisfaction that something was being done about Warlords now. He could already hear the clash of weapons from a distance. Crossbow bolts sped towards the Tekromuns on the bridge, and fire parcels were thrown from embrasures out of the grey and wooden headquarters. There was adequate defence, and as Aerol's warriors charged the double-door entrance, pots of oil were set alight, to fall with fiery death onto the heads of Aerol's warriors.

Smoke and fire rose in spiralling towers, obscuring Marcellus' angled view of the battle.

'Do your worst!' Aerol goaded, carefully turning his tensed jaw to Marcellus.

This was Marcellus' time to prove himself, and he didn't want to disappoint.

Marcellus raised his right index finger and crafted patterns in the air. He glanced back at Aerol to see his response and saw that he observed incomprehensibly, and almost fearfully, at his sorcery in action.

He weaved his finger in arcs, and continued moving it fast in a myriad of different lines, shapes, and angles. Aerol tore his gaze back to the target, which appeared to be the bridge. At first Aerol was confused, and he looked first at Marcellus and then back towards the bridge. Then he realised what had changed in a micro-second, too fast for his perception to record the alteration: the half of the bridge that connected to the platform where Aerol's auxiliary forces were had neatly and cleanly been cut away from the other half and had now completely disappeared.

Aerol gnawed his lip, and looked towards Marcellus murderously.

'Tell me how that helps!'

'Watch!' Marcellus urged.

Warlord Feroc's warriors, seeing that their escape had been cut off by some mystical means, began to panic. Instead of defending the fortress vigilantly, they left the battlements.

'What's happening, are they going to surrender their fortress?'

'No, inadvertently they're going to open the double-door entrance for your warriors, because they are going to charge through and take the western bridge, now that the southern bridge has been compromised.'

'I had better send my auxiliary force west, by an alternative route.'

'That is a good idea.'

'They are cowards ... they panicked too quickly when their escape was cut off...' Aerol drawled.

'It's the unknown that terrifies them. They do not know by what means we have taken away the bridge. If we can do this to the southern bridge, then by accurate reasoning we can do this to the western bridge. They see it in the way that they must rally their warriors into a cohesive unit to cross the western bridge as soon as possible. They will battle through the warriors of your main force, if they are strong enough. Any survivors will cross the bridge and will meet your auxiliary force to the west, thus ensuring your victory.'

'How did you do it?' Aerol asked, baffled.

'Sorcery,' Marcellus sharply replied.

Aerol's lingering smile was unnerving, perhaps indulging. It was also ugly. To Marcellus, his smile meant he would probe the matter again at some point; maybe not today, tomorrow, or even in a few weeks, but he would. He knew this not only because it was what he wished to prevent at all costs, but because Aerol was highly perceptive and manipulative: he knew how to play Tekromuns' desires against them. He would attack Marcellus' mind, and he would probably get what he wanted, because Marcellus had no defence against such tactics. At least Marcellus was beginning to understand the mind of this tyrannical Warlord.

The battle ended swiftly, and as predicted. There were mass numbers of the enemy dead, while Aerol had lost few. The smile that was painted on Aerol's roughly spotted lower face was evil, and spoke of further bloodshed and triumph.

Despite Marcellus' earlier reservations, he found himself enjoying his role. He could use his powers with carte-blanche, and he would end this war. He didn't really feel any responsibility for the lives that had been lost; for lives were lost every day in skirmishes and conflicts between the Warlords. And better the lives of warriors, than the lives of civilians, who Marcellus hoped he was saving through Aerol's conquests.

Marcellus was led by Aerol and some of his most highly trusted warriors, between a recessed gap that was revealed when two rectangular pillars were pushed aside by two bodyguards with massive ripped muscles, who used such force to move them that Marcellus was not sure ordinary brutes would have been able to push them.

The tiled floor seemed to quake after the bodyguards' tiring efforts, which could be discerned from the miniature puddles of sweat that grew into being on their misshapen foreheads.

Aerol stood at the fore, arms held outward to present his glorious meeting room, or so Marcellus assumed it was where he was being led.

'To commemorate our first victory, we shall have a feast as has never been had on the home-world; in honour of our esteemed sorcerer Marcellus...' and at the mention of his name, Aerol glanced back meaningfully, but the import of the gesture was not understood by Marcellus before he was distracted by the spacious cavern he was led to, where flickering torches cast flames, creating eerie phantom shapes from the movements of the warriors as they clumsily perched on one

of two stone benches that sat on opposite sides of an incredible stone slab; at least it looked like stone.

Marcellus sat between two surly brutes, who glared at him grumpily, as if begrudging his presence in the room.

Just because I'm a sorcerer? It's not a good enough excuse!

Behind was the thunderous rumble of the pillars being heaved closed by the same bodyguards, which made Marcellus jump in surprise. His insecurity was probably because he felt claustrophobic, for despite the room being large, he knew he was hemmed in, being shouldered none-too-subtly by ill-mannered Tekromun. Thankfully nobody noticed his awkward movements, too intent as they were on their goblets of drink and the impressive meaty feast before them, being composed of the fallen enemies and apparently exquisitely prepared by Aerol's chefs. The food still looked ugly and grotesque to Marcellus, since his appetite was lost and because he preferred civic cuisine.

'To Marcellus!' Aerol began, lifting his ornate chalice in a toast and smiling menacingly in his direction.

'To Marcellus!' the rest grumbled in assent, having to put their forks down to acknowledge him, which obviously tested convictions.

They dug into their food in earnest, prodding the meat, slicing it open and shoving it into their mouths with gumption. It made Marcellus wish he could share their enthusiasm for it, but swallowing the blood of his enemies made him feel sick.

It feels wrong somehow, to consume of those we have killed in battle. It's not respectful.

Most of the meal, nobody spoke and spittle flew everywhere. But after they had all eaten, and cradled their expanded bellies, Aerol spoke a few words to those close to him, so discreetly that Marcellus could not hear what was said.

It dawned on Marcellus that these particular individuals were of some importance to Aerol, perhaps his greatest warriors, experienced commanders, or most respected generals.

I have been welcomed among their ranks!

Aerol had requested Marcellus' immediate presence in one of his chambers, which were growing in size and brimming with brazen treasure and contrastingly elegant décor.

Marcellus entered cautiously, hands at his waist, eyes taking in the impressive chamber and the implacable living statues bearing pole-axes that stood sentry at either side with grim expressions. There were a dozen of them in all, and Marcellus wouldn't be surprised if there were more of Aerol's most trusted hidden in alcoves to each side of the room, ready to burst in and cause bloodshed at a moment's notice if anything foul befell Aerol, or even the prestigious room.

Ignoring the reflective treasures; coins, gems, and polished weaponry; Marcellus meekly bowed before Aerol to await the reason for his summoning.

'You have manners Marcellus, of that there is no mistake!' Aerol guffawed, stroking the armrests of his new throne with such greedy possession that it repulsed Marcellus.

'You see these bags of treasure?' Aerol asked idly, glancing to the side and poking his long fingers into them, while playing with the shimmering coins. Aerol abruptly flicked his eyes towards Marcellus. 'They're all yours!' he stated in a tone that brooked no dispute.

Eyes widened in surprise, Marcellus even took a step back.

'That's too much treasure for a single Tekromun, and I cannot accept,' Marcellus waved his hand in denial, enforcing his refusal.

Aerol stared at Marcellus with a slack smile, his eyes expressionless.

'My most trusted and fearsome have taken of such riches, and *you* are *trusted* Marcellus if not fearsome. There is no guilt in these times of war Marcellus, and we must take what is left before others do likewise. Great Barbarism is so called for such a reason, and unless there is a drastic

change to the home-world, we had all better get used to the reality,' Aerol spoke, clearly aiming the platitudes towards Marcellus.

'We can change barbarism if we try...'

'These are futile arguments Marcellus, from one who is too hesitant to reap the rewards that are rightfully his!'

'This is not the future we should be fighting for,' Marcellus challenged, 'and it isn't what I'm fighting for.'

'You're fighting for me Marcellus, need I remind you that? I fight for the *present*.'

'What need would I have of all this treasure?'

'Favours, servants, fine platters, females, weapons, and the list goes on.'

'What about friends?' Marcellus asked incisively. 'Or is this not an Age for friends?'

Aerol chuckled, and then his chuckling rose in cadence.

'What use would you have for friends Marcellus?'

'There must be something greater to aspire to than ... than possessions.'

'There is, and that thing is called conquest Marcellus; something we shall all fight to achieve. Now, if you will not take these bags at least take my female servants who shall tend to your every need,' Aerol gestured and two young females walked suggestively past Aerol, their eyes looking on Marcellus' body with longing.

'Okay, thank you, but I don't need them,' Marcellus felt it prudent to clarify.

In Marcellus' new room, the females immediately started to fiddle with what meagre and yet prized possessions he did have, and they got in the way. His clock twanged as a wire broke, which frustrated him greatly because he wasn't sure he would find one that looked as simple and pleasing.

'Would you both just sit down?' he asked in irritation.

They acquiesced, and bid that he sat down next to them.

Marcellus accepted because he could not find a reason to refuse, and he didn't want to displease them too much.

Do they have to stay in my room? There's not enough space.

'So, you're the great Marcellus? We've heard a lot about you,' the one to his left said, licking her lips and stroking his chest, which made his skin hot and tingly.

'Stop!' Marcellus commanded, taking their hands off him and going to sit opposite his blankets.

'What's wrong with you?' the other female spat, as if personally insulted Marcellus had not surrendered his body.

'He's unusual,' the first female added, 'it must be because he's a sorcerer.'

'Ooh!' the second female, weaving her hands in the air to form intricate and ultimately convoluted patterns in the air.

'There is no mystique behind my sorcery,' Marcellus said clearly.

'Why don't you relax and sit down? My name is Clarita, come on! We won't bite.'

'I don't feel at home here,' Marcellus admitted, looking away from their entreaty.

'Aww Clarita, that is so sweet. What *is* wrong with him?'

Marcellus considered telling him about the unusual circumstances of his birth, but held himself back. Clarita and the other female were too easy to talk to and though Marcellus thought they were pleasant and their curvy bodies and supple skin nice to look at, he didn't trust them. Something was afoot. Aerol was giving gifts too freely and obviously, and favours usually had to be repaid, if Marcellus' experience with the cooks in the civic kitchens had taught him anything about gratitude.

'I suggest you both leave. I like your company, but I am suspicious of Aerol's gifts.'

'You should be, you castrated freak!' the other female said viciously, standing up and leaving him and Clarita with the verbal assault still lingering in the air. Curiously, Marcellus didn't feel shock, pain, or offence; just relief that one of them had left.

'I am so sorry, I don't know what's wrong with Nisa, but she can be vicious if she doesn't get what she wants.'

At that, Clarita's eyes were fixed on Marcellus' chest muscles. Compared to most Tekromun he was remarkably thin, and with slender "unpumped" muscles, but that must have been appealing to some.

'I see, will you please leave?' Marcellus requested.

'I will, after I've told you how much I like your unusualness.'

'I'm not sure this is helping me.'

'No really!' she said and leaned forward and kissed Marcellus' lips before he had time to decide on a response to this assault.

Really? She just seems to want my body.

'I've got to leave now,' Marcellus declared, standing up and briskly heading off to the public library, while ignoring the moaning he heard from behind.

Never underestimate females; they almost tempted me.

He was outside, standing beside Aerol's massive wide muscular back, ribbed as it was in layers of muscle and with the curves of developed bone growth. They basked in the momentous sight of daybreak, as the yellow sun appeared giant in its unimpeded punch up through the dim inscrutable line of the horizon.

'It's beautiful isn't it?' Aerol broke the silence. 'Our homeworld...'

'You keep summoning me and bestowing me with gifts, but I do not require them,' Marcellus stated bluntly, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

'I've noticed,' Aerol spoke calmly and breathed in deeply of the cool dry air, his torso expanding to such a size as to make Marcellus look like a stick by comparison.

'You have much to teach us, Marcellus, of life, and your queer sense of priorities could be construed as principle. I respect that in you, and it makes my offerings to you appear as hollow and empty, a fact which displeases me because of how my subordinates perceive my actions.'

'How others perceive actions should not make them the guiding force of one's behaviour.'

'It's a simple truth, and yet profound for that same reason. Nobody on the home-world is perfect Marcellus, and you must see that you set us high standards, but I see now how you see us as flawed. Tokens are symbols of excess to you, and unless you have a compelling positive reason to act or accept tokens then they are seen as undeserved privileges. Is my assessment accurate?'

Startlingly accurate...

Marcellus nodded timidly, and waited in silence for Aerol to guide the conversation to the point, and Marcellus wondered if it was concerning another battle.

'And so, here it is Marcellus, another token for you to deconstruct with that knotted brain of yours ... a sword!'

Unsheathed discreetly, Aerol held its magnificence out at the side, where the sun's power made it glitter and sparkle with such intense silvery brightness that Marcellus had to squint and look away. Along its length elegant handwriting adorned its length, written as it was in dried dark blood, which wrapped itself around both edges while only stopping at the solid straight silver hilt.

'Behold my father's sword.'

'Is this another gift?' Marcellus asked, too late at hiding his mesmerised eyes.

'Yes, of a sort, but not of riches or excess. It's something to show my appreciation of your support in the battle and a hope that we can continue to work to bring peace to the home-world.'

'It's wondrous!' Marcellus breathed.

'You don't have to take it...' Aerol drawled.

'I accept,' Marcellus replied suddenly, overawed that Aerol would present him with a sword that meant so much to him.

Inside Marcellus' mind, for a brief moment, was a question to ask Aerol about his father, but Aerol spoke quickly.

'It's time to prepare for the next battle, and I must be on my way to formulate a strategy. Take care of the sword Marcellus, and I will summon you when your presence is required.'

Aerol balanced the sword carefully on the edge of the building's precipice, half of it hanging off, and stormed away through the entranceway behind.

Marcellus tiptoed to the edge and cradled the heavy sword in his hands, saving it from falling into the depths of infinity below.

So close, and you could have met your end.

Marcellus clutched the sharp edge to his breast, as if he was holding a newly born tyke, and pondered the distances meaningfully.

Aerol knows I like objects of antiquity. How was he able to determine this, through the females?

The thought was unsettling, but the sight of the fluffy clouds surrounding the halo of the sun that rose strongly behind the grey textures of the buildings was so capturing that he didn't want to obsess over negative thoughts about Aerol, especially when he had just passed to Marcellus a sword of great historical value.